



Remorseless

DEVILETTE

LEGACY OF VALENTINO
BOOK 1

KYLIE KENT

REMORSELESS DEVILETTE

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Izzy Valentino is ready for you to read her story, however, I do need to warn you that this story can be triggering for some. There is a heavy focus on unplanned pregnancy throughout the book, a very small discussion of child sexual abuse, and a lot of adult content including consensual sexual acts, and violence.

If any of these are hard to read subjects for you, I suggest you skip this one.

Otherwise, enjoy the bumpy rollercoaster ride that Izzy and Mikhail are about to take you on.

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[CLUB OMERTA](#)



For one night, I'd like to not be Isabella Valentino. Daughter of Angelica and Neo Valentino, two people who have earned their reputations as the most ruthless couple across the globe. And for once, I'd like not to be Izzy, mafia princess and granddaughter of Al Donatello, Italy's most feared Don and the boss of bosses.

I'd like to be someone else, just for a bit. I want to blend in, have fun, be a little reckless without the pressure of being everything everyone expects me to be. Don't get me wrong, I fucking love my family, would die for them. I'd kill for them. And I have. It's just... I wonder what it would be like to not be me. Although, being me is pretty awesome, most days.

I can't be the only person who has this thought from time to time. Surely not. I know I'm far from normal, but still, I'm not crazy. I know crazy. I've met crazy, and I'm far from that.

Tonight, I get to be someone else. I can live out that fantasy. It can't hurt. So I'm no longer Izzy. For the next few hours, I think I'll be Jolene. Dolly Parton once sang about a certain woman not taking her man. Well, ladies, if your man is out alone tonight, I advise you to come and find him before I do. Because I do not plan on going home alone, and I can't be held responsible for our poor choices.

I take one last look in the mirror. The sparkly black sequin dress that barely covers my ass sits firmly against my olive skin. It's not something I would usually wear. But Jolene? Yep, this is definitely her style, and she's not the least bit self-conscious about it. My long dark hair has been replaced by a blonde bob, courtesy of the high-end wig I picked up just this morning. Reaching for my trademark blood-red lipstick on the counter, I twist off the top and hesitate. This is my go-to color. Maybe I should choose a different one...

Shaking my head, I slide the lipstick across my bottom lip, and then the top. Maybe giving Jolene a little bit of Izzy isn't such a bad idea. After one final inspection, I spin on my six-inch Louboutins and make my way to the garage before I stop and turn around, heading for the front door instead.

Pulling my phone out of my clutch, I call for a town car. I can't take one of my own if I'm attempting to go incognito. Which, in a city where everyone knows who you are, who your family is, incognito is the only way to let your hair down and have fun.

That's if I don't want to see my nameless date's face plastered all over the missing person's page the following day. The thing about my family is... they're everywhere. They have eyes everywhere. And my dad, my uncle, and my four cousins, they all take their protectiveness to a whole new level, beyond anything this world has seen before.

Half an hour later, I'm walking through the club doors like I own the place, like I belong here. I don't. I shouldn't be here at all, and if any of the men in my family knew I was here, they'd come in, guns blazing. But this knowledge does little to stop me. Besides, this is probably the one place in this city where I'm not at risk of running into any of my cousins. Because I'm in enemy territory.

This club is owned by the Petrovs. A rival Russian family. If they knew a

Valentino just crossed their threshold, well, I don't know what they'd do. But I do know I wouldn't get a warm welcome. I'm not scared of them though. I have no doubt I'm more skilled and more trained than any of these Neanderthals. In fact, I've never met a Russian I haven't been able to take out, or at least caused serious bodily damage to. I might want to be Jolene tonight, but that doesn't mean the transition back to mafia princess won't be seamless if I need to smash some Russian skulls together.

I head straight for the bar, way too sober for my liking. Finding an empty seat, I place my clutch on the bar top. It takes mere seconds for the attractive bartender to approach me. "You're not from here," he says with a thick Russian accent.

"I think what you meant to say is: what can I get for you?" I tell him. My eyes roam from his hips upwards. He's built. He works out. His forearms are all muscle, further defined by the ink that disappears under the folded sleeves of the white dress shirt he's wearing like a second skin. A kind smile graces his face, but when my eyes finally meet his, I see danger lurking behind those icy blues. His dark-blond eyebrows raise in question.

I don't back away, don't lower my gaze. If he didn't want to be ogled, then he wouldn't have those forearms on display—forearms that I bet could brace me against a wall, or a door, or a window.

"What will it be then?" he finally asks.

"I'll have a cosmo. Please." I pull out my black card before returning it to my clutch and grabbing a fifty instead. I watch as he busies himself making my drink. It's not the usual whiskey sour I'm known to order, but tonight is about being different, and I don't do anything in halves.

I'm all in.

"ANOTHER?" The hot, strong-armed bartender asks.

"Sure." I smile flirtatiously—at least, I think I do. It's hard to tell. As I go to stand, my foot slips. Thankfully my reflexes aren't as inebriated as I am right now, and I manage to catch myself.

"Shit." A pair of hands reaches over the bar to hold me steady. His hands. Those arms I've been drooling over are right in front of me now. It'd be weird if I stuck out my tongue and licked the lines and curves of his ink,

wouldn't it?

“Whoa, babe, need a little help?” a rough voice says, not so quietly, as a large body presses up against my back.

I stiffen. Who the hell thinks they can press up against me? Before I get a chance to turn around and send this asshole back to the cave he crawled out of, my handsome bartender picks up a knife. A small knife he was just using to cut lemons. He runs it through his fingers, twirling it around as he says something in Russian, while those stormy blue eyes stare daggers at the figure behind me.

Within seconds, I feel the person take a step back. “Sorry, Mikhail, I didn't know, man,” he says.

I crane my neck to see the guy walking away before quickly returning my attention to the bartender. “Mikhail? It suits you.” I shrug. “But I'm no damsel. I could have handled that.” I gesture a thumb over my shoulder.

“I have no doubt, stink.”

“What? What's kotyonok?” I ask.

He leans over the bar, his finger between us motioning me to come closer. My body moves as if it's on autopilot. His breath warms the side of my neck and I inhale, moving closer again. “Kitten,” he whispers in my ear. “Those claws of yours are going to feel so fucking good scratching down my back as I fuck the shit out of you.”

I lean away with a smirk on my face. “You're pretty sure of yourself. Perhaps I'm not that kind of girl,” I tell him.

“What kind would you be then, kotyonok? The kind I take home to my mother?” He laughs.

“Absolutely not. I'm the kind you fuck six ways to Sunday and never see again.”

“Let's go.” He jumps over the bar—literally hurls himself over the bar top—and lands beside me. Taking my hand in his, he tugs me towards the back of the club.

“Wait... where are you taking me?”

“Somewhere I can see you naked, but all these fuckers in here can't.”

Huh, well, that works for me.

I follow along, doing my best not to trip or stumble in these heels. We pass through an archway that leads to a corridor. Mikhail pulls a set of keys from the pocket of his black dress pants and unlocks a door. Holding it open, he tugs me inside. The room is dark. I can't see anything until a blinding light

comes on above us. It's an office; we're in some kind of office. If only he knew who he was bringing into his lair...

You know what? I think I like this game, and it appears my new Russian friend here just raised the stakes.



Six weeks. That's how long it's been since everything was turned upside down. I should have known better than to expect the easy life to continue for long. I was raised in this world. I've lost count of the number of funerals I've attended. Although nothing has prepared me for today. The fortieth day. It's supposed to be the final goodbye. The soul of my brother is going to its resting place, whether that be heaven or hell. I guess I'll find out which when I meet up with him again.

Everyone is here, waiting for me. They expect me to make a speech, tell my stories of Vlad. How can I go out there and act like everything's okay? It's not fucking okay. He's not going to be okay. Wherever the fuck he's

going, it won't be with the one thing I promised he'd have. It's a Russian tradition to be buried with items you'll need in the afterlife, and Vlad doesn't have our father's gold-encrusted pocket knife.

Why, you may ask? Because *she* fucking stole it.

Whoever the fuck she is, because she sure as fuck isn't Jolene—the name she gave me that night we met. I've searched this city high and dry, only to come up empty-handed at every single turn. I won't stop looking until one of us is dead. She didn't just steal something from me. She stole the one thing that my brother is missing, the one item he needs in order to rest in peace. And that is a crime that I can't let go unpunished.

My cock hardens at the thought of her. Fucking that girl was like nothing else. No matter how good her pussy is, I'll still kill her. Probably after I fuck her again. But the result will be the same... as soon as I find her.

"Boss, you coming out?" Ivan, my best friend and newly appointed right-hand man, taps on the door.

"Fuck off with that *boss* shit," I grunt before raising the glass of vodka to my mouth and swallowing the remainder of the contents in one go.

"You can't hide out in here all day. They're waiting for you," he says. I watch as he walks over to my desk, picks up the bottle of vodka, and refills my cup and another for himself.

"I can do whatever the fuck I want. Like you keep reminding me, I'm the boss now." I lift an eyebrow, challenging him to argue otherwise.

Ivan shakes his head. "I get it. You didn't want this, but it's yours and you gotta get the fuck up and get on with it."

"He won't rest at peace. Because of me." I point to my chest.

"You don't know that..."

"Yes, I do. The one thing... the one fucking thing he wanted to be buried with, and I lost it. I never should have borrowed it that day. I never should have taken her into my office. It was stupid."

"Well, if it's any consolation, one look at that girl and any one of us would have done the same." He laughs. Heat works its way through my body with the thought of how easily I could kill my best friend right now. "Woah. Why do you look like you want to gut me all of a sudden?" Ivan holds up both hands.

"Because I do," I tell him.

He blinks as if he's waiting for me to elaborate. I'm not going to. Never have I thought about killing him before. One word about her, and I'm ready

to slit his fucking throat. When, really, the one who deserves to be on the other end of my blade is *her*.

“Shit, I thought you were just chasing this girl down to get the knife back, but you like her.”

“I don’t like anybody,” I grunt, push to my feet, and button up my jacket. “Let’s get this shitshow over with.” I walk out of the office and head to the living room, which is full of people. Family, friends, associates. All here to pay their respects, to give that final send-off to my brother, their boss. I may hold the keys to the kingdom in his absence, but in their eyes, I’ll never live up to his legacy. I know it, and they know it. Though neither will ever say it out loud.

My eyes scan the room. It’s all red and golds. Over the top, if you ask me, but Vlad was a showy motherfucker. Me, not so much. I’d much prefer to be back behind the bar serving drinks. Those days are long gone.

Memories of that night invade my mind as I stand here, in the silence. *She* invades my mind. The sooner I find her and put an end to her, the fucking better off we’ll all be.

A throat clears in the back of the room. My head shoots up and I lock eyes with Julian, one of my brigadiers. His face pales as I glare at him. *Good, let the fucker sweat.* I won’t be fucking rushed into shit. I hold out a hand and a glass of vodka is quickly placed into it. By whom, I don’t know or care. I raise the glass towards the sky. When, really, it’d make more sense to pour the fucking vodka on the soil. We’re not the kind of men who go to the heavens and we’re all fucking kidding ourselves if we think otherwise.

Vlad believed though. He was adamant he was going up and not down. He was fucked up like that and no one ever dared to correct him.

“Pahkah, Vlad. Until we meet again.” I bring the glass to my mouth. As I swallow, the room echoes my goodbye as everyone toasts to my brother.

I move aside and sit in the empty chair. The boss’s chair. I feel the eyes of everyone on me. Let them look. None of these bastards would last a day in the position I’ve just been thrust into, and if they think otherwise, they can try to fucking take it from me. I might not want the job, but pride will have them grabbing it from my cold dead hands before I give it up. My whole fucking life has been dedicated to serving this family, my brother, my father before him. They were great fucking bosses. And now it’s up to me to lead this organization into the future.

It doesn’t take long for the room to fill with conversation while everyone

memorializes Vlad, talking about his greatness, their fondness for him. He was one sick bastard. Cruel. But he was loyal to the bone. He was the right brother for the role. I was only ever meant to be the fuck-up. Not the one in charge.

“Mikhail, do you... want some company?” Anya kneels in front of me with an expectant look on her overly made-up face. I have no doubt that if I told her to undo my trousers and suck my cock right here, right now, she would. Even with her parents in the room. I catch the eye of her father, who is watching his daughter with a proud smile on his face.

Sick fucking bastard. He probably put her up to this. Get into bed with the new boss and secure your place by his side.

I turn back to Anya, reach out a hand, and wrap it around her throat. Leaning down, I place my mouth next to her ear so only she can hear me. “You’re disrespecting my brother at his send-off. Get the fuck away and never touch me again.” I pull back and meet her wide-eyed gaze. “Ponimat?” *Understand*, I ask her.

She nods, and I release my grip, stand, and step over her. I don’t make it to the door before Ivan is at my side.

“Was that necessary?” he whispers.

“Yes,” I tell him as I head to the office, ready to shut myself off from the world again until a voice stops me.

“Boss, I found something.” Lev, the guy tasked with hunting down Jolene, is standing in the hall.

“Come in,” I say, opening the door. I walk around my desk and take a seat. I then wave at the chair in front of me.

Normally Lev, a six-foot-five Russian brigadier with a shaved head and covered in tats, looks scary as shit. But right now, he looks *scared as shit*. He should be. I’ve thought about cutting his ears off more than once over the last six weeks. He hasn’t been able to find me a damn trace of Jolene. It’s like the woman is a figment of my fucking imagination. A ghost, who vanished into thin air. Whoever the fuck she is, she was smart enough to have every second of CCTV recording deleted from my servers before I woke the next morning.

Seeing how nervous he appears, I doubt he has anything worthwhile for me. I fill my glass and lean back in my chair. “Well, what is it?” I ask him.

“Ah...” Lev looks around the room. Ivan is standing at the threshold. “You might want to shut the door for this, boss.”

I nod to Ivan, who closes us in, and then raise a brow at Lev. The suspense is almost killing me.

“Isabella Valentino,” he whispers the words, as if saying the name aloud will somehow conjure the devil himself. Or should I say the *devilette*?



I run my hands through my new blonde locks. There's no more need for Jolene's wig. I've decided blondes really do have more fun. That night six weeks ago with Mikhail was one of the best nights of my life. Sexually speaking. And that's a fact I will never outwardly acknowledge to another living soul. It's also not a night I can ever relive. And, yet, I've never wanted a round two more than I do right now. But he's a Petrov, and that makes him the enemy.

The Petrovs run the Russian outfit. They're also direct rivals to my family, and when I say direct, I mean if you put them in a room together, the walls will be painted red. The feud between the families started long before I

was around. My dad and uncle had a friend, Lana, who ran off with one of the Petrov princes. Apparently, they were hiding in plain sight in Brooklyn because, around four years ago, my cousin Theo fell head over heels in love with their daughter, Maddie. And two years before that, Maddie's parents were killed. Yep, you guessed it, by a Petrov. Maddie was left to raise her little sister Lilah by herself—well, until my cousin came swooping in and refused to take no for an answer. To this day, the Petrovs don't know that Maddie and Lilah are their long-lost relatives, and that's exactly how we plan on keeping it.

That being said, the feud didn't end there. It continued when the Russians targeted my cousin's wife. And, well, Matteo, being the hothead that he is, went in guns blazing. You'd think that would have put an end to the war between the families. But, nope, it didn't. There's been a constant back and forth. The Petrovs attacking and the Valentinos retaliating. The last major blow having occurred four years ago when my cousin Romeo blew up some restaurant with most of the Russians' major players inside. There hasn't been much else since, but you'd be stupid to think the war between the families is over. It'll never be over.

Glancing at my reflection in the mirror, I can see that I look different, but no matter what changes on the outside, I'll always be Isabella Valentino. I turn and inspect my rear end. It's perfectly hugged by my barely there leather shorts that I've paired with a white sheer blouse and black lacy bra underneath. A tad slutty, but that's what I'm going for. I'm looking for a night of fun, passion, chemistry. Okay, I'll settle for an hour. I don't even need a whole night. What I need is to find one man, just one, who can match up to the memory of *him*.

There has to be someone better in bed than Mikhail Petrov. This is New York City for god's sake. If I have to sleep with every man within a twenty-five mile radius to find that needle in the haystack, I will. Because I can't have him again, but I also can't settle for anything less either.

So, with my new look, and new *go get 'em* attitude, I pick up my keys and head out of my apartment. I'm not messing around tonight. I'm going straight to a bar where I know I'll be swarmed by men, all ready for the taking.

Pulling up to Jasper's, I hand the valet my keys and strut my way up to the door. I glance down the street at all the people waiting to get in. Sometimes, being a Valentino really does come in handy.

“Izzy, you look...” Dan the doorman stops speaking with a shake of his head. Too afraid to finish his thoughts, and not because of me. No, he’s worried that one of the men in my family will overhear him.

Most girls only have their fathers acting like overprotective, overbearing buzz kills. Me? Not only do I have a dad who the city fears more than the bogeyman, but my grandfather is the head of the Donatello Crime Family—they call him the boss of bosses. My Uncle T, the head of the Valentino Syndicate, and my four cousins, otherwise known as the Valentino princes. And then there’s me, the princess.

I wouldn’t swap my family for the world, but sometimes I really wish I could just run away to my aunt’s island and leave it all behind. Zia Lola is my dad’s sister, who has absolutely nothing to do with the whole organized crime thing we’ve got going on here. She spent half her childhood being abused in the worst possible way. A scene I was forced to watch when I was kidnapped by the same people when I was eight years old. It was because of my Zia Lola’s courage that my dad found me. She snuck out and told him where we were all so that I could be rescued—something she didn’t do to save herself. As fucked up as that experience was, it bonded us in a way no one else will ever understand.

“Hot?” I offer Dan, clearing the thoughts of my family from my mind.

“Ah, yeah, sure...” He opens the door for me, letting me pass. And as soon as I step into the darkened club, I’m greeted by the familiar loud music and flashing lights.

It’s still relatively early and this place is already packed. I walk up to the bar. I don’t have to wait long before the bartender hands me a whiskey sour. “How you doin’ tonight, Iz?” he asks.

“Good, you?”

“Can’t complain.” He smiles and walks off to serve some customers.

Turning my back to the bar, I lean against the ledge and sip at my drink as I take in my surroundings, looking for tonight’s lucky winner. It doesn’t take me long to spot him. Broad shoulders, light sandy-brown hair perfectly styled in that just got-out-of-bed way, a custom-fitted suit with a gold-encrusted Rolex on his wrist. He looks over and notices me watching him. I smile and blink a few times before I lift my drink in greeting.

Three, two, one. And here he comes, like a fly to honey, his eyes roaming up and down my body and a smirk on his lips that I’m sure has dropped many panties in its wake.

“Hey, need another?” he asks, nodding to my now-empty glass.

“Izzy, and sure, whiskey sour.” I hold out my hand to him and his big palm warms my skin as it engulfs mine. I have a good feeling about this guy. He might just be the one to fuck the Petrov right out of me.

“Hugh,” he says, returning my gesture.

I smile and pivot to the bartender. He nods and then makes my drink before bringing it over. “Thanks.” I take the glass and focus on my target. “So, Hugh, let’s not pretend that we need to get to know each other first. Let’s cut to the chase so that you can find a dark corner, take me to it, and give me an orgasm I’ll never forget,” I tell my new friend.

His eyebrows almost reach his hairline. “Ah, sure, okay,” he says, his eyes darting around the room until my back pocket vibrates. I pull out my phone, cursing the minute I see my cousin's name flash across the screen.

“Lil coz, now’s really not a good time,” I block my ear before answering the call.

“Iz, I need you to do something for me. Go to Katarina’s place, pick up her assistant, and bring her to my parents’ house,” Luca says in a rushed tone.

“I happen to know your mother very well, Luca. Which means I know for a fact she taught you Neanderthals manners,” I tell him.

“Please,” he grunts.

“Okay, but why am I picking up your girlfriend’s assistant?” I question him, knowing there’s much more to the story than what he’s giving me.

“Because someone just took a fucking shot at us on Broadway, and I’m heading home now. Katarina would like to know that her friend isn’t left alone in her house, in case the fucker decides to go there next.”

“Please, for the love of God, tell me you didn’t get shot again,” I huff out. I really don’t think my Zia Holly, his mother, can handle many more bullets inside her children.

“I didn’t. But my car did. Fucking idiot. I’m going to take my time torturing him,” he says.

“Okay, I’ll meet you at your parents’ place,” I groan.

But it’s family. *What can I do?*

One lesson you learn quickly in this world is that family always comes first. No one will have your back like family.

“Oh, and, Izzy, bring pizza,” Luca says before the line goes dead.

“Argh, damn it,” I hiss before shoving my phone back into my pocket. I look up at Hugh, who’s watching me with weary eyes. “Sorry, Hugh, family

drama. Rain check?" I ask, slamming my glass back down on the bar. I don't wait for his response before walking out.

AFTER COLLECTING A VERY confused personal assistant, I bring her over to the Valentino estate. She was quiet the whole drive here, chewing on her nails. But I guess you would be too if you knew your boss/friend just started a relationship with a known mafia prince before you're shoved into a car with one of his relatives.

I'm not a total psychopath. I did explain why I was taking her here. Though I don't think it helped ease her worries all that much, seeing as the explanation involved mentioning how Katy and Luca were being shot at. She'll have to get over it though, because things need to get done.

I walk through the front door and smile at the men on guard. Then I lead the girl into my Zia Holly's dining room and spread the pizza boxes out over the table. "I'll be right back," I tell her. "Dig in." I nod my head at the pizza. I don't need to look too far before I find everyone standing around in the living room, midconversation.

"Ah, Zia Lola, I'm a pro football player. Pretty sure I'm famous," Luca says.

"Yeah, how many games have you played professionally again?" I throw in my two cents. Luca got shot during the national anthem of his first pro game. Granted, he jumped in front of the bullet that was aimed at his now girlfriend, Katy, who was performing at the time.

"Izzy?" Luca questions.

"Well, I'm not Mother Teresa," I say with a smirk.

"What the fuck did you do to your hair?" he asks, sounding horrified.

I run my fingers through my brighter locks. "I heard blondes have more fun, and I wanted to have fun," I tell him.

"And did you? Have fun?" he asks.

"So much, until you called and pussy blocked me," I tell him.

"Ew, TMI, Iz. The only thing I wanna know is a name." Luca's face twists up in disgust.

"Never gonna happen, Luc. Pizza's in the dining room. I'm hungry. Katarina, join me." I smile at her.

“Ah, sure.” Her voice is hesitant, so I grab hold of her hand and lead her out of the room.

“Izzy, be nice,” Luca calls after us.

“I’m always nice. Just ask the guy I left behind with blue balls.” I laugh, and as I turn to look back at my cousin, I see his face contorted in a mixture of rage and disgust.

I swear the men in this family like to think I’m still a virgin.



“You don’t need to be here for this, you know,” Ivan says from the driver’s seat.

I’m currently sitting on the passenger side, seeing as my ass is too fucking drunk to drive. “Yes, I do,” I tell him. I’ve tried to drink the awareness away, but it didn’t work.

Two days ago, Lev came to me with a folder full of images and a name. One fucking name and probably the last fucking name I ever expected to find attached to the girl from the bar. Isabella Valentino was my Jolene, my kotyonok. My fucking little thief. And my next fucking victim just as soon as I figure out how I’m going to deal with her.

I'm not in a rush. I was, but now that I know who she is, I need to take my time, make sure I do the crime justice. She is the fucking Valentino princess after all. When I take my vengeance on her, the whole family will fall to their fucking knees. I know the war between the Petrovs and the Valentinos started well before we were even thought of, but that doesn't stop it from seeping down the bloodlines. I hate the Italians just as much as my father did. They're the reason so many of my family members, my friends, aren't here anymore. For all I know, the Valentinos were behind my brother's assassination too. I haven't had any evidence to say it was them for sure, but I can't help but wonder if she was meant to be a distraction that night. It can't be a coincidence.

Why else would Izzy fucking Valentino find herself in my bar? In my bed? And she was so fucking keen for it too—the girl practically begged me to fuck her. I can still hear her screams, her moans. My cock hardens as the memory of her pussy wrapping around me like silk hits me hard.

“Fuck!” I curse, hitting the dashboard with my fist.

“People are starting to ask about Lev,” Ivan says, ignoring my outburst.

“Let them ask,” I grunt. It was a case of shooting the messenger. Seconds after Lev uttered those two words, *Isabella Valentino*, I aimed my pistol at his head and pulled the trigger.

I don't know if it was because I didn't want anyone to know I'd succumbed to the obvious trap she'd laid out for me. Or if it was because I don't want anyone in my organization knowing she's the one who stole from me, risk having the whole fucking family after her to prove themselves to their new boss. And I want to serve her punishment myself.

“What are you going to do about her?” Ivan asks.

“I haven't decided yet,” I tell him. I trust the man with my life, but do I trust him enough for every thought in my head? Fuck no. A smart man will never trust another soul that much. That's how you get yourself killed.

“I can do it if you want,” Ivan offers.

“Nyet,” I growl. “I'll deal with her myself.” I look at him to make sure he sees just how serious I am.

“Okay.”

“What the fuck are we doing here anyway?” I ask as he pulls up to the docks. The hour it's taken to get here has sobered my ass up, and right now, all I want to do is find another bottle and get my buzz back.

“IRA, they're picking up an order.”

“An order of what?”

“M60 machine guns and M16 rifles. It’s a simple in-and-out deal,” Ivan says.

“Great, sounds boring.” I sigh, opening the door.

“I’m sure you’ll find a way to make it more exciting, boss.” He laughs.

Turns out, Ivan was right. Not even fifteen minutes into the meeting with these Irish fuckers, they’re getting on my last nerves.

“There a problem?” I ask the *pridurok* currently parading around as their point man.

“It’s short. They’re supposed to be two hundred M16s. There’re only one-eighty,” he says.

“You callin’ me a liar?”

“No, I’m calling it as it is. It’s short. Which means your cut will also be short,” he says before reaching into his bag, taking out stacks of cash, and handing them off to his men.

“Nyet, that’s not going to happen,” I tell him.

“Mate, this isn’t how your brother and I did business,” he says.

I make a point to look around the room. “Vlad, you here? Vlad? No, guess not. You got me now, motherfucker. If you don’t like it, I’ll keep them all then.”

He straightens to his full height. I’m pretty sure he’s attempting to intimidate me. He’s not. I slowly remove my jacket. I don’t feel like getting blood splatter on it. I see all of my men are on edge, waiting for my next move.

“You see, mate.” I throw his words back at him, knowing full well we aren’t mates. “I don’t give two fucking rats’ shits if you’re buying this or not. There’s always another buyer. You, though, you sure you’re gonna find another seller? Especially when I call your boss and tell him how you alone are responsible for fucking up this deal...” I ask him.

He swallows. Looks to his men and then back to me. “Fine. Have it all,” he says through gritted teeth.

“I’m glad we’re on the same page.”

Once they have their car loaded, I call out to the bastard. “Hey, mate?”

He turns around. I pull the trigger. The bullet lands perfectly between his eyes, and it all goes to shit after that one shot.

Ivan tugs me behind our vehicle. “Get the fuck off me.” I shove him aside.

There are bullets flying in every direction. “You tryin’ to get yourself killed?” he yells back, right as a bullet whizzes past my head and grazes my ear.

“Fuck.” I take aim and start shooting. Within minutes, the gunfire stops and I scan our surroundings. Ivan is standing right next to me—thank fuck for that. I see one of my men on the ground clutching his gut. “Get him to the doc now,” I tell the others, who are looking at me and waiting for orders. “Grab our shit and torch the place.” I walk off and climb into the driver’s seat of my car.

Ivan jumps beside me just before I pull away. “If you were lookin’ to make a statement, I think you did it,” he says.

“Yeah? But I wasn’t.”

“You need to sort this shit out, boss. She’s messin’ with your head. Don’t let her do that to you.”

“You don’t know what you’re talkin’ about,” I tell him.

“Maybe, but you’re not acting right, so fix it,” he says, then adds, “Drop me at Sveta.”

Sveta, the club. My fucking bar. The place I met her, fucked her. I don’t say anything, and neither does Ivan as I pull up in front of Sveta and wait.

“You comin’ in?” Ivan asks me.

“Nyet.” I shake my head.

“Should I be concerned?”

“Always.” I smile at him.

“Don’t fucking die on me, Mikhail,” he says.

“Oh, it’s Mikhail now, not boss?” I counter.

“You might be the boss, but you’ll always be Mikhail too. Don’t forget that.” He jumps out of the car and slams the door shut.

That was his way of reminding me not to forget myself. Who I am deep down.

I continue into a part of the city I shouldn’t enter. The Italian part. I leave my car on the edge of the territory lines and walk until I find myself standing outside the apartment of Isabella Valentino. The lights on the top floor are on. Her floor.

What the fuck are you doing, kotyonok?

I can’t help but wonder... if I were to go up there now, would she be scared? Would she be excited? Would she try to kill me on the spot? I’m certain that last answer would be a resounding yes. The others? They’re the

ones that leave me curious.



It's official. My family is out to ruin my sex life or lack thereof. My libido has been at an all-time high the last couple of weeks, and every time I think I'm going to get the opportunity to have that itch scratched, one of my cousins has a problem they need my help solving.

Take right now, for example. I'm sitting in my cousins' apartment with their girlfriends, after Romeo called in a favor at the most inopportune time. I was two steps away from entering a new bar that would have held a whole myriad of possibilities past its doors. I knew when I saw his name on my screen that I should have hit *reject* instead of *answer*. But it's family. And nothing is more important than family. He was only meant to be gone for

twenty minutes. Tops. His words, not mine. I look at my watch. It's been twenty-five.

