



RHAPSODY
of Pain

ZAKREVSKY BRATVA BOOK THREE

NICOLE FOX

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ZAKREVSKY BRATVA

BOOK 3

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RHAPSODY OF PAIN

I know Demyen Zakrevsky is wrong for me.
But I can't help hoping... *What if he's not?*
After all, he's saved me time and time again.
He's made me a mother twice over.
He's healed my broken heart.
But he's also the one who sold me in the first place.
The one who got my baby stolen away from me.
The one who broke my heart over and over and over.
I can't decide if he's a saint or a sinner.
I suppose now's the time we'll find out for good.
Because the bad guys have my baby, and they want one thing
in return:
Me.
And for my daughter's sake, I'll give myself up every. single.
time.
So I take one final step into the shadows.
And I just have to hope that the man who calls me "his" won't
let me go without a fight.

***RHAPSODY OF PAIN* is Book 3 of the Zakrevsky Bratva
trilogy. Demyen and Clara's story starts in Book 1,**

***REQUIEM OF SIN*, and continues in Book 2, *SONATA OF LIES*.**

DEMYEN

I need to focus. This is a rescue mission. Our lives are literally at stake.

But all I can think about is how fucking incredible she feels in my arms.

Clara's scent fills my nostrils and I'm as good as drugged. I meant to grab her so she won't alert the guards with that stupid fence—but now, I'm holding her because *my God*, I thought I'd never hold her again.

And even though I initially meant to just keep her from screaming... now, my hand is pressed over her mouth to feel the soft curves of her lips.

She's here.

She's right here.

Something inside me buckles under the relief washing over me like a flood. I bury my face in her hair to breathe her in, to feel her soft curls against my face, to prove to me that she's real and I'm not just dreaming all this.

Clara is alive, she's here, and she's in my arms.

Once she calms down and it seems like she's not about to scream her head off and draw all the attention to us, I ease my hold around her. It takes every ounce of self-control within me to not just throw her over my shoulder and carry her off to the getaway car.

Clara pulls away from me a little too fast. She turns around and her eyes widen when she sees my face. At first I think it's in disbelief, maybe even relief...

... but then she turns and runs like hell in the opposite direction.

There's a lot to unpack there.

We just don't have the time for it right now.

I run after her, constantly glancing toward the house to make sure we don't alert anyone to our presence. I can face down my father no problem, but it's Clara who won't survive if he catches us.

And I don't know if I'll survive losing her again.

This time, when I grab her, she swings her bodyweight around to throw me off-balance. It's only halfway successful, but it gives her enough room and leverage to claw at my face and arms. I have to back down just to block my eyes from her sharp fingernails. Clara takes that window of opportunity to dart back across the courtyard and try for the steep hill lining the side garden.

Thank God it's the furthest point away from everyone else.

"Get off me!" she hisses when I tackle her to the ground. Really, I do it only to keep her from running away again and also so the bushes hide us better—but *goddamn*. Feeling her beneath me, pressed so close to my body...

Focus, dumbass.

I gesture for her to stay quiet. Clara glares at me and tries to shove at my chest. It's cute that she thinks I'm letting her get away again.

When she starts smacking at my face, I grab her wrists with one hand and pin them down over her head. My other hand clamps back down over her mouth.

My brain struggles to tell my dick to shut the fuck up so we can get out of this in one piece.

“If you don’t quiet the fuck down,” I breathe low in her ear, “they’ll find us. And they *will* kill us.”

She stills. She’s still glaring at me, but at least she got the memo.

“Let me go,” she mutters against my hand. The sound is muffled, but I can still make out the words.

“No.”

Clara tests my grip on her wrists and quickly slumps when she realizes I’m not letting go. She sighs and tries to look away, but my hand over her mouth won’t let her turn her head.

Her only option is to look at me. Well, glare at me, anyway.

Once I’m fairly confident she’s done making serious noise, I move my hand away so she can at least silently mouth her words to me.

“Why should I trust you?” is her leading question.

Which is, unfortunately, a good place to start.

I just wish I could think of the right words to respond with. But my mind draws a blank and she takes that as confirmation that I am, in fact, a treacherous bastard.

“That’s what I thought. Get. Off.”

I relent only because I need her to see she *can* trust me, despite all the evidence to the contrary. I try to at least keep a hold of her wrist, but Clara yanks away and puts a solid three feet of distance between us.

“I’m not going back.” She glares at me, daring me to make another move against her. “You can’t make me go back.”

At first, I think she means to Oleg’s place, and I sure as hell don’t blame her. But before I reassure her that I wouldn’t let her go back there even if she wanted to, I realize that may not be the place she’s talking about.

“Breathe. I’m not making you go anywhere.” I hold my hands up in surrender. “Where do you want to go?”

She studies me through narrowed eyes. “Willow.”

I nod. "Of course. She misses you."

I miss you, too. We all fucking miss you.

Clara shifts from angry and suspicious to suddenly unsure, maybe even afraid. "Is she... okay?"

Again, I nod. "As okay as she can be without her mother." I offer my hand out to her. "I'll take you to her."

She recoils and stares at my hand in horror. And again, I pretend like that doesn't just fucking stab me in the gut with regret. When her eyes scan upward to meet mine, it's as if I'm some complete stranger luring her into a white van.

"Why should I trust you?" she asks again. "You're his *son*. You're no better than he is."

God, I want to tell her how wrong she is. But she's right that it's his blood running in my veins. That my actions brought her to his doorstep. Hell, I practically gift-wrapped her for him.

But I can only erase one sin at a time. Some will have to wait.

I drop my hands to my sides. "You know what? You're right. I've spent my whole life hating the bastard and here I am, imitating him. I fucked up. I fucked up badly and I'm going to be paying for that mistake for the rest of my life." I lower my eyes to the ground at her feet. "Whether or not I get to have you in it."

Clara takes one, then two, very slow and very small steps toward me. "What mistake?"

I meet her gaze. I need her to see, to know, that I mean every word. "Taking you to—"

I stop myself. No, that isn't right. The fuckup happened days before the auction. Weeks before.

"Ever thinking you were guilty. Or lying. Or just..." *Overreacting to a stupid fucking dream you had.* I sigh. "Look. I came here to get you out." I glance around for any signs of the guards, but it looks like we're in the clear. "I've been looking for you ever since that night at the auction, and—"

“You sold me.” Clara shakes her head. “You *sold* me!”

We don’t have time to unpack the logistics of what happened, so I go on the offense just to move her rear into gear. “We can talk about this later. But right now, we need to get the hell out of here before Oleg and his men find us. Or else neither of us will ever see Willow again.”

She bites her lip. Thinks about it.

“I’ll even sit up front with Pav if it makes you feel better,” I offer. I’m going to ignore the way her face instantly brightens up at the mention of his name. “We circled back and parked a few blocks away. He’s waiting there to take you home.”

Without any further hesitation, Clara turns on her heel and starts walking toward the front of the house—right as angry Russian shouts fill the air.

Shit.

This time, I grab Clara and shove her forward, damn the consequences. She lets me do it, but those fucking slippers on her feet keep tripping her up. I shove down my irritation beneath the fear and panic at hearing Oleg’s men shout even louder.

I’m not sticking around to find out what they’re saying.

We’re almost over the hill when Clara trips and falls again. She tries to not cry out, but the rocky sand scrapes her knee pretty bad. To her credit, she at least tries to push herself back up, but her arms and now her legs are trembling too hard.

Blyat’. We need to keep moving. I don’t care if she tries to blind me or rip my tongue out—I’m going to get her to safety and deal with her rage later.

I come up behind her and scoop her up into my arms, not breaking stride even as she shifts to get more comfortable. The fact that she immediately wraps her arms around my neck and leans in close both spurs me on and somewhat distracts me.

She’s here.

In my arms.

Focus, asshole! Get to the car!

Pavel is still parked another block away, but the bottom of the hill gives us a solid running start away from Oleg's estate.

We both hear engines roar to life. Clara clings to me tighter.

I've got you, baby. I'm not gonna let them take you from me again.

There are a thousand things I wish I could say to her, but I know it's better to keep silent. For now, I just need to get us down and over the street, maybe cut through a few backyards, and at least make sure she's safe inside with Pavel before bullets start flying.

"I can run," she whispers.

I shake my head and keep walking with her cradled in my arms. "Blood trail. Your knee will give us away."

I don't tell her I'm worried she's too weak to keep running. That she looks too frail, too traumatized, to move as quickly as she needs to in order to survive this escape.

I can't tell her that I'm too scared to let her go, even if it would make running easier for both of us.

I have to be strong.

I have to be fearless.

I have to keep my head on straight.

Clara needs the best of me.

DEMYEN

Hummers race down the street from Oleg's driveway, but I'm able to duck between two dark houses and into deep shadows before they spot us.

And, blessedly, Pavel had the urge to start the Rezvani and roll it along the back street. By the time we emerge on the other side of the cramped houses and dark alley connected to them, he's got the doors open for us and almost perfectly aligned to conceal us from the cross street.

True to my word, I set Clara in the back seat and let her manage her own seat buckle. I climb into the front passenger side and yank the door shut. Pav doesn't need a signal to know it's time to peel the fuck out of there.

Especially now that one of the Hummers has picked up on our presence and is now barreling toward us.

"Pav—"

"Hang on."

It's a two-wheel turn in that small side street and I grab the handlebar overhead to stop myself from slamming into the door window. One glance in the rearview mirror shows me that Clara managed to buckle first, and is clinging to the strap with eyes closed and lips trembling in a silent prayer.

The Hummer roars up close behind us. Pavel slams his foot down on the accelerator. A small whimper escapes the backseat, but I make myself ignore it and fucking *focus*.

“Almost there...” Pavel whips another turn down a different side street to throw them off, but we’re met with another Hummer that nearly cuts us off.

Clara clamps a hand over her own mouth. She knows better than to shriek at a time like this.

“How long?” I start rummaging through the glove compartment.

“Two minutes.”

“Where’s the—”

“Under the seat.”

I reach down between my legs and fumble blindly under the seat until I feel it. The gun is lightweight and meant for emergencies; pretty sure this counts as one.

“I need a five-mile mark,” I tell him.

“Got it.”

Instead of taking a main road out, Pavel whips the Rezvani off the road entirely and plows through the desert in the opposite direction of home. More Hummers fly after us, but the sudden change in terrain and lighting slows them down just enough to give us some more distance.

“That’s five,” Pavel announces.

Perfect.

I roll down my passenger door window and pull myself out through it, gun in one hand and doorframe gripped with the other.

Once I’m in position, I rest on the window’s edge and aim.

The lead Hummer’s front tire blows with the first shot. It’s lucky, but hell, it’s about time Lady Luck gave me a blessing or two. Still, we’re losing city light fast and the jolting of the SUV over rocky terrain makes a steady aim nearly impossible. I won’t get that lucky again.

The Hummer I shot pitches and rolls, crashing into the one right behind it. But instead of giving us a break in the chase, it

clears a path for three more to pull up side by side and close in behind us.

I'm leveling the gun again when something hot stings my arm.

Fuck!

I've been shot. Grazed, really. It's less deadly than it is just fucking annoying and it makes holding my arm steady all that more challenging. But I grit my teeth and bear down, using the roof of the SUV to steady the hand holding the gun, and take a few more shots.

One hisses as it buries itself in the Nevadan sand.

So does another.

But the third lands home.

The satisfying sound of glass breaking and panicked shouts reaches my ears as the now-dead driver sags in his seat and pulls the truck veering off-path. A few more bullets whizz past, and I'm forced to duck inside the vehicle to regroup before my head gets lopped off by a cactus.

"How many are there?" Pavel asks.

"At least five, and twice as many men. Think we can outrun them?"

"By fuel alone, probably. But that depends on how far you wanna go."

I twist around to look at Clara. She's wide-eyed and terrified, but she's not screaming her head off. She just stares back at me, clutching her seatbelt like it's a lifeline.

The answer is obvious: I'll go as far as it fucking takes just to keep her safe.

"Do it. I'll send the coordinates."

Pavel's face twists in a grim smirk. "Already done."

We're taking a few hits to the outer shell, but nothing pierces the windows. They're probably trying to do what I did earlier and blow out our tires so we have no choice but to stop. Good

luck with that, though. If I can't aim in the growing dark, none of those *mudaks* will be any better.

My phone buzzes. I don't want to answer it, but I have a feeling this one is important.

I glance over my shoulder to check on Clara again before I press the phone to my ear. "The hell do you want?"

"You have five minutes to bring her back."

I scoff. "Right. What makes you think I have her?"

