



*Forbidden*

**BLOODLINE**

ARIA RAY

# Forbidden Bloodline

*Russian Brava secret baby romance*

Aria Ray

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# About the Book

**I have the devil's child— And now the entire underworld is after me.**

One unforgettable night, a blaze of unbridled passion. Muscle-bound, intense, and outright possessive, Victor left me powerless to resist.

I realized the danger too late—the moment I saw his Russian mafia tattoo.

Shortly after, I fled, but the precious gift he left inside me bound us forever.

Four years later, Viktor storms back into my life, now a powerful Bratva boss.

*Commanding, filthy rich, lethal.*

if I could resist... Our son is his mirror image, ensuring Viktor won't let us slip away.

by choice or fate, we're thrust into his dangerous world. His enemies want his blood. And now, my son and I are caught in the crossfire.

My dangerous protector hasn't finished writing our story yet.

But when he discovers that my son isn't the only secret I've hidden, can his broken trust ever be repaired? And when his adversaries choose to use me as leverage, will he risk everything to save me?

# Chapter 1

## *Olivia*

I was on the long, winding road down the coast back toward Boston when the storm that had been brewing for an hour hit like a sledgehammer. My old Prius skidded sideways on the wet road as buckets of rain and a hard slap of wind came in from the seaside. I fought down my panic and regained control, but the downpour was too much for my windshield wipers to handle even on the highest setting. Two minutes in, I knew I would have to get off the road.

Just my luck. At this rate, I wouldn't see my little apartment in Cambridge again until tomorrow. I hoped my roommate remembered to feed the fish. The whole idea of holing up in some roadside motel until the skies cleared annoyed me. But better to distract myself with thoughts like that, than let the fear of being blown off a cliff by the storm paralyze me, as my little car shuddered under the onslaught.

Why the hell did I agree to meet a client out in the ass end of nowhere anyway? Murray really owed me on this one. Not that I could blame him for wanting to be home with his wife and baby daughter this weekend, especially after the kid had arrived almost a month early. But this was his client, and his trip to take. And driving in this mess really was kind of scaring me.

Still, I shouldn't be complaining, and was probably only grumpy about this to distract myself from the fear that was building in my chest from the increasingly slippery roads, which my tires were beginning to struggle with. They were due for a change, but I was putting it off because I didn't want to part with the cash...

But the auction house where we both worked was planning a massive estate sale for the Salem-based McDonough family, and had sent me out in Murray's place to do the initial appraisal. The family had collected Faberge eggs, Spanish doubloons, and first editions of dozens of famous books. Probably two hundred and fifty million dollars' worth of treasure, all told. Even my tiny percentage would set me up for years, so bad weather aside, I

was still grateful for the opportunity this job was about to offer me.

I could get that new computer I've been needing. I could go back to art school if I wanted.

I could take my closest friend, Anna, on an all-expenses paid weekend away, since I knew she'd been sad lately because her husband was away on a six-month tour of duty. She was unofficially my stepsister, and after she and her family had practically taken me in when I was a teenager, I wanted to be able to give something back to her. It was the least I could do.

Hell, I could do all that and still finally be able to pay off all my student loans—maybe even manage a down payment on my own house, if I was careful and nothing unexpected happened. The commission was a life-changing amount, and it was mine. If I got back home alive, of course.

The wind lifted in another terrifying slap of violence against the side of my vehicle, and I considered that maybe a new car purchase should come first, for the sake of my safety.

It was another five hair-raising minutes before the high, serpentine road brought me back toward the solid ground and a turnoff into the bright autumn woods. The rain and wind were knocking swirls of scarlet, orange, and gold leaves everywhere as I took the turnoff, praying that it led to civilization—a roadhouse, a gas station, somewhere with a parking lot where I could get my bearings and look up local hotels.

What I finally found was a single roadside bar of heavy, dark timber that looked old enough that Lovecraft could have written about it. The high gambrel roof was slate and dripped with moss that was going brown with the turning weather. Ancient neon beer signs glowed in the tiny, multi-paned windows, and bare bulbs glowed under the eaves. A carved wooden sign over the door named it 'Parkway Pub and Inn'.

As I was pulling into a parking space out front, the whole world lit up white. Barely a second later, thunder roared. That decided things for me. I was going inside. That massive building looked like it could survive a hurricane.

I grabbed my purse and my umbrella and stepped out into the storm, only to have the umbrella turned inside out and then yanked from my hand by the wind.

I was soaked in the few seconds it took me to lock up the car. By the time I walked in the front entrance, I was dripping, shivering, and praying my phone hadn't gotten waterlogged in my purse. Fortunately, when I pulled it out, it only had a few drops on it.

I looked around and saw a vast, wooden-pillared pub with carved wood everywhere, from seats to tables to wall molding to the elaborately carved bar. A check-in desk stood right in front of me, and off to the side, I saw a set of stairs leading up, probably to the inn portion of the place. As the greenish spots from the lightning flash cleared my vision, I saw a tallish, older woman watching me from behind the desk with amused brown eyes.

“Can I help you, honey?”

“Uh, yeah.” I blinked rain out of my eyes and put on a smile. “I was going to wait this out in the bar, but just in case...do you have any rooms available?”

“Six of the ten, so you're in luck. You want to put down for one in case we get more in from the rain?”

I thought about it, then shrugged. “Sure, put me down for the night.” I paid cash and signed the ledger. I heard a cork pop and a round of masculine laughter from inside the bar.

“Go on in,” the desk clerk told me, and I did, moving through the large, dim room past heavy, dark wooden furniture, framed movie posters, and anemic-looking ferns. I walked between two long, occupied trestle tables—one with a group of tall, dark-haired men in suits who were pouring champagne, and the other with a mix of men, mostly in hunting clothes or rain gear.

One of the second group, a red-faced bear of a man who looked twice my size, stared at me as I walked past him, his small brown eyes fixed on me in a



way I instantly disliked. His expression was greedy, predatory. I knew without looking that his eyes were fixed on my skirt-clad ass below the edge of my purple tweed suit coat.

I was used to being looked at by men. I didn't think of myself as vain, but I was on the petite side and when men were always staring at your butt or your chest, you made certain assumptions about the state of your curves. Plus, my dark red curls seemed to draw attention, and coupled with my pale skin and big blue eyes, I think it made me look younger, which was also apparently a draw card. That is, until they caught my attitude, then they usually changed their mind about my apparently naive disposition.

It wasn't usually such a big deal, I could handle a bit of staring. But sometimes the stares were more than just stares. Sometimes they were a warning that more was coming, like comments, a wayward hand getting grabby, or some creep following me down the street. One had even tried to slip a tracking device into my purse so he could find out where I lived. That one, I had taken a photo of and sent it to Anna's brother Luis, who had told me he had local friends who could discourage the creep. Luis was a social guy who apparently had a never-ending supply of acquaintances, and as Anna's older brother, he'd gone out of his way to look out for us ever since we were young. But Luis and Anna were back in Boston.

I wished I'd brought a book in with me, but I doubted ignoring this drunk asshole in its favor would stop a guy like that. Maybe I'd get lucky, and the storm would let up quickly. The intense ones rarely had much staying power.

"Coffee," I told the bartender, a middle-aged man with a shaved head and a dad bod who wore a horror movie t-shirt and had full-sleeve tattoos on his arms. He was so much more memorable than the desk clerk that I blinked at him for a moment.

He flashed me a grin. "Two drink minimum, sweetheart." He had a Long Island accent.

"Two coffees, then. I'm soaked through." I caught myself craving a cigarette and looked around to distract myself. I had quit four years ago, back when I had just been starting out at the auction house. When stress started

getting to me, the cravings returned, like ghosts haunting my brain. At least my body didn't crave them anymore. That had been hell.

As I looked around, I caught a better look at that group of suited men. They looked like close family, brothers, maybe, all with that thick dark hair, pale skin, and high cheekbones. They had the same basic taste in suits too, all with crisp white shirts. Most were hulking bruisers, big as the hunter who was staring at me, but with much more muscle. But the one that really caught my eye was a bit different from the others.

He matched them in height but was slimmer and more elegant, with a gymnast's body filling out his suit instead of a linebacker's. His black hair had a widow's peak and was cropped close to his head, giving him a neat, almost soldierly look. His eyes were deep-set and slightly hooded, his nose sharp, his cheekbones and jawline cut from marble. But it was his eyes that caught my attention the most.

They were a peculiar shade of pale green, so bright they almost didn't look real, like flashes of light beneath his dark brows. He was distracted, barely glancing my way as I looked at him, talking in a foreign language to one of the big guys. I listened again, it sounded Eastern European, maybe Russian.

Feral eyes. Something of a wolf in them. Between that and his sleek body, and that sharp white flash of a smile, I found myself wanting to drink him in longer. But unlike the prick in the hunting gear and red ballcap who was still eyeballing me, I knew that staring was rude. I dragged my eyes away and focused on messaging Anna that I was okay, but stuck where I was.

Tattoos came back with my coffee, and I slid him a ten. He nodded and I grabbed the mug, which was trucker-sized and heavy porcelain, so I had to cradle it in both hands. If they had come in cute colors, I would have wanted a dozen. The coffee was fresh, strong, and so hot I had to blow on it before every sip. Good stuff.

I was starting to warm up and stop dripping when I heard a heavy tread come up behind me, and smelled stale tobacco, beer, and sweat.

*Shit*, I thought, blood pressure rising. *Here we go*. I just prayed that a bad

attitude would be enough to dissuade this creep, because I had no weapons and no one to turn to for help.

# Chapter 2

## *Olivia*

I never quite knew how to deal with horny guys who wouldn't take a fucking hint. It was like walking a tightrope over a minefield. Bruise one's ego too much and he could get violent. Bruise it too little and he wouldn't go away. I had to be a bitch, but not so much of a bitch that this hulking lunk got his fists out. As he settled his weight onto the barstool next to mine, I wiped all traces of a smile from my face and looked up.

"Hey, baby. What're you doing so far from town?" His breath stank as much as I had expected.

I took a swallow of my coffee before replying. The gleeful sneer in his voice made me weigh the mug in my hand, wondering how good of a weapon it would be in a pinch. "Commute for work. Why?"

He stared at me, the direct question forcing him to think for a moment instead of continuing his leering, shit-tier courtship. "Just wondering how long you're stickin' around, darlin'."

I looked out at the parking lot. Sheets of rain blew across it, and the wind rattled the windows in their frames. I saw someone's trash can roll down the street in the wind with its attached lid pushed up like a sail. "I'm leaving as soon as it's safe to drive again." I prayed that would be soon, but I wasn't holding my breath.

"That could be hours." He sounded so happy about it that I pretty much knew what he was thinking. I was smaller and weaker than he was, and female. He could scare me into making this a done deal. I would go upstairs and take his dick just to keep from getting hurt. All he had to do was keep up the intimidation. He had to figure that would be easy, I was half his size, after all—then again, knowing his type he probably thought he was God's gift to

women, and I'd be totally up for a tumble.

I glanced at him and took in his wide, greedy grin before looking away again in disgust. I looked around to see where the bartender had gone, he had disappeared into the back. Great. Some dive out in the boonies probably wouldn't even know what an Angel Shot was anyway. I should have stayed on the road. "Maybe. Why are you asking?" I kept my voice calm, pretending to be oblivious to what he was trying.

"I want a piece of your sweet ass." He grinned wider as he said it.

Anger, disgust, outrage, horror. I struggled to keep it all out of my expression. Look calm, even bored, and confuse him. Keep him off balance. Hope it didn't come to violence. I had a lot of self-defense classes under my belt, but this guy was the size of a half-shaved grizzly.

"Charming," I said with more sarcasm than I'd meant to show. My heart was starting to beat fast. It was really obvious this guy didn't give a shit whether I consented or not. "Does your mother know you talk to women like this?"

He blinked at me again, seeming confused. Had he really expected me to be flattered? Or had he expected me to be scared? I acted like neither, and that baffled him. "The fuck kind of question is that?" he demanded after a second.

"The kind that should tell you you're out of line. Are you drunk?" I asked point blank.

He glanced back at the small squad of empty beer bottles on the table where he'd been sitting and shrugged. "Not enough so I can't get my dick hard, baby, don't worry."

*Jesus Christ.* "Go hit on someone else. I'm not staying." I got up, leaving my coffee behind, and turned to head to the desk to cancel the room. Better to brave the storm than deal with him a minute longer.

"Where the fuck do you think you're going?" His fist closed around my

forearm like a meaty manacle, dragging me to a stop. His grip left me cold with fear for what he might try now that he had me captive.

*Fuck. Okay. Time to draw some attention.*

“Let me go,” I said, much louder. The conversations around the bar cut off suddenly, and heads turned to look our way.

“Jesus, Billy.” The bartender emerged from the back with another bottle of champagne and rolled his eyes when he saw what was going on. “Quit manhandling that girl. You want to spend the night in the drunk tank again?”

“You mind your own fucking business, Mike,” Billy the Rapey Asshole snarled as he squeezed my arm hard enough to make my fingertips tingle. I tried to twist out of his grip, but it wouldn’t budge.

“Get the fuck off of me, you smelly creep!” I yelled, trying to break his grip by rotating my arm against his thumb. Against anyone smaller than this side of beef, it would have worked, but he just started yanking me closer to him.

“Let the lady go.”

The third voice was calm, icily calm, and silky, with just a touch of a Russian accent. I turned my head and saw the man with the green eyes standing there. I hadn’t heard him walk up.

“Oh, what is this shit now? You go back to your goddamn immigrant friends, fuckface, before you get hurt.” Billy was going from ruddy to red and starting to sweat visibly. His free hand clenched into a fist, and he turned on the slimmer man threateningly. “This bitch is mine.”

The stranger just smiled calmly, opening his stance just a touch. He had locked gazes with Billy. “Don’t make me repeat myself, *mudak*, or you will quickly regret it.”

Billy swallowed, his cheap beer courage wavering a little as he got confused again. “The fuck are you gonna do?”

The man sniffed, then glanced behind him once. A chorus of chairs squeaked against the slate floor, and every one of the suited men got up as one, and started walking over. The stranger's mild smile never wavered. "The real question is...do you *really* want to find out?"

Billy looked from him to me, to the men closing in on us with implacable expressions, and then to the barman, who only shrugged and gave him a look as if he deserved this.

I felt a tiny, animal shudder of instinctive fear go through him as he turned back to the green-eyed man, but beer and ego won out. His face twisted obstinately. "I'm not gonna—"

It was right then, while he was distracted, that I grabbed my still piping mug of coffee and poured the contents over his arm. "I said get the hell off me!"

He yelled in pain and shock and his hand opened. I jerked free, scrambling back out of grabbing range. Immediately, Green Eyes and one of his friends were standing between me and Billy like a bulwark.

The big man half-doubled over his scalded arm, obstinacy turning to rage as his face purpled. "Bitch! I'm gonna—"

"You will do nothing but excuse yourself and leave."

Billy looked up and saw the green-eyed man leaning down to look him in the eyes, his fine, pale face inches from Billy's sweaty, coarse one, still smiling. He opened his suit coat slightly, showing Billy something hidden inside, under his arm. Billy's purple face paled to a sickly pinkish in an instant.

What the hell was under there? A gun? Several guns? A bazooka? Well, whatever it was, it did the trick.

"Get out of here," Green Eyes instructed.

Billy nodded and straightened, his entire demeanor instantly changed. He

gave me one last nasty look before turning and walking quickly toward the door, still cradling his scalded arm. His shoulders were up, his back stiff, and he never looked back. The big men at Green Eyes' table watched him go, and waited half a minute before heading back to their seats.

The bartender sighed in exasperation, as if this kind of drama was commonplace here. He grabbed a bar rag and went to wipe up the spatters of spilled coffee as we moved to give him room. "Sorry about that. I'd ban the guy, but he's one of my few regulars. Don't know I'd make the rent every month if it wasn't for his drinking issues."

"Mmhmm," I said, wondering how many women his buddy Billy had driven out of here with his behavior. Probably more customers than he'd made up for in beer purchases. But on the other hand, I wouldn't have wanted to face down Billy myself, not without backup. And aside from the desk clerk, Mike didn't have any.

"It seems that you need a better class of regular," Green Eyes said smoothly. "Fortunately for you, my brothers and I have our hunting lodge just up the road now."

"That big place? Jesus, that's sat open for ten years. You renovating it?"

"We broke ground just before we got here." He considered my empty mug sitting on the bar top. "It appears that the young lady requires a refill."

Green Eyes turned his gaze to me as Mike the Bartender went to pour me my second cup of coffee. "Are you all right?"

I slid up my sleeve and checked my reddened forearm. I might have bruises in the morning, but it didn't hurt much. "Nothing worse than an annoyance," I confirmed. "Thanks for stepping in."

"It was necessary." A bit more warmth trickled into his smile. "I wouldn't think much of a man who sat by and did nothing in such circumstances. And such boorishness offends me."

Anna had warned me when I'd started dating, "Beware of white knights."



Those were men who did the right thing in situations like this, but afterward acted like it entitled them to a chance with you. Normally, I would have taken everything about this guy with a grain of salt, and been adamant that he wasn't going to successfully coax me into bed.

But the problem was, I was already hooked. I had been before he had even stood up for me. That had only intensified things.

I wasn't normally a shallow person, but between his cool composure, the eyes, that sexy voice, and how he filled out that suit, Green Eyes already fascinated me...including sexually. In fact, my body was reacting to him in ways I hadn't felt in years.

Maybe it was my long dry spell—five years of orgasm-free relationships followed by two of avoiding dating altogether. But whatever it was, I couldn't ignore it. I put my smile back on.

“Yeah, it offends me too. I feel like I should start carrying bear mace when things like that happen.” I accepted my fresh mug with a nod and turned back to Green Eyes. “So, what's your name? I'm Olivia.”

“Viktor,” he said, and gestured behind him at his table. “Please. Join me and my brothers. I would love to talk with you further.”

I hesitated. There was something dangerous about this man, but also something hot and chivalrous. He had been so damn confident when he had faced down Billy, brothers or no brothers. What was he capable of?

But I couldn't walk away. So I found myself nodding and turning to join Viktor at a seat on one end of the long table.

# Chapter 3

## *Olivia*

The storm roared on for hours as I ate pub food and drank champagne with Viktor and his strange group of brothers. I called Anna, letting her know I was safe, but stranded, then did the same with Blaise and Daniel at the auction house. I had to push myself to do both, because every moment I spent with Viktor I became more and more fascinated by him. Real-life concerns had become annoying distractions from our conversation.

“At this rate, we will all require rooms for the night.” Viktor sighed as we both looked at the rain turning into hail as it battered the windows. The sky was darkening further, and I knew he was right.

“Yeah, I couldn’t navigate this in broad daylight for more than ten minutes, and that was a real nail-biter even with four-wheel drive. Where are you coming up from?”

“Downtown, near Scollay Square. Yourself?” His bright eyes had a way of piercing into mine even when he was smiling. It didn’t intimidate me; instead, it only increased the warm, melting feeling I got deep in my belly when I looked at him.

“Cambridge. Been there since college.” This was why Anna and I had shared a small apartment even when we both started earning—student loans had us both by the throat. When she married, I’d gotten a new roommate, but hopefully the commission from the McDonough sale would let me clear my debts and have the place to myself.

“Ahh, I see. No wonder you are reluctant to make the drive at night.” He glanced over at his brothers, who were embroiled in some debate in Russian that involved a lot of mock anger, laughter, and back slapping. “Yet you are dedicated enough to brave it for the sake of your company. This auction house is lucky to have you.”

“Let’s just hope they remember that when it’s time for my percentage.” This was my first big score for the auction house. We would have to do a series just to sell it all, and they would doubtless draw rich collectors from all over the East Coast.

He chuckled again, a brief, low sound in his broad chest, accompanied by the faintest curve of a smile. I had learned that Viktor’s real smiles were subtle things, his thin, well-shaped lips barely showing the flash of his teeth. The one he had given Billy had been wider, fake, and cold-eyed. This one had warmth in it...just for me.

“So you said you’re in imports?” I was trying to keep the conversation going instead of just staring at him, but that was tough. He had me all flustered without even getting into serious flirting.

“Yes, my brothers and I have made our fortune through our warehouses and retail connections. It is a small fortune thus far, but I shall build on it.” His gaze swept over me. “Though I doubt you have much interest in the import business.”

“Not separate from you, no,” I said as boldly as I could, although the somewhat shy smile that slipped across my lips as I spoke was entirely unbidden. My body had only gotten more drawn to him over the course of the conversation, and when he mentioned staying, I had to fight off a surge of excitement at the possibilities. Just listening to that silky voice of his made me crave his touch. “Is it that obvious?”

“Not particularly, but I know women.” The gleam in his eye made me swallow hard. At this point, I barely noticed his loud brothers, or the intensifying hailstorm, or even the blues music Mike had put on to distract from the ice shattering against the windows and walls.

I forced down the sudden shyness that tried to come over me. I wasn’t much of a flirt, I’d never tried to seduce a man in my life, but I’d certainly never acted *shy* about my interest. Normally I was happy to let a guy make all the moves, and if he didn’t, then, oh well. But Viktor made me want to try.

“I’ll bet you do,” I muttered, looking him up and down. A man like this

could probably get any woman he wanted into bed, and he knew it. His confidence was not overbearing, he didn't brag. He didn't need to. "The question is, what do we do about it?"

His eyebrows rose slightly, his intense gaze locked with mine. "Well, I suggest we make the best of the situation."

My breath caught in my throat. But I pushed myself past my shyness, for once listening to the heat he stoked up in my body just by talking. "Guess we'll need a room, then."

And the way he smiled at me at those words made it all the more worth it.

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The walk upstairs took forever. I only had two small glasses of champagne in me, but I felt dizzy and warm and a little frantic to reach my room and follow Viktor into it.

"I don't normally do things like this," I admitted, hoping to explain away my slight awkwardness as I fumbled the key into the door and failed to open it the first two turns.

His hand covered mine, he took the key and pressed it in a fraction, then turned it smoothly. "I'm very flattered, then, that you are making an exception."

His green eyes mesmerized me for a moment before he leaned forward and kissed me, pulling me into his arms as the door slid open. We stepped back through it, one of his hands leaving me to close it and set the key on the shelf beside it. Then he wrapped me in his arms again, and the way he pressed his body against mine, all hard and lean beneath his suit, had my skin immediately spark with tingles.

We were kissing roughly, hands starting to roam and breath coming heavy

and shaky, when another lightning flash blinded me. A second later, the lights went out, turning us into shadows in the fading light.

I froze and he looked up, but then just let out a low, warm chuckle that whispered against my ear before he bent down to kiss me in the dark.

“The lights are out,” I muttered unnecessarily, as he trailed his soft lips down along my neck. When he let out another quiet chuckle, his breath ghosted against my collarbone. I couldn’t help the shiver that ran through me.

“What do we need light for?” he murmured as his fingers grazed the underside of my breast, and I found my own hands clutching tightly against his lean hips. “I can see your beautiful curves just fine in the moonlight. And I will hear you moan my name with or without light.”

I shuddered and lifted my hands to unbutton his shirt, but he moved back then and stuck me with his intense green gaze.

“Viktor,” he rumbled, his face serious as he watched me, green eyes flicking back and forth between mine. “Say it.”

“Viktor,” I whispered, wondering how something so simple as saying a name could suddenly be so sexy.

His lips curved upwards. “Again.”

I bit my lip at his order, my breath somehow escaping me, and his arms tightened abruptly around me.

“*Again*, Olivia,” he growled, leaning his lips down closer to mine even as his smile broadened, became more predatory. “Don’t make me repeat myself.”

“Viktor,” I said, louder this time, as my hands snaked their way around his neck. “*Viktor*.”

“Mmm,” he hummed with a pleased expression, before leaning down to nip at my ear. “Good girl.”

“Jesus...” I whispered, threading my fingers up into his dark hair, as he tilted my head up with a light fist in my hair and began kissing me once more.

His touch was subtle and smooth while he ravaged my mouth, unbuttoning my blouse to caress me without a single fumble or tremor. Such confidence. Such patience. He slid his fingers over my exposed skin after pulling off my blouse, caressing my belly, my arms, my shoulders. He covered my cleavage with light, teasing kisses until my nipples ached for attention.

Impatient, I reached back to undo my bra, offering my breasts to him in the dark. It fell open and his kisses circled down over my breasts, growing longer and more intense the closer he got to my nipples. My hips trembled as I pressed myself against him, fingers in his hair, breath already coming in harsh pants. When had I last wanted a man this badly?

Had I ever?

His mouth closed on my nipple and I whimpered, pushing my breast against his face while he suckled and nibbled eagerly. Hazy with desire, I started to take off his suit coat, only to have him gently stop me.

He stood back and stripped, the filtered light from the shaded windows splashing over pale, smooth skin and lean muscle and catching in his brilliant eyes. I caught the faint dark patterns of tattoos on his skin as he set his clothes aside carefully on the bedside table. Meanwhile, I was down to my hose and panties, eager to feel his bare skin against mine.

He retrieved a condom from his trousers before he'd even stripped off his boxer briefs, while I bent down to roll the hose off of my body. When I looked up again, he was watching me, expression unseen in the dimness, but his breathing had gone heavy and shaky as well.

He scooped me up again, so easily that it shocked me, and carried me to the bed, settling me on it easily. I reached for him, my fingertips sliding down his chest as I tried to beckon without speaking. I kept feeling like any words I could say would somehow be inadequate, or destroy the mood.

He reached down and took the waistband of my panties in hand, caressing my hipbones with his thumbs teasingly, his hands warm and sleek against my skin. I lay back and lifted my hips, and he pulled the little scrap of fabric off of me, tossing it away toward the clothes pile by the door.

I watched him roll the condom on, his cock was a blurry outline in the dark. But then he was laying me back on the edge of the bed and I felt the smooth, throbbing head slide against my folds. I lifted my legs, wrapping them around him as he pressed the tip of his erection into me and then thrust forward, going deep in one long, easy slide from my wetness.

I gasped out loud and gripped his forearms. He let out a groan and started thrusting, rocking the bed under us as our hips slapped together. I squirmed under him as the movement sent jolts of pleasure through me, trying to keep quiet but already failing.

My voice rose in little gasps and whimpers, sobs of encouragement that were the only words I could form. He was thick, stretching me a little, adding a tiny edge of pain to the mounting pleasure that only pushed me faster toward my climax.

I was going to lose control. I was already shaking hard, and my voice had gone from whimpers to shuddering gasps and low moans. My pussy tightened around him as he moved faster and faster, somehow staying on his feet, his fingers digging into my ass cheeks as he lifted me against him.

“More,” I begged, and he gave it, speeding, growing rougher, punctuating my moans with little grunts and shouts as he fucked me better than I had ever felt in my life before. It felt like I was losing my mind. I cried out each time his hips slapped against mine, not able to stop myself.

And then I didn't care, I grabbed him by the hips and tightened my legs around him and begged for him not to stop. He sped up again, whole body rigid with pleasure, riding me hard toward our peak.

When it came, I bucked under him like he'd shot me full of lightning, each contraction sending pleasure roaring through me almost unbearably. I heard myself screaming, “Yes, yes, yes,” and then his hard, breathless groans as his

cock jumped and shuddered inside me.

I started to slowly gray out from the intensity, feeling like I was dissolving in bliss. He laid his head on my shoulder, panting hoarsely, and I raised my hand and slid it through his short, sweaty hair in a weak caress. Then my eyes closed, and everything drifted away for a little while.

I came to in time to feel him laying me back against the pillows before sliding under the quilt to join me. His skin was damp with sweat against mine, and shudders from aftershocks ran through us both.

“Get a little rest,” he purred as he settled beside me and pulled me into his arms. He chuckled as I whimpered and buried my face against his chest, overwhelmed. The fingers of one hand slipped through my hair, caressing me. “You’re going to need your strength for later.”

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When I woke, the storm was over, the quiet outside almost disorienting after all that chaos. I opened my eyes to a room slowly filling with the gray light of dawn, and Viktor’s warm bulk snuggled up behind me as he breathed slowly in my ear.

My whole body was so relaxed that I didn’t want to move. I had never had sex like that in my life. It had exhausted me, exhausted him, and left me craving more. A woman could seriously get hooked on his level of dick game. Not to mention his charm. Maybe he would want to see me again. Maybe this was the start of something amazing.

Eventually, I had to get up, and did reluctantly, heading for the bathroom to clean myself up and tend to my body’s needs. I was a little sore in spots, and as I showered, I caught glimpses of little finger-bruises and suck marks all over me. He had marked me beautifully. It turned me on all over again just to see them.

But when I wrapped myself in a towel and walked back out, mulling over



whether I was rushing back to Cambridge and my life or lingering for more of this sexual mini-vacation, I suddenly stopped short, and all those pleasant thoughts fled from my mind.

Viktor and I had undressed in the dark. My clothes trailed to the door, while his were piled haphazardly on the bedside table. Along with something so unexpected that it left me staring at it while my body went from warm and relaxed to tense and cold.

It was a shoulder holster. Invisible under a jacket or suit coat, it wasn't the kind of thing an imports guy would need. Not the giant automatic pistol tucked into the holster.

I hadn't honestly thought he had a gun hidden in his suit coat the previous evening, I don't know what I thought he showed that asshole at the bar, maybe flashing a cop badge or something. Maybe I just hadn't wanted to consider the possibility of what scared the man off too carefully, because then I couldn't look at him with desire anymore. Because there's a big difference between the kind of man that owns a hunting rifle, and the kind that holds a handgun in a holster.

Who the hell was he? An attaché from one of the Eastern European embassies? A cop? Something else? Definitely not just some benign importer, that's for sure.

He hadn't owed a one-night stand the truth, but disappointment and worry gnawed at me anyway as I gazed at his sleeping form.

That's when I saw the tattoos.

He had two eight-pointed stars inked on each shoulder. The sleek, well-muscled chest that I had caressed with such hunger bore an eagle and a crucifix. They were all in blue-black line art, faded with age, the lines slightly blurred like prison tattoos, and God help me, I knew what that meant. Not the specific meanings of each one, but rather what they implied.

Viktor was an actual goddamned Russian mobster. The brothers downstairs weren't family by blood, but by avocation. *Bratva members*.

I had just gotten the most spectacular sex of my life from a guy who had probably killed people with that gun. Who had shown Billy, not a badge or bear mace under his coat, but that he was armed, and ready to blow his beer-soaked brains all over the bar floor if he had to.

How had I missed the warning signs? But I knew. There was only one answer for that. I had been too wrapped up in Viktor's masculine charm to let myself think about much else.

I had to get out of here.

Moving as quietly as I could, I pulled on my clothes and checked around for my belongings before stepping into my shoes. Viktor didn't stir, three bouts of sex in a night had worn him out. I counted my blessings as I opened the door, slipped out into the hallway, and closed it carefully behind me.

All thoughts of seeing him again had evaporated. I rushed downstairs, praying I wouldn't run into one of his men, or anything else that would delay me on my way out. I was going back to Cambridge now, going back to my job, and doing my best to forget last night.

If I ever could.

# Chapter 4

*Four years later*

*Viktor*

It took four years total to renovate and refurbish the Bratva's hunting lodge up near Salem, and by then, I was ready to sell the damned thing and move on with my life. But I had to admit, the results looked good, and I was considering keeping it.

Uncle Mischka had insisted on restoring the place using traditional means—stonecutters, woodworkers, stained-glass artists, antiques specialists, a few of the best even brought in from New York. The lodge had modern amenities, but they were nestled inside timber and tile walls that looked the same as when the big old house had been new, over a century and a half ago. Now that Uncle was gone, the place was all mine—if I could get the memory of what it had cost me out of my head long enough to enjoy it.

Now, Boris and I stood in the splash of multicolored light that came from the towering stained-glass windows in the two-story entryway, talking shop while we waited on the others. No hunting today, Mischka had insisted on being buried up here, and we were still in black suits from the funeral.

“You’ll be pakhan now,” Boris said unnecessarily, as he fit a cigarette between his lips. He didn’t light it, smoking in the lodge was forbidden, even to the head of my Sovietnik. Boris was more than one of my internal security heads—he was my strong right hand, and I relied on him for much.

I grunted my acknowledgement, thinking of Mischka, wondering if he was at peace now after the brain cancer had turned his last six months into hell. I had taken over for him unofficially about a year ago, and everyone was used to me being in that position. My elevation was just a technicality, more for the outsiders we dealt with than for us. “It’s what he wanted.”

“And everyone else.” His big hand touched my shoulder lightly.

Mischka’s era had brought us to Boston, established us, and made us strong. Now I had to live up to that. But at least Boris and the others had my back, instead of plotting to slip a knife into it, like so many back in Russia.

“What about the estate sale?” Mischka had died without a family, aside from us, and he had a lifetime of belongings to deal with. I had taken much of his rare book collection, but there were duplicates, and things that just didn’t interest me among them.

He sighed. “The auction houses in Salem are few and booked up. We’ll be going with a house down in Cambridge.”

*Cambridge.* I immediately thought back four years, to the red-haired woman I had met just down the road and spent the night with. Olivia. The one who had vanished.

I couldn’t help my regret at that. She must have seen my tattoos and my sidearm lying with my clothes and panicked. It had ruined my plans for the morning, I had fallen asleep thinking of keeping her. I had never had that kind of connection with a woman, not before nor since. I’d asked at reception the next day, but she’d paid in cash and the ledger just required a name. It had crossed my mind to try and look her up, but as always, life took over—and with Uncle Mischka’s illness I had other things to deal with.

“Fine, send me the details and I’ll arrange a meeting.” I was curious to see if it was Olivia’s auction house. If that wasn’t who we were using, I’d have to make sure it was.

She could have moved on from there a while ago. She could be anywhere. She could be married. It was probably ridiculous of me to even be thinking about her right now. But if she wasn’t married, if she was still in the area, still working at an auction house then I’d find her. I’d see her again. Olivia wasn’t the kind of woman I could easily forget, and what did I have to lose? I had no doubt that she’d remember me. If nothing else, I was the scary mobster she had run away from.

I found myself smiling slightly at the thought. I could work with that.

“Look...” Boris hesitated. “The men keep talking about the Puerto Ricans. Do you have a plan for dealing with them yet?”

My smile slipped. The Puerto Ricans had been steadily eating into our gun-running profits for the last decade. They were a Netas chapter, the single Boston Pueblo, with plenty of support both back home and in the States. Formerly handling parts of the drug trade that we didn't, they had stayed under our radar for a long time. But once cannabis had been legalized, the bottom had fallen out from one of their businesses, and they had branched out into areas we controlled to make up the shortfall.

They were a smaller chapter than our Bratva, and so far, our clashes had been brief and resulted in injuries, not deaths. I was reluctant to call for wiping them out, especially when they were so hard to locate and lock down. El Luchador, their president, was the only one we knew much about at all—and even then, no-one knew his actual name or what he looked like.

“I want to try for talks with El Luchador as soon as possible. See how reasonable he is.” Or how easily intimidated, if it needed to come to that. “We've shared the city without these problems for decades.”

“Yeah, but they weren't running guns then. And we weren't getting into fights.” Boris had close-set, dark eyes that made him look duller than he actually was. Right now, they stared at me probingly.

“They will answer for their offenses against us,” I reassured. “But the last thing we need is them calling in reinforcements from downcoast and touching off an actual war.” I considered the issue for a moment. “Perhaps we should get them in our debt.”

“How?” He had gone from wary to intrigued.

“We have far more power and influence in the region than they do, even in New York City. We control Boston's ports. They've had to truck things in overland from downcoast this entire time. If we offered them port access, we could take our cut that way, while they congratulate themselves on fixing a

decade-long problem.”

“Some of the men may see that as being soft on them,” Boris warned.

I sighed. Nobody from within our Bratva would ever have dared to challenge me, but if my own men had doubts about my plan, outsiders definitely would. I was trying to prevent any more funerals, but if that didn't make me look hard enough in the public eye, I would have to change tactics.