Where the fuck is he?

"Are you okay? I'm really sorry about this. I don't know why she won't stop. I've tried everything," Livvy says, apologizing for the crying infant she's bouncing up and down on her knee in attempts to settle the kid. Matilda, Romeo and Livvy's six-month-old, has a set of lungs on her that could rival any banshee's. But she's cute as hell, so she can get away with making as much noise as she wants. It usually doesn't bother me at all, but today I feel... *off*.

"I'm good. Just tired. I'll be right back." I stand and go in search of the closest bathroom.

I turn the handle for the guest bathroom and then decide to use the one connected to Luca's home office. It's a room that doesn't get much use, which means no one will find me throwing up my lunch in there.

I make it to the toilet just as my body decides to empty itself of whatever contents it has left. I swipe at the tears that fall down my cheeks. I hate being sick. Honestly, right now, all I want to do is ring my mom and dad and tell them to come get me. I know my dad will find a way to make me better. He always does. Ever since I was a kid.

Neo Valentino is one of the most feared men in this city, but he also chose to be my papa. He adopted me when I was eight years old. Shortly after he met my mom, fell head over heels, and claimed me as his own. I will be forever thankful to him for stepping up. My bio dad wasn't winning any Father of the Year awards. Especially considering I killed him around the same time. He was aiming a gun at my mom, and there was no way in hell that I was going to let him hurt her. Neo tried to give me the mafia's version of a normal childhood after that. For years, the man wouldn't let me touch a weapon. He even filled my bedroom with dolls, dress-up clothes, and all the other normal shit little girls were supposed to like. It wasn't until I was around fifteen that he caved and let me train again. I'm not sure what changed his mind, probably the fact that I got tits and was starting to show interest in boys.

I lean over the toilet's ledge again and dry-heave into the bowl.

"What the fuck?"

I turn my head to find Luca standing over me with a pistol aimed at my head. "Close the door," I tell him.

Luca slams it shut and tucks his gun into the back of his pants. “What’s wrong?” he asks me, bending down to meet me at eye-level.

“Nothing. People get sick all the time, Luca. It’s perfectly normal,” I tell him, not able to keep the bitchiness out of my tone. I know it’s not his fault. I just really hate being sick.

Luca looks me up and down. “For the sake of this city, I really fucking hope it’s food poisoning and not morning sickness,” he says. His words sink in and I feel the blood drain from my face.

Fuck, no. I cannot be pregnant. Nope, I am not pregnant. I just ate something bad.

“Fuck, Iz, what have you done?” Luca sits on the floor and wraps his arms around me. I let the tears fall freely as I take comfort in his hold. “It’s okay. Whatever it is, we’ll fix it,” he says.

“I don’t think we can fix this, Luc. I really fucked up this time,” I admit.

“We’re Valentinos. We can fix anything.” He kisses the top of my head.

“Right. You’re right. I’m being ridiculous.” I pull out of his arms and push to my feet. “I just ate something wrong. That’s all,” I tell him. Turning on the faucet, I cup the water in my hands and rinse out my mouth.

Luca gives me that look, the one that says he thinks I’m full of shit, but he drops the topic. Although I know my cousins, and they’re meddlers. There is no way he’s not going to be bringing this up again.

I’VE BEEN TOSSING and turning in my bed for hours. Luca’s words are haunting me and the reality of the situation I could be in right now is hitting home. Hard. Sitting up in bed, I pick up my phone. I know I’m going to regret this, but I have to know. At least I *think* I have to know.

I dial the first number that comes to mind and wait. I know she’ll answer. Bianca. The only friend I’ve collected and kept throughout the years. Which says a lot more about her tenacity to not give up on me than it does about my interpersonal skills.

“Isabella Valentino, do you have any idea what time it is?” she scolds when she finally picks up.

“Bianca, I need you to do something for me without asking questions,” I tell her.

“Who are we burying, and will I get blood on my new Jimmy Choo boots? Because if the answer is yes, I’ll go home and change first. It would be an absolute tragedy to have to burn these babies,” Bianca says, and I can hear her grinning on the other end of the line.

“We’re not burying anyone,” I tell her. Not yet anyway. If I did in fact get knocked up by a Petrov, well then, we’ll for sure be burying someone. Because I have no doubt it will only add fodder to the war that’s been raging for years. “I need you to pick up a pregnancy test for me and bring it to my apartment.” I’m met with silence on the other end of the phone. I pull it away from my ear and check that the call didn’t get disconnected. “Bianca?” I ask.

“Uh, yeah, just give me a minute because I swear you just said to pick you up a pregnancy test,” she whispers, like it’s the world’s biggest secret. And understanding who my family is, it just might be.

“I did,” I tell her.

“Who? When? How? I mean, I know *how*. But shit. Fuck. Izzy, this is huge. Like huge, huge,” she tells me, as if I don’t already know.

“I’m aware,” I tell her.

“Okay, hold tight. Fill up that bladder and I’ll be there in ten,” she says right before the line goes dead.

I get up out of bed and pace around my apartment before picking up the bottle of whiskey and pouring a glass. It’s not until I bring it to my lips that I realize what I’m doing and slide the glass away.

Shit. What if I am pregnant? I can’t be someone’s mother. I’m not ready for that. Don’t get me wrong... I love the crap out of all my cousins’ kids. But I like handing them back and going home to my empty apartment. One of the reasons I’ve never really had a serious relationship is because I like my space. I like my own time. I don’t have patience for a needy man-child who wants attention from me every second of the day. Also, I’ve just never found anyone that I feel that connection with. I’ve watched everyone around me find their one person—you can see it clear as day when they’re with them. My mom and dad, my aunt and uncles, and even my cousins have all found their person.

Placing my hand on my stomach, I glance down. *Maybe this is my person?* I hear the ding of the elevator doors and head towards the foyer.

“Okay, Momma Bear, time to pee on some sticks,” Bianca says, waving a plastic bag around.

“What’d you do? Buy out the entire store?” I ask her.

“Duh, you need to be sure. Come on, let’s do this. I need to know if I’m going to finally be an auntie,” she says.

“Your brother has kids, Bianca. You already are an auntie,” I remind her.

“Yeah, but that’s not the same.” She walks into my bedroom and empties the contents of the bag onto the bed.

Then I watch in horror as Bianca starts to unwrap a bunch of sticks. “What if it’s positive?” I ask her. I’ve gone over the math. I’m late. I didn’t even notice until Luca mentioned something.

“If it’s positive, we’ll deal with it however you want. I’m here for you, no matter what you decide to do,” Bianca tells me.

“Thank you.” I take the tests out of her outstretched hand and walk into the bedroom. After peeing on the sticks, I lay them all out on the vanity and wait. Bianca comes and stands next to me. She takes hold of my hand.

“Breathe, Izzy, it’s going to be okay,” she says. But as I watch the word *positive* flash on the first stick, I know that it’s going to be anything but okay.



Standing on the other side of the road, I pull the hood over my head, rest my back on the brick wall, draw a cigarette to my face, and check all my pockets for a light, only to throw my smoke on the sidewalk when I don't find one.

I've been waiting for her to leave. I could walk into her building, take the elevator up to her penthouse, and ransack the place with her inside. It's what I'd usually do in a situation like this. In most instances, I would have already killed her, found the fucking knife, and gotten on with life. Instead, I've spent days watching her. Yesterday, I saw Izzy's friend Bianca show up in the middle of the night. The girl didn't leave until the following morning.

Tonight, I've been waiting for her to step out so I could go and search her apartment. I know she would have kept her little prize. It's exactly what I would have done if the shoe were on the other foot.

I see a mass of long blonde hair exit the building. It suits her, the long hair. My cock twitches at the sight. He hasn't gotten the message that she's not our fucking friend. Although, I wouldn't say no to playing with her again. I'd have to slit her fucking throat right after, but still... It'd be a shame not to sink into her one more time. I know I'll spend the rest of my life looking for a pussy that could measure up. I also know I'd never fucking find one.

There's never been anyone like Isabella Valentino.

She looks both ways before she peers across the street. I freeze. I know she can't see me in the shadows, but fuck, it feels like she's staring right at me. Then I watch her walk off. I wait until she's a block away before I push off the wall and cross.

Ivan won't be more than five steps behind her. Waiting for my word. As soon as I find what I'm looking for, he'll grab her and take her to one of my warehouses. I can't fucking wait to see her tied up. At my fucking mercy. Which she'll get none of.

I nod my head at the doorman and walk straight into the building like I own the place. The secret to fitting in somewhere you don't belong is acting like you do. I hit the numbers on the keypad that Ivan said would give me access to the penthouse. Grateful for his hacking skills when the elevator starts moving. It only takes one step into Isabella's apartment to know she's every bit the spoiled mafia princess I thought she was. Opulence has not been spared. Every detail screams money.

I start in the living room, making sure to return everything exactly where I found it as I dig through drawers, trinkets, and shit. Moving into the kitchen, I open every cabinet and even check the refrigerator. Which is empty, bar the leftover containers of Chinese food and a bottle of OJ in the door.

It seems my kotyonok doesn't like to cook for herself. Thoughts of cooking for her fill my head before I shake the absurd notion away and move on down the hall. I stop when I step into her bedroom. Inhaling a deep breath, I close my eyes as her scent fills my nostrils. I really need to fucking snap her pretty little neck sooner rather than later. Just being in her space has me thinking dangerous thoughts.

Thoughts I have no right thinking about a dirty fucking Valentino.

I need to remember what she did and focus on the anger I have towards her. After all, she distracted me. She kept me from being with my brother when he was killed. She might as well have pulled the fucking trigger herself.

I open her closet and start sifting through the contents. Frustration getting the better of me as I start throwing her shit around. It has to be here somewhere. I walk into the bathroom and pull all the shit out of her medicine cabinet. Then I bend down and pick up the wastepaper bin. Moving the plastic bag sitting on top, I drop the bin back to the floor before shifting through one of the dozen sticks that are shoved inside.

POSITIVE. *How can one word have so much impact?*

I take a step back and slam an open palm against the vanity. “Fuck me,” I mutter out loud. Pregnant. Isabella Valentino is pregnant. I pull my phone out of my pocket and dial Ivan’s number.

“Boss.”

“Where is she?” I ask.

“At a bar. Just sitting by herself.”

“Is she drinking?” I ask him.

“No, just water.”

“Don’t touch her. Make sure no one else gets within a foot of her either,” I tell him.

“Everything okay, Mikhail? Did you find the knife?”

“No, but I found something else.” I hang up the phone.

It seems Little Miss Valentino stole more than a knife from me that night. I do the math in my head. It’s been six weeks. It could be someone else’s kid. That thought pops into my head. It should give me relief, except the idea only makes me more fucking murderous. That’s what I should want, though, for it not to be mine. This city isn’t ready for that scenario.

I walk back out to the living room and pour myself a glass of Scotch from Isabella’s wet bar. Let’s face it—it’s not like she’ll be drinking the stuff anytime soon. Throwing back the liquor, I fall onto one of the sofas. My head hangs low. My hands run through my hair.

Pregnant. Fucking pregnant. This is the last fucking thing I need in my life. I’ve just had to take over the family. A kid is a weakness I didn’t ever plan on having. I could still put an end to this. There is no pregnancy if there’s no mother.

Reaching into my pocket, I pull out the test and stare at it. At that one

word. *Positive*. I'm *positively* fucked right now. I might be able to think about fixing this situation, but the reality is I can't fucking kill her. I haven't been able to bring myself to do it, even knowing what she did, so how the fuck can I do it now with the possibility that she's carrying my child?

I should leave. I wonder if she's planning on telling me. Will she come and look for me? Tell me I'm going to be a father?

Without even having to think on it, I know the answer's a no. Because if I were her, I'd never fucking admit to anyone that I got knocked up by a Petrov. We're not exactly on friendly terms with the Valentinos, nor will we ever be. I remember my father telling me how his cousin, Alexei, fell for a Mortello girl. One of the five Italian families of New York. It didn't end well for anyone. The couple went on the run and ended up being killed by his own family. By us.

Running isn't in my blood. I don't fucking run from shit and I sure as fuck won't be running from this. There's more than one option here, and the only way to figure out which I'm going with is to face her. So I force myself to sit still, lean back in the chair, briefly close my eyes, and wait for her to return.

I must doze off, because when I wake, my hand shoots out to wrap around a neck. A soft, delicate neck. Before a sharp pain cuts through my upper thigh.

She fucking stabbed me...



I dig the knife deeper into his thigh, knowing I'm not hitting anything important and the bastard's not at risk of bleeding out in my living room.

"Kotyonok, I've been waiting for you," he says, tightening his grip on my throat.

"Pity, can't say I was looking forward to seeing you. Ever again," I tell him, twisting the blade to widen the wound.

He winces and grits his teeth before that mask of indifference goes back up over his face. "Really, that's a shame." He grins through the pain. Then he reaches down and pulls the knife out of his leg before he manages to twist us

around and pin me beneath him with his palm still wrapped around my throat. I'll let him think he has the upper hand. For now.

Everyone always underestimates me. Why would a Petrov be any different?

"You stabbed me with my own fucking knife? Do you have any idea how long I've been looking for this?" he asks while eyeing the gold pocket knife.

"If I were to guess, I'd say around six weeks?" I raise an eyebrow in question at him.

Mikhail tilts his head. His gaze travels down my body, stopping at my stomach before meeting my glare again. "Anything you need to tell me, kotyonok?" he asks.

He knows. How the fuck does he know? This is my fight-or-flight moment. I will not let him take this from me. My knee comes up and connects with his balls, and my right fist swings and connects with his face. It's enough to get him to loosen his grip. I shove at his chest and he falls backwards. Then my hand reaches under the coffee table and pulls out the pistol that's strapped to the underside.

Aiming right for his head, I flick off the safety. "Not a single fucking thing. I think it's time for you to leave," I tell him.

Mikhail rises to his full height, rubbing a hand over his jawline. "My kotyonok has claws. Good. You're going to need them."

"The door is that way, unless you'd rather go out in a body bag?" I'm quick to add. "I don't care either way."

"You're not going to shoot the father of your child," he says confidently.

I laugh. He has no idea who he's dealing with, and to prove my point, I send a bullet through his arm.

"What the fuck?" he hisses.

"I killed my own father when I was eight. You really think I'd have any qualms about killing you?"

Surprise is written all over his face as he holds a hand over the hole that's now in his arm. Then he smiles. This guy must have a death wish, breaking into my apartment and standing right in front of me while I'm pointing a loaded weapon at his head.

"You are interesting, but you didn't deny it," he says.

"Deny what?" I ask.

I watch as he pulls a stick out of his pocket before holding it up to me. "You're pregnant."

I consider telling him that it's not mine, that I'm not pregnant. Instead, I decide it's probably better if I just get him to believe the kid's not his. So I give him my best smile. "You think because I'm pregnant, it's yours? That's awfully presumptuous of you, Mikhail. You are one of many men I've fucked in the last two months. You want to play daddy? Go find some other girl to knock up because I can assure you this one isn't yours," I tell him.

His jaw ticks as he approaches me. I don't move. I still have my weapon trained on him. He doesn't stop until he reaches me, the end of the pistol touching his forehead. "You're lying," he says before reaching up, snatching the gun out of my hand, and throwing it across the room.

His hand grips the back of my head, grabbing hold of my hair. Before I can react, his lips slam down on mine. His tongue pushes into my mouth and, briefly, I return the kiss before common sense washes over me and reminds me he's the enemy. I bite down on his tongue and he quickly pulls away.

"You fucking bit me," he says.

"The next thing you try to stick inside me will get cut off," I tell him.

"You'll change your mind, kotyonok. You're going to beg me to fill all of your holes."

"I'll slit my own wrists before I beg you for anything." And I mean it. I will not beg a Petrov for anything, ever.

"Tell me, do you have plans to harm this child?" he asks.

"What? No," I answer. "Not that it's any of your business."

"Good. I'll be in touch," he says, releasing me and walking away. But not before pausing to call out over his shoulder. "Oh, and Isabella, everything concerning you just became my business."

I watch his retreating back while asking myself why I didn't shoot to kill. What the hell is wrong with me? I can't have this news get out, and he knows it. Bianca is the only other person who knows I'm pregnant and she has no idea who my sperm donor is.

My phone rings. I pull it out of my bag and see my uncle's name flash across the screen.

"Uncle T, how are you?" I ask him.

"Good, how are you, Bella?"

Oh fuck, please don't let him know. It's almost impossible to hide anything from my family—they always find a way to snoop in my business—but this is a secret I'm willing to just about sell my soul to keep.

"Good. What's up?"

“I need a favor. Meet me for breakfast,” he says.

“Okay,” I agree. Because, well, nobody really ever says no to the man.

I PROBABLY SHOULD HAVE NEGOTIATED to meet my uncle for lunch instead. I didn’t account for feeling like shit this morning. Sporting a huge pair of sunglasses, I walk into the restaurant and quickly scan the interior.

“Bella.” Uncle T stands from the table—it’s his usual spot—and wraps me in his arms. I return his hug until he pulls back to look me over. “What’s wrong?” he asks me.

“Nothing. I just had a bigger night than I was planning,” I lie, hoping he’ll buy that I’m just hungover.

“Okay, sit down,” he says, pulling out my chair, before adding, “I have a job for you.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Does Papa know about this?” My father hates it whenever I do a job for either side of the family. That doesn’t stop me, but I know if he had his way, I’d be locked in a tower with no outside contact from the world.

“He does now.” The voice from behind me has my head turning. “Bel, are you sick?” Dad asks me.

“No, I’m fine, Papa.” I push to my feet and hug him a little tighter and a little longer than I usually would, needing the comfort of being in his arms. Then I loosen my hold and reclaim my seat, as my father sits next to me.

“T, what the fuck’s going on?” Dad asks.

“Like I was saying before you rudely interrupted my breakfast date with my niece, I have a job for her,” Uncle T replies.

“My daughter.” Dad points to his chest. “And she doesn’t have to do any jobs for you.”

“No, she doesn’t *have* to. Which is why I’ve always made it clear that her participation is optional.” My uncle looks to me while sliding a piece of paper in my direction. “Here.”

I unfold it, my hands trembling as I read the two words scrawled across the center. *Mikhail Petrov*.

“Why?” I ask, trying to keep my voice calm. Even. Reserved.

“He’s been snooping around our territory. I don’t know why, but he needs to go.” Uncle T shrugs.

“I’ll do it.” My father snatches the paper out of my hand.

“No, Papa, I will.” I snatch it back and shove it down my bra, knowing neither of them will attempt to retrieve it now.

“That’s not fair. And I don’t want you doing this,” Papa tells me.

“I know, but I want to,” I insist.

“We’re going to discuss this,” he huffs out while scowling at my uncle.

“It was Angelica’s idea, not mine,” Uncle T admits.

“It was Mom’s idea?” I ask, unable to mask my shock.

“Yep.” Uncle T nods at me before turning to my dad. “You ever tried saying no to my sister?”

“Yes.” Papa deadpans. “It’s not that fucking hard.”

“Really? Should I call her now so you can tell her Bel isn’t going to be doing this job?” Uncle T pulls his phone out of the inside pocket of his jacket.

“No need. I live with the woman, sleep in the same bed. I’m sure I’ll be able to tell her myself.” Papa smiles.

“Ah, yeah, as lovely as this has been, I’ve got things to do. Thanks for breakfast, Uncle T.” I stand, bending at the waist to kiss and hug both my uncle and my dad before practically bolting from the restaurant.



“You good?” Ivan asks, his gaze focused on my arm. The one with a hole in the center and a few stitches holding it together.

“If you don’t stop asking me if I’m good, I’m going to rip your fuckin’ tongue out,” I tell him.

“Fine. Just tryin’ to help. Wanna tell me who the fuck shot you at least?”

“If I wanted you to know, I’d tell you.” I haven’t told him about my little situation just yet. He knows I got the knife back, just not all the specifics. Which is why we’re currently in the cemetery in the middle of the night, having my brother’s casket exhumed. It’s probably too late for him, but I have to try. Hopefully, he’ll be able to find peace wherever he is once I have

this knife buried with him.

“So, what are you going to do about the girl?” Ivan asks.

“What girl?”

“The Valentino girl.”

“Nothing. We’re not doing anything about her,” I grunt.

“Why the fuck not? She stole from you,” he snarls.

“Ivan, drop it.” I step forward as I see the coffin rise to the surface.

“Mr. Petrov, I’ll give you some privacy.” The gravedigger disappears into the darkness—he’ll be waiting for me to wave him back over when I’m ready.

I open the casket and look at my brother. “Better late than never, right?” I say, placing the knife right on top of Vlad’s chest. I make the sign of the cross and close the lid. Then I turn to face Ivan when I hear the first gunshot.

“Fuck, get down,” he yells, jumping on me.

I look up and see a mass of blonde hair duck behind a tree. Did she seriously just try to take me out at my brother’s gravesite? Fucking ruthless.

“Are you hit?” I mutter to Ivan.

“No, you?”

“Nope.”

That’s when I hear it, a grunt and another shot, as a bullet whizzes past my head.

“Who the fuck is that?”

A third shot rings out and I see a body slump to the ground. When I reach the spot where he fell, she’s there, digging through his pocket.

Isabella stands and looks at me. “Why the fuck is the IRA trying to kill you?”

“What are you doing here?” I counter.

“Apparently joining the line of people trying to take you out.” She smiles.

“And yet you just saved my life.” I shove my hands into my pockets.

“Only because I don’t want some other fucker taking all my fun. Now, I’ll ask you one more time. Why is the IRA after you?”

“I might have pissed them off.” I shrug. “They don’t take kindly to their members being killed.”

“Don’t suppose they do,” she says, then adds, “How many people are trying to kill you?”

“Why? You want to play bodyguard, kotyonok?”

“No, I want to make sure I’m at the front of the line.”

“Well, I’m right here. What ya waiting for?” I ask her. I didn’t realize Ivan was behind me, pointing a gun at her until her eyes dart to him, forcing me to glance over my shoulder. “Put it down,” I tell him. “Do not fucking shoot her. She’s pregnant,” I tell him in Russian.

His eyes widen but he holsters his weapon. “Boss. I’ll, ah, I’ll get the car,” he says.

I nod and wait until he’s out of earshot before I look back to Izzy. “Isabella, you’re really in no condition to be out in the middle of the night getting into gunfights.” I try to keep my voice calm but she’s being reckless.

“And yet, here I am. Let’s get one thing straight right now, Petrov. This child. It’s mine and mine alone.”

“Are you trying to tell me I’m not the father?” I lift an eyebrow in question. She opens her mouth and then closes it. She can’t say it. I smile. “See, kotyonok? Like it or not, this child is mine just as much as it is yours. The difference is I’ve got no other living family, so it’s important to me that it’s kept safe. Don’t make me lock you up until you give birth.”

“I’d love to see you try.” She laughs, then lifts her chin in my direction. “How’s the arm?”

“Never been better.” Stepping over the body on the ground, I take hold of her wrist. “Where’s your car?”

“Why?”

“So I can make sure you get inside and drive home.”

“You know this whole pretending to care thing, it’s cute and all, but completely unnecessary. You won’t live long enough to see this baby born,” she says.

“We’ll see.” I walk towards my car. If she won’t say where she’s parked, I’ll drive her home in mine.

“You need to stop snooping around our territory.”

“I was looking for something you stole. Now that I’ve found it, I have no need to return.”

“Good.”

“He deserved it, you know,” I tell her.

“Who?”

“Your biological father. I know what he did, and your response was warranted.”

She blinks at me but doesn’t say a word. “I’m over there.” She points at

her car.

“Next time you’re trying to take me out, at least let me see your face first.”

“Why aren’t you fighting back?” she asks as I open the car door for her.

“You’re the mother of my child. I have no interest in harming you, Isabella.”

“You really need to stop saying that shit. You think you have people after you now? Wait until my family finds out you knocked me up.”

“Ah, so you finally admit it’s my child.”

“It could be yours, along with about twenty other men. In fact, I’m late for a date as we speak. Catch you around.” She jumps into the car and shuts the door. I know she’s purposely trying to get a rise out of me. I also know that it’s fucking working.

However, instead of reacting, I walk over to where Ivan is waiting for me. “Don’t say a fucking word,” I tell him before slipping into the passenger seat. “I need a fucking drink.”

I THROW BACK the shot of vodka and look around the club. It’s the same scene as always. Girls dancing, naked waitresses serving drinks while offering to be of any *other* service. I would usually take a few of them up on that, but tonight I’m not interested in fucking any of them. It’s like my dick is broken. It’s not budging even a little at the sight of these women. It’s not them. They’re beautiful. It’s me.

No, it’s her. Fucking Isabella Valentino.

“Are we going to talk about it?” Ivan asks.

“Nope,” I say.

“Fine, you can listen then.” He points a finger at me. Anyone else, and that finger would be removed from their body. “This isn’t the movies. You guys don’t get to ride off into the sunset together. Think about what happened last time a Russian knocked up an Italian.”

“What?” I ask.

“Alexei and that Mortello girl.”

“He knocked her up?” How did I not remember that tidbit of information?

“Yep, then they ran off. Took the family twenty years to find ’em.”

“What happened to the kid?” I knew that Alexei and his girl were killed. It was a cause for a celebration all those years ago, justice served for betraying the family.

“No idea, never found ’em.”

“I have a cousin out there somewhere?” I know why my father would have left that part of the story out. Family is everything to me. It’s more important than any old fucking feud that started long before I was a twinkle in the man’s eye. The bastard knew I’d try to find that cousin and bring them home. A fact no one else would have been too keen on, seeing as the kid’s blood would be considered tainted. “You need to keep this news between us. No one can know until I figure out how to protect her,” I tell him.

Ivan nods. But we both know the reality of what’s coming isn’t going to be in my favor. As soon as the family knows, they’ll have a price on Isabella’s head.



He was right there. I had the perfect head shot and I didn't take it. Instead, I saved his damn life. I have no idea why I did it. I heard the crunch of dead leaves, turned my head, and saw someone else pointing a rifle at him.

I didn't think. I simply readjusted my scope and pulled the trigger. At the time, I told myself it was because I wanted to be the one to rid the world of another Petrov. I didn't want someone else doing the job Uncle T gave me. I'm not a hundred percent sure that's the reason, though...

I've never hesitated before. I've never felt any sort of conscience or

remorse when I've completed a job. The fact that he caused me to choke makes me hate him all the more. Which only serves to heighten my determination to end the bastard. The fact that he's the sperm donor to the life growing inside me makes no difference.

After all, I killed my own father. I can kill the father of my unborn child just as easily. They wouldn't even have to know. No one would have to know I was so careless to get knocked up by a Petrov. It's really the best outcome for everyone involved. If I don't kill him, my parents will when they learn he's the one who knocked me up. My uncle, cousins—shit, even my grandfather will line up to take Mikhail out. At least I'll make it quick and reasonably painless. The rest of them? Well, they'll enjoy torturing the fuck out of a Petrov.

And for some ungodly reason, I don't want to see that. Dead, yes. In agony, not so much.

"Izzy?" my mother's voice calls out through my apartment.

"In here," I call back.

Seconds later, Mom stands in the doorway of my dressing room. I've been applying concealer on top of concealer to hide the dark bags under my eyes. Turns out, when you suddenly have a conscience about having to kill someone, sleep doesn't come so easily.

"What's wrong? You don't look good." Mom walks over to where I'm seated and places her hand on my forehead.

"I'm fine. Just tired," I tell her, avoiding eye contact.

She stares at me quietly, as if waiting for my façade to crack. I don't let it. Instead, I focus on finishing my face. "Word is your uncle gave you a job," she finally says, leaving out the part about it being her idea.

"He did."

"I also heard from Theo that you haven't done it yet. Any special reason why?"

"Your brother has a big mouth. Someone should really shut it for him," I tell her, not addressing that last part.

"What's going on, Izzy? Do you need help with this one?"

I know I would only have to say the word and my mom would have it done by the end of the night. She hates it, though. As good as she is at killing, torturing, whatever she has to do, she has a heart and it takes a toll on her every time she's forced to end a life.

"I'm fine. I can do it," I tell her.

Mom lowers herself down next to me on the bench seat. “But you don’t want to. Why?”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell her, spill the beans and let her deal with them. Because I know, above all, my mom will always choose me—and my half-Russian unborn baby. But I don’t tell her. I can’t burden my parents with this mess. I need to find a way to fix it myself.

I know how to do it, how to fix it. It’s the whole executing of the plan that I have to get on board with. Logically, it’s simple. Pull the damn trigger and all my problems are gone. Mostly. The thing is... logic doesn’t take into account that what I really want to do is have Mikhail strip me bare and fuck me senseless again. Which obviously is never going to happen. But what’s life without fantasies, right?

“I never said I didn’t want to do it,” I tell her.

“You don’t have to say it. I know you, Bella. I can see you don’t want to kill him. Why?”

“Have you ever wondered when this whole Italian-Russian war thing is going to end?” I ask her instead of answering.

“I’m not sure it ever will,” she says.

“Yeah, me either.”

“Whatever it is, I will help you.” She runs her fingers over my forehead, brushing my hair back from my face. “You know there is nothing in this world more important to me than you, Izzy. Whatever’s happening, I’m here. Always. You’re not alone.”

Tears well on my lashes. I take a deep breath. I’m not a crier. So why the hell do I feel like bawling my eyes out right now?

“I know, Mom. I promise I’m okay, and if I’m ever in over my head, you will be the first one I call.” I smile.