"Don't play your fucking games with me, boy!" Oleg's voice roars over the phone. I catch Clara wincing in the corner of my eye. "Bring! The bitch! Back!"

I take a deep, slow breath, then click my tongue. "Tsk tsk, *Otets*. Such language. You kiss your mother with that mouth?"

"*Ty mertvyi sukin syn—*"

"You're breaking up. Try again later." I hang up and drop the phone back into the center console.

Pavel steals a quick glance at me, then at the rearview mirror. "Do you *have* to poke the bear?"

"I'd prefer to choke him, but I do what I can with what I've got."

He whips a hard left to avoid a pile of boulders; the last-second move successfully lures another Hummer into the rocks and forces the two flanking it to risk rolling with even sharper turns.

More bullets pepper the backside of the Rezvani.

I'm ready to risk leaning back out again and shooting out the remaining Hummers, when we're suddenly surrounded by a blinding flash of dozens of headlights. Other Rezvanis, more Hummers, and a few Jeeps roll into view and start circling the chase to slow everyone down. By the time the full ring forms, both Pavel and our pursuers have no choice but to skid to a stop.

My Bratva has arrived.

I don't jump out of the vehicle just yet. I simply sit here and enjoy the sounds of my men shouting commands and aiming their weapons at what's left of Oleg's crew. Metal screeches and doors slam, and it's the sound of fists hitting flesh that cues me to go ahead and join the fray.

"Stay here," I tell Clara. She nods.

I haven't put the gun away this whole time, and I don't plan to until we're safe back at the villa. It feels heavy in my hand as I step out and calmly saunter over to the cluster of Zakrevsky Senior men who are now on their knees with hands on top of their heads, staring down dozens of barrels aimed at them. My men clear a spot for me, and I cock a brow at our new captives.

"Gentlemen." I survey them, their downcast heads, their sullen grimaces. "I have only one question to ask you. Which of you helped Oleg hurt my woman?"

No one answers. Everyone just stares at the dirt.

I cock my gun for good measure and casually aim it at the ground right in front of them. "I won't ask again. Who here stood by and allowed that bastard to injure and *scar* Clara Everett?"

"We had nothing to do with that!" One man, older and probably in his fifties, spits at the dirt and snarls at me. "She was branded, nothing else. *Pakhan* refused to let us touch her."

That answers a lot of questions at once.

Unfortunately for these bastards, no answer would have saved them.

I nod to one of my *vors*, who grabs the man who spoke by the back of his shirt and yanks him up to face me.

"And you just stood by?" I growl. "Let him brand her like an animal?"

The man's face twists in a lewd smirk. "No. I held the bitch down while he did it. Only way I figured he'd let me get a feel. Why not? That's what slaves are good for."

I return his smirk. "You know what you're good for?"

The blast of my gun is muted only by his skull and the wet splattering of blood and brains on the sand.

“Fertilizer.”

When I slowly turn, I’m met with a few more fearful gazes from Oleg’s men who didn’t count on me being so cruel. Prisoners of war are to be kept safe, right?

Not in this war.

I give my men the signal and they get to work. When the corpses are piled up and set to burning, I take a picture to send to my father. Let him watch his soldiers crumble to ashes on the desert sand.

“Scorched earth” has a whole new meaning now.

CLARA

As soon as Pavel parks this tank contraption in front of Demyen's estate, I want to cry.

I thought I'd never see those front doors again.

I thought I'd never see *home* again.

And the fact that this place feels so safe, so perfectly *home*, breaks my heart into a thousand pieces.

Because this *isn't* my home. This *isn't* safe.

Nowhere is safe so long as a Zakrevsky lives there.

Pavel is the one who opens my door for me and helps me out. He offers his hand for me to take, but I grip the door panels for balance instead. I don't look up at him in case he seems upset or insulted, but in the corner of my eye, I see him smile sadly and nod. He opens his mouth to say something, but thinks again and turns away.

I try to ignore the sting in my heart. He's my friend—at least, I thought he was.

But he let Demyen take me away. He let Demyen *sell* me.

And now, he has nothing to say. Maybe he thought he'd never see me again. Maybe he's upset that I'm back, or that I made him go through so much trouble and risk his life just to get me away from Mas—Mister Zakrevsky.

No one comes around to shoo me inside, or away, or anything. Demyen is off to one side, talking with his men who pulled up behind us. He doesn't glance at me, not even once.

He still hates me. He cares enough to get me out of that hellhole, to bring me back to Willow, but that's where it ends between us.

Oh, God. *Willow*.

I should be excited. Elated. Overwhelmed with relief. Instead, I'm breaking into a cold sweat and feeling my stomach turn to stone. It churns and hardens with every step I take toward the front door of the main house. My palms slip on the door handle; they're too clammy.

Willow doesn't deserve this. She doesn't deserve a mother like me—someone who just up and vanishes, then comes back worse than when she left.

The door opens and I slip inside.

“Clara?”

Again, my stomach turns. But not from fear or self-disgust, just... I don't know what Bambi thinks of me. She, too, let Demyen take me to that horrible auction. She *knew* what would happen to me there.

But here she is, rushing toward me with relief on her face and tears in her eyes. “Clara! Oh my God! You're here!”

She wraps her arms around me and hugs me tight.

It hurts.

Everything fucking *hurts*.

I wrench myself away and back up into the wall. Maybe if I press myself against it hard enough, the adobe will open up and swallow me whole. Take me into the safe darkness and surround me with an impenetrable shield so no one can ever hurt me again.

So the burning on my skin just from being touched will go away.

Bambi looks at me, her brow furrowed with confusion. Then hurt. Definitely regret. “Clara... I am so, so sorry.”

I want to cry. I want to scream. I want her, him, *everyone* to know exactly what they did to me.

Because if she's not lying, if she actually does care...? I don't want a fucking apology. I want her to *know*. To understand on a bone-deep level what her complacency caused.

I force myself to lift my eyes to hers. "You knew."

She sucks in a soft gasp. "Clara..."

"You *knew*. You knew what he planned to do to me and you didn't stop him." Tears choke my voice, but I swallow them back. "You didn't even try."

Bambi's tears fall. She tries to square her shoulders, but they slump almost instantly. "I didn't have a choice..."

I don't buy that. Not from her. "You always have a choice. Always."

She opens her mouth to say something, but the front door opens next to us and Demyen walks through. He pauses when he sees us. Uncertainty clouds his features.

"Is there a problem here?"

But Bambi quickly wipes her tears away and nods. "Nope! All good. I'll go let Gloria know about... I mean, I'm just gonna... I..." She turns on her heels and swiftly leaves through a side door.

Demyen shoves his hands into his pockets and looks at the empty space next to me. "I'll take you to go see Willow. She's been asking for you."

I hesitate. I can't believe I'm hesitating over seeing my baby girl, especially after all this time fighting to survive so I could, but...

I rub my arms. It doesn't do much to soothe me.

He holds a hand out to me, then pulls it back. I'm not going to let that sting, at least not for long. I just follow him through the main house and out to the courtyard, where he points to show me where she is.

My heart leaps into my throat.

Willow's room—her *real* room—is back to how it used to be, with even more plants and toys overflowing it with warmth

and happiness. She's sitting outside with Gloria, snuggled up in a papasan chair reading a picture book under the soft lights of the solar lamps.

Gloria glances up, then freezes. She quickly covers her mouth with a hand, then nods at something Demyen signals and whispers into Willow's ear.

Willow looks up at me. Her sweet little face bursts into a brilliant smile, and she leaps to her feet. "Mommy!"

I wince. I step back.

Demyen notices.

So does Gloria. She gently hugs Willow from behind and whispers again into her ear. My sweet baby girl's face falls, but she nods and lets her adoptive grandmother usher her into her bedroom.

My chest burns. My ribs are squeezing in on each other.

"You okay?" Demyen softly asks next to me.

No, I'm not FUCKING OKAY! is what I want to scream at him, but I don't have the energy. It's a miracle I can slowly shake my head.

"I can't..." I suck in a deep, rattling breath. "I just need some time. I want to be my best for her."

I have to focus on what I want, for Willow as well as myself. I want to hold her close and cover her beautiful little face with kisses. I want her to know I would never, and *will* never, just up and leave her.

But I don't want to taint her with my touch.

I don't want the remnants of that monster—still clinging to my skin—to somehow infect her with nightmares.

I don't want him to somehow touch her through me.

Demyen stares at me. Like he's horrified. Like I just said...

Oh, shit. I just said all of that, out loud, right in front of him. I'm so far removed from my own body, my own existence,

that I can't even tell the difference between a private thought and my voice.

He doesn't say anything in response. Just glares at me.

And then he storms off.

"Don't take it personally." Bambi's gentle voice comes up behind me, and she moves to rest a hand on my shoulder. But then she quickly pulls it back and settles for folding her arms around her slender waist. "He's facing his own dark demons."

I thought she left.

"I was going to." Bambi sighs and delicately wipes the side of her nose. "But I feel like turning away from you is the worst thing I've ever done."

Shit. I'm going to be struggling with unknowingly voicing my thoughts for a *while*.

"Really, I just... I just wanted to make sure you're okay."

What is with everyone and "okay"? I'm not "okay." I will probably never be "okay." If I have to hear that word over and over again, I might as well puncture my eardrums now.

Bambi sighs. "You know you're safe here, right?"

I slowly turn my head to look at her. "Am I?"

She frowns. "Of course! We've been looking everywhere—"

"Was that before or after you all just decided to sell me into sexual slavery?"

"That's not fair."

The laugh that suddenly bubbles from my chest has absolutely no humor or joy or anything remotely positive in it. "Fair? You want to talk about *fair*?!" I fold my arms across my chest and face her head-on. "I think, after being promised so many wonderful things, after being given a home and a job and what I *thought* was love..." Again, my voice cracks, but damn it all, I'm going to get through at least this much. "—Only to have it all ripped from me for *no fucking reason*, no one who stood up for me, no one to stop Demyen from... from..."

Shit. I'm losing it. I'm shaking, I'm crying, and I am so. Fucking. Pissed.

“So no, you're totally right. It's *not* fair! It's not 'fair' that I'm constantly accused of lying when I'm the only one here who's ever actually told the fucking truth!”

I don't wait for her response. It's not worth the headache or heartache or all-over ache. I just want to be alone. I don't even care if my old room by Willow's is occupied by someone else now—I'll kick them out if I have to.

When the door opens easily and I see it's back to how I used to have it, down to the placement of my collected knickknacks on the bookshelves, I burst into sobs.

And then I start ripping my clothes off.

Because in reality, they're *not* “my” clothes. They're Oleg's. I couldn't escape his nightmare realm without being covered in his clothes and in his scent. Even now, as buttons fly and I tear the shirt off me, every movement pushes that same horrible musk into my nostrils and makes me wish I could burn it all in a blazing inferno.

Maybe I can. There's a fireplace in the study. I could totally march across the compound, completely naked, and burn every last fiber of Oleg Zakrevsky to ash.

But that feels like too much effort. I'm struggling as it is to kick his stupid jeans off. When I do manage to untangle my limbs, I bunch up his clothing and throw it as far away from me as humanly possible. Which isn't far, but at least it falls behind an end table.

Shower. I need a shower.

If I can't burn him off me, I can fucking boil him.

Stumbling into the bathroom makes me grip the sink for balance. Which makes me stare at myself in the mirror for a very, very long time.

I did what I had to do.

I did what I *needed* to do in order to survive.

I never gave in. I never gave up. I only did what was necessary to plan my escape.

I didn't...

I did...

I...

My trembling arms suddenly stop shaking.

And with a shriek of unbridled rage, I rip the mirror off its hinges and throw it against the wall.

But that's not enough. I can still see myself in the glass. I can still see the bruises, the circles under my eyes, the straggled hair hanging limp around my face.

I can still see what he did to me.

I can still see what he turned me into.

So I pick the mirror back up and slam it against the wall again.

And again.

And again.

Over and over until there's nothing left but tiny shards and fractured dust glittering on the tiled floor.

I practically punch the shower handle up and crank it to the hottest setting. I don't care that the initial water is ice-cold; I step inside and let the heat slowly overcome the chill.

My gaze lands on a razor hanging up in a small suction cup holder on the shower wall.

I could probably pop the blades out.

I could use one to cut this stupid fucking brand from my thigh.

No. He's taken enough from me. I won't give him the pleasure of taking a literal pound of flesh from my body, especially since that would prove he's forever damaged my mind. And then I'd have a constant scar to remind me of him still.