“They are getting this one chance to remember who runs Boston,” I said firmly. “If they do not take the matter seriously, we will send them back downcoast. In boxes.”

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I liked Cambridge. It was a breezy college town, dominated by the university and all the businesses that had grown up around it. Students mixed with residents young and old, crowding the streets three seasons out of the year. Classical architecture mixed with ultramodern. Parking was a pain in the ass, but I didn't mind.

I found the auction house, Grant & Meriweather, and spent another ten minutes finding a space within easy walking distance. I had my briefcase with me and looked like any other businessman walking through the square, if a bit better dressed.

My head was full of thoughts of the auction arrangements, of Uncle Mischka, of the Puerto Ricans, and how badly I didn't want there to be a war for Boston's streets. I didn't want to look soft in front of my men or anyone else, but the last thing I needed was a bloody conflict just to preserve my reputation.

My uncle had groomed me to become his successor since I left prison back in Russia and came over in my twenties. I knew I could do the job. He would never have had such faith in me otherwise. But now, it was time to step into his shoes. And I still hoped to do so without shedding any unnecessary blood in the process.

I was a block from the auction house when I saw an unforgettable head of wavy red hair coming out its door. I paused for a moment to look. Yes, it was her. Olivia. As beautiful as ever, if not more so—bright blue eyes full of merriment, hair escaping from her French braid beneath a burgundy beret. Time slowed as I watched her step out, the curve of her hips sparking a muscle memory beneath my fingers of the way she had felt. All the hazy recollections of that one night sharpened in my mind, and as I watched her turn to hold the door open for someone else, smiling down with a look of adoration on her face that I absolutely wanted directed at me, I could almost smell the faint, floral scent of her shampoo again.

Then a small boy, perhaps three, came skipping out and ran into her legs, wrapping his little arms around them and beaming up at her. She laughed and reached down to scoop him up. I couldn't hear her from where I was standing, but I could see her. This was her auction house, the one she had been working for the day I'd met her. And now she had a little boy, one with jet-black hair, pale skin, and dark brows.

And green eyes. Pale green ones, very striking. Very distinct, as he looked at me curiously over her shoulder as she started walking away.

Now I found myself frozen to the spot for a different reason altogether.

I saw eyes like that in the mirror every morning. And I had never seen them elsewhere before.

I almost dropped my briefcase.

That boy. Three years old, perhaps a little older. Black hair, pale skin, pale green eyes. Like mine.

My brain did the math as I stared after them in astonishment. Could it be?

Had she taken something of me with her after that wild night together? Was I staring at the results across the distance, laughing and clinging to his mommy as she carried him?

I let my breath out in a rush and tightened my grip on my suitcase. My

priorities had just been reordered. I still had an auction to discuss with whoever was left in the auction house while Olivia went to lunch with her—our?—son. But once that was done, I was going back to my men, and setting those skilled at information gathering to find out every single thing they could about her.



# Chapter 5

## *Olivia*

“You done with lunch, sweetie?” I looked across the little cafe table at Michael’s plate, which was bare except for the remnants of his demolished child-sized burger and apple slices. He was eyeing my fries speculatively as I smiled at him.

“I want some,” he insisted.

“What do you say?” I said, raising my eyebrow at him.

“Please.”

I gave him a small handful. “Don’t eat too quickly, you’ll get a tummy ache.”

He pouted, but munched his way through them while I finished my own lunch. Michael’s appetite was huge, but he wasn’t fat at all. He burned it all off running around. He was lean, quick, and brilliant-eyed, just like his father.

Life came at you fast, with plenty of twists you weren’t expecting. I had always lived with this motto in mind, understanding that nothing in the world was fully predictable. Especially when other people were involved.

Four years ago, I had spent a wild night with a Russian mobster named Viktor. A man who, God willing, I would never meet again. But he had left me with something unexpected, a gift, even if I had panicked for a while when I had found out.

Michael had turned three a little over three months ago. He was a smart, healthy, active kid who had no idea who his father was. Luis, my friend Anna’s brother, was the closest thing he had to a father figure, and he was really more of an unofficial Uncle. After I had spent practically half my childhood with him and Anna, he and his sister treated me like family and took to Michael in the same way. And well, let’s face it, Michael was pretty

much the cutest three year old in the existence of all humanity, so how could anyone not fall in love with him?

But Luis was always so busy with work, that his visits with my son weren't near as much as I knew Michael needed.

I worried now that as he was getting older, really taking in the world around him, that he would need a more stable father figure in his life, and the thought often riddled me with guilt.

"I want to see Auntie Anna later," Michael said once he'd inhaled the last fry.

"Tomorrow, honey, she's busy today." Anna was Michael's godmother, and the only family he knew besides Luis and myself. She worked from home and babysat him half the time. He liked her better than daycare, though the only friend he could visit with at Anna's house was her dog, Pookie, and now her newborn little girl.

I had discovered I was pregnant about a month after my commission from the McDonough auctions had come through and changed my life. There was really nothing else to do that felt right besides seeing it through. I was making enough money to rent a place for myself, and the lack of roommates definitely helped the situation. But even though the single mom thing hadn't been in my plans, I wasn't going to chicken out.

Michael had shown up a few weeks early, but had still been strong and robust, yelling his head off practically from the moment of birth and wiggling all over even when he was nursing. He had spent his first year dealing with skin allergies and ear infections, colic, and outgrowing clothes faster than I could buy them. Now, he was growing into this energetic, alarmingly quick little guy whom I had to keep my eye on at all times.

I finished my sandwich and caught his little fingers reaching for my box of fries again. "Hey. Let me have some too."

He grinned a little. "I like them."

“I know you do, but your tummy isn’t big enough for much more. Remember what happened in the car yesterday?”

His smile faded a little. Carsickness and an overfull tummy had not made for a good time for either of us. Or for my new Prius’s upholstery. “I’ll eat slow,” he promised.

I sighed and handed him one more long fry, which he did manage to eat more slowly this time. I didn’t mind the wild ride of being a single mom. But it was always strange, thinking where my son had come from, and trying to figure out what I would tell him about his father when he finally asked.

After lunch, we walked back to the auction house, where Anna would pick him up in about an hour. The auction house didn’t mind if Michael visited, as long as he kept quiet and there wasn’t an actual auction being held, so he usually spent a few hours around lunchtime with me before I dropped him back at whoever was looking after him that day.

“I wish Auntie Anna could come with us for lunch more,” my son chirped on the way back. He had my thumb in his usual death-grip, though he hadn’t needed me to help him keep his balance walking in a while.

“Me too, but her daughter’s too young to come out with her to lunch yet. They’ll be able to join us in a few more months.” Anna’s little one, Gina, was still absolutely tiny, and had been even more of a premie than Michael. With Anna’s husband off on a tour of duty, it fell on Anna to handle all the parenting.

“She should leave Gina home. All she ever does is sleep,” he grumbled. “Stupid baby.”

“Hey, now, you were that little not that long ago. And I had to watch you all the time. Even more than now.”

He blinked up at me. “I don’t remember. Are you sure?”

“Oh yeah,” I chuckled. “I remember all of it.” The health scares, the lost sleep, the cluster-feeding. Finding out what nipple balm was used for. And,

of course, roughly a million dirty diapers a week to deal with.

Motherhood wasn't always easy, especially once Michael got into the tantrum stage. Luckily, he was starting to grow out of that now, and I only had to rarely deal with a meltdown. He wasn't a bad kid, but sometimes his emotions and his appetite were just too big for him to deal with. But the thing was, he was also clever, with a mischievous streak.

I'd done my best not to spoil him, but I was always uncertain. I had grown up without a proper family, aside from when Anna and Luis's dad had taken me in all those years ago. I had no mother figure to use as my example. Only what I had missed and longed for, all those uncomfortable nights on a group home bunk.

It would have been a miserable time if not for Anna and Luis, the inseparable siblings who were neighbors to the group home along with their eccentric, often-absent father. We had bonded for life during those days, so close that I'd ended up spending more time with them than in the group home. I remembered getting a lot of odd looks from the rest of her Puerto Rican family. I was a pale, freckly redhead and stood out like a sore thumb among them. But eventually, my story had made the rounds among them, and the odd looks had ceased, replaced only sometimes by pity.

"I want a sister," Michael said suddenly, and I stopped dead in the flow of the crowd and blinked down at him.

"Uh...why?"

He flashed a grin. "I just want one. Can I have a sister?"

"I thought you didn't like little girls." I forced myself to start walking again, the confusing shock making my heart beat fast.

"No, I just don't like Gina, she's noisy and Auntie Anna is always tired. But I want a sister."

"And Gina doesn't count?" I teased gently as we drew near the auction house.

“No, she doesn’t! She’s my cousin. Auntie babies are cousins. You said!”

I winced. I had no older relatives to nag me about having more babies, but now Michael was starting up. At three. “Maybe someday,” I reassured him. “I need to find someone to be her daddy first.”

“And mine?”

*You have a daddy, I wanted to say. He just has a job so scary that I can’t have him around.*

“We’ll see, sweetheart.”

Sometimes I still dreamed of Viktor—his eyes, his smile, that silky voice, and most of all, that one wild night we’d had together. I hadn’t been on more than a few dates since then. I used raising Michael and having a busy job as my excuse, but the truth was, Viktor had ruined me for other men.

It wasn’t just the fear that the next guy I went to bed with might turn out to be a criminal too. Nobody I had met since then had made my body light up like that. Nobody since had intrigued me, mentally and physically, so quickly after meeting them. And nobody but him had left me craving him, years afterward—even as I prayed I never saw him again.

Plus, nobody else was my boy’s father. It felt... It felt odd, when I went out with other men. I couldn’t shake the feeling that it was wrong, no matter how much I tried.

Was I ever going to meet anyone who turned me on like that, who wasn’t a career criminal? What the hell did it say about my taste in men that a damn Russian mobster was the one who had really done it for me?

When we finally stepped out of the crowd into the cool, quiet depths of the auction house, I let out a sigh of relief so intense that Marcie, our receptionist, looked up from her desk and chuckled.

“Hey, Marcie. Any messages for me?” I asked as I let Michael go over to her for a hug.

She got out of her seat to give him a squeeze, then settled back in with a bemused smile that left me wondering what was up. “Yeah, actually. We had a guy come in looking for you. He’s setting up an auction for his uncle’s estate and insisted you be the one to handle it.”

“All right.” I took the sticky note with his phone number on it and glanced at it. I frowned. The name on it was Viktor Ivanov.

“Interesting guy,” she went on, as I blinked down at the note. “Polite, suave, kinda hot too, if you like Russians.” Marcie was off the market, and her tastes were totally different, her husband was a giant Black man who looked more like a quarterback than a pediatrician.

I was shaking a little, but struggled to keep my voice steady. “Did he have green eyes?”

“Yeah, really bright ones, kind of like Michael’s. Why, do you know him?” Her soft brown eyes swept from Michael to me and back again. “Is he bad news? You look a little nervous.”

“No, he’s fine. He’s just an acquaintance I have to have an...awkward talk with.” To say the least.

I hoped I could trust him not to bring any bad news into the auction house. And maybe he wouldn’t. The whole thing could just be business, instead of him seeking me out after four years.

But somehow, I didn’t think so.

# Chapter 6

## *Viktor*

**B**oris was as good as his word, and I had a dossier on Olivia Martin before the day was over.

She was a single mother with no family, a product of America's dubious foster care system. She had come up in her job, and was now handling auction accounts for herself, instead of for a superior. No addictions, no serious medical issues, no debts. But she had stayed in the same small apartment for almost a decade now, probably to make sure there was enough money to take care of the boy's needs.

The boy. Michael. Michael Martin, born May thirtieth, three years ago. No father registered. No man in her life, apparently, either. I wondered if she'd even dated anyone since me. Probably not, as she had been dealing with motherhood by herself.

*Michael Martin.* Cute little guy. Probably a bit of a hellion, if he took after me as a kid. Very likely my son, though of course there was no easy way of getting a DNA test without her cooperation. And we weren't there yet, especially if she'd been scared off by my carrying a firearm. But if the boy was mine, I had an obligation to him—and to his mother.

Even if she wanted nothing else to do with me, she was raising my son. That meant I had to do right by both of them. And besides, perhaps time had mellowed her opinion. Perhaps she wouldn't run this time. Perhaps there was a chance now of turning our dalliance and mutual obligations to Michael into more than that.

As I flicked through the printouts, I smiled a little. It had only been one night together, and it had ended badly with her slipping out like that, but I hadn't forgotten her. Of the many women who had shared a bed with me, she

was the one who stuck in my mind.

It was her beauty, her fire. It was the way she had weaponized a cup of coffee to help me ensure her safety in the presence of the kind of weak man that preys on vulnerable women. It was even the way she had chosen to quietly leave the next morning, instead of freaking out or worse, calling the police on me. Something about all of this, about the way we spent our short amount of time together, had ensured that for some reason, I'd never quite forgotten her.

She had courage, intelligence, and a sense of discretion. Those soft blue eyes, the cloud of red hair, those amazing curves...they were just what had grabbed my attention first. The hint of who she was as a person was what had kept it.

I'd wanted to know her after our brief spell together. Even that night, I recalled thinking I'd wanted to see her again. And now that we'd crossed passed once more, that desire was reignited to a fire.

Within a day or two, tops, I expected a phone call from her about my uncle's estate sale. And I would start things by being all business, talking about that instead of anything personal. But eventually, it would come time to talk about Michael, and everything else.

I wanted this woman. She was beautiful, capable, and the mother of my child. After just one night, she'd already given me something I'd never really been sure I would have—a family to call my own. A son. This hit something deep inside me, and I couldn't even name what it was. It just felt...deep. Right.

My boy. My woman.

Olivia was already mine, she just didn't know it yet.

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As it turned out, it was less than eighteen hours before she called me. I had the auction house number in my phone, and when the caller ID lit up my screen, I couldn't help but smile.

I picked up at once. "This is Viktor."

"Hi, Viktor," she said after a few seconds of hesitation, and the soft cadence of her voice, feminine and maybe a little breathy from nerves, had my cock twinge slightly at the memory of that voice calling my name in the throes of passion. How I longed to hear that again. "I heard you have an estate sale that you want me to handle."

"Yes, my uncle's," I replied, keeping my tone crisp and formal despite my thoughts. "He has a very large book collection, many first editions, and you're the only one I know in the business, so I thought I would call you." Not that I wouldn't have been eager to call her just because of the shade of Michael's eyes and my lovely memories of her. But I had left my message on the pretext of business, and with her flighty departure last time I'd seen her, I didn't want to risk scaring her off yet. Not until I could at least see her in person, and it wouldn't be so easy as a click of a button to evade me.

"Well, I'm flattered that you remembered me," she started, and stopped when I chuckled.

"You're rather difficult to forget, Olivia."

She swallowed audibly. "So...so are you."

For a moment I thought she was working up the nerve to apologize for ditching me, but then she quickly went on. "I'll need a look at the collection to give you an estimate, and then we'll have to plan how you want to handle the sales. I have plenty of book collectors and sellers I can invite, but not until I see what we're dealing with."

"Fair enough. I am free every day this coming week, except for tomorrow. When would be good for you to come to my hunting lodge? Everything he had is stored there."

She hesitated again. I could practically feel her weighing the risks. But after a few more seconds, she simply said, “Sure. Wednesday. Text me the address. Is two o’clock good for you?”

The little spurt of excitement I felt surprised me. I barely knew her, after all, even if the boy was mine. But what I felt went beyond that. I fought to keep my voice businesslike. “That will work fine. Thank you.”

I hung up and was barely finished with texting her the address when someone knocked hard on my office door. I frowned, instinctively reaching for the .45 pistol in my desk drawer. I kept my hand on it as I spoke up. “Come in.”

Boris threw open the door and rushed in, sweating and out of breath. He looked worried. “Sorry to interrupt, but we have a situation,” he said in Russian.

My frown deepened slightly but I removed my hand from the gun. Whenever Boris was upset enough, he lost his English and used our mother tongue. “What is it?”

He struggled to catch his breath, and after a few moments, switched back to English. “Petrovich is in the hospital. He’s alive and conscious, but he says it was the Puerto Ricans.”

“What?” Ivan Petrovich was my *Derzhatel Obshchaka* who handled all of our financial affairs. I had just talked to him earlier about my uncle’s auction, and how much of the money should be folded back into Bratva coffers. I was ready to put all of it in—it had been willed to me, but I had enough money of my own. Greed was a weakness, and we needed cashflow now that we were dealing with unexpected competition. But all of that felt irrelevant right now, I wanted vengeance for my friend. “Give me the details. When did this happen, and who did it?”

“We don’t know for sure, but there’s only one Pueblo in Boston. That means El Luchador must have called the shots.” He huffed a last time and then started breathing more normally. “He was shot at while he was driving, he hit a guardrail and the car flipped trapping him. The shot didn’t kill him,

but he's got a broken leg and a concussion, and the car's totaled. It was one of our motor pool."

My eyes narrowed. "That sounds like a direct challenge." And if I didn't answer it with at least equal violence, I would definitely look soft. And Petrovich would never have any faith in me again.

"Yes, it does." He swallowed. "That whack on the head has made his memory of the men fuzzy, but he has a dashcam and a rearview cam. We're hoping we can get images off them to determine who did this. But it's a good bet that El Luchador and his Pueblo are involved."

I shook my head, pushing myself slowly up from my seat. I really did not like having to resort to violence. It was a drain on ammunition, supplies, money when I had to fix any men injured, and a fucking waste of lives when they died. "He never agreed to the proposed meeting, did he?"

"We have yet to hear about it. It hasn't been that long, but this..."

"I understand. This has to be answered. And not with negotiations." I licked my lips, sorting out my plans for a few seconds before saying, "Get me both recordings. What hospital is he at?"

"Boston General. He's going into surgery soon and may not even be awake when you get there."

I rubbed the bridge of my nose. "All right. Let the men know I want to meet later today. We have work to do beyond the usual."

He nodded, already backing toward the door. Boris would never turn his back to me—he was old school, and saw it as an insult. "I'll put the word out and get you those videos."

I nodded and raised a hand briefly, dismissing him. Once he had stepped out and hurried away, I sat back down in my chair, scowling.

El Luchador had gone out of his way to avoid violence between us for years. But now I was proposing that we negotiate, and suddenly the man was

sending his muscle to hospitalize my finance guy?

It meant he didn't want to negotiate. He wanted war. This was a gauntlet thrown down. And what bothered me more was that he knew enough about the Bratva to target someone important in it.

So either he had found a way to spy on us, or we had a mole. Someone close enough to me to know who was who, and who to attack to anger me the most. Petrovich was a close personal friend, and a good man. He hadn't deserved this. He was as valuable and close to me as Boris, and I didn't want to think about him dying on the operating table.

But whatever happened, I was going to make sure he knew I wouldn't let this go unpunished, and that I would see to his protection much more personally after this.

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When I reached the hospital that evening, I had to bribe my way in, as it was after visiting hours. Petrovich was strung up with one leg in traction, a bandage around his forehead, and the typical scratches and bruises of a man who had been in a rollover crash. He wasn't a big man compared to the rest of us. He was fairly tall and fit, but older, his wavy graying hair the color of iron to match his eyes. They had shaved his mustache to sew up his split lip.

"Vanya! I heard what happened. How are you doing?" I came in with a stack of my uncle's books, classics he loved, and set them on the bedside table before shaking his hand.

He smiled, then winced as it pulled at the stitches. "Traffic problems," he said mildly, and I chuckled and shook my head.

"Your sense of humor is intact at least." The man was far tougher than he looked. I pulled over a chair and sat beside his bed. "How are they treating you?"

“The food is worse than prison slop, but it is edible.” He reached for his glasses on the tray beside him and put them on, peering at me. “Good, my vision is no longer as blurry. When they first brought me in, I could not focus at all.” One of his pupils was still slightly larger than the other.

“Did you see the men who did this?”

He nodded slightly. “I saw them, the car looked like it was going to cut me off, so I went to swerve, that’s when they fired on me. I didn’t recognize them, but it had to be the Puerto Ricans. This attack was very sudden, very unexpected. I know they have been cutting into our profits, but I did not expect them to be out for our blood after staying away for so long.”

“And just when we were making friendly business overtures as well. I am sorry, Ivan.”

“This was not your doing. Them attacking now makes no sense at all. They can’t possibly think they can kill us all or drive us out. So why do this?” He tried to sit up and winced slightly as the motion jarred his leg.

“Perhaps they assume we are weakest when transitioning to a new pakhan,” I mused. “If so, they are very much mistaken.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I have video from your automobile cameras. Our computer guys are doing an image search online to try to determine their identities. Once we have them, I will bring them in for interrogation. After that—well, I was going to give you a say in it.”

“Thank you, Viktor.” He sighed. “I appreciate that. How is everyone taking this?”

I pursed my lips, wondering how much I should tell him. The meeting had split us down the middle. Half, including Boris, thought we should answer blood for blood. Half thought we should capture the men and ransom them back to gain an upper hand on the market.

I was inclined toward the second option. I hated the waste that a war like this would bring. This wouldn't be to claim new ground or access to profits, but for reputation and retribution. It might be necessary...but I needed some time to think.

What I didn't need, however, was for my men to think I was hesitating because I was weak or avoiding violence from fear. I didn't want to have to deal with my own men being in constant debate over my choices.

But none of them, not one, could complain if I let Ivan choose the fate of his attackers. That was a courtesy I had extended as a brigadier, and later when I was in Boris's position. No one would be surprised when I showed Ivan the same.

Ivan had gone quiet, and he looked very thoughtful.

"Still deciding?" I asked, understanding his hesitation perfectly.

"I don't want a war," he said quietly. "But they have gone too far, Viktor. The two men in that car...once you're done with them, I'm not sure."

"You're tired from your surgery and everything else. Take your time, give it some thought. We can wait another day." I needed to buy time anyway, giving him time to think would give me time to consider all my options thoroughly without appearing to hesitate. "Meanwhile, once we get details on the Pueblo members who did this, we will bring those men in."

"Did anyone get my briefcase out of the car before it was towed?" he fretted.

"Boris handled it. I have it in my office. I can bring it if you wish."

"I do. I want to get some work done." He smiled again at my expression. "Finances won't wait until I'm up and around."

I nodded. "I'll bring it in tomorrow."

"Perhaps I'll have an answer for you then." His tone was apologetic, but I could understand it. Ivan was not a man of the gun. Who was I to judge

another man, especially when I, too, needed time for careful consideration?

On the way back home, I found my thoughts turning to Olivia. In two days, I would be welcoming her into my home, and into a couple of very awkward conversations. But perhaps she would understand where I was coming from if I explained it well enough, and led with my desire to do right by her and Michael. And I did plan to explain, at least partially, at least at first.

Because my woman would never be put in danger from ignorance. She would know enough to make the right decisions to protect herself and our children.

It was raining as I headed for my house near Scollay Square, one of those steamy summer rainstorms that barely relieved the heat. Now and then, I heard a rumble of thunder out across the sea. The eye of the storm was slowly getting closer—we would probably have a lightning storm later.

Despite my desire, the timing of meeting Olivia again was terrible. If the Puerto Ricans really were pushing for war, there wouldn't be much I could do to dissuade them, besides answer violence with violence. Olivia and Michael would end up in danger if they associated with me too closely or too often during this time of potential turmoil—particularly if it became known to my enemies who they were to me.

That, I absolutely could not let happen. Not my son. Not his mother.

That meant I had to move quickly and decisively to bring this conflict to an end—either by never letting it start, or by pushing such a force of violence and blood on the enemy that they had no choice but to concede, or be wiped out, before it could turn into a long-term war. But how was I supposed to do that when I didn't even understand the reasons behind the Puerto Ricans' sudden shift from fist fights and fender benders to attempted murder targeted directly and purposefully towards our profits, not to mention my personal friend? Rashly resorting to violence might well underpin everything my Uncle Mischka and I had built, if I didn't know everything first.

The whole situation had a fishy smell to it, something wasn't quite adding up. I had to find out what was really happening. And I had to do it before

there was any chance that Olivia and Michael could be connected to me by my enemies.



# Chapter 7

## *Olivia*

“You doing all right, sweetheart?” Anna asked me, brushing dark hair out of her eyes as she let me into her Cambridge apartment that was twice the size of my own. I felt a stab of jealousy, it must be nice to be married and have two incomes. But I pushed that thought aside as I stepped into her home. I wasn’t anything but happy for Anna for being in a good situation. I was just feeling some ugly self-pity towards the instability in my own life, since having a kid had drastically changed exactly what I could do with that big cash out I’d gotten all those years ago. But I had no wish to push that onto my friend.

“Oh, I’ve just got another assessment up in Salem tomorrow,” I said as breezily as I could. “That drive’s always a pain in the butt.” She didn’t need to know about Viktor, or how much meeting him again tomorrow was worrying me. “Where’s my little man?”

“Sleeping with Pookie again.” She had a little laugh in her voice.

I followed her into her clean, blue-and-white tiled kitchen and saw the enormous doggie bed in one corner was doubly occupied. Pookie was a huge, brown dog with floppy ears, a close coat and wide doggie smile like a pit bull, and a tail that inexplicably had long feathery fur like a golden retriever’s. She adored Michael and was thumping her tail hello, while holding the rest of herself still for his sake.

Michael was napping on top of her, hair askew, flopped there with his eyes closed, and his soft little face calm. He didn’t even twitch as I came over and bent down to look at him.

“Michael,” I called softly. He stirred a little. Pookie whined excitedly and then started licking his forehead, turning his bangs into cowlicks.

“Aaaa! Tickles!” His green eyes opened blearily as he pushed the dog away and wiped drool off his face, blinking in confusion, then beamed when he saw me. “Hi, Mommy!”

I scooped him up into a hug. “Hey, kiddo. How was your afternoon? You didn’t give Anna too much trouble, did you?”

“Nuh-uh! We did shapes.” He giggled as I bounced him a little, then set him down. I was going to have to start lifting weights if I was going to be strong enough to carry him in a few months, he just kept sprouting up more.

“He was fine. There was drama, but it didn’t have anything to do with him.” Anna was pouring us glasses of lemonade from the pitcher in her fridge. Pookie ambled up to her and sat, whining until she slipped the big dog an ice cube to chew on.

“What happened?” I felt my inner tension ramp up another notch, and prayed it wasn’t anything too bad. Nobody in the hospital, nobody in jail, nobody dead.

“It’s Luis. He’s doing that thing again where his work’s stressing him out and he won’t tell me what’s going on. Says he doesn’t want to talk about it.” She handed me a glass and Michael his little purple straw cup. The whole time, Gina snoozed away obliviously.

“Oh. Wow, I’m sorry.”

“How am I supposed to be there for my brother if he won’t let me know what’s going on?” She sighed, rolling her eyes. “I worry about him getting stressed.”

“Maybe he figures he’s sparing you something.”

“Maybe. But when he leaves things out, my imagination always fills in the blanks and ends up worrying me more.” She put the pitcher away, then grabbed her glass and led us into her living room. Pookie followed, clearly hoping for more ice cubes.

“Didn’t your dad used to do that?”

“Yeah,” she grumbled. “That’s where Luis got it from. My mom was always complaining about it. He had a heart attack when he was in his early forties. I don’t want that happening to Luis, he needs to learn to relax.”

Luis had always kept quiet about his work, which demanded long hours. Anna and I had always joked that we didn’t really know what he did, we knew it was something to do with security or alarm systems and involved a hell of a lot of callouts at unsociable hours, but that was about it. I tried to imagine growing up like that, with one parent always disappearing. In a way, it seemed worse than having no parents at all. “What does he do when you confront him about it?”

“Walks out of the room, mostly, out of the apartment if I get too persistent. He’s so stubborn!” She shook her head as she settled on the couch. I sat on the far end, with Michael plopping himself down between us.

“That’s ridiculous.” Being that secretive with your loved ones had to hurt. I hoped I didn’t have to start hiding things from her too, now that Viktor had walked back into my life.

Not that I intended to start up with him or anything. But I owed him the truth about Michael, and about my leaving. His being Michael’s dad meant he might well be in the picture from now on. I looked around at Anna’s comfortable home once more, comparing it mentally to my cramped little space, and wondered if maybe, for Michael’s sake, that wouldn’t necessarily have to be a bad thing?

If Viktor wanted to help with the finances, for example...

Then I forcefully shoved those thoughts away. I was just being shallow, there was nothing wrong with my apartment or the life I’d so far been able to give my son. We were comfortable, and my work brought me good money, even if our city was expensive and getting more so by the day.

We were fine without Viktor all these years. I didn’t need to invite danger into my son’s life, and there was nothing to suggest that Viktor would ever

even know about Michael.

“Maybe you should start doing the same to him and see how he likes it,” I said to Anna, if only to distract myself from my thoughts. “Just leave out a lot of important details about your life, see if he figures out how frustrating that is and how much it makes people worry.”

“I don’t know, maybe.” Gina stirred, and Anna went from looking at me to gazing down at her and cooing. “Hi, baby. You gonna wake up?”

Gina blinked her big, dark eyes open. She looked almost exactly like her mom in baby form, her fluffy black hair had a curl to it, their eyes were the same shade of brown, and when she woke up to realize what was going on, she let out a cheerful gurgle and reached out to touch her mother’s face.

“There we go.” Anna smiled down at her daughter. “God, Max is going to feel so bad if he misses much more of her childhood. She’s gotten grabby.” She winced as Gina’s fist closed around one of her earrings, and gingerly extracted it, then took her earrings off. “Guess I shouldn’t have risked these things.”

“Maybe not. Michael almost pulled mine out through my earlobe a dozen times when he was tiny.”

Michael shot me a look that was worried and pouty. “I did? That’s bad!”

“It’s okay, sweetie, babies just grab things.”

“Yeah, I’m gonna start having to put my hair up from now on, and no more dangly earrings.” Anna gave a rueful smile. Gina gurgled and started making fussy noises. “Uh-oh. Somebody’s hungry.”

“Babies are hard work,” Michael observed on the way home.

“Yes, they are. Especially for one person. That’s why smart people think it over a lot before having them.” Michael didn’t know he was a surprise baby from a one-night stand. I didn’t want him to have any doubts that he was wanted from the beginning.

I had told him I had gone to the doctor to get a treatment to make me pregnant. Most of my coworkers thought I'd used a sperm donor, or a volunteer. Fortunately, nobody in my life seemed to judge me for it, or Michael either. If they did, they kept it to themselves.

But that brought up another worry. What in the world was I going to tell Michael about Viktor, if he did come into my boy's life? I couldn't just introduce them and tell him, "That's your dad, by the way. He's a Russian mobster, but don't worry." I think I owed it to Viktor to tell him about his son. Was it selfish to see him in person, possibly even have to actually introduce him to my boy, and then lie about it? Though *could* I lie about it, even if I wanted to? Michael was like a miniature mirror version of his father.

It was one thing when he wasn't in the picture, when neither of us ever talked or even thought about each other—well, maybe I thought about him a few times over the years, but I doubt the same was true for him.

It had been like he wasn't even real, like he was just some random sperm donor. But having him exist in my life again as a real person, not just a memory... It felt different. I didn't know if I could, or should, keep the truth from him after all. But I was very worried about what tying myself to him through Michael was going to mean for all of us.

It wasn't just that he was an obvious career criminal. I didn't even know what kind he was. He could be a drug kingpin, he could launder money, he could even be involved in human trafficking. He had claimed he had an import business, and it might even be above board, but it was certainly a front for something I didn't want to know about.

Even if he turned out to be the good person I had caught glimpses of in the bar, he was still in a dangerous line of work that could see him jailed or killed. Associating with him too closely might put us in danger too. And I couldn't possibly tolerate someone doing that to my baby boy.

I had to make sure that Michael grew up safe and secure. I hadn't had that, growing up in that regimented, second-rate group home. Basically a filing cabinet for unwanted kids. I had never felt safe in that place, not with all the kids with behavioral problems, mental health issues, or gang ties. Michael's

childhood was going to be better than that. I would put everything I had into it.

And if that meant I had to play hardball with a guy who scared me, I would do it, for the sake of my son.

Our son.

I only wished I knew how Viktor was going to take it. But as I drove back to our cozy little apartment, to evening chores, and dinner, I prayed he would care enough to help us instead of bringing problems into our lives. For Michael's sake, if not for my own.

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I made it to the hunting lodge ten minutes early, after sweating out another drive on that long, curvy stretch of highway. It wasn't storming today, just windy as heck. My Prius was great on gas mileage and rode low enough that it was one of the easier cars I'd driven in high winds, but that didn't help my nerves. I was going to carry that stormy evening with me for a while, especially that five-minute slow drive through what had felt like a hurricane.

The hunting lodge was huge, one of those giant old Victorians you saw dotting mountains and filling small foothill villages from here down to Delaware. It was painted white, like most of them, with a green trim and roof, and huge stained-glass windows set into its north-facing wall and entryway. I stared at the windows, which featured Art Deco sylphs in trailing gowns, their hair flowing in an unseen wind. I parked in the driveway and just stared up at them for a bit, wondering how much money they had taken to install, the detail was amazing, right down to their faceted glass jewelry.

I got out and had to hang onto my briefcase as a gust of wind tried to yank it out of my hand. Was the weather up here always this crazy? Maybe this was just a thing around this stretch of coastline. A price to pay for the awesome views.

I turned back to the house, squared my shoulders, and headed for it, my black patent leather pumps clicking on the cobbled drive. I had spent an extra half hour today deciding on an outfit, wanting something that was feminine and businesslike but didn't look too sexy. The problem was, with my curves, that was difficult.

I had finally settled on a charcoal suit and crisp white blouse. I had tried for subtle makeup, but it hadn't looked right, so I had gone for crimson lips and slightly smudgy eyes. I could wear chunky gold jewelry again now that Michael was older, so I went for it. Just the lightest spritz of Santal Blush to go with, florals mixed with dark suits didn't make sense to me.

Now my doubts about the ensemble, about the chignon I had put my hair up in, about the perfume, all came back to haunt me as I walked up the stairs to the expansive front porch. Not to mention my doubts about being here at all. I tried not to fidget as I pushed the intercom button next to the big, elaborately carved front door.

There was a click, and a deep, unfamiliar voice said, "Yes?"

"I'm Olivia, I'm Viktor Ivanov's two o'clock," I said, putting on my charming businesswoman voice.

There was a buzz and a heavy clunk, and I tried the door to find it suddenly unlocked. Remote system. Nice, but a little scary. I didn't like the idea of him being able to lock that door with the touch of a button. It would get in the way if I had to get out quickly.

I stepped inside to take in an airy flagstone entryway, two stories tall and covered in splashes of colored light from the stained-glass windows. It was so beautiful that I didn't realize for a moment that footsteps were clicking down the hall toward me.

"You look even lovelier than I remembered."

# Chapter 8

## *Olivia*

I looked up, startled, just as Viktor walked into view wearing that faint, mild-eyed smile that I remembered. His real smile, from what I could tell.

He looked better than I remembered as well, though I didn't want to admit it. His hair was a little longer, his skin a touch less pale, and his eyes just a bit less hard and exotic looking than I remembered—maybe from gazing into Michael's soft ones for so long. He was still as handsome, still wore a suit better than any other man I'd met, and still wore very little in the way of jewelry or adornments. He wore a tie tack with an eight-pointed star on it, and I saw the same motif on his cufflinks.

He didn't look like someone who had probably killed at least a few people in his lifetime, if not dozens. He looked like someone who had built a real estate empire, or maybe conducted a famous symphony. Rich, hot, cultured... those thoughts were dangerous by themselves.

"Thank you," I managed after a few moments of taking him in. "I honestly never thought we'd meet again." Should I apologize now? Should I at least shoo that elephant out of the room so we can breathe a little before continuing?

But I couldn't bring myself to. I only smiled and gripped my briefcase tightly.

"Please, follow me," he said, gesturing gracefully down the hall. "We will handle this in my office."