“Nonno wants everyone at family dinner on Sunday, his place,” she says before pushing to her feet. Leaning down, she places a kiss on my forehead. “Try some chamomile tea. It’ll help,” she tells me before walking out.

Chamomile tea? Oh god, she knows. How the hell does she know?

I SMOOTH a hand down my dress, over my stomach. It’s still as flat as it’s

always been but I'm petrified everyone is going to know. I have a strong inkling my mom already does, but I haven't figured out how that's possible.

Walking through my grandfather's house, I smile politely at the staff, at the armed men that are positioned in every corner. Family is important to Nonno. Whenever we're all gathered here, he increases the number of men he has at the ready. I think it'd take a dozen tanks to get through the walls of this estate anyway. Out of habit, I pick up a champagne flute from a waiter as I walk into the living room.

"Ah, Bella, how are you?" Nonno approaches me slowly. I don't miss the shake in his hands as he places them on my face. He kisses each cheek before hugging me.

"I'm good, Nonno. How are you?" I return his embrace.

"Can't complain," he says.

"Izzy, good of you to finally grace us with your presence. Was your schedule of doing a whole lotta nothing today so full that you couldn't make it on time?" My cousin Theo makes a point of looking at his watch.

"It *was* actually." I smile at him, refusing to take the bait. I bring the glass to my lips before I stop and lower it again. "I see Maddie still hasn't found that stick yet," I throw back at him.

Theo hates when people are late. I honestly thought that when he met Maddie four years ago, the stick that's permanently lodged in his ass would be removed. No such luck. The guy doesn't know how to relax.

"Coz, thanks." Luca snatches the glass of champagne out of my hands with a look that says *we're going to be talking later*.

Great, he knows too. Although the fact he found me throwing up my guts in his bathroom was what initiated his suspicions, and I just confirmed them when I stopped myself from taking a sip.

"Izzy, I need to show you something. Follow me." This command, not a request, comes from Romeo. Out of all of my cousins, I think he might be my favorite. He's the least annoying. Which is why I follow him out of the room.

"Are my parents here yet?" I ask him.

"Haven't seen 'em," he says.

"So, what are you showing me? If it's your porn collection you hid in Nonno's attic when you were thirteen, I've already seen it." I laugh.

Romeo glances at me over his shoulder. "How the hell did you find that?" he asks.

"You suck at hiding shit," I say. "Also, I noticed you and Luca spending a

lot of time up there so I went snooping.

“Of course you did.” He rolls his eyes and opens the door to one of the guest rooms. “After you.”

I step inside and look around. If it were Matteo bringing me into an empty room, I’d be looking for booby traps or some stupid prank. But this is Romeo. If he’s pulling me aside, I know it’s serious.

“I got you this,” he says, reaching into a cooler and pulling out a bottle of champagne.

“Ah, okay.” I look at the bottle. “Thanks?”

“It’s nonalcoholic,” he states, and my stomach drops like a ton of bricks.

Is there anyone in this family who doesn’t know? I haven’t told a soul, other than Bianca. Mikhail knows, but I’ll deny it’s his for as long as I possibly can.

“You know there’s not a thought that goes through Luca’s head that I’m not privy to,” he says in way of explanation. That stupid, witchy twin thing they have going on is bizarre and honestly freaks me the fuck out.

“Does it work both ways?” I raise a brow in question.

“You know it does,” he says.

“So when you’re fucking Livvy and thinking all those dirty thoughts about her, Luca thinks them too?” I ask with a purposefully puzzled expression on my face.

“I hate you,” Romeo grunts.

“No, you don’t.” I laugh. “But I will kill you if you tell a soul about this.” I snatch the bottle out of his hand and pop the cork.

Romeo retrieves a flute from the bag and holds it out to me. “So, who is the guy?”

“There is no guy.”

“You’re not the Virgin Mary, Iz. There has to be a guy and I’ll find out who.”

“Leave it alone, Romeo.” I glare at him.

“If he ain’t stepping up and looking after you, then he deserves to be gutted like a rotten fish.”

“I’m fine.”

“You have all of us. You’ll be fine either way. But whoever he is, he’s already a dead man walking. Concealing his identity will only buy him a few more days, weeks *tops*,” Romeo says. But he’s wrong. There is no way my family can know all the men I’ve fucked over the years. Too many of them

are still breathing for that to be true.

I briefly consider giving them some random name. Picking some guy, just so they stop looking. If it comes to it, I will. But for now, my lips are remaining zipped.

“Let’s get back out there before they send a search party.”

By the time we enter, everyone has moved into the dining room. I sit next to Theo. He might be a grumpy ass, but he’s the one I want to question tonight.

“Are you okay?” he asks as I take my seat.

“I’m fine. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“You look pale,” he says.

“Careful, Theo, people will see that crack of humanity peeking out.”

“Shut up. You happen to be one of my top three favorite cousins. I don’t want you dying on me.”

“You only have three cousins,” I point out.

“Which is why you’re in the top.” He smirks.

“Why’s the IRA going after the Petrovs?” I ask him.

He turns his head to face me, his eyes scrutinizing my every feature.

“Why?”

“Curiosity. What’s their beef with them?”

Again, Theo remains silent. He’s perceptive as hell and I really hope I’m putting on my best poker face right now. “How’d you know the IRA is after the Petrovs?”

“I heard a rumor in the salon,” I lie.

“No, you didn’t,” he states.

“Fine. If you don’t want to tell me, I’ll ask someone else.”

“Don’t snoop in business that isn’t yours, Izzy,” Theo warns me. Any outside observer would think he’s the older cousin here. But I’m almost a decade Theo’s senior. He shouldn’t be giving me lectures about what I can and can’t do. Eventually, he huffs out a breath. “I heard Mikhail Petrov killed a bunch of ’em during an arms deal.”

“Why would he do that?”

“Because he’s a fucking Russian pig and they have no ethics,” he grunts in reply.

I decide to drop my line of questioning. I could point out that his wife is in fact half-Russian *and* a Petrov at that, but I don’t. It’s something we don’t talk about in the family. It’s safer for her that way.



I've been staring at these reports for hours. They're from one of the family's more legitimate businesses. The thing about being underground these days is that you have to have just as many interests above it. The Petrov family has their hands in a range of companies. From fashion houses, cosmetics, through to oil and mining. We don't discriminate. If there's an opportunity to launder our other ill-found wealth through a business, we'll obtain it. It does mean I'm working at least sixteen hours a day. Between keeping everything in check, dealing with the attacks from the IRA on my men, and doing my best to maintain my distance from my newfound obsession.

Okay, the obsession isn't all that newfound. There hasn't been a day I haven't thought of that woman since I woke up alone in my office at the bar. I told myself it was because she stole my knife. That I just wanted to bury my brother properly. However, after getting it back, not much else has changed. My thoughts are consumed by her. She openly admitted she was trying to kill me and what do I do? Get a fucking hard-on.

Let's be honest, though. If you were looking at her, you'd be hard too. Isabella is fucking stunning. Probably the most beautiful creature I've ever seen, and I've had my fair share of women.

"Boss, we need to go and sort out some shit at the bar."

"What shit? What bar?" I ask Ivan, glaring at him, more annoyed by the fact that he interrupted my thoughts than the fact that he just barged into my office without so much as a knock.

Ivan squints at me in return. "Sveta," he says.

I raise my brows. Sveta has always had a special place in my heart. I started that bar from the ground up. It's the only legitimate business we have that I don't use for other means. I made sure it was clean. It's also where I knocked up Isabella. I don't need to hear her admit that the baby is mine. I feel it.

"What's goin' on?" I ask, pushing to my feet. I walk over to a cabinet and open it. Strapping three pistols to my body before turning around again.

"Fucking IRA assholes did a drive-by," Ivan spits out.

"Why the fuck didn't you start with that?" I yell, already stalking towards the door. I climb into the passenger seat of the waiting car, and Ivan climbs into the back. "Yekhat!" I yell at my driver, urging him to go.

The wheels spin as he peels out of the estate. It only takes ten minutes to get to Sveta. Igor broke every road rule there is to get here. Not that any cops are actually sending me fines. Not if they want to keep those hefty bonuses they receive on a monthly basis—thanks to yours truly.

As soon as the car pulls to a stop, I jump out, hearing both Ivan and Igor cursing behind me. I pause on the sidewalk in front of Sveta. The wall of glass that separated the outside from the inside is gone. Shattered all over the sidewalk.

"Anyone get hit?" I throw over my shoulder, stepping through the hole in the open wall.

"Pyat'," he tells me, shaking his head. I'm shocked there were only five casualties. Seeing how late it is, this place should have been packed.

As I navigate my way around the debris, I'm stopped by a uniformed officer. "Sir, this is a crime scene. You can't be here."

"This is my fucking bar. I'll go wherever the fuck I want." I shove him out of my way and continue into the main area. The farther I go, the more my anger builds. I'm going to fucking slice their heads clean from their fucking scrawny little Irish bodies. Then I'll cook them up in some fucking stew and send the pot to their families.

"GET DOWN!" Ivan yells out in Russian. I turn to look out the window right as a blacked-out SUV slows to a stop. A machine gun sticking out the open back window. Bullets start flying in my direction, and before I know what's happening, Ivan is shoving me to the ground. Covering as much of my body with his as he can.

I push at his chest. "Get the fuck off me," I grunt.

Just as quickly as the bullets came, they stop. By the time I get off the ground, the car is long gone. I storm towards the sidewalk and jump into our SUV. Thank fuck Igor left the keys in the ignition. I don't wait to peel out into traffic. The car is nowhere to be found, but that's not going to stop me from hunting down every Irish fuck in a five-mile radius and mowing them down.

Crime families are creatures of habit. They tend to stick to the same blocks, same restaurants, same strip clubs. It's no fucking secret where the IRA likes to spend a majority of their time. Which is why I find myself parked down the street from Sensations, an Irish gentlemen's club—*sure as fuck, there's nothing gentlemanly about it.*

I pull a cap out of the glove box and pull it low over my eyes. Which is when I feel the cuts on the side of my face and the liquid dripping down my forehead. I bring my shirt up and wipe at the blood. It'll have to do. I don't plan on being here long anyway. I walk the few blocks to the club, sticking close to the shadows and avoiding the gaze of any onlookers. I have no doubt that the Irish have scouts out on the street, ready to alert the fuckers of any unwanted presence.

Handing over a fifty to the bouncer, I walk through the doors of the sleazy strip club. It's dark, which allows me to enter unnoticed. I find an empty booth in the back of the room and take up residence. It's not long before a scantily clad waitress approaches the table. I let my eyes roam up her long legs, over the bareness of her midriff, then land on her cleavage.

Nothing. Nada. Not even a fucking twitch. At this point, I'm considering

the idea that I may need to see a fucking doctor. My dick should be pleased with the present scenery. Any other day of the week, it would be. Until I met her...

“What can I get for ya?” the woman asks.

Clearing my throat, I put my best American accent to work. It’s a skill I perfected in elementary school. “A Jack and Coke,” I tell her. Keeping my head trained on the stage.

I’d much prefer a shot of vodka but figured whiskey is the safer choice among the current crowd. The room goes dark before the MC makes some overexaggerated announcement for a new dancer.

The waitress drops my drink on the table. “Anything else you need?” she asks me.

“Nah, I’m good,” I tell her.

The spotlight comes on and a figure steps out onto the stage, while my gaze remains hyperfocused on the shadowy hourglass figure. Until I feel my cock stir and I look down at my crotch. Maybe he isn’t fucking broken.

Thank fuck.

I continue watching the figure on the stage, whoever she is. The girl moves with a grace you don’t see in many strippers. When she steps out from behind the curtain, my heart stops. Six-inch stilettos lead up to a pair of long, lean legs. My eyes travel up to her face, a face I’d fucking recognize anywhere, then trail over to that short blonde wig, the very one she was wearing when I bent her over my desk and fucked her into oblivion.

What the fuck does she think she’s doing?

I’m stuck, rooted to the chair, watching her dance around the stage in nothing but a G-string and a tiny fucking bra. Every fucking man in this place ogling the fuck out of her. I can feel the pounding of my heart kickback in the form of rage. At her. At all her onlookers. At myself for not putting a stop to it. The feeling is trying to consume my whole being. I want nothing more than to march up to that stage, throw her over my shoulder, and get her the fuck out of here.

Doing that would probably get us both killed. So, instead, I ignore my instincts, sit, and wait. When her song is up, she doesn’t go back behind the curtain like the other dancers—no, she fucking jumps off the stage and struts right up to a booth. My fingers twitch as I watch her pull up a piece of Irish trash and lead him down a corridor. She is not giving him a private show. Fuck that. Before I can talk myself out of it, I’m up and making my way

behind them. There are three doors. The first one leads to the men's bathroom. The second is unmarked. I turn the handle and push the door open. Stepping inside with my gun drawn, I close the door behind me.

"Kotyonok, what the fuck are you doing?" I growl, taking in the scene before my eyes. My little kitten has this fucker laid out on the ground. His shirt cut open and a knife to his throat.

She turns her head and smiles up at me. "Working, and you're interrupting. Leave," she snarls.

"Consider yourself fucking retired," I tell her. Keeping my gun trained on my kitten's next victim, who is looking between me and Isabella with a mix of curiosity and fear—*and really, who could blame the guy?*—I pick her up and tug her back against my chest. Only to catch an elbow to the chest, causing my grip to loosen. Isabella spins around and holds the knife out at me.

"Don't worry, honey. You're next. Take a seat and let me finish this," she says, pointing to the guy on the ground.

"You two realize you're not making it out of here alive," he says.

"Shut the fuck up," I tell him before aiming my gun in his direction. "Stand up."

"Wait, no. This is my show," Isabella argues. "Don't move."



Mikhail and I are in a standoff, both fighting over who is going to be the one to put an end to this Irishman. I may not be the most romantic girl at heart, but I'm pretty sure this is not what sonnets are written about.

"I was here first. You can take a ticket, asshole," I seethe. God, I hope this child doesn't inherit his annoying personality. Not that I really know the guy, but from the few encounters we've had, I can tell he's really not all that likable. Unless you only count looks, because Mikhail is a solid eleven out of ten.

I can feel my panties dampen just at the thought of him pressing that firm

body of his against mine. He smirks, and his icy-blue eyes twinkle as they roam my almost-naked form, appearing pleased with himself. As if he can read my mind.

“Stop ogling me,” I tell him.

“If you don’t want to be ogled, then you should put some fucking clothes on,” he says.

“I prefer none at all.” This comes from the fucker still laid out on the floor.

Mikhail tilts his head towards the guy. “I’m going to rip your eyeballs out, then shove them up your fucking ass,” he says in an eerily calm voice.

“Well, that’s graphic. And, honestly, I’m getting a little bored.” I bend down, pressing the tip of my knife in the Irishman’s throat, right at his carotid artery. “Better luck in the next life,” I whisper in his ear before sinking my blade deeper.

He kicks and shoves at my arm, but it’s too late. I’ve already done the damage and he’ll bleed out any minute now. I land on the floor on my ass, not being able to keep my balance. A loud growl erupts in the room. By the time I realize the feral noise is coming from Mikhail, he has the knife ripped out of my hands and is stabbing it into the body of the Irishman over and over again while yelling something in Russian.

“Shit, Mikhail, we need to leave. Now!” I pull at his arm but he doesn’t budge. “Come on, or I’m leaving you here for them to find you. Either way, I’m out.” I push to my feet and make a beeline for the door.

It isn’t long before I feel Mikhail behind me. He places a hand on my lower back and guides me down the hall, the opposite way I came. We end up at a back door, and then in an alley. The cold sends chills through to my bones. I guess standing outside in your underwear isn’t a smart idea on a November evening in New York.

“Put this on.” Mikhail shoves a coat into my chest. His coat.

I want to refuse on principle, but it’s fucking freezing out here. And truth be told, I don’t fancy making the trek home in nothing but my underwear. I pull his coat around me and do my best not to bring the collar up to my nose to sniff. I don’t need to do that, though, because I can feel his warmth soaking in from the fabric, wrapping around me and causing me to remember how good it felt having his body on mine. I need to get away from this guy before I do something stupid. Like sleeping with the enemy. Again.

“Well, I would say it’s been a pleasure, Petrov, but I’d be lying and my

mama always taught me not to lie, so..." I shrug my shoulders, turn my back on him, and proceed down the alleyway. Pausing when I hear his footsteps following me. I don't look back, not for five whole blocks. But then, I can't help it. "What are you doing? Why are you following me?"

"I need to make sure you get home on time. *My* mama always taught me not to let a girl walk home alone." He smirks at me.

"Huh, guess you are the exact reason the phrase 'a face only a mother can love' came to be," I muse.

"You liked my face just plenty when you were riding it." As he says the words, his eyes dart downward.

I pull the coat tighter around me, reminding myself that I can't let him know that he has my thighs quivering, my panties damp, and my heart rate increasing. "Look, I'm no damsel in distress. I don't need you to walk me home."

"No, you're not, but you *are* the mother of my child. And I'm going to make sure you get home."

"I've told you it isn't yours," I hiss at him.

"And I've told *you* I don't believe you."

"How exactly do you see this playing out, Mikhail? You getting visitation rights on weekends? Getting a free pass from hell? Because you're not going to live to see this child born. You have more people trying to kill you than should be humanly possible."

"I think I'll survive," he says. *Cocky fucking bastard.*

I always swore I'd never end up with a made man, and I stand by that decision. They're all fucking full of themselves and over-the-top controlling, if you ask me. Although, when I watch my mom or my Zia Holly manage to get their way with little effort, I have to wonder just how controlling they are. I'm seeing it now in my cousins' marriages too. They're the type of men that most people would cross the street to avoid, yet these innocent, beautiful, and smart women have them completely wrapped around their little fingers.

My uncle, my dad, my cousins have all sworn allegiances to the family, to put the organization above all else. But I have no doubt that each one of those men would leave it all behind for their wives. I'm not made—the fact that I don't have a dick between my legs has everything to do with that. My Uncle T and my grandfather might be accepting of the fact that women can do more than just sit barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen. But some traditions are unchanging.

“You know we can stand out here all night, freezing and arguing, or you can keep on walking so we can both get on with our evenings. Believe it or not, I have shit to do other than following your ass around,” he says.

“Be my guest. Go and do that shit. No one is stopping you. I hear the IRA is looking to make another arms deal. You should put your hand up for that one.” I pivot on my heel and continue down the street.

There are five blocks between me and Valentino territory. I know it would only take one word and our guys would come running from their perching spots lining the city sidewalks, guns raised and trigger fingers itching to take out another Petrov. I don’t do that. Instead, I spend the rest of the walk back to my apartment worried that someone is going to see the fucker following me and shoot him before I do.

“I NEED WINE,” I complain to Bianca, who is lying on the other side of my bed.

“Same. But you’re knocked up, girlie, so I guess we’re going to have to settle for Ben & Jerry’s,” she says, holding up a tub of cookie dough.

“Argh, don’t remind me,” I groan.

“Sooooo... we hate him, right? The baby daddy?” she asks.

“As if he were the sworn enemy,” I tell her, leaving out the fact he’s that exactly.

Bianca turns her head and looks at me, her eyes searing through my every feature. I feel like her stare-down lasts hours when, really, it’s probably only seconds. “HOLY FUCKING SHITBALLS, ISABELLA VALENTINO!!!” she screams out while launching herself off the bed. I can’t help but laugh as she starts pacing up and down the length of my bedroom. She waves her hands in the air. “You fucked the enemy!” she exclaims. “I can’t believe you didn’t tell me. Who? When? Where? I’m going to need all the details about when and how my niece was conceived. Positions, length, the whole lot.”

“First of all, yell it a little louder. I don’t think they heard you in Brooklyn.” I roll my eyes. “Second, I said no such thing.”

Deny until I die, that’s going to be my motto for this pregnancy. I think I could very well convince my father that I’m the next Virgin Mary and this was just another immaculate conception. No one else would ever believe it.

But he sure as fuck would. Because he'd want to.

"You don't need to say it. I know you, Izzy. So, details." Bianca waves her hand in a rolling motion, like she thinks that will get me to open up and spill all my secrets.

I shake my head. I'm not giving her details. I can't let anyone know just how much of a clusterfuck I've made of my life.

Bianca climbs back on the bed, sitting in front of me while giving me her best puppy-dog eyes and pouting out her bottom lip. "Come on, Iz, when have I ever betrayed you?" she asks, then answers her own question. "Never. I would never sell you out—you know that. You have to talk to someone about this. And that someone is me." She points to the middle of her chest.

"You don't understand, Bianca. This isn't one of those romance novels you read. This is real life, *my life*, and if people find out, it's going to turn into World War III," I tell her.

"Oh, he's *that* forbidden then, is he?" She waggles her eyebrows up and down.

"Mikhail Petrov," I whisper, as if saying his name will be enough to conjure him up from the bowels of hell.

Bianca's eyes widen, and then she reaches over and pulls out her phone, which only has her eyes widening again after she types something into Google. She turns the phone around and a picture of the devil himself smirks back at me.

"Forget auntie. I'm about to make this baby of yours my future stepdaughter. Shit, Iz, I can't believe you didn't tell me about this. I mean, this is goals right here." She points to the screen.

I don't hear anything past the fact she wants to get with Mikhail, and I have to remind myself that she's joking. At least, I hope to God she is because I've gotten used to the girl. I don't want to have to kill my best friend and my baby daddy in the same week.



I walk into the dining room and everyone is sitting around the table. Why the fuck do so many people have to be in this house all the goddamn time?

“Utro, sit, sit.” Vera, the head of my house staff, ushers me into a chair.

“Morning,” I return her greeting and take my seat.

The table is already full of food, a spread for a king of sorts. Ivan sits to my right and is glaring daggers at me. I ignore him. Picking up the cup of coffee that Vera puts down in front of me, I sip it. I reach over and grab a slice of sharlotka, dig my fork into the cake, and let the apple flavor invade my mouth.

When I finish my meal, I turn to Ivan—who is still glaring at me—and lift a brow. “Problem?” I ask him.

Everyone else at the table goes silent. There are six other men here, all top members of the organization. My brother enjoyed having an audience. He loved this life. Me? I tolerate it. If I had my way, I’d wake up in an empty house. Alone. Cook my own breakfast. Fetch my own coffee. However, appearances are everything. Also, I have way too many people wanting to kill me right now to allow myself that much vulnerability.

“Yeah, you are reckless and you’re going to end up next to your brother and father if you don’t stop.”

“We’re all going to end up next to them eventually.” I shrug.

Ivan shakes his head, gets up, and walks away. I look at the rest of them still sitting at the table. “Anyone else have a problem?” I ask.

“Nyet, boss.” They all shake their heads.

“Good. Keep your eyes out today. There’s bound to be some angry Irish fuckers lurking around,” I tell them. They smirk in response—crazy-ass bastards love a reason to fight. I push up from the table and leave them to their meal. They all know what’s expected of them.

Sitting at my desk, I fire up my laptop and open my inbox, dreading all the work laid out in front of me. As much as I try to focus on the task at hand, replying to emails, putting out fires, I can’t go two fucking minutes without her popping up in my head. I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone like Isabella Valentino. She’s not like the Russian girls, who are happy to be kept so to speak. I couldn’t imagine any of them wanting to get blood on their hands. Isabella, though... she doesn’t flinch at the reality of what we do. What it takes to be in this world. That shouldn’t turn me on as much as it does.

I want to know what she was doing in that strip club last night. What was she trying to get out of the Irishman?

At least what happened in that room won’t get traced back to her. They’ll assume it was one of my men that did it. Retaliation for the drive-by at my club. Which reminds me... I need to head over there and make sure the clean-up’s being handled properly. I pick up the phone and dial Ivan. Even if he’s pissed at me, I know he’ll answer.

“Boss.”

“We need to head over to Sveta,” I tell him.

“Meet you out front,” he grunts before ending the call.

I get up, retrieve my jacket, and strap myself with a small arsenal before

leaving the office.

“HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE?” I ask the cop, who is trying to tell me my club is still a crime scene, which means I can’t access it to do repairs yet.

“As long as it takes,” the smart-ass replies.

I turn my back to him and make a call. I happen to be very friendly with the chief of police.

“Mr. Petrov...” he greets me.

“I want your officers out of my fucking club in the next five minutes,” I tell him and hang up without waiting for a reply. I then walk over to the bar and lean against the ledge, where I wait and watch. And sure enough, not even two minutes later, all the officers are getting notices to evacuate the building. “Guess it didn’t take that long, huh?” I say to the bastard who tried to deny me access to my own fucking club.

“Guess the innocent people who died here don’t matter as much as your money does.” He shrugs. I choose not to engage with the fuckwit. I have much more pressing matters to deal with, like getting this place fixed up and running again.

“Boss, the glaziers are coming in this afternoon to replace the windows,” Ivan says, pocketing his phone as he steps over broken chairs to make his way towards me.

“Make sure it’s bulletproof. I don’t want a repeat of what happened here,” I instruct.

“Already did.” He smiles at me.

“If you’re expecting a gold star, I’m fresh out,” I tell him, my eyes flicking from corner to corner. Tables are knocked on their sides, chairs are broken, and glass litters the ground. “We need to get the clean-up crew here.”

“We’re here, Pakhan.” A young soldier walks in, followed by three more just like him.

Pakhan, I’m not sure I’ll get used to the title. For a moment, I thought they were talking to Vlad, but he’s not here. “Great. Get this shit fixed up by the end of the day,” I tell him. Then take one last look around before I walk out and jump in the car. Ivan is quick to follow me and climb into the driver’s side.

Once he's pulled out into traffic, he looks at me. "So, what happened last night?"

"Nothing," I tell him.

"Bred sivoy kobyly." *Bullshit*, he says in Russian.

"Last I checked, you weren't my ma. I don't need to explain my whereabouts to you, Ivan."

"No, you don't. But I want to know how much deeper shit you managed to get us in with the IRA. I need to keep you alive."

"It's not your job to keep me alive," I remind him.

"No, but it *is* in my best interest. So what happened?"

I huff out a breath. The fucker won't quit until I give him something. "I went to their strip club."

"Why?"

"I wanted to kill them all. I only got one."

"How?"

"What do you mean *how*? It doesn't fucking matter how. There's one less fucking Irish fuck on the streets—that's a good thing."

"You know, we've always had a peaceful relationship with the IRA. Until now. Perhaps this can be mended."

"Nyet, they can go and get fucked. I'm not dealing with them. There are plenty of other buyers in the world."

"Okay. Next question, baby momma drama. What are you doing about that?" he asks me.

"There's no baby momma drama. It's between me and her."

"It's going to be between all of us when everyone finds out."

"I'll deal with it."

"Are you prepared to go to war for this woman and child?"

I don't answer him. Because I don't know what to say. I mean, will I go to war for her? Fuck that, of course, I would.

"She'll be the first one lined up to pull the trigger on me. This isn't some Romeo and Juliet story, Ivan. This is a case of a one-night stand gone wrong." The words taste bitter on my tongue. There was nothing *wrong* with that night. Other than the fact I'm still convinced it wasn't a coincidence. She stole my fucking knife and left before I woke up.

Maybe it's time I find out those answers for myself. Was Isabella sent there to distract me? Because if she was, she deserves a fucking pay raise.



“Bella?” Uncle T’s voice echoes through my apartment.

“Bel, you here?” My father’s voice follows it.

Argh, if I bury myself under these sheets, maybe I can pretend I’m not here and they’ll both leave?

But no such luck. A knock sounds on my bedroom door before it opens. “Found her,” Papa yells out. “Bel, you okay?”

“I was perfectly fine sleeping until you two started yelling,” I groan.

“You weren’t answering your phone,” he says in way of explanation.

“I. Was. Sleeping,” I tell him.

“I. Was. Worried,” he replies, mimicking my tone. “I’ll be in the living

room. Get up,” he adds before turning around and exiting the room.

I pull a pillow over my face and scream. Sometimes I wish my family was a little less involved in my life. Why did I think it was a good idea to give them free access to this penthouse?

I’m seriously considering moving back to Italy for a while. It’s the only place I can get any form of peace. I pick up my phone from the bedside table and text my mom.

ME:

Get your brother and husband out of my apartment before I shoot them.

MAMA:

Don’t be dramatic, Isabella. You’re not going to shoot them.

ME:

I might if they wake me up again.

MAMA:

It’s noon. Why are you still in bed? Are you okay? Never mind, I’ll stop in and check on you this afternoon.

Argh, that was not helpful at all. Throwing the phone on the bed, I slide out from under the covers and throw on a robe. I guess the sooner I deal with them, the sooner they’ll leave. I walk out to the living room to the delicious smell of coffee. Great, just what I need, a reminder of another thing I’ve been forced to give up for the next nine months. According to Bianca, coffee is on the no-go list for pregnancy.

“Is there a good reason why you two are waking me up?” I ask, finding my father and uncle making themselves comfortable in my living room.

“You didn’t answer your phone,” Uncle T reminds me.

“I was sleeping. People usually don’t answer phones when they’re asleep.”

“I do,” he says.

“Well, I guess we all can’t be as awesome as you, Uncle T,” I retort. To which, he just chuckles.

“You haven’t carried out that little job I gave you. Why?” he asks me after a pause.

I blink. So that’s the real reason he’s here. He wants to know why Mikhail Petrov is still alive. Come to think of it, I’d like to know too.

“It’s complicated. Don’t worry, that guy has more people trying to kill

him than just me. The fucker will be dead before we know it.” The words taste vile on my tongue.

I want him dead, I remind myself.