Instead, I focus on scrubbing every last trace of him off me. I empty half the bottle of body wash into the netted sponge and

lather it up, scrubbing myself head to toe with the soap that smells so much like Demyen.

I hate him.

I *have* to hate him.

But he's not here. He's not watching me in this shower. So for now, I allow myself to give in to my deepest, darkest pains. I sob as I scrub, and I do my damned hardest to remind myself that even in the worst of it all, a part of me kept wishing I could see Demyen one last time. I remind myself that he came to rescue me, and he got me out of there.

The water grows hotter. So do my tears.

And so does my skin, as I start scrubbing it a second... third... fourth time...

But no matter how hard I scrub, I can't get rid of the stain.

DEMYEN

Walking a lap around the compound didn't do much to ease the guilt eating away at my soul.

I don't want him to touch her through me.

"Fuck!" I roar as I grab a bottle of vermouth from the bar and throw it against one of the stone columns in the secondary courtyard.

The shattering glass and foaming red liquid splashing everywhere does feel a little cathartic. So I grab another bottle and throw it at the same spot. I don't know why it helps. All I know is that breaking things makes me feel some sort of relief.

After the fourth or fifth bottle, I kick a barstool over and then decide it will look better chucked into the pool. Same with another. And another.

I'm tempted to go in after them and just sit down there. Forever. Or at least until Clara forgives me for what I've put her through.

Which—let's be honest—will probably be forever.

My eyes sting, but I let them water up and blur my sight. I've been blind to everything around me up until now; what's a little more visual impairment?

I ordered my men to take Oleg's troops to our next most vulnerable warehouse instead of the cells here at the compound. I wanted them far away from us.

She doesn't want Oleg touching Willow through her?

Well, I don't want Oleg touching Willow through *me*.

After all, as he reminded me, it's his blood flowing through my veins.

His blood.

Zakrevsky blood.

After all these years denying our connection, burying away any sort of likeness to the monster of my childhood... I did more than just grow to resemble him.

I *became* him.

I grab the table and throw it into the pool. Then the other chair, just so there'll be a matching set.

If I ever get my hands on Oleg, I'll tie him to that fucking chair and watch him drown. And then I'll join him. End the line with me. Tolya's safer in prison, anyway. Far, far away from any possibility of repeating our shit, or worse.

It's several more minutes of drinking and throwing shit before I feel better enough to start walking back to the main courtyard. I need to check on Clara, but I don't want to scare her any more than I already have.

Clara's lights are on. The window curtains are shut, but I should still see her silhouette through the golden glow.

Weirdly, I don't. So I test the doorknob, find it unlocked, and slip inside.

All the lights are on. The overhead, the bedside, the end table... the little hall leading to the bathroom... the bathroom...

And the shower. Come to think of it, it feels strangely damp in here.

Something in my gut says I need to go check on her. The worst possible scenario flashes through my head and I all but run to the door and yank it open.

Hot steam rolls out in a thick cloud. I can't see through it for the longest moment; when I do, I'm shocked by the sight.

The medicine cabinet is a disaster, its hinges twisted and torn and mangled. Mirror shards cover the floor in every direction.

And sitting on the shower floor, beet red and sobbing, is Clara.

“Shit!” I fumble for the shower lever, but it’s burning hot. All the towels are soaking wet and in a pile by the toilet. I’m not thinking straight, so I do the next most logical thing and yank my shirt off so I can use it as an oven mitt against the metal.

The water shuts off, but Clara doesn’t seem to notice. She’s curled up in one corner, knees hugged to her chest, her long wet hair clinging to her face.

“Come on,” I mutter to myself more than her as I crouch down. “Let’s get you dry.”

I start to scoop her up, but as soon as my skin touches hers, Clara suddenly shrieks and twists in my arms. She claws at my face and kicks wildly, so hard that I have to set her back down on the shower floor.

“Get off! Get off!” she screams at the top of her lungs, something between words and bloodcurdling shrieking. “*Get off!*”

Another shriek, another lurch against me, and then she resigns to slapping my chest over and over until she whips back around to try and turn the shower on again.

“Get off! Get him off! I need to get him off!”

It doesn’t take much to realize who she’s talking about.

My heart shatters into more pieces than the mirror on the floor as I watch her crumple in on herself. Clara Everett, *my* Clara, has a fiery soul tempered by a lifetime of enduring the worst mankind has to offer.

To see her like this after only a few weeks with my own father?

It’s a punishment worse than death.

I fall to my knees behind her because I don’t know what else to do. I pull her into my arms and brace myself for the well-deserved onslaught because, again, I’m all out of moves here.

I stretch out my legs and slide us back against the far wall. At least this way, I can hold her close and gently rock her back and forth. Slowly, subtly, but I do it.

She's not fighting me anymore. She's stopped screaming.

I don't know what to say. I don't know what I could possibly tell her to make things right, so in the end, I don't say anything at all.

Slowly, her sobs quiet and still. But I don't let go. I hold her closer, tighter, and let her bury her face into my neck so she can scream if she needs to.

I'm glad for the shower, for the water still streaking her skin.

It lets me hide my own tears.

DEMYEN

Once Clara has calmed down, I make an executive decision for both our sanities and carry her over to her bed.

But instead of tucking her into it, dripping wet and naked, I wrap her up in the comforter and hoist her back into my arms.

I should have posted a guard inside her room, or at least asked Bambi to stay with her. Clara is in no state of mind to be left all alone. Not when there's dozens of sharp glass pieces scattered around her bathroom floor.

As we pass by it, a quick glance over toward the solarium confirms that Willow is still fast asleep. I hope the kid didn't hear anything that just happened.

Clara doesn't make a sound the whole way to my room. She doesn't so much as whimper when I sit her down on my bed and leave her inside the bundle while I head to my bathroom for fresh, dry towels. And when I return, I can see she hasn't moved an inch.

I don't know if I should be worried or relieved.

The first thing I tackle is her hair. Right now, it's a tangled, sopping mess hanging limply around her face and body. I grab one of my wide-toothed combs and a hand towel, then move toward the bed. I realize I'm about to soak it through with my jeans, so I kick those off and kneel behind her, making sure to keep a respectable distance between us.

I squeeze her hair as dry as I can with the hand towel, then get to work combing out the tangles. Something in my chest

tightens painfully. All this time with her, and all this time away from her, and at no point have I ever just taken the time to enjoy the simple things about her.

Like the way her curls spring to life around my fingers, regardless of how thoroughly I've combed them.

Or the way she sighs and slumps as the comb massages her scalp, slow and smooth.

It takes a long while to work every tangle from her hair, but I'm glad for it. The silence, the focus, gives both of us time to sort through our thoughts.

At least, it does for me. By the time I'm done, I'm more determined than ever to work the tangles out between us, however long that may take.

Even if it takes forever.

Clara stands and lets the now-wet comforter drop to the floor. Immediately, I force myself to concentrate on drying her off with a soft bath towel so I'm not distracted by her naked curves.

Or by the sight of my family's crest seared into the back of her thigh.

As I work, I don't let my fingers touch her skin. I don't think she's ready for that, and I'm not sure she ever will be.

I can't blame her. For right now, she just needs to know that I'm here for her, I'm here *with* her, and she's safe. I'm going to take care of her, starting now.

She tries to pull away suddenly, but I don't let her. I wrap my arms around her, using the towel as a blanket to hold her against my chest.

"It's okay," I whisper into her hair. "You're safe. I'm not going to hurt you."

"Because you already have?"

Well... shit. Just when I think she can't gut-punch me any harder, she does.

I deserve it.

“Because I’ve never regretted something so much in my life,” I finally admit. “And because I’m determined to never make the same mistake again.”

Slowly—painfully slowly—Clara turns around. She doesn’t try to pull away, just shifts inside the towel until she’s gazing up at me with those beautiful eyes framed by her long, dark lashes.

“Why?” The word catches and rasps in her throat.

I know what she’s asking. I’ve asked myself the same question every second of every minute of every day. *Why? Why did I let this happen?*

I tuck a curl behind her ear and let my fingertips trail along the side of her soft cheek. To think I almost lost her... to a sick psychopath, no less... because of my quick temper and blind sense of “justice”...

“I didn’t—” I stop, rethinking my approach. “I should have never brought you there. I knew how dangerous it was. I should have kept you here where you’d be safe.”

Her beautiful brow furrows. “But you—”

“I made a swift decision, months ago, that I never should have even considered in the first place.” I sigh again and sit on the edge of the bed. “I need you to know...”

On the one hand, I want to look her in the eyes when I tell her this.

On the other hand, it’s far easier to confess my mistakes when I don’t have to see the betrayal etched all over her beautiful face.

I clear my throat and tell myself that no matter what happens between us, she *needs* to know. “I never actually sold you. At all.”

Clara stiffens.

“The second we walked into that cocktail party, I knew it was all a huge mistake. I knew there was no way I’d ever let anyone take you from me.” I sigh and press my brow to her

shoulder. “But I couldn’t get us out fast enough. Not without raising suspicions with the Yakuza.”

She sighs. “Raizo.”

“I came back for you.” I did. I can still feel the sickness just remembering that night. “I came looking for you and couldn’t find you. I thought... Well, it doesn’t matter what I thought. But when I still couldn’t find you, I confronted Raizo. By then, you’d already been sold.”

I feel her body shake in my embrace. Fresh tears roll down her face. I want to kiss them away, but that might scare her. Too much, too soon.

“We don’t have to talk about it anymore right now,” I reassure her. “But we do need to talk about it eventually. No more secrets. No more lies.”

Clara snuffles, then nods. “Yeah,” she agrees. Her voice sounds clearer now. “Just... not tonight?”

I smile softly. “Not tonight.”

Finally, she leans into me. Finally, I feel what tiny amounts of trust she’s willing to give and I swear to myself I’m not going to take them for granted. I cradle her head to my chest and kiss her hair.

Even if this is all I ever get with her moving forward, it will still be enough.

“I’m going to take care of you,” I murmur. “I want to take care of you. Anything you want, anything you need, just tell me.”

Again, Clara stills. “Anything?”

I pretend like my stomach doesn’t immediately bunch into knots at the sound of her hesitation in that one word. “Anything,” I reply. “What do you want?”

She suddenly bursts into laughter. “Short of a time machine? I want a *lot* of things. But mainly, I want to not feel disgusting every time I move.” Her head turns to the side so she can look at me. “I want... I *need*... to just...” She rubs her arm vigorously until her skin turns a bright pink and I have to grab her wrist to stop her. “I need to get him off me. I don’t want to

feel like he's still touching me, I don't want to smell him, I don't want to see those horrible marks..."

Before I can even blink, Clara whips around and straddles my lap. The towel immediately drops to the floor. She looks me in the eyes for only a second...

And then I'm pulled into a kiss.

Fuck. I've wanted this for so long. I've spent every night since she was taken aching to feel her in my arms, to taste her on my tongue, to hear her soft little sighs and moans and make her cry out my name.

But this isn't right.

None of this is right.

She's been through so much in such little time. I'm not about to compound her trauma by just being yet another man who uses her.

I make sure to kiss her back—she needs to feel that I do, in fact, want her—but then I cup her face in my hands and ease her away. "Clara, I can't..."

"Please." Tears brim her lashes. When she blinks, one rolls down her soft cheek and I swipe it away with my thumb. "I want you, Demyen."

My brain is scolding me for even considering it; this isn't the way to do things and she needs some time.

My dick is screaming at my brain to shut the fuck up.

My heart? Well, my heart is finally getting a say in things for the first time in... ever.

"Baby, I want you, too. But I want you to take some time. Figure out what it is you *really* want—"

She silences me with another kiss. Goddammit, I don't have the strength to pull away or stop her. She tastes like heaven and wine and everything I thought I'd lost and once again, I have a mind to murder whoever breaks this moment.

"Clara—"

“I want *you*.” She threads her fingers through my hair and gently tugs, all while shifting her hips on my lap to straddle me even closer. Her sugary lips brush against mine and the combination with that wiggle is not helping my mind stay clear. “I need you.”

I sigh. I know I’m going to regret asking this. “What do you need me to do?”

“I need you inside me. Around me. All over me.”

I swallow. Hard.

Clara’s lip still trembles, but she looks at me with a heady swirl of determination, desperation, and desire. It’s a giant red flag made with the most exquisite fabric. “Help me, Demyen,” she whispers against my mouth. “I don’t want to feel any of them anymore. I just want you.”

If this were any other time.

Any other time, under any other circumstances, these words coming from her mouth would have me pile-driving into her within minutes. As much as I’ve insisted on being the one to own her, claim her, mark her with my teeth and my scent, it’s a completely different experience knowing that she *wants* me to.