I followed him down the hall, admiring all the carved and polished wood, the dark, patterned wallpaper, the refurbished timber floors and shaped plaster ceilings. "The remodel looks fantastic," I commented.



“Ah, you remember. Yes, it took the better part of the intervening years to complete everything. My uncle insisted on as much authenticity as possible, without sacrificing modern conveniences. Striking that balance was a bit of a challenge, especially with a lack of local contractors with such antiquated skills.”

“I can imagine.” I longed to live in a house like this one someday, once I had made some more big commissions and Michael was old enough. Everything I had that didn’t pay for necessities was going toward three funds—an emergency fund, one for Michael’s future schooling, hopefully including being able to fully pay off his college, and one for a down payment on a house. The market was insane right now, but I hoped it wouldn’t stay that way forever, and I believed in moderate, debt-free living now so that I could finally, *finally* feel like I could breathe one day and not have the constant fear of finances living in the back of my brain in the future.

“Well, it certainly looks like it was worth all that time and effort,” I said as we walked through his halls. “Who was your stained-glass artist?”

“I had to import him. A Frenchman, barely spoke English, but absolutely brilliant. He’s responsible for some of the post-fire restorations on Notre Dame.”

“Wow. That’s one hell of a thing to have on your resume.” I followed him into his office, which was expansive, bookshelf-lined, with a huge mahogany desk and massive chairs and benches to match, all seats upholstered in royal blue velvet. He settled behind his desk, and I sat in a chair across from him, setting my briefcase on the desktop and opening it.

“I did a little background research to prepare. Summer is the middle of prime time for classic book sellers around here, so we’re good, and I may already have some interest.” I felt a pleasant little jolt whenever I looked him in the eyes, which somehow looked greener when surrounded by all the plush blue velvet. I tried to ignore it, but the tingling between my thighs was growing stronger, and he wasn’t even doing anything, other than existing.

Did he really have such a strong, animal magnetism? Or was the memory of our night together triggering some kind of a Pavlovian response in me?

Probably both, if I was honest with myself.

Viktor was the only man in my life who had gotten me into bed without there being a developed relationship between us, and being in his presence now was reminding me exactly why.

*Calm down, I told myself. This is business. He's a rich mobster. He's probably dangerous. At least save the personal stuff until after what you came here for.*

“Fast work,” he said approvingly, and it took me a second to bring my racing thoughts back to the present and remember what he was talking about. He leaned forward a little and fixed me with that piercing gaze. “How have you been, Olivia?”

“I...” He wasn’t sticking with just business. “My life’s changed a lot, but mostly for the better. Thank you for asking.” That sounded ridiculously formal and evasive all at once. I felt my cheeks start to prickle with heat.

“I see. Well. That’s lacking in detail, but I’m not surprised. You’re not sure whether you can trust me, are you?”

My mouth went dry. *Oh God.* He really was getting straight to the point, and, apparently, the point had little to do with selling old books.

I felt a shiver race down my spine.

“I’m sure it’s none of my business what you do,” I started, the nerves building into a pit in my stomach now that I couldn’t hide behind business, “but...”

“But you saw the gun and the tattoos,” he said calmly, and I couldn’t help my small gasp at those words. I began to wring my hands in my lap. “You have some idea of their meaning, and it sent you running.” Now his smile turned tight, his eyes a touch regretful.

“I’m sorry,” I said sincerely, if quietly. “That was probably rude, but I...” I looked down at my hands. “I don’t know anything about the world you walk

in. What you've done, who you associate with, or how much danger is involved. I didn't know how to handle it once I did the math."

"Well, you do catch on quickly. But you don't seem to have told anyone about what you deduced, or I would have heard about it." He lifted an eyebrow, and I suddenly wondered if he'd done surveillance on me. Could he? Did he have that kind of power and connection? I swallowed and did my best not to panic as I looked around once more at his private office. In the lush, gigantic lodge that he owned. Just who exactly was he, in this organization? Clearly someone at least fairly high in rank, if not all the way at the top.

"That was a bit of a surprise," he continued smoothly, "a pleasant one. Like you."

My breath caught in my throat, never having felt more grateful for not reporting something in my life.

I had braced myself for a lot of things regarding this meeting. Explaining. Running off. Dealing with anger or irritation over it. Apologizing. Maybe even starting the process of bringing up Michael. But I hadn't expected this. I hadn't expected Viktor to still show interest in me. And the way he was looking at me now didn't leave me guessing.

And I didn't expect for me to still want him, so much that the warmth in his words and the heat in his eyes melted me inside, despite the conflicting flecks of fear racing through my body at the background danger surrounding this man.

"W-well," I murmured. "I suppose that's good. I mean, the truth is..."

"Do you regret our time together?" His voice stayed mild, cool, silky, like the feel of his hands on my body had.

"No. Not at all. Just the circumstances." My smile was wobbly. I tried to get my professional cool back, but it was gone. The gleam in his intense eyes had stolen it.

“Good. For I have no regrets at all. But I certainly would have regretted passing up a night with you.” He just plain didn’t blink enough. Being under his stare was like being under a hot spotlight.

“O-oh. Well, I’m flattered.”

He fought a smile. “I’ve embarrassed you.”

“No. Just a little flustered.” And way too aware of how he’d completely taken over the conversation, steered it where he wanted, with such direction and confidence that all I could do was keep up.

He had me off balance. I could barely catch my breath. My whole body was humming with the sensual promise in his words.

“I’m sorry, this is just...unexpected.”

He tilted his head slightly. “Inappropriate?”

I blinked at him, knowing I should say yes. I had come here on business. I needed to refocus on that. But instead, what came out of my mouth was the truth. “If it was anyone but you, I would say so.”

He let out a shivery breath that almost undid me. If he had started putting the moves on me right then, I would have fallen for it instantly. My body was screaming for a reunion of a whole different kind. I couldn’t help but stare at the broad shoulders hidden beneath his elegantly tailored suit, at the defined line of his strong jaw, at the way his eyes kept flicking down along my body... I could almost feel the caress of his gaze on me.

He didn’t move from his seat, simply gave me the slow, satisfied smile of an apex predator as his electric green gaze slowly dragged back up my body and met with mine. His eyes were hooded with lust, but he simply said, “Good to know.”

“I...” I had to tell him about Michael, I realized. If this man started pursuing me, he’d find out about Michael fast, and then he’d have all kinds of questions about why I hadn’t said anything sooner.

“Yes?” His fingers were steepled, and I couldn’t help but remember how they’d felt running along my skin. He didn’t exactly mock me, but there was amusement in his patience.

“I came here to talk to you. Well, the main reason is the estate sale, but I did have ulterior motives too, and, um... I don’t want to waste my employer’s time, or yours, but—”

“You’re not wasting my time. I enjoy every moment I spend with you. Though if I had my preference, we wouldn’t be spending time in my office.”

My breath caught and I bit my lip, immediately catching myself wondering what the master bedroom of this place looked like. What its sheets would feel like under my back. And whether the sex would be as good as I remembered.

I squeezed my thighs together hard, realizing I was giving him a deer-in-headlights look. “That should probably be a conversation for later, once we have completed our business.” My voice came out breathier than I’d intended, and his fingers interlocked, looking like they were squeezing together as he leaned forward, his gaze intense.

It should be a conversation for never, I chastised myself, but what was said was said. How did he get the truth out of me so easily?

“I suppose you’re right,” he said softly, his voice deepening slightly, but there wasn’t much disappointment in his face and that small smile still played at the corners of his mouth.

He was teasing me. It infuriated me and charmed me and turned me on even more, all in the same instant of realizing it.

I shook in my seat as I stared at him. He knew exactly what he was doing to me, and he was enjoying it. “Don’t make fun,” I said quietly. “It took me a lot to come up here.”

“You’re not afraid of me, are you?” His eyes glittered.

“A little. I never planned to do anything that would put us at odds,

though.” I said that carefully, while my heart started pounding even harder.

“So what I tell you in confidence will remain so?” He licked his lips briefly, just a flash of tongue.

“Of course. Just, it may be safer for you to keep from telling me too much about your...business.”

He chuckled, and I was thrown back four years and straight into the memory of that wild night together. The memory of his agile mouth closing around my nipple hit me hard, and I gasped aloud.

He lifted an eyebrow. “Now that wasn’t fear, was it?” He leaned back in his seat, head tipping to touch against the backrest as his eyes made another lazy perusal across my body from under his hooded lids. “No, that wasn’t fear at all.”

The air between us crackled. “I...I should...”

He got up fluidly and moved around the desk, looming close. One slim finger crossed my lips. “You should do nothing but come with me out of this office.”

“Go with you where?” I managed, although I was surprised he could even hear me with how softly my voice whispered out against his finger.

His finger brushed lightly across my bottom lip once, before standing to his full height with something of a smirk.

“Will you follow me?” he asked without explanation, and my traitorous body complied with a nod as he slipped his hand into mine and drew me up to stand.

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*I shouldn't be doing this*, I thought as he led me upstairs. But my body kept walking. My stomach was still jumping with that mix of anxiety and desire I couldn't control. He was in control. And that turned me on so much I couldn't think straight.

The master bedroom was cavernous, with mullioned windows, velvet drapery, and heavily carved built-ins. There were more bookcases stuffed with leatherbound volumes, window seats deep enough to sleep on, and the biggest antique Turkish rug I had ever seen on the floor. The bed was a massive four-poster, its heavy purple velvet curtains throwing the interior into shadow.

He stripped me insistently, and my hands moved to help him instead of trying to hold my buttons closed, my skirt unzipped. He lowered me into that dark cave of fabric, and I felt velvet slide under my bare back.

I suddenly felt shy as his feral eyes swept over me, and I curled in on myself a little.

"I did not get to look at you this clearly before," he purred. "Don't hide yourself now."

I uncurled a little, but my hands didn't leave the fronts of my breasts. As he stepped back to take off his suit, my heart started pounding again, and my hands dropped slowly.

His broad, pale, deeply inked chest heaved as he unbuckled his belt. He stripped down and reached into his bedside table for a rubber. I gazed at his erection as it jumped slightly between us.

He rolled on the latex sheath without dragging his eyes from me. "Beautiful," he murmured. "Now. Lie on your back, reach over your head and grip the head of the bed."

I hesitated, wondering if he planned to tie me. The carvings I saw, had smooth handles worked into them. I wondered as I gripped them if he'd chosen the design for that purpose, or had ordered it specially. "What are you going to do to me?"

He smiled wickedly and slid onto the bed, coming up onto his knees at my feet. “Just hold on. If you let go, I may have to tie you.”

The threat sent a shiver through me, and I started aching inside. “I’ll do my best.”

“Good girl.” The rush of pleasure I felt at his little praise made me blush, half in embarrassment. But it also made me ache for him more.

I hung onto the bars as he tucked pillows under my back, and then slid between my thighs on his knees. I felt his cock slide against the lips of my pussy and moaned. But then he leaned forward and started kissing my breasts, taking his time as I squirmed under him. Then he took one of my nipples in his mouth and suckled deeply, turning my moans into whimpers.

My clit tingled with frustrated pleasure with every lash of his tongue against my skin. My hips jerked reflexively, rubbing against his erection again and again without his entering. I wanted to grab him, run my hands over him, dig my nails into his skin, but I kept my fingers obediently wrapped around those handles. My heels slid back and forth against the velvet coverlet as I struggled against the urge to beg for his cock.

Finally, I couldn’t stand it anymore. “Please,” I whispered.

He chuckled and sucked harder, but didn’t make a move to push himself into me. I writhed on his lap, gripping those handles like I wanted to squeeze through them.

“Please, please fuck me,” I sobbed finally.

He lifted me slightly and I felt him press into my aching pussy, slow and smooth, while I bucked my hips and groaned with relief. His fingers dug into the globes of my ass and held me steady as he started thrusting.

He was stronger than I remembered. More limber, more relentless. His cock and his mouth together sent jolts of pleasure through me that I could barely endure. Within the first minute, I could already feel my first climax building.



Then it hit, and I arched like electricity was running through me, gripping the wood behind me and thrashing in time with my contractions. My cries echoed around the huge room, and I couldn't stop them.

He groaned against my breast and switched to the other nipple, forcing himself to slow down a little while his surging hips drew out my pleasure. I ground against him, my clit tingling with hunger yet again as he pounded into me over and over.

He was so cool, so in control, so focused on my pleasure that every tremor and groan my desperate movements coaxed from him felt like a triumph. And when he finally lost control and started pounding against me, it excited me so much that I came again, clenching around his surging cock while his groans shuddered with bliss.

We collapsed together onto his bed, my head falling back in surrender. He gently worked my hands free from the woodwork and I slid them over his back, caressing his beautiful body while he shivered and moaned softly in my ear.

I drowsed, feeling him slip free of me long enough to get rid of his condom. I didn't think I could move. Every muscle in my body was tired.

*I shouldn't have done this*, I thought even as I lay entwined with him, enjoying every second of it. *There are a million reasons why I shouldn't have done this.*

But it was done.

And now, I had to figure out how to live with the consequences.

# Chapter 9

## *Viktor*

I wanted to keep my little Olivia at least through supper, but I knew she had obligations...including to my son. The pleasure I felt with her in my bed was beyond any I had partaken of before or since. It made me as eager for her as any smitten twenty-year-old. But the maturity of age gave me control.

So we had an early meal together, mostly quiet. We had exhausted each other. And then we worked out the paperwork she had brought in perhaps fifteen minutes, and I sent her on her way.

It did not trouble me that she had not told me about Michael yet. That was an awkward, heavy conversation, and though we needed to have it soon, I had no worries that I would never see her again. She would be back. Again, and again.

She wouldn't be able to help herself.

As for me, she had already borne me a son. A happy accident, but it made the idea of a regular involvement with her even more intriguing. I was still a young man, but I wanted to put down a few roots now that I was pakhan. I didn't want my sex life or my personal legacy to fall by the wayside while I was whipping Boston back into shape.

I looked back over the inventory sheets for my uncle's estate sale, confident I would soon have that part of things neatly tucked away in my completed file. I was confident that Olivia would work hard for me. I doubted she would let herself do any less.

I wasn't a manipulator when it came to women. I had seduced plenty of single women who had been on the fence about coming to my bed, but that was more about being able to read what they said, what they didn't, and what their bodies were telling me. I preferred an explicit yes, but by the end of an

evening with me, they ended up saying that a lot anyway.

I dragged my thoughts away from Olivia and the things I wanted to do to her, and grabbed my phone, texting Boris.

***I've got the estate sale handled and settled our hospital bills. How are things over there? How is Ivan?***

There was a long pause before he started entering his answer. I waited, frowning. Then it came, and I nearly dropped the phone onto my desk.

***He's taken a bad turn in the last few hours. He's still alive but he's going into surgery again.***

My jaw set and I stood up, my afterglow torn to shreds by a rush of adrenaline. Damn it! I let myself get distracted while Ivan was still vulnerable.

Not that I could have done much against an unforeseen medical complication, but something about this didn't sit right. Boris had been on watch the whole time with his men, but I couldn't shake the smell of foul play from my nostrils.

The hospital was forty minutes away.

***I'll be there in half an hour.***

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I sped the whole way there, mind racing, making plans. I didn't yet know how bad Ivan was. I didn't yet know if my concerns about it would bear fruit.

I didn't know Boris to ever be incompetent, but I had checked my phone records when stuck in traffic ten minutes into the drive. He hadn't tried to contact me even once. *Did you forget in the midst of the chaos, Boris?* I

wondered. But that wasn't like him either. He had a chess player's mind inside that thick skull. His memory was as good as mine.

This wasn't like him. And that wasn't the only thing that was off about this situation. It was just the easiest one to put my finger on as I raced toward the hospital.

Boston PD knew my car and kept their distance. Now and then some idealistic upstart of a cop, or even an overzealous detective might come sniffing around me and my uncle's business, but most knew better. Boston's Finest would rather have someone like me or my uncle around, keeping order on the streets where they couldn't, and treating our monthly round of bribes as just the price of doing business, rather than the alternative.

By the time that I pulled into the hospital parking lot, my muscles were so tight that my back was starting to hurt. I wanted to spring into action, find someone to fight, some way to take this situation in hand, besides waiting helplessly by his bedside to see if Ivan made it through the night. But again, I knew, you couldn't fight old age or medical complications. Not unless you were a surgeon.

I didn't fix human bodies. I was significantly better at breaking them. And before, that had made me feel strong.

Now, however, it made me feel useless. My fists were balled at my sides as I walked into the crowded lobby to address the desk nurse.

The way her face fell when I asked for Ivan's current room and status didn't help my outlook one bit. I kept my composure, as always, and my manners as well. She pointed me down the hall.

"The crash cart came for him fifteen minutes ago," she called at my back, and I felt a shudder of the darkest kind of apprehension steal through me. What had happened?

I sped up, but didn't let myself run. I saw the medics with the crash cart come out, rolling it between them, pushing it out into the hallway. Was the crisis over?

Then Boris came out, looking around, and walked toward me, holding up a meaty hand as if he was going to try to block me from seeing whatever was coming out of the door after the cart. “You don’t want to go in there right now, boss,” he told me in Russian. “It’s a bad scene.”

“What are you talking about?” I demanded. “What happened?”

Then I saw them rolling Ivan out on a gurney. His face was covered, the drape falling like tent fabric from his beaky nose.

My eyes widened. “What...? God. Boris! He’s dead? How?”

He moved his mouth soundlessly for a few seconds, trying to put together the right words for what he had to say.

I grabbed him by the shoulders. “Boris! Pull yourself together and tell me.”

“I—” He licked his thick lips and blinked a few more times, his eyes bulging with shock. “I just ran off to take a leak for five goddamn minutes, and when I came back, he was flatlining! The cart was already in there and —”

I let him go, my hands dropping uselessly to my sides. My eyes locked on the gurney with my friend and employee’s corpse being wheeled away, down to the elevator that led to the morgue. There was no battle to be fought here. We had already lost.

And yet...

“Where’s the nurse who was attending him when you left?” I ducked my head inside the room, but saw only a tall, thin man scowling as he examined one of the IVs. He had a medic’s scrubs on.

“He...he was right here.” Boris looked around, then leaned back to look inside the nurse’s station a few doors down the hall. “Not here. Where the fuck did the guy go?”

“Who the hell put this patient on a potassium infusion?” Came the voice from the man inside the suite. He stalked out, blond hair and black glasses

askew, and looked around with a scowl before his eyes settled on me. “Excuse me, do you know who the attending was on this? I can’t make out the initials.”

“We were looking for him ourselves. We’re hoping for information about our brother.” I said it smoothly, even as my heart banged away in my chest. Boris nodded beside me.

“Sorry for your loss,” the man said distractedly. “But we have a problem. I’m going to check with the floor nurse right quick.” He loped his way down the hall, and I stared after him, eyes narrowed.

“You think maybe somebody screwed up?” Boris asked quietly, that baffled tone lingering in his voice.

“Potassium.” I was not a medical doctor, but if there was one thing I had learned about, it was crime and punishment. The commonest drug used to stop the heart in the last stage of lethal injection was potassium chloride.

My heart started pounding faster, and suddenly my fists were clenched again. “Boris,” I said in a firm voice, “we need to find that nurse. Now.”

I didn’t have to ask him if the nurse—if the guy even was a nurse—was Puerto Rican. Because what had just happened to Ivan wasn’t malpractice. It wasn’t a screw-up.

It was a damned assassination.

“Hey!” A yell from the lanky medic who had lingered behind the crash-cart team tore my eyes away from Boris’s incredulous face and forced me to look in the direction of the nurse’s station. Then a compact, muscular man, olive-skinned and with jet black hair, came racing out of it. He was wearing a nurse’s scrubs, but they pulled across his broad back and flooded at the ankles. A bad disguise.

He saw us staring at him and turned to race in the other direction.

I bolted after him, aware of the bulk of the gun under my coat but also of

the security cameras everywhere. I had to catch the bastard, had to question him. But he was fleet and desperate and raced ahead while I followed him toward the service stairs.

I heard Boris pounding after me as I followed the man into the stairwell, where I lost him for a moment before a clatter on the stairs below told me where he'd bolted to. I took the stairs two at a time around the open stairwell to catch up, determined to get my hands on that fucker before he could get away.

I was halfway to catching up with him when I saw a flash of metal in his hand and ducked back just in time. A bullet rang off the concrete wall where my face had been.

"Fuck!" Boris yelled, and we both drew our guns. If this guy wanted to shoot it out with us, he was going to answer my questions with a few bullets in him.

I made sure to break the security cameras on the way down, knowing the last thing I needed was a video circulating with my face on it after this mess. Whoever that man was, he was screwing up my life more and more with every passing minute.

He fired again as I rounded another corner. I ducked, and this time fired back. I heard him let out a little yell of panic as the bullet barely missed him.

Boris was lagging behind. I was so full of adrenaline that I wanted to yell at him for screwing up again. Ivan had died on his watch. This assassin had slipped past his men. And now he was an inch from getting away because Boris couldn't fucking keep up!

But I couldn't get the breath to yell right now. I had to save it for running, while the air went acrid from gun smoke.

We were almost to the ground floor. I lunged forward and fired at the man's back right as he ducked around the corner. Damn it! This was getting ridiculous. *Boris, where the fuck are you?* I thought as I clattered down the last few flights.

We were lucky. In his panic, the killer ran right past the door to the ground floor, and into the service basement. Jaw set, I quickly followed, praying I could corner the man before he fired again.

The basement looked like a low-ceilinged warehouse, with shelf after shelf of file boxes sitting in three rows running all down its length. The man had hidden somewhere in there, waiting to ambush us.

“You’re not doing yourself any good, stranger,” I called as I descended into the shadowy room. “You can try to put a bullet in one of us, but it won’t go well for you. Give up now, and have a chance at life.”

I heard an echoing clatter somewhere in the rows of shelves, but the concrete walls and the size of the room bounced sounds around strangely. I wasn’t quite sure where he was.

Boris came down the stairs fast and nearly knocked into me. “Watch where you’re going!” I snapped, completely out of patience with him.

“Sorry, boss.”

I lowered my voice to a whisper. “We split up. Check the left side of the room. I’ll take the right. Be careful. This guy’s waiting for us.”

He nodded and gave me a thumbs-up. When he turned his back to cross the room, I rolled my eyes. I had never seen him act this way before. It was like he’d never chased a man down before.

Was it shock from Ivan’s death? Guilt? I couldn’t tell, and I didn’t want to speculate. Whatever it was, Boris had gone from my strong right hand to someone who bumbled things far too much, and I didn’t understand how or why that could be happening right now.

I moved row by row, as silently and methodically as I could, fighting to keep my cool in spite of the nerve-wracking situation and my rage. We had to catch this guy, and we had to catch him alive.

Now and then I looked down my row and saw Boris, moving in as low a



crouch as he could. The sight of his boulderlike profile should have reassured me. But for the first time, it didn't. I half expected Boris to stumble on the guy and get into trouble I would have to rescue him from.

What was going on with him? It was like someone had taken my super competent and reliable friend and turned him into an idiot. It had me so angry after Ivan's shock death that I found myself contemplating how I would punish him for this.

Certainly, I wasn't going to put him in charge of anything important for a while.

The minutes crawled past as we worked our way up the aisles. The guy was keeping still, but I knew he was still in here. Lying in wait for us, him and his gun.

I was almost at the end of the row. Nothing yet. Had he slipped out of the aisles and hidden somewhere in the back of the room?

All of a sudden, I heard a scuffle on the far side of the room, and Boris let out a grunt and a curse. I was just turning to race in that direction when two shots went off, deafening in that echoing space.

Had Boris just gotten himself shot? *Fuck!* I got there as fast as I could, only to see him breathing heavily as he stood over the crumpled figure of our quarry. The man was still, and a puddle of blood spread around his head. His eyes were open and staring.

I turned to Boris, who still had his gun hanging from his hand as he watched Ivan's killer bleed out. He looked up as I arrived, that stupid blank look on his face again.

"Are you shot?" I asked him, and it took a few beats to sink in before he shook his head.

"Damn it, Boris, we needed him alive! What the hell happened?"

He looked startled at my raised voice. "He got the drop on me. I had to

shoot him. I'm sorry."

I squeezed my eyes shut, reaching for my self-control, then bent down and checked the man's clothes for anything distinguishing. The only thing I got was a nursing ID that was probably faked. "Rodrigo Narvaez Colon. One of the Puerto Ricans." I was almost certain of it. The dead young man was a Pueblo member. He had to be.

"Give me the badge." Boris held his hand out for it. "I'll have my computer guys dig up info—"

"No, thank you." I tucked the badge into my pocket as I kept eye contact with him. *You've fucked up enough for one day.* I didn't say it, but when his eyes widened in surprise, I just smiled benignly.

"I'll be handling this one myself, start to finish. I'll let you know if I need any help." Which right now wasn't likely. On Boris's watch, in the span of less than thirty minutes, we had lost Ivan, and he had killed the one man who could have confirmed the connection to El Luchador.

His face fell slightly, and his eyes took on an angry glint. "It's not my fault that Ivan's dead."

I stared back at him coldly. "An assassin got in right under your nose, Boris. Possibly multiple times. You can't claim you were in the toilet the entire time. So explain to me who you think I should hold responsible for this?"

"El Luchador!"

I stared at him in disgust. "You're really doing this now?" He had sometimes dodged responsibility when we were both younger, but nothing like this. "El Luchador may have called in the hit, but you're the one who was supposed to be on watch for any attempts. You failed."

His chest heaved and he glared at me. He hated it when I had to call him out. I hated it almost as much. It had rarely been necessary, but he seemed to think our friendship should absolve him of any screw-up automatically. And

so when I had to call him out for a mess he'd made, he acted wounded, like I was crossing some agreed upon boundary.

But this time his mistakes had cost us dearly. "We'll discuss this elsewhere. For now, let's get out of here before the police cordon off the place."

We managed to slip out, and Boris immediately walked away toward his car while I made for mine. I felt the separation keenly. That was my best friend, my strong right hand, who had suddenly gone weak, distracted, and incompetent on me when I needed him most. And he was sulking because I'd had to call him on it.

*Let him stew. He knows I'm right.* And right now, I had bigger fish to fry. Boris was right about one thing. El Luchador was our most likely suspect in all of this crap, and if he was, he had just declared war by killing Ivan.

And if he wanted a war this badly, I'd give him one.

# Chapter 10

## *Olivia*

I drove back to the auction house in a daze. My hair was back to perfect, my suit unruffled, every button in place—and yet beneath it, I was hiding all the marks Viktor had put on me. All the marks I had loved receiving. Marks I was now desperate to keep hidden. My arms were still a little stiff and sore from my time hanging onto his bedframe, but I managed to keep control of the wheel as the traffic got progressively crazier, the closer I got to Boston. But my mind was racing.

I wasn't mad at him for being so seductive. He hadn't made me do anything I hadn't thoroughly wanted to do. No, I was mad at myself.

There were no excuses this time. No blackout to hide his tattoos. No ignorance to excuse my time in his bed. I knew the man was a career criminal. I knew he'd probably killed people. I knew my life was already complicated by his being Michael's biological father. But here I'd done it again, running upstairs with him to his bedroom like I was sixteen, and had no thought of consequences.

*I'm messing around with a criminal, I thought as I slowed for a traffic jam up ahead. I have a son with a criminal, and I still have to tell him about it. And I don't think I know how to let anyone else in my life know about this.*

And the worst part of all of it was that none of it changed the thrill I felt deep inside. None of it made me crave him any less. Of all the men I had ever encountered, Viktor was the only one I absolutely had to have in any way that I could get him.

“What the hell is wrong with me?” I mumbled as I entered the stop-and-go traffic inching past an accident up ahead. Was I just sick somehow? Reckless? What was it about this one guy?

He was spectacular in bed, which really didn't help me fight my obsession with him. He was a cool customer in any situation, no matter how tough. He was brilliant, imaginative, and always in control. The hotness only made it all worse.

But he lived and worked on the wrong side of the law. That had always been a dealbreaker for me, ever since I had dumped my first boyfriend for selling weed to junior high school students. I couldn't afford to compromise my own standards just because something in me was thirsty for bad boys.

Except that was stereotyping Viktor, and not from what I had seen of him so far. The man was a paradox—criminal, but honorable and strangely kind. Probably capable of great violence, but I'd never felt anything but safe with him.

"I don't know what the hell I'm supposed to do about this," I muttered as I scooped up my phone to text the auction house while I was stuck. I'd use the shitty traffic as my excuse, but I knew that wouldn't work every time I was late getting back from Salem.

I needed to get Viktor's job done, handled, and off my desk so he and work didn't mix anymore. I couldn't deal with the conversations that would arise otherwise.

When I finally landed back at my desk, it was past six, and the only person remaining was Marcie. She smiled and waved as she saw me walk in. Then her smile faded as she saw my face.

"Oh crap. He didn't go with somebody else at the eleventh hour, did he?"

I blinked at her, then realized what she was talking about and forced my smile back on. "Oh, no, all of that's going ahead just fine. I've just been caught in traffic for the last hour and a half."

"Oh! That's what your text was about. I get it." She dug in her drawer and offered me a caramel.

I went over and took it, genuinely grateful. The roast beef, mushrooms,

and greens I'd had with Viktor had felt like a snack after all that...exercise.

"Thanks. I'm starving." And I still had to let Anna know how late I would be.

I did it as soon as I was back at my desk and pulled out my phone. ***Finally got back from Salem. Need an extra hour to handle my paperwork. Is that okay or should I get the little guy and just have him here?***

She replied, ***It's fine, bro's not coming over after all. I could use the company.***

"Crap," I muttered. Marcie lifted an eyebrow, but didn't pry as I replied. ***Another argument?***

***Yeah. Just before you texted me. Someone he used to go to school with got shot at Boston General. He's dead. But the thing is, I looked up the news on it, and the guy is suspected of killing one of his patients.***

My eyes widened. ***Jesus.***

***It's really weird, and when I asked Luis about it, he wouldn't tell me anything.***

I sat back in my seat, my eyes so wide that Marcie took one look at me and said, "Okay, what kind of crazy shit is going on?"

"You, uh, hear about that shooting over at Boston General? I didn't have the radio on." I kept texting while I talked to Marcie. ***That's really messed up, I guess it's a shock for him, can you imagine finding out an old school buddy turned into a killer? I'll pick up some chocolate on my way over, we can hang out a while.***

***Thanks, sweetie. I'll see you when you get here.***

Marcie shifted in her seat. "Yeah, I got some phone alerts about it. They said the guy was a suspect in one of those Angel of Death type murders." Her eyebrows rose. "You don't know anyone involved in that, do you?"

“No, but a friend of mine is neighbors with that dead suspect and now she’s freaked out.” The lie came out smoothly, though I felt bad about telling it. But Anna’s brother’s drama and his tie to this guy wasn’t Marcie’s business.

“Holy crap.” She popped one of her caramels into her mouth, shaking her head as she did so.

I nodded as I booted up my computer.

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“Boston General have confirmed that the suspect, David Sanchez-Rivera of Cambridge, was not employed by the hospital nor any nursing agency that they use. His last known work address was with an automobile repair shop shut down in 2020 for suspected money laundering. Authorities have not been able to determine what his connection was to the man he killed, or how he was able to infiltrate the nursing staff undetected.” The newscaster’s voice rattled on calmly as I fought the after-dinner traffic. “No one has come forward yet with any information about this case, and the coroner’s office has not released any further details. The victim, Mr. Ivan Petrovich, who was fifty-seven years old, leaves behind a successful accounting business and does not appear to be known to his killer. As yet, any motives are unknown,” the newscaster concluded.

I huffed out a sigh, mind wandering a little. The deeper questions of the case would probably never even make their later soundbites, because the only person involved who was not dead was whoever shot the killer.

What had it been? A serial killer targeting someone completely unrelated? A hit? And who had then turned around and shot Luis’s old school friend in the hospital basement?

I couldn’t expect any kind of answer to any of that, not from the news. Maybe three months from now, or later, some online analyst with a wild hair up his ass about mysteries would lay out every bit of the case, and I would finally get closure.

When I finally got to Anna's place, she was sitting on her front steps with Gina in her arms, enjoying the last of the daylight. Pookie was playing with Michael out on the sidewalk while she watched.

"Hey!" I called as I stepped out of my car. She smiled and waved, and my son ran over for a hug. My back got a twinge when I lifted him. "Oof, you're getting so huge. One day soon you'll be picking me up."

"Really?" He blinked at me as I bounced him in my arms, trying to ignore how the effort made my stiff muscles crack. "Will I really get that big?"

"Big and strong." And dangerously quick, and smart as the edge of a razor. Just like his father.

God. I wonder if I have to worry about what happens if he turns out to look too much like Viktor. Someone in his line of business must have enemies. What if someone makes the connection and targets us? The thought made me go cold as I turned to follow Anna back inside.

She saw my expression and looked at me worriedly. "Did something happen today?"

*Yeah, something did. I had my reunion with Michael's dad, and he fucked me silly. Also, he is definitely a Russian mobster. How was your day?*

But I knew her day had been crappy too. Besides, I had to keep the whole Viktor matter to myself. I didn't even know how I would begin to bring it up with anyone.

"Just a lot of fighting the wind and traffic coming down from Salem. I get great commissions from the rich folks up there, but every time I come home from it, something crazy happens."

Her laugh sounded forced, but her eyes were warm. "I get it. Come on inside, I made iced tea."

Michael and Pookie played in the kitchen and Gina went down for a nap while Anna and I roosted with our tea in her small living room. As soon as



the kids were occupied, Anna's smile started to crumble around the edges.

"You've seen the details on that case? The one about Luis's old friend?"

"Yeah, I checked on it. It looks like a big mess."

"They don't have any idea why he killed that Russian man," she said, sounding a little distraught. "And I don't have any idea why Luis would be this upset over his death. I mean. I remember the guy from school, but that doesn't mean I knew him. He and Luis weren't exactly tight then."

I chewed my lip. "Maybe it's just the shock. Like you find out that the person you used to swap baseball cards with is suddenly a killer. I can't even begin to think how that would feel."

She swallowed, and after a moment nodded and said, "Yeah, that might be it."

"Maybe we could talk to Luis together, see if he's okay?" I suggested softly, but she shook her head.

"No, you shouldn't get involved in this. I know you're dealing with your own crap. I don't want you ending up with Luis pissed at you as well. Hopefully, he'll calm down."

"You're the closest thing I have to family after Michael," I reminded her. "If it'll help you, I'll dive in without a second thought."

She smiled, her eyes still too wet. "Thanks, honey. But I need to figure out how to talk to Luis about all of this myself. I'm sure he would clam up even worse if you involved yourself, you know what my brother is like, he won't talk about his emotions."

I forced a smile and nodded. "I'll stay out of it, then. But seriously, if you need to vent more, I'm here."

She sighed, laying her head on my shoulder. "Thanks for being there."

"Always. It would take a heck of an emergency for me to not be."

Just then, my phone buzzed with a new message. I opened it, it was from Viktor. ***I rather wish that you could have stayed tonight.***

My eyes widened and my mouth went dry again. My heart was suddenly pounding.

“What is it?” Anna was right there to see my screen. When she read it before I could close it, her eyes widened too. “Oh my God.” She straightened and blinked at me in happy amazement. “Do you have a new boyfriend?”

Holy crap did I blush at that. “U-um...no?” *I am so not ready for this conversation.* “More like I ran into someone I used to, uh... who I once, you know...” My blush deepened and I looked away.

“That’s obviously not all this is, though. Not when he’s leaving you messages like that. Who is this guy? How come you haven’t told me about him?” She jumped on the subject with the desperation of someone who badly needed a distraction.

What should I tell her?

I decided to skim over the facts. “I met him four years ago in Salem when I was chasing up the McDonough account. He was at the hotel I took shelter in. We hit it off. I don’t know what I’ll do about it now, but he seems to be interested.”

My heart was beating so fast that I felt dizzy. Right under my light blouse, barely covered by the collar, was one of the suck marks Viktor had left on me. If she saw it...