“Is something wrong? Is there a reason you’re not completing the task? Anything you should tell us?” Uncle T asks. The way his eyes sear into mine has me feeling like he already knows the answer. I’ll go to my grave before I tell him though.

“Bel, what’s going on?” Papa adds, looking from me to my uncle.

“Nothing. I’ve just been busy... that’s all. I’ll get it done. Don’t worry about it,” I dismiss them.

“You know you can tell us anything, right? We’re not here to judge you. We’re here to help.”

I sink into the sofa. “I know, and I appreciate it, but I’m fine—other than the fact that I’m tired because I got so rudely woken up.”

“Okay, we’ll get out of here and let you get back to bed.” Papa pushes to his feet, walks over, and places a kiss on the top of my head. “Love you, Bel.”

“Love you too, Papa,” I reply.

Uncle T is slower to make a move. He finally stands and follows my father’s actions, kissing my forehead. “Love you, Bella. Make sure you come to me before you do anything rash,” he whispers.

“Always.” I smile, but even I know the action’s forced, which means so does he.

THREE HOURS LATER, I came home from the spa, and instead of going back to sleep, I decided a facial was in order. Walking into my apartment, I know straight away I’m not alone. I can sense someone else is in my space. I’m about to retrieve a pistol from the drawer in the entrance table when my mother walks around the corner.

“Izzy, I was wondering when you’d turn up.”

“You couldn’t have been wondering all that long, considering this is my home,” I tell her.

“This isn’t your home. It’s your apartment. Your home is the house where you grew up.”

“Which one? There’re a few of them.” I laugh.

“All of them. Come on. I made you pasta.”

“I really did win the mother lottery,” I say, following her into the kitchen.

“What did your father and uncle want?” she asks as she dishes up a plate full of fettuccini Alfredo.

“Uncle T wanted to touch base about the job. I haven’t finished it yet.” I shrug.

Her hand freezes midair. “Don’t do it, Isabella. You’ll regret it for the rest of your life,” she says.

“Why would I regret it?” I ask. I don’t think I would. I don’t regret anything I’ve done.

“I’m your mother. I know these things. I’m telling you not to do it. But only you can decide what your heart can truly live with,” she says, placing the plate in front of me.

I don’t respond. I’m really shitty at lying to her, so I decide to stuff my face with the pasta instead. “This is good,” I tell her after a few mouthfuls.

“I know.” She stares at me.

“What?” I ask.

“You’re really going to sit there and not tell me? I’m your mother, Isabella. If you can’t tell me, then who can you tell?” There’s a hint of sadness in her voice.

“You obviously already know.” I point my fork in her direction.

“But I want to hear you say it. I want you to tell me yourself.”

“How did you know?”

“How did I know what?” she asks me.

“That I’m pregnant. How did you know?”

She gasps and holds a hand to her chest. “You’re pregnant? Oh my goodness, Isabella, this is fantastic news. I’m going to be a grandmother. Finally,” she says with an exaggerated excitement.

“Don’t act surprised. I know you already knew.”

“Okay, I knew. But what I don’t know is why you’re not telling anyone.”

“Have you met Papa? Uncle T?” I raise a brow at her.

“Okay, fair point,” she says. “But they love you, Izzy, and they will only ever do what’s best for you.”

“I know. But what if what’s best for me isn’t what’s best for them?” I ask.

“You’ll only know if you open up to your family.”

“I’m going to Italy for a few weeks. I need to think about things,” I tell

her.

“Okay, want me to come with you?”

“No, but I might take Bianca.”

There’s just one loose end I need to tie up before I leave. As I sit here, eating my mother’s pasta, a million different options run through my mind. None of them seem all that appealing, but I’m putting it down to pregnancy hormones. It can’t be anything else.



I could smell her the moment she stepped into my bedroom. Her trademark strawberry and mint scent, plus the fact that my cock started to come to life, meant that I knew it couldn't be anyone but her.

I don't open my eyes. I wait to see what she's planning on doing. I figure she's not here to climb into my bed and get her hot little body underneath mine. But now that I think about it, that's exactly where she's going to end up.

It doesn't take long before I feel the blade at my throat, and my hand snaps up to wrap around her wrist. Instead of pulling her arm away, I push the knife deeper into my skin. I feel it pierce the surface, the blood starting to

drip down my neck.

“You’re going to have to do better than that if you’re trying to kill me, kotyonok,” I say. Closing my free hand around her waist, I pull her down on top of me before I roll over so her back is pressed into the mattress beneath me. Exactly where I wanted her to be.

The whole time, I make sure the knife doesn’t sink further into my flesh. Right now, it’s just a scratch. But it has the potential to cause real damage. Isabella’s eyes are wide. She struggles beneath me, the movement only making my dick harder. Which she quickly realizes and stills.

“You know, things as pretty as you really shouldn’t be so lethal,” I murmur, removing the knife from her hand and tossing it onto the floor.

“Too bad, seeing as you’re about to have a front-row seat to just how deadly I can be,” she counters.

I hold her hands above her head, as I run my mouth down the curve of her neck. “Mmm, your threats only turn me on more, kotyonok,” I tell her, pressing my cock into her pussy to prove my point. When she lets out a little moan, before attempting to cover it with a cough, I know she’s not as immune to me as she likes to pretend. “How much have you thought about this? About giving your body over to me again?” Pulling her wrists together, I use one hand to hold them in place while the other roams her body.

“Not even once,” she says.

“A killer and a liar? Tell me, where do I swipe right?” I ask her.

“Swipe right all you want. I’ll be swiping left,” she hisses.

“Your body begs to differ. Perhaps I should put an end to those lies you’re spewing by filling that mouth with my cock.”

“You put that thing near my teeth and I’ll bite it off,” she says. Still, she doesn’t struggle as much as you think she would if she really didn’t want to be here.

I sit up and straddle her waist. Taking her black shirt in both of my hands, I tear the fabric down the middle. I’m greeted by the view of her breasts, pushed up in a lacy black bra. Her golden skin just calling for my tongue to lick it.

Isabella’s hips buck beneath me. “This isn’t happening,” she says.

Cupping her breast, I let go of her wrists so I can use both hands. I then roll her hard little nipples between my fingers. Her back arches off the bed, pushing her chest further into my palms.

“It’s happening. You just don’t want to admit that you want it to happen,”

I tell her.

Leaning down, I capture her mouth with mine before pushing my tongue inside. It briefly crosses my mind that she's going to bite it off, but then her arms wrap around my neck and she returns my kiss. Her tongue fighting for dominance. Something I won't give her. My hand wraps around her throat, tilting her face up slightly while giving me more access to her mouth. A growl escapes me as I shove my tongue as far down her throat as I can. Isabella's palms roam along my bare chest, to my abs, before she stops at the top of my briefs. Taking hold of her hand, I push it under the fabric and guide her to my cock, which she clutches. Then tugs.

Fuck.

I grind my hips into her hand as she continues to slide her fist up and down. Breaking the kiss, I shove her hand aside. If she keeps doing that, I'm going to come before I get anywhere near her pussy. I open the button on her black jeans and slide them, along with her underwear, down her supple thighs.

"Just as fucking perfect as I remember," I tell her. I swipe a feather-soft finger through the center of her wet folds. Her hips buck off the bed as I bring my hand to my mouth and suck on her juices. Isabella reaches for my cock again. I take hold of her hand and press it against the mattress. Locking her in place. "I can't wait to sink into you. Tell me, kotyonok, will it feel as good as I remember too?" I ask her.

"Why don't you find out?" she says.

That's my green light. Lining up my cock, I don't wait for her to change her mind. I thrust into her. Stilling, because the moan she lets out is a mixture of pleasure and pain, and as much as I wanted to kill her before, now I just want to keep her. I want to bury my cock inside her every single fucking day.

"It's better," I tell her, slowly pulling out before sliding back in.

"Mikhail, if you don't fuck me like I know you can, I'm going to strangle you," she grinds out between clenched teeth.

"You want me to fuck you like I own you, kotyonok? Because this body, it's mine now. You are mine now," I tell her.

She doesn't say anything in return. Neither of us does as I pick up her legs, rest them on my chest, and fuck her. I don't stop, not even when she has her first orgasm. I continue fucking her right into the next.

"Oh god, I can't," she says, shaking her head.

"Yes, you can. I want more. I want it all," I hiss out. Reaching a finger

between our bodies and finding her clit, I press my thumb down.

She ignites again, her legs tremble, and her pussy milks my cock as I spill myself inside her. I pull back and watch as my cum leaks out. Scooping my finger through the mixture of bodily fluids, I push it into her pussy. "I like having me inside you," I tell her before rolling onto my back.

"Don't get used to it," she says breathlessly.

"Oh, kotyonok, I plan to be inside you every day from here on out," I tell her, watching as she jumps off the bed and swipes her clothes off the ground.

"Where's the bathroom?" she asks.

I point to the closed door behind her and shut my eyes for what seems like only a minute while I listen to her rummage through my cabinets. I know she won't find anything of use in there. Consciousness seeps in as I feel something sharp in my side. Opening my eyes, I find Isabella standing above me.

"Shhh, it won't take long," she says.

I go to move my arms but they're tied to the bed. I stop struggling. Somehow, a peace falls over me. I'm going to die at the hands of a beautiful woman. Better than getting taken out by some ugly motherfucking Irishman, right?

"It's okay," I tell her.

"None of this is okay, Mikhail. But it is what it is. We're a product of our environments, and I won't have my child born into a war that ends with it being hunted down by your family," she says.

"I would never allow that," I tell her.

"You wouldn't have a choice. Do you really think they'd let you lead when they found out? You'd be overturned within seconds."

"Promise me one thing," I plead. "Make sure they know I wanted them, that I loved them no matter what. My blood runs through their veins just as much as yours does."

I see a tear roll down her cheek. "I promise," she says, right before she digs the knife deeper and twists. Then her hazy figure walks out of my bedroom, closing the door behind her.

15



Four months later

I wake up covered in sweat. Again. It's been the same nightmare for the last four months, ever since I left Mikhail bleeding out on his bed. I keep seeing that look in his eyes. The one that said he'd do anything for this child, including die at my hands. I knew there was no way he'd be able to live and not make a public claim to this baby.

I rub a palm over my swollen stomach. Silently apologizing to my daughter for taking her father from her. I guess it's true what they say. A mother always knows best. Mine certainly did. She warned me I'd regret killing him. That it would haunt me, and I do regret it. But then I think of my unborn child and the life she would have had if I didn't. That gives me peace of mind, knowing I did what's best for her. She might hate me if she ever finds out, but she'll be alive and that's all that I care about.

I've heard the stories from Maddie about her parents hiding from the Petrovs. They were eventually found and killed. Thankfully Maddie and her sister Lilah weren't with them at the time. Everyone seems to believe that the Petrovs don't know of their existence and that's why they haven't gone after them. Which is exactly why I did what I did. Two people can keep a secret if one of them is dead, right?

That's not exactly true, I guess. Mom and Bianca know the truth. Everybody else is under the impression that I don't know who the father is. I got knocked up some random night by a stranger whose name I never bothered to ask. It wasn't my proudest moment. When I had to look Papa in the eyes and blatantly lie to him. See the disappointment reflected at me. He won't say it, but I know he's upset with me. Uncle T's reaction was different. He seemed disappointed. I have a feeling he knows and is waiting for me to confess. He hasn't said anything, but he also hasn't bought up the whole Mikhail Petrov job again after I told him it was done.

Not that I've spoken to him a lot over the past four months. I haven't been able to bring myself to go back to New York. And now, I'm past the point of being able to fly safely. I'm six months pregnant and counting down the days until I can hold my baby girl in my arms. I have a feeling, a hope that she will inherit those icy-blue eyes. Ones that match her father's. It would be a blessing and a curse.

My heart shattered the moment I walked out of his bedroom and left him

behind the way I did. It shouldn't have bothered me. I've never had more of a reason to kill than to protect my child.

"How's Mama?" Bianca walks out to the patio, handing me a glass of iced tea.

"Fat, swollen, and hot," I tell her.

"Pfft, you're hardly fat. A little swollen maybe, but fat? Not at all," she says.

"Thanks," I murmur, sipping at the cool tea.

"I can see why you wanted to run away to Tuscany. It's beautiful. I think we should just stay here forever. We can raise little Bianca as a lesbian couple but without the benefits," she suggests, and liquid spurts from my mouth.

"I really wonder how I became friends with you at times," I tell her.

"I don't recall giving you a choice." She beams at me.

"You know, I don't expect you to stay here. You have your own life back in the States. I get that."

"What, and miss all of this?" Bianca waves a hand around, gesturing to my grandfather's estate. "Besides, I don't know if you've noticed, but Italian men... they're something else."

I wish I could agree with her, but I can't look at any man with interest. Besides the fact that I'm the size of a whale and moody as all hell, none of them measure up to the one I want. The same one I know I can't ever have because I made sure of it.

"I know they say he's disappeared and all, but maybe if you put feelers out, he'd contact you," Bianca says.

She doesn't know that I killed him. That's a part of my life she'll never be privy to. I swallow the lump in my throat. "I don't know who you're talking about," I lie.

"Baby daddy, hot Russian, ring any bells?"

"None at all, and don't ever say that out loud, Bianca. Nobody can find out about this. Swear it." I look directly at her.

"I swear no one will ever hear it from me." She zips her lips shut before adding, "Well, what are your plans today other than wallowing in self-pity?"

"I'm not wallowing."

"Good, then we're going baby shopping. This child of ours doesn't have nearly enough looks yet."

"She's a baby. She doesn't need looks," I tell her for what seems like the

hundredth time.

Bianca is the truest form of a trust fund brat. Don't get me wrong, she's made herself a name and a healthy income being a blogger. Which is exactly how she's managed to uproot her life and stay in Italy with me for the past four months. But her trust is what feeds her addiction to designer labels.

"Come on, shopping in this country is better than anywhere else."

"Okay, but only if we stop and get pedicures too," I agree.

"And make some poor worker deal with the atrocity that is your feet?" she gasps.

"Shut up." I shove at her chest before my eyes flick downward.

THREE HOURS LATER, I'm standing in the middle of a baby store, looking at a light-blue dress. The color reminds me of Mikhail's eyes. I run the soft fabric through my fingers as a sadness I can't describe washes over me. I put it down to hormones, shake off the feeling, and force myself to leave the outfit behind. As much as I want to buy it, I don't. I scan the shop, getting the sense that I'm being watched, until I find the source. Romeo and Luca are standing outside the window, staring at me.

I roll my eyes. It seems every week or so, one of my cousins just so happens to be in town. I think they have a rotating roster of whose turn it is to drop in on me. This week it must be the twins.

"Bianca, our weekly visitors have arrived," I tell her.

"Oh goodie, I love the eye candy." She smirks.

"You know they're all married, right?"

"That's why I only look. I can appreciate a beautiful body without touching it. Some of us have a little thing called *self-control*." She laughs.

"I have self-control," I argue, knowing full well that's a lie.



She looks sad. I don't like it. I want to find the reason and fix it for her, which is a problem. For me. The woman literally left me bleeding out to death, and still, I want to take care of her... and our child. I watch her from where I'm parked across the street. She picks up a blue baby dress and stares at it before returning it to the rack.

She doesn't know I'm not dead. She won't be looking over her shoulder for me because I'm nothing but a ghost to her. The sperm donor to her child, at the very least. I'll never forget the look in her eyes as she dug the knife into me deeper. The way she turned away and walked out. I can't hold it against her though. Honestly, she did the right thing, given the circumstances.

She wanted to protect the identity of our child. And there was—*there is*—no way I'm not laying a claim to the baby. It's mine just as much as it is hers. I understand her fears. I have the same ones. I watched how my family reacted when it happened years ago. But this is different. We're a different generation, and I am the fucking Pakhan. Let the fuckers try to overrule me. It'll be fun to put them right back in their place. For the last four months, I've been running everything through Ivan as a proxy.

I woke up connected to a shit-ton of machines in a makeshift hospital room in the basement of my house. The first question Ivan hurled in my direction was who was it? *Who got to me?* I never uttered her name. I won't give her up. It'll remain our little secret. I know that once I get to her, explain to her that things can be different, that I'm not going anywhere no matter how many times she tries to kill me, she'll come around to my way of thinking.

I watch as two of her cousins walk up to the storefront window. They've been visiting a lot, each week a different family member. Isabella waves and shakes her head, and a few minutes later, she walks out to greet them. I wish I could hear what they were saying. I see her smile but it's not a full smile. Though it is beautiful nonetheless. I never truly understood the whole *glowing* thing, but Isabella looks fucking fantastic pregnant. I wait for her to get into the car, which is meant to take her back to the Donatello estate. Once it pulls off far enough down the street, I head into the store she just exited.

"Buongiorno," the saleswoman greets me.

"Buongiorno," I parrot while making a beeline for the blue dress. I could tell Isabella wanted it. I don't know why she didn't buy it, but I'm going to make sure she gets it.

"Ah, English?" I ask the saleswoman—*my Italian is shit*. I know enough to get by, and picked up a little more over the last few months, but it's not nearly enough for a conversation.

"Yes."

"I'll take this. Can you have it delivered somewhere for me, discreetly? I want to remain anonymous," I tell her, holding out an extra fifty euros.

"Of course, sir."

I write down Isabella's name and address on a piece of paper, which the woman clearly recognizes when she reads it. To her credit, she doesn't say anything. I have no doubt the people here are loyal as fuck to her family. This is Donatello territory after all. Walking out the door, I climb back into the car and head to the shitty little apartment I've been renting for the past few

months.

After waking up, it took three days for me to find her. I then spent the next four weeks debating what to do about the whole situation. I didn't want to approach her hot-headed. It wouldn't do either of us any good. Eventually, I followed her to Tuscany, and I've been watching, going as far as to hack into her medical records to find out how she's doing. How the baby's doing. It's also how I found out we're having a girl. I'm going to have a daughter.

I pull onto the street and don't even bother to lock the car. It's not worth shit anyway. The thing about staying incognito is blending in, and me driving around in a Lambo would do quite the opposite. I climb the three flights to my apartment, and as soon as my palm twists the knob, my phone rings in my pocket—Ivan's name flashing across the screen.

"Yeah?"

"How's the stalking?" he asks.

"I'm not stalking. I'm waiting."

"You're stalking. Do you think you can hurry up this trip of yours and come home? Things with the IRA are getting heated."

"What have they done now?"

"Blew up three containers full of product," he says. Hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of cocaine and weapons... gone.

"Hit 'em back. I want every fucking warehouse set ablaze. Tonight," I tell him.

Ivan doesn't say anything. He doesn't agree with my decision. His silence tells me he's trying to devise a way to convince me of an alternative. "Boss, I think we should send a message. One of the higher-ups has a nice little family. A daughter in college. We could..."

"Nyet. Family is off-limits. We're not touching them," I yell through the phone. Six months ago, no one would have been off-limits. Now, I think of that tiny life growing inside Isabella and an uncontrollable rage flows through me at the thought of any motherfucker using her to get to me.

"I just think if you want to hit 'em where it really hurts, then..."

"Nyet. Enough. I will not hear it again, Ivan."

"Fine. We'll do it your way," he concedes, not like he has a fucking choice. He may be acting boss in my absence, but I'm still the one in charge.

"Good. Don't roll over. Torch their fucking buildings and businesses. But not the families. They're innocent people, Ivan. We're changing how we do things."

“All right. I’ll send the boys out,” he says.

“Anything else you need to tell me?”

“They want to know when you’re coming back. They think you’re in Russia, and nobody has seen you there. They’re asking questions, Mikhail.”

“Let them ask. I’ll come back next week for a while,” I tell him. It’s not like I’m doing much here, apart from sitting on my ass and waiting for a woman to give birth to my daughter.

“Good, the boys will appreciate seeing your ugly mug,” he says.

I don’t reply. Disconnecting the call, I throw my phone on the counter and collapse into the world’s most uncomfortable sofa. I run a hand down my face.

What the fuck am I going to do?

I need to see her, talk to her. I know I can’t just break into the Donatello estate. That place is locked up tighter than Fort Knox. I need to get her when she’s out in public. She doesn’t seem to take security with her. The only person she keeps close is her friend Bianca, who is easily distracted by any man who shows her the slightest attention. I’m sure I can find some poor lad to lure Bianca away next time the girls are out together. Then I can take Isabella into a secluded place and make her listen to reason.

Will that put added stress on her and the baby? Perhaps I should wait until after the kid is born. Fuck, I don’t know what to do. This is the exact reason I’ve been here for three months and done nothing.



Watching the sunset over the Tuscan mountains, I hold a hand over my stomach, feeling the movements of my daughter. She's a kicker, that's for sure. I've been considering names for her, and can't help but wonder what strange Russian versions Mikhail would have wanted. His last words were to make sure this baby knew he wanted it.

I stole that from him. From both of them...

The one name I keep coming back to is Mabilia—it means lovable. I can't think of anything more lovable than this child. She's not even here yet and I know there isn't anything I wouldn't do, wouldn't sacrifice for her.

“Izzy, there’s a delivery for you.” Romeo walks out to the patio, handing me a pink and blue box. It’s from the baby store I stopped inside earlier today. Maybe I left something behind.

“Thanks.” Standing, I take the box.

“You good?” he asks me.

“I’m fine. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I don’t know. You’re growing a whole-ass human inside you?” He shrugs,

I roll my eyes at him. “Women have been doing this since the beginning of time, Romeo. You’re smart enough to know that.”

“Yeah, but those women weren’t my cousin,” he says with a smirk.

“You have two other cousins you could be bothering, you know. How are Lily and Hope doing?” I ask about his cousins from his mother’s side.

“Same as always. They’re fine. They don’t need me. They have husbands.”

“I don’t need or want a husband. You know Mama took care of me by herself just fine for the first eight years of my life.”

“*Please*, she had a house full of staff and Nonno. She was hardly alone, and neither are you, because you have all of us.”

“I appreciate you wanting to help, don’t get me wrong. But you don’t need to worry about me. I’m going to be fine,” I tell him before pivoting on my heel.

Walking into my bedroom, I throw the box down on the chair next to the other shopping bags from this morning’s little spree. Something has me picking the box up again—curiosity perhaps. Sitting on the bed, I untie the pink ribbon, remove the lid, push the white tissue paper aside, and pull out the light-blue dress that caught my eye at the store. The same dress that reminds me of Mikhail’s eyes. I rummage around the box for a card, a note, anything to explain why they’ve sent this to me. There’s nothing. So I grab my phone and call the store. It’s late but I’m hoping someone might still be there.

The phone rings out. Hanging up, I make a mental note to call them tomorrow. It’s odd for this dress to turn up. Maybe the sales lady saw me looking at it and thought I might want it delivered. That’s a big assumption, even if she knows my grandfather.

I continue staring at the dress. Closing my eyes, I can still picture his face. I see his smile aimed at me from across the bar the first night we met. I

imagine his gaze boring into mine. I have to force myself to open my eyes again. I don't need to be thinking about him.

I was with him twice—granted they were the most intense, pleasurable, and soul-connecting experiences I've ever had. But they're not nearly enough for me to be feeling such a loss. Especially when his disappearance was by my own hand.

"I SWEAR to god I've never had to pee so much in my life," I complain to Bianca. We're at lunch, at a nice little pizzeria, and for the fifth time since we've sat down, I need to use the restroom. "I'll be right back. Don't touch my food," I warn her.

Flushing the toilet, I walk up to the faucet to wash my hands and look around. You know that feeling like you're being watched? Yeah, I have that right now. I don't see anyone else in here so I turn back to the mirror. Probably too fast because I lose my balance.

"Ah. Fuck."

A pair of arms reaches out to catch me. "Careful."

His husky voice washes over me like a security blanket. I shake my head. I cannot be seeing him right now. He's dead. I killed him. Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath. I'm hallucinating. Except, when I open my eyes again, he's still there. Staring right back at me, his hands closed around my shoulders, holding me in place, and those icy-blue eyes searing right through me.

"What? How?" I ask, slowly recovering from the shock of seeing someone who's meant to be dead. A ghost.

"Thought you could get rid of me that easily, kotyonok?" Mikhail asks with a raised brow.

"You didn't exactly put up too much of a fight." I shrug, removing his hands from my person. I step to the side, trying to put space between us. Which isn't an easy feat with my protruding belly.

"I'm not afraid of death, especially at the hands of a beautiful woman," he says, his eyes traveling up and down my body.

"So you won't mind waiting here while I walk out there and grab a steak knife to have a second go at it then?" I fold my arms over my stomach. I

don't know what his intentions are. I mean, any other made man, any other boss would be seeking retribution for what I did. I'm not sure why he should be any different. But it's not just me he'll be hurting, and I'll be damned if I let anything happen to this baby.

"Take that look off your face. You and I both know I'm not here to hurt you. It seems I'm incapable of it," he says, adding something that sounds very much like a Russian expletive.

"Then why *are* you here?" I ask him.

"Did you get my gift?" he says instead of answering.

The blue dress. It had to be from him. How long has he been watching me?

"What gift?"

Mikhail's lips tip up at one side, and that cocky smile does something to me that it really shouldn't be doing. "You got it," he tells me. He's not asking. "How are you? How's the baby?"

He can't seriously be asking how I am right now. I shake my head. "I can't do this, Mikhail. We can't do this. It's..."

"It's happening, whether you want it to or not. You're pregnant with my child. I'm not going anywhere. Get used to it." He nods before adding, "Do you need anything?"

"For you to be dead and buried in some unmarked grave in the middle of nowhere," I'm quick to reply.

"I'll take that as a *no* then."

I smile. Even though everything inside me is telling me to get away from this man, there is one thing I know he can give me that I desperately want. It's just not something I can ask for, especially not from him and while I'm so... pregnant.

Mikhail stares into my eyes, his gaze flickering over my face before something settles on his. "I got you. You don't even have to say it."

"What?" My eyebrows scrunch in confusion.

He doesn't answer. Instead, he pushes my back against the wall and drops to his knees in front of me. I look down. *Oh no, I can't let him do this.* I can't be doing this. But as he lifts the hem of my dress and his face nears my bare pussy, all logic and any chance of thinking clearly go out the window. Mikhail's lips brush across my belly. He says something in Russian and then his mouth moves down. He grabs my left leg and rests it on his shoulder as his tongue slides through my wet folds.

My head falls backwards and my hands reach out to grasp on to his shoulders as I attempt to keep myself upright. It's been so long since I've been touched by anyone other than myself that I'm ready to combust after just a few strokes. Mikhail's mouth latches on to my clit and he sucks before twirling his tongue around the hardened bud.

"Oh shit," I hiss out.

"Fuck! So fucking good," he says, removing his mouth from me.

My hands take hold of the back of his head, pushing his face against my pussy without shame. "Don't stop," I tell him. And he doesn't. He doesn't stop until my legs are like Jell-O and the only thing holding my body upright is him.

Then he smooths my dress back over my thighs and stands. "Why aren't you wearing panties?" he asks me.

"Because I'm a grown-ass woman and can do whatever the hell I want," I reply.

"Not complaining, kotyonok. It just gives me easier access to your pussy." His hands are still holding me, supporting my weight. "You okay?"

"I've had better," I lie.

"No, you haven't," he says with a confidence that should annoy me, except it doesn't. Instead, it makes me want to drop down to my knees and return the favor.

"Why are you here? Why now?" I ask. With the orgasmic afterglow fading away, the reality of the situation is hitting home.

"I'm here because you are. This, you and me. We're having a child together. It makes sense to be where you are."

I laugh. "You know, I never told you this baby was yours, Mikhail. Most guys... they'd take that as their get-out-of-jail-free card and run."

"I'm not most guys, Isabella. I'm not running. And you don't need to tell me. I know she's mine."

"How do you know it's a girl?" I ask, although I really shouldn't be shocked.

"You could run to the other side of the world, and I'd still find you. Nothing and no one is going to come between us."

"Oh my god! Mikhail, there is no *us*. There's you. A Petrov. And there's me. A Valentino. Have you forgotten what happens when you get mixed up with the enemy? Because I haven't."

"You have my word that nothing is going to happen to you or our child,

Isabella. I won't allow it."

"You can't stop your deranged family from coming after me, or this little girl. Don't kid yourself, Mikhail. This is just going to be history repeating itself if you make this known."

"I'm the Pakhan, Isabella. *That deranged family* does whatever the fuck I tell them to do," he says. Taking a breath, he sighs. "I don't want you worrying about any of that. It's not good for you to be stressed."

"Maybe you should have stayed dead then," I tell him.

"Where would be the fun in that? Look, I have to return to New York for the week. I want you to come with me."

"Even if I wanted to, which I don't, I can't fly. It's not safe for the baby."

"Okay," he says.

"Okay?"

"Stay. I'll be back by the end of the week."

"Why are you leaving in the first place?" I ask, knowing full well he's either not going to tell me, or give me some bullshit these types of men are known to dish out to women.

"Some of my guys are getting antsy about my absence. They need to set eyes on me. They need reminding..."

My jaw drops. I was not expecting that at all. I mean, it's not like he just gave me the secrets to the inner workings of his organization, but he did say there's tension amongst the troops. Or at least that's what I'm taking from it.

"Don't worry, kotyonok. If you can't kill me, I doubt anyone else can." He smiles, and my lips curl in response.

"You haven't met my mama and papa." I laugh. "Also, I'm not the slightest bit worried. If your own men kill you, it'll save me the trouble of having to do it myself. Again."



As I sit here, looking at the men lined up before me, the only thing I can focus on is how much I'd rather be in Italy melting under their fucking summer sun and eating an endless amount of flavorless pizza. Instead, I'm home, being forced to make a statement. Put an end to the restlessness within the family that has reared its ugly head since I've been gone.