The “why” is what’s causing my hesitation. She’s been claimed, and marked, and used by evil men before. What she’s asking me to do right now is erase those memories by flooding her mind, body, and soul with new ones.

Can I do it without causing any further damage?

My hands smooth along her sides, over her back, and down to cup her ass. *Fuck*, I can feel her grow hot and wet for me already.

“I’ll give you exactly what you want,” I murmur low in her ear. “But you have to be my good girl. You have to do as I say.”

The shiver that travels through her body goes straight to her hips, which roll and grind on my lap.

I know she thinks I mean to do something like spank her and plow her into a screaming orgasm—which is absolutely on my

To Do list. Eventually.

She doesn't know that I have different plans for her gorgeous body tonight. Plans and ideas that involve a lot less aggression and a shit ton more care than she's ever received.

Because damn it all, she fucking deserves it.

And if I can forge an apology—or the remnants of one—by showing her exactly what she means to me? It's a start.

I guide her lips back to mine and take the time to taste her. No rush, no pressure, simply savoring the way her tongue darts sweetly between my lips. Enjoying the way she lets out a soft moan when I suck on it, stroking with my own tongue. I nibble on her bottom lip and groan when I feel her tremble again, this time with pleasure.

Her body writhes under my touch as I continue to rub and caress her silky soft skin. When I feel her ribs, how frail and underfed she is, I let out another growl. This time, I'm pissed.

Not at her, of course. It's just another thing I'm adding to the list of things I'm going to take out on Oleg.

“Let me know if anything hurts.”

Clara purrs and holds my head to her. “Harder.”

Oh, I am definitely harder. I'm also going to keep testing the levels until she tells me to stop—and I hope she does actually tell me to stop.

I'm more worried she won't.

My arms wrap around her tighter, pulling her into me until there's no space left between us. I suck on the curve of her neck, swirl that same patch of skin with my tongue, then bite down.

She doesn't tell me to stop. Instead, she cries out softly and digs her nails into my shoulder blades, grinding on my lap.

I pull off with a wet smack of my lips against her skin the second I hear the slightest hint of a whimper. The mark left behind is big and red, and is undoubtedly going to leave a solid hickey there for a few days.

By the way she moans and kisses me again, then presses me to the other side of her neck...

I'm getting the impression that's exactly what she wants.

A quick turn tumbles us onto the bed, and I tuck her under me before she has a chance to wriggle away. The fact that she's here, right here, sighing my name and reaching for me to kiss me... This gift is not lost on me.

I know how things could have gone.

I know how lucky we both are to have this moment.

My tongue glides along her collarbone, then lower, until I find the swell of her breast. But a new surge of rage rolls through me when I see the faint lash marks darting across her sensitive skin.

I lightly graze the tip of her nipple with my teeth. Clara hisses, so I immediately stop and look up to ask, "Too much?"

She bites her lip, blushes, and slowly shakes her head. "No, sorry. Just... really sensitive there."

"I can—"

"Don't stop. Please."

Not that I could even if I wanted to. I've been starving for her and now, she's laid out before me like a feast.

Clara moans and arches her body closer to me as I kiss her breasts. "Yesss... please..."

Who knows how much time passes between savoring her plump softness and moving on—down her ribs, to her stomach, where I find more bruises shaped like fingerprints. As I find each one, I suck and bite and lick her skin until my marks are the only ones either of us can see.

By the time I reach the delicious curve of her hip, her waist is a tapestry of my reclaiming.

I almost want Oleg to come by. Just so he can see and understand—without question—that she is *my* woman.

I drape her legs over my shoulders and settle between them. Kissing her mound feels like an act of worship. Maybe it is; I find myself breathing words of thanks with every press of my lips to her damp skin. She shivers, moans, and rolls her hips with such eagerness that I have to press a hand over her lower stomach to hold her in place.

“Please, Demyen... I need...”

I know what she wants, but I’m getting a better sense of what she needs as I kiss and lick around her slit without going for it right away. The finger-sized bruises on the insides of her thighs add more fuel to my rage; I count each one as I bite and suck them away.

Each one is another day that Oleg will suffer before I grant him death.

“Harder, Dem. Please...” Clara tugs my hair in her fingers, urging me to go rougher.

She wants to play with fire? Fine—I’ll make it hot for her.

I do to her thighs what I did to her neck, shoulders, and stomach, covering every bruise with lovebites and hickeys until all either of us can see is the mosaic I’ve created.

But I don’t stop with just the bruises. I kiss a fiery path up to the outer edge of her slit and suck the delicate flesh between my teeth.

Clara cries out, bucking against my face. The death grip she has on my hair, pulling me into her rather than pushing me away, is another good sign that I need to keep doing exactly what I’m doing.

So I do.

At times, I let my tongue drag through her pussy and savor the way she hisses and mewls and writhes against my hold. But I wait for her to beg me, wait for her to become a sobbing mess of need and desire before I finally, *finally* plunge my tongue inside her depths.

And when I do...

Oh my fucking God.

She tastes so fucking divine. I might actually get drunk off her.

Whatever plan I had in place goes flying out the window the second I swipe my tongue from slit to clit. There's no more forethought, only my starvation for her driving me to lap and suck and coax more, more, *more* from her.

I latch onto her clit with a deep, hard tug between my lips and Clara nearly sits up with the sudden onslaught of toe-curling pleasure. Her feet rub and kick on my back; her fingers in my hair threaten to rip it out by the roots.

“Dem... Dem... Dem...”

That's it, baby. Forget his name; say mine instead. Scream it so the world can hear.

I work one, then two fingers inside her. Gently at first, of course, but only as long as it takes to get a good rhythm going. When I curl my fingers and find her sweet spot, all bets are off.

It only takes a minute for Clara to clench, shudder, and gush.

I don't give her time to recover. I don't give her time to figure out my next move. She's still trembling with her release when I slide up her body and push my cock balls-deep inside her with one solid, single thrust.

Home.

She feels like home.

Home and heat and everything I've ever wanted. And per her pleading, I don't go slow or gentle—I keep her legs spread around me, my hands sliding up and down her thighs, as I work us both into a hard, solid rhythm. The only thing louder than the wet slapping of my hips against her ass are her wordless sobs of deep pleasure.

I hook her knees over my elbows to open her up wider. So I can take her harder, and deeper, all while gazing into her eyes.

“Look at me, baby.”

Clara's lost in her pleasure, lost in whatever dream she's having while she ripples around my cock. Her long lashes

flutter and her plush lips pucker with every gasp.

I fist a hand in the back of her hair and tug. “Clara, I said *look at me.*”

The movement, the command, makes her squeeze tighter around me. *Fuck!* I have to keep myself together. Have to prolong this as long as possible.

Her eyes flutter open. I’m instantly drowning in their dark seas and can’t resist kissing her.

“Look at me.” I press my brow to hers and quicken my pace. Her body rocks beneath me; she’s clinging to me tightly and nods while obeying. “Good girl. That’s my good girl. That’s my perfect, beautiful girl.”

“Dem...”

“Are you gonna come for me?” I push hard, deep, and grind inside her. *Fuck*, I’m close. “Are you gonna scream my name and come on my cock?”

Clara nods, but her brow furrows. I can feel her writhing, working herself on me, but she’s still struggling to reach that peak.

“I’ve got you. I’ve got you, baby...” I kiss her, long and deep, before I pull out of her pussy without warning. She whines and hiccups a sob of frustration which quickly turns into a yelp of surprise when I flip her over onto her stomach.

One hand pins her down into the pillows by the nape of her neck. The other hand smooths down her back, cataloging every lash mark and bruise until I wrap my palm around her hip.

I guide my tip to her slit and shove myself home inside her as she spasms. “Yeah, baby. That’s it. Just like that. Scream for me... Let it all out...”

My words are a panted mantra as I flatten her facedown onto the bed and pump inside her like this is the last fuck I’ll ever have.

Like I can’t bury myself deep enough inside her.

Like anything less than turning her brain into pleasure-drunk mush is unacceptable.

Clara cries out into the pillows, claws the sheets, and throws herself back into me to meet every single solid thrust. I wrap my arms around her and hold her like that, my chest and her back sliding against each other as I take what belongs to me.

As I give her what is rightly hers.

“I’ll fuck you just like this,” I pant in her ear. Her breasts feel so fucking heavenly in my hands. “I’ll make him watch... Make all of them watch... while I fuck you just like this.”

She shudders again. Arches her hips even more, spreads her legs wider. “Please, please... I need...”

“I know what you fucking need, baby.” My whisper crackles with the possessive growl this woman constantly pulls out of me. “You need me to fuck you. To claim you. To show each of them who fucking owns this pussy. Who makes you scream and come every fucking night because this is the only dick that does it for you.”

The only sounds now coming from her slender throat are a symphony of “uh-huhs” and grunts.

I don’t know how much longer I can draw this out. I’m throbbing to the point of aching, and my balls are screaming for the release they’ve been denied for weeks. “Baby...” I kiss her neck, her shoulder, the side of her brow. Panting just as hard as she is. “Baby... I’m gonna... Where...”

What few functioning brain cells I have left demand to give her the dignity of choosing.

Clara turns her face to mine. Pushes herself up and back so I’ve got nowhere to go but inside her. Pulses her still-spasming inner walls along my shaft.

“I want it,” she whines. “I want you. I want you. I want you in me...”

I seal my lips to hers. Feed her my grunts, my groans, and then my muffled shouts of purest pleasure as everything falls apart and I’m coming... I’m coming... I’m coming...

So is she. I don't know if it's the flood of heat now pooling inside her womb, or the fact that I'm marking her in every way possible. Maybe it's a bit of both, as it is for me. Either way, I feel her bathe my shaft with her own liquid heat—and then she sinks into the pillows and I collapse on top of her.

Breathless.

But never in my entire life have I felt more whole.

Clara doesn't say a word. I don't know if I have the ability to speak—not yet, anyway. But one quick glance at her face makes me realize I've managed to fuck her until she's literally passed out.

And honestly, that's probably not a bad thing.

She needs a dreamless sleep more than anything else now.

I'm in no rush to leave her warmth. Eventually, I do, and it's such a rush of masculine pride mixed that comes with seeing her naked body marked head to toe, inside and out, marked by me.

Then I see it.

The one scar I won't be able to kiss away.

Growling, I force myself to my feet to go grab a damp washcloth from the bathroom. Clara is moaning softly in her sleep when I come back and press the washcloth to her thigh, but she doesn't wake up. I move slowly, wiping tenderly between her legs until there's nothing left of our passion.

Well, physically, anyway.

When I'm done, I throw the rag aside, sigh, and sink into the overstuffed armchair next to the bed. Towels and rags forgotten, all I can do is watch her sleep and listen to the sound of her steady breathing. The fact that she doesn't seem to be dreaming—or at least, not having nightmares—provides some small relief.

I don't know what to do.

With her.

With us.

With anything.

But then, once again, my heart speaks up with irritation and tells me that I know *exactly* what needs to be done. What I should have done ages ago.

Stop. Fucking. Pretending.

CLARA

I wake up with the dawn. It's the first time in a long time that I've done that without being afraid of what the day will bring.

My limbs stretch as I yawn, and *damn*, I feel better than I have in a long time. Nothing's perfect, of course; there are still plenty of creaks and aches that will take time to heal.

But the pain I've been carrying has been more than physical. It's been emotional, psychological, spiritual.

Now? I feel like I've been given a full-body massage, inside and out.

I blink.

Technically, I have...

I roll onto my side and almost yelp with surprise. Demyen's sitting *right there*, in some masculine study of throne-like furniture. Staring at me.

Has he slept at all?

I tug the sheet up over my breasts and blush. I know it's ridiculous to hide from the same man who's rocked my world, repeatedly, but... I don't know where we stand. And I don't know if he actually wants to see my ladybits or if that was just a pity fuck we both needed.

"Good morning," I offer in greeting.

Demyen simply grunts.

Alrighty then. That answers a few pressing questions.

I pull myself upright so I'm at least sitting against the pillows. Good thing, too, because just those few small movements make me wince. Not in pain, necessarily, just...

Goddamn. The man knows how to fuck a woman raw.

He's also done a marvelous job painting my body with his personal brand. I feel my face grow hotter as I take a subtle inventory of my chest and legs, and almost drop my jaw in horror when I see his teeth marks on my stomach.

He doesn't know about the baby, right? I mean, there's no way he knows. He couldn't possibly—

I clear my throat and pull my wits together. What's left of them, at least. When I remind myself to at least give him a smile, I catch him texting someone right before he gets up out of the chair.