“Wow. You ran into him again today?”

“Yeah, I stopped at the same place for a coffee on the way back,” I lied, without even really making the conscious decision to do so. “He’s one of their regulars. He’s, uh, really hot, but I don’t actually know that much about him.” And what I did know was mostly things I couldn’t repeat.

“What’s his name?” Her chin was on her hand, and she had that little half

smile she had worn a lot when we'd shared gossip in college.

“Viktor. He’s eccentric. Kind of private.” I looked down at the message and felt my cheeks heat up again just looking at it.

I had wanted to stay too. But it had been impossible. And I didn’t want to tell him that, any more than I was ready to tell him why it had been impossible. My obligation to his flesh and blood, and mine.

“Maybe you should go for it. I mean, how long has it been?”

“Pretty much since I last saw him, give or take some crappy dates.” I smirked back at her. “I haven’t met anyone as interesting as him since.”

“So go for it! I mean, what’s the worst that can happen?” She hesitated. “He’s not married, is he?”

“No, no, nothing like that. Or at least, if he is, he’s good at hiding it.” I doubted he had ever been married. Not because a woman couldn’t fall in love with a guy like that, but because I just couldn’t see him taking that much interest in a woman, and then leaving her behind. He seemed like the kind of guy who wanted to live with his commitments.

Or maybe I was reading too much into it.

“Yeah, I guess I could give him a try. But first I have to tell him that I have a kid now. That scares off a lot of guys.”

She put a hand on my shoulder. “Hey. If this guy’s scared of being with a single mom, it tells you a little about his thoughts on responsibility. And nothing good.”

I nodded, but inside my doubts were nipping away at me. We had a kid linking us now, and he needed to know about that kid so we could figure out what to do. And then I had to figure out how to tell Anna and Luis about him.

But I did know this, when I described Michael’s father to them, I was only ever going to call him an importer. Not a crime lord. That secret I would keep to myself.

# Chapter 11

## *Viktor*

It took Olivia over an hour before she replied to my text. I tried not to look like I was checking my phone too often in the meantime, but I felt the absence of her more than I had expected.

Ivan's death had left me feeling strange. Not exactly afraid, for I never feared for myself, only occasionally for others, but not exactly secure either. It was more like I was suddenly, acutely aware of how alone I was.

That was ridiculous, of course. I had my Bratva. I had my life, I had friends. But I also had a close friend who would be in his grave as soon as the coroner's office was done with him. And another close friend who had suddenly become a world-class screw-up.

And in the middle of all of that, while I stood in my home's converted ballroom of a meeting room and waited for my men to finish assembling, I couldn't help but keep thinking of Olivia. Of the warmth I felt in her presence. Of the bliss of having her in my bed. And how much that would distract me now, pleasantly, from the isolation deep inside.

But I would have to wait to act on that until I knew I wasn't dragging her into a brewing war. Doing that would endanger not only her, but also my son. And that, I could not allow.

I simmered with anger as I waited on my men, but still glanced down a last time to see if she had answered. And that was when she did.

***I wish I could have stayed too, but a lot has changed in my life. I have a son now, and he needs his mom in the evenings.***

I imagined she would be hesitant to bring up Michael, but at least she wasn't being secretive. That would have been the one thing I absolutely could

not tolerate from her.

Not knowing how to bring up the little life that bound us together now, our son, my heir, was understandable. Trying to hide him from me altogether would not have been permissible. If she went too much longer without broaching the subject, I might have to take offense. I might have to wonder if she planned to lie to me, to keep my son a secret. And I might not be able to take such an act lightly.

But for now, with such a brief re-acquaintance, I could forgive it. I could even understand.

***Of course. Take care of your child. I have family matters of my own to deal with tonight. I simply wish I was with you instead at the moment.***

Then she wrote back something I hadn't expected, which shocked me in a strange, pleasant way, ***Are you okay?***

It actually took me a few moments of blinking before I could answer. ***No. But that's not a conversation for over the phone. I'll contact you again once my current meeting is over.***

Moved by her innocent concern, I tucked my phone back into my pocket and then squared my shoulders, moving to my seat at the front of the room before deciding to stand instead. I was restless. My rage over Ivan and his killer's clumsy death kept pushing me to move around when I wanted to be still, serene, and in control.

Boris came in last, with his men, and none of them could look me in the eye. I watched Boris take his seat, considering again how I wanted to handle this. I was tempted to call him out, as much for his cowardice as for his incompetence today. But I had already taken away a degree of his responsibility to match the degree of trust he had killed in me with today's bumbling.

I decided I was not going to call him on the carpet in front of everyone. I was going to focus on the problem, and how to solve it.

“Today, we lost Ivan,” I said simply once the last of them had taken their seats. “He was attacked by the Puerto Ricans on the road, ended up hospitalized for his injuries, and was then assassinated by another of their members who pretended to be a nurse.”

A rustle went through the crowd. I heard some of the questions, *How did this happen? Who was on watch? Why would they kill Ivan?*

I nodded grimly, but neither fed the rumors nor sought to answer every question. Instead, I said simply, “We chased the perpetrator, only for him to be shot during a confrontation. The only ID he had on him was a fake name. However, the coroner’s office soon identified him for us.”

I took a deep breath, and my hand slid to the warm, glassy rectangle of my phone in my pocket. Just feeling it there was strangely comforting. But I didn’t need comfort. I needed to be the toughest of the tough, unassailable.

“The coroner also confirmed that Ivan was killed by an overdose of potassium administered in his IV.”

I let that sink in, including the fact that the assassin had been able to get in and tamper with Ivan’s IV on Boris’s watch. Let the whispering start up again—the rustle of horror, shock, suspicion. I saw a few men turn to look at Boris, who sat stonily. Everyone knew who I was most likely to trust with guarding Ivan.

I didn’t have to call out Boris for failing. I didn’t have to mention him at all. His incompetence spoke for itself. *Damn you, Boris. Of all the times for you to be off your game, it had to be while protecting one of our most essential men.*

“Ivan’s autopsy should be completed soon, and his body released to his family by the weekend. We will help with his funeral arrangements, but we will be holding a separate memorial. His widow has asked that no member of the Bratva be in attendance at the burial.”

A rumble of irritation at that, which I echoed in my heart. Ivan’s wife blamed the Bratva for his death. I couldn’t really blame her for that, he had

died because he was a member. But the reality was that the Bratva as a whole was not to blame. Not for what El Luchador's Pueblo had done.

“I know that the family's decision may upset some of you who considered Ivan a personal friend. However, such is the way of our line of work, and Ivan's widow is already suffering. We will not disturb her in her time of grief. If I catch any of you even looking in that direction, you will answer for it.”

Some of the tension left the crowd. But then, a deep voice spoke up from the back—Boris. “So how are you going to answer the Puerto Ricans for this one?” he demanded.

I stared at him. *You have a lot of balls, poking at me about this right now.* But I knew that same question had to be in everyone's minds. “I have worked very hard to be cautious in this matter, and give the Pueblo and El Luchador room to negotiate and seek a mutually beneficial arrangement. Now, in response to my overtures, one of our best men, my friend, the best finance man on the East Coast, lies dead. Murdered. I want full details on what happened, and who was involved. But make no mistake. I'm just verifying what I think we all already know. El Luchador has thrown down the gauntlet. We will get to the bottom of Ivan's murder,” I reassured my men. “But we must also now prepare for war. If the Pueblo would rather fight than deal, we will make sure they can never survive it.”

A ragged cheer went up. Shouting. Some arguing, but not much. Many of them were eager for the fight—too eager. I looked around at them and wondered how many more of them I would lose in that fight. How much blood would have to be spilled until El Luchador saw reason.

Perhaps he never would. Perhaps I'd have to put him down like a dog.

But most of those around me weren't deep thinkers unless it came to their duties. They weren't considering the cost in blood. All that most of them were concerned with was that if blood was to be spilled, then that blood should come from our enemies.

Afterward, there were drinks, cigars, and snacks. I refrained from all of

them, my fingers still wrapped around my phone in my pocket as I mingled, greeted people, and answered questions.

The whole time, however, I was haunted by the idea that I might be missing something. An essential piece of the puzzle. Some fact that would change my perspective on everything.

“I thought you were going to send me down to the coroner’s office,” Boris said, suddenly at my elbow. I hadn’t noticed him pushing through the crowd toward me.

I turned and eyed him. He smelled of alcohol, and there was a belligerent spark in his eye. “I handled it myself,” I said simply. “Is there a problem?”

“Yeah, there’s a goddamn problem!” His voice raised just a little too much, and a few conversations around us died. Then more. I could feel the crowd listening.

I crossed my arms. “Go on, then.”

He hesitated, seeming surprised that I was willing to listen instead of arguing back. But that was part of why Uncle Mischka had chosen me to be pakhan and not him. He was always ready for a conflict over something. I thought things through.

Boris often didn’t. Like pre-gaming this much before a meeting to announce a member’s death. Like challenging me now. I had gotten used to his hotheadedness as his close friend, but coupled with screw-ups, it was intolerable. So was his assumption that I would be as easily set off as he was.

His brilliance was sometimes eclipsed by his temper. Meanwhile, I was even smarter than he, and managed to keep a clear head. Most of the time, anyway. “Well?” I demanded, my tone calm but sharp. “Explain your problem, we’re all listening.”

“Look, things didn’t go well with the hospital. Ivan’s gone. I know.” He went silent, his thick jaw flapping like he couldn’t form the right words. “I know how you have to be feeling.”



He had no idea how I was feeling. First Uncle Mischka, and now Ivan before we could settle his estate. And that didn't just bother me because of the losses. The timing was interesting.

"But...?" I coaxed him, finding his silence too long for my patience.

"But you can't take on solving Ivan's murder by yourself!"

I stared at him. *You did nothing but get in my fucking way today, you bumbling, drunken fool*, was what I wanted to say. Which was when it clicked.

"I don't plan to," I replied smoothly, even as the suspicions added fuel to my growing anger and disgust. "Let's take this into my office," I said in a clipped tone.

There was muttering all around us. None of them liked being called into my office alone during one of these gatherings, any more than they'd liked it when Mischka had done the same. He'd only had to call me in once, and I remembered feeling about ten years old during that walk into his study.

Boris already felt lousy—I hoped. He might just have been drunk because he had never been sober today, including while watching Ivan. But even if he was a step away from breaking down crying, it was time.

I could hear him huffing behind me as he trailed me to my office. I could smell drunkard's sweat, beer, and whiskey. Every time I got a whiff of it, I had to fight the urge to turn around and turn his mountain of a nose into a foothill.

Once we were both behind closed doors, I turned to him and he stopped short, the two of us standing within arm's reach of each other.

"What the hell did you pull me in here for?" he demanded.

"I need to know one thing, that I do not want the others hearing. Because if your answer to this question is what I think it is, and they heard it, they would tear you apart."

I stared into his eyes and saw his rage and bravado waver. He knew which of the two of us was deadlier. Who had more power, even back when we'd been equal in rank.

“What is it?” The strength had gone out of his voice. That just disgusted me further.

“When did you start drinking today, and who among your men helped supply you?”

He stared at me dull-eyed for a few seconds before something clicked in his head. “You think I was off my game today because somebody drugged me? You think they turned one of my guys and he—”

“No,” I said, knowing his elaborations were just to cover his ass. “I think you haven't been sober all fucking day.”

I watched his face carefully. He went white, then red. Guilt flickered into his expression, followed by fear, and then anger. “I don't drink any more than any of the other guys,” he snapped.

I took a steadying breath, wondering if my knuckles would break on his face. I would use the heel of my hand instead, hit harder.

“You might be able to lie to yourself about that,” I replied coldly, “but you must be out of your mind to try to lie to me.”

“I wasn't drunk watching Ivan.”

“Then how did that murderer get past you today?” I demanded. “That isn't like you. None of this is like you!”

The frustration had crept into my voice, but for some reason, hearing it seemed to calm him some. “Viktor, look, seriously, this all has a really simple explanation. I had a late night, last night. A date went well unexpectedly, and by the time I needed to be back at the hospital for my turn on watch, I'd had, like, three hours of sleep and—”

“A hangover.” I frowned. I still didn't trust his story entirely, especially

with his being so drunk right now. As much as I wanted to believe him, I couldn't. Ivan was dead because of this.

“Look, when have I ever been this far off my game before?” His eyes pleaded, the belligerence finally ebbing away.

“Not since we were both teenagers.” I sighed, thinking suddenly of those days, back when everything had been so much simpler. Hell, they were simpler six months ago.

“See? Don't freeze me out. If I'm going to watch over the guys for you, and handle things while you look for a new Ivan, I need—”

“Who was the girl?” I cut in suddenly.

“The...girl?” He blinked at me slowly, disgusting me with his dopey expression.

“The one you partied with instead of sleeping.”

“Oh yeah. Maria.” He saw the look on my face and paled again. “What is it?”

“Where did you meet her?”

“I ran into her at my bar. You know, Horatio's over by Scollay Sq—”

My brain was already doing the math, and I didn't like the results. “You met her at a bar you're known to frequent. That night?” He nodded. “Thought so. What did she look like?”

“Real cute, curvy. Kinda dark.” His wistful smile made me want to backhand him.

“Dark curly hair?”

“Yeah, big brown eyes, big...” He cupped his hands in front of his chest while my blood pressure continued to rise.

That absolute moron. “So a Puerto Rican woman seduces you and leaves you hung over and exhausted while guarding Ivan. And that very day, a Puerto Rican assassin shows up to poison him.”

He blinked at me slowly, his smile fading.

I rolled my eyes and took a few steps away from him before spinning back around to face him. “She set you up, you damned fool!”

He swallowed, gaze sliding away from mine. “Oh God.”

“If you want to get back into my trust, and the brothers’ good graces, find Maria. That’s your only job right now. Go find her, use your men for help if you need to, and bring her to me. *Alive* this time, Boris.”

Drunk or not, Boris now looked horrified. He nodded and backed out, opening the door for himself and leaving my presence.

# Chapter 12

## *Olivia*

I woke up early the next morning and immediately looked at my phone. No new texts from Viktor. I hated that he had me worried about him. He was a stranger, a criminal. Amazing in the sack, and Michael's father, but I barely knew him. And he was too damn dangerous. Just being around him was probably risky.

But there I was, checking my phone again. I set it aside, rolling my eyes and flopping back onto my pillows. *Stop worrying about him!*

I stared at the ceiling, listening for any sound that Michael was stirring. Nothing yet. I drew in a deep breath, and said, low and very firmly, "Olivia. Do not let yourself fall for this man."

But the moment my eyes closed, I was back in his dim room, velvet under my back, hands gripping the wood, writhing as he sucked my nipples and fucked me at the same time.

I gasped and my eyes flew open. "No," I told myself again, but it was no use. My entire body was already tingling, my nipples suddenly hypersensitive as they rubbed against my cotton tank top. I wanted him again.

Ugh. Why did the best lay of my life have to be a damn mobster? If Anna knew, she'd be furious at me. We had both sworn off troublemakers in high school.

But now, she was married to a Captain America type who had been overseas since before the birth of their daughter, while I was pining for a guy who had probably shot people before. Might do it to me if I learned the wrong thing or pissed him off enough.

I wanted so badly to be able to walk away, leave him behind, never think

of him again. But Michael tied us together. And my body craved Viktor with an intensity I couldn't explain or justify.

But I couldn't let myself love him. I couldn't fall. If I did, my judgment would go completely to shit, and I wouldn't be able to trust myself.

Michael woke up while I was taking my shower. I came out wrapped in a towel to find him standing in the hallway, rubbing one eye sleepily. "I'm hungry," he mumbled.

"I know, honey. Go to the bathroom and brush your teeth, I'll get dressed and get breakfast together." I really didn't feel like eating, not with the whole Viktor mess running through my head constantly. But duty called, and I couldn't expect Michael's tummy to wait on my weird emotional crap.

I came back from my room in jeans and tank top, my usual warm-weather gear when I wasn't working, to see Michael already parked in his seat at the table. "You brush your teeth?" I asked him. He nodded, but his eyes looked sly. "Michael..."

He pouted, but after a few moments he slid off his chair and went back to brush his teeth. He didn't understand that rushing through his morning tasks wouldn't make mine go any faster.

I made him eggs with a little cheese and mushrooms, and some of those crisp little sausages, and fruit salad. I didn't know why he liked mushrooms so much, but he beamed when he saw them and picked each of them out of the scramble in turn, eating them all first.

Meanwhile, I picked at my food while Viktor haunted my mind.

"Can we go to the park today?" Michael mumbled around a mouthful of fruit.

"Chew and swallow before you talk, honey, you could choke."

He pouted a little this time, but did so anyway. "Park?"

"Yeah, we can go see the ducks."

“Yay, duckies!” He peered up at me. “Do people have pet ducks?”

“Yeah, but they’re hard to have in the house. They poop everywhere. You have to make them wear diapers.” I wrinkled my nose at him, and he grinned.

“Duckie diapers? That’s funny! I haven’t needed diapers in a long time.”

“No, you’re a big boy. But ducks can’t learn how to hold it until they can go outside.”

He gave me a big-eyed look. “Can you teach them to use the toilet?”

I laughed, my worries fading away a little. “No, they’re water birds, they’ll probably try to swim in it.”

He was bursting into giggles when my phone suddenly rang. I pulled it out with more eagerness than I wanted to. It was Viktor. “Hello?”

“Yes, hello.” His voice was smooth and calm as ever, and I cursed the surge of relief that went through me at the sound. “My apologies for taking so long to get back to you. I was in meetings of various kinds until late yesterday. Are you free?”

“I’ll be done with cleaning up from breakfast in about half an hour, can I call you back?” Michael and I always had meals together, and I wanted my attention on him.

“Ah, I see. My apologies for the timing. I’ll call you back in half an hour.”

My heart was already pounding, and my thighs were squeezed together under the table. I huffed in annoyance with myself, wondering if I was ever going to be able to manage my feelings for Viktor properly.

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After breakfast, I got the kitchen cleaned up in record time and got Michael set up with a new coloring book and some music he liked. Then I sat at the kitchen table like a dumb, lovestruck teenager until my phone rang again. When it did, I realized what I was doing and blushed, almost refusing to pick up the phone. But that wasn't a very grown-up response either.

*This man is doing my head in and he's not even trying,* I thought to myself as I connected the call. "Hello?"

"Better?" Viktor sounded amused, and not one bit impatient. I wished that didn't make me feel relieved, but it did.

"Yes. Sorry about that, but my first duty is to my son. So, what happened?" I leaned back in my seat a little to check on Michael, who was quietly coloring while his tunes were softly playing.

"My accountant was murdered. First someone ran him off the road, then they came back and poisoned him at the hospital." His voice was calm, measured, with only a hint of tension.

My throat suddenly felt like it was closing up, as my mind immediately went to the Russian man who'd been all over the news. The one Luis's school friend had killed. *He was part of the Bratva?*

For some reason, this information, this connection, made me feel a little sick. With worry? With fear? I couldn't place it.

"I...I'm terribly sorry," I managed to murmur, "that sounds horrible." And yet despite the sudden swirl of thoughts and emotions flying through me, I couldn't help but notice how obviously and easily the truth had come out. He could have told me anything at all, and I'd probably have had no reason not to believe him. But he chose to tell me what was actually happening.

"Yes, I had to spend some time at the coroner's office," he continued, his smooth voice sounding a little exhausted, "make sure the family knew. It took far longer than expected."

"You don't have to apologize," I said too quickly. "I was just concerned."



“Yes.” Just a beat of silence. “I admit I was a bit surprised. I don’t get asked that too often.”

*Are you all right?* Somehow, the thought that nobody checked in on him, not even his ‘brothers’, made me sad. And then there was his admission. He hadn’t been all right. But he had soldiered on regardless.

“You just lost someone close to you.” I left it at that, not feeling like I should have to explain my empathy.

“Indeed.” And he was quiet again, as I tried to digest what I had just learned.

“Is that bossa nova in the background?” He changed the subject so fast that I had to adjust for a moment.

“It is. It’s Michael’s current favorite. He likes music without words best.” I couldn’t help but gush a little about my baby.

“The boy is three years old, correct?”

Uh-oh. He was feeling things out about Michael. “Yes. As of a few months ago.”

“Sophisticated tastes for a child,” he noted, and I laughed nervously.

“Yes, he’s definitely doing his own thing.” Bring it up, I urged myself. Get it over with. Let Viktor know he’s a father, and that you’ve been debating this whole time whether to try to get in touch with him. “Um...” My throat was tight again. Why was this so hard?

“Yes?” His tone was gentle.

“About Michael.” I struggled with my feelings for a few seconds, but I had always been a bad liar. “You should know...I mean...” I sounded like an idiot. Blushing furiously, I took a moment to compose myself. “He has your eyes,” I said finally.

This time the silence was long, but when he spoke again, he shocked me.

By not being shocked. “I noticed.”

“What?” I looked around unconsciously, worrying that he had me under surveillance after all.

“When I went to hire your auction house for the disposal of my uncle’s collection, I saw the two of you walking away. I was so shocked at the time that I did not say anything. I haven’t quite known what to say since.”

“Me either.” I let out a nervous laugh, not sure whether to be ashamed or relieved that he already knew. “Not for a long time. It’s part of why I never tracked you down.”

“That and my...occupation?” Again, gentle teasing in his voice. My cheeks felt like they would burst into flames.

“Look, I’m not even judging. And I don’t talk to anyone about what little I know about you. I just didn’t know how much danger being close to you would put me in. Me or my son. But you still have a right to know.”

“It is good that you understand that.” I heard a soft huff and wondered if he was smoking. “I would like to meet him. But right now it is too chaotic. You may not believe this, but I have no desire to bring additional danger into your life or his.”

I caught my breath for the first time in what felt like weeks. He wasn’t angry. He was being reasonable. He was concerned about our safety. It was nothing like what I had braced myself for. But then again, I had no experience with fathers. “So...what now?”

“Do you need assistance with him?”

Another surprise. “Do you mean, like, child support? No, I make enough to cover us. But there is his future to think about.”

“Private school. College. Medical expenses and the like.”

How could he be so cool about this when I was jumping around inside my own skin? “I hadn’t gotten quite that far, but, yes. But...” I stopped, suddenly

unable to continue. My mouth was dry. I got up and got myself a glass of water.

“There’s something else?” he pried gently.

*Just spit it out.* I sat back down heavily, taking a swallow before speaking again. “Yes. What should I tell him about you?”

“Tell him...” He trailed off thoughtfully. “Tell him that I have been on a long journey overseas. I do not think he should know right away who I am... in case these chaotic times force some kind of separation.”

I felt a chill go down my back. This mess involving the deaths, and Luis’s school friend. What was going on that he thought there was a risk he might have to leave? “That’s important. I don’t want to upset him.” *Or have him gain a father and suddenly lose him all over again.*

No. That could not be allowed.

“Then we are in agreement. Good.” I heard the rattle of something, and the scratch of a pen. “I will contact you about scheduling the estate sale when your office is next open. Once that is properly out of the way, I want to spend more time with you.”

This time the shiver that went down my back didn’t leave me feeling cold at all. “I’d like that,” I said softly, before I could stop myself.

That throaty, self-satisfied little chuckle of his made me squirm. “Good. I look forward to it.”

He ended the call, and I downed the rest of my water in a few gulps, my hand shaking slightly. Did that conversation just happen?

Yes, it had. I had gotten through it, stilted and uncomfortable as the conversation had been. I had managed to tell him, finally, that Michael was his son, and he had taken it well. It looked like we might be able to handle this amicably.

But in the process, I had learned something I hadn’t been ready for. Luis’s

killer childhood friend was an enemy of the Bratva.

# Chapter 13

## *Viktor*

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news, sir,” said the senior police detective, as he sat across my desk from me. “But they’re going ahead with the investigation.”

I sighed and leaned back in my padded chair, staring at him. He was a small man for a cop, with flat, shiny blond hair clinging to his skull and a round head that sat directly on his shoulders. He also looked nervous, which told me he was relatively new to his rank.

I had cops in my office at least twice a week now. It didn’t bother me, just part of doing business in Boston. I remembered seeing them in my uncle’s office during my early twenties and being astonished. Now it was just another chore to get through.

“I see. Well, that’s not really a surprise. Though I do appreciate that you brought the news to me in person.” It showed respect.

With the press attention and two dead men, missing security tapes—which I had arranged to be conveniently lost, and a mystery killer—or mystery to them at least, I knew exactly where to find Boris—at large, it was inevitable that Cambridge PD would start nosing around.

“What do you want the guys down at the precinct to do?” he asked tentatively.

I eyed the notebook in front of me. Chicken scratches in Cyrillic. He wouldn’t be able to read them—with a surname like Jorgensen I guessed he was of Scandinavian heritage through and through. “I have a man looking for an associate of Ivan’s murderer. Once we are done questioning her, you can have her. I only want the head start.”

“It’s the Pueblo, then.”

I nodded curtly.

“Fuck.” He ran a hand back over his glued-down hair pointlessly. “Are you going to war? In the middle of Cambridge?”

“I did not wish to. But two of our people are dead, and El Luchador won’t meet.” I turned a page in my notebook. “It is the opinion of the Brotherhood that they should be driven out.”

“We can lean on them. They might be hiding out, but they have friends, family...” He hesitated when he saw my expression shift.

“I’m willing to go a long way, and take a great deal of personal risk, to avoid a war in my town,” I told him quietly. “But I refuse to involve innocents unless we are left with absolutely no choice. Unless they actually break the law, I don’t want you and yours leaning on anyone who is not a direct Pueblo member.”

His expression was an interesting mix as he nodded frantically, relieved, surprised, afraid. “U-understood.”

“That said...” I hesitated. I didn’t want to go behind Boris’s back, but he had yet to produce any information on the woman who had seduced him the night before Ivan’s murder. And I needed to make sure he wasn’t hiding anything. Alcohol wasn’t the only intoxicant that could put a man off his game, and I wasn’t sure that this Maria wasn’t still playing with his head. Or other parts. “This Maria woman.”

“Yeah, about her. I can’t exactly have the boys put out an APB on Puerto Rican women named Maria, but what I can do is send you data on who we bring in with that name.”

That was worse than useless. I didn’t even know what the damn woman looked like. The only one who could verify her face was Boris...

“I want one of your men to watch one of mine for a while. He’s the one

who had contact with her, and I want someone to watch for her if she approaches him in public again.” I gave him Boris’s details without a single lick of guilt about it. I probably should have felt something, having Boris tailed by the police like he was no-one, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that something was going on here. Something that I couldn’t trust him to see, with the way he’d been lately.

“Don’t let him realize that he’s being tailed,” I added after a moment. Not that there was much of a chance of that if he was drinking as much as I suspected. But whatever was going on, my instincts told me I couldn’t rely on Boris alone right now. Not anymore.

“Of course not.” He stared at me for a moment, then ventured, “You don’t seem as hot for a turf war as your boys.”

“Definitely not. Yet another reason why I want this handled discreetly.” But even as I said it, I knew there would likely be no other choice now but war. If not violence in the streets, then a cold war of quiet move against quiet move, which would still involve deaths.

Either way, Ivan had to be avenged. And if I discovered that Mischka’s death was anything but completely natural, blood would run.

“Was there anything else?” I asked the new detective.

“No, sir.” He had seen the look in my eyes, and was now so pale that his hair looked carrot by comparison. I waved him out distractedly, and he hurried out of the office like his ass was on fire.

I got up and went to stand at the window, watching him hurry out to his unmarked sedan and drive away. As I stood there, my mind drifted toward more pleasant things.

Olivia. Our son Michael, whom she was apparently working very hard to care for and protect. I smiled faintly. Our conversation had been awkward. But it could have gone so much worse.

At least I had that now. Though I was well aware that if the Puerto Ricans

sank low enough, they could leverage that. And being that they had murdered a helpless old man in the middle of a hospital, I had to make sure nobody found out about my new woman and my unexpected son.

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*“Now, Viktor, what have I told you about speaking out of turn?”*

*I lifted my head and wiped blood out of the corner of my eye. The other was already swelling shut. My beating had been intense, but that wasn't what bothered me. No. What had me tensed up inside and tempted to test the ropes that bound me was the sobbing I had heard in the other room.*

*“My apologies.” I was always cool and polite when I spoke to Mr. Florescu. He had plucked me off the Vladivostok streets along with some other boys, and in return, we owed him our lives, our loyalty, and, above all, any money that we earned.*

*Which was why I was tied to a chair right now, at fifteen, taking a beating that would leave me scarred.*

*“So explain to me again where that money got to, Viktor. You were short again.” His voice was thick with anger, and I knew that whether I was honest or not, he wasn't done hitting me.*

*But if I lied and he caught me in it, he would do more than beat me. Possibly much more. He had killed one boy for taking a payoff from a rival gang. Maybe not intentionally, but dead was dead.*

*“My neighbor was starving,” I said simply. “She has small children. There is nothing for her by the time she can get into the bread lines. I thought—”*

*“You thought what? That you would save her? With my money?” He sounded so disgusted that my ears burned. “You and Boris are both idealistic idiots. No wonder you've paired off like brothers.”*

*I heard the sobbing start up in the other room again, and this time I was sure of it. “Sir—”*



*“Don’t give me your ridiculous excuses. Now I have to put that stupid woman on the streets to earn back what you stole. Where she should have gone in the first place, really. Who told her to have babies if she couldn’t feed them?”*

*I felt my rage simmering inside me as I looked at the man who had taken me in and made me a thief. In just a few short years, he had gone from my hero to the man I despised most. Florescu was a petty sadist, cruel, greedy, without even the pretense that some thieves called honor.*

*“What about her children?”*

*“What about them? Plenty of kids grow up with whores for mothers. If they’re lucky, she even keeps them.” That was a dig at me, at all of us, we were all throwaway children.*

*I was just realizing how much I wanted to kill him when the door opened, and two of Florescu’s men came in dragging a struggling woman.*

*But the woman was Olivia. She had Michael in her arms—*

I sat straight up in bed with a little shout and stared around the dim room. Nightmare. Nothing more. Florescu was long dead, Boris and I had long since come to America, and now both of us had power within a Bratva of our own. And Olivia, she had never been to Russia.

But the dream had still spoken of things that could happen.

Olivia didn’t avoid me because she didn’t want me to know about Michael, or didn’t like me, or didn’t want me in her life. She avoided me because she was afraid. I would never harm her or Michael, but she was right. Trouble follows a man in my position.

I got up, tugging my pajama pants up a little as I crossed my bedroom floor. I pushed aside my curtains and stared out the window at the rainy view beyond. I had put in an order for Uncle Mischka’s autopsy report, aiming to compare it with Ivan’s. I was having Boris followed. I was coming at this from every angle I could come up with, but I still felt like I was missing

something.

My dream had me thinking of Olivia and her safety far too much. It wouldn't be much of a drive to go check on her. But I shouldn't. I might be followed. Also, it was the middle of the damned night and she had a small child.

I still found myself on the road in one of the motor pool's anonymous black sedans within twenty minutes of having that internal debate. I would just keep an eye on her neighborhood for a while. Make sure that nothing troubling was going on.

I played instrumental jazz as I drove, but softly, keeping a wary eye on traffic, especially potential tails.

I started to relax as I drew closer to her apartment building. The neighborhood was solidly middle class, the building well kept, but the units looked small. I wondered if she was trying to save money. She had insisted that she was well off, but apparently her standards and mine were different.

I frowned slightly. I could at least set her up in one of the houses I owned. It was a small thing for me, but it could make a huge difference for her and my son. A yard to run around in. A dog—big, tough, and well-trained—to look after their safety.

Maybe even room for me.

I rolled my eyes as I caught myself in that idea. Plenty of Bratva men had wives and children eventually, but I was a fool to even think about that now. Not only was Olivia afraid of getting too close to me, but I was new in my leadership position, and it was currently being threatened.

I was just considering pulling out of my parking spot across the street when I saw something I hadn't expected. There was a figure prowling the alleyway alongside her apartment building. A tall man, all in black, his face covered with a bandana under his hoodie.

A scowl deepened on my face as I watched him. He was fiddling with the

bars on one of the apartment windows. Not Olivia's—but that didn't matter. There was no telling where the man would go once he broke into the building.

Could someone have found out about Olivia and me this quickly? I hadn't even told Boris yet. The man could just be a random prowler.

But he had picked the wrong alleyway.

I got out of my car, locked it, and looked up. The man was standing still in the shadows, alerted by the sound of my car door opening and closing. I started crossing toward the apartment, not quite facing his direction. He didn't move.

I drew my pistol from under my jacket as I saw a flash of metal in his hand, and bolted toward him as fast as I could.

I heard a yell as he dropped whatever was in his hand and it clattered on the ground. Then he ran for it. I picked up speed, racing after him, my black overcoat flapping at my heels. We cleared the alleyway just as someone flicked on the lights in the window he had been standing at.

I was faster than most men my size and age, so the prowler lost ground to me fast, especially when he had to scramble over a fence. I had only caught a flash of dark hair and frightened black eyes. I had no idea who the hell he was. But I was going to find out.

Our chase took us through the backyard of a large house and then over another fence. I was still gaining ground on him. But then he leaped the fence into the next yard over, and I heard a deep-voiced snarl from beyond, that sounded like it came from a bear. My quarry yelled suddenly and started scrambling to get back over to my side of the fence while a deep, booming bark echoed out over the neighborhood.

I gave him a hand by grabbing both his lapels as soon as his head and shoulders popped back up over the fence. I dragged him the rest of the way, hearing the cloth tear. He came over with the back of his raincoat ripped off. I heard the dog growling and shaking his head.

Lights were going on in some of the surrounding houses. I dragged the idiot into the darkest, most remote corner of the yard and slammed him up against the garage wall. He was a kid, maybe nineteen, and definitely not Puerto Rican, unless he'd been adopted. His freckles stood out on his ashen face like paint splatters.

“Who are you? What the hell did you think you were doing?” I hissed as I smacked him against the wall again for emphasis.

He flapped his mouth silently. Impatient, I looked around for security cameras and then drew my gun and stuck it in his face. He whimpered, cringing away from it. This was no hitman.

“Well?” I demanded.

“My girlfriend lives there. She blocked me and won't talk to me, and she wouldn't say why so I—”

I stared at him. *Are you fucking kidding me?* “So you thought you would break into her home.”

I looked him up and down. That raincoat was too heavy for the weather. With an annoyed snarl I shoved my forearm into his throat, partially blocking his airway as I pinned him down. Then with my other hand I waved my gun in his face. “If you so much as twitch, I'll shoot you in whatever body part this is nearest.” Then I checked under his raincoat and yanked out a long, cheap catalog knife, pulling hard enough that its faux leather sheath dropped to the ground in two pieces.

“You thought you'd chop her up. With this.”

He didn't seem to know where to direct his terrified look now—at my eyes, at the gun, or at the knife. “I...she was...I just wanted to make her come back...”

“Then maybe you shouldn't have scared her off in the first place.” I wanted to kill him for his audacity, for his bloody plans, and for fucking inconveniencing me like this when I could have been watching over Olivia.

“You can’t make a woman come back to you once you damage her love for you enough, you damned fool.” I forced him to look at me, letting back on the partial pressure I had on his throat so that I could switch the knife to my free hand and tuck it under his weak chin to keep his head up. “You would have murdered her as soon as you realized that.”

Tears brimmed over in his tiny shit-colored eyes. “I...I...all I did was choke her once!”

He let out a tiny squeak of fear as he saw my expression.

“I should kill you here and now, before you hurt any more defenseless girls,” I growled. “Your kind never gets taken to task for your actions. You just pity yourselves and pull the same shit over and over.” I moved a step closer. At this angle I could have severed his jugular with one stroke, even with this cheap-ass knife. “It’s time you learned about consequences.”

He started to hyperventilate. His breath was foul. That only pissed me off more.

“If you ever go near her, this building, or this neighborhood again, or speak of this to anyone, I will know. I will find you. And I will *geld* you with your own knife!”