I glance from one man to the next, all of them trying not to show the fear I can smell in the air. They know they've fucked up. All ten of them have been talking shit about my leadership.

"You have nothing to say for yourselves?" I ask in Russian. "Funny, seeing as you all had a lot to say over the last month." Walking a straight path

in front of them, I stand in the middle of the line, my arms stretched wide at my sides. “Well, I’m here now. Like you wanted, so speak,” I bark out.

Ivan coughs, disguising a laugh from where he’s positioned at their backs. That crazy fucker lives for the bloodshed this lifestyle has to offer. Me? I do it as a necessity, to stay alive. Nothing more, nothing less.

None of the men say anything. Not a single word. “Are you not even going to attempt to defend yourselves?” I ask.

“Boss, what’s the point? We’re dead anyway.”

“The point? What’s the point of explaining why you thought it’d be wise to try to work up an army of my own men to go against me? Huh, guess you’re right. There isn’t a fucking point. And you are all dead.” I draw a pistol from behind my back.

It’s not enough that I have to deal with the constant fighting between us and the IRA. Now I have my own kind fighting against me too. Fuck that and fuck them. I have so much more to live for now, so much more to protect than just myself.

Aiming my gun at the only one to speak up, I pull the trigger. One clean shot to the middle of his head. Blood and brain matter splatter everywhere before his body slumps to the ground.

“Anyone else got anything to say?” I ask.

The remaining nine shake their heads. I crane my neck, eyeing the one in the middle for a second, then I take aim at the closest guy’s knee and pull the trigger. He falls to the ground, holding his blown-out kneecap and screaming in agony. Moving on to the next guy, I aim at both his feet, sending a bullet through the center of each. The third fucker gets a round to the shoulder. The one after that earns himself a shot to the stomach. I don’t stop until they’re all squirming in pain on the ground.

“Still got nothing to say?” I ask.

“Ssss-sorry, boss,” the guy with the blown-out knee says. I aim and take out his good leg.

“I sure hope you weren’t holding out for mercy because it seems I’m fresh out of that shit,” I tell him.

I continue firing holes into them for hours, until they bleed out and I watch every last one of them take their final breaths.

“Torch the fucking place,” I tell Ivan, tossing him my empty pistol before walking towards the exit. I stop at the two men standing guard at the door and step out of the plastic coveralls that protected my suit from all the residual

blood splatter. “Make sure word gets out about what happened here today,” I tell them. I don’t wait to hear their response. I don’t need to. I know they’ll start talking the moment I’m out of earshot.

I climb into the car. The drive back to my house goes fast, thoughts of Isabella and that baby girl of ours filling my mind. So much so that it’s not until I pull into the driveway that I realize two Feds are standing in front of my gate.

“What the actual fuck?” I curse under my breath. I make a call to my lawyer before I step out of the car. He knows he better get his ass here and quick.

The door of my car is ripped open by an overeager detective. “Mr. Petrov, we’ve been looking for you. Step out of the vehicle. Hands in the air.”

“It seems you found me. What can I do for you?” I grin while ignoring his request.

“We want to ask you a few questions. Mind coming in with us?”

“Am I under arrest?” I ask, noticing I haven’t been shoved to the ground and cuffed.

“No, we just have some questions.”

“Too bad, because I don’t have any answers for you. Now get the fuck off my property.”

“Isabella Valentino. Know her?” one of them asks, stopping the car door as I attempt to slam it shut again.

I pause. Which is the worst thing I could have done because now they fucking know they’ve got me. “What about her? Anyone who’s picked up a celebrity rag knows who she is,” I tell them.

“You don’t strike me as the kind of guy who reads gossip,” he replies.

“I like to keep up on my current events. It’s not a crime.” I smile.

“Right. So, do you happen to know the *current* whereabouts of Miss Valentino?”

“Why the fuck do you think I’d know where a Valentino is? Try her house, her family’s.”

The bastard pulls out a photo of me and Isabella in the alley outside of the fucking Irish strip club. “This suggests you know her better than I think her family would approve,” the smart-ass detective says with something that sounds a lot like glee in his voice.

“That photo suggests shit,” I tell him. “Take your questions to her family, show them whatever the fuck you have in that folder, and see how much they

tell you.”

The Valentinos are smart and fucking loyal. There is no way that family is giving up the whereabouts of their little princess.

“Stay in town. We might have some more questions,” the quieter of the two tells me before tugging his partner towards their car.

“Don’t bother. My answers ain’t fucking changing.” I slam my door shut and press the button for the gate to open.

As soon as I get into my office, I pull out a new burner phone from my drawer and put a call through to Viktor, the guy I’ve left in Italy surveilling Isabella. He doesn’t know why he’s watching her, just that he is and that nothing is to happen to her.

“Boss, what’s up?”

“Where is she?” I ask.

“In her house, hasn’t left all day.”

“I need you to pick up a burner and have it delivered to her within the next thirty minutes. And be sure to send me the number as soon as you get it,” I tell him.

“Sure thing, boss. I’m on it.”

“Let me know when it’s done.” I disconnect the call. I need to find out why the fuck the Feds are looking for Isabella. Next, I dial Samuel, one of the guys who does intel for me. He’s not part of the organization, but he’s the best at what he does and he’s quick.

“Mikhail, it’s been a minute,” he answers on the first ring.

“I need you to get a file from the FBI for me. Can you do it?”

“You want me to hack into the Federal Bureau of Investigation?”

“I didn’t fucking stutter. Can you do it or not?” I ask.

“Oh, I’m already in. What’s the name?”

“Isabella Valentino.” I’m greeted by silence. The clicking of the keyboard stops.

“As in, *the* Valentinos?” Samuel asks.

“Yes. Find the file, Samuel.”

“It’s your bank account. This one’s gonna cost you big time,” he huffs.

“I don’t care what it fucking costs. Get that file to me ASAP.”

“Okay. But... why do you want it? Is this some Petrov/Valentino war thing that’s about to break out? ’Cause if it is, give a guy a heads-up so I can skip town and avoid the bloodbath.”

I disconnect the call without bothering to respond to his nonsense. Two

minutes later, my email dings with the requested file. “What the fuck have they got on you, kotyonok?” I ask to the empty office while clicking open the attachment.



I've been looking over my shoulder all week, expecting Mikhail to jump out of the shadows at any minute. It's starting to drive me crazy, not to mention piss me off, because I don't jump at things in the shadows—I'm usually the one standing in them.

I called my mom two days ago. I wanted to tell her that I saw him. That he's not dead. I know that it's killing her, keeping the identity of this baby's father a secret for me. She doesn't hide things from Papa, and this is the first time I've ever had to ask her to do it. It's selfish. I know it is. But I honestly thought it was the best thing if people didn't know. I still do. It's just going to be a lot harder now that Mikhail isn't dead. No, he and his magical damn

tongue are very much alive.

My thighs squeeze together. The memory of what he did in that bathroom to me is enough to almost have me combusting with need. I'm honestly confused as hell by my feelings towards the man. When I realized I wasn't hallucinating and he was really standing in front of me, I was instantly overcome with relief. I didn't kill him...

Then, the next minute, I felt nothing but fear for what his being alive would mean for my child. And, of course, I wanted to kill him. Again. I'm not even going to mention how I felt when he dropped to his knees, when he placed the softest kiss on the bump of my belly before giving me a mind-blowing orgasm. Nope, I'm not thinking about that.

“Un soldo per i tuoi pensieri, mia cara.” *A penny for your thoughts, my dear.*

I turn to see my mom walking into the room. “Mama, what are you doing here?” As much as I try to jump up to hug her, it takes me a lot longer to actually pull myself out of the recliner. This pregnancy thing certainly isn't for the weak. It's hard work.

“You needed me, so I came. Now, come sit down. I think we have about four hours before your father turns up.” She laughs.

“Does he know you're here?” I ask her.

“He does now. I called him when I landed.” She smiles.

“You didn't tell him you were leaving? He's going to be pissed.”

“He'll get over it, trust me. Now, what's going on with you?” Mom reaches up and strokes her fingers through my hair. It's a soothing motion she's done since I was little.

I bite my bottom lip. Trying like hell not to let the tears fall. I'm blaming pregnancy and the hormones that come with it. I'm not usually a crier. “I... I didn't kill him,” I whisper.

“What? What are you talking about?” Mom asks.

“Mikhail, he's alive. I saw him. He was here.”

Mom's eyes flick around the room. “Here, in this house?”

I shake my head. “No, last week. He followed me into the bathroom at a restaurant.”

“Did he hurt you? Threaten you?” Mom stands like she's getting ready to go to war.

“No. He didn't,” I'm quick to assure her.

She sits back down and stares at me. “What'd he say? What does he

want?”

“I don’t know what he wants. Not really. But I think he wants... to be a father.”

“He said that?”

“He says it’s our baby and he wants her.”

“And what do *you* want?” she asks.

I know the meaning behind her words. If I tell her I want him to disappear and have nothing to do with this baby or me, she’ll make it happen. If I tell her that I want him to be the father to our child, she’ll make sure that everyone else in the family either gets on board or at least pretends to be.

“That’s the million-dollar question, Ma. I don’t know what I want,” I admit.

“Yes, you do.” She places a hand on my heart. “In here, you know what you truly want. When you thought he was gone for good, you were sad. I’ve never seen you like that. And now he’s back, so what is it that you want, Isabella?”

Guess she’s going with the no-bullshit, tough-love parenting thing here. “Remember before we met Papa, how you mentioned you were going to take me away? We were going to find an island and live without any of this.” I gesture around the room.

“I remember.”

“I want that island right now,” I say.

Mom gets a distant look in her eyes. “Do you think you would have been better off if I had followed through with those plans? Left everything behind?” she asks me.

“No, I don’t. That’s not what I mean. I had a great life, Mama. You and Papa were meant to find each other. I would never want you to not have that.”

“I would give up everything for you, Izzy. Even now. I know you’re an adult, perfectly capable of looking after yourself and all that. But if you want me to buy an island and run away with you, I will.”

I smile. “I know you would. That’s not what I want. I’m just scared.”

Mom wraps her arms around my shoulders and pulls me into her chest. “I know, baby. I know. It’s going to be okay. Whatever you decide to do, it will work itself out.”

MOM WAS RIGHT. Four hours after she arrived, my father turned up at the estate looking for her. I left them in the house and decided to sit out in the garden to soak up the sun.

“Izzy, you got a weird delivery,” Bianca says, holding up a pink box.

My brows draw down. “Who’s it from?” I ask as I reach out a hand.

“I would never open a package meant for you.” She gasps, placing a palm over her heart.

I squint my eyes at her. “You totally opened it, bitch.”

“Okay, but only to make sure it wasn’t like a bomb or something. Really, I was taking one for the team by checking it out.” She nods her head like she’s agreeing with her own statement.

“Riiiiight.” I pull the lid off the box and glare at the contents. “It’s a phone.”

“I know. That’s why I said it’s weird. There’s no note. I checked,” she tells me.

“Of course you did.” I laugh.

“Sooo, who’s sending you a phone? Or is this one of those *don’t ask questions* kind of times?”

“I have no idea,” I lie. I have a suspicion this is from Mikhail. How he manages to get things to me at my grandfather’s estate, I have no idea.

“Okay, well, I’m going to go get a drink. Want anything?” Bianca asks.

“I’m good. Thanks,” I tell her. A minute after she leaves, the phone in my hand rings. I debate whether or not to answer it, but curiosity gets the better of me. “Hello?”

“Isabella, how are you?” His velvety voice washes over me.

“Why are you calling me?” I ask him. “And why are you sending me a phone?”

“I had a visit today, from a couple of Feds...”

“Is this the part where you tell me you’re going into witness protection? I’d say good luck but you’ll be dead within the week—you and I both know that.” I grin into the phone.

“I am many things, kotyonok, but a rat is not one of them. They had some questions though. About you.”

“Me? What about?”

“I’m going to send you the files they have on you. I want you to give them to your cousins, Matteo and Olivia.”

“Wait, what do they have on me?” I ask him.

“You need to stay where you are. Do not return to the States. Just give the files to your lawyers and let them work their fucking magic.”

“How’d you get these so-called files?” I raise an eyebrow in question, even though he can’t see me—at least I don’t think he can. My eyes flick from side to side of their own accord.

“I have friends.”

“That’s hard to believe,” I fire back.

“Okay, I pay people to get me what I want.”

“That’s more like it.”

“Isabella, they have pictures. Of us, in the alley outside the strip club,” he says. “They tried to use them to get me to talk, threatening to show your family.”

“What did you say?”

“I told them to show whomever the fuck they want. That I had nothing to say to them.”

“Okay.”

“Okay?” he parrots.

“I mean, it’s not but I’ll fix it. Thanks for the heads-up.”

“Kotyonok, if your family can’t fix this for you, I will. I’m not letting anyone take you away from me,” he says.

“Matteo and Livvy are the best defense attorneys in the country. I’ll be fine,” I tell him.

“I know you will. I’ll be back beside you as soon as I can. Do you need anything?”

“I’m a mafia princess. What could I possibly need, Mikhail?”

“You’re wrong. You’re no princess. You’re a fucking koroleva,” he says before cutting the call.

I open Google and type in the Russian word.

Queen. Maybe I misheard him, or spelled it wrong?



I haven't heard from Isabella since she confirmed she had the file I sent her. I've considered calling her a million times. I need to know that she's okay, that she's not freaked out by what was in that file. I know I told her to pass the information on to her family, to help her make that shit disappear. What I didn't tell her was that I'm already working on getting rid of whatever evidence and witnesses the cops have.

I'm not sure what the fuck those idiot Feds thought they were doing by showing their cards, probably waiting for me to involve myself. Whatever the fuck they're playing at, I plan to win.

My phone buzzes on the table. I glance down at the name flashing on the

screen, swipe up the phone, and answer it. I've had my guy looking for the identity of the witness. "Samuel, what you got?" I ask him.

"Nothing yet. It's not as easy as it should be. Whoever this guy is, they're keeping the name locked up tight," he says.

"Then why the fuck are you calling me?" I yell down the line, my hand white-knuckling the device.

"Because I knew you'd be waiting to hear from me. I haven't given up. I just need to dig deeper. There will be a lead somewhere."

"Then do us both a favor and fucking find it." I disconnect the call and throw the phone across the room. It smashes into the wall before falling to the floor. "Fuck!" I yell out, running my hands through the ends of my hair.

I stand, walk over to the wet bar, and pick up a bottle of Grey Goose. Uncapping the lid, I pour the liquid down my throat, closing my eyes as I focus on the burn in my chest. I will not let the mother of my child be taken away. By anyone. If Samuel can't find the fucking rat bastard who's testifying against her, then I'll have to find someone else who can.

"Mikhail, it's eight in the fucking morning," Ivan says, slamming the door to my office closed as he steps over the threshold.

"Your point?" I ask with a raised brow while bringing the bottle to my lips again.

"My point is it's fucking eight in the morning, and you don't have time to drown your sorrows in the bottom of that bottle." He snatches the Grey Goose out of my hand.

I could get it back but it's easier to just pick up another one from the shelf and uncup it. "I'll drink whenever the fuck I feel like it," I tell him, taking a chug to prove my point.

"Is she really worth getting yourself this worked up, Mikhail? You don't even know that baby is yours. It could be anyone's," he says.

The bottle drops from my hand, landing on the floor right before my right fist connects with Ivan's face. "Say another word against her. I fucking dare you," I tell him.

Ivan glares at me as he lifts a hand to rub at his jaw. "This is what we're doing?"

"She is mine. That baby is mine."

"She tried to fucking kill you, Mikhail. She left you bleeding out in your own bed. Walked right out the door and didn't look back."

"She had good reason."

“Are you even listening to yourself right now? If anyone else did that, you’d already have their heads on a stick.”

“She’s different. I don’t expect you to get it. I do, however, expect you to accept that she’s a part of this. A part of me,” I tell him.

“You don’t even know her. This woman is going to be what puts you in an early grave.”

“You’re wrong, and I can’t wait to see you eat your words.”

“Whatever. Your jet’s ready,” he says before walking out of the room and slamming the door behind him.

I’M SITTING in the jet, ready to take off, when my phone rings—the name *Isabella* flashing on the screen.

“Isabella, is everything okay?” I ask her.

“Did you read the file?”

“I did.”

“So you know then?” She’s referring to her little secret—the one she was hoping to keep from the rest of the world.

“I know,” I tell her.

“I can’t show this to my family, Mikhail. They’re going to go nuts. My Papa, he’s not going to cope well...”

“I’ll fix it. I’m working on finding the witness and then making him disappear.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Because you’re mine, Isabella. I’m not letting anyone take you away, especially not the fucking pigs.” I hear her deep inhale.

“Where are you?” she asks.

“About to leave the city. I have to stop over in Moscow, and then I’ll make my way back to Tuscany.”

“My parents are here,” she says.

“Okay.”

“You know, as much as I want to kill you, my father is going to want it ten times more.”

“I don’t doubt it. I’ll see you soon, kotyonok. Try to relax.”

“I’m growing a tiny human inside me. I have a case built on me with

what looks like solid fucking evidence. How exactly do you expect me to relax?” she growls into the phone.

“Think of the mind-numbing orgasm I’m going to give you as soon as I see you again,” I tell her. The call disconnects. She hung up. A smile spreads across my face. She didn’t argue, didn’t deny that she was mine. She also didn’t tell me not to come back. I’m taking that as a win.

Twelve hours later, the plane touches down in Moscow. And it isn’t long before I climb into the back of the waiting car. “Boss, good to see you again,” the kid in the driver’s seat says.

“I need you to get us there as fast as you can,” I tell him.

“Sure thing, boss,” he says before slamming his foot down on the pedal. By the time he pulls up to the Petrov estate, I don’t know if I should shoot him or give him a pay raise. He zoomed in and out of the traffic like he was being chased down by the cops. I did tell him we needed to get here quickly, and he delivered. But, fuck, I think I can still feel my heart in my throat.

“Where’d you learn to drive like that?” I ask him.

“Eh, used to steal cars.” He shrugs.

“What’s your name?”

“Lex,” he tells me.

“Lex, ever been to Italy?”

“Never left the motherland,” he says.

“Go pack a bag. I’m taking you with me. I might need a good getaway driver.” I clap a hand on his shoulder before exiting the car.

I have no real reason to be in Moscow, but I know I’m being watched, and I wanted those fucking Feds to think I’m spending my time here. I can’t have them knowing where I’m actually headed.



This cannot be happening right now. I cannot let my family find out about this. What would they think of me?

What if they already know? The Feds could have approached any one of my family members and asked about my whereabouts. Not that any of them would ever say a word. But I know them. If they had an inkling that the Feds were building a case against me, they'd be wanting to know why and what evidence they had.

I could ask Livvy. She's newly graduated and works with Matteo, but she's already made quite the name for herself as a criminal defense attorney. And I'd have to tell her what I've been doing—considering the trauma she

went through when she and Romeo first met, I don't know how she'd handle it.

Livvy was raped, by Russians. It was unrelated to the war between our families and was the result of some jealous-ass bitch who had a thing for my cousin and wanted his girlfriend out of the way. But that doesn't make it any less traumatic.

I'm screwed. Without asking my family for help, I don't know how I'll get myself out of this mess. I know Mikhail said he was working on it, but can I really trust the man I attempted to kill to save me?

The answer to that would be a resounding no.

I don't trust him. I trust that he's returning like he says he is, and I trust that he can and will give me that mind-numbing orgasm he mentioned. But that's about all I trust. I did try to kill him, and he is a Petrov.

I close the lid to my laptop and my shoulders drop with the action. There really is only one way out of this, and it's the one thing I didn't want to have to do. I'm going to have to tell my father what I've been doing. Papa and Uncle T will fix this. They won't like it, the danger I've been purposely putting myself into, but they will fix it. And they'll do everything in their power to keep me out of the prison system.

Although, there is the whole running away to a deserted island thing too. I wonder if I can wait it out for the next couple of months, until Mabilia is born, and then take her away. Maybe pay a visit to Zia Lola and never leave that island of hers. I remember staying there with my aunt when Papa first bought the property. I thought we'd live there forever, but eventually, we returned to New York and Italy. Not my Zia Lola, though. She travels everywhere, but that island is her home. I could go there and never leave. We'd be safe, Mabilia and me.

I shake that idea from my head. No matter how far I run, it won't change the fact that everyone is going to find out what I've been doing. Maybe the damage will be less if I tell them myself? Who knows? And maybe if I confess to Mama first, she can calm down the men in the family. The first thing Papa is going to want to do when he finds out is lock me away in a tower somewhere. A place no one can touch me. When I was eight, he promised he'd always chase away the monsters, and he has. But what happens when he finds out that I'm luring them in to play with them first?

My heart is racing and I feel a light sweat coating my body. Just the thought of coming clean to my family is making me ill. I know what I have to

do but it doesn't mean I want to...

If ever I could use a stiff drink, it'd be now. I rub a hand over my swollen belly. "I will do this. If not for me, for you," I whisper to Mabilia. Then I stand and walk through the house, looking for my parents before I chicken out.

"Iz, we need to talk. Now."

I turn my head towards the sound of my not-so-happy cousin. "Matteo? When did you get here?" I ask him.

"About five minutes ago. I've been looking for you. Come on." He gestures to the back patio.

"Why? What's going on?" I ask him, my heart racing a little faster.

"Let's walk," he says, opening the sliding door.

I follow him outside, along the path that leads to the lake at the back of the property. He's silent as we walk side by side—well, he walks. I mostly waddle at this point.

"I don't even know where to start, Izzy. What the fuck were you thinking?" he huffs out.

"You'll have to be more specific, so I know what you're talking about."

"I had a case file sent to me anonymously. The Feds are looking for you, and honestly, the case they've built is pretty fucking ironclad," he grits out between clenched teeth.

I stop dead in my tracks. "You saw it?" I whisper.

"Yeah, I saw." He runs a hand through his hair. "What bothers me more is the fact that you didn't come to me, Iz. Why the fuck am I finding this out from someone else and not you?"

"I only just found out myself," I tell him.

"Why?"

I know what he's asking without saying the words. *Why was I doing what I did?* He wouldn't understand. No one would. Well, maybe Zia Lola, but she's the only one. She's also the last person I want to find out about this. It would destroy her.

"I... I don't know," I whisper.

"Bullshit. You know," Matteo says.

"What am I going to do?" I lower myself onto a log by the bank of the lake.

Matteo plops down next to me. "I'll make this case go away, Iz, but you have to stop. You know that, right? You're about to be someone's mother.

You cannot put yourself at risk like that.”

“I know but...” I keep myself from saying anything more.

“There are no *buts*, Iz. It’s reckless,” Matteo says. “And we already have enough of that in this family.”

“Does everyone else know?” I ask him.

“No, it’s not my place to tell them. It’s yours.”

“Thank you...”

“There’s one more thing,” he says, side-eyeing me. “Mikhail Petrov? Really?”

I cover my face with my hands. I can’t look at him. I was hoping those pictures weren’t in the file by the time my family got it. Did Mikhail send it? If not him, then who?

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I reply.

“Too fucking bad. We’re talking about it. I heard through the grapevine that you left him for dead—that true?”

I stare at him. I have no idea where my cousin gets all his intel from but he always seems to know everything. “I did.”

“Did he do this to you? Did he...” He doesn’t finish his sentence, but his eyes say it all.

“No, Matteo, it was consensual—very consensual,” I assure him. All I need right now is someone in my family making an assumption and going off on some rampage.

“So... what you’re saying is that you willingly got into bed with the enemy. Damn, Iz, I expected this from Luca or Romeo. But you?” He laughs. “Does he know?” he asks, nodding his head at my stomach.

“He does,” I admit. For some reason, talking about Mikhail and the paternity of Mabilia is somewhat freeing. I feel like a huge weight has been lifted off my shoulders.

“And what are his intentions?”

“Jesus, Matteo, we aren’t living in a Jane Austen novel. His intentions are for us to live out some fairy tale that ends with a happily ever after. And obviously, that’s not happening.”

“Why not? You deserve your fairy tale too, Iz.”

“Fairy tales don’t involve falling in love with the enemy,” I tell him.

“Are you? In love with him?” Matteo asks.

“I don’t know.” I sigh.

“I call bullshit on that too.” His eyes narrow in on me before he adds, “At

least let me be there when you tell Zio Neo who knocked up his little princess. I need to see that shit.”

“I’m glad my mess of a life is so entertaining for you,” I groan.

“It’s not a mess. Well, not one we can’t fix anyway. Come on, let’s go back inside. It’s hot as balls out here.” Matteo tugs me to my feet.

Right before we enter the house, I grab his arm and pull him into a hug. “Thank you,” I whisper.

“Oh fuck, don’t cry on me, Izzy. Zio Neo will hit me, and he’s got a mean right hook,” Matteo grunts while holding me a little tighter.



Lex and I touch down at a private airport in Florence. The last thing I need is for word to get out that I'm in the country. I'm here to focus on Isabella and convincing her to come home with me. I don't need to be trying to stay alive at the same time. Because if I'm honest, any number of the families here would love to take me out. Doing it in home territory would just add to their satisfaction.

I've considered bringing up the topic of marriage to Isabella. Our union could be the thing that puts a Band-Aid over this long-term feud between families. I think I'd have more luck doubling my fortune in Vegas than getting that girl to marry me. If it were anyone else, I'd strong-arm them into

going along with whatever I wanted. Isabella, though, honestly, she scares me a little. She did try to kill me once. Attempting to force that woman into anything will more than likely result in my blood on her hands. Again.

“Why are we in Italy, boss?” Lex asks.

I made him get into the passenger seat. I know where I’m going and he needs to spend a few weeks learning these roads before I let his crazy ass drive me around. “It’s a need-to-know basis, and you don’t need to know. Your focus should be on driving around, getting used to the streets here, and staying out of sight. Anyone unfriendly sees you, you don’t know me. Got it?”

“Got it.” He nods his head before adding, “My mother always said there were two things in life that would cause a man to do things outside of his usual repertoire. Money or a pretty girl.”

“Your mother sounds like a smart woman.”

“She was,” he says.

I don’t make any further attempts at conversation as I weave in and out of the shitty narrow streets. When we get to the apartment building, I leave the car running and tell Lex to take it for a spin. Walking up the stairs, I pull out my phone and call Viktor. He answers on the third ring.

“Boss, you arrive?” he asks.

“Yep, where is she?”

“She hasn’t left her house. One of her cousins arrived. Other than that, no movement,” he tells me.

“Which cousin?” I ask.

“Middle one. Matteo.”

“Thanks.” I hang up. Maybe Isabella decided to tell her family after all, or is it a coincidence that Matteo dropped in? They do visit frequently.

I want to call her, but I’d prefer to have better news to offer first. I send Samuel a message, asking if he’s got anything else for me yet, and then send a text to Ivan, telling him to find an apartment for Lex. Throwing my phone on the bed, I strip out of my clothes and walk into the bathroom. It’s so fucking hot outside I don’t even turn the warm water on in the shower. I step under the cold stream and let it cool my overheated skin.

My mind whirls with how I’m going to get this case to disappear. Just as I turn the shower off, there’s a series of loud bangs coming from the front door. Wrapping a towel around my waist, I open the bathroom cabinet, thankful there’s still a fully loaded pistol inside. Then I creep towards the

door and peek through the peephole, but there's no one there.

"You took too long, so I let myself in."

I jump, turning at the sound of Isabella's voice. How the fuck she's behind me, I have no fucking idea. But it's so impressive I can't help but smile.

"Why are you smiling? I could have pulled the trigger without you even knowing I was here," she says, scolding me.

"If you were going to shoot me, kotyonok, you would have done it already," I tell her. "You look good. Are you okay?"

"Did you send that file to my cousin?" she asks, placing her hands on her hips.

"No."

"Then how did he get it?"

"No idea, but it wasn't me. What'd he say?" I ask her.

"Nothing, just that I need to tell my parents and let them work together to sort it out."

"I have people looking for the rat. I'll find them."

"Maybe I'll find them first. You seem off your game, Mikhail." She smirks, running her eyes up and down my body.

"Off my game? I don't think so." I take hold of her hand and pull her towards the bedroom.

"What are you doing?" she asks.

"Taking you to bed. I promised you a mind-numbing orgasm. I don't break my promises, kotyonok." I look over my shoulder at her. "Besides, it's been way too fucking long since I've felt your pussy choke my cock."

"No. I can't," she says, pulling her hand out of mine.

"Why not?" I ask her. There haven't been any updates to her medical records. As far as I know, she and the baby are doing great.

"Ah, have you not noticed?" She waves a hand in front of her stomach. "I'm freaking huge, Mikhail. I can't have sex."

"Is there a medical reason behind your logic?"

"Yeah, I'm pregnant."

"That's not a reason not to have sex. Come on." I take hold of her hand again.

"You don't get it. I'm not the same. I'm huge. I can't just..."

"You are not huge. You're fucking beautiful, growing our child. It's gorgeous," I tell her. I guide Isabella over to the edge of the bed and lift her

dress over her head. She tries to hold it down. “Stop, I want to see you,” I say, tugging the fabric free from her body. Her breasts are bigger, her stomach stretched out in front of me. I drop to my knees. “I can’t wait to meet you, baby girl,” I whisper in Russian before placing a small kiss on her abdomen. Rising back to my full height, I spin Isabella around and lean her over so her hands are resting on top of the mattress. I slide my fingers through her wet folds. “Fuck, you’re drenched.” I push two fingers inside her. Isabella lets out a moan as she pushes back against my hand. “That’s it, kotyonok. Fuck yourself on my fingers, or perhaps you’d prefer my cock?” I suggest, unwrapping the towel from around my waist and letting it drop to the ground.