“Where are you going?” *Ugh, I sound so pathetic.*

Demyen's wicked mouth curves into a smirk. He tosses his phone onto the bed and starts rummaging through his dresser. “Ordered us some breakfast. Now, I'm getting dressed. I figured Gloria doesn't want my sausage as much as I want hers.”

My laugh comes out in the ugliest snort. But oh my God, when's the last time I actually laughed?

He notices. He seems pleased. He doesn't exactly hand me an award for the accomplishment, but he does toss me a large t-shirt. “Here's this if you want it—but don't cover up on my account. I'm enjoying the view.”

I bet he is. And despite being a way to lighten the tension in the room, it strikes a chord inside me that sends a wave of relief through my rattled nerves.

Maybe it wasn't just a pity fuck.

If he means it, if he really does like seeing me like this, in his bed... maybe he's telling the truth?

Maybe he really does want to fix whatever this is between us.

Which would also make it impossible for him to be lying about the auction. There's no way he'd bring me there to sell me, and actually go through with it, only to... to... I don't know if "romance" is the right word, but whatever it's called, Demyen went through a lot of effort to make this happen.

He came for me.

He saved me.

I'm so lost in my own thoughts that I completely forget to pull on the shirt before Gloria arrives with a tray laden with breakfast food, juice, and coffee. Thankfully, Demyen positions himself in the doorway so she can't see past his broad shoulders. They chat for a bit in hushed tones; I'm sure at least part of it must be about me.

Demyen thanks her for the food and waits for her to leave, then shuts the door and brings the tray over to the nightstand. Hotcakes and bacon, fresh strawberries, and whipped butter in tiny little cups beckon me with their warm scent.

Well, except the bacon.

Which is weird, because I *love* bacon.

Ah, shit. I bet it's the pregnancy. A similar thing happened when I was pregnant with Willow; I didn't go full vegetarian, but chicken breast was basically the only meat that didn't make me vomit for the first six months.

I reach for the orange while Demyen starts munching on the bacon. Good—maybe he won't notice or ask questions that I'm not ready to answer.

He hands me a mug of coffee. Is coffee okay this early in the first trimester? I can't remember. Maybe if I just pretend to sip on it. That shouldn't harm anything, I think.

"Thank you," I say with a small smile. I'll at least hold it in my hands for a while and breathe in the rich aroma. If he asks, I'll explain the delay with "it's too hot" or something like that.

Demyen grabs his phone off the bed and flips through it for a silent minute. Then he turns it to me.

On the screen is Willow, talking Bambi's ear off while the woman braids her hair.

"She's doing well in school," Demyen adds while I watch my baby girl get ready for the day. "Her teachers absolutely adore her. There was some concern with her, while you were gone..."

My stomach knots. *Don't cry. Not right now. You're doing good.*

"But the school counselor has been working with her. Made good strides with her adjustments, and now that you're back..." He drinks his coffee. I get the feeling it's more to calm his own nerves than to actually drink something. "When you're ready, I mean. She'll have a lot to update you on. She's got a big painting she's working on. I know she'll love to show you."

I need to pull my shit together first. I need to be the best mother possible, despite all the circumstances.

At least I feel less disgusting. I can't smell that monster anywhere, and aside from the raised keloid bumps on the back of my thigh, he's all but gone from my body.

I never thought I'd be grateful that scar is located where it is. It's out of sight, and that's what matters.

I hand the phone back to Demyen. "Thank you. For taking care of her." I don't have better words to describe the immense, overwhelming relief flooding my soul to see my daughter so safe, healthy, and cared for.

By him. By Demyen.

"Yeah, well..." He sighs and plops into his chair, taking another sip of coffee. "I owe her. I was a complete asshole to her and she didn't deserve any of that. I'll be making up for it for a very long time."

"I'm sure she's already over it by now."

He shrugs. "Maybe. Maybe not. I know I'm not, so that's the timeline we'll go by."

My heart squeezes. Did I ever think I'd find a man who could love my daughter the way I love her?

God, please—even if nothing happens between us... please let him be everything Willow needs in a father. Please let him be everything this new baby needs in a father.

“Anyways.” He drums his fingers on the armrest. “We should probably talk.”

He's right. I know he's right. I totally agree with him.

It doesn't mean I *want* to.

“Okay.” I sniff my coffee and take a microscopic sip. *Dammit*, Gloria made me my favorite brew with the exact amount of sugar I always use. “Where should we start?”

Demyen looks at me, his face full of uncertainty. It would be cute in any other situation. He opens his mouth to say something, hesitates, then goes for it. “What happened, exactly, between you and my father?”

Sure. Great. Let's just fly out of the gate swinging punches.

I lower the mug to my lap and stare at the dark liquid. “Well, he bought me. For fifty million dollars.” Something occurs to me just now. “Wait... I know you say *you* didn't sell me, so did Raizo—”

“Raizo gave me a cut.” Demyen looks rather uncomfortable and shifts in his chair. “I didn't want it.”

“But you still took it.”

“No. Not...” He sighs. “I didn't keep it. It actually belongs to Willow. I had my accounting team diversify the assets. She'll be set for college, travel, wedding, retirement, all the bells and whistles.”

I... I don't know what to say to that. Or what to think.

My sale—my hellish ordeal, being auctioned off like livestock—has put my daughter in a perpetual state of financial security.

And just like that, I'm no longer haunted by the auction itself. I can easily accept it as a necessary evil that at least

accomplished a previously unbelievable goal.

And also—just like that—Demyen is looking exceedingly more attractive than before. I don't know how, but just knowing that he did all this for my child...?

I could climb onto his lap for it.

“So he bought you.” Demyen steers us back on topic before I have a chance to set my mug down and start acting on my horniest impulses. “Where did he take you after that?”

That's a surprisingly easy answer. “He took me for a drive, actually. It was kind of weird.”

Demyen lofts a curious brow, but his eyes give away the fact that he knows exactly what I'm talking about. “Was he all nice and generally pleasant, up until you did something to annoy him?”

I frown. “Yeah. He did that a lot, even after the drive.”

“Yeah.” He nods. “That's Oleg for you. He loves to fuck with your mind. It makes it more fun for him.”

I guess Demyen would know, wouldn't he? Even though he went and visited at Mas—Mister—no, *Oleg's* place, it was easy to see there is no love lost between the two. Was that monster just as terrible to his own children as he was to me?

Thinking about Oleg is starting to make me feel sick. My fingers are beginning to tremble.

Maybe it's too soon.

“So this drive—”

“I can't.” I say it so suddenly, I startle myself. Coffee splashes over my fingers and onto the bedsheet still wrapped around me. I quickly dab it up and set the mug on the nightstand, avoiding Demyen's hard stare. “I'm sorry, I just... I can't. I can't talk about him.”

Demyen rubs a hand over his mouth as he stares at me. “We need to talk about it. It's important—”

“We will. I promise.” Still avoiding meeting his gaze, I at least manage a weak smile. “Can the fact that the mere mention of

his name makes me sick to my stomach fill in the blanks for now?”

“Clara...”

I sigh. “I know he’s your father. I get that. But honestly, I’m trying to forget that fact even more. You want to know what he did to me? You saw the aftermath. Can’t that be enough?”

Demyen is not pleased with my answer. He rubs his teeth with his tongue, and the little muscle in his jaw ticks. But then he nods. “Fine. But we *are* going to talk about Raizo.”

My nose curls. “He didn’t touch me. He wanted to, but he didn’t.”

“Yeah, he made that pretty fucking clear.”

I steal a glance at Demyen. He spoke with Raizo? Of course he did. They’re in cahoots, or allies, or whatever international criminals call each other’s frenemies-with-benefits. “So... I don’t know what you want me to say?”

“You keep saying he’s bad news, or he’s double-crossing me, or whatever. I need to know how you know. And why you’re telling me.”

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. I’m immediately under the impression that no matter what I say, Demyen won’t believe me. Is it even worth the trouble?

Maybe things have changed since the auction. I don’t know, so I have to reserve judgment.

“Well,” I begin, “let’s see... Raizo Watanabe has been on my father’s radar even since he rose up the ranks in the Vegas Yakuza. Because, you know, they have people everywhere.”

The corner of Demyen’s mouth ticks up in the tiniest amused smile. “Yes, I know.”

I pick at my orange. “Yeah, so, I know what he’s like. What he used to be like, anyway. Before my mom died. Then he went all weird and Dad kept griping about the growing strength of the Yakuza, and how they’re enemies with the Russians, so I just put two and two together.”

Demyen holds up a hand. “Hang on. You knew Raizo *before* he was Yakuza? How?”

Mom may be gone, but Dad’s still around. I’m not sure that’s a secret I’m ready to speak into the universe just yet. Maybe one day.

I shrug again and keep picking at my orange. “Hell if I know, Dem. I was just a kid.”

It’s not entirely a lie. I don’t actually know how Mom knew Raizo or why he kept coming over behind Dad’s back. I really was just a kid and they both treated me like one.

I only have hunches.

Demyen runs a hand through his hair and sighs. “Okay. Fine. Tell me what happened at the hotel, before you were sold.”

“I ran into Martin.”

Dem snorts and nods. Does that mean he already knows about that? *How?*

“And then I ran into Dad.” I study Demyen’s face for any tells he might give. He looks somewhere between stressed, anxious, and suspicious. “We had a very serious talk and—”

Holy shit. The confession!

I sit up straight and swing my legs over the edge of the bed. “Tell me you heard the voicemail.”

Demyen frowns. “The what?”

“The voicemail. Or recording, or whatever. I sent it over to Bambi once I had it.” My heart is pounding so fast, I can barely breathe enough to keep up. “He confessed. To everything.”

Now, Demyen is all but glaring at me. “He confessed?”

“Yeah! Well, he said everything he knows about how Michael Little died. It wasn’t—”

Demyen holds a hand up to stop me. “Clara, there is no voicemail. No recording, no confession, nothing. If Bambi had it, she would have sent it to me by now.”

And now, my heart sinks into my gut. Because of course, I can't catch a break.

"I want to believe you. I really do." He taps a finger on the armrest and sets his jaw. "But you're making some pretty big claims based on evidence that doesn't exist. What am I supposed to do with that?"

I blink at him. *Is he fucking serious right now?*

I slide off the bed, wrapping the sheet firmly around my body. "I need a shower."

"Clar—"

"Excuse me."

I'm not in the mood to argue with him. I'm not in any mood to fight for my truth, to convince people that I'm not just some crazed liar with time to kill and nothing or no one at stake.

When I reach the archway leading to his extravagant bathroom, I pause. I look over my shoulder at him. "You know what I've been wondering this whole time? I've known Raizo since I was a kid. So has Dad. And from what it sounds like, Dad knew your family and so did Raizo, for the same amount of time."

Demyen, who is now standing and tapping out something on his phone, shrugs a shoulder. "So?"

"So why was it so hard for you to find me? Why did it take so long for us to run into each other?"

He pauses.

Now, I'm the one who shrugs. "I don't know. Maybe it was fate. Or maybe... maybe I'm telling the truth. Sure seems like a good reason to keep us apart, doesn't it? Divide and conquer, as they say."

I leave him to chew on that. I need a fucking shower.

CLARA

Part of my campaign to erase the recent past now officially involves wearing Demyen's clothes until I permanently smell like him.

Also, men's boxers and boxer briefs are all sorts of insanely comfortable. It should be illegal. It's definitely sexist, giving half the human species shorts made out of clouds while the other half has to wear itchy lace and walk with elastic bands digging into our skin.

I'm lying on top of his bed, wearing the shirt he gave me and a pair of gray boxer briefs, when someone knocks at the door.

Someone who knows I'm in here. Demyen left over a couple of hours ago.

"Who is it?" I call out from the bed.

"It's Bambi."

I frown. "Go away!"

The door opens anyway. Bambi walks in, shuts it behind her, and quickly throws her hands up in surrender. "I know, I know. I get it. I'm the last person you want to see right now."

To her credit, she does actually seem contrite. Guilty, even, and filled with regret.

It would be great if I could believe any of that.

"I said, go away." Now that she's inside the room, I feel zero obligation to shout across it. "I'm busy."

Bambi resists raising a brow at the not-a-damn-thing I'm currently busy with. But instead of leaving, she slowly walks toward the bed. "Clara, can we talk? Please. Just hear me out."

I don't respond.

She sits on the edge of the bed with a heavy sigh. "You were right: I had a choice. And, well... I chose my own survival."