He was nodding gingerly, too aware of the knife under his neck. His eyes rolled like a frightened horse’s. When I pulled the knife away, he ran for it, stumbling out of the yard as fast as he could.

I stood there in the shadows, catching my breath. The lights around us had gone back out. But I suddenly became aware that someone was watching me.

I looked over and saw a furry head peering at me over the fence. The dog was absolutely gigantic, a brown and black Ovcharka that probably outweighed me. He’d gone silent and just watched, as if knowing I had his intruder in hand.

“Good dog,” I told him. He tilted his head slightly, then dropped back down. It was unusual to see a Caucasian shepherd dog being used as a guard

dog here, maybe I'd have to get someone to check on the owner. *Or maybe, I just needed to stop being so paranoid about what kind of people were getting close to my woman and child.*

I slipped out of the yard, tucking my pistol away and hiding the knife up one sleeve. The thing felt like it had been hammered out of a car bumper. What was with stalkers and oversized, cheap cutlery?

I went back to my car without slipping through the alleyway, though I did turn back once I was on that street to see what the metal thing he had dropped was. My eyes widened—it was a pistol. I had scared that wet-behind-the-ears little maniac so badly that he'd dropped it instead of firing it.

His girl dumped him, and his response was to break into her apartment with a knife and a gun. I should have cut his throat. Hopefully, I had put enough fear into him that he would think twice about indulging any more of his 'romantic' fantasies.

I sat in my car watching a while longer. Eventually, a slim young woman in pajamas wandered out yawning to see what the fuss had been about. She looked in the alley, saw the gun, and turned around quickly, looking around before rushing inside.

I sighed. She hadn't seen me, but she was doubtless about to call the police. And that marked the end of my vigil.

*Sleep well, Olivia,* I thought, hoping she would only learn about the strange events at her apartment building in the morning. *You and my son too.*

# Chapter 14

## *Olivia*

I checked my makeup in one of the decorative mirrors hanging by my desk for the dozenth time that hour. Then the clock on my computer for the tenth. Viktor was coming in to discuss the estate sale, which was opening this weekend.

It was the first time that my coworkers would see us together. The first time that anyone who had met Michael would get a good look at Viktor. Those distinctive eyes of his that he'd passed down to his son, they couldn't possibly be missed.

There would be questions. If not today, then soon. At this point, it was unavoidable. My fault for bringing Michael to work. But what the hell was I going to say to everyone?

*Guess I'll have to cross that bridge when I come to it.* I fussed with my hair, the items on my desk, even my computer desktop. My hands wouldn't stop moving, so I forced them into my lap and folded them.

Viktor was on my mind more with every passing day. Every minute I spent with him, it seemed, the more he slipped into me—into my thoughts, into my body's cravings. I'd dreamed of him just that morning and woken up reaching for him across my empty mattress.

*I'm an idiot,* I thought as I struggled to double-check all the documents needed for the auction. I kept telling myself not to get stuck on a Russian gangster, but then let him live rent-free in my head more and more.

"You okay?" Marcie had picked up on something, probably from my expression.

I smiled tightly. "Oh, you know how it is, it's been a crazy week. Had to

drop off my car this morning for a service and pick up the rental, now I'm just stressing over the upcoming auction series."

"That's new. You used to do that a lot in your first year, but you've been sailing through without a worry line for years now."

"It's the client." I weighed how much to tell her for a few moments. "He's not particularly difficult, just..."

Her eyebrows lifted. "Particularly hot? I saw the guy come in when he was looking for you."

I blushed before I could stop myself, and she chuckled. Then her face went thoughtful. "How long have you known the guy?"

"Viktor? A few years, technically..."

"And you've never flirted with him or anything like that?"

She'd already figured it out. I should have guessed. Marcie missed so little that she probably could have become a detective. "I...well, he's sure flirted with me. But not in a creepy way. Which is both great and really distracting."

"Have you ever considered going for it? I'm assuming he's not married."

I hesitated. She was even more of a hopeless romantic than I. The more I told her, the more she would want to know. "If he's married, he never wears a ring." I touched my finger. "No tan line."

"Good sign," she teased. "If you're this preoccupied by the guy, I'd say go for it. Unless you have reason to suspect he's an asshole under the looks and charm."

It would be easier if he was an asshole. But he had never been anything but charming, considerate, and seductive as hell. I resented how smugly assured he was of his power over me, but that was mostly because he was right. The guy could snap his fingers and I'd follow him to bed.

"No. He's not perfect..." *Because he's a criminal.* "But he's not a bad



person.”

And that was the craziest part. I had met guys with no parking tickets who were bigger assholes than Viktor, at least so far. Guys who verbally and mentally abused the women in their lives, or even slapped them around. Guys who were cruel and controlling as hell. Viktor was the first lover I’d had who had bothered to turn me on properly before plunging in.

Tough not to get hooked just on the “not a dick but knows how to use his properly” energy.

“So? Ask the guy out. It’s 2023, honey, he’ll love it.” She winked and I smiled awkwardly.

“I’ll think about it. Meanwhile, did I tell you what happened last night at my apartment building?” Easier to pretend I had that worrying me as well, instead of it being Viktor all the time.

“What was it? Not anything too crazy, I hope.” Her excited look turned to one of shrewd concern.

“They arrested my downstairs neighbor’s ex on stalking charges and attempted breaking and entering.” I stifled a yawn. I had ended up short on sleep because of these shenanigans, but it had been kind of interesting, in a very creepy way.

“Oh crap. She isn’t hurt, is she?”

“Nah, he didn’t even get in through her window. That’s where the story gets interesting.” She nodded and I went on. “See, my neighbor was dating this neckbeard guy for about six weeks. You know the type, half in a games-and-anime fantasy world with no social skills or personal hygiene, gets excruciatingly weird and demanding around girls every time no matter how often it backfires on him?”

Her worried look became exasperated. “Yeah. We’ve got a neighbor like that. Did he ask you for feet pics?”

“Twice, once in front of her.” I winced at the cringiness of it all. “Anyway, she finally dumps this jackass after he throws a tantrum so loud that I heard every single word, and when he won’t leave her alone after that, she gets a protection order.”

“Good on her.” She nodded her approval before tossing me a foil-wrapped caramel. “But that wasn’t the end of it.”

“Oh, no. Nobody gets stupid-angrier than a stalkery guy who’s been told no, after all. So last night, super late, I wake up and there are cop lights flashing through my window. I get up and put on a robe so I can go investigate. They’ve got this guy in handcuffs, face down on the back of a cruiser, with his coat torn to hell. And he’s crying and thanking them and babbling something about his ex’s new boyfriend.”

She barked a laugh. “Did the guy kick his ass or something?”

“The creep was apparently breaking into her window with a gun and a knife on him when some guy he’s never seen before comes running across the street out of nowhere and comes after him. Chased him through a few yards, took his weapons away, and said he’d kill him if he came back around that building again.”

Her eyebrows were creeping up again. “Oh shit.”

“Yeah. I asked the girl about it, and she said she’s not even dating anyone and has no idea who the man was who protected her. One of the neighbors called the cops, and they found her ex’s gun on the ground outside. Then they found him half a block away having a panic attack behind a car.

“He was so scared of the guy who went after him that he begged to be put in jail. Cops were happy to do it after they found out what he was up to before he got chased away.”

“Sounds like he was planning to straight up kill the poor girl.”

“Yeah, it’s the instability most of all that scares women off from these guys, and this is why. Some men, you can’t tell they’re going to be abusive or

a danger to you until you're with them. But a guy like that practically has abuser tattooed on his forehead.”

“I think she tried pity-dating him.” Young girls always seemed to think they could fix guys or inspire them to grow up with enough love. Thank God some random man decided to step in.

“Yeah. I wonder who the hell he was.” She scratched her chin, then unwrapped one of her caramels.

“Only thing I know is what the guy said while he was being arrested. Dark hair, light eyes, nice suit, accent, gun.”

“So, James Bond.” The corner of her mouth curled up and I laughed.

“Whoever he was, we owe him one.”

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I didn't know what I was feeling when Viktor finally walked through the door. He had two of his brothers with him, the huge coarse-faced one who was almost always by his side, and another man, shorter than both of them but just as beefy, who was mostly watching his associate more than Viktor.

The vibe between them distracted me a little from my confusing jumble of emotions. It seemed odd. Not like the dynamic I had seen between him and his men, and between his men, before. It almost looked like Viktor and the other guard didn't trust his right-hand man so much anymore.

I got up to greet Viktor and shake his hand, and all the words dried up in my mouth when he took my hand and kissed it instead. Just the lightest brush of his lips and I was a wreck. *Damn him.*

I struggled for a moment, then pasted my smile back on and offered them a seat across from my desk. Only the big one sat beside his boss, the third stood near the doorway, alert as a Doberman. But again, his eyes went back to the big guy more than anywhere else.

I was in a room full of mobsters. Killers. And one of them had way too

much power over me.

“I’ve already gone over the basic auction schedule with you, so today’s meeting is mostly about this weekend. The auction is all of your uncle’s lower-ticket items, so it will be mixed and open to the public. We get a lot of people at the public auctions, so I expect everything or nearly everything put out to sell. If not, we can find room for the unsold items on the rest of the schedule, unless you have another preference.”

The big one adjusted his tie unnecessarily. His gaze floated from me to his boss to the window and back again. Nervous. But what about?

There was a whole little drama going on in front of my eyes, but I had no idea what the context or details were. And I wasn’t sure I wanted to know.

“That should be sufficient for a first run. The higher-ticket auctions are to be by invitation only?” Viktor glanced at the man next to him and his eyes narrowed just slightly.

“Yes.” I produced a copy of the guest list for the second auction. “Book collectors, scholars, and anyone in the business of handling first editions who is established enough to be on the local radar. Please let me know if you want any alterations to the list.”

“I want a dozen of my men included on the guest list. I don’t want us all coming in together. I will give you their names via email.” He sat back in his seat, his gaze flicking to meet that of the man beside him, who almost flinched.

“Understood.” I suddenly realized that the man was at least a little drunk. I couldn’t smell it on him, but something in the stiff, nervous way he held himself told me. Drunk and pretending not to be.

He considered the papers I had given him so far, then looked up again. “Will you be attending the auction?”

“All of them. You’re my client, they’re my accounts, it wouldn’t be right not to be there.”

He pursed his lips slightly with pleasure as if to hide a smile, his eyes hooding in a way that made them smolder even more. “Good. Is there anything else I should know about this weekend’s auction?”

“Here’s a list of the staff working the event, including our house security and their photographs.” I passed him the printout. “I’ll be sending all of these via email as well.”

“Good.” He peered at the list, and then set it with the other papers. “I am assuming your security people are armed?”

“Armed, licensed, and bonded. We handle billions of dollars in goods yearly.” They all also wore concealable bulletproof vests under their suits. I had pushed the change a couple of weeks ago, claiming it was because of a deadly robbery at another auction house across town. Even if absolutely nothing bad happened at Viktor’s auctions, you really never knew.

Marcie walked past my door with a stack of papers, glancing in just as Viktor looked up curiously. She caught sight of his eyes and almost dropped the stack before recovering, giving me a startled look and then continuing her walk.

Well...crap. If she hadn’t realized Viktor was Michael’s dad before now, she sure as hell did just then. I coughed into my fist and plowed on.

The rest of the meeting flew past in fifteen minutes. By the end of it, I was almost feeling hopeful. The auctions were going to have as much security as a bank between his men and our security staff. Hopefully, we wouldn’t need them. But if we did, I was confident we would be able to contain any problems.

Like one of his guys being drunk on the job. And whatever else was going on in that situation. Sitting here watching it all play out reminded me of just how little I really knew about Viktor.

“Well, I think that concludes things for today—” I began, but stopped short at the slight shake of Viktor’s head.

“Not quite,” he said evenly, before flicking his wrist almost absently towards the man sitting beside him. “Brothers, please give us a moment alone.”

The beefy man beside him shifted his tie once more and gave him a half-startled look, before the two men promptly left without a word. As the door swung firmly shut behind them, I noticed them stationed on either side of the frame in almost military fashion.

“Um,” I managed after a moment, “is everything alright?”

“Better than alright,” Viktor replied, and his smile widened and warmed his eyes. “Stand up for me, please.”

I blinked. “Uh...”

But when he just raised a brow, I found my body obeying him without conscious thought.

He lifted two fingers and gestured me over with a decisive flick, eyes never leaving mine, and I felt an immediate heat flood my body and pool in my lower belly. Jesus, how did he always affect me like this when he barely even did anything?

Once more my traitorous feet obeyed his wordless command, and when his fingers enveloped my wrist and tugged, I slipped onto his lap without any hesitation.

“I...don’t think this is very appropriate for the office,” I managed to mumble, though I was caught entirely in his smoldering gaze.

“No-one will enter,” he replied confidently. “Trust me.”

“I do.” The words slipped from my lips unbidden, but the way his expression seemed to soften at hearing them made it so that I couldn’t quite regret saying it.

“Good,” he whispered, before taking my chin between his fingers and drawing me down for a pantie-melting kiss.

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*I'm not in love with him, I reminded myself after we said our goodbyes and I watched him walk out the door. I barely know him. This is infatuation. I shouldn't dress it up as anything more than what it is. Especially when Michael's well-being still needs to be my first priority.*

I was still putting away my papers and straightening the chairs when Marcie came back, walking into my office with her eyes wide and her mouth just a little open. I sighed and braced myself for what was coming.

“So, uh, when were you going to tell me that the rich Russian guy is Michael's dad?” she asked as soon as she closed my office door.

My smile was half wince. “When I figured out how the heck to talk about it?”

She let out a little laugh. “Well, will you at least give me the basics?”

“I met him back before he ever became a client. We had a one-night stand. I'd never done that before and I was embarrassed. We fell out of touch, and I let it happen. Then I found out I was pregnant.”

Her eyes widened even more. “Does he know?”

“He does now, that we're back in touch. We're figuring out what to do about it.” I sighed and sat back down while she grabbed the chair the big guy had been sitting in. “Whether we end up together or not, we'll figure something out to benefit Michael.”

“Oh man. Telling him after four years must have been awkward.”

I laughed, some of my tension dissipating now that my sanitized version of the truth was finally out in the open. “You're not kidding. I'm just really glad

he took it well and wants to do right by his son.”

“And you,” she reminded, as if I would forget.

“And me. But we don’t know yet what that part’s going to look like either.” I couldn’t even figure out what I wanted it to look like. Friends and co-parents...with benefits? Love? Marriage? Ridiculous. The man lived in a completely different world than we did.

But apparently, my body hadn’t gotten the message. And I was worried that my heart was just as stupid.



# Chapter 15

## *Viktor*

**B**oris sat in the back with me while Andrei drove the sedan. He was silent, his eyes flicking from me to his hands, which were curled nervously on his knees.

He was drunk. I had seen him drunk a hundred times before, but never during the day, and never on duty. But now, he'd done it twice within a week. And just like then, he was trying to hide it from me now.

We had gotten into some decent fights in our youth. I always beat him—he had the size and reach advantage but he simply never trained as hard, and he wasn't as clever as I was either. Toughness only held him for so long when I was just as tough and persistent.

Right now, I wanted to order the car to the side of the road and kick his ass like we were still a couple of rowdy Russian orphans. But instead, I had to retain my composure, and handle this professionally.

The only problem was, in the Bratva, there were no firings. There were punishments, there was a form of exile involving the forcible removal of one's tattoos...but ultimately, the only answer to the worst offenses was a bullet.

I was a long way from that with Boris, but I worried. I worried that he would be stubborn, that he would double down on his newfound stupidity if called on it. That he would disappear into the bottle he was now pulling on by lunchtime. And that he would once again fail in a way that got one of us killed.

When he finally spoke, however, it wasn't any kind of apology. Nor did he ask what was on my mind that kept me quiet as well. No. He cleared his throat, and then said in a low voice, "You're fucking that auction lady, aren't

you?”

I shot him an incredulous look. “What in God’s name are you bringing that up for?”

“The hypocrisy.” He stared at me, then scowled and bobbed his head. “Yeah, you are. You’re fucking her. On the regular, I’m guessing, from the way you looked at her.”

I stared at him silently for several seconds and watched him start to fidget again. Then I said, in a low, cold voice, “What hypocrisy?”

“You didn’t like my screwing around when I was supposed to be focused on business, and that was fair. But then you turn around and do it yourself!” His face was darkening. Little snaps of anger showed in his small, black eyes.

I turned on him, the anger that had been simmering inside me since I noticed he was drunk rising in me like magma before an eruption. “Have you completely lost your mind, speaking to me this way? Olivia was doing her job today, as was I. She did not distract me from it in ways that cost the Bratva, like your Maria did. She’s helping me settle my uncle’s affairs.

“The fact that she’s been in my bed a few times does nothing to damage my performance as leader. None of us have died on my watch because of my minor involvement with her. Can you say the same?”

He sank back in his seat a little, big arms folded on his barrel chest and his face as sullen as a teenager’s. “That was just bad luck.”

I fell silent and just stared at him, amazed how my strong right hand had become so weak and childish so fast. I knew his feelings were hurt that I was no longer showing him any favoritism, but I couldn’t afford to. Not while he kept fucking up and then pretending it wasn’t a problem or wasn’t his fault.

“That was a mix of exhaustion from carousing all night with a lover who may just be working for the Puerto Ricans, and drunkenness from your newfound alcoholism. Which I see won the fight again today.”

He went pale at that, and I snorted in disgust and looked away. “Of course I noticed, Boris. And very likely, so have others.”

When I looked back at him, he was staring at me red-faced, jaw set, stubborn anger in his eyes. I shook my head incredulously. I hadn’t seen him act like this since we were twenty. “What do you think is going to happen once it gets around that you’re often drunk, arguing with me, failing at your duties in ways that get people killed, and possibly sleeping with a Pueblo member? Once that happens, I’ll be expected to discipline you, or then I really will seem weak.”

No answer. His mouth worked, but not a word slipped out of it.

“Why the hell are you acting like this?” I watched him squirm under my gaze and refuse to look back at me. “You’ve let your drinking get out of control, and you’re acting like a boy half your age—”

“Don’t insult me,” he growled under his breath.

I slapped him. Back of the hand, across his face. Not even that hard, but it startled him into silence. He’d seen me do it to others before, but I’d never had to do it to him before.

“You are drunk, you are fucking up, and you are being an asshole about it,” I told him in Russian. “You are embarrassing me. You are embarrassing yourself.” That seemed to get through his defenses, he flinched slightly. I calmed a little as I switched back to English.

“If you find the truth insulting, perhaps you should change it. I find it insulting that you’re failing me and giving me a bad attitude on top of everything. But when I ask you what’s going on—”

“Nothing is going on,” he snapped a little too quickly and loudly for comfort. “I’ve just been having a run of bad luck.”

“I would agree with you, but your bad luck is largely self-inflicted,” I replied with exaggerated patience. “I simply don’t understand why one warning wasn’t enough for you.”

He was quiet for a long while. I watched him, keeping my face implacable. Finally, he looked up at me and said, “You should trust me to take care of my problems on my own.”

“I did. But you’ve failed to do so, Boris. You have failed my faith in you, our brothers, and yourself. And most of all—”

“Don’t say his name.” The exhausted despair in his voice shocked me.

I sat back, looking at the traffic around us. “At least you have the decency to be ashamed.”

He huffed with anger, then went quiet. We rode for a while in silence. Finally, he said, “I’m not that drunk.”

“Not as badly as last time. But still noticeable. And it’s making you belligerent.” At least I hoped that was what his attitude was about. “If there is no problem behind all of this, why have you not taken your situation in hand?”

“It’s not that bad,” he started, and I rolled my eyes.

“Do you want the back of my hand again? You’re acting like a fresh recruit. If you want to keep your standing, get whatever help you need and dry out. I don’t want to see you in this condition again or I’ll have to punish you in front of the men. Harshly.” I locked eyes with him until he looked away.

I hated this. Why did there seem to be no getting through to him? Or at least, very little. Could it be the alcohol? I had never seen any signs of addiction in him in all this time. He’d abused his liver plenty during weekend parties, but no more than the rest of us.

Something was going on. And it bothered me deeply that he wouldn’t even admit there was a problem, let alone tell me what it was. Now he had challenged me because I had any lover at all, but had forbidden him from sleeping with a potential enemy saboteur.

I didn't know why, but it bothered me that he knew Olivia was my lover. That he knew her face and where she worked. I wondered why that would worry me, the man was still my best friend. It didn't make sense to worry about his knowing.

But then again, his behavior didn't make sense either. I prayed I was wrong, but my gut told me there was going to be more trouble ahead between us. I just didn't want Olivia dragged into it in the process.

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It was raining the day of the auction, with a sunset-dark sky at noon and wind blowing umbrellas inside out all over Cambridge. Boris was beside me, but this time, sober and a lot less nervous. We were all packing, all wary.

When you worked in the underworld and were more than semi-famous, you didn't want to end up showing your face in public at any scheduled event. If your enemies knew you were going to be at a certain place at a certain time, it made it easier for them to set up an attack.

It was a damned book auction. It shouldn't have required us to wear vests under our suits, or for me to bring out my Taurus Judge just to settle family affairs. But with a war with the Puerto Ricans still looming over us, I couldn't take any chances.

I had brought ten men with me besides Boris to mingle with the crowd. Some would already be there, others would trail in after me, linked by their throat mics but seemingly here completely on their own.

"I wonder who's going to be there," I mused as we drove into the auction house's VIP parking lot. To hear Olivia speak of it, there were enough wealthy book enthusiasts in the Boston metro area to ensure a very large crowd. Hopefully, that meant that everything would sell.

But large crowds had their drawbacks as well. Harder to watch for

problems, or get to them before they blew up. More innocent people for the enemy to use as meat shields before we could get to them.

Hopefully, none of the Puerto Ricans had gotten wind of the auction series. But if they had, we would be as ready for them as possible.

Boris grunted and pointed across the street to the packed regular parking lot, where cars circled futilely looking for spaces. “Too many for the lot, apparently.”

“I see that. Well, let’s see what Uncle Mischka’s books will get us.”

I didn’t bother with an umbrella, as for Boris, he used one of the big golf ones that had a windproof flap and unbreakable struts. He held it over both of us as we hurried toward the awning-sheltered entrance.

Inside, the lobby already bustled with activity. I looked around for Olivia and quickly caught sight of her standing by a small flock of suited employees with name tags, probably doing a last-minute briefing. They scattered away slowly after she finished, and I walked over, giving her a smile.

“Good afternoon, my dear. You look lovely.” She had dressed up a bit for the auction, in a long aubergine gown just modest and severe enough to make her still look like she meant business. The silk shimmered slightly as she moved, making her look a little like a 1940s femme fatale.

She lowered her head slightly and blushed at the compliment, which made me smile. “Thank you. We’re ready to head in when you are.”

As she turned to leave, I wrapped my fingers lightly around her wrist and drew her close, reveling at the way her breath caught and her gaze softened as she stared up at me.

“Where is Michael today?”

She blinked at me, her blue eyes wide and slightly confused. “He’s with his aunt, Anna. She’s babysitting—”

“Good.” I smiled, and resisted the urge to dip my head and capture her

slightly parted lips. “You’ll be leaving with me once we’re done here.”

“O-oh,” she stuttered. *Adorable*. “I...okay.”

My smile stretched, and it took all my willpower to take a brisk step back from her. The only thing that made the distance between us bearable was the way her breath escaped her in a long, shaky exhale that left me in no doubt that she was equally affected by my nearness.

I wanted her to sit with me, but had to satisfy myself by sitting in the front row of the auction room in a spot where I could watch her backstage. She was buzzing around still, making sure everything was just so before we started. And then, the auctioneer was walking out to the podium, and the first book in the series was set out for display.

The crowd truly was enormous, filling every seat and the back half of the aisles. My men mingled with them. If anything happened, I would be able to give orders to them instantly, despite the crowds and noise.

It was fifteen minutes into the auction when I realized three things. One, book auctions were so sedate as to be almost boring. Two, Boris was watching me more than the crowd. And three, I probably would have been having trouble staying awake were it not for Olivia.

Every glimpse of her was like a bright spark in my mind, giving me focus despite the sleepy proceedings. Just a flutter of deep purple silk, the flash of her sweet, pale face and white shoulders, that rich spill of red hair, and I was alert again, looking her way with an eagerness that reminded me of the crushes of my youth.

It amused me to realize that I was this preoccupied with her. First, the watch I had sat outside her apartment out of fear someone would disturb her, and now straining for glimpses of her backstage like it was the only reason I was here.

I wanted her again. No, scratch that. I always wanted her, but it grew unbearable as I struggled to sit there seriously and keep an ear out for any word from my men.

I wanted to make her want me just as much. I wanted to make her beg for it again. And after that I wanted ordinary. Breakfast together. And finally, the chance to meet my son.

I would talk to her afterward, I decided, and not just for business. Unless she had to watch my boy this evening, I wanted her with me. In my arms.

I snapped myself out of it just as a first edition set of Mark Twain's stories went on the block. I had almost kept it for myself, but realized I already had one in better condition in my library. My own book collection had grown larger than my uncle's, thanks to the few dozen volumes of his I hadn't owned. Sometimes, it took me a minute to keep straight what I had already collected.

I was watching the bid paddles go up as the auctioneer pointed around when Boris leaned over and murmured in my ear, "One of the guys is checking out a car that just pulled into the alley next to this place. They're just sitting there and letting the engine run."

I frowned and checked my earpiece. It was on. I took it out and fiddled with it, and discovered the spiraled cord that ran down into my collar had come slightly loose from the earpiece. I fixed the situation, swearing under my breath. I had been listening to dead air for almost twenty minutes while something had been brewing outside.

"Going to need to find a better design for these things," I muttered as I switched the earpiece back on.

At once, the radio crackled with voices speaking Russian.

"I'm heading in. Got my gun drawn but I'm hiding it by my leg. Looks like there's only two guys in the car." The main voice was a hoarse whisper in my ear. "Might be Puerto Rican. Not sure in this shitty lighting."

"Don't start shit unless you have to," I advised firmly. "Are they responding to you?"

"They're just sitting there ignoring everything. Looks like they might be



waiting for something.” Mikhail’s voice sounded low and tense, like he was expecting trouble.

I didn’t like this one bit. It felt like there was something very strange and potentially dangerous going on back there. “Get a photo of the plates,” I advised. If doing that didn’t get them some kind of negative attention, the people in the car were just oblivious bystanders.

“Yeah, doing that now.” A second later, I heard a scuffle followed by a staticky click.

“Mikhail?” I asked sharply. It sounded like his signal had just been cut off. But then I realized all of them were. The voices in my ear had completely stopped. Boris frowned and tapped his earpiece beside me.

I turned to him. “Take two of our guys and check out what’s going on back there. I think someone might be jamming us, and if they are, I’ll bet the gear is in that car.”

He gave me a startled look I couldn’t fully read, and then nodded. “I’ll do that.” Then he got up and sidled to the edge of the aisle, looming over each person as he passed them with an awkwardly apologetic smile.

I checked my connection again, then swore under my breath. If they were jamming us successfully, they had to know what frequency we used. If that was true, they were getting inside information from somewhere.

How the hell could I give orders now? Not easily. I scowled, then checked my cellphone. No signal. Not one single bar. Whoever was jamming our mics had thought of that too. I wondered how long it would be before the civilians realized their own phones were down.

The thought of that led straight to the thought of Olivia, and immediately I knew I had to protect her. If something was happening, I had a duty to keep it from slopping over and harming her.

They were after me. I’ll leave and draw them away. She could handle selling things without me watching. If I did this right, she would never even

know that danger had been knocking on her door.

I set my jaw and stood, excusing myself down the row of seats until I got to the side aisle. I stepped out into the open, letting any of my men left in the crowd see me. Then I slipped out through a side door.

The service corridors surrounding the auction floor were deserted save for a few guards. They walked around, spread so thin that I easily slipped past them and headed for the side exit. But before I could quite reach it, my attention was caught by quick, light footsteps coming down the corridor, accompanied by the soft rustle of silk.

Olivia appeared, a worried look on her face as she looked around for me. I emerged from the shadows, and she jumped. “Sorry,” I murmured, but I couldn’t find my smile under the circumstances.

“That’s all right. Look, you left suddenly, and all our radios are down. Cellphones too. What’s going on?”

I opened my mouth to reassure her that I had no idea, and then decided she needed to know. “Someone’s parked a car in the side alleyway that probably has a jammer in it. I have enemies. They must have learned of the auction and decided it was a good time to try to take me out.”

Her eyes widened, but she managed to keep her wits and keep her voice low. “We’ve got to get you out of here, then!”

“No. *I*’ve got to get me out of here. You’ve got to go back and run the auction. I will draw them away.” I looked her in the eyes.

“But, Viktor—” she started, one hand already on the exit door.

“No. I will not have you endangering yourself for my sake.” Though it moved me that she would think of it. I wasn’t used to anyone outside the Bratva giving a damn whether I lived or died. “Go back, Olivia. I’ll contact you again as soon as I am able.”

She stepped back from me, pale and trembling, but then nodded and turned

to go.

It was just then that a figure walked toward us in the dim hallway, one of the guards on his rounds. He stopped dead when he noticed us, then moved forward a little more slowly, not reaching for his radio. His hand was down by his holster instead.

Olivia held up her ID for the man, but I frowned. I didn't recall him from the photos Olivia gave me.

I grabbed her one-armed a moment before he drew his weapon. My other hand yanked the Taurus from its holster while I turned to put her behind me. She was just reacting with a squeak when he took aim and the gunfire started.

The man's first bullet bit into the wall six inches from my head. The slug from mine hit him in his right shoulder, destroying it and spinning him completely around. The pistol dropped from his suddenly limp hand and he thudded to the ground a second after, his eyes wide with shock.

Running feet, heading towards us from around the corner at the far end of the hall. Friend or foe? No way of telling. The door was steps away. I pushed Olivia toward it, and we ducked out into dim daylight and rain.

Empty crates were stacked along the wall beside the door, I yanked them down to block it as we ran. "My cars are in the VIP parking lot," I told her as we hurried to get distance between us and the door.

"Won't they know which car is yours?"

I stopped dead. I had parked in the small, sparsely occupied VIP lot, along with three other cars from our motor pool. We were the only ones parked in it. "Damn it." It seemed Boris wasn't the only one off his game lately. "You're right. If they haven't rigged a bomb, they'll at least be watching the cars." I weighed my options. Stealing a car was out. The subway station was a few blocks off.

"So we take mine. It's a rental while the Prius is in the shop. Nobody knows what it looks like."

She was involving herself. Bravely. Loyal.

Inside, I split down the middle—one half angry and worried that she wouldn't let me get her out of this nasty business as fast as possible. One half suddenly wanting her with such savage urgency that I couldn't push it from my thoughts.

“Very well,” I told her. “We'll do it your way.”

# Chapter 16

## *Olivia*

Viktor had just shot someone in front of me to save my life. He had done it without blinking. Without hesitating. And now, I was saving his.

I wasn't running from him. I wasn't calling for the real security guys at the top of my lungs. I was helping him get the hell out of here without being killed.

The two gunshots echoed in my ears, the hard bang of the .38 across the hall and the deep, terrifying boom of whatever the hell that giant gun of Viktor's was loaded with.

But what stuck with me just as much, if not more, was what Viktor had done before even drawing his revolver. He had put himself bodily between me and the shooter. Practically picked me up one-armed, like I weighed nothing, and set me down behind him while he aimed.

His actions had woken something in me. I tingled all over as we hurried across the street through a break in traffic, scared to look behind me in case some of the men trying to kill Viktor noticed us. My mind was racing, wondering what the hell I was going to tell the auction house, and also wondering what Viktor's plan was once we were underway.

"What now?" I panted as we reached my car and I fumbled my keys out.

"Now we draw out the car with the jammer in it and my men will mop up any idiots still in the building. Quietly, I assure you," he added at my expression. "My men do know their business."

"Oh Jesus," I mumbled as I let us both in. "I'm guessing you want to drive?"

“No, I’ll need my hands free. I hope you know how to drive defensively.”

“This is Boston,” I replied simply as I hopped into the driver’s seat and buckled up.

His chuckle made my toes curl.

I had no idea what he was planning to do until he instructed me to park at the mouth of the auction house’s side alley. There was a black sedan, similar to one of Viktor’s cars, sitting there with its engine running. I pulled to the curb as instructed, then saw him reaching up to open the sunroof. “Hey, it’s raining!”

“Yes, apologies.” He stood up suddenly, and before I could react, fired at the sedan’s windshield. The whole thing shattered inward, chunks of safety glass pelting the two startled, bloodied men sitting inside. He fired again, and I looked away just in time for the results to just be a red blur in the corner of my eye. The guy riding shotgun had to be dead.

“Oh God,” I mumbled as I struggled to process what had just happened.

He dropped back down into his seat and pulled the sunroof closed, keeping the gun handy. “Get us out of here!”

I pulled out into traffic and entered its flow, shaking the whole time. A few seconds after we left the curb, the sedan roared out of the alley and knocked a subcompact aside as it turned the corner to follow us. The interior was a red mess just beyond the shattered windshield, with one furious man glaring at me from behind the wheel.

A million crazy things ran through my head as I sped up, weaving through traffic as carefully as I could to try to keep a bit of distance between myself and that maniac. What enemy was after us? How had Viktor guessed that the cellphone jammer was in that car? What was being caught in a car chase-gunfight combo going to do to my car insurance? “Who are these guys?”

“It’s probably best I don’t tell you,” Viktor said, voice still as cool and smooth as the silk of my dress. “Suffice it to say that the streets of Cambridge

aren't going to be as safe as they were for a while."

"Great, wonderful. So now what?"

"Let him keep you in sight for a while, but don't let him get too close."

"What if he shoots?" I asked, trying to steady my breathing while keeping an eye on the car in my rearview mirror.

"He's the just the driver, but keep a good distance from him. I'm hoping he's not stupid enough to try and start a gunfight right here in public," Viktor said, as he tipped out the remaining bullets and reloaded the gun with what looked like shotgun cartridges.

I wasn't sure if this was a comfort or not, but drove like my life depended on it, because it did.

Both of our phones buzzed back to life suddenly, dumping a load of vibrating message alerts. Then Viktor's phone rang.

Still holding the gun in his other hand, he put it to his ear. "Boris! No, I led the car away from the building. I'll soon be making my escape. Get the boys to capture a few of those bastards and wrap them up for me for questioning. I'll be back home in..." he glanced at me, and there was so much heat in his eyes that it made my heart pound. "...four hours. Just keep them on ice until then."

Now he was kidnapping people and letting me overhear it. Well, if my first instinct was to jump in and help him get away, this came with the territory. But I really didn't know how to feel about it, at least besides somehow horny and terrified at the same time.

"They'll be able to wrap things up handily with their communications back." He hung up, smiling confidently. "Now, let's take this fool on a merry little chase. Right turn two blocks ahead, please."

I huffed nervously. "Sure. Okay." I took the turn and headed for the highway, wondering where we would end up. Fifteen seconds later, the sedan

screached around the turn, making the cars behind me let out a chorus of honks. “Yeah. He’s definitely still on us.”

“I’ll disable the car once we’re near the on ramp,” he said in the same calm tone, seeming unconcerned that he was getting closer to us by the second. I sped up, trying to keep enough distance between us that the man behind the sedan’s wheel wouldn’t take a shot at us. “Keep on the side street, nobody uses it. No security cameras either, and I don’t want any bystanders getting hurt.”

That surprised me a little, but I just nodded, set my jaw again, and tried not to think about the sedan creeping up into my rearview mirror again. The neighborhood got crappier and the street more full of potholes as we neared the on ramp.

The wind picked up, rocking my rental and the tires skid a little on the nearly flooded street so I had to slow. I turned the corner just as a shot went off behind me. “Oh crap,” I mumbled, as Viktor sighed and reached for the sunroof latch again.