Isabella looks over her shoulder at me. “Hurry up before I come to my senses, Mikhail.”

“Let’s not pretend you don’t want this as much as I do,” I say, lining up with her entrance. “Tell me, kotyonok, has there been anyone else since me?”

“You don’t own me. I can fuck whoever I want,” she says instead of answering the question.

I laugh—not a comical, *oh that’s funny* kind of laugh. More of an *I don’t fucking think so* kind of laugh. “Try me, Isabella. I’ll slit their fucking throats and fuck you on the ground next to the pools of their blood,” I tell her as I slowly push inside her.



Mikhail's cock stretches me in the best way, a slight pain followed by immense pleasure as he slides in and out. His movements are slow, so damn slow, like he's savoring every second of our connection.

His hands grip my hips, his fingertips digging in hard enough that I know they'll bruise. I push back against him, matching the rhythm of his movements. As much as I want to go crazy and fuck him like a nymph that hasn't seen a cock for months—because let's be honest here, that's exactly what I am—I let him continue his slow pace. I wouldn't have thought slow sex could feel this good. Each time he bottoms out inside me, I feel a new wave of heightened pleasure.

“Fuck, you feel good, kotyonok. I don’t want to ever stop,” he says.

“Then don’t,” I tell him. “Oh god. Shit! That. Do that again.”

Mikhail pivots his hips again, and every nerve ending in my body feels like it’s been lit up like a Christmas tree. “Come for me, kotyonok. Now,” he grinds out.

His body folds over mine, one of his hands travels around my waist, his thumb presses against my clit, and I explode. I don’t know what it is I scream out, but I know I’m screaming something as I come undone. Mikhail thrusts harder. Three, four, five times before he stills.

“Fuck me,” he hisses.

“Give me five minutes to catch my breath and I will,” I tell him.

He pulls out, and I’m not ready to face the feeling of loss that comes over me with the action. Maybe this is what people mean when they claim a woman has been *dick-matized*. Is that what this is?

The man knows how to use his God-given equipment—that’s for sure. But I’m not some teenager crushing on the first boy to show her any interest. I’m in my mid-thirties. I’m old enough to know better.

My whole life, I’ve avoided getting together with men like Mikhail. Made men. The ones associated with my family were all either too smart or too scared to even look in my direction. So it was easy to avoid them. Now, I feel like I’ve been missing out. The authority, the control, how Mikhail uses it on me. It’s intoxicating, and I can’t help but want more of it.

I crawl up onto the bed before lying on my side. I have no doubt that I look like a beached whale, but I’m too worn out to even care. I close my eyes and let myself enjoy the post-orgasmic bliss. That is until I feel the bed dip next to me and my eyes spring open. Mikhail’s face, his stupidly beautiful face with those icy blue eyes, is right in front of mine.

“What are you doing?” I ask him.

He blinks at me before a smirk graces his lips. “It appears I’m lying next to you, kotyonok.” His hand comes up and touches my hair.

I swipe at his arm. “Stop. We’re not doing this. As soon as I have the energy, I’m getting up, walking out that door, and going home,” I tell him. “*This*. It’s not happening.”

“It’s already happened, Isabella,” he says.

No one calls me that. *Isabella*. I get a lot of Izzy, or Bella, or Bel. But never Isabella, and every time Mikhail says it, I find myself liking the sound of my name rolling off his tongue. Or maybe I just like his voice.

“We’ve fucked, three times to be precise. This isn’t a thing.”

“We’re having a child together. It’s a thing.”

“Aren’t you worried that I’m going to try to kill you again?”

“I have no doubt that at some point, you will try. I’ll take my chances though. I’m not having my daughter grow up without a mother and father.”

“Mabilia,” I tell him.

“Huh?”

“That’s her name. Mabilia.”

“Mabilia. I like it,” he says, watching my hand move over the roundness of my stomach.

I groan and take hold of his wrist. “Here. Feel this.” I place his palm right over the spot where she’s kicking.

“Holy shit, that’s her?” he asks with wide eyes.

“She likes to kick,” I say.

“I think she’s going to be just as strong as her mama.”

“Well, we can only hope she’s not as stupid as her father. He seems to have a death wish,” I counter. Before I can move or react, Mikhail’s lips slam onto mine. His tongue pushing past the seam of my mouth.

He keeps his hand firmly on my stomach as he literally kisses the breath out of me. By the time he pulls back, I’m panting and ready to go another round, which is the exact opposite of what I should be doing.

“That’s the first time you’ve said it out loud,” he tells me.

“Said what?”

“That she’s mine. *Ours*.”

I roll my eyes at him. “It’s not. I just haven’t said it to you.”

“You’ve told people?”

“My mom knows and so does my best friend,” I say. “Oh, and now my cousin too—thanks to that file that was sent to him.”

Mikhail stands and walks out of the bedroom. He returns a few minutes later wearing a pair of slacks and an unbuttoned shirt. I guess it’s my cue to leave. I climb off the bed and look at my dress on the floor. Squatting, because that’s really the easiest way to reach it, I scoop up the fabric and push to my feet again.

“I want to take you out,” Mikhail says, and I freeze. “To eat,” he clarifies.

“Yeah, we can’t do that. People will see,” I remind him. “I can’t walk out the front door without everyone in this town knowing who I am.

“So, let them see.”

“You really do have a death wish.” I shake my head. “My papa will hear about it in less than two minutes.”

“I’m not afraid of your father, Isabella,” Mikhail says.

“You should be.”

“You’re worth the risk. Let me take you out.”

“I’m glad you think so, but if you’re going to die because of me, I’d prefer it be my doing and not my family’s,” I tell him with a sweet smile.

“But I will let you feed me. We can order in.”

“How’d you get here?”

“The Donatello estate is six hundred years old. It’s full of hidden passages and tunnels under the city.” I shrug.

Mikhail’s jaw ticks. He doesn’t like that answer. “You shouldn’t be sneaking out, and you shouldn’t be alone either.”

“I’m more than capable of taking care of myself.”

“I know that, but you’re pregnant, and not as agile as you’re used to being. Not to mention, how dangerous it would be for you to actually get into a fight.”

Everything he’s saying is true, and it all makes sense. But because it’s coming out of his mouth, I’m not going to acknowledge it. “Carbonara. I want pasta,” I tell him, changing the subject.



I open the door partway to get the bag of food from Lex. “Spasibo.” I thank him before shutting it in his face again.

“Anytime, boss,” he calls back in Russian.

“You brought men with you?” Isabella asks.

“A couple.” I shrug.

“Oh my God, this smells so good.” She snatches the bag from my hand and walks over to the little two-seater dining table. Leaning against the wall, I watch as she removes the takeaway dishes from the bag before helping herself to the cutlery drawer. When she places them on the table with a couple of plates, she looks up at me. “What?”

“Nothing, I... I like this,” I admit.

“Don’t get used to it. I’m just really hungry, and if you don’t get over here and eat, there won’t be anything left for you in a few minutes.”

“If you’re hungry, then eat it all. I don’t mind.” I nod before claiming the chair opposite her.

“Eat the food, Mikhail,” she says while piling my plate up with pasta.

We eat in comfortable silence. Something I didn’t really expect. I find myself trying to come up with ways to keep her here longer. I don’t want to let her go.

“I have a question and I want you to answer it honestly,” I say.

“When have I not been honest with you?” she asks.

I shrug, because it’s really fucking hard to trust everything she says. Even if I want to. After all, she did leave me for dead. “The night we met. Was it planned? Did you intend to distract me?”

“What? Why would I want to distract you?”

“My brother was killed that night. My intel suggests it was a Valentino who did it, so I’m asking you directly. Were you there to keep me from being with him?”

“I’m not a whore, Mikhail. You really think my family would send me out to fuck you so they could carry out a hit? Also, it wasn’t us. We didn’t kill your brother.”

“I never said you were a whore, Isabella,” I say.

“No, but you implied it, which is the same thing.”

“It’s not. And you haven’t answered the question.”

“I wasn’t there to distract you, Mikhail. I was there to forget who I was for one night. I was there to have fun. I wasn’t planning anything more than that.”

“Okay.” When all the food is gone, I push to my feet and set the plates in the sink. “I think you should stay the night,” I suggest.

“And I think you’ve lost your damned mind.” She laughs.

“It was lost a long time ago. Doesn’t change what I said.”

“You know I can’t.”

I don’t argue with her about it. It’s been a great afternoon and I don’t want to end it on an argument. Instead, I pick up my keys and wallet. “I’ll take you home then,” I say.

“You don’t have to do that.”

“Isabella, I’m not sending you out there by yourself. Let’s go.”

“Okay, but follow me. We can’t be seen together.”

“Lead the way.” I hold open the door to the apartment.

“Don’t stare at my ass,” she says, peering at me from over her shoulder as she walks past.

“That thing is a work of art. It’d be a shame not to appreciate it, kotyonok.” I close and lock the door behind me, then follow her down the stairs, with my eyes glued to her ass.

It takes ten minutes of navigating through backstreets, as Isabella keeps to the shadows, before we reach a door. “This is where I leave you.”

I laugh. We’re still a long way from her estate. “Sure,” I agree, despite having no intention of turning around.

Isabella pushes up on her tiptoes, and for the first time since I found her again, *she kisses me*. It’s quick, but I feel the touch of her lips right down to my soul. This woman, a woman I barely know, has me wrapped around her little finger and she doesn’t even realize it.

“Thank you for today,” she says.

I nod my head and wait. Isabella taps a pin into the keypad and disappears through the door. I catch it just before it closes. I wait a minute, then follow her. I can hear the click of her shoes on the concrete floor, keeping a few steps between myself and the sound. She’s out of her damn mind, eight months pregnant and walking through tunnels alone. It’s damp and it stinks down here, not to mention the cold. I want to catch up with her and give her my shirt, anything to keep her warm.

I shake my head. I’ve avoided relationships my whole life, because I didn’t want to end up like *this*. Following a woman around like a lost puppy while begging for scraps of her attention. And look at me now...

Even with this knowledge, I know I’ll follow Isabella anywhere. All over the damn world if I have to. I’m lost in my own head when the sounds of her footsteps stop. I pause and listen. It’s not completely dark—there are lights on the walls in intervals—but I can’t see her.

“Whatever you think is going to happen here, you’re wrong,” I hear her say.

I open my mouth, thinking she’s talking to me, when someone else replies, “Oh, I know exactly what’s going to happen here. You’re going to come with us.”

“And how do you plan on making me?”

“Using whatever force is necessary. Look at this, Isaac, the little

Donatello slut all by herself.” The bastard chuckles, the sound bouncing off the stone walls and burning my ears.

I’m already moving towards them. I retrieve the pistol from behind my waistband, my steps faltering when I hear a slap and a scream. *Her* scream. And my blood ices over. No fucking way did they just hit the mother of my child. I pick up my speed, quickly turn a corner, and watch as they come into view.

Two men, hovering over Isabella, who is curled up in a ball on the floor. Just as one of the fuckers lifts his foot, aiming to kick her in the stomach, I raise my arm and pull the trigger. The bullet lands right between his eyes. I shoot the second fucker in the shoulder. Then the knee. Before he even has a moment to process what’s happening. As much as I’d like to end him too. I don’t. I want to know why the fuck they’ve gone after Isabella.

I grab him by the scruff of his shirt. “Who are you working for?”

“Fuck you!” he spits at me.

I pull my head back and slam it forward, busting his nose and splattering blood across both our faces. “Who the fuck do you work for?” I ask again, and the sick fuck just smiles at me.

“Mikhail.” Izzy’s worried voice has me turning in her direction.

Her hand is covered in blood. “Something’s wrong,” she says, and I hear the terror in her words. My gaze falls to her legs, where a small pool of blood is building underneath her.

“Fuck.” I turn back, shoot the fucking asshole, and watch as he drops to the ground. Tucking my piece into my waistband, I bend down and scoop Isabella up into my arms. “It’s okay. It’s going to be okay,” I tell her.

“The baby...” It’s all she says. It’s all she has to say.

“I know.” I start walking, then jogging towards what I hope is her estate.

“Turn here.” Isabella gives me directions as we make our way through the tunnels. Five minutes later, we push through a door and I’m standing in the middle of an empty living room.

“Help!” I scream at the top of my lungs. “We need a fucking doctor. Now!” I yell out again.

“No, you have to go. They’re going to kill you, Mikhail. Just leave me here. You need to get out of here,” Isabella says.

“I’m not fucking leaving you,” I tell her. I still have her in my arms. My knees buckle and I fall to the ground, holding her against me. “Someone get a fucking doctor.” I can feel my heart beating out of my chest. I’ve never felt

this out of control in my entire life.

Seconds later, five men rush into the room, followed by a woman—Isabella’s mother. She drops to her knees in front of us. “What happened?” she asks me.

“She fell,” I tell her, my words getting stuck in my throat. I cannot lose her. I feel like I just got her. “Two men cornered her in the tunnel. They’re still there,” I tell Isabella’s father, who is currently pointing the hot end of his pistol at my head.

“Let her go,” he grunts at me.

“No. Get a fucking doctor,” I fire back.

“Papa, no. Please.” Isabella looks at her father, wincing as she tries to sit upright. She’s attempting to cover my body with her own.

“Don’t move,” I tell her.

“Neo, doctor now,” her mother yells.

“He’s on his way.” This comes from Matteo. He turns to the other three men and tells them something in Italian before they nod and disappear through the tunnel door.



“You need to push, Izzy,” the doctor tells me.

I shake my head. “It’s too soon. She’s not ready yet.” I still have one month of my pregnancy to go.

“She’s ready. Push,” he says again.

“No, I can’t.” I’m squeezing someone’s hand. I look to my right to see Mikhail. It’s his hand.

“You can do this, kotyonok. You have to do this for her, for our daughter,” he whispers in my ear.

“What if she’s too small?” I ask him.

“She’s going to be just as strong as her mama,” he assures me.

I scream as another bout of pain racks through my body.

“Do something to help her before I fucking break all your fingers off,” Mikhail threatens the doctor.

“It’s too late. She can’t have anything now,” the doctor says.

“Isabella, it’s okay. Think of Mabilia. She’s ready to meet you, kotyonok. You’ve done the work and now she’s ready,” Mikhail says.

I look to my left and see my mom. She nods. “It’s time, Izzy.” Her gaze keeps flicking from me to Mikhail. I know she doesn’t trust him. She does, however, want what I want and somehow she knew before I did that I want *him*.

“I’m scared,” I tell her.

“I know. It’s going to be okay.”

“Okay, Izzy, on the count of three, I need you to push,” the doctor instructs. “One, two, three. Push.”

I push, with every last bit of energy I have, and feel like I’m being torn apart from the inside out. After hours of agony, stress, and fear of the unknown, I hear it. I hear her cry.

“Congratulations, you have a beautiful baby girl,” the doctor says before holding up a tiny little bundle.

Everything is a blur as he hands my daughter to a nurse. “Where are you taking her? Stop. Mikhail, don’t let them take her.” I try to sit up. I want her. I have to get her.

“It’s okay. I’m going with her. Wherever she goes, I’ll go with her,” he says before pushing to his feet.

“Make sure no one gets her.” I squeeze his hand to further my point, then release my grip.

I don’t know what’s happening. The doctors and nurses are fussing around me. My eyes are locked on the corner of the room, where the nurse took my baby. Mikhail is hovering over the woman. Watching her every move.

“She’s perfectly healthy,” the nurse says, walking back over to me. She brushes the blanket aside and lays Mabilia on my chest.

My daughter has a head full of dark hair and skin a shade or two lighter than mine. She’s beautiful. Tears fall down my cheek. “Look at what we made,” I say to Mikhail.

“She’s perfect,” he tells me while running his fingers over her tiny forehead and cheek. He bends forward and kisses her before whispering

something in Russian.

“What did you say?” I ask him.

“I told her that she has you to thank for being so beautiful.” He smiles at me. “You did this, Isabella.” He wipes the tears from my cheek. The tenderness he’s able to show me, even after what I did to him, is something else.

I don’t deserve it and I’m terrified of getting too used to it because, honestly, I like it. Mikhail’s eyes are watery when I look up at him.

I turn to my mom. “Mama, can you get Papa?” I ask her. I need my father to see Mabilia. I need him to be here too. I need both of my parents.

“I’ll be right back. Congratulations, baby.” Mom kisses my cheek and then Mabilia’s forehead.

I wait for her to walk out of the room. Leaving Mikhail and me alone—well, apart from the team of nurses and doctors. “Can you believe we made this?” I ask him as I stare down at the most perfect little thing I’ve ever seen.

“She’s amazing,” he says.

“We can’t let them get to her, Mikhail.” I peer up at him.

“Who?” he asks with drawn-down brows.

“All of them, your family, my family’s enemies. They will try to get to her.”

“No one is going to touch our daughter, Isabella,” he says with a confidence I’m not sure I feel.

“You were right. I shouldn’t have been walking alone. I couldn’t protect her. I’ve already failed her,” I admit aloud for the first time.

“You didn’t fail her. We are both going to protect her. I swear I will happily give my life for hers.”

“You already did, remember? I’m...” I can’t say *sorry*, because it’s not true. If it came down to it, I would choose her over him every time. “I didn’t want to do it,” I say instead, because that *is* the truth.

“I know. It’s in the past, Isabella. It’s okay,” he says, then adds, “I think we should get married.”

I cough. “What?” Surely, I’ve misheard him.

“I’m serious. I want to get married,” he says again.

I blink up at him. When the door opens and my parents walk in, followed by Matteo and Bianca, I’m saved from having to answer. Mikhail looks over his shoulder, then turns back around and tugs the blanket up, covering my exposed breast.

“Bel, you okay?” Papa asks, approaching the side of the bed opposite Mikhail.

“I’m okay, Papa. Look at her, at Mabilia.”

Papa leans down, kissing my cheek. “I was so fucking scared,” he says. “Don’t do that to me again.”

“Don’t worry, Papa, I’m done having sex for as long as I live. There is no way I’m risking doing this a second time,” I tell him.

“*Never* is a long time, Izzy. Let’s not get carried away,” Bianca calls out.

“I never did like you,” Papa says to her.

“I know.” She beams at him.

“Everyone is on their way, Iz,” Matteo says. “Congratulations, by the way. She’s beautiful.” He looks down at Mabilia.

Mikhail’s jaw tightens. “I have to make a call. I’ll be right back,” he tells me before placing a kiss to Mabilia’s head, and then my forehead.

“Okay.” I search his eyes for some sign of what’s bothering him. It could just be the fact he’s in a room full of my family, and it’s finally sinking in that I’m a Valentino.

Then again, he addresses me like no one else is watching. Like there is a bubble around the three of us. Him, me, and Mabilia.

Papa doesn’t say anything. I know he wants to. I can see his fingers twitching as he watches Mikhail walk out of the room. “Really, Bel? Him? You could have told me,” Papa says as soon as the door closes.

“I’m sorry,” I tell him.

His eyes flick between all the other occupants in the room. Mama, Bianca, and Matteo. “The rest of you don’t look too shocked. You knew and didn’t fucking tell me?” he asks them.

“Best friend vault.” Bianca shrugs a shoulder and takes up the spot Mikhail just vacated.

“I *just* found out. Don’t shoot me.” Matteo holds his hands up in mock surrender.

“We’ll talk about this later. Now isn’t the time or place, Neo. Our daughter just had a baby, and whatever she chooses, whoever she chooses, it’s up to her. Not us,” Mama tells him.

“I don’t like him,” Papa says, crossing his arms like a properly scolded child.

“I do,” I say out loud for all of them to hear.

“We are not having a repeat of Lana and Alexei. You are not running off.

Whatever challenges come from this, we'll face them together," Papa says.

I want to agree with him, but if I'm honest with myself, I would love nothing more than to run off with Mabilia. I know it's not realistic though. I just have to make sure I can keep her safe. Between me and Mikhail, we can build an army around her so that no one can touch her. I don't plan to ever take my eyes off my little girl.



“I don’t care what you have to do, Ivan. Figure it out. They cannot find her here,” I yell down the phone. “Find out their flight path and change it.” I hang up.

A throat clears behind me. I turn to find Isabella’s cousin standing there, his hands in the pockets of his pants. I look from him to the door that leads to the room where Isabella and Mabilia are situated.

“If this is where you threaten my life and warn me off, save your breath. It won’t work,” I tell him.

He laughs. “You think I need to threaten you? Do you even know my cousin?” He shakes his head. “Who are you trying to keep away?”

“We both know the Feds are after her, so I’m curious as to why you’ve just put your entire family on a flight to Italy. You’re handing her over on a silver fucking platter,” I tell him.

“You think I haven’t put contingencies in place? That case isn’t going to stick,” he says.

“Until that witness is found and removed from the picture, it’ll stick. You and I both know that.”

“I’ll find them.”

“Who were the goons in the tunnel?” I ask, changing the subject.

“No idea.” He turns around and heads for the hallway.

I look down at myself. I’m covered in blood. I send Viktor a message, asking him to bring some clean clothes to the hospital. Viktor has been watching over Isabella for the last few months, whenever I couldn’t be. He’s one of the higher-ups in my organization and a long-time friend. I’ve known him almost as long as I’ve known Ivan. As much as I’d rather have the latter here watching my back, I need him running shit in my absence. I’m hoping the statement I made when I went back to the States last week is enough to settle the discord in the ranks until I can come up with a more permanent solution.

Right now, I need to focus on Isabella and Mabilia. When someone gives birth in my family, everyone waits a week before visiting. Allowing the new mother the rest she needs. I’d love to go in there and kick all the fucking Valentinos out of that room—somehow I don’t think that’d go over too well with Isabella if I tried. So I school my features before walking back inside, where I find Bianca in my spot. Instead of making a big deal about it, I stand at the end of the bed. Isabella looks up at me and smiles.

Her eyes look tired. It’s obvious she’s exhausted but she won’t say anything. This is very uncharted territory for both of us. That being said, every great discovery has started with someone deciding to live a little dangerously, right?

“Ah, I’m going to head back to the house and get your bag and whatever else you need, Izzy,” Bianca says, cutting into the awkward silence.

“Thank you,” Isabella replies.

Bianca pushes through the door, which leaves one nurse in the room along with Isabella’s parents. I move around the bed and reclaim my chair. The nurse says something in Italian and Isabella nods in response.

“What she say?” I ask her.

“She said it’s time to try to feed the baby.”

“Feed her? Oh... In front of everyone?” My eyes flick from Isabella to her parents.

“Ah, I’m going to get a coffee. I’ll be right back, Bel. You need anything?” her father says.

“I’m good. Thanks, Papa.” She smiles up at him.

He walks out, and I watch as the nurse moves Mabilia around on Isabella’s chest until my daughter’s mouth latches on. Izzy’s face scrunches up like she’s in pain.

“Is it supposed to hurt?” I question the nurse.

“It’s fine. It’s just... different,” Isabella says, running her fingers over Mabilia’s tiny little head.

“She’s doing great. When you were born, you were so fussy it took you ages to latch on like that,” her mother says.

“Fussy, me? I don’t believe that,” Isabella fires back.

“Zia Holly set up the guest room in your penthouse for her.” Isabella’s mother nods towards Mabilia.

“I’m not going back to New York yet,” Izzy replies.

“Why? What are you planning on doing?”

“I’m not sure. But I can’t go back. Not right now. I’ve changed my mind. Can you ask Papa to get me some chocolate please, Mama?”

“Okay.”

I wait until Mrs. Valentino walks out of the room. The nurse is still hovering around. “Can you give us a minute?” I ask her.

“Ah, yes. Press the button if you need anything, Miss Valentino,” the woman tells Isabella.

I watch our daughter feed from her mother. It’s a sight to behold really. I never thought I could be so transfixed by something so tiny.

“What are you thinking?” Isabella asks.

“That I’m jealous of my own daughter right now.” I smirk at her. “And that we need to talk about what we’re going to do. You can’t go back to New York. And you can’t stay here and risk extradition either,” I tell her.

“I’m sure Matteo will find a way to clear my name,” she says.

“And until he does, you need to disappear, Isabella. *We* need to disappear. These aren’t small charges. They’re serious and will carry a life sentence... several life sentences.”

“I know.”

“You haven’t told your parents, have you?” I ask her.

“I don’t want to.”

I don’t know what to say to that. As much as I can’t stand the Valentinos, I know they love their kin and would do anything for Isabella. She needs their support to get through this.

“We can disappear for forty days. On the fortieth day, we will invite your family to see her. It’s a Russian tradition to give the mother and child some space.”

“And it’s Italian tradition for family to be overbearing and never leave. Always,” she says with a smile. “I know where we can go. Well, where *I* can go. I don’t expect you to follow me, Mikhail. I get that you have a job to do. We didn’t plan this, and I’m okay with doing it alone. What I mean is... you don’t have to stay.”

I blink at her. “You’re out of your pretty little mind if you think I’m not following you wherever you go. I don’t know what more I have to do to prove to you that I’m in this. I’m all the way fucking in this.”

“I just don’t want you to think I expect anything—that’s all.”

“I do.”

“What?”

“There are a few things I expect from you,” I tell her.

“Like what?” she asks.

“One, I expect you to let me help. I expect you to not lie to me. Ever. I expect that there will be times over the years when you’ll want to kill me again, but I’m hoping you’ll refrain from trying. I expect you to give us a proper chance at being a family. And I expect you to listen to your heart.”

“That’s a lot to expect,” Isabella replies. “I’ll do my best to not attempt to murder you again, but no promises.” She smiles.

“I’ll take it,” I say. “So, where is this place that you want to go?”

“My Zia Lola has an island. It’s off the coast of Australia. She’s not home at the moment. We can stay there. Nobody will find us.”

“Okay. My pilot’s going to need the coordinates.”

“We’ll take a Valentino jet to Sydney, then a chopper to the island,” she counters.

I don’t like the idea of not being in control, but I recognize there’s going to be a lot of give and take if this relationship has a chance of working.



It took some convincing, but I managed to get Papa to agree to have Mikhail stay at the estate with me. I did have to threaten that I'd go elsewhere to get him to cave. Which, right now, as I look between the two men, probably would have been a better idea.

Papa appears ready to maim Mikhail with the butter knife clenched in his fist. Mikhail, however, seems as though he doesn't have a care in the world. He's leaning back in his seat, one of his arms wrapped around the back of his chair while his thumb rubs small circles on my shoulders.

Mikhail is a toucher. Any chance he gets, he has his hands on me. Sometimes, it's his palm resting on my thigh, his arm over my shoulder, or

just his leg brushed up against mine. I'm sure it's his way of trying to stake his claim and make a point that I'm *his*. But then there are moments when I think it's just the fact that he likes touching me.

No matter how at ease he might look, though, I know differently. There is no way he's not scoping out the room. Aware of where everyone is and what they're doing. You don't get to his level in any organization without being aware of your surroundings.

I do have to give Mikhail credit. It's obvious he's trying. He has been nothing but polite to my family, who have been nothing but hostile towards him—barely saying a word while glaring at him like they can't wait for the opportunity to string him up by his ankles and skin him alive.

"Papa, I was thinking of going to the island for a while," I say.

We've been home for a week. Mabilia has settled in well. She really is a perfect baby. Every time she wakes up in the middle of the night, Mikhail is the first one to get up to soothe her. He never complains about her crying or my grumpy, sleep-deprived mood swings. He just continues to make sure I have everything I need. That Mabilia has everything she needs.

The rest of my family is due to arrive today. Matteo said there was an issue with the jet and they couldn't make it out last week. As much as I love them, I've enjoyed the time with just my parents, Mikhail, and Bianca. Matteo has been in and out. We've barely seen him but I know he's working a lot.

Nobody has been able to find the rat who's scheduled to testify against me. And I still haven't worked up the nerve to tell my parents what I've done. I know I'm going to have to soon.

"Why? What's wrong with coming home to New York?" Papa asks.

"I like the island. It's peaceful," I tell him.

"What's going on, Bel. You and Matteo, even this one..." Papa points to Mikhail. "...is hiding something. What is it?"

"It's nothing. I just want to go to the island with Mabilia and Mikhail. Settle into this whole parenting thing without the noise of the city."

"I call bullshit," Papa says.

Mikhail's fingers tighten around my shoulder. He's not happy about something. I look to him and plead with my eyes, begging him not to say anything.

"She has the Feds building a case against her. Sorry, Iz. It's better if everyone knows and is on the same page," Matteo says, entering the room.

“What?” Papa asks him.

“The Feds, they’re looking for her,” Matteo repeats.

“What the fuck for?” Papa yells, and Mabilia starts crying in my arms. She was sleeping.

“You make my daughter cry again, and I will make you bleed,” Mikhail says to Papa in a tone I’ve never heard him use before. It’s a tone I know all too well, though. The one all bosses seem to adopt when they mean what they say.

Mikhail takes Mabilia from my arms and holds her to his chest. I let him. At least if he’s holding her, he’s not cutting up my family.

“Fuck you. You knocked my daughter up, asshole,” Papa grunts. “Nonno is sorry, Mabilia,” he adds in Italian.

“And I plan to do it again. Have you seen the perfection we created?” Mikhail says, looking down at Mabilia, who has settled into his chest.

“What’s going on? Why are you yelling?” Mom scolds Dad as she enters the dining room.

“Oh, just the little fact that the Feds are after our daughter and none of these fucking idiots thought to tell us,” Papa says.

“Ah, this idiot right here told you,” Matteo interjects, holding up a hand, and Mom smacks him across the back of his head as she walks past. “Ow, Zia Angelica, what the fuck?” he groans.