I try very hard not to scoff. "What was gonna happen if you actually stood up for me?"

"I've *been* standing up for you. That's why I was so afraid of calling him out on his bullshit. I've been on his ass so much about how he treats you. When it came time, I just..." Bambi sighs. "I didn't trust him to trust me. Or you. And that was my biggest mistake."

I really wish I knew what she was talking about. Still, I can't ignore the sounds of genuine regret in her voice. So I scootch over and give her more room to sit next to me, which she accepts with a hopeful little smile.

It fades with yet another heavy sigh. "I don't know how much Dem's told you about me."

"Not much."

She nods. "I figured. He respects me enough to not blast my backstory all over kingdom come, you know?"

"Decent of him." I do remember some things he shared when things were good between us. I just don't want to take away from anything valuable Bambi might end up sharing.

"Yeah. Well... I was a hooker when he found me."

I pretend like this is new information, and that Demyen did not tell me any of this over drinks at his casino. "Pardon?"

Bambi leans back on her arms and stares off into nothingness. "My parents were pieces of shit, if I'm going to be perfectly honest. My dad ran out on us before I was even born, and my momma thought that having broad shoulders and a big dick qualified a man as a replacement baby daddy. She was so desperate for love, for attention and acceptance, that she never saw the way her boyfriends looked at me. Or..." She shudders.

“She knew exactly what they wanted and actively chose to turn a blind eye.”

I hope she’s not talking about what it sounds like she’s talking about.

“Mom’s last boyfriend—at least, the last one I ever had to deal with—decided he’d supplement the family funds by pimping me out. I decided then and there that I was done. I was done with his bullshit and done with her complacency. So I took to the streets and never looked back.”

On instinct, I reach for her. “Bam. I am so sorry.”

She waves my concern away with a casual flick of her hand. “Ah, it’s all in the past. Where I keep it locked away, until tiny slivers peek out and make me fuck up and betray my friends.” She steals a peek at my face. “I owe Demyen my life. Literally. He didn’t just take me off the streets; he put me through college, helped me establish my career, and most of all, he made me face my demons until I became the scariest motherfucker in the dark.”

I stifle a small laugh. That does sound kind of like Demyen.

Now, she’s the one reaching across the space between us. Bambi gently pats my hand. “That’s what you need to do, Clara: face your demons. Be *their* worst nightmare. Don’t let them have a say in how you live your life.”

I wish it was that easy. I really do. But just the thought of having to stand on my own against the horrors the men of my life have created... It’s exhausting. I’m beyond exhausted.

Tears sting my eyes. “I don’t know if I can,” comes out in a choked breath.

“Start small. Ground yourself where you’re the safest.” She offers a small smile. “You’re safe here. You can ground yourself here.”

“I mean...” I sniff and hug my knees to my chest. “I don’t know about that. Demyen—”

“—is head over heels for you,” she interjects.

What?

She nods at my surprise. “It’s true. I’ve never seen him like this, and I’ve known him for freaking ever. He’s had one-night stands and drunken run-ins, sure. But this? With you? This is new. This is big.”

I blush and hide my face behind my arms. “This is just convenience.”

Her brow practically hits her hairline. “You and I both know there’s literally nothing ‘convenient’ about parenthood. And yet, despite his inner protests, that little girl has him wrapped around her finger. Did he tell you about her parent-teacher conferences?”

“No. I mean, he told me she’s doing well in school...”

He made it sound like general reports. I figured someone like Pavel or Bambi was giving him the insights.

But she shakes her head with a shit-eating grin. “Demyen’s been personally meeting with her instructors on a weekly basis. Attended the big school conference fair just last week. In person. By *himself*.” She shrugs and corrects herself. “Well, okay, Pavel wanted to go with him for the fair. They had popcorn.”

Once again, I don’t know what to say.

Bambi notices my shock. She tilts her head to one side and gives me a considerate once-over. “I don’t want you to run away screaming. But I have to ask this because I’ve been wondering for a while now.” She takes a deep breath, then lets it out in a low sigh. “Do you know what a good man looks like?”

I blink.

“I’m not saying he’s perfect. Shit, he’s anything but. It’s just...” She does that peering thing again, her expression full of sympathy. “When every formative experience you’ve ever had with the male half of humanity is worse than the last, it’s fair to wonder if you’d know a good man when you meet one. Someone who cares *for* you, and *about* you. Who cares for everyone in his world before he looks after himself.”

I just sit here and soak in her words. Is that what Demyen does?

As I scroll through a mental list, the answer becomes an ever-resounding *YES*.

His whole vendetta against me came from a care and concern for his older brother. From a sense of justice—misguided, for sure, but still present.

But even before he figured out who I am, Demyen insisted on bringing me *and* my daughter, without hesitation, to his home the second he knew we were escaping abuse.

In fact, Demyen never asked for more details when I told him. He seemed to just hear and understand that we were in danger, and his immediate response was to protect us.

Just like he protected Bambi.

And probably Pavel.

And, I'm guessing from their seemingly undying loyalty, every single one of the men of his Bratva.

I blink back hot tears. Then slowly shake my head. "I really don't. I don't know what a good man looks like, I don't know what being protected feels like..." I hide my face in my hands. "*Fuck!* This is why I can't—I can't—I—"

It's suddenly harder to breathe. I don't realize I'm rocking back and forth until I feel Bambi's hand start to rub gently on my back.

When I suck in a deep breath to force the calm, it's shuddering and raspy. "I'm such a fucking mess. I'm dirty and disgusting and... and... Willow deserves so much better. Better than me, better than all this shit she's been through, better than—"

"I'm gonna stop you right there." Bambi pries my hands from my face. Her brow is arched in that *don't-even-argue-with-me* look I've seen her give Demyen plenty of times. "You don't get to decide what Willow wants. Yes, you are her mother and you will always decide what's best for her. But you don't get to decide if you're worthy of her. *She* does."

I want to argue, but it kind of makes sense. I think. “She’s so little...”

“Yeah. Which means she doesn’t know the details of what’s been going on, and she probably will never find out. Not entirely. What little she does learn will happen when she’s much older and able to come to her own conclusions.”

Like I did with my own mother. My beautiful, amazing mother who endured hell to give me as close to a slice of heaven as possible. What would she think of me now?

What would she do, if she were in my shoes?

Bambi pulls out a folded piece of paper from her pocket and slowly opens it. “She’s a tough kid. Smart as hell, and one of the sweetest, most compassionate children in the world.” She lays the paper down on the bed next to me with a pat. “She’s also a little girl who misses her mommy.”

It’s a crayon drawing; I recognize Willow’s artwork immediately. A smiling sun shines above a field of grass and flowers, all scrawled around abstract etchings of her and me holding hands.

“My mommy loves flowers. I love my mommy. I miss her, too.”

“Demyen helped with the spelling,” Bambi says softly. “We’re working on the basics with her handwriting, but her teacher says she’s excelling for her age level.”

My eyes flood again, but this time, these are happy tears trickling down my face. My sweet baby girl is so smart! So talented, and so perfect. I don’t want to ruin her. I don’t want to steal the sunshine she loves by clouding it out with the darkness that seems to constantly fill my life.

But I miss her. I miss her so much.

“You have every right to be pissed at me. And Pavel. You have every fucking right to beat the ever-living shit out of Demyen. Shun us, throw us out of your room, whatever you need to do to get your space while we grovel for your forgiveness.” Bambi taps the drawing with a finger. “But are you really going to punish your little girl?”

My jaw drops open. “No! She didn’t do anything!”

“So why are you keeping her from seeing her mommy?”

I hug the picture to my chest as if it can somehow transform into Willow. Through my tears, I see Bambi slowly rise and move to the bedroom door. She turns to say something more, then decides against it and leaves.

This road to recovery is going to be incredibly long, if I ever do reach that destination. I’m covered in scars, visible and invisible alike, and I’m so scared that I’m going to somehow harm my little girl.

But if everything is true?

I’m realizing that Willow is safe. She’s safe, and she’s protected by people who love her almost as much as I do.

And maybe, just maybe...

I’m finally safe, too.

CLARA

I take another shower. Not because I feel dirty, just because I needed to feel the warm water gently cascading down my skin.

There's definitely something to be said about those rainfall showerheads.

After sneaking back to my room and slipping on a clean sundress, I decided it's time to soak up the remaining summer sun before the days start melting into autumn. Not that there's much difference out here in the Mojave, but those of us who have lived here our whole lives can feel the shift in temperature.

I try offering Gloria some help cleaning the kitchen. She shoos me away with a wink and a smile, and at the last second, suggests I go relax by the pool.

A few minutes later, after settling into one of the lounge chairs, one of the bartenders quietly sets a small tray next to me. Grapes, gourmet crackers with aged cheese, and a huge glass of blended sangria make up the ensemble. I pretend to take a sip of the sangria before I set it out of arm's reach.

No one comes up to me to talk. No one stares at me awkwardly, or whispers as they walk by to do whatever it is Demyen's people do. I'm left alone to my own devices, which feels...

Boring.

It feels incredibly, insanely boring.

I don't know what I was expecting after everything. Not just coming back after *The Ordeal*. There's been so much patching over, talking through, and, well... "making up for lost time" with Demyen and Bambi.

Where do I stand? Or sit, as the case may be. Am I a guest? A former employee?

One thing has become increasingly clear: I'm definitely not a prisoner.

I'm soaking in the desert sun, listening to the trickling song of the marble fountain in the pool, lost in my thoughts that drift to daydreams of *What Could Be*. What kind of life can I have, if I'm able to overcome the damage done to me in Oleg's home? What kind of woman could I allow myself to be, now that I'm safe and free to actually have a choice?

Why does my heart ache when I start imagining taking Willow and leaving this place?

I don't hear the doors to the main house open and close. I don't really notice the scuffling of staff around me. It's not until I feel something—someone—large and ominous suddenly next to me that I sit up with a gasp.

"Sorry," Mako says with a hand held up apologetically. "Didn't mean to startle you."

"I'm fine." It's kind of a lie, but mostly the truth.

"I just wanted to let you know that if anything becomes too much, just give us a signal and we'll take care of things."

I furrow my brow. "Um... okay?" My heart picks up the pace, but since he seems calm, I tell myself there's no impending danger.

Mako nods and moves to the main house. He seems to be silently communicating with someone through the door's window, because after a few quick nods, he turns the handle.

And is almost immediately flattened by the door when Willow comes barreling through.

"*Mommy!*"

Oh my God.

I don't notice leaving the chair. I don't even register moving at all—I basically teleport halfway across the courtyard to sweep my little girl into my arms and cover her sweet face with kisses.

And cry.

I'm definitely crying.

Scratch that—I'm *sobbing*. So is Willow, which both surprises me and makes me hug her even tighter. Her little arms are a steel band around my neck and I don't care if I suffocate to death in her embrace. It's enough to just be here, with her, holding her in my embrace.

I cry because I'm so relieved. To see her, to hold her, to know that she's been so well-cared for. Even now, as I glance over her shoulder, I can see Mako and Bambi watching from a respectful distance. They both seem relieved and yet cautious.

It was *me* he was talking about—I realize that now. Mako had the presence of mind to assure me that if I couldn't handle this, if such a reunion was too much too soon, he and Bambi would step in to usher Willow away and give me space.

The thought of them doing that almost makes me growl ferally. I definitely cling to Willow tighter. I know it's for our best, but she's *my* baby girl. *My* baby.

Bambi was right. Willow needs me, her mommy.

And I need her.

I also cry because I'm so, so, *so* fucking terrified that all of this can vanish at any moment. That I'll suddenly wake up, pinned beneath that horrible man, and I'll once again be worlds away from my precious daughter.

I cry because I want this to be real.

I need this to be real.

And then I cry because somehow, I know beyond any doubt that it is.

Willow seems to know that my tears are more than just relief and happiness. She doesn't uncurl herself from around me, but she does reach one small hand up to caress the side of my face.

That's when I hear it. So soft, so sweet, so... so perfect.

The last time I sang it to her, I was trying to keep her calm while we hid from the monster who imprisoned us in his house.

Now, it's Willow singing softly to me, hiding me from the beast whose mere memory still makes me shiver and retch. She holds me close to her, tiny little fingers lightly stroking my cheek, and reminds me that there are good things waiting beyond the rainbow.

If happy little bluebirds can fly... why can't I?

DEMYEN

I'm the world's biggest fucking asshole.

"Yeah, so, how's that foot tastin'?" Bambi sing-songs from the speaker setting of my phone.

"I'm gonna call you back," I mutter. My eyes never leave the computer screen as I blindly fumble for the End Call button to hang up before she says anything else to rub it in.