This time when the unholy bang of his hand-cannon echoed in my ears, I kept my eyes on the road. I didn’t know if he’d just blown out one of the tires or simply shot the driver in the face. I didn’t want to know.

I was trembling by the time we got onto the highway, my system flooded with adrenaline. The car stank of gun smoke, my head was pounding, and I was starting to feel sick. I breathed deep and slow through my mouth as I rolled down my window.

“Are you all right?” he asked me softly as he tucked that giant pistol away.

“No,” I managed when I could get the words out.

“Do you need me to drive?”

I looked over at him, realizing that I was having trouble feeling my fingertips and toes. My lips were tingling like I had been out in the cold too long. “Yes,” I said finally, and got off on the next exit to find a place to stop.



We switched seats, he sprayed something from his pocket that smelled like ozone and killed the cordite smell almost right away, then buckled in and started the car. I sat beside him as he drove back onto the highway, face in hands, struggling to pull myself together.

I remembered the entire windshield blowing apart as the safety glass shattered. The gun he used was a revolver, if a huge one. “What the hell were you loading?” I asked finally as I lifted my head. I still had the headache, but now that the stink was gone, I could handle it.

“It’s a small shotshell,” he said as mildly as if we were discussing where to get dinner.

“You walk around with a damn shotgun-revolver?” I asked incredulously.

He chuckled, a little smile returning to his lips finally. Nothing ever seemed to unnerve him—not even an assassination attempt. “I’m a fan of high stopping power.”

*You don’t say*, I thought as I stared at him. “Where are we going?”

“I have a safehouse nine exits out. We’ll drop out of sight for a little bit, and then you’ll be able to go home.”

I caught my breath. I knew he had plans for those hours of hiding out.

My mind was whirling as I struggled to process the craziest fifteen minutes of my life. He’d killed people in front of me, ordered a kidnapping, and now I was letting him drive me off somewhere. My body was responding to the prospect like adrenaline was an aphrodisiac. But the rest of me wondered if he was taking me there to make love to me, or to make sure I could never tell the police about what I’d seen.

# Chapter 17

## *Viktor*

My sweet little Olivia had done quite well, all things considered. But she also seemed somewhat terrified and conflicted. I even caught her looking at me with worry, as if she half expected me to pull the trigger on her next.

I could understand it, but it was intolerable. I didn't want my woman looking at me with fear. There were many, many brutes in this business who treated their women with possessive disdain and sometimes cruelty. They liked being feared by a woman. Small men, weak and frightened and craving that feeling of power that always eluded cowards.

When Olivia looked at me, I wanted to see her innocent blue eyes full of trust and desire. Perhaps even love. Not this.

I wanted to eradicate her fear of me just as I'd eradicated those men to protect, not just myself, but her as well. The desire to have her look at me as her safety, not her danger, overcame me in that moment so strongly I almost didn't understand it.

"I'm sorry," I said finally, as I warred to keep my tone even, despite the odd way my heart jumped. "I did not want to bring the darker aspects of my...business...into your life. But it seems that my enemies just would not let it lie."

She was quiet for a long while. "I think this was why I ran away before. Not so much because I was worried you'd hurt me, but because I was worried you'd draw trouble. That I'd start drawing trouble too."

I nodded slowly. "My enemies may connect us now. Though it is gratifying to hear that you don't consider me a monster."

Even as the words left my lips, I had to wonder at them. Since when did I

care what anyone's moral judgment of me was? Since when did my gut tighten with worry at the thought that a woman might choose to turn from me should she find out the true darkness of my world, my life?

"You've never seen anyone killed before, have you?" I asked her softly, when all she did was continue to stare at me, hesitation tightening her shoulders as her eyes jumped nervously over me.

"No," she murmured, shaking her head. "I haven't had anybody try to kill me before either."

"Your world is so different from mine." I stifled the urge to run my fingers through her soft red curls soothingly. "I was born in this one. I first ducked gunfire when I was ten. Now, sometimes...well." I laughed a bit awkwardly. "It feels no more troubling than bad weather.

"But I don't want you to look at what happened back there and think that I'm all right with it." I shook my head as she continued her appraisal of me, an appraisal that I wished more than anything would come out favorably. "I didn't want this, Olivia. Not this street fight, not those men dying, and not having your safety jeopardized like that, especially. I don't want you even *near* danger."

She hummed softly, considering my words. "I can't be near danger. My son—our son..."

"Yes." I kept my tone as gentle as I could, even as I wondered, half in distaste with myself, and half with shock, at when I had become so in need of the approval of a woman. Was this what weakness looked like? Could this be my downfall in the end? I couldn't make myself care enough in that moment to stop. "He needs you safe and happy. I want you to be safe and happy. But I also want you." The truth of those words hit my chest like a ton of bricks. "And my world is not always safe."

"It was like being in the middle of a war," she mumbled.

"It was a war. But instead of a war between nations, it is a war to control this city. The men who have done this thing, they don't think about who gets

hurt or who loses. They only care that they win. They killed one of my best friends. They have tried to kill me. They will go after Michael and you as well if they find out about him.” I went quiet, the words ‘*Let them try,*’ floating through my mind with such ferocity in that moment that I felt it as a physical force.

“What should we do?” her voice sounded ready to break, and I once more resisted the urge to touch her soothingly while I was trying to drive.

“You and I are going to lie low for a few hours, have something to eat and a stiff drink, and...” I smiled slowly as I turned to eye her, hoping to distract that worried look right out of her. “Find some way to occupy ourselves until you can safely return home.”

“I kind of mean everything else.”

I sighed gently, although my smile remained as I turned my eyes back to the road. “I suppose we’re just going to have to make all of the other auctions, invitation only.”

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The safehouse was actually a small apartment complex built in a U-shape around a courtyard garden. Four of my men lived in the complex, with the top floors reserved for guests and those I wanted to protect. I had used the safehouse several times during the last local war, when Uncle Mischka would call and warn me that the main house was being watched again.

“I still can’t believe that the rest of my staff didn’t even realize there was anything going on. They even missed the gun shots.” Her eyes were wide with incredulity as she read the messages on her phone. She’d told her boss that she’d had to leave suddenly because Michael was sick, and they’d bought it without question.

“You’d be surprised how much people don’t notice.” It wasn’t entirely a

surprise to me. Between the auction house's stone walls, the heavily soundproofed inner walls, and the extreme traffic noise outside, the gunfire had been mistaken for old cars backfiring. My men had cleaned up the mess. Everything else could be explained away.

"Yikes. Makes me wonder what I've just walked past without thinking anything was up." She winced, and I chuckled again as I pulled her car into the underground parking garage.

"Probably a few things. If the criminals involved are discreet enough, you could walk past a murder without realizing it is going on." That didn't seem to comfort her. "However, you do seem pretty observant, just inexperienced. It's possible you haven't missed much of anything without noticing it."

"Well, that's kind of terrifying," she said with a sarcastic tone.

I pressed my lips together against open laughter and steered us into one of the open parking spaces. "I'm sorry. I just want you to know that I take your safety, and that of my son, very seriously. I know how to watch for trouble, and I'm going to do everything I can to keep it away from you. I want you to look forward to seeing me, not fear the next time it happens. That's very important to me."

Her mouth worked, and she glanced from me down to her hands. "I noticed, but it's going to take me some time to get over this. And probably some alcohol."

I tutted at her gently. "I might have to drive you home if you keep talking about that. It's not an issue if you get a bit drunk on me, but it will be if you drive."

"I guess that's fair." Her voice was shaky. I wanted to slip an arm around her, but I was busy parking the car. Done, I went around and opened her door for her.

"I can't believe I just survived that," she mumbled as I helped her out of the car. She was shaking. She looked ready to cry. But she was still here, still with me.

“I was not going to let them harm you,” I murmured as I helped her toward the elevator.

She wiped a tear, hanging onto me desperately. I felt another stab of guilt.

“I’m sorry,” I continued softly. “I did not want to expose you to the dangers of living in my world.”

“Seems to me it’s a package deal.” She choked slightly. “Does that cordite smell ever get out of people’s clothes?”

“It may take dry cleaning.” I smiled apologetically. “I’ll handle it, and supply you with a substitute.”

She blinked up at me, then shook her head. “I don’t even know why I brought that up.”

“Because talking about clothing care is easier than talking about what just happened.” We stepped into the elevator together. “But we must.”

I didn’t want to *talk* right now. The adrenaline and triumph of the fight had set my blood on fire. I regretted being forced to kill, of course, but the Puerto Ricans had bought their own deaths by taking aim at me—and at Olivia. And despite my distaste for taking life unneeded, I was never going to hesitate. Not ever, and certainly not with Olivia’s safety on the line.

And now, in the aftermath of the fight and the chase, I wanted my woman, in my bed.

But not until I knew she was all right.

“I’m just glad they can’t easily trace the car back to me.” She smoothed back her hair, fingers trembling. “Oh God. What if they do?”

“It’s quite simple, my dear,” I insisted gently. “You and my son will go into hiding under my protection while we arrange for your leave of absence from work for health reasons. I’ll even ensure the place you move to is nicer than the one you have now, and certainly more secure.”

I saw her open her mouth to protest my generosity, and held up a silencing finger. She blinked, then sighed, caving with a sad but grateful little smile.

“If I do not make these allowances for your safety, I suspect you would flee the area entirely for my son’s protection and your own. You’re too smart to stick around if you’re in danger.”

“That’s true. Michael’s not going to like it if we suddenly have to move and hide. I’d do it, but, Viktor...what’s happening? Who were those men, and why did they take the risk of attacking you in broad daylight?”

The elevator stopped at the fifth floor, and I stepped out with my arm around her. “Inside for that conversation,” I insisted, and she nodded. Unit 503 was one of my private safehouses. I swiped a keycard and let her in, following and locking up behind her.

“I have mentioned that there may be trouble brewing in the streets in this region before,” I said quietly as I led her from the entryway to the great room that took up most of the space.

It was clean and cozy, with insulated curtains on the windows, hardwood floors, and a huge couch separating the living and dining areas. The whole thing was done in muted creams and browns to go with the woodwork—not my favorite, but easily replaced if something unexpectedly messy happened. I had used a safehouse before to wait for my men to fetch one of our medics, and bled generously on the couch in the process. It would have been much harder to replace on short notice if it had been, say, royal purple velvet.

“Yes, you did. You didn’t elaborate. I was glad at the time, but right now I’m worried about what happens if I’m caught up in this against my will from now on.”

I felt my heart sink a little at her words. I didn’t want her to run from me. “I’m still hoping that we can avoid that,” I said quietly. “Many of us are married, and of those, most avoid including their wives in Bratva matters. Lovers, even more so.”

That sad smile again. “Is that what we are?”

“I think that what we are is something we’re still figuring out,” I clarified as I brought her over to the couch. “Though clearly Michael’s presence necessitates that we have some kind of relationship.” I smiled back as gently as I could manage, trying to keep my eyes off the shine of her hair or the way even that modest dress clung to her curves as she sat.

“Yeah, that’s the thing. It’s too soon.” She forced a smile. “I prefer to at least be going steady before my first car chase, though.”

I laughed a little, and then cupped her cheek. She was still trembling, her pulse beating fast below the corner of her jaw. “Well, you’ve kept your sense of humor and you haven’t run from me. Those are good signs.”

Her smile was wobbly. She was scared and exhausted. There would only be so much I could do about that.

“Over the last several months we have become aware of a local rival gang moving in on our territory. They have always lived here, but now they have decided to branch out into areas where we have had a local monopoly. The competition is unwelcome. But I still hoped for a sane treaty with them that would avoid bloodshed.”

I brought her a cold lemonade, with cut strawberries floating among the ice cubes. “This should get the taste out of your mouth. And besides, best not to drink on an empty stomach.”

She frowned at me, but sipped obediently while I put a bottle of champagne on ice. “I guess. So these guys, they want a war. You don’t want a war, but you can’t afford to back down either.”

“Exactly.” I set the ice bucket with the champagne aside on the counter, poured my own lemonade, and came to sit beside her.

“You never told me who these people are.” She looked up from her drink, her manner almost timid.

“They’re a Puerto Rican group known as the Pueblo. Part of a larger organization based mostly in Puerto Rico, partly on the East Coast. We are



the northernmost group that has ended up butting heads with them.”

“Why were they so hot to attack you?”

Basically, because they had a chance of finding me there. I do not know why they decided to incite violence, but this isn't their first assassination attempt against my organization. It's simply the first unsuccessful one. In part thanks to your quick thinking.”

She blinked rapidly as she tried to hide her expression behind a sip of lemonade. “I wasn't about to let Michael's father die at the hands of these guys. I mean, what would I tell him if I went and did something like that? How would I explain?”

I smiled lopsidedly. Of course, it was too soon for me to be that precious to her personally. And yet I was still moved by the risk she had taken. “You were very brave. And I will make sure that your courage is not repaid with more danger.”

“See, you keep saying that, but I don't know how you plan to do it.”

“Besides putting you and Michael somewhere safe if it comes down to it? I'll have a man watch your work in case they decide to drop in on you.”

It was the wrong thing to say. She moved away from me slightly, a flicker of doubt in her eyes. I restrained myself from moving closer or reaching after her. “What is it?” I asked gently instead.

“This is all too much. Maybe where you come from it's a normal day when you shoot three people in the middle of an active assassination attempt, but for me, this is all...it's just...” She went quiet, gesturing in frustration as she struggled to find the right words.

I found that I was bracing myself. She hadn't run from me yet, but perhaps I was making her feel smothered. Perhaps she was working her way up to running.

“Take your time,” I urged softly. “You've been through a lot.”

She leaned her head on my shoulder mutely and I put my arm back around her, letting her shelter against me. She made a small, unhappy sound, and eventually asked, “When did you first end up in a situation like that? You’re as cool as if we spent the day at a museum or something.”

Now it was my turn to force a smile. “I grew up in the business. This isn’t the third time or even the dozenth that I have been in a firefight. I wish I could say otherwise, given the look on your face. But I will not lie to you.”

“Well, I’m glad about that part. But how old were you when it started?”

I took a long swallow of my lemonade and looked at her, weighing how much to tell. My life was so far from anything that someone like her would consider normal.

“I was an orphan. I grew up on the streets in Russia. For someone like me, crime wasn’t so much an option as it was a necessity to survive.”

She blinked and gave me a startled look. “But I thought your uncle—”

“He adopted me legally so I could inherit. He did not raise me. He’s not even a blood relative. In fact, by the time I met him, my childhood was well over.”

She nodded, glass halfway to her mouth. She noticed it and blushed, then hastily took another drink. “I see. So you didn’t have any family either. Not until you joined up with your...brothers.”

“That is correct.” Then I caught the either, and it was my turn to look surprised. “I thought you had a sister.”

“What? No...”

“You said Michael was staying with his aunt today, Anna...”

“Oh!” She blushed and looked down momentarily. “Sorry, I didn’t mean... She’s not a blood sister. She was just my neighbor growing up in the group home. We’re very close and Michael sees her as an aunt. As a matter of fact, I see her as a sister, myself. Her family was always busy and her brother was

already working, so a lot of the time she didn't have anyone either. We bonded quickly, growing up." She was clutching the glass with both hands, not seeming to notice it or the shaky way she took her little drinks. "I don't know what I'm going to tell her about today."

She again looked on the verge of tears. "I don't know what I'm going to tell anyone!"

I took her gently by the shoulders and looked at her firmly. "My men were discreet. The most that will be discovered once they are done cleaning up after the Puerto Ricans' mess is that someone tried to break in a side door during the auction. You don't have to give the real details."

She swallowed and nodded, eyes wet. "I already told my boss that Michael was sick. But I'm not comfortable lying like this, Viktor."

"That is exactly why I wanted to keep you out of all this bloody business." I couldn't keep the frustration out of my voice. "I lost my innocence at ten. I'm used to this. But I know that you are not, and I..." I sucked air through my teeth, trying to find the right words. "I do not wish to scare you off."

She let out a harsh noise, half laugh and half sob, and buried her face in her hands. "Oh God," she mumbled, and I realized she was trying to hide her tears from me.

"Olivia." I let all my regret out into that one word. There were a million things I wanted to explain, what separated me from the men who had tried to kill us, that I had a code, that I did not hurt innocents nor allow them to be harmed if I could do something about it. But it was too much, too soon.

I held her instead, bundling her onto my lap and nestling her against me, letting her hide her wet face in my neck.

"It will be all right," I promised her, though I knew I couldn't actually predict that. "Trust in me. I will find a way to work every bit of this out with you. You will be safe. Michael will be safe."

She looked up at me, her eyes lit with tentative hope. "Do you promise?"

she whispered.

“I swear it,” I said, and prayed that time and circumstances would not make a liar out of me.

# Chapter 18

## *Olivia*

We didn't make love at the safehouse. My body wanted it, and I knew he wanted it. But my head was too much of a mess.

When he touched me, a war kicked off inside me. Wanting more, wanting to pull away from him, wanting to cling to him, wanting to run. I wanted to lose my mind and all sense of time in his arms. I wanted to make my excuses and hurry off quickly to hide in my home with Michael. To hide in my last shrinking scrap of normalcy, in my quiet world where people did not try to murder me and then got their heads blown off to stop them.

Instead, he held me, seeming to understand that sex would have only added to my turmoil instead of resolved it. I felt bad about denying him, and frustrated about denying myself, but I wasn't okay, and he could see that.

Now I was on my way home, in a butter-soft jade-green jacket dress that fit so well I wondered if he'd snuck a measuring tape into bed with us. Grateful, but also conflicted, and still a little terrified.

*If only he was less understanding than I expected, not more.* The irony stuck in my mind. It was true. If he had been petty or pushy or thoughtless with me after today's insanity, I would have fled. But instead, the more I knew of him, including how he was under pressure, the harder I fell for him.

No matter how dangerous that got for me.

He had put himself between me and a bullet. He had sworn to go all out to protect me and our son. He had put my needs before his, even in extreme situations. He had even apologized for the scare afterwards, though God knew he had been the one trying to protect me from the men who were really guilty.

He was perfect. Well, not perfect, but amazing. More amazing the more that I knew about him. Except, he was a gangster who just shot three people in front of me.

The memories of those deaths sat strangely in my head. The horror surrounding them was dreamlike and distant. But then I would remember looking away from those terrible red blurs with such nauseating clarity that I would go cold and start trembling.

He killed in front of me. But he did it to save our lives. Maybe more lives than that. Viktor was heroic and monstrous in one action. And I couldn't have one without the other.

This was his life. This was his terrifying world. If I wanted him in my life, his world would leak into mine. Into Michael's. Maybe not as much as I was afraid would happen, but enough that I had serious reasons to worry.

A smart woman wouldn't fall for him. She would figure out the minimum contact she and her son could legally get away with and stick to that. She wouldn't be craving his body and his touch in the middle of all this turmoil.

Apparently, I was not a smart woman.

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On my way to pick up Michael, I was right on the nose of 'on time', as if nothing unusual had happened today. When I pulled up, I noticed two strange cars in Anna's driveway—a scratched-up black sedan and some kind of fancy Italian sports car in silver. Curious, I walked up the brick walkway and onto her porch, listening before I knocked.

Two men were arguing inside, while a baby wailed in the background. I could hear Anna's strained voice asking them to stop fighting in front of the children. Their Spanish was so rapid and full of slang that I couldn't pick up on all of it through the closed porch window.

*Oh God, not more drama.* My mind already felt like a stack of bowls leaning against a cupboard door, ready to fall apart with a crash if shifted too much. But my son and Anna and her baby were all in there. I had just survived the scariest day of my life. No way two macho assholes having a fit were going to measure up to being caught in that gunfight.

I set my jaw and rapped on the door. “Anna? Hey, Anna, it’s me Olivia!”

“Come around the back!” I heard her call and sighed with relief. If we could dodge whatever testosterone war was going on inside the house by hanging out in the backyard, I was all for it.

When I got through their incredibly narrow side yard and out into the little lawn out back, I heaved a sigh of relief. The baby had stopped crying, Anna looked frazzled and irritated but also resolute. She gave me a one-armed hug as I walked over.

Michael was playing with the dog, who had been chained up at the far end of the yard under a tall pine tree. He waved and smiled distractedly when he saw me.

I hugged Anna back. Inside, the yelling and bitching kept on.

I could understand a lot more of their conversation now through the glass patio door. I pretended I didn’t, but listened in as I talked to Anna.

“Hey. What’s going on?”

She rolled her eyes. “My brother. One of his work buddies rolled his car and they are fighting over what to do about it. His buddy thinks it’s Luis’s job to pay out what insurance won’t cover. Luis told me to leave them alone to deal with it. I’ve been trying.” But her expression was troubled and resentful, and I could understand why.

Inside, I made out Luis’s voice, contorted with anger, his Spanish so rapid that every word came out like machine gun fire. “I didn’t make a call on any of that! What the hell did Miguel think he was doing, bringing you guys there and going after him? Now we’re down—”

The other man cut him off, his voice now raised in shock as much as anger. “What the fuck do you mean, you didn’t want us going down there to hit the guy? Miguel said—”

“Miguel lied, Paco. He came up with the idea all on his own. And now two more of my guys are—”

His next few words were cut off abruptly, and they shifted to harsh whispers. I was pretty fluent in Spanish, but it was hard keeping up with what they were saying, though I got the gist of it—it sounded like one of Luis’s friends had gotten involved in a fistfight. What was it with men? I’d been shot at today by some mobsters, and now Luis and his friend were arguing like hot-headed teenagers about some fight. I met Anna’s eyes, she shook her head before pasting on a too-bright grin and continuing. “Anyway, I brought us out some lemon popsicles. They’re homemade.”

“Awesome.” I went over to the table under the same tree the dog was chained to and gave Michael a hug before sitting down. Anna didn’t usually chain Pookie as she was such a sweet dog, and I wondered why she had. I gave her head a scratch before sitting down. The white, cast iron chairs bit into my thighs uncomfortably, but I didn’t care. I was just glad to be sitting with my little boy and my friend after the nightmare I had just been through.

But I couldn’t help but strain my ears for snatches of the men’s argument.

I didn’t see Luis much nowadays as he spent most of his time working at his regular job, or working on cars with his friends at their garage. I still saw him occasionally at family events, where I had been Anna’s perpetual plus-one since we were ten. But it suddenly struck me that I knew very little about Luis’s life these days, and the man he had become. He looked tired, I remembered Anna’s dad used to be the same. Her mom was worried he’d work himself into an early grave—which was what had happened. I could see why Anna was so concerned about her brother now.

“So how was the auction?” Anna sat down across from me with the bowl of popsicles and passed me one, before turning to hand one over to Michael.

Michael pouted. “Pookie wants one too.”



“Oh, honey, she doesn’t like lemon. She has her nice cool water.” Anna smiled at him, but he sulked a little.

I jumped in on my cue. “We don’t want to give her an upset tummy, Michael.”

That clicked with him. He pulled the pop out of its mold and stuck it in his mouth, nodding.

“How come your dog’s tied up?” I asked, pretending to have forgotten her last question as I fished around frantically in my head for an answer that wouldn’t lead to even more questions.

“It’s Paco. Him and Miguel and a couple other guys in Luis’s crowd, she just really doesn’t like them. We have to tie her out here because she’ll bite him if he gets too close to me. Some dogs are funny around men.”

“But not Luis, right?”

“Oh, no, she loves him to death. Most people, actually. It’s mainly just Paco and Miguel.” She frowned thoughtfully, then popped her own popsicle back into her mouth.

I tried mine. The sweet-tart taste reminded me immediately of lemonade and champagne with Viktor, and that reminded me again of how we hadn’t slept together. It was like an itch under my skin, one only he could scratch properly. I tried my best to push the feeling aside. *Later. Once my head is clearer.*

“You know,” I said hesitantly, “they say dogs know when someone isn’t a good person.”

She shot me a look that told me she had considered this before, and then turned toward Pookie, who was playing gently with Michael. And yet the dog had also positioned herself between the table and the house as soon as we had sat down.

“Luis wouldn’t let anyone near us who would hurt us,” she insisted, but I

wasn't so sure. And as I looked down at the dog and my son, I saw Michael looking up at me with those pale green eyes that, like his father's, missed nothing.

More shouting inside the house, the volume going up until I could hear it clearly again. Luis's voice was raised in anger, "Paco, if I have to tell your dumb ass again that none of this happened on my orders—"

"Well what the fuck did you expect? Miguel wanted action."

A door slammed.

I almost dropped my popsicle.

Anna had gone very quiet. The mix of fear and confusion on her face mirrored my feelings exactly. Michael looked between us, worry growing on his little face.

"What are they saying?" he asked us, startling us out of our shock.

"They're just having an argument, sweetie," I reassured in a shaky voice. "Don't worry about it."

"Yeah." Anna clearly didn't have any more of an idea what was going on than I did.

"I'm sure it's nothing," I said, trying to convince myself more than anything, just as the argument moved closer.

Both men burst out suddenly into the yard, yelling and swearing at each other. The baby, who had been snoozing on Anna's shoulder, woke up and instantly started wailing. Michael cringed back behind the dog at the noise, and Pookie started growling in a low, menacing tone I had never heard from her before.

One of them was, of course, Luis, who came out after the other like he wanted to pull him back, still yelling at him in Spanish. "Damn it, Paco, this is my sister's home, stop being a dick and leave her out of this."

“It’s not her, it’s the fucking redhead! Who is she?” Paco turned out to be a small, wiry guy with a wispy black mustache and beard and some really unfortunate tattoos. He was red-faced and sweating and so blind with anger that for a few seconds, as he stomped toward Anna, he didn’t notice Pookie. But then the dog jumped to her feet to protect us, and he stopped in his tracks.

“Hey!” Anna had had enough. She bundled her wailing baby against her chest and stepped forward to stand with the dog, glaring between Paco and her brother like a couple of idiot kids. “Luis, did you bring this asshole over to my house just so you could argue, scare me, scare my kid, and upset Michael and Olivia too?”

Michael’s eyes got big, and he blinked at his Auntie Anna in almost comical shock.

Paco stared at her, then at me. His jaw worked.

Meanwhile, Luis came up and slapped a hand down on Paco’s shoulder hard enough that he winced. “No,” he said with a completely forced smile while his buddy stared holes through me. “This is just a misunderstanding. Paco had to tell me some things that wouldn’t wait.”

Anna clutched her baby tighter as she saw the look on Paco’s face. “Yeah, well, next time you and your punk-ass friends want to beat your chests and scream at each other, do it somewhere that is away from me, my home, and my baby.”

Luis reddened slightly, and his grip tightened on Paco’s shoulder until the smaller man grunted in pain. “Sorry, sis, sorry, Olivia. We’ll just take this elsewhere. Come on, Paco.”

Paco didn’t budge, instead stabbing a finger at me. “Who is this white bitch? What’s she doing here?”

Michael stood up, one hand still on Pookie’s bristled back. “Don’t you talk about my mommy that way!”

*Oh God.* I was about to lunge forward and scoop my son up out of harm's way when Luis lost the last of his patience. He dragged Paco away one-handed, gripping him so hard that Paco went from red to pale. "I said come on, Paco! You and Miguel have made enough of a mess as it is without you getting paranoid over a family friend."

He switched back to Spanish and kept lecturing him as he dragged him around toward the driveway and out of sight. The baby started to calm down with her mother rocking her, and I hugged my son, who still looked alarmingly shocked.

A few seconds later, a car door slammed, and then another. Two engines roared to life, and I winced. "What was that about?"

"I have no idea," Anna mumbled. "I've seen Paco before, but I've never had something like that happen around us. And I sure don't know why he was asking about you."

"Yeah, that was really messed up and weird. I thought all your family friends knew about me."

Michael petted Pookie, who was calming down as well now that the men were leaving. "You said a bad word," he told Anna, who blushed.

"Sorry, sweetie. I didn't mean to. I just got mad because they came out and upset everybody."

"Yeah. That guy was mean. I hope he won't come back."

"I'll make sure Luis tells him not to." She puffed out her cheeks in exasperation and grabbed a fresh popsicle before sitting down again.

Numb, I went through the motions of doing the same, and got Michael a new one too. I couldn't even taste the popsicle anymore.

We spent twenty minutes talking about everything but the alarming incident that had just derailed everything, trying to get normalcy back. It only worked on the surface. The whole time, I was thinking back to being in the

car with Viktor, the shooting, and even the fact that Luis had once been friends with the guy who murdered Viktor's accountant.

The last snippet of information had been weighing on me, and I wondered if it was something that I should tell Viktor about. But I didn't want to get Luis involved in the Bratva's business, with his friends fighting it sounded like he had more than enough on his plate. I shuddered as I remembered the way his work buddy, Paco had stared at me before Luis had dragged him away.

# Chapter 19

## *Viktor*

I was quietly furious as I pulled up to the warehouse where we did our interrogations. The auction had been thoroughly disrupted by what the employees now thought was a thwarted break-in. Olivia had gotten a good scare and could have been killed. Two of our men had been injured capturing a pair of my would-be assassins.

On top of all that, my body was still humming with frustrated desire for Olivia. Who, thank God, hadn't run at her first taste of my life in the shadows. But she was still so upset that even the heat between us couldn't draw her away from the fear and shock.

I almost lost her today, in more ways than one.

Yet another grievance to lay at the feet of our rivals.

Four of my men were guarding the main space, which was a dummy warehouse only partly full of actual boxes of merchandise. Buried behind them were shipping containers that had been welded together and converted into a combination of hideaways, with some rest spaces for guards but mostly used for cages for enemies we brought here.

When Uncle Mischka had first shown me the place, I had walked out feeling sick, and praying I would never have to use it for its intended purpose. But that was a long time ago, and a different, much younger me. Now, I was relieved to have the facility at my disposal. Otherwise, I would have had to interrogate them somewhere closer to home. Somewhere more memorable, less disorienting, and more likely to allow them to walk away with new knowledge of us and our activities.

If I didn't have this space, I would have had to kill them afterwards. And my distaste for wasted life did, unfortunately, extend to my enemies. Not that

it ever stopped me. I would always do what had to be done for the safety of my family or my organization. But my preference remained in the other direction.

After what had happened today, I couldn't help but imagine what Olivia would think about this, both what I was about to do, as well as the very existence of our interrogation rooms.

I was sure that on the outside, it would seem rather gruesome to her. But maybe one day, she would see that it was a kindness. Perhaps she could come to know me well enough in time, to see that I was offering life by continuing with my uncle's established interrogation procedure. That by bringing the enemy here where they could gain no information on us, knocking them out and taking them elsewhere to free them—after we received the intel we needed, of course, and only then—I was offering something most others would not.

I've always suspected that Uncle Mischka chose me as his successor for a very specific reason. Not just for my organization, leadership, and the power I'd gained in my time with the family. He'd been teaching me, training me to succeed him from a young age, before he'd ever really seen all that in me. And I've always thought that it was because without ever saying it, we both knew we had a similar outlook on the importance of life, and our role in taking it.

I sighed and shook these distracted thoughts from my mind, just as Boris came out to meet me, relief on his face. "Didn't know what to think when you dropped out of sight."

I shrugged. "I told you I was using a safehouse and to contact me when you had anything. Now, what have you got for me?"

"Two Pueblo goons. Not sure how much use they'll be, but we should be able to at least get some names out of them." He turned, and we began walking to the back office, where a hidden staircase led down to the interrogation rooms.

As I followed Boris down, I heard Mischka's voice in my head, going over

the specifics of how to get information from a man properly.

*You have to decide whether you are there to torture them, or there to get information. You must understand that when you are making an example of a man, when you are breaking him so that his condition will terrify your enemies, the methods are very different from what you do when you want a man to talk.*

*You see, a man will say anything to make torture stop. After a while, they will simply make up whatever they think will satisfy you, just to end the fear and pain. That is not proper interrogation. It will get you garbage nine times out of ten. If you wish to get at the truth, the key is not pain.*

*The key is intimidation.*

“How long have they been chained up in the interrogation room?” I asked patiently.

“Twenty minutes. They were in the cages for three hours before that.” They should be pretty softened up.” We strolled casually down the narrow concrete hallway that led to the occupied room. It was deliberately unkempt and empty, with the several flickering lights remaining purposefully un-fixed and erratic in their spray of dim light.

“Did you lay out our tools and leave them to wait with them there?”

Grisly things, those tools. Unpleasant to handle, and twice as much so to use. But it was all part of Mischka’s established routine, and thanks to his tutelage I knew the importance of psychological warfare.

It encouraged the men to start talking nice and quickly, before so much pain was inflicted that they were likely to lie just to make it stop. And it meant that we didn’t particularly need to do any real damage. Surface stuff, likely to leave marks but easy enough to recover from and not very debilitating.

Some men called me soft for it, repeating the same things about Mischka. Those men now wore scars of their own that proved just how ‘soft’ I was.



Scars, and an unwillingness to repeat those words twice.

“Yeah, every tool is out there on display for them.” Boris chuckled. We had gone a bit hog wild with our collection. Besides surgical and autopsy tools like bone saws, mundane devices like pliers and clamps, and some homebrewed items like an electro-torture device hooked up to a car battery, we had also added some rather disturbing things from the local sex shop. I had even donated that giant, gaudy knife I had confiscated from the would-be murderer to our pile.

The rooms down here were a touch on the dramatic side, and were a source of amusement among my men, who seemed to love it and make a game of discovering what we could get away with displaying, and what was too much.

I let them play with the decor as much as they liked. It was a running joke and brought the men closer, which I approved of. Although they all knew that when the time came that we had need of the rooms, they were to be cleaned out of the more ridiculous items.

Although, Sergei’s purchased double-ended dildo had almost made the cut once, simply from the sheer confusion and fear that might come from seeing it. The rainbow unicorn design had gotten it scrapped, though, in the end.

Right now, two men had been tied up and left in chairs facing a long table of a mishmash of items, most of which we used but some of which were honestly mostly a hazard.

I found my lips curling into a cold smile as we almost reached the back containers. “Switch on that soundtrack we made. We’ll let them relax to some music while they wait.”

He gave me a wry look and nodded, moving to the small utility room set right outside our interrogation chamber. I waited. A few seconds later, the muffled screams and pleas of a man being tortured started playing through the walls.

It was a recording from a previous session of ours from a particularly

cowardly fellow we'd interviewed, who'd reacted quite strongly even though we'd barely touched him, so it sounded realistic and suitably dramatic. The reverberations were perfectly suited to the space. There was no way to tell it was a recording through the walls.

I checked my watch, schooling myself to remain patient. A minute passed. Then two. The wailing and begging intensified, only to be cut off suddenly with a loud scream and the sound of a rotary saw starting up.

Once the saw started, I barked out a loud order to stop so that I could have a chat with the man—mostly because the saw was never used at the time, so there wasn't much left to the recording—and Boris cut the sound and switched to one of quiet whimpers as I turned and headed down the hall, knowing that the Pueblo waiting for me would hear my receding footsteps.

After a few minutes I returned, wondering absently what Olivia would think of me now, knowing I was an actor, too, as well as a mobster.

I felt my lips quirk up wryly. The things I did to speed up the process...

As I finally entered the occupied room, smirk still in place as I needlessly wiped my hands with a handkerchief, the two men turned nervous, if defiant, eyes my way. They sat under floodlights in the center of that otherwise dim space, forced to face the shadowy gleams of the tools I could use on them.

They were both Puerto Rican, of course, compactly muscled, tattooed, dressed in army surplus gear. Hard men.

*We'll see how hard they remained by the time I was done.*

“What the fuck was that all about?” one of them asked, his dark hair slicked back, and the black-and-red tattoo of a spider crawling up his neck pulsated in time with his heart. Despite his brave facade he was nervous. His eyes darted in a telling way, once to the side and then down, before his scowl intensified and he glared back up at me.

I raised a brow and pocketed my handkerchief as I studied him. He couldn't have been older than twenty-one. Practically still a boy. “What was

what?”

“Who was screaming?”