“That was for not having complete loyalty to your cousin. If she doesn’t want you to share her shit, then don’t share it,” Mom says.

I smile at Matteo and raise my brows with an expression that says what I don’t. *Sucks to be you, coz.*

“I’m helping her, not ratting on her. We need to figure this shit out. She’s facing life or worse.”

“What? What are the charges?” Mom asks.

I stiffen. It’s not like my parents are innocent or that they think my hands are clean. But what I’ve been doing, it’s different. It’s not *for* the family. It was something I did purely because it made me feel good.

Matteo shifts his gaze to me. “Yeah, that part is up to her to tell you. I’ve got a call to make,” he says, practically running from the room.

“It doesn’t matter what they’re saying she’s done. What matters is making sure they don’t find her,” Mikhail fills the silence.

“You’re right. But I’d still like to know what they have on you, Isabella.” Papa looks directly at me. He full-named me. That means he’s pissed.

I feel a cold sweat form on my forehead. I shake my head. I *can't* tell them. If they know what I've done, they'll want to know why, and that why is something I've never spoken about to anyone. Not with them, not with Zia Lola, no one.

"Isabella, Mabilia needs changing. Come help me." Mikhail pushes to his feet. He has Mabilia cradled in one arm as his free hand takes mine and pulls me out of my chair.

"Wait, Bel! Whatever it is, you can tell me. We don't keep secrets in this family, and I can't fix something if I don't know what I'm fixing," Papa says.

"I know. I'm sorry." I walk out of the dining room. I hear Mama and Papa arguing as I make my way down the hall. Mikhail follows silently. He doesn't say a word until we're in my bedroom and the door closes behind him.

"Your father is right, you know. They need to know," Mikhail says.

"I can't tell them," I say quietly.

"Isabella, they're not going to judge you. Let's not pretend that we both don't know they've done worse."

"It's not about what I've done. It's the *why*. They're going to ask me why and I don't want them to know."

I can see it on his face. He wants to know why as well, but he's not going to ask. And for that, I'm thankful.



I don't know what I was expecting when I agreed to stay here with Izzy, but I never in a million years thought my self-control would be put to the test so frequently. I wasn't about to leave my daughter behind either. If living under the same roof as the fucking Valentinos is the sacrifice I have to make to be with Mabilia, then I'll suck it up and keep my mouth shut—no matter how much I want to tell them all to fuck off.

If I were certain it wouldn't push Isabella away, I'd be trying my damndest to talk her into letting me get us our own house here. Although, since she's brought up going to her aunt's island, I've kept my mouth shut and am biding my time to get away from everyone else.

Isabella starts pulling out diapers and wipes, preparing to change Mabilia. “Kotyonok, stop. She doesn’t need a new diaper.”

Isabella stops and turns around. “Oh, I thought you said...”

“I said that to give you space from having to answer questions you don’t want to answer.”

“Oh.” She averts her gaze.

I want to ask her why. I want to know so fucking bad, for her to tell me why she felt the need to do what she did. I don’t ask though. If she wants to tell me, it will be on her terms and in her own time. I can’t push her to open up.

“Thank you,” she says, sitting on the bed.

I look around her bedroom. It’s like one of those rooms you’d expect to see in a historic palace. The ceilings are at least sixteen feet tall, painted like what you’d find in old churches. The whole room is decorated in deep shades of royal blue with gold accents, while the antique four-poster bed is fitting for a princess. A mafia princess.

“Has this always been your bedroom?” I ask her.

“Um, yeah, why?”

“It’s... different,” I say.

“It’s outdated, but I like it. Before it was mine, it was my mother’s. Before that, my great aunt’s. This house has been in the Donatello family for well over six hundred years,” Isabella says with pride in her voice.

“That’s a lot of history.”

“It is. And one day, this will all be Mabilia’s too, you know.” She sounds almost sad when she says this.

“Why don’t you sound happy about that?” I sit next to her on the bed. I lay Mabilia on the mattress in front of us.

“Do you ever wish that this wasn’t your life? The blood, dirty money, what we have to do for it?” Isabella asks.

“I’m Pakhan of the Petrov Family, Isabella. I don’t have the luxury of a different life,” I tell her matter-of-factly.

“I know that—neither of us do—but sometimes I wish I was someone else. That’s what I was doing the night I met you. I was being someone else for just one night. Being a Valentino can be... a lot. And I have moments when I just want to escape it all.”

It makes sense. Just because I accept my fate, it doesn’t mean I haven’t thought about what it’d be like to be anyone else.

My lips tilt up at the sides. “You know, I can easily make you someone else,” I tell her. “If you don’t want to be a Valentino, I can make you a Petrov.”

Isabella blinks at me. “No offense, but that’s not exactly an upgrade.” She laughs.

“Ouch.” I place a hand over my heart. “Don’t listen to her, Mabilia. Petrov is a great fucking name,” I tell our daughter.

“We haven’t actually registered her birth yet, or discussed her name,” Isabella says.

“What do you mean? Her name is Mabilia,” I say, confused.

“We have to fill out paperwork, give her a last and middle name.”

I’m not sure I like where she’s going with this. If Isabella thinks for one fucking minute my child won’t have my name, she’s going to learn just how ruthless I can be. Because I will never allow my daughter to bear another man’s name.

“Okay, before you lose your shit, hear me out,” Isabella says.

I nod my head, clench my jaw, and wait for her to continue.

“I think we should wait to register her birth. The less people know about her, the safer she is. And birth records are public knowledge.”

“You want to wait?”

“Yes.”

“Isabella, what exactly do you envision her full name to be?” I ask, needing clarity on this topic. I don’t mind waiting, as long as we’re both on the same page.

“Mabilia Valentino-Petrov,” she says quietly.

I consider the possibility of hyphenating our daughter’s last name. It’s not the worst idea in the world. “I have one tiny alteration,” I tell her.

“What?”

“Mabilia Isabella Valentino-Petrov,” I say.

“You want her to have my name?”

“It’s a beautiful name, Isabella. Why wouldn’t we want her to have it?”

“I just... You know you’re the only one who calls me *Isabella*, right?” she asks.

“That’s not true. I just heard your father call you Isabella in the dining room,” I correct her.

“When your parents full-name you, it’s because you’re in trouble. It’s not the same.”

Huh, I guess I never really had parents who bothered enough to give me a nickname. I look down at Mabilia and wonder if I should give her one. Something that's just for her and me. I'm not sure what it would even be. I really love the name Isabella chose for her.

"I like this, talking to you. Getting to know each other. We should have done it sooner," I admit. The more time I spend with Isabella, the more I find myself falling for her. I know when I first found out she was pregnant, I had an instant urge to protect her.

Yes, I was physically attracted to the woman, always have been. But now, it's more than that, more than the need to protect the mother of my child. She's becoming *more*. I was serious about my marriage proposal. I would marry her in a heartbeat. Not out of obligation, or to keep her close because that would keep my daughter close. But because I can actually see her as my queen, my equal, my wife. I can see us having a future together, giving Mabilia siblings.

"Yeah, the whole not being able to rip each other's clothes off the second we see each other thing means we have to actually talk," she says.

"Just how long does this sex ban last, exactly?" I ask her.

Isabella laughs. "You just watched me push a whole human out of my vagina. There's no way you want to go back in there after that."

"If I could, I'd bury my cock into you right now, kotyonok. There will never be a time when I don't want to fuck you. Even when I wanted to wring your little neck, I wanted to fuck you first," I tell her.

"Who woulda thought you'd be such a sweet-talker, Mikhail? I don't know why my panties aren't melting off me right now."

"How long?" I ask again.

"At least six weeks. And that's if I decide I want to ever have sex again. Pushing a human out of you isn't what I'd call a good time. I'm not signing up for a repeat performance," she says.

"We will give Mabilia a sibling, or two."

"Well, you best be looking for a new baby mama, because my shop is closed."

"Anyone else would pale in comparison to you, kotyonok. Why would I look for another one when I already have the best?"

"Just so you know, I get that you have needs. And we aren't... well, we haven't really discussed what we are. But I'm not stopping you from going out and *you know*..."

“You want me to go out and fuck other women?” I ask with a raised brow.

“I’m just saying you don’t owe me anything.”

“So you’d be completely fine with me fucking some random chick?”

“I didn’t say that. I’d probably hunt her down and kill her afterwards, but I’m not going to stop you.”

I laugh. There’s the woman I’m growing to love. “I don’t want anyone else, Isabella. And you and I, we’ve defined what we are.”

“And what’s that?” she asks.

I smile. “Engaged and very fucking exclusive,” I tell her.



Engaged. The word keeps repeating in my head. That, and I legit think Mikhail has lost his mind. I'm not marrying him just because we have a child together, or because he fucks like it's an Olympic sport and he's the reigning gold medalist.

Nope. No way, no how am I agreeing to this craziness. Just having him here is beyond insane. But I'm trying to make peace between the families for Mabilia. She'll be okay growing up without a daddy but that doesn't mean she should have to. I don't even care that he has the world's best cheekbones, or that his chiseled jaw ticks when he's angry in a way that makes my panties wet. And that cocky, self-assured smirk he's mastered doesn't make an ounce

of a difference when it comes to my decision to marry him or not.

The term that man was made in God's image—well, if God had the image of the most perfect man, it would have been the mold he used to create Mikhail. Still, he's out of his insanely beautiful head if he thinks we're engaged.

"We are not engaged, Mikhail. As for exclusive, I'm not exactly in any position to date, but if I were, I can assure you that it would be my decision, not yours," I tell him.

"I have no problem living the rest of our natural lives in sin, Isabella. I don't need to be married to know that your ass is mine," he says with a smirk that seems to further his point.

I smile. It's cute that he wants something between us, but it's also unrealistic. It won't ever work out the way he keeps insisting. "I tried to kill you, Mikhail. How you even sleep next to me is a wonder," I tell him.

He laughs. "I can sleep because I know you don't want to kill me. You didn't then and you sure as shit don't now. You were scared."

He's right. I was scared. As I stare down at my perfect little daughter, that fear hasn't gone away. "I still am," I admit. "I've never been responsible for anything, and now I have Mabilia. And I feel like if I let my guard down even for one second, I'm going to fail her."

"You're not going to fail. She's lucky to have you as a mother, Isabella, and I'm lucky to have you as the mother of my child. We might not have planned this, but look how fucking perfect she is. This wasn't an accident. She was meant to happen. We were meant to happen."

"This." I point to him. "This is exactly why I've spent my whole life avoiding made men. You're all too fucking cocky for your own good."

"You've never dated a made man?" he asks.

"Never."

"Huh," he says with a twinkle in his eye.

"*Huh*, what?" I glare at him.

"*Huh*, my job of getting rid of any other man who knows what it feels like to be inside you just got a whole lot easier." He smirks.

"You will never get that list."

"We'll see."

I look at the door. "How much longer do you think I have until they send a search party?" I ask him, changing the subject. We've been in here for a while and, honestly, I'm surprised that my parents haven't already busted in

the door wanting to know more details.

“What are you going to tell them?”

“I don’t want to lie, but I can’t tell them anything.” I shake my head. I have no idea how I’m going to handle this situation. I get that I need my family’s help with this. I’ve gotten myself into a mess I can’t get myself out of alone. But I can’t face having to tell them either. “I spent years in therapy as a kid and never told the therapist anything. She tried to pry every detail out of me, but even at eight, I knew whatever I told her would be passed on to my parents. I wasn’t stupid. I knew who my Papa was, how people feared him,” I admit.

“Eight? What the fuck, Isabella? You’ve been holding this in for that long?” Mikhail curses under his breath.

“You don’t understand. I don’t want people to look at me differently. I don’t want to upset them. I saw what it did whenever Zia Lola wasn’t well. I saw the pity in their eyes whenever they looked at her... the heartbreak they felt for her. I don’t want to do that to them.”

“What...” Mikhail stops midsentence. He looks at Mabilia. “What if it were her? Would you want her to tell you or keep it to herself?” he asks me.

“Of course I’d want her to tell me everything.” *But that doesn’t change the fact that I don’t want to tell my parents.* Mikhail doesn’t get it because he doesn’t know the extent of what happened. I’m about to tell him a little bit when Mabilia starts crying. I pick her up. “Shhh, it’s okay, *bella*. Mama’s here,” I coo into her ear.

“You really are a natural at this mothering thing, you know. I can’t wait to fill a house of children with you,” Mikhail says with a wistful look on his face. A look that has no business being there.

“I’m not having more children, Mikhail.”

“She needs a sibling, or two, or three. There is no bond greater than that of a sibling, Isabella. Didn’t you ever want a little brother or sister?”

“Never. I had more than enough cousins around me growing up,” I say.

“Mabilia won’t have that luxury. My brother didn’t have children and now he won’t. And, well, there are no other aunts or uncles to give her cousins. I had a brother and plenty of cousins growing up—albeit the Petrov family has reduced in size over the past four years...”

“My cousins have plenty of kids. She won’t grow up alone,” I counter, ignoring the last part while knowing full well my family is responsible for a lot of that.

Mikhail opens his mouth to argue the point further when there's a knock on the door. I guess this is the end of our little chitchat.

I jump up and open the door to find my father standing on the other side with a scowl. "Everyone is here. You might want to pass her over. She might be the only thing that saves him." Papa smiles like he's going to enjoy the showdown that we both know is about to happen between Mikhail and my cousins. Particularly Theo. He will go to the ends of the earth to make sure his wife's true identity remains hidden. No one can know she and her sister are the lost Petrov children.

"He can handle himself," I tell Papa. I haven't really ever seen Mikhail in a fight, but I have no doubt that my words ring true. I also know I'm not about to let my family cause any real harm to him. Especially when his only crime is his last name. I will fight for him, not because I need him but because Mabilia *deserves* him. "We'll be right out," I say to my father before turning around and looking at Mikhail. I feel like I should warn him, give him a heads-up about the hostile environment he's walking into, but where would be the fun in that? "Come on, might as well get this over with."

"Can't think of anything else I'd rather do," Mikhail says in the most sarcastic tone I've ever heard.



I follow Isabella out of the room, like the lost fucking pup I am when it comes to her and my daughter. “Just so we’re on the same page, are you attached to all of your cousins? Is there any I can actually kill and have the chance you’ll forgive me?” I ask her.

Isabella turns her head to answer from over her shoulder. “Don’t kill any of my family members, Mikhail,” she says. “But don’t worry... I won’t let them kill you either.”

I laugh. “I don’t need you to protect me from anyone, kotyonok,” I tell her.

I know I’m walking right into the lions’ den here, but I keep my posture

straight and the *I don't have a care in the world* look plastered on my face. I've been in this house for over a week, and if I hadn't been following Isabella around through all these long ass hallways and rooms, I'd have no idea where the fuck I was going. The house needs a map just to get from point A to point B.

After about five minutes, we enter a large living room that looks like it belongs on the set of *Downton Abbey*. I've been around luxury my whole life—the Petrovs have never been short on cash—but this estate is what I think of when I hear the term *old money*.

A lot of my family's wealth can thanks to my father and my brother. It's on my shoulders to continue building their empire, and now that I have someone to pass it down to, I plan to develop as many legitimate business ventures as I possibly can. Mabilia will never want for a thing in her life, that I'm certain of. Although, if I can't convince Isabella to have more children, our daughter might be wanting for a sibling. If it comes down to it, I have no qualms about knocking Isabella up "accidentally." I mean, she got pregnant the first time we had sex. We obviously both have what it takes to make more babies.

That's if I survive her family. I look from one Valentino to the next. I know who all of her cousins are. I also know her Uncle T and her Aunt Holly. You can't live and work in our world and not make it your business to know.

"Okay, we're either going to play nice, or I'm leaving," Isabella says. "With him," she adds, pointing her thumb at me.

"Play nice? You expect me to play nice with a fucking Petrov?" Theo grunts.

I don't miss the slight change in his wife's features. She actually takes a tiny step backwards too. Theo looks over to her and whispers an apology.

I look at his wife. I've never really paid attention to the women in Isabella's extended family before. To me, wives and children never come into the equation. I'd never go after them, so why bother knowing anything about them?

There is something familiar about her, though. I can't put my finger on it. Not straight away anyway. When her eyes meet mine, that's when I see it. She knows too. I have to force myself to look away. I place my palm on Isabella's lower back. I'll take her lead here. I'm not about to start a fight with my infant daughter in the room.

“Okay, this isn’t happening. All of you get over yourselves and congratulate Izzy and Mikhail,” Holly says before walking up to us. “Oh my gosh, Iz, she’s absolutely beautiful. Isn’t she just perfect, T?” she says, turning and giving her husband a glare even I’d want to back down from.

“Of course she is. Anything Izzy makes is perfect.” The head of the Valentino family walks up to his niece, completely ignoring my presence, which I’m fine with. “Congrats, Bella. She really is perfect,” he says before asking something in Italian.

Isabella replies, and T nods his head. I look between the two, having no idea what they’re talking about other than it’s about me. I try not to let it bother me, but it fucking does. I need to learn this fucking language. A mental image of Isabella tutoring me crosses my mind and a smile curls my lips. Playing teacher-student with her would be fun.

“What the fuck are you smiling about?” her cousin Romeo asks me.

I look to him and reply, “I was thinking of fucking your cousin while she taught me Italian. So the next time I’m in a room with you all, I’ll know exactly what’s being said about me.” Of course, I say all this in Russian.

The gasp from Theo’s wife tells me my suspicion was right. She knows the language.

“I can’t wait until Izzy comes to her senses and lets me spill your filthy blood all over the floor. You want to know what’s being said about you? You’re not fucking welcome here—that’s what’s being said,” Romeo tells me.

I guess he can speak Russian too. I’ve heard the kid was some sort of genius or some shit. “I’d like to see you try.” I take a step forward, placing my body in front of Isabella and Mabilia.

I know in my head that no one here will hurt them, but people forget to account for collateral damage in a fight. And I’ll be fucking damned if I let my daughter or Isabella get caught in the middle.

“Like it’d be hard,” Theo says.

I raise an eyebrow at him. *Give it a go.* I dare any of these fuckers to try me.

“Stop. Theo, seriously? We’re going to be talking about this later.” Isabella hands Mabilia to me, then walks over to Romeo and says something in Italian.

I don’t give a shit what they’re talking about, so I head over to one of the sofas and sit down with Mabilia. They can carry on with whatever shitshow

they thought was going to happen, but I'm not playing into it.

"Sorry I'm late. It took me forever to get here. Where is this new baby I need to smother?" A girl walks into the room. When she looks my way, she freezes on the spot.

"Lilah, this is Mikhail Petrov, Mabilia's father," Theo's wife says before stepping forward.

I glance from one girl to the other while she stares at me. "He looks like..." Lilah trails off.

"How was your flight?" Theo cuts in and wraps his arm around her.

"Long. What'd I miss?" She scans the room, seeming to recover from her initial shock.

Mabilia starts crying. I hold her up against my shoulder while whispering into her ear. I assure my daughter that she's safe, that I have her—in Russian of course.

Isabella comes and sits next to me. "I need to feed her," she says, taking Mabilia out of my arms.

I lean in. "I don't care if they're your cousins. They're not seeing your breasts," I tell her.

She rolls her eyes, then addresses the room. "Unless you all want to see me pop out a tit, this is your cue to exit."

I return the hard glare of every male member of her family as they make a quick escape. "Bel, come find me when you're done," her father tells her. He's the last to exit.

"Well, that went better than I thought," Isabella says.

Her mother and Holly stayed behind. "A lot better," Angelica agrees.

I don't bother saying anything as I help Isabella get Mabilia into a comfortable position for her to latch on. It honestly still amazes me watching her feed. And, yes, I still feel that twinge of jealousy. I also find myself wanting to have that bonding experience with my daughter.

"How are you doing, really, Izzy?" her aunt asks.

"I'm good. Honestly, Zia Holly, everything is fine," she answers. "Where's Zia Helena? I thought she was coming too."

I don't know a lot about that particular Valentino, other than she's Neo's sister and runs a popular café.

"She was going to call you. She and Lola had a trip planned and they're going to stop by in a few days."

"Oh, okay. I haven't been checking my cell. I might have missed her

call,” Isabella replies.

“I’ll get you some water, baby. Mikhail, do you want anything?”
Isabella’s mother asks me.

“No, I’m good. Thanks, Mrs. Valentino,” I say.

“*Angelica*. You can drop the Missus,” she tells me.

Once she and Holly leave the room, I run a hand through my hair. I need to know... but I don’t know if I should bring it up. “Were you planning on telling me or not?” I ask.

“Telling you what?” Isabella’s brows knit with the question.

“That the missing Petrov kids were a part of your family? That my cousins have been alive all along?”



My eyes widen. *How the hell does he know?*

“I...” I shake my head. “No, I wasn’t planning on telling you,” I admit.

“Why?” he asks.

“Because they’re my family, and *your* family has been hunting them down like wild pigs. I was keeping them safe.”

“I was never hunting them, and neither are any of the men working for me.”

“Maybe under your rule, but their parents were killed by your family. Their own family, Mikhail. And why? Because their father fell in love with

an Italian girl.”

“I know the story. I know what my uncle did, but I wasn’t in charge then, and my brother wasn’t either,” he tells me.

“You do know that Romeo’s wife was raped by a Petrov too, right? Did you really think I’d hand those girls over on a silver platter?”

“I didn’t know that... but, again, I wasn’t in charge. I wasn’t Pakhan.”

“I helped Romeo find them. I saw him kill them, and all I could think of was how much I wanted it to be at my hands instead of his.”

“Who?”

“The two Petrovs who raped Livvy.”

“I’m sorry that happened to her. But that wasn’t me, Isabella. I would never do or condone such a thing.”

“You’re right. It wasn’t you. You didn’t do it.” I sigh. “What are you going to do? About Maddie and Lilah?”

“Nothing. I never wanted to hurt them. I know my uncles and my father might have run things differently, had different views, but I’m not them. I don’t want to continue a feud that has nothing to do with me. With us. Any of us.”

After Mabilia is done feeding, I hand her over to Mikhail to burp. She can spit up on his clothes this time. “I’m going to go find my father.”

“Want me to come?” Mikhail asks.

“No, it’s fine. Just stay with Mabilia. Don’t let her out of your sight,” I tell him.

“I won’t,” he says.

I force myself to walk away. I haven’t been separated from her yet. Two steps out of the room, and I want to turn around and go back. I don’t. The sooner I get this talk over with, the sooner I can go spend some time on my zia’s island.

“Papa?” I call out when I enter his office.

Sure enough, he’s inside. Alone. *Thank god*. “Come in and close the door, Bel,” he says, pushing to his feet and walking around his desk.

“I’m sorry,” I huff before slumping into the sofa. “I know I’ve disappointed you and I’m sorry.”

“You could never disappoint me, Bel. Never.” He sits on the sofa opposite me.

“I went and had a baby with a Petrov. I have a federal case against me. How can you not be disappointed?”

“Do I wish you had picked someone else, anyone else? Yes, but we don’t get to choose who we fall in love with,” he says.

“I’m not in love with him,” I’m quick to clarify.

“Are you sure?” he asks with his brows furrowed.

“I tried to kill him. I left him for dead, Papa, tied to his own bed. You don’t do that to someone you love.”

“You might, when you’re doing it to protect someone you love more. Do you really think if your mother had to choose between us, she wouldn’t hand my ass over as the sacrificial lamb in a heartbeat?”

“Probably, but if she couldn’t save you, I would, Papa,” I tell him.

“I wouldn’t want it any other way, Bel.” He clears his throat. “Now, tell me what this nonsense with the Feds is about?”

“I... I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t want you to be angry. I don’t want you to be upset. I don’t want you to look at me differently,” I say.

“I could never look at you differently. You’re my daughter, Bel. You will always be my daughter, no matter what.”

“Have you heard of the Stiletto Killer?” I ask him. He nods his head. Of course, he has. *Everyone has*. She’s made headlines recently. “I did it. I’m the Stiletto Killer,” I admit.

Papa’s face doesn’t change, no hint of disgust or disappointment. “Okay. So you killed a few lowlife scum. That’s not anything to be ashamed of.”

“I’m not ashamed,” I say. “I liked doing it.”

“Okay. I’m going to fix this, Bel. I’m not letting anyone lock you behind bars. I promise you that.”

“Don’t you want to know why?” I ask him.

“Do you want to tell me why?” he replies.

I shake my head. I’m not ready to tell him why I killed all those men. Why I enjoyed it, or why I don’t want to stop doing it. I don’t know if I’ll ever be ready to tell him or anyone else, for that matter.

“I’ve arranged flights for the three of you to head out to the island tonight,” he says.

“Thank you, Papa.”

“I’m also going to send a couple of the guys with you.”

I groan. “Who?”

“Romeo and Theo.”

“Absolutely not. Are you insane? Did you not see how much they both want to slaughter Mikhail?” I ask him.

“I did, which is why I want them to go with you.” He smiles.

“You’re enjoying this a little too much, Papa.”

“You’ll understand when Mabilia gets older and wants to date,” he says.

“I don’t know how you and Mama did it. How did you keep me safe all these years? I’m petrified that something horrible is going to happen to her. And she just got here.”

“We didn’t always keep you safe, but what your mother did do was give you the skills you needed to survive. As soon as that baby can walk, I’m hiring a self-defense trainer for her.”

I laugh. “I think we’ll wait until she’s at least five,” I say.

“Zia Lola had one of the rooms in her house turned into a nursery for you.”

“Oh, she didn’t have to do that.”

“I think she enjoyed it.”

“Thanks again, Papa, for everything. I love you.” I stand and hug him.

“I love you more, Bel. Always,” he says.

I walk out of the office. I need to get Mikhail and Mabilia and pack some things. When I walk back, they’re not there.

“Mikhail?” I scream out at the top of my lungs, running out the door. I stop in the hallway. I can’t run through this whole estate. I pull my phone out of my pocket and open the house’s security app. I search through five cameras before I find them. He took her back to my bedroom. My heart calms as I watch him sitting on my bed with Mabilia on his bare chest. He has his eyes closed but I know he’s not asleep. Pocketing my phone, I head in that direction before I run into Romeo.

“Izzy, can I kill him yet?” he asks.

“No,” I tell him. “You need to let it go, Romeo. He’s my daughter’s father.”

“He’s a Petrov,” he fires back.

“You know, I’m really getting tired of this whole *he’s a Petrov* thing. Guess what, genius? My daughter is a Petrov, and so are Maddie and Lilah.”

“That’s different.”

“No, it’s not.”

“He’s the fucking Pakhan of the Russian organization, Iz. He’s not just some associate.”

“I know who he is, Romeo. And I’m telling you now. I like him and he’s not going anywhere, so get used to it.”

“You know, he said he was thinking about fucking you while you taught him Italian,” Romeo says, the disgust evident in his voice.

“Huh, that doesn’t exactly sound like a bad time.” I smile and walk around my cousin, leaving him muttering various Italian expletives behind me.



I zzy walks into the room with a weird smile on her face. “You okay?” I ask.

“Yep, good. You?” she replies.

“Fine. How was the talk with your father?”

“It was really good, actually. Let me put Mabilia down in her basinet.”

I really like holding her when she’s asleep. I like holding her when she’s awake too. If I had my way, I’d never let her go.

“Trust me, she needs to go in her crib for the lesson I’m about to give you,” Isabella says.

I raise my brows at her in question, but I don’t utter a word as she gently

picks up our daughter and walks her over to her cradle. I'm mentally preparing myself for the pain of whatever lesson Isabella is about to give me while racking my mind, trying to figure out what it is that I could have done to piss her off.

"Lose your pants," she says, climbing onto the bed.

"What?" I ask, confused.

"I heard that you wanted to fuck me while I taught you Italian. We can't fuck, but I can do other things while I teach you a few keywords you're going to want to know. Now, you can either strip and let me play with your cock, or I can just start packing for our trip to the island," she says.

Seconds, it takes me 1.5 seconds to decide on the first option. I chuck my pants to the side, freeing my now rock-hard cock. Isabella straddles my legs as her hand wraps around my shaft.

"*Cazzo*. Repeat it. *Cazzo*," she says, slowly sliding her palm up and down.

"*Cazzo*."

"Pretty good. That means cock. Do you want me to play with your *cazzo*, Mikhail?"

"My *cazzo* is your *cazzo*, kotyonok," I tell her, unable to keep the moan from escaping my mouth when she tightens her grip.

Isabella bends down. Her tongue slides up the underside of my shaft. "*Leccata*. Means lick."

"Isabella, *leccata* my *cazzo*," I tell her.

She smiles. "You're a quick study," she replies before her tongue darts out and swirls around the tip.

"Fuck." My hips buck upwards. My fingers clench around the bedsheets. She's fucking teasing the hell out of me with that tongue of hers.

"*Succhiare*. Say it. *Succhiare*."

I watch the way it rolls off her tongue. "*Succhiare*," I repeat.

Isabella smirks at me and then wraps her lips around my tip, proceeding to slide my length into her warm, wet mouth. She hollows out her cheeks as she sucks on her way back up before releasing me with an audible pop. "*Succhiare* means suck."

"*Succhiare*, I like that word," I tell her.

"I'm sure you do. *Piu forte*. Repeat it. *Pui forte*."

I repeat the phrase to her.

"Good. That means harder. Now, *ingoialo*."

“*Ingoialo*,” I parrot.

“That means swallow it. If you don’t tell me to *ingoialo* when you’re coming, I’m not going to swallow, so remember that word,” she says.

“*Ingoialo*.” I repeat it in my head over and over again. I gotta admit if school had been this fun, I would have been a much better student.