Why?

How?

And again... *why?!*

The voicemail I was so adamant did not exist in any way, shape or form, that Bambi definitely never sent me at any point...

Is staring at me.

On my laptop screen.

*In the fucking **Spam** folder.*

I almost don't want to click it. Clicking it will either confirm or deny that this entire time, Clara's been telling the truth. It will tell me that I either heard exactly what I heard that fateful night at The Meridian between her and her father...

Or I, in my infinite assholery, just up and left the woman of my dreams to be swallowed whole by her nightmares.

The mouse moves at a snail's pace across the screen. My finger feels so fucking heavy descending for that click.

But I do.

I click it.

And I brace myself.

At first, static. Then... *“Watch your tone with me, young lady.”*

Every protective nerve in my body instantly bristles at the sound of Greg Everett talking to Clara in that threatening snarl. I don't fucking care if he's her father—he lost that privilege the first time he ever raised a hand against her.

“Or you'll what? Hit me? Kick me around like you used to? Good times, right?”

That's my girl. That's the fire in her I fell in love with, the same fire I'm determined to see stoked back to life despite, and in spite of, everything she's been through.

“Clar-bear...”

“I don't understand why it's so hard to leave Martin. You turned your back on Uncle Mike like it was nothing. What's so different now?”

“What are you talking about?”

Fair question. I turn up the volume and lean back in my chair, pretty damn impressed by her investigative skills. I might need to take her with me to an interrogation and just let her do her thing.

Some day.

Eventually.

When I'm not so on edge that I'm ready to shoot the wind for touching her wrong.

“I think you know.”

Greg chuckles. *“Enjoying the free champagne a little too much, huh?”*

“Michael Little was poisoned.”

There's a long silence. I don't even notice I'm holding my breath until my lungs start to burn. And then: *“Michael Little*

was shot.”

“He was. But that’s not what killed him.”

“And you know this how?”

“I don’t. You just told me.”

Get him, Clara! I don’t try to hold back the smile that spreads on my face at the sound of her using his own words against him. Goddamn, she’s amazing.

“I didn’t...” Another long, heavy silence. Then Greg lets out a heavy sigh. *“Shit. I didn’t think it would ever get out.”*

I freeze.

And then I rewind the recording and hit the play button again.

“I didn’t think it would ever get out.”

Pause. Rewind. Play.

“I didn’t think it would ever get out.”

Blyat’.

This is the confession she was talking about. The one I swore did not exist.

I let the recording continue playing, telling myself to not be frustrated with the awkward silence and subtle rustling because obviously there’s more. Obviously, Clara must have been just as floored as I am right now.

“I didn’t poison him. I swear it, Clar-bear. I want—no, I need you to know that. I know how much he meant to you.”

Bull-fucking-shit.

“But you came home early that day. And then he came over for coffee...”

“Yeah. To off me.”

I suck in a breath the same time I hear Clara audibly gasp.

...The fuck?

“Yup. You heard me. Mikey figured out I was on the take, which he was going to report me for anyway... But then he

found out about your mother and I having some marital problems and I guess he decided killing me was better.”

“*Marital problems.*” Clara snorts a laugh. Her voice drips with sarcasm and practically frames the phrase with air quotes. “*You mean he found out you were beating her.*”

“Clara—”

“*Call it what it was, Dad. At least give her the dignity of the truth.*”

My shock is momentarily sidelined by the sudden bloom of pride inside my chest. Clara’s take-charge voice is doing all sorts of wonderful things below the belt, too.

Focus. I need to focus.

“You’re right. I fucked up. A lot. And Mikey found out and you know how he was. You were like family to him. I thought I was, too, but he turned his back on me and slipped that weird fucking poison into my coffee.”

“*Dad. That’s crazy. You’re trying to tell me—*”

“You saved my life, Clar-bear. I didn’t know it, not at the time. But when that coroner’s report came through and I saw that fairytale bullshit was what did him in, I knew.”

I don’t realize I’ve thrown the coffee mug across the room until the sound of it shattering pulls me out of the sudden blinding rage clouding my awareness.

I pause the recording. I take a deep breath. I tell myself that I need to listen to the whole thing before leaping to conclusions.

I’ve done enough of that kind of leaping to last a lifetime.

“How do you know? It could have been me. I could have been the one who poisoned him.”

Greg laughs. He actually fucking laughs. “*Oh my God, Clara. You’re too funny! An eight-year-old committing murder by poison? Honey, I have seen some twisted shit in my career. And yeah, I’ve come across some child killers who still send chills through my spine. But you, honey? Please.*”

“*I could. I had the book.*”

My stomach twists into knots. She challenged the notion with my own words, my own conviction that she was or ever has been, one way or another, responsible for Michael Little's murder.

To hear Greg fucking Everett laugh in her face at the very idea is to hear him laughing in mine.

I fucking despise it.

"That damn book. It was his, first, did you know that? Got it at a school book fair when we did one of those anti-drug assemblies. He'd read it while on patrol. He was always into plant shit. I used to tease him about starting his own greenhouse and making real good money, if you know what I mean."

He keeps droning on and on, waltzing down memory lane and comparing Michael to Martin. I never met the former, but my gut says he was a far better man than anyone else in this fucked-up pit of vipers that is LVPD.

"I found that wolf shit growing in his windowsill. After the autopsy, I mean. I knew you obviously didn't have anything to do with it and your mother had been visiting her friend all day. So I had to ask myself, how did the poison get there?"

"He grew the poison for you."

Well... shit.

My mind is so full of thoughts, dark thoughts and guilty thoughts and raging thoughts that all make it impossible to hear whatever the fuck Greg crowed about in the aftermath of his dropped bomb. It's easier to just tune it all out. Let it play as the white noise to my meditation over who I'm going to murder first.

Greg? Martin? Oleg? Raizo?

Greg. It has to be Greg.

"What do you have against the Zakrevskys?"

Clara's question yanks me back out of that mental storm. I lean forward in my chair and crank the volume up even more,

as if the background static might reveal extra hints or hidden answers.

“It’s all about control, sweetheart. You need to learn this. I’ve been trying to teach you your whole life. You have to keep things under control at all times. Oleg knew how to play by the rules. But Tolya? He was a wild card. He was out of control.”

Oh, Greg.

Greg, Greg, *Greg*.

He has no fucking idea what “out of control” looks like in a Zakrevsky.

But I promise him one thing: he is about to find the fuck out.

I jump out of my chair and pace back and forth inside my office while I listen to the rest of the recording. I listen to Clara fit the puzzle pieces together and I listen to Greg confirm that he, in fact, was the one who kidnapped her that night. All part of some fucked-up bait-and-switch plot to kill who seems to be the one decent man in this shitty story.

I listen to him explain how Tolya doing a good and honorable thing is what made him “uncontrollable.”

I listen to Detective Greg Everett, the arresting officer, croon with pride over his brilliant scheme to weaken the Zakrevsky dynasty because there’s no way a young upstart like me could ever manage the reins of such an operation.

And I listen to him admit, with his whole chest, with such immense satisfaction, that he loves conducting lucrative, repulsive business with Raizo Watanabe.

Business like bringing down the one Bratva who stood in the Yakuza’s way. Like procuring broken women off the streets whom no one will miss and selling them into that sick fucking prostitution ring.

When the recording finally finishes, I download it onto my phone and grab my headphones. I shoot a quick text to Pavel to make sure no one enters the gym for the next two hours.

I’m going to be punching things.

Throwing things.

And *planning* things.

DEMYEN

Down in the gym, I punch bags and mannequins and walls until I can't feel my fists anymore. I bench press weights I've never dared to try and the rage coursing through my veins makes it feel like I'm lifting feathers.

I squat, sprint, crank out endless sets of pull-ups and sit-ups until I nearly puke.

The soundtrack of my workout is The Recording on replay. Greg's cocky voice and Clara's determined one dancing a verbal tango around, and then into, the dirty details of what actually happened to Michael Little.

The whisper in my mind reminding me that this has been sitting in my spam folder *the entire fucking time* is what eventually drives me out of the gym and all the way across the compound to my favorite little hole in the wall.

Tonight feels like a bourbon sort of night. Half of me is tempted to chug straight from the bottle. Let the drunken stupor hit faster.

The other half is scolding me for running from my problems instead of facing them head-on.

That second part can shut the hell up and let me get some fucking sleep. I'll face my problems with a solid game plan in the morning.

I'm halfway through my second refill when my phone buzzes in my pocket. I ignore it and go back to my drink.

A moment later, it buzzes again.

“What?” I snap when I answer.

“Cut the attitude. I need your help,” Oleg’s voice rumbles across the void.

I snort. “Okay. Let me go ahead and wake up because I know I didn’t just hear you ask me for help.”

“She ran away. Everett. She drugged me and slipped my guards. I need her back.”

Now, I just flat-out chuckle. I know for a fact that Clara didn’t drug him—he’s too proud to admit a woman clocked him in the head and left him for dead.

“That sounds like a ‘you’ problem. Have a great night.”

“She is your problem, too!” Oleg shouts into his phone. “She is your fucking problem and you are going to help me find her and drag that lying whore back to my estate!”

“No, I don’t think so. Again, have a—”

“If you hang up on me, boy, I will blow your little compound to bits. Don’t fucking test me.”

I sigh. “Fine. I’ll bite.” I sigh again and roll my eyes. “How is Clara Everett my problem?”

Aside from keeping me in a near-constant state of obsessive need to touch her, smell her, taste her, and bury myself inside her.

“She’s our goddamned bargaining chip. Did you not figure that out? Why the fuck do you think I’d bother with the little bitch otherwise?”

“I don’t fucking know, and I don’t care to know who you stick your dick into or why.”

Oleg sighs. “I can admit to enjoying the game too much sometimes. I risk missing out on the prize.” He clears his throat and refocuses. “Which is why I’m calling. I need you to find her. Hunt her down and drag her to my private hangar. Hell, do me a favor and act as her personal guard for the flight back to Russia. I trust no one else at this point, *duratskiye okhranniki*.”

Typical of him to curse his men instead of accepting responsibility for his own actions. But the part that has me tightening my grip on the tumbler is the “back to Russia” bit.

“Russia? I thought you just left.”

Oleg grunts. “Only temporarily. Once I get that bitch into my main operation, Everett and the LVPD won’t have any way to bring her back without going through me.”

“So... let me get this straight.” Another gulp of bourbon steels me to stomach this conversation. “Your plan is to kidnap Clara Everett—again—then take her to Russia, sell her into some violent prostitution ring which may or may not kill her, and demand ransom from her father and the Las Vegas police?”

“Not just any ransom. *Tolya*.”

I set the tumbler down with a slow, solid thud. “*Tolya*.”

“I am going to make it very clear to Everett and his idiot colleagues that if they ever want to see Clara alive and well again, they will release *Tolya* and send him back to Russia.”

“And then you’ll fly her out to the States?” I don’t believe it for a millisecond.

Oleg snorts and confirms my suspicions. “Absolutely not. If she’s not already dead from the very long list of clients I have lined up for her, I’ll be keeping her as my personal slave. Maybe even breed the bitch like I wanted to do before she ran.” He chuckles. “Or, who knows? You do an excellent job helping me, and helping *Tolya*, I might loan her to you. Let you get your dick wet and work out your rage on her before I turn her over to *Tolya* for his fun.”

I laugh like I love his idea.

I’m actually laughing because *oh my God*, the fucking audacity.

And the idiocy. *He doesn’t know I’m the one who took her*. He doesn’t know just how much she means to me. It’s practically unbelievable.

The thing is, I can’t leave Oleg to his own devices completely unsupervised. But if I’m going to keep tabs on him, I need to

under his skin.

“Yeah, sure.” I pour myself a third glass and chug the whole thing in a single gulp. If I’m going to make a deal with the devil, I’m not going to do it sober. “I’ll help you. Give me the details, including her seller.”

Oleg’s proud beam practically echoes through the phone. “That’s my boy! And fuck all with the seller. I can see why he got rid of her. Raizo, *skol’zkiy ublyudok*, kept the sale anonymous.” He snorts another laugh. “Probably to stop me from returning her for a refund. She’d be more trouble than she’s worth, if she wasn’t worth my son’s life.”

It’s a herculean effort to keep my voice level and detached.

“Send me a text with her details. Last seen, distinguishing marks, et cetera. I remember who you’re talking about, but I wasn’t paying much attention.”