“No-one,” I said completely honestly, as I came to a stop beside the table. “You are the only two in here, beside myself and Boris.”

“Fucking liar,” he growled angrily. “Fucking monster.”

My smile broadened when his friend beside him, beefier, older, and with a darker skin tone, spat at my feet wordlessly.

“Come now, that’s not very polite,” I said, turning back to Spider-Neck, knowing within just a few seconds that he was the one who would give me what I needed. “I think your friend needs to learn some manners.”

He didn’t seem to know how to reply, and then the door opened behind me to show Boris’s dimly outlined head poking through.

“Boss, should I hose down the occupant of chamber one, or...?”

I snorted. “Don’t waste my water, there’s no-one in there worth bothering with.” Again, completely true. Chamber one was entirely empty, of course.

“Understood,” Boris mumbled, playing his part perfectly, before ducking back out. I turned towards the table to inspect the instruments, pretending not to notice the bewildered look the boy was sending his stoic partner.

“Now,” I muttered casually, fingering a set of pliers, “shall we begin?”

“Fuck you,” Spider-Neck managed, although it was clear that he was beginning to lose his nerve.

“You’re not my type.” I didn’t even bother looking at him as I moved along the table, but then I paused. Someone had left a handheld milk frother among the torture implements. For a second, it made my smile real, and I shifted a large, serrated machete forward to hide it better.

But then it was time to get down to business. I took up a scalpel and slid

the blade from its plastic safety guard, before walking toward the young talker. I took a half step closer to him than was strictly necessary and leaned forward just a bit. His eyes widened slightly, he had gone suddenly quiet.

I tapped him under the chin with the flat of the scalpel blade, making him flinch. “Now. Here’s the deal. For every ten minutes that pass without you answering my questions, I will remove one of your tattoos. I’m very good with a blade, lucky for you, so I should be able to do it without you losing too much blood. Don’t worry, I won’t let you die quickly.”

His face paled, and he pressed his lips together as if to stop them from trembling. The other guy was glaring at me, but I could see worry mixing in with his rage. “Santiago,” he hissed, “don’t—”

I turned fast and caught the older one by the chin. He tried to fight, but before he could, the blade was glittering an inch from his eye. “I started with your friend because I can see that he’s reasonable. But you? You want Santiago here to take the fall for you, don’t you? Bleed before you have to.”

“Shut the fuck up, man,” Santiago spat, and I eyed his frantically beating spider tattoo for a moment. “He’s not like that. He’s a good guy, unlike you, you sick bastard.”

“Is that so?” I let go of the chin between my fingers and straightened, studying the older man briefly before turning back to Santiago’s sweaty, pale face. “Hmm. New plan.”

I turned and strode back towards the table, carefully placing the scalpel down before lifting the pliers up with a little twirl.

“For every ten minutes that passes without you answering my questions, I will remove one of your friend’s fingernails with this useful little tool.” I turned back and smiled once more. “That gives you time to comply, before I begin twisting off knuckles.”

Santiago’s breathing visibly quickened.

“Boris,” I barked suddenly, satisfied to see Santiago flinch. *Good, this*

*should be quick and easy.* “I need your timekeeping.”

A few seconds later, Boris reappeared with an old digital stopwatch.

“Should I start, Boss?” he asked as he came to a pause just behind me.

“Please,” I answered, and the older man visibly strained against the restraints tying him to the armrests of his chair when Boris clicked the start button.

“Wait,” Santiago cried. “You haven’t even asked anything yet!”

“Oh, how silly of me.” Then I walked towards the older one and gently tapped his nose. “Question one, should I start with your left hand, or your right?”

“You crazy fuck, what kind of question is that?” The boy was visibly panicking now, enough so that it was beginning to crack through his partner’s silence.

“Santiago, relax,” he growled in Spanish, presumably thinking that I couldn’t understand. “Don’t let the sick bastard get to you.”

“What the hell do you mean, relax? How the fuck can I relax?” Santiago muttered, again in Spanish.

“Nine minutes left,” Boris interrupted them, and I lowered the pliers to his pinky.

“I think he said the left hand, correct, Boris?”

“Sure, Boss.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Santiago cried. “Don’t hurt him. Just hold on a minute.”

“What for,” I said darkly, dropping my polite act as I pinched the pliers firmly against the man’s nail. “You tried to have me killed, today. What reason do I have to spare you anything?”

“Fuck, fuck, fuck—Jose, what do we do? He’s going to bleed you out, he’s crazy!” Santiago spat.

I kept my expression neutral, let them think I couldn’t understand a word they were saying. ‘*Know your enemy*’, Uncle Mischka always said.

“If we talk,” Jose growled, continuing the Spanish, “and El Luchador doesn’t fucking kill us, Miguel sure will. You know he was in charge of today, and he won’t want us making him look bad. So shut it!”

“But Miguel’s wrong about shit all the time! It’s probably his fault today went down like it did! He’s the one that told us this guy was a skinny little white bitch! He never warned us that we’d be dealing with fucking Ivan the Terrible!” Santiago replied.

I almost burst out laughing, straining against it so hard that my ribs hurt. Which would have been a bad idea, as I absolutely didn’t want them to catch on that I understood every single word. This exchange could be an information goldmine. So I ripped off Jose’s nail with a hard, quick yank, which very effectively dissipated my laughter.

“Jesus fucking Christ!” Santiago cried desperately, although Jose took it with nothing more than one sharp shout, and a clench of his jaw. “It hasn’t— It hasn’t been ten minutes! You didn’t even ask anything! Jesus fucking Christ!”

“Boris, restart the clock, will you?” I said as I turned and walked casually back to the table to drop the bloodied nail.

“Yes, Boss.”

“*Chacho*, look, if we want to survive this, we’ve got to be smart,” I heard Jose say behind me in a quiet, strained voice. “Don’t give him any names. Don’t talk about the boss or Miguel. Just play dumb, okay?”

“I don’t think it’s gonna work on him. And if he finds out we’re holding back...I mean, what’s he gonna do next? This white guy is crazy, man.”

“If I may interrupt,” I said with exaggerated patience as I turned back. “I’d like to know why in the hell your leaders are so eager for a war with us.”

Santiago continued to visibly panic, and Jose kept his lips stubbornly pressed together, so I sighed, strode back across the room, and grabbed onto his next nail.

“Th—the boss just wants you out of the way!” Santiago cried.

“By which you mean El Luchador.”

“That’s what Mig—”

“Santiago!”

The boy stopped abruptly, and I made a show of beginning to pull on Jose’s second nail.

“Stop! Stop, you sick freak! It’s only been a minute!”

“Two, actually,” Boris chimed in, and I sighed again and released the nail, moving over to crouch beside the barely-adult who was panicking so much his spider tattoo appeared to be crawling.

“You were going to say Miguel, right?” I said. Santiago took in several panicked breaths and just stared at me. “I already know of him.” Admittedly, I had only just learned of the man thanks to their conversation, but they didn’t need to know that. “So you’re not giving me anything useful.” I lifted the pliers and rested them ominously against the back of his hand. “Continue what you were saying. You’ve got eight minutes left.”

“M-Miguel...that’s what he said. That the boss wants you out of the way. So we hit the auction and tried to get it done.”

“Santiago, I swear to fucking Christ I will kill you myself.” Jose hissed in rapid-fire Spanish.

“I’m not saying anything that isn’t already obvious!” Santiago looked like he was on the verge of hyperventilating.

“I see,” I said, partially overriding their chatter so they wouldn’t catch on that I understood. “And whose idea was it to involve a large number of innocent bystanders by attacking me at my uncle’s estate sale?”

“I don’t know!”

“So you’re not sure that orders came from the top? Is there a mutiny brewing in your ranks?”

“I didn’t say that,” Santiago snapped, although his voice was raising in pitch.

“So it is El Luchador who’s trying for a war?”

“I-I didn’t say that, either!”

“Boris?” I looked questioningly over my shoulder, and my second glanced up from the stopwatch.

“Six minutes.”

*“Jesucristo, Jesucristo, Jesucristo”*

Santiago was properly panicking now, his face bone-white and sweating, his fingers trembling so much the pliers I still had against them were visibly shaking. Looking at him properly now, I reassessed my estimation of his age. He could be even younger than I’d thought.

I lifted the pliers...

“Hey, eyes over here, shithead,” Jose snarled. “Leave the kid alone.”

“This isn’t your war,” I said patiently down to the two of them as I stood. “This is your boss’s war. I’m a reasonable man. I wanted to negotiate. But he decided to send a killer after my friend, and then a lot of you after me. Now your people are dying and getting captured—that’s five already, to his one murder—and he still thinks he’s going to win in an all-out street war? It looks to me that you’re on the losing side.”



“El Luchador never wanted a goddamn war,” Santiago said weakly, slumping in his chair as I moved away. “Miguel and some of the others, sure. But El Luchador probably figured we could just carve things up without shedding blood. He’s a good man. He’s not... He’s not crazy like you. He’s good.”

“Then how is it that you find yourselves captured and left for dead after an attempt on my life?”

When no-one immediately responded, Boris helpfully chimed in with a cheerful, “Three minutes!”

“Listen, man,” Jose said wearily, eyeing the young Santiago as if his panic was hurting him more than his lost nail, “you’re crazy if you think El Luchador is just out there pouring his heart out to every one of us. You don’t do that, right? So why would you think he does? He’s not fucking stupid, he knows there could be information leaks and shit. I don’t know what you think we know, but you’re barking up the wrong tree. Nobody tells us jack shit. *Nada.*”

Interesting that he would bring up information leaks, as if it was normal to be assuming backstabbing and traitors. Thing is, it’s normally leaders who have those paranoid thoughts. Grunts won’t usually hold that stress on their shoulders, not unless they personally know of a traitor in their midst—or in their enemies ranks, feeding them intel.

I moved back to Jose and put my pliers to his next finger without emotion. He just sighed, hung his head, and clamped his lips shut.

“Your boss is just as bloodthirsty as you claim me to be, and cares nothing for the lives of his men. Nothing for your lives, sending you out on a suicide mission when he knows by now the kind of force the Bratva would bring to an event like this.”

“He’s not—”

“One minute left!”

“—like you.”

“Then why are you here?” I pulled on Jose’s nail, enough to force a grunt out of him, and Santiago’s fingers began to convulse against his armrests.

“Fifty seconds, boss.”

“Why, Santiago? If he’s such a good man, if he cares for his people, then why are you in this position?”

“Don’t answer him, *chacho*,” Jose gritted out from behind clenched teeth, reverting back to Spanish. “He’s playing games.”

“Why are you here instead of safe in your bed?” I continued. “Is El Luchador completely unintelligent? Can he not strategize? Is your leader a moron not worth following, or a selfish bastard equally unworthy of his position without a care for the lives of his men?”

“Thirty seconds.”

“Tell me, Santiago, because it has to be one of those two options.”

“You’re crazy, man, *loco*.” Santiago whispered, and I tugged slowly on Jose’s next nail, semi-dislodging it, knowing from experience that it was more painful than a quick tug. And when the older man grunted again and twitched violently in his seat, Santiago’s eyes rolled like a frightened horse as he frantically looked around the room, searching for an escape.

“Ten seconds.”

“H-he’s not stupid,” Santiago muttered. “He’s good. He saved me, he’s good...”

“Then what source is feeding your boss bad information on us?” I demanded.

A tear dropped out of his eye and rolled down his cheek, even as he continued to frantically scan the room as if desperate to look at anything but me and his partner. “I don’t know. I swear to God, man, I don’t know who.

They don't tell us shit like that."

*So. There was a who, after all.*

The little beeping alarm of the stopwatch rang out across the room, and I ripped out Jose's second fingernail. It was distracting, they'd think I did it out of anger for not getting information out of them, and they'd both be unlikely to notice or remember Santiago's slip of the tongue.

*Who.*

Someone was feeding them information about us. Which could only mean one thing.

The Bratva had a traitor in our midst, and I didn't want them to know that I suspected it.

A cold finger of horror and suspicion ran its way down my back. I looked up at Boris again, but he was paying no attention as he fiddled to reset the stopwatch. I pushed aside my annoyance at his inattention, forcing myself to focus.

Perhaps it was better if he didn't know what I suspected, anyway.

I eyed him one more time, before turning back to my captives.

"Useless," I sighed, dropping the pliers straight to the floor as I stood and pinched the bridge of my nose. "Boris, don't bother with the next round. These morons have nothing for me."

Santiago sagged in relief, but Jose only stiffened, eyeing me as if he expected to immediately receive a shot to the head. Which was a very fair assumption. However...

"I'm sending you back to your boss with this message," I said absently, as I pulled my handkerchief back out and wiped specks of Jose's blood from my fingers. "First, tell him what a very reasonable man I am, for sending both his men back to him, alive and well." Jose's eyes widened at that, and I sent him a cold smile. "But this is the absolute last reprieve he will get, the last show

of reason, rationality, and good faith that he will ever get from the Bratva. I want to talk to him. In person. Face to face. If he cannot offer me this one show of respect, then there is nothing that will help you or your men again, for as long as El Luchador continues to breath. Do you understand?”

Santiago nodded almost convulsively, his eyes squeezed shut in relief that I wasn't continuing, but Jose continued to stare at me as if he wasn't quite convinced. No matter, his opinion meant little to me.

Pocketing my handkerchief, I turned and walked slowly towards the door, speaking to Boris in Russian and looking at no-one. “Blindfold them, drive them downtown and dump them. Cut the rope off their hands but leave the bags on and get out of there.”

Boris hesitated, and then turned to follow me out. Once we were at the far end of the hall, he spoke. “You're really letting them live after they shot at you and your girl?”

Olivia's fear-filled blue eyes flashed through my mind unbidden, and I stopped. I straightened my cuffs, smoothed a hand through my hair, and continued to look straight ahead.

“Do not question me.”

“But, boss—”

I walked out without a word, with only one question floating through my thoughts on repeat.

*Who?*

# Chapter 20

## *Olivia*

Michael was sleeping with his tummy full of dinner, and I was up on the couch, trying to read a cozy mystery but unable to remember anything on the page.

I was still toying with the idea of whether I should tell Viktor about Luis knowing the man who had killed his friend. So much had happened over the past few days that I was getting antsy about everything. I really didn't want to pile more trouble at Luis's door, the killer was a childhood friend—someone he probably hadn't seen in years—and he seemed to be having enough problems with his other friends. Just because Luis was Puerto Rican, didn't mean that he knew people who was involved in any of this.

I smiled, thinking about my friend's older brother. He would lift Michael onto his shoulders for a ride every time he saw him. Once at school he punched a guy five years older than him when I was thirteen, to protect me from his sleazy advances. I grew up with Luis, he was one of the closest things to family I had. I hoped that he would sort out whatever was going on with his friends soon, he'd been so stressed out recently and I knew Anna was worried about him. That guy Paco was a total asshole, I could imagine someone like him hurting people.

My thoughts drifted back to Viktor, and I wondered how good a judge of character I really was. Viktor didn't strike me as the kind of man who would shoot down three people without even blinking? No. No, he didn't. But he had, right in front of me.

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At midnight, I was tossing and turning in my bed when my phone buzzed. It was Viktor. ***How are you doing?***

I didn't know whether to be scared or relieved or horny.

***Can't sleep***, I texted finally, feeling my cheeks heat up with embarrassment and sudden desire.

***That's common in these situations, I'm afraid. Is there anything I can do?***

I should have come out and told him everything. My fears, my worries, the way I couldn't get that insane half hour of running from gunmen out of my head. But instead, I just wrote the one thing that came into my head, ***Come over.***

***That's a surprise. Earlier, you were too upset.***

***I'm still upset. Something else happened today after I left. It's too much to talk about over text.***

There was a long pause, long enough to make me worry a little. Then he replied, ***This isn't going to be a breakup conversation, is it?***

I stifled a laugh. After all the crazy things that had happened today, his first concern seemed so ordinary that it was almost out of place. Yet I was flattered. Men had tried to kill him today, and his first concern was me. And not losing me.

Tears leaked out of the corners of my eyes. For the hundredth time, I wished he was in some normal job, with a normal life, where compatibility and breakups and all of that were the worst things we had to worry about. But I knew that wasn't true with us, and there was no choice but to deal with it unless I tried cutting him out of my life entirely. Which wouldn't work particularly well being that he was Michael's dad.

***No! I just don't want to text about... you know. All the things that happened today.***

***Understandable. I can be there in half an hour. Are you sure?***

I smiled. I wasn't used to anyone outside of Anna and Luis, when he wasn't working, prioritizing me like that. ***Yes, I'm sure. Michael's sleeping, but maybe you can meet him, you know, in the morning.***

Another pause as he digested the implications. ***I'll be there in twenty minutes.***

That made me laugh out loud. ***Okay. I'll see you then.***

As soon as he went quiet, I jumped up, suddenly frantic. Should I dress? Dress up? Get a shower? Did I have time?

I finally just brushed my hair out, realized I'd made my waves super frizzy by brushing them, then put my hair into a braid three times, before I was satisfied that it looked effortless like I'd just naturally had a perfect look by accident, and then threw a silk robe over my short nightgown. By the time I had that done and was deciding on whether or not to put a little concealer under my eyes to hide my tired circles, my phone signaled that someone was buzzing the intercom downstairs.

Oh God, I hadn't even figured out what to tell him!

I checked the camera feed to make sure it was him, then sighed in relief and resignation and buzzed him in. Guess I was going to have to wing it.

But as soon as he tapped on the door, my stomach dropped. I had decided I'd tell him about Luis's link to his friend's killer. Part of me felt like I would be betraying Anna and Luis's trust—but it might help Luis too, he was obviously troubled about it all.

I opened the door. Viktor came in, as polished as ever, a canvas bag in one hand with a bottle of wine sticking out of it. He immediately stepped forward to pull me in for a kiss.

I kissed back like I was starved for it. I didn't know what to say, how much to say, or even how I was going to handle introducing him to Michael. But I

knew I wanted him in my life, in my bed. That was the one thing I was sure about.

He set the bag down and pulled the door shut behind him. We stood close enough to breathe each other's air. He smiled down at me, a gleam in his eyes that made them look even more feral and sexy.

I barely remembered to lock the door before I got so caught up in his kisses that everything else left my mind. His tongue darted into my mouth as he turned us and pressed me against the wall. I whimpered and wrapped one of my legs around his hips, all of my worries starting to drift out of my head.

*I'll tell him later*, I reassured myself.

It wasn't what I was supposed to do. But as I led him by the hand to my bedroom, all I felt besides desire was relief that I could set it aside for a while. That I had an excuse.

My robe ended up a puddle of silk on the floor as he stepped out of his shoes and backed me up against the bed, kissing me hungrily the whole time. His hands slid up under my nightgown, caressing my thighs, pushing the fabric up as I lay back on the bed with him looming over me. His smile widened as his fingers found me bare, I never wore panties to bed.

We undressed each other, my fingers busy with his shirt buttons until I had to stop to let him pull the gown over my head. By the time I could see again he was shouldering out of his jacket and holster, setting both aside carefully.

The sight of that hand-cannon didn't alarm me anymore. Weirdly, it made me feel safer. So much had changed in me and my life since Viktor had walked back into it. Or maybe I was just too horny to care.

He flipped me over and ran his tongue down my spine, hands tracing my curves before gripping both of my ass cheeks and kneading them roughly. I groaned through my teeth, trying to keep quiet, but by the time he stepped back to grab a condom from his pocket and shed his pants, my breathing had already gone ragged.



He left suck marks down my spine that made me have to smother whimpers with my pillow. He reached around to pleasure me, nimble fingers teasing my breasts, labia, and clit until I was rocking back against him in time with his movements. When he finally entered me, he had to muffle my blissful gasps with his hand.

He crouched over me, moving together feverishly while doing everything we could to try to keep quiet. My door was locked against small, sleepy intruders, but I was far too aware of my apartment's thin interior walls.

My nails dug into the bedding as I felt my pussy tighten around him. He thrust hard and fast, grunting and panting in my ear with the strain of holding out, as that delicious tension started building in my body. I squirmed as I arched against him, pressing my ass against his hips eagerly with every thrust.

Finally, I couldn't take it anymore, I dropped my face into my pillow and pushed back against him in one long, slow, grinding arch as my muscles clenched and fluttered around his shaft. He hissed and gasped and pushed back hard, through the waves of ecstasy I felt his cock jumping and trembling inside me.

We pushed against each other that way until the last spasms passed and our sated bodies loosened. I collapsed under him, he lay down over me, holding me and murmuring tenderly in my ear as we struggled to catch our breath.

The orgasm had been so intense that it brought tears to my eyes. He kissed the back of my neck and I moaned, reaching back to caress his cheek.

We drifted, his warm weight over me driving away every trace of trouble or fear. My eyes slid closed. When I opened them again, he was climbing off of me to get rid of the condom. I rolled over to watch him go, enjoying the sight of his tight, lean body walking nude across my bedroom.

Then I remembered Michael, and Murphy's Law, and hastily grabbed my nightgown to pull it back on, just in case I hadn't quite locked my bedroom door in my haste.

Viktor came back, pulled on his silk boxers, and climbed into bed behind me, moving up close as I lay on my side. He kissed my shoulder as he settled in and draped one arm over me. “What are you thinking about?”

“How I’m going to introduce you to Michael,” I half-lied. It was definitely one of the questions still milling around in my head. “Do you think you’ll want to stick around? Be in his life? In mine?”

He chuckled, as if I should already know the answer. But when I didn’t say anything, he moved forward and murmured in my ear, “I’m starting to like the idea of waking up to your face every morning. And yes, I want to participate in the care of our son. But right this moment, it’s you that I’m thinking about most.”

That only added to my ambivalence. I knew I would be worrying about it in the morning—how to negotiate the space between his world and mine, how to be co-parents and lovers when the whole world seemed determined to add new complications to that.

“I think we should be honest with him,” he said confidently. “Obviously not about what I do, but that I am his father and that I aim to be around a lot from now on.”

That surprised me. “But what about the street war?”

He paused for a few seconds, then chuckled again, although the sound was completely devoid of humor. “I am pretty much forcing the opposition to come to the table at this point. It will be too costly for them not to, and I think I’ve done a good job teaching them that today. So this war is very likely to be over very, very soon. Don’t worry.”

I let out a low sigh. “I’ll try. So I guess we’ll be introducing you to your son at breakfast, then.” I punctuated the sentence with a long, unexpected yawn.

“Mmm. Yes. And then we’ll sort out something nice to do with the rest of our Sunday.” He kissed the lobe of my ear so delicately that it made my heart ache.

I wasn't sure if that was the best solution, or if my tired, overworked, overwhelmed, frightened brain was just looking for a way to stop me thinking and let me sleep.

I'd think about it more in the morning, when I'd had more time to process everything. He made it sound as if we'd have the full day together tomorrow, so if I needed to, I'd make sure to tell him before the way was out.

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Viktor's phone buzzed repeatedly in the dark of the early morning. I heard him grunt and felt the bed shift as he rolled over, reaching for it. A moment later, I opened an eye to the glow of his screen as he checked his caller ID.

Whoever it was couldn't wait. He sighed through his nose and connected the call. "This had better be good."

I heard the voice on the other end, deep, male, too low for me to pick out words. I heard the tension in the caller's tone, though, and felt the blissful relaxation drain from my body.

Viktor listened silently to whatever the explanation was for almost a minute and a half before breaking in. "All right, Boris, fine," he stifled a yawn. "I'll be back in half an hour."

"What is it?" I tried not to sound too worried. It must be something urgent, as he had jumped out of the bed and was already trying to pull on his pants one-handed.

He said a few curt words in Russian and hung up. "*Mudak.*"

"There was something I wanted to tell you, I don't know if it's important or not but—" My voice was hesitant.

"Duty calls," Victor turned to me with an apologetic smile. "It can wait, I

must also wait to meet my son, it seems. Or spend more time with you.” He leaned down and kissed me lingeringly. I whimpered, tingling and frustrated. “I will make it up to you both.”

I got up to throw on a robe and let him back out of the apartment, mind racing. Was it something to do with the attack yesterday? Yes, it had to be. “Okay. Call me once you’re free? I need to see you again today.”

He stole another kiss at the threshold. “Absolutely.”

And then he was gone.

# Chapter 21

## *Viktor*

“Do you want to tell me why you’re waking me up at five in the fucking morning, Boris?” I growled as he walked into my office. He looked sleepy and, again, a little drunk, but it was well after hours this time and I had too many other things on my mind.

“I figured you’d want to hear this face to face. Once you left, on the way to dumping off those two guys we grabbed, one of the guys got scared again and started talking. Thing is, what he told me was so crazy that I had to check it out, find some proof, before I brought it to you.”

I lifted an eyebrow, then gestured to the seat across from my desk. A full mug of coffee was already waiting for him, I was halfway through my own. He grasped his gratefully and took a long swallow.

“That’s proactive of you. So what was this odd assertion, and what did you find out about it?”

“The auction lady. The one you’re fucking.”

“Olivia. And mind your tone when you speak about her.”

“Mind my tone? Look. That woman, the one you’re claiming you don’t have a serious thing with? She has a son with your eyes.”

“I’ve claimed no such thing, and I am fully aware of the boy.”

He blinked in surprise and went quiet.

“She confirmed that her son is mine herself, Boris. Please tell me you didn’t get me up this early for that.”

“No.” He rubbed his face awkwardly. “But it’s a concern. A lot of what I dug up is real goddamn concerning. See...you need to know who your Olivia’s been associating with. For years, since she was a kid, in fact.”

My brows drew together, sudden concern giving my brain a clarity the caffeine hadn’t managed yet. “What?”

“El Luchador. Otherwise known as Luis Burgos Gutierrez. You know, the guy who tried to have you killed today? She’s best friends with his sister, Anna. Roommates in college. Has him over at her apartment regularly. Sends your son on playdates with his niece. That close.”

My heart was starting to pound. I focused on calming myself, but all the deep breathing in the world couldn’t stem that sudden rush of adrenaline.

“Isn’t it obvious? You accused me of fucking some woman who is in with the Puerto Ricans, and now it turns out you’re actually doing that!” He started breathing heavily, his face darkening. “And God knows how much she’s told them about you, or how much she’s manipulated you for them.”

“She’s never pried into my personal affairs,” I said mildly, half-absently, finding myself praying that this whole thing was some kind of horribly ironic coincidence. Yes, we were dealing with a mole, but Olivia had gone out of her way to avoid asking for any specifics about what I did, hadn’t she?

But then I caught myself.

The auction.

Yes, news of it had been public, but my name hadn’t been attached to it. So how had El Luchador and his group learned that I would be there in person?

She didn’t need to pry into my affairs to pass on information about that.

I set my coffee mug down, mind racing. Boris watched, a strange look of guilt on his face. “Look, I know you like the girl, but—”

“Quiet,” I snapped, propping my head on one hand as I struggled to focus.

She risked her life and future safety of her son—our son—to get me out of that situation. Or did she simply do that to get further in under my guard?

Olivia didn't seem to have a manipulative bone in her body. And if she had been manipulating me all along why had she vanished for the better part of four years.

But maybe it was circumstantial. Maybe she hadn't planned from the start to get to me, but made opportunistic moves now that I'd willingly waltzed back into her life.

*Or maybe she didn't know anything about this at all.*

“You're absolutely sure of this?”

“I had one of our computer guys dig up their social media.” He handed over some printed photos, and my heart sank.

Olivia with Anna and my son. Olivia at a barbecue with Anna and Luis. Warm, friendly, hugging like family. I wasn't sure how I envisioned him. He'd managed to keep a low profile for years, but he just looked like a regular guy.

El Luchador—Luis, the man who had just nearly had me killed, hoisting my son onto his shoulders while Olivia, grinning, planted a friendly kiss on his cheek.

I felt my blood start to boil.

“Look, I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news—” Boris started, but I shot him a look that silenced him. Fear flickered in his eyes.

“I agree with you that this can't be a coincidence,” I said carefully. “I'll let you know once I've decided on a course of action.”

“You're not going to just kill the bitch for shilling you?”

I suddenly and purely wanted to kill Boris for talking about my woman in that way. I barely managed to restrain myself, but he must have seen the

anger in my eyes because he set down his coffee and looked ready to bolt from his chair.

“No,” I said in a wintry tone. “I will investigate her involvement with the Pueblo and with Luis. Once I am certain, I will act accordingly. But I’m not going to run off like Othello on someone else’s say-so.”

“Even me?” He looked hurt as well as nervous now.

“Even you. The woman is defenseless and the mother of my child. I will not do anything to harm her unless I am left with no choice.”

He closed his eyes and shook his head, and when his eyes opened again, I saw something unexpected.

Anger.

“I can’t believe you,” he snapped. “I brought you hard evidence that this woman’s been making a fool of you all along, rubbing shoulders with people who want you dead!”

“The second part is certainly true,” I said, reining in my growing anger as best I could. “The first, I do not know yet. She’s shown no signs—”

“She’s betrayed you, Viktor! God, will you just stop thinking with your cock for five seconds?”

I took in a deep, solid breath through my nose and fought to remain calm. “When have you known me to act rashly? I am not thinking with my cock. You, however, are acting on emotions and alcohol. Again.”

“I’m trying to help you!”

There was frustration in his voice, but I was quickly losing patience for his disrespect. “Boris.”

He shook his head, interrupting me. “She is playing you, Viktor. She set up acting the damsel in distress today to make herself look innocent to you.”



“I don’t know that yet. And I won’t act on a maybe.”

“Jesus. I’m going to have to get the other lieutenants together and talk this over with them. You’re clearly compromised, Viktor. You’ve got hard evidence she’s in with the enemy and you’re still defending her, that fucking whore. *Suka blyat!*”

My breathing hitched. I had never wanted to punch him more in my life. I raised my hand instinctively, but then I stopped. Hearing the disrespectful language he was using about my woman was like a knife through my heart. But Boris was loyal, any threat to me was a threat to him too. Was I just shooting the messenger? Boris had done a lot of odd things lately, but this... I couldn’t ignore the evidence simply because I was losing trust in my right-hand man. What he showed me was irrefutable, if possibly not the entire story.

I picked up my mug, considered it for a moment, and then placed it back down with a heavy thud untouched.

“I will look further into this.”

“Viktor! Are you serious—”

I stood up abruptly, and he stopped.

“I will look further into this,” I repeated, “and in the meanwhile, I will be cutting off all contact with her until I’m satisfied with what I find.”

He huffed and rolled his eyes. “Well, that’s something, at least,” he snorted, disgust on his face as he stood. “But don’t think I’m kidding when I say the men are going to seriously question your suitability to lead if you don’t deal with this shit decisively.”

I held back my anger just a little longer. “Boris?”

“Yes, *boss?*”

I did not like the sarcasm in his voice.

“Do not contact me in any way. Do not talk to me. Do not call me. Do not show your face around me.”

The sneer on his lips deepened, but he pressed them together and didn't speak.

“If I walk into the room, you walk out. If you must tell me something, you find a messenger to deliver the information. Your disrespect offends me. Your lack of trust in my ability, your lack of control, emotional and alcohol induced, offends me. You're slipping. You will make yourself scarce until I tell you otherwise. Do I make myself clear?”

His face flickered with a multitude of angry emotions, but he didn't speak.

He simply turned his back on me and walked out.

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It took a few hours to verify Boris's research on Olivia. Every image of her with Luis or his sister added to the burden of tension, disbelief, and anger that weighed me down. Boris seemed to think I should shoot her, the mother of my child. I wasn't going to do that. But at the same time, I couldn't dismiss all of this as a coincidence either.

My computer guy had managed to hack Olivia's social media accounts, as I looked at her private messages with Anna, I noticed that nothing ever came up about Luis or what he did. Either they were being very discreet, or neither one knew about Luis's criminal connections.

*Was that even possible?*

No. Not with the war on. Maybe she knew both of us before there was trouble between us, but that didn't keep Luis from using her against me now.

There was only one thing to be done about this until I figured out how to

handle it long term. I had to break off contact with Olivia for now. I hated the whole idea of it, but I hated the idea that she might be pressed into watching me, or deceiving me, or both, even more. I couldn't afford to look weak or a fool in front of my men. Boris was already threatening to call a meeting on me and try to get me voted out, temporarily or permanently.

He had seemed so angry. Like I had committed some unforgivable sin by becoming involved with the mother of my child. Old school Bratva may have foresworn family, but that was not the way now. But whatever his feelings were, and whatever his reasons for them, I wasn't going to put up with Boris challenging me. Especially not with all his recent screw-ups.

I finished my research and poured myself a double Scotch before even trying to pick up the phone. I needed to do this calmly, without accusations or reproach. I didn't want to hurt her any more than I had to.

I had already drained the tumbler, chewed up all the ice and swallowed it, and started scrolling my phone pointlessly by the time I finally managed to push myself into making the call. The whole time, there was an ache in my chest that I didn't want to think about.

Olivia answered after one ring. "Hi!" she said, sounding bright, cheerful, and totally oblivious to what was coming. My stomach knotted with guilt, but I set my jaw and plowed on.

"Hello, Olivia. We need to talk, and I'm afraid I don't have time or ability to do so in person right now." I paused, hearing the falter in her breath.

"Oh?"

"Olivia...understand that I am not doing this because I want to. But right now, I have to be very careful. And right now, that means keeping away from you and Michael."

She gasped, a pained sound that made me wince. "What? Why?"

"Various parties have learned of our association. Some may even have learned that Michael is my son. I have men after me right now, and I do not

want to lead them to you.”

It wasn't even half of the truth, but I prayed it would be enough to sound realistic—either to stop her from getting suspicious that I was on to her if she was deceiving me, or to minimize any hurt I might cause her if she wasn't.

But when her protest came, it was one I hadn't expected.

“If they know about me, it's already too late. They know where I work. They can probably figure out where I live. And...and there's more, Viktor. There's something I wanted to tell you, I tried to tell you before you left—”

“I'm listening.” I wanted to hold out hope that there was some explanation that would make all of this all right. But right now, dealing with a mole, plots against my life, and hard evidence that Olivia was close with Luis and his family, I had no choice but to distance myself.

“My best friend, Anna, the one I grew up alongside. Her brother Luis, he's...”

Wait a second. Was she confessing? “Go on.”

“He knew the man who killed your friend, the one in the hospital. I mean, he wasn't a friend friend, they knew each other at school, but—” her words were running into each other, and she paused to take a breath. “Yesterday, I was at Anna's house and... I don't know. There was another man there and he seemed really scary... I—we—”

“What is it?” I tried to sound reassuring, I wanted her more than anything to finish her sentence. To see what it was that she wished to tell me. Would she lie? Try to throw me off scent?

“I think Luis's friends might be involved with those guys who came after you at the auction house.” She sighed shakily.

“His friends... Luis. Someone you've known for years.” I couldn't keep my skepticism at bay any longer. Was she trying to manipulate me? “And your best friend Anna is his sister. But somehow, neither of you knew this?”

She could sense something was wrong. “No, we didn’t. We—we *don’t*, really. But after yesterday, I...”

“After yesterday, what?” I wanted to believe that she didn’t know. But Boris’s warning rang in my head. Was I being objective enough? Or did my growing feelings for her addle me?

*Many strong men have fallen because of the machinations of a woman, my boy. I could practically hear Mischka in my head. You have a cooler head than most, but don’t think you’re immune.*

And Boris, threatening to call a meeting against me with all the lieutenants, calling me unfit to lead. As if his own screw-ups had never happened. As if I was the one over the line. What a wonderful best friend he’d turned out to be lately. But just because he was being a bastard didn’t mean he didn’t have a point. What if the others saw it too?

“Yesterday, there was a man with him,” Olivia continued, her voice shaky and quiet. “He threatened me, Viktor. He started questioning me. Luis and Anna were both telling him that I was just a family friend, but he kept after me until he was dragged out.” Her voice got shakier.

Sincere, or a brilliant actress? “How could you know this man your whole life and not know that he leads the local Pueblo? He’s not just associating with people who threatened me. The man is a rival crime lord.”