Isabella bends down and takes me back into her mouth. Fuck, I’m not going to last long. Her mouth feels too fucking good. And it’s been a while since my dick has seen any kind of action.

My fist wraps around her ponytail, pulling a little while guiding her pace up and down my shaft. “*Pui forte*,” I say through clenched teeth.

Isabella does not disappoint. She sucks harder, faster. Her hand slides under and wraps around my balls, massaging them gently.

“Fuck. I’m going to come,” I grit out, my hips grinding up to match her rhythm. She gives me a look. “*Ingoialo*, Isabella, fucking *ingoialo* all of it. It’s all for you,” I tell her. I feel her smile around my shaft right before my whole body spasms, my seed squirting down her throat. “Fuck, kotyonok, I think I need to pencil you in for daily language lessons.” I pull her body up mine. Then I push my tongue into her mouth, tasting myself on her.

A moan parts her lips. I capture it, swallow it, as I take everything she’s willing to give me with this kiss. She pulls back, separating our mouths. I lean forward and peck at her lips again. I’m not ready to be done with her yet.

“You’re a good student. A quick learner,” she says.

“Who told you I wanted to learn Italian?” I ask, honestly curious.

“Romeo gave me a quick translation of what you said back there. If he didn’t already hate you, he sure as shit does now.” She laughs. “I can’t believe you said that in front of my whole family.”

“I said it in Russian. How was I supposed to know any of them would understand me?”

“Don’t underestimate Romeo. He’s the smartest person I know. Well, besides his wife.”

“I like how close you are to your family. I want that for Mabilia. My family, we... we weren’t really like that.”

“Were you close to your brother?” she asks.

“Yes, to a point.” I slide out from underneath her, grab my pants, and tug them on. I don’t want to talk about my brother. I still don’t have answers when it comes to his death. I was certain it was the Valentinos, but now, I’m

not sure. “I’m going to get you a drink. Be right back,” I tell her, making a quick escape out of the room.

I wander through the halls of the house for about five minutes before I eventually find the kitchen. Opening the fridge, I pull out a bottle of orange juice and a bottle of water. I didn’t ask Isabella what she wanted, so I figure one of these should be okay. I close the fridge door, ready to turn on my heel, when Theo’s wife walks into the room and stops dead in her tracks. She looks like a deer trapped in the headlights.

“You don’t need to fear me,” I tell her in Russian.

She stares at me for a bit before she finally opens her mouth to speak. “You look like him. It just... brings back memories,” she replies in my native tongue.

“Strong genes?” I shrug.

“Yeah, I guess.”

“I wasn’t involved, just so you know. With what happened to your parents. That wasn’t me.”

“Your family still wants me and my sister dead, though.” She sighs.

“No, they don’t. And my family, *me*, we are your family too. My father and your father were cousins. That makes us cousins. I don’t have a tendency to kill my cousins.”

“My parents were killed by my father’s brother, so you’ll have to forgive me for not trusting your word on that.”

“Again, I’m not here to hurt you or your sister. I’m here for my daughter and the mother of my child. But you and Lilah, you’re my family too, so if you do ever need anything, I’ll be there.”

Her brows pull down. “Thanks,” she says.

I walk away, leaving her to her thoughts. We just had that whole conversation in Russian. She doesn’t just understand it. She’s fluent in the language. I smile. The realization that I’m not the only Petrov in this house full of fucking Valentinos is somewhat comforting. Even if Maddie and Lilah aren’t ready to acknowledge that part of their heritage.



After checking on Mabilia, I walk into the adjoining bathroom and brush my teeth. I'm guessing it was the question about his brother that had Mikhail running out of the room. We have to work around each other to learn what topics are off-limits.

This is what getting to know each other is all about. At least, I think it is. I've never had a relationship that lasted longer than a few dates. I might have known Mikhail for a while now, but we're only just getting to really know each other. We have the whole chemistry part down. There is no denying that my knees go weak whenever he walks into a room. I could actually stare at him for hours—that's how pretty he is to look at.

I rinse my mouth and set my toothbrush back into the holder, noticing that Mikhail's is right there next to mine. It's just a toothbrush. It's not a big deal. But it also kind of is. I inhale and exhale, closing my eyes. I tell myself it's nothing. They're just toothbrushes.

Walking out of the bathroom, I head to the closet, pull down a couple of suitcases, and open them up on the bed. I go back and forth from the closet to the suitcases with armfuls of clothes in tow. The bedroom door opens and Mikhail walks back in.

"I didn't know what you wanted," he says, holding up a bottle of orange juice and a bottle of water.

"I'll take the juice." I reach out a hand but he raises the juice above his head. His other arm wraps around my waist, pulling my body up against his. Then his lips lightly peck mine.

"When are we leaving?" he asks.

"Tonight," I tell him.

"Good." He releases me. "I can't wait to be alone. Just you, me, and our daughter."

Shit, he's not going to like what I have to say. "Ah, yeah, about that..." I groan. "Theo and Romeo are coming with us."

"What the fuck for?" he grunts.

"Papa said he wants more people there." I lift a shoulder in a half shrug. "It'll be fine. You won't even know they're there," I tell him.

"Doubtful," he says. "I have to make a few calls." He grabs his phone from the bedside table and stalks out to the balcony.

I continue packing as he carries out a heated conversation, none of which I can understand. I close the suitcases once they are filled with the essentials and place them by the door. I check on Mabilia, who is still sleeping peacefully. Then I stick my head out the balcony door and get Mikhail's attention.

"Hold on."

I watch as he presses the mute button on the phone. "I'm going to have a shower. Can you listen for Mabilia? I don't know if I'll hear her if she wakes up," I ask him.

"Of course," he says before unmuting his call. "Ivan, I've got to go," he says, then listens for a reply. "I don't fucking care. Deal with it or I'll find someone who can." He hangs up and quickly pockets his phone.

"Everything okay?" I ask him.

Mikhail opens his mouth before closing it again. “Fine. Just work shit. Nothing you need to worry about.” He wraps an arm around my waist as he steps back inside. “Go have a shower. I’ll be right here if she cries.”

“Okay, thank you,” I tell him. “And I’m sorry for interrupting your call.”

“You are never an interruption, Isabella. Don’t ever think that.”

“I get what your job entails, Mikhail. You don’t have to play it down for me.”

“I know you understand the lifestyle, the job. But that doesn’t mean I don’t want to protect you from my world as much as I can. You think you have darkness inside you, Isabella, but I guarantee my soul is far more tainted than yours will ever be.”

I could stand here and give him the shopping list that would suggest otherwise. But he knows the things I’ve done. He’s seen the case the Feds put together. What he doesn’t know is how much I’m itching to get back out there and do it again. I want the blood. I want to erase the scum from the earth. But I’m not only thinking of myself anymore. I have a daughter, and putting myself in recklessly dangerous situations isn’t smart. I can’t let something happen to me and leave her alone. She is my priority now and making sure I’m always going to be here for her is what I plan to do.

I turn on the shower and wait for the room to steam up before I pull the dress over my head and step under the hot water. My stomach feels like a plate of jelly, the remnants of growing Mabilia inside me. I honestly thought I’d hate the changes to my body after getting pregnant, but I’m finding I really don’t. My hips are bigger—everything is a little bigger—and I now have visible stretch marks across my abdomen, but I’m not worried. They’re a reminder she was there.

I squirt the bodywash onto the loofah and rub the suds over my skin. I take my time washing and rinsing my hair. Then I pick up a razor and shave my legs. I feel like it’s been a while since I’ve been able to do such a simple task. I take my time and make sure every square inch is silky smooth.

Finally shutting off the water, I wrap my hair in a towel and then use another to dry my body before draping it around me. I step out of the bathroom and Mikhail sits up straighter in his chair.

“Good shower?” he asks.

“Yep. Did she wake up?” I ask him.

“No.” His eyes roam up and down my body.

“I’m just going to get dressed.” I walk into the closet.

Mikhail follows me, closes an arm around my waist, and pulls me flush against his chest. “Mmm, you smell edible,” he says.

I laugh. “Thanks, but I assure you I’m not *edible* right now,” I tell him.

“Mmm, pity.” He spins me around. “How are you feeling? Still sore?”

“Not really.” I don’t feel sore, but I am bleeding, which will last for a few more weeks—one of the pitfalls of giving birth.

“Good.” Mikhail takes my hand and leads me over to the bench seat that runs down the middle of the closet. He sits and then pulls me down on top of him. My legs straddling his. My pussy landing on his crotch.

“Shit, I can’t do this. I’m bleeding, Mikhail, like a lot.”

“And?”

“And, well, I’m probably going to bleed all over you. It’s gross,” I tell him.

“You’ve already had my blood on you. It’s only fair I return the favor, *kotyonok*. I want to watch you come. Rub yourself on me. Make yourself come for me,” he says.

I open my mouth to argue with him when he grabs my hips and pulls me down on him. My clit rubs against the hardness of his cock beneath his pants. I swear I almost see stars—it feels that good.

“Mikhail, we shouldn’t.” My protest is weak as a moan escapes me.

“We most certainly should. Feels good, right? I fucking love this look on you, *kotyonok*.”

“Ah, what look is that?” I ask him.

“The look of ecstasy. There is nothing better,” he says. His mouth finds my neck. I tilt my head to the side, giving him better access as I start to grind myself on him. I’m practically dry-humping him like a horny teenager.

“Fuck, I love your body,” Mikhail says as his hands run under the towel, around to my ass.

“Mmm, yours is a work of art. Mine is... a work in progress. Recovering,” I say.

“You’re perfect. Come for me, Isabella,” he commands, and just like that, I feel myself climbing higher, chasing that release.

“Oh god. Shit!” I hiss when I finally tip over. My legs tighten, my back arches, and I fall backwards. Mikhail’s hands catch me, stopping me from falling.

“Fucking beautiful,” he says before his lips connect with mine.



The conversation I had with Ivan two weeks ago still plays through my mind. There was something off about him that I can't quite put my finger on. I've known him for as long as I can remember. He's family. I trust him. I can trust him. Or at least I fucking hope I can, because right now, he's the one who's keeping an eye on the business while I'm sitting on this tropical island with the two most important females in my life.

"Boss, you might want this." Lex hands me a bottle of sunscreen.

"Thanks." I take the bottle and tuck it into my pocket.

I watch Isabella rocking in a chair up on the porch with Mabilia in her arms. Her eyes meet mine and she smiles. I swear I feel my heart skip a beat

every time I see that smile on her face. Something changed in her when we arrived. She's more relaxed, seems more at peace than I've ever seen her. There's a new sparkle to her eyes too. Mabilia is almost one month old. We might not have planned for her appearance in this world, but I'm fucking thankful every day that she's here. That child has changed the projection of my life in the best possible way.

I dial Ivan's number again. It's the third time I've tried to contact him this morning, and he hasn't answered. For the last two weeks, we've spoken every day. He gave up asking for my location.

I haven't told a soul where we are. Apart from her family, and Lex and Viktor, who I insisted tagged along with me, no one knows we're here. When Isabella told me that her two cousins were coming, there was no way I wasn't bringing two of my own men with me as well. I'd like to say spending two weeks with the Valentino siblings has bonded us, created a mutual understanding, or some shit. It hasn't. Honestly, it's a miracle we haven't tried to kill each other yet.

Do I lock the door to our bedroom every night? Fuck yes, I do. The old saying "keep your friends close and your enemies closer" couldn't be any more true in this situation. They do love Isabella and Mabilia—the loyalty they have to family is probably the one thing I respect about them.

"I can't get ahold of Ivan. Have you heard anything from the home front?" I ask Lex.

"Nyet," he answers.

"Viktor," I call out to the scowling man who's silently standing on the corner of the balcony. He's not a fan of the heat. The fact that he won't take off his suit probably isn't helping his situation. When he reaches me and Lex, I start conversing in Russian. "Something's off. I haven't been able to reach Ivan all morning."

"I'll try," he says. I watch as he dials Ivan's number. The call rings out.

"Do you think something happened?" Viktor asks.

"I have an uneasy feeling. You two, stay close to Isabella and Mabilia. They are your priority."

Both men look at me like I've lost my mind. I'm their Pakhan and they're fully prepared to lay down their own lives to protect me, and I'm basically telling them if something happens, leave me behind and take care of an Italian woman and her child. *My* child. Not that my kotyonok needs a man to protect her. I'm fucking thankful she was raised to have all the skills she

needs to survive in this world of ours. I've seen far too many women land themselves in an early grave because they couldn't help themselves when they needed to.

"What do you think's going on?" Viktor asks.

"I have no idea. It's just an uneasy feeling. We have an advantage here. No one can get in without us seeing them coming. Just be prepared." I'm hoping I'm just being paranoid but, fuck, my gut has never been wrong before and right now I feel like something big is about to happen. I make my way up to the porch. "Kotyonok, come inside," I tell Isabella while scanning the empty beach.

"Okay?" she says with a question in her voice.

Theo and Romeo are sitting at the dining room table. They're both miserable bastards. Isabella says it's because they don't like being away from their wives and kids, who stayed behind in Italy.

I place my hand on Isabella's lower back and lead her down the hall into the bedroom we've been sharing.

"What's going on? You look... wired," Isabella asks me as soon as the door is closed.

"I don't know. I just have a feeling."

"Most people have feelings, Mikhail. It's normal," she says with a cocked eyebrow.

"I can't get ahold of Ivan. Something isn't right," I tell her.

"Well, maybe he's just busy," she suggests, attempting to be unaffected, but I can see it on her face. She knows that's not the case as much as I do.

"Maybe." I cup her cheek in my right hand. "When I think of something happening to you or Mabilia, I..." I allow my unspoken words to hang in the air.

"I know. It's okay. We're okay, Mikhail. We are right here. We are safe," she says.

"You're right. It's fine. Ya tebya lyublyu." I tell her that I love her in Russian. She has no idea what I've admitted to her, or that I mean every fucking word of it.

"What did you say?" She smiles.

"I'll tell you later. Be right back," I say. Leaning down, I kiss my daughter's head and pivot towards the dining room. Theo and Romeo are both still sitting at the table. "How long before you can have the chopper here?" I ask them.

“Why? You going somewhere? Back to the rock you crawled out from?” Romeo asks.

“Enough,” Theo barks out to his brother before turning back to me. “Why?”

“I want it here on standby. I need a way to get Isabella and Mabilia off this island quickly if something happens.”

This makes both men sit up straighter. Theo’s stare bores right through me. I’d never admit it to his face, but he’s going to make a great Don when he takes over for his father. A sentiment I’ll never speak aloud to anyone.

“What do you know?” Theo asks.

“Nothing. It’s just a gut feeling. Get it here with a pilot or two,” I tell him.

“Yeah, I don’t take orders from you,” he grunts.

“It’s not a fucking order. It’s a request, and while you’re at it, find a boat. We shouldn’t be sitting ducks in the middle of an island with no way out,” I tell them.

“There’s always a way out. Want me to give it to you?” Romeo asks, picking up the pistol that’s sitting in front of him.

“Stop. Put that away, Romeo,” Isabella scolds them. She hands Mabilia over to me. “If Mikhail has a bad feeling, then we need to listen. This isn’t about you. This is about *her*.” She points to our daughter.

“You’re right, Iz. I’ll make arrangements.” Theo nods.

I smile at my kotyonok. She really is a force to be reckoned with.



Mikhail has been on edge for the past four days. He had Theo arrange for a chopper and a pilot to be on the island permanently. He also had a speedboat anchored on the shore. And a bag packed for Mabilia with all the essentials stored in each node of transportation in case we have to leave in a hurry.

The past six weeks have been better than I could ever imagine. I've always been attracted to him physically because, well, if you saw him, you'd get it. But I'm not just falling for the man anymore. I am in love with him. I don't want to imagine a day without him.

Mikhail hasn't brought up the topic of marriage since the last time he

asked. Although, if he were to ask me now, I'm pretty sure my answer would be yes. Maybe I should do what Matteo did and just go to Vegas for a weekend and blame the alcohol for us "accidentally" getting hitched.

Speaking of, I pick up my phone. I haven't spoken to my cousin for a few days. I know he's working tirelessly on my case, trying to find the informant. Mikhail still has his people looking too. Both sides are coming up empty.

I wonder what happens when they find out? When I'm able to return to New York? What will happen with me and Mikhail when the reality of our lives sets in? Here, on my aunt's island, it's easy to get lost in the fantasy. In the fairy-tale ending that wasn't made for people like us. Back home, it'll be different. Harder.

I press the green phone icon next to Matteo's name. I'm about to hang up, thinking the line is going to ring out, when he answers.

"Izzy, everything okay?" he asks.

"Yeah, everything's fine here. How are you?"

"Good," he says.

"I'm sorry you have to do this, Matteo."

"Don't be stupid. There is no one else I'd do this for, Iz. I will never stop fighting for you."

"Thank you," I say.

"There is something I was wondering..." he starts and I stay silent, waiting for Matteo to continue while dreading what I know he's going to ask me next. "All the so-called victims, they all have one thing in common. They're known sex offenders," he says.

"Oh," I say. "I'm sorry... Mabilia just woke up. I have to go." I disconnect the call. There is no way I can get into the *why* of what I did with my cousin. Although, if anyone would get it, it would be Matteo. His first kill was the kid he caught raping his cousin Hope when she was sixteen.

I take a deep breath and do something I've been avoiding doing since I gave birth. I open my laptop and log into the website I have set up on the dark web for girls to report their assaults anonymously. Women, especially those mixed up in our world, can't always tell someone what happened. They can't go to the police and get justice through the legal system. That's why I set this up, so they have another option. A way to punish those who deserve it. And I'm the one who makes sure that happens.

Guilt consumes me when I see how many messages and notifications I've missed. I scroll through the first few messages. They're all the same.

Please help me. I don't know what else to do.

It's the tenth message that has my heart beating out of my chest. This one included a picture. I'm staring at the face of Mikhail's best friend, his right-hand man. His accuser says that this man has been abusing her since she was seventeen. The bedroom door opens and I snap the laptop closed.

Mikhail looks from me, to the device, then back to me. "Did I just catch you watching porn?" he asks with a lopsided grin.

"Why would I watch porn when all I have to do is look at you and my entire body heats up?" I smirk.

"What were you doing then?" He tips his head towards the computer.

I open my mouth to lie but I can't do it. "I need to tell you something, but I need you to swear it won't leave this room."

"Isabella, you have my loyalty always. Whatever you tell me will stay between you and me," he says.

It still amazes me how this man can offer such loyalty to the woman who, months ago, left him bleeding out. But I'm not about to tell him how insane he is to do so.

"The Stiletto Killer. I want to tell you how it started. *Why* I started it."

Mikhail sits on the bed in front of me. He takes hold of my now-shaking hands. "You don't have to tell me anything you don't want to. I don't care why or who you killed, kotyonok. I know your heart is good," he says, but I continue anyway.

"When I was eight, I was kidnapped..." I've already told him a little about this. "You know that's how we found my Zia Lola. The men who took me were the same ones who were keeping her."

He nods his head silently. I take in a breath.

"I haven't told anyone this. Neither has Zia Lola. But when the man took me into the basement." I pause, closing my eyes. Talking about it makes me feel like I'm there again. "They shoved me into a cell with my aunt. I didn't know who she was at the time. I was screaming at the man, telling them that my papa would find me and make them pay." I smile at the thought. I had so much faith in a man I barely knew back then too. My heart was right when it came to my papa. He's never let me down. I hope it's right about Mikhail as well.

"I can see you doing that," Mikhail says, breaking me from my thoughts.

"They hit me, then they... they started to undo their pants." I peer up at him, and he sits straighter. His jaw clenches. He doesn't say anything, but his

grip on my hands tightens. “I didn’t know what they were doing. I was eight. But then one of the men climbed on top of my aunt. He was... he was raping her. I just knew he was hurting her. I tried to close my eyes. I didn’t want to watch. But they forced me to open them. I had to sit there and watch them rape her.”

“I’m sorry...” he says, because what else is there to say when someone admits something like that?

“She looked at me and told me it was going to be okay. She just held still and let them do what they wanted to her. She didn’t fight. I now know why, but at the time, I was thinking: *Just tell them to stop. Make them stop hurting you.*”

Mikhail wipes the tears from my cheek. I attempt to shake them away with a steady breath.

“Eventually, they left and then my Zia Lola snuck out. She didn’t take me with her, and I didn’t know if she was coming back. But I knew my papa and mama would find me.” My hands are shaking more intensely. This is the part of the story no one knows. The part I didn’t tell anyone. “When Zia Lola was gone, a man came into the basement by himself. He didn’t even care that my aunt wasn’t there. He walked up to me, grabbed me by my hair. He undid his pants and then put a gun to my head.” I look down. I can’t look at Mikhail when I tell him this part. “He... he made me touch him. Told me what to do, and said that if I didn’t, he was going to shoot me.”

“Isabella, you don’t have to say more. I get it. You never have to justify why you’ve killed those men. Not to me,” Mikhail says.

“That’s not all. I didn’t know who he was at the time, but then when I saw him pointing a gun at Mama... That’s when I discovered that, that same man was my biological father. He knew I was his daughter., and he didn’t care...” I can hear the weakness in my own voice and I hate it.

Mikhail places a finger under my chin, lifting my face to his. “That man wasn’t your father. Neo Valentino is your father, Isabella. It takes more than DNA to deserve that title,” he tells me.

I search his eyes for the pity or disgust I’m expecting to see, but it’s not there. “Ten years ago, my cousin made his first kill. A kid he caught raping one of his other cousins. That’s when I started doing what I did.”

“What you did isn’t a bad thing, and I’m not going to let the fucking pigs anywhere near you,” Mikhail says.

“I started a website on the dark web, a place for women... girls to report

men. Victims in our world who wouldn't otherwise be able to get justice." I pick up the laptop and open it. "I haven't logged in since before Mabilia was born, but I... did this morning and saw this." I turn the laptop around and show Mikhail the message that has his friend's picture and name with a detailed description of what he's done to this woman.

"Ivan?" Mikhail growls. "No fucking way. How the fuck could he do this under my nose?"

I'm not sure if he's questioning me or himself. I don't know what to say.

"Is there a way to find out who this woman is?" he asks me.

I shake my head. There's a reason it's anonymous, and even if I knew, I'd never give up a victim's identity. Not to anyone.



I can't believe what I'm looking at. Fucking Ivan... I almost don't want to believe it, but I can't deny the evidence in front of me.

Isabella just opened up to me about her trauma, about a secret she's kept since she was eight fucking years old. If I could bring that fucker back to life just so I could string him up and kill him all over again, I would.

Nobody should ever have to go through what she did. My mind wanders to Mabilia, the thought of somebody doing that to my daughter, and I see red. I would burn the fucking world down for that little girl. God help anyone who tries to cross her.

A loud knock at the door has me reaching for the pistol that's on the

bedside table.

“Boss, you decent?” Viktor’s voice, full of urgency, calls through the door;

“Yes,” I call back. Pushing to my feet, I head to the door and open it.

“Sorry, boss, but you need to see this.” He hands me his phone, with a message from Samuel on his screen.

SAMUEL:

Tell Mikhail it was Ivan, and he knows where they are.

My eyes meet Viktor’s. We both know shit is about to go down. “Get Lex and tell him to grab the pilot. He’s going with them,” I instruct him, then turn to Isabella. “Get Mabilia. You gotta go.”

I walk over to the wardrobe. I open it and toss the blanket aside. It was covering the small arsenal I have stored there. I strap three pistols to my hips and back before grabbing a pile of ammo.

“What’s going on?” Isabella asks, holding Mabilia tight to her chest.

“Come on, I need you to get our daughter off this island.”

“What’s going on, Mikhail?” she repeats, a little louder this time.

“It’s Ivan. He’s the fucking rat and he knows where we are,” I say. “Theo, Romeo!” I yell out through the house. They both come running down the hall. My hand is on Isabella’s back, leading her out to the chopper.

“What’s going on?” Theo asks, already reaching for his pistol.

“It seems I have a visitor on the way. You need to get them out of here,” I tell him.

“What? No, I’m not leaving you alone,” Isabella argues.

“I won’t be alone. Viktor is staying.”

“Oh, gee, well, that’s a relief,” she says, her voice full of sarcasm. “Come with us.”

“I’m not running, kotyonok. I’ll end this and then come to you,” I tell her.

“Come on, Izzy, I’ll stay with him,” Theo says. “Romeo can go with you and Mabilia.”

She looks from her cousin to me. “I don’t want to leave you here.”

“I know, but you have to get Mabilia to safety.”

“Shit, Boss! Incoming, now,” Lex yells out through the front door.

“Fuck, they’re here already,” I curse under my breath. I push Isabella towards Romeo. “Get them on that fucking chopper,” I tell him.

“Wait!” Isabella smashes her lips on mine. “Don’t fucking die on me, Mikhail,” is all she says before spinning around and running out the back door.

“Lex, go with her,” I tell him.

“Boss, there’re a lot of them. You sure?” I can see the indecision on his face. He’s torn between protecting me and following a direct order.

“Go!” I yell at him. Then head to the front window and peer out. I’m waiting, listening for the sound of the chopper as it takes off. I don’t care how many of these fuckers come at me as long as my daughter and her mother are not anywhere near here. I spot Ivan walking up the beach. He has ten men with him, but they’re not ours. “Fucking Irish,” I hiss out.

“Ain’t that your second?” Theo asks, tipping his head in Ivan’s direction.

“He’s about to be dead is what he is,” I say, then add, “Why isn’t the chopper taking off?”

Theo moves to the side window. “They’re loading up on the boat,” he says.

I had the boat moved from the front dock to the little river behind the house. I figured it would be easier to access and better hidden that way. There’s another island not too far off the coast. I had Lex arrange to have a larger boat anchored there.

“What’s the plan here?” Theo asks.

“Stay alive?” I shrug.

“Right.”

“You should go. I can’t have Isabella hating me because I got her cousin killed,” I tell him.

“Yeah, I’m more afraid of her than I am of you. If I leave you here, she’ll have my balls in a glass jar.” He shakes his head.

I watch as Ivan signals for the men to surround the house. “They’re closing in.”

“Fuck ’em. Let ’em try us,” Viktor says. “Fucking rat bastard.”

Theo pulls a grenade from his pocket—*where the fuck did that come from?* I watch as he slides the window up, pulls the pin, and throws the explosive device outside. It lands right in front of the three men on the left of the property. As soon as the guys on the right hear the explosion, they open fire on the house. Everything happens in a blur. The front door is kicked in and two men step inside. Both of them dropping to the floor seconds later.

“Take the back,” I tell Theo.

He nods and jogs to the other side of the house. Gunfire is raining down on the front, and at this point, I think every window has been shattered. My gun is aimed at the door, waiting for the remaining fuckers to walk through.

“If shit gets bad, get the fuck out of here and find Isabella,” I tell Viktor.

He nods but I know he doesn't agree with my decision. A smoke grenade rolls through the open door. I scoop it up and toss it back out before it activates. Smoke billows, filling the front of the property. The fuckers open fire as they enter the room. I look over to Viktor, who's sprawled out on the floor with a bullet between the eyes.

Fuck!

I aim at the first guy I see. There are at least five in the front room. I take two out before the other three can turn their guns in my direction. All of a sudden, everything stops and the room goes quiet. “Looky who we have here, boys. The big bad Valentino heir,” Ivan's voice calls out.

How the fuck did they get the drop on Theo? I purposely sent him in the opposite direction. “You're a dead man, you filthy fucking Russian rat,” Theo spits out.

“Oh yeah? And who's going to kill me? Where's your backup, pretty boy?” Ivan asks.

“Right fucking here.” I stand and walk around the corner, my gun aimed at my best friend's torso. I don't even hesitate—that's the mistake everyone makes. Waiting. Talking it out. Delivering some big speech. When all you have to do is pull the trigger.

Shock crosses Ivan's face right before he grabs at his chest and falls to the ground, gurgling. Theo grabs one of the other guys around the neck, snapping several vertebrae, while the last fucker makes a run for the door. I hate shooting a man in the back, but the coward doesn't deserve anything more. My bullet rips through the center of his skull.

“Fuck! Zia Lola is going to be pissed,” Theo says, scanning the destruction in our midst.

“Let's go. I need to get to Isabella.” I run out the back of the house towards the chopper.

She should be on the other island by now. I should be able to catch up with her on the boat. Theo jumps into the chopper, shoving the dead pilot out of the door, and sitting himself behind the control panel. Guess that's why they took the boat.

“Do you know how to fly this thing?” I ask him.

“There ain’t a lot I can’t do.” He smirks.

I buckle up and fucking pray that he’s right as he starts hitting buttons and levers. It isn’t long before we’re up in the air. I scan the ocean for the speedboat but don’t see it. Fifteen minutes later, Theo lands the chopper and I jump down and run towards the dock.

“Isabella?” I yell out as soon as I reach the speedboat. There’s no answer. That’s when I notice the larger boat one dock over. “Kotyonok?” I call out, entering the cabin. No one’s here.

Where the fuck is she? I turn when I hear the sounds of footsteps behind me. It’s Theo.

“She’s not here.” I’m doing my best to keep my voice calm. It’s not fucking working. “Where the fuck are they?” I hiss.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

About Kylie Kent

Kylie made the leap from kindergarten teacher to romance author, living out her dream to deliver sexy, always and forever romances. She loves a happily ever after story with tons of built-in steam.

She currently resides in Sydney, Australia and when she is not dreaming up the latest romance, she can be found spending time with her three children and her husband of twenty years, her very own real life instant-love.

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Let's stay in touch, come and hang out in my readers group on Facebook, and follow me on instagram.