She stopped breathing for a good five seconds. “He’s what? Who? Luis?”

“Surely you can’t be that naive?” She didn’t immediately respond, and my chest was constricting, my heart getting colder every second. She genuinely sounded shocked, but there was no way that she could have not known what was going on. “I hope you understand how this all doesn’t quite add up, Olivia.”

“I *didn’t* know,” she all but whispered. “He’s a good guy, Viktor, I—I don’t know. I’ve only ever known him as a good guy.”

“Now you’re trying to defend my enemy.”

“No, I—”

“I find it very suspicious that you knew nothing, and somehow coincidentally ended up close with them while getting close to me while they’re also trying to kill me.”

“I...” She trailed off, her breathing fast and shaky now. “Look, I know how it sounds, but neither Anna nor I had any idea. He kept it all away from us. Don’t you have to do the exact same with some of your friends? Don’t you see how it’s possible?”

That sounded almost reasonable, but she had no idea of the life I had led, despite the stories I had told her. She was simply too alien to my world. “You’re the only person I’ve gotten close to outside of the Bratva for well over a decade,” I said flatly. “I haven’t taken the risk.”

“Oh,” she breathed. “Viktor...I really didn’t know. I don’t know what else to say, I... I need you to believe me.”

“I want to believe you,” I admitted. “But if you understand how this sounds, you know I’m not just walking away for your safety. I’m walking away for mine as well. Until this matter is resolved, I can’t contact you. Maybe not even then.”

I heard sobs in her breath now. Tears on the way. It made my chest hurt even worse. “But...you and I...Michael...”

“I know.” I braced myself as she started weeping quietly. “I don’t want this either. But I have no choice. I won’t take the risk.” I had to end this now, or it was going to get emotional. I didn’t want to fight with her, and I couldn’t stand to hear her cry. “Goodbye, Olivia.”

I hung up on her protest and sat back in my office chair like I’d just been punched in the chest, knowing I had hurt her terribly but had no way to avoid it. Either she was too dangerous for me to be around, or I was too dangerous for her to be around. Possibly, both.

Until I won this damned war, I had no way of learning the truth.

# Chapter 22

## *Olivia*

What were the stages of grief again?

I didn't quite remember, but I knew I was cycling through them. It wasn't an easy progression, though. Guilt came way before anger, leaving me quietly sobbing on my couch while Michael had his afternoon nap. I should have voiced my concerns about Luis's friend to Viktor earlier.

Now he might never know his father. Not because I had done anything wrong, but because of something beyond my control. How was I to know that my lifelong friends were entangled with a criminal organization? That didn't bear thinking about, that Anna might have been lying to me all these years too. I was certain that even Anna hadn't known, but Viktor didn't believe me.

He had talked about it like he was just trying to make sure. He had avoided accusing, avoided yelling. But his coldness had stabbed me right in the heart regardless.

The worst part of all of it was that I could understand his reasoning. Right now, things looked very bad for me. I had connections to the people who were trying to kill him. I had just barely learned about that after knowing these people my whole life. Of course it sounded improbable.

But he had also abandoned me just as I had already been pulled into his world, like it or not. If anything happened to me or to Michael because of this crazy mess I was caught in the middle of, he wouldn't be there to protect us.

*So there's that promise out the window.*

That's when the anger hit. That son of a bitch. I was telling him the truth! All I've ever tried to do was do right by him, Michael, and my friends. I had no idea how he and Luis ended up at odds, any more than I knew how Luis

became a crime lord or even when he did.

This was so stupid. Luis and Viktor were playing wargames in the streets over what? Territory? Business? Who got to run which type of contraband? Who got to own the police?

And meanwhile, their loved ones were put in danger by all of it, sometimes without even knowing it.

I should have stayed out of his life except to handle the estate auctions. I shouldn't have gone back to his bed. I shouldn't have kept talking to him outside of keeping it strictly business. And I sure as hell shouldn't have let him find out about Michael.

But that was done now. No taking any of it back. No way forward but to deal with the consequences.

I called Anna. I didn't know who else to call.

"What's wrong?" she asked as soon as she got on the phone.

"Viktor left me. And...oh God, Anna, it's all just crazy. I don't know where to begin." Or how much was safe to tell.

"It's got to be less crazy than the conversation I had with my brother last night," she said.

"I wouldn't bet money on that."

She stayed quiet for a few seconds, then said, "Okay. We'll take turns. You go first."

Once I started talking, it all spilled out. Finding out that Viktor was in with the Russian mob. Finding out I was going to have a son by him. Raising Michael while not even trying to look for his criminal father. Running into Viktor again and having him find out about Michael. Rekindling our relationship. Starting to get serious, starting to make plans about things like co-parenting Michael. And then the attack at the auction. Nearly being killed. I left out the part about Viktor killing people because I was still wrapping my



brain around it. Working together with Viktor to escape, only to learn, hours later, that Luis was somehow involved in the attack. And after that, Viktor learning I was lifelong friends with the family of someone who had ordered his death.

“But Luis wouldn’t do that!” Anna broke in. I had to wrestle with my anger for a second and let her go on. “He told me everything, Olivia. Running the local Pueblo, tension with the Russians, trying to avoid a war.”

“But Viktor says the war was his idea in the first place!” I couldn’t help it, my voice broke.

“Luis says the same thing about Viktor. But the attack at the auction house...he swears it wasn’t him. One of his lieutenants, Miguel, called some guys together and did it on his own. Now he’s in the doghouse with Luis. And Luis is in the doghouse with me for doing all this stuff behind my back and then bringing some of his guys around us and our kids. I am so pissed at him.”

I had to know. “Tell me the truth Anna, did you know about any of this? Did you know your brother was involved in the Pueblo?”

She shook her head. “I had no idea, honestly. He kept it from us all, I knew some of his childhood friends were involved in shady stuff, but Luis stopped hanging out with them after college.”

Well, that was something, at least she hadn’t been lying to me. Thinking back to what she’d just said I was stuck back on the idea that Luis hadn’t planned the attack on the auction house. “So it wasn’t Luis? It was someone else? But why would they do that?”

“I don’t know. Luis says that Miguel’s disappeared and taken some of his guys with him. He also found out that Miguel’s been speaking against him with the other guys. But that’s all I know. He says he tried to protect me by keeping me in the dark.”

“Viktor’s said similar things to me. But I ended up pulled in anyway.”

“Me too, I guess. What are we going to do?”

“Stick together,” I started, before a sound distracted me.

I heard a faint noise in the back of the apartment, like a wine glass being dropped. It sounded like it had come from Michael’s bedroom. I frowned and stood, wondering if I had woken him up. “Hold on a second, I heard a noise in Michael’s room.”

“Be careful, honey,” she said, but I was already moving, praying it wasn’t anything to worry about.

I opened Michael’s bedroom door and my stomach dropped in horror.

The huge man who had been drunk at the auction was standing in Michael’s bedroom. He had Michael out of bed, one meaty hand clamped over his mouth, and the muzzle of a gun pressed to his temple.

I dropped the phone, my eyes locking with Michael’s terrified ones.

“You will cooperate with me, or I will kill your son in front of you,” he said in his deep, accented voice. I nodded, wide-eyed, my lips as numb as snow.

“Boris, wasn’t it?” I tried to appeal to him, also praying that I had his name right. “You work for Viktor. Why are you doing this?”

“Not anymore I don’t,” he replied disdainfully. “Viktor is a fool. The boy is proof enough of that.”

He shifted and I saw the window was wide open behind him, its screen cut away and a glass-cutter circle piercing it. He’d cut the window glass and reached in to unlatch and open it.

“Please give me my son,” I said as softly and calmly as I could.

“No. You come with me now. No more talking.”

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They had one of those black sedans with tinted windows waiting outside. Boris carried Michael, pressing the gun into my child's side. Michael was frozen in fear, not even able to reach out for me. He was old enough to understand the danger of a gun and of a strange man.

Once I got in and slid over, he pushed Michael into my arms and slammed the door. I noticed a heavy plexiglass partition between the front and back seats, a second before my boy was in my arms, burrowing into my chest and shaking.

"Shh, shh," I soothed him as Boris got into the passenger seat. A shorter, darker man was driving. "It'll be okay."

But I knew it wasn't. Either Viktor was playing some horrible game with us, or Boris was planning to use us against him. Either way, I had no way to call for help, my phone was on Michael's bedroom floor where I'd dropped it.

"Please tell me what you want," I asked once we were underway. I didn't like that we weren't blindfolded. It meant they didn't care if we saw where we were going. And the only reason they would do that is if they knew they could guarantee my silence. Probably with a bullet.

"What do I want?" Boris chuckled, and the man beside him snickered. "I want Boston, little girl. I want control of the Bratva and the territory. And you and your little bastard son are going to help me get it."

I had my hands over Michael's ears. "What do you mean?"

He flashed a grin over his shoulder at me. "You'll figure it out once we get where we're going."

Something about his wide, cruel smile made me hate him even more than when he was pointing a gun at my son. I held Michael, silently praying for a stroke of luck as we drove on.

If he wanted the Bratva it meant he wanted Viktor dead. Did he plan to use us as bait?

I mulled everything I knew. Miguel rebelling against Luis. Boris turning traitor against Viktor. A war each group's leader claimed not to want—but encouraged by the actions of others.

*What was I missing here?*

Michael was clinging to me with his arms and legs like a baby koala. His face was hidden against me, but he wasn't trembling and weeping anymore. I didn't know if he had calmed down or simply worn himself out. I cuddled him, making comforting noises while I watched us heading into central Boston.

We finally slowed in front of a small hotel in mid-renovation, its entire facade hidden behind scaffolding and plastic safety netting. They turned onto the garage ramp, and we disappeared underground. The sudden darkness made Michael flinch. I stroked his hair, doing my best to help him keep calm.

If we were going to die, or be forced to run for our lives somehow, if everything was going to be so scary that I didn't even know how to handle it, I was still going to be a mother to my little boy and protect him from what was going to happen. I would spend my last breath trying to provide him with safety and comfort, even if I failed. It was all I could do.

I sat there numbly while the two men got out and started speaking to each other. But something was strange—they weren't speaking English or Russian. They were speaking Spanish, Puerto Rican Spanish.

“Run up and tell Miguel that we got them. Now all we have to do is finish the frame-up and wait for Viktor to lose his mind.”

“You sure this is going to work?”

“Of course. If he thinks Luis killed his son and the boy's mother, he'll stop at nothing until Luis is dead.”

I clapped a hand over my mouth, horror rising in my throat like bile. They planned to use us to drive Viktor into a frenzy and start an all-out war.

“Thinking about it...it’s better than that,” the other snickered, and I suddenly recognized the voice. Paco! That bastard who had fought with Luis and scared the kids.

“If Luis thinks Viktor killed his sister’s best friend and her son in a fit of rage, he’ll stop at nothing too. They’ll get rid of each other!”

Boris chuckled and waved Paco on. “I’ll be up with them in a few minutes.”

So that was their plan. Frame Luis and Viktor both for our murders, set them at each other’s throats, and then arrange to kill them during the resulting war.

At which point, Miguel and Boris would take over their respective groups and set up a truce.

How long had they been working together? How long had they been plotting against their own bosses, who trusted them?

Probably a long time. Long enough that if I wasn’t conveniently here, they would have found another way. Anything to satisfy their own lust for power.

I tried to plead with Boris again as he opened the door and forced us out, but he simply looked at Michael meaningfully and touched his holstered pistol. I shut up, picked up Michael, and walked obediently to the elevator.

The hotel renovation was mostly done inside, enough that the new carpets were laid, the new doors hung, the recessed lights and plaster molding installed. We went up to the top floor, the fifth, and came out into a lobby space where several men lounged, chatting in a mix of Spanish and Russian.

One of them was Puerto Rican and almost as handsome as Viktor, in an elegant and broody-eyed way, with a killer mustache I wouldn’t soon forget. But as our eyes met, I noticed how empty his smile was, and shivered.

“So, you got them,” the man I assumed must be Miguel, said grandly to Boris. “Good. Go get yourself a drink. I think the lady is smart enough not to try to run with so many of our men around.” He stared me in the eyes.

I swallowed and nodded.

Miguel cocked his head. “Is your little boy sleeping?”

“No, he’s terrified. We got dragged over here at gunpoint.” I couldn’t keep the edge out of my voice.

“I see.” He sniffed and exchanged glances with Boris, who was pouring himself three fingers of Scotch from the elegantly appointed bar. “So, you have something to say for yourself?”

“Yes. Look, I’m guessing you either want me as bait for Victor, or you want to hurt us and have Viktor blame Luis for that.”

“Or Luis blame Viktor. Whatever gets them fighting properly.” His smile showed all his teeth. “You have some better idea, perhaps? Something that might save your lives?”

“You do whatever you want to me. But let my little boy go. Killing me is insult enough, and my son hasn’t done anything wrong. He’s just a little boy. You don’t need both of us. Please...please, let him go. You don’t need him.”

“Ah, but you see, I can’t do that.” Miguel sounded almost genuinely regretful. “We need your son to goad Viktor into action properly. He’s too calm, he thinks too fucking much. How do I know how much he cares about some *puta*? But his son, his heir... Now that will guarantee action.”

“Yes, and I’m saying he doesn’t care enough about either of us to be goaded into anything. The man dumped me this morning!”

This didn’t seem to concern Miguel so much as make him thoughtful. “I see. So you believe this is an indication that he does not care what happens to you or his son.”

“He sure doesn’t seem to,” I said.

He nodded slowly, then looked at Boris again as the big man came over to sit on a nearby couch. I still stood there awkwardly, the two men lounging and watching us.

“That’s really too bad. However, I know for a fact that no man genuinely turns off his emotions when he breaks up with his woman. And he’ll certainly concern himself about the fate of his son.”

I winced. Well, it was worth a try.

Michael had his head tucked under my chin and was crying silently, his tears leaking through my shirt. Miguel was staring at me, amused. He turned to comment to Boris, who was drinking down his booze like he didn’t want to be sober for putting a bullet in my head.

Boris’s phone rang.

He checked it and scowled. “I need to take this. Don’t do anything until I get back.”

He walked away before picking up, robbing me of the chance to yell for help. Not that I had any idea who was on the other end of that call. But I had to think of something.

My little boy was depending on me to figure out a way for us to survive this. But right now, all I could do was think of Viktor, and wish he was here again to stand steadfast between me and danger.

# Chapter 23

## *Viktor*

I buried myself in paperwork after my goodbye call to Olivia, trying my best to distract myself from the hollow ache inside me. Olivia. Best lover I had ever had, brave enough to risk her life to help save mine. Dedicated mother to my son. Could she really be the one betraying me?

She didn't know enough to explain all the problems that had cropped up. Just the details about the auctions. She could still be involved, but someone else had been leaking intel as well.

Who knew my schedule, my methods and plans? Who knew that I was seeing Olivia, or that she'd already borne my son? The questions nagged at me as I went through the copy of Mischka's autopsy I had ordered.

No signs of foul play. No toxin residues, no injuries. Death by natural causes. At least I didn't have to avenge him too. Not like Ivan.

Ivan, whose murder had turned this from a cold war to a hot one. A murder right under Boris's nose.

...Boris.

A nagging suspicion tugged at me faintly. He certainly knew all of my schedule, my plans, my habits. He knew about Olivia, and about Michael. He had known about the auction.

He knew everything that I knew.

Could that Maria woman possibly have pumped him for that much information during their drunken night together? Or...?

Boris was acting bizarrely lately, and he had bungled guarding Ivan and



then bungled again catching the assassin. I had wondered if my long-term friend was becoming an alcoholic, that the years of heavy drinking were starting to take their toll. But what if there was more to it? *What if he did it deliberately?*

Frowning, I picked up my phone and called our contact in the Cambridge PD to see if they had gotten anything on Maria, or on Boris. I still didn't want to believe that he had anything to do with the efforts against me, but whatever the truth was, I had to face it.

Detective Jorgensen answered immediately. "Evening, sir."

"Yes, good evening. I need to follow up with you on the whole Boris and Maria matter." I tried to keep my voice as calm and breezy as usual.

"Well, I had a couple of things come in from the webcrawler, including some CCTV stills. Your man has definitely been hanging out with some unsavory characters, but there aren't any women among them."

My frown deepened. "Who, then?"

"I'll send you an email with the photos attached, check your junk mail as I'll use an anonymous address. Expect it within a few minutes, I want to make sure I have them all."

"Fine, fine," I said impatiently. "Can you give me the basics?"

"Hispanic, maybe Puerto Rican, good looking, around five nine, curly dark hair, epic mustache."

"A Puerto Rican...man?" My mind was already racing. What was going on? Had Boris forgotten the Bratva and our friendship, and taken bribes from the other side?

"That's right, sir. No ID on him yet. I'll let you know as soon as that changes."

"Yes, do that. And send everything over that you have immediately."

Once he was off the phone, I called Boris. The phone rang several times before he picked up. “So. Finally decided to speak with me again, huh?”

“Don’t start with me,” I snapped, more annoyed than I thought possible at the way I heard him scoff in response.

“I’m a little bit busy, boss, can I call you back?”

“No,” I insisted. “This will not wait. I have marching orders for you and your men. Get back here so I can brief you.”

“Boss, seriously—”

“You have twenty minutes, Boris. After that, I send men out to look for you. Is that clear?”

The annoyance fled his voice. He sounded wary, suddenly, and placating. “Yeah. Boss, I get it. I’ll get the guys together and come over.”

“Good. We’re going to war, Boris. I want you and your boys fully informed before I send you out against Luis.”

For some reason, this cheered him. “You’re finally going after that guy? Sounds good. I’ll be right behind you.”

*The question is, will you be back there planning to plunge a knife in my back?*

We hung up and I got on my laptop to wait for the delivery of photos and stills. But before it could arrive, my phone rang again. It was Olivia, I was about to reject the call, but I found that I couldn’t.

I picked it up. “Hello, Olivia, what do you want?” I asked a little warily.

“Is this Viktor?” The voice was female, very scared but determined, with a light Puerto Rican accent.

I lifted an eyebrow. “Yes, it is. And you are?”

“My name’s Anna. I’m Olivia’s best friend.”

I scowled. “If you’re here to scold me over breaking Olivia’s heart, I really don’t have time—”

“Someone’s taken her,” she said shakily, and I stopped dead.

“What?”

“A man with a Russian accent. He took her and Michael. I overheard the kidnapping because I was on the phone with her at the time. I went over to her apartment to check and the back window’s broken into and they’re... they’re gone. Her phone was on Michael’s bedroom floor. I found your number in there.”

A cold jolt of adrenaline rushed through me. But then I remembered who I was talking to. “You claim a Russian man took her? Not, say, your brother?”

“My brother is in my house babysitting my baby daughter, damn it! It’s one of your guys who’s got Olivia.”

I frowned, skeptical but very worried for Olivia and my boy. “If this is some kind of trick—”

“You’re worried about me tricking you? I thought you were the one who had her kidnapped!” She struggled audibly with her temper, breathing ragged. “If you are who my brother says, you have to know every Russian mobster in town. You’re our only chance of finding and rescuing her. So if you know something—”

“Wait. You and Luis intended to rescue her from me?”

“She’s family! Of course we’re not going to leave her to die! She might not be that way by blood, but there’s no way either one of us is going to let her or her little boy get hurt just because she fell in love with you!”

I sat back in my chair, having to digest this for several seconds. “This isn’t the conversation I thought I would be having with Luis’s family. For the record, I don’t have her, and I would never harm her. But it seems that we

need to work together and figure out who has her, what their aim is, and how to rescue her and Michael. I already have my suspicions.” I checked my email again, and saw the bundle of images had arrived from my informant. “One moment.”

I started opening the images, and my eyes widened. There was Boris in a bar, all right, drinking and chatting with a handsome Puerto Rican man with curly hair and a very nice mustache. They looked chummy. A quick look-through of the images showed that they had gotten together several times.

“I definitely know one of the men who took Olivia. I suspect your brother will know the other. I can forward you the photographs, or bring them with me, if you’ll tell me where to meet you.”

“Olivia’s place. I’ll stay here until you arrive, it’ll be quicker if you come somewhere you know. I’ll ask Luis to join us.”

“I just have one question. Will your brother accept a truce, at least for the moment so we can get this done?”

She let out her breath in a whoosh. “You’re saying you want to help rescue her, not just supply information? Why? I thought you were done with her.”

“No,” I said simply. “Our parting company was for safety reasons, but now I realize it was a mistake. You’re not the only one who loves her, Miss Anna. Now please, convey my message. It seems that you, your brother, and I have a lot to talk about.”

\*\*\*

I had spent months trying to get a meeting with Luis. Ironic that it should finally happen now, when my woman and my son were both in peril. But as I knocked on the door to Olivia’s apartment and Anna answered, I realized I was just glad to get it over with.

I inclined my head to her, noting her baby daughter in a sling across her chest. “Ma’am.”

She appeared to be relieved at the sight of me, calm and cordial and, best of all, cooperative. I'm not sure what she was expecting. "He's in there."

Luis was the same height as I, all lean energy as he levered himself off the couch and came to shake my hand. I could tell he was packing under his leather jacket. So was I. But our hands stayed empty.

"You're a hard man to get in touch with," I said, and he nodded solemnly.

"I didn't get the impression you would want to talk. Not with your body count recently."

"Yes, well, with one exception, I was defending myself. These assassination attempts weren't your idea?"

"No. I only heard about both of them after the fact. I didn't even know the guy in the hospital was one of ours until Miguel brought the news. He says you killed him."

"Incorrect. That was Boris. I thought it was a bumbling mistake at the time, but now I realize he likely killed the man to keep him from talking."

"Miguel led the attack on the auction house," Luis said. "I suspect he sent the hitter to the hospital too."

"Why would they want to foment a war? Worse, why would they work together to make sure we wanted to fight?"

"We can ask them when we catch them," Luis replied grimly. "But I can guess. If we're in the middle of a bloody war with a high body count, it won't look too strange if we both get killed in the fighting. Just one stray bullet for each of us. Then guess who figures they'll take over?"

I winced and pinched the bridge of my nose. *Damn you, Boris.* Boris had been incredibly jealous when I had become Mischka's protege instead of him. But that had been twenty years ago. I had always expected him to grow out of his envy of me, especially when I gave him more trust and power than anyone else. But apparently, he simply never had. "That sounds alarmingly

plausible.”

“So how do you find out where they’ve taken her?” Anna asked, her face pale and creased with worry.

I pulled out my phone. “All of the cars in my motor pool are fitted with two GPS locators. If one is disabled, then the tracker under the seat should still be active. Even Boris does not know this. I’ll just check their locations and see which one swung by here, and where it is now. Then we can call in some reinforcements and get down there.”

“Anna, you stay here with Gina, I’ll get one of my men to keep an eye on the house, in case anyone comes back. I’ll let you know when we’ve rescued her.” Her brother said firmly.

She smiled weakly, but there was a faint gleam of hope in her eyes. I started checking the car locations, while Luis started calling all the men he felt he could trust. Soon, I would be doing the same.

We would rescue Olivia and my son, and we would end not only this wasteful war, but the traitors who had fomented it.

# Chapter 24

## *Olivia*

“Son of a bitch,” Boris growled in English, as he came stomping back in. “We’ve got a wrinkle. Viktor’s calling me and my men in to plan a strike against Luis now. If I don’t show, he’ll know something’s up. We can’t afford that yet!”

Miguel stood up, smoothing his suit with his hands before giving Boris a mild smile. “Of course we can. Once these two turn up floating in the harbor, that’s all he’s going to think about.”

“No, you don’t get it. The man’s too smart. Too observant. He’ll know. He’s been suspicious of me lately anyway.” Boris looked jumpy and torn suddenly. He kept glancing at Michael, who was still hiding in my arms. “Bad enough we’re involving his kid.”

“Oh, come now.” Miguel smirked. “You act like you’ve never killed a child before.”

“That’s because I haven’t.” Boris’s tone of disgust gave me a touch of hope. “I didn’t sign up for that kind of shit. Even gangsters have limits!”

“Not if they want to reach the top, they don’t.” Miguel turned his attention to us and touched the gun on his hip idly. “But fine, I’ll take care of it.”

“What about Viktor? What should I tell him?” Boris, the wannabe leader, looked completely lost, like he couldn’t handle hard situations without someone else’s oversight. I wondered if this was exactly what Miguel was banking on. That he would ultimately pull the strings of *both* organizations, with Boris constantly running back to him for support. “Maybe we should keep them alive as leverage?”

“The point is not to keep them alive as leverage, Boris,” Miguel said with

exaggerated patience. “The idea is to get him so furious at Luis, and Luis so furious at him, that they go to war and make mistakes out of rage. Then we kill them off and take what’s theirs. That’s been the plan since we learned of these two!”

“So, what, then?”

“Send some of your men, have them buy you time while we deal with this here. And meanwhile, stop freaking out! We’re almost ready—”

He paused as his own phone rang. He picked it up, and immediately started conversing in rapid Spanish.

“No, boss, I’m just handling the gun parts order like you wanted. It’s a ton of inventorying.” He listened for a few seconds. “Wait, you want me there? Why?” Another long pause. As he listened, a very unpleasant grin bloomed on his face. “Oh. Well, that’s unfortunate. Wait, you’re sending everyone out looking for them? Boss, this order has to be passed on to the assembly guys by—okay. Okay, yeah, I get it. We’ll be there within half an hour.”

“What is it?” Boris asked as he hung up.

Miguel shot him a disgusted look. “You screwed up! The bitch was on the phone with Luis’s sister when you took her. She overheard everything! Luis already knows she and the boy have been taken. He’s calling everyone in to search for them!”

I let out a small sigh of relief. Anna had heard. She had told her brother. And Luis was coming through for her...for us.

Boris’s face darkened. “How was I to know that call was still connected? She dropped the damn phone.”

“Are you kidding me with these excuses?”

“Don’t treat me like your fucking subordinate! We’re supposed to be partners!”

The two continued arguing while I stroked Michael’s hair and watched,



praying that this tiny bit of good luck would grow. These two were greedy for power. That also seemed to extend to trying to boss each other around. If their alliance fell apart catastrophically enough, so would their plans. Hopefully, including their plans to kill us both.

As I sat there on one of the new velvet couches, watching their snapping at each other turn into a full-on shouting match, I found myself thinking of Viktor again. How quickly he had acted when I was in danger. But now, he didn't even know I was in trouble, he had cut me off. I prayed that somehow, our increased fortune would include him.

But that was impossible. He didn't know we had been kidnapped, let alone where we were.

The fighting paused briefly when someone called Boris again. He argued into the phone in Russian, then gave up and said something in a calmer tone. He then started making phone calls. "I'll send some of my guys ahead to buy time with Viktor. We won't need so many guards, there's no way they know where we're holding them, I switched off the car's tracker."

"Fine," Miguel grumbled, pulling out his phone. "I'll do the same. What do we do with these two in the meantime?"

"Keep guards on them until we figure out the best course of action."

Miguel laughed, making Boris's face darken again. "Best course of action is that we shoot them and make sure the bodies are found! We talked about this!"

"That was before I realized you meant the kid too!"

"Don't be a fucking pussy, Boris! You brought the boy here, what did you think was going to happen?"

They went back to arguing while I watched helplessly. Most of the men were walking out, off to buy time with the very men these two were plotting against. But there were still enough guards around that I couldn't make a break for it. Yet. I waited for my opportunity, thinking only of getting

Michael out safely.

I heard the hum of the elevator going down with the departing men. But then, past the argument of the livid men nearby, I heard the elevator start to rise again. Simultaneously, I heard several pairs of feet rushing up the fire stairs.

Boris and Miguel were too busy arguing to notice until the moment that two men walked in, with a collection of dark-suited figures piling into the doorway behind them. Both men had shotguns in hand. As I recognized them, my eyes widened.

It was Viktor and Luis. Shoulder to shoulder, with their loyal men behind them.

Boris was caught flat-footed for a few seconds as he took them in. “Oh fuck,” he said finally.

I grabbed Michael and rolled off the couch, landing on my back and then rolling on top of him to shield him, just as the gunshots started going off. Boris let out a startled grunt and I heard him hit the floor with a thud that shook it slightly.

Miguel was screaming in Spanish, cursing Luis, Viktor, all the men who had come with them. I heard his voice grow louder as he scrambled toward us, probably planning to take us hostage.

I looked up and saw his gun was pointed at the men, not at me. I rolled over and planted both feet in his groin, doubling him over and driving him backward. He let out a wheeze and fumbled with his gun, almost dropping it. Before he could level it at anyone, Luis shot him and he fell over backward.

Silence. Footsteps. I dared to look up. Boris and Miguel’s men were kneeling, disarmed, hands on heads, and surrounded by the others. It was over even more suddenly than it had begun.

Then Viktor was there, setting the shotgun aside on the couch and reaching for me, for his son. I sat up and he pulled us both into his arms. He was here,

he and Luis had saved us. Together.

His men chattered around us as Viktor hugged us, talking about the betrayal, the new treaty, and how they couldn't believe that Boris and Miguel had joined up to try to overthrow their rightful leaders. I looked past Viktor's shoulder and saw Boris and Miguel both sprawled on their backs on the concrete floor, heads haloed in blood. Their faces looked so graphic that I covered Michael's eyes.

Viktor saw my face and looked up at one of his men. "Throw some sheets over those, my son is too young to see bodies." The man obligingly headed into the nearest suite, coming out with folded bedsheets to cover the corpses with. I was glad to see them disappear from sight.

"I thought I'd never see you again," I told Viktor weepily. "But you saved us anyway."

"With a little help from our friends, yes, I did." He kissed my forehead. "I am sorry it took me so long."

"That's okay. You got here in time and we're safe now. That's what matters." I swallowed and looked up at him. "I love you."

"And I love you," Viktor said softly.

Michael started to squirm between us, his shock and terror wearing off as he started to realize we were safe. When he looked up, all he seemed to see besides my face was Viktor's.

"Hi, who are you?" Michael asked, then peered at Viktor for a second. "You've got the same color eyes I do!" His little voice was shaky and quiet, as if he was doing his best to be brave.

"That's because you got your eye color from him, honey," I told Michael as Viktor smiled at him. "This is your daddy.

"He came to save us."

# Epilogue

*Six months later*

*Olivia*

I woke up to rain and wind battering against the hunting lodge's armored windows, and Viktor spooning me from behind. One arm was tucked under the pillow beneath my head, while the other was slung over me loosely. His breathing was slow and even, he was still asleep despite the cacophony outside.

Thunder rumbled in the distance. I opened an eye and saw dawn breaking through the storm clouds. It was the only light coming into the room, the line of streetlights I could see through the trees from where I lay was still dark. *Blackout*. I listened, hearing the backup generators humming floors away in the basement. Between them and the house batteries, we would be fine for a solid day.

But that wouldn't keep the thunder from waking Michael and scaring him into our bed. He was a lot less nervous these days than he'd been months ago, but loud noises still got to him.

Six months after Viktor had buried Boris and called an end to the war, my life remained a mix of the ordinary and the unbelievable. This had its drawbacks, but for the most part, I loved how things were going.

It was true that I would never be able to tell my friends and coworkers at the auction house what my new husband did for a living. We were still figuring out what to tell Michael about it. Right now, he just knew that Viktor had been far away during those years when he was gone from our lives. I hoped that by the time he learned his father's true calling, he would be old enough to keep the secret on his own.

On the other hand, with Viktor, my life was endlessly richer, more exciting and more exotic than I had ever known. We had honeymooned for a month in the Caribbean on a yacht with a full staff and armed guards. Viktor had taught Michael to swim in the yacht pool while I had watched, marveling quietly at how fast the two were bonding.

I rolled over carefully in Viktor's arms and gazed at his sleeping face. He looked so peaceful. He had pulled on a pair of pajama pants during the night, but his tattooed chest was bare. I slid my hand up it and he stirred.

"There's a thunderstorm," I murmured in his ear. "That means Michael's incoming."

His brilliant green eyes opened, and I propped myself up on one elbow to kiss him. He smiled up at me. "I see." I felt him quickly do a pants-check on himself and my smile turned into an amused grin. He'd had to break himself of the habit of sleeping nude and leaving the bedroom door open. Fortunately, there hadn't been any mishaps in the meantime.

Right on cue, another thunderclap shook the windows. Much closer this time, louder, following a lightning flash just a few seconds before. The storm was right on top of us. He stretched against me. "Sounds like the roads are going to be a mess for a while. Should we cancel with Anna and Luis?"

"I think we should talk to them and see what they want to do. Last time it rained like this they were fine, but then there was the time with the road closure." My last word was punctuated by a yawn. I wanted more sleep, and certainly more snuggle time. We hadn't come up here for the weekend to get up early and be busy all day.

"All right. I'll make the call as soon as it's a reasonable hour." He was going to say more, but before he could, our bedroom door opened.

Michael was in his favorite superhero pajamas, and his hair was sticking up haphazardly from sleep. He rubbed one half-open eye and shuffled toward us. "Thunder's loud and scary. I can't sleep."

"I get it, sweetie," I told him as Viktor and I both sat up. "C'mon, snuggle

in. The storm's going to be a while."

"Why is it so loud?" he grumbled while I stifled a laugh. He was so cute with the crazy hair and chirpy-voiced grumping.

"Thunder gets louder the closer the center of the storm is. Right now, it's overhead. It will quiet down eventually." Viktor scooted over to make room for our son, who flopped onto the bed and nestled in between us on top of the covers.

"Oh. Okay." He jumped as lightning flashed and thunder roared at almost the same time. "I just wish it would go away faster!" Then he gave me a worried look. "Is Auntie Anna still coming?"

"We're hoping so. It depends on how bad the roads are. It might be difficult for them to get here." I smoothed Michael's hair down gently so it would stop tempting me to giggle.

"Stupid storm. I want them to bring Pookie up again!"

I smiled. "Well, if it doesn't work this weekend, next weekend's supposed to be clear. It'll be fine, sweetie."

These days, Anna and I spent even more time than we used to confiding in each other because we had found ourselves in the same basic position. In her case, she had to figure out how to explain her brother's work in ways that her own husband could understand, and, eventually, she'd have to do the same for her daughter. There were a lot of potential conflicts involved, and I didn't envy her the coming talk with her husband.

Figuring out how to live ordinary lives on the edge of a criminal organization took a lot of work. The fact that the men leading those groups were so close to us only helped in some ways. The no-weapons-around-our-kids rule took a while to stick with some of the younger members. I still didn't know that much about my husband's day-to-day work. I still hoped he wouldn't end up shot, arrested, or betrayed again.

A year ago, I wouldn't have been able to grasp that someone could work

outside the law and still be a good and honorable person. Now, I was married to one. And Anna had been sister to one, unknowingly, for years. We loved them both, and we chose to live with their secrets.

I sometimes rationalized my choice, thinking that there would always be crime lords, and that the city was better for having an honorable man at the top in Boston. And maybe that was even true. Viktor's and Luis's characters certainly helped end the war between their organizations quickly and with no further bloodshed. They helped keep the peace now. And that meant I felt safer with Viktor than with anyone else in my life.

But in the end, for better or for worse, I was with Viktor because I loved him, and we both wanted Michael to grow up with two parents. The most simple and ordinary of reasons, which many couples would give as their own.

We curled up in bed and watched the storm, chatting softly and answering Michael's endless questions about everything from how thunder worked, to when he could finally learn to drive a car. I looked over the top of our son's head at my husband, and when he looked back at me, I saw in his fierce green eyes a contentment I had never imagined could rest there.

## **THE END**

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Aria Ray writes suspenseful, hot, and intense romance stories featuring powerful alpha-men and witty heroines, full of sacrifice, love, and happily-ever-afters.

Like the heroines of her novels, Aria has always had a crush on sinfully sexy bad boys – dark, controlling, irresistible, but tender and loving.

When she is not writing or daydreaming about new stories, she loves to spend time with her own gang of alpha males – a husband and twin boys.

But the real mob boss of the family is Don Corleone – the cat.

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