“Please. I saw the way you looked at her. At any rate, I’ll just send one of my men over to your place and—”

“Just swing by the casino,” I interrupt. “There’s a much better selection of imports there, anyways. And you haven’t even seen my escorts yet.” I figure if there’s one thing that will lure the beast into my trap, it’s a scantily-clad woman.

“Twist my arm,” he jokes. “Fine. And Demyen?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t fuck this up. You bear my name, but I will not hesitate to kill you if you fuck this over.”

“The love is mutual, Otets.” I hang up before he can have the last word.

CLARA

Baby steps.

Baby steps are still steps in the right direction. If nothing else, they're better than standing still.

I keep telling myself that every time I feel the doubt creep in. Doubt that I'm doing right by Willow when I shy away from things I used to do with her.

I just... *can't*.

The first morning after we reunited, I cried when she left for the school day. It wasn't the leaving—it was the way her sweet little face fell when I tried to gently explain that I couldn't take her to school on my own.

What I was trying to say was, “Mommy is terrified of losing you, getting kidnapped, driving over a landmine, falling into an endless, bottomless pit...” But what she heard must have been something like, “I can; I just *don't want to*. I didn't want to see you the second I came home, so why would I want to spend time with you in the car?”

The second morning, I'm given the biggest surprise: Roxy pouncing on me with a giant hug and excited squeal the second she comes through the door. Apparently, Demyen had texted her and invited her to the compound.

We hug, we cry, we pseudo-scream at each other for me giving her “the biggest scare of her life.” And then she doesn't ask, she just tells me, *We're grabbing the kiddo and driving into the city together.*

I try to let her know I'm not ready, but she shoots me a look and firmly informs me that I'm getting my ass in the car even if she has to tie me up and throw me in.

It's little too soon for kidnapping jokes, but the sentiment is enough.

I'm a nervous wreck the whole ride. What if we're attacked along the way? What if Oleg's men suddenly appear in their trucks and start shooting out our tires? Will I be able to throw myself over Willow and protect her from bullets? Will I be able to protect her from Master?

Roxy doesn't make me leave the car when we pull in to drop Willow off. But she does take my little girl's hand and walk her around to my side of the car so I can open the door to give her a hug goodbye.

Baby steps.

Once Willow is safely in her classroom, we go through the drive-thru of Roxy's favorite gourmet cafe and she forces me to order the most elaborate, creamy, sugary concoction I would never normally get for myself.

"You need more meat on them bones, girl," she insists. She turns to the barista and adds, "Let's get a box of pastries, too. Two of everything on the menu."

Then, sugar fix in hand, she drives us up to a lookout spot so we can eat breakfast and gaze out over the city in peace. When she parks, she points out how still and isolated it is. "If anyone tries to sneak up on us, we'll know. And..." She cracks her knuckles menacingly and gives me a megawatt grin. "... I just *wish* a muthafucka would!"

I laugh and nudge her. "I missed you, Rox."

"Missed you, too, hon."

We lapse into an easy silence for a few moments, both of us chewing and sipping contentedly. "So," she asks through a mouthful of sugar-dusted croissant, "when's the baby due?"

I promptly choke on my coffee cake.

Roxy glances at me and smirks. “Oh, come on. Like I wouldn’t figure it out.”

She really would. I wasn’t exactly planning on waving a banner over my head, but I also wasn’t planning on telling her, or anyone, for a *while*.

I should have known better.

“What gave me away?” I know she has weird eagle eyes that notice tiny details about people most others would miss, but still. I needed to know if there’s anything that will alert Demyen to my condition.

I’m just... not... ready. Not yet.

“You insisted on decaf.” Roxy sips her frappe and shrugs. “I know you. You’re a quad-shot beyotch when the opportunity arises. Last time I recommended decaf, you just about gouged my eyes out.”

We share a laugh. And then, in the slightly awkward silence that follows, I nod. Kind of.

Roxy lights up. “Oh my gosh! *Oh my gosh!* Does he know?”

“No!” My expression must be haunting, because she immediately sobers up and rubs my arm.

“Hey. Hey, it’s okay. You okay?” She sits up straighter and frowns. “Did Demyen do something to you? I know you’ll tell me what’s been going on when you’re ready, but you were gone for *weeks* and I—”

“It’s not... No.” I try to give her a reassuring smile. “Demyen didn’t do anything. Bad. I mean, he didn’t hurt me or say anything or whatever. I’m just... I’m not ready? We’re not exactly picking out china patterns together, ya know? I don’t know how he’d react to finding out I’m pregnant with his baby.”

“Oh, so it *is* his baby.” She nods thoughtfully. “Good to know.”

My eyes nearly bug out of my head. “Who else would it be?! I’m not that kind of girl!”

“I don’t know! Girl, I’ve been there. I’ve seen his collection of broody hunks walking around all hot and muscled and... Well, you do have your pick. And after Martin? That’s like swimming in a candy jar.”

I snort. I absolutely do *not* have my pick. And honestly? I kind of don’t mind that at all. “I’ve only slept with Demyen the entire time I’ve been there. He’s actually the only man I’ve slept with since leaving Martin.”

Which is a giant relief no one will ever fully understand the true depths of.

“Yeah, well, you could do worse. The guy has great hair. And he’s decent-looking.”

“He’s built like a Greek god.”

Roxy cocks a brow. “I thought he was Russian?”

“I don’t know any Russian gods.”

“Except Demyen, apparently.”

We giggle and go back to ravaging the pastry box. It’s the most food I’ve eaten in one sitting since returning from The Ordeal, and somehow, Roxy just knew it was exactly what I needed.



The next morning, I’m up before Willow and I’m the one to help her greet the dawn. The way her face lights up when she sees me at her side... It’s like a soothing balm to the open psychic wounds I’m still nursing. She grins, wraps her arms around my neck, and happily lets me drag her out of bed and into a big bear hug.

I don’t know if any morning will ever feel “normal” again, but each one that arrives is a reminder that I’m here. This is real.

I’m safe, Willow is safe, and we have each other.

We’re sitting in the dining room, working on the puzzles on the back of the cereal box together while munching on the cinnamon-sugary goodness, when Demyen darkens the doorway.

“Demmy!” Willow happily hops up out of her chair and runs over to him. He sweeps her up into a hug and gives her a playful growl as he nuzzles her with his scruffy chin.

“How’s my little cub this morning?” He kisses her cheek and they rub noses together.

Bunny kisses. Demyen Zakrevsky, big bad Bratva boss, the king of the Las Vegas underworld... is giving my five year-old daughter *bunny kisses*.

And... and she’s giving them right back.

I might actually need to pinch myself.

Then again, something’s already pinching me. In my heart. In a way that both thrills me and terrifies me.

I knew from Day One that I was attracted to this man. How could I not be? He’s breathtakingly handsome, devilishly charming, has a great sense of humor, and despite every logical cell in my brain screaming *run away*, the dangerous edge to him is something that makes me bite my bottom lip and curl my toes.

But he hurt me.

He betrayed my trust.

He offered me the world and then ripped it all away.

And then... came back? Which, I guess, counts for something? I just can’t throw myself at him like I used to. Or like I used to want to.

Except now, he’s not just doting on my daughter—he’s acting like she’s his. Like she’s *always* been his.

That does things to a mother’s heart. Things I really don’t need him to be doing, not while the wounds are still so fresh.

Unless... could this mean they’re healing? Just a little bit?

I don’t know. Shit, I don’t know anything anymore.

“My God!” Demyen exclaims with feigned insulted shock. “Are you doing our crossword puzzle without me?”

Willow giggles and points to her chair, so he carries her over and sets her down in it. “I’m showing Mommy how far we got! Right, Mommy?”

I don’t know how it flew past my notice: the words already figured out in half of the crossword puzzle in the center of the box. There’s also tic-tac-toe and a maze we were just now working our way through. But as I squint closer at the crossword puzzle, I realize that the penciled letters are definitely not Willow’s beginner-level handwriting.

They’re Demyen’s.

He settles into the chair next to Willow, who wiggles happily in her seat and flashes me an excited grin. “Alright, what do we have today? Three Down. What does it say?”

“Oh, she can’t—” I start to softly say, but Demyen lifts a finger where his arm is resting on the back of her chair.

Willow pulls the box closer. “I... seen-gah—”

“Sing,” Demyen corrects. “But very close. Good job! Keep going.”

“Sing.” Willow proudly nods once and continues. “I sing... to... the... moon... and... I... look... lick-ee?”

“Like.”

“Like! Your...?”

“You got it. Keep going.” He gently rubs her back for a second to encourage her.

“Your fr... frrrr...”

Demyen squints dramatically at the box. “That’s a tough one. Need help?”

“Can I sound it out?”

“That’s usually what we’d do, isn’t it? But I’m thinking this time, it might be one of those tricky bastards.”

“Demyen!” I gasp, then laugh. “Language!”

Willow smiles up at me. “It’s okay, Mommy. I know I’m not allowed to say bad words. Only grownups can.”

Oh, dear Lord... what sort of bad words has she learned “not to say”? I smile and rub her back just like Demyen did, though I shoot him a *what the heck?!* look, to which he responds with a not-so-apologetic shrug.

“Frrr... free... free-in-duh?”

Demyen beams proudly at her and leans back in his chair. “Really, *really* close! Great job, *dochen ’ka*.”

Willow slumps with a sigh. “I didn’t get it.”

“Hey. Hey, now.” He tucks a finger under her chin and gently tilts her face up to look at him. “What do we say about hits and misses?”

Willow sighs. “Even if it’s just a graze, it’s still a hit.”

He arches a brow. “And...?”

“And even if I miss, I still get more shots.”

Demyen lightly ruffles her hair and grins. “That’s my girl. Now, do you want to know what the word is? Or do you want another shot at it?”

I can’t believe it. My baby is learning Hitman Phonics. I... I don’t know how to process this.

Willow crinkles her nose in thought. Then gives an affirming nod. “I think I need help this time.”

“Good job asking for help. I’m proud of you.” When he raises his hand for a high five, she smacks it hard and they go into some sort of secret handshake I’m definitely not in the know on. “The word is ‘friend’.”

“*Friend*,” she repeats. She turns back to the box and starts again. “I sing... to the moon... and look like... your... friend. Four letters.”

“Hm...” Demyen strokes his chin in deep thought. “That’s a good riddle. I think I might be stumped.” His gaze flicks up to mine. “What do you think, Mom?”

I think I’ve entered an alternate universe—that’s what I think. I gape a bit and shake my head, flabbergasted. Just not by the

crossword puzzle. “Shoot, I don’t know. That *is* a good one! What sings to the moon?”

“A wolf!” Willow suddenly exclaims. She holds her fingers up and carefully counts the letters as best she can. “Wolf. Wh... double-you... oh...” She looks to Demyen for help, who nods his encouragement but doesn’t say anything other than sounding the letters out with her.

“Ell... eff... It fits!”

Demyen high-fives her again and makes a little victory fist. “Got the pencil?”

Willow snaps her fingers—another surprising development; *when did she learn how to do that?*—and hops up to find the pencil they apparently use for the crossword.

While she digs through the utensil drawer, Demyen meets my stare with a slightly more heated gaze. Or maybe... maybe it’s not heated? It’s definitely *different*. Kind of. No clue how, but it is.

He offers me a lopsided smile and is about to say something when Willow comes bouncing back. Immediately, the somewhat-heated gaze downshifts into something else as he refocuses back on her.

She hands him the pencil and watches him write each letter in the little squares.

“Double-you... oh... ell... eff!” they announce together.

My heart is no longer pinching. It’s straight-up weeping, overcome with overwhelming joy and pride and... and... *love*.

Love for Willow, of course. Obviously. But also for... Can I dare to think it? Is it too dangerous to entertain?

I didn’t think it could be possible, especially not after The Ordeal. Despite his explanations and apologies, it just all felt a little too little, a little too late.

And yet. *And yet*. Here we are. Here *they* are, sharing a bond and a rhythm I never in a million years expected Demyen to not only embrace, but encourage. He’s teaching her how to

read, how to spell, how to overcome those little insecurities that naturally eat us up inside.

Above all, he so clearly, obviously loves her. Just as much as she loves him, if not more.

Demyen glances at the watch on his wrist and sighs. “Well, kiddo, it’s that time. Let’s get our teeth brushed and grab your backpack. Did you grab your lunchbox from Gloria?”

I pat the small bag on the table. “We got it.”

He smiles, then winks at me. “Did you ask Mommy if she’d like to come?”

Willow immediately spins around in her chair and folds her hands. “Pleeeaaaassee, Mommy?”

“With coffee and cream?” Demyen adds.

“Yeah! Pleaassee, Mommy? With coffee and cream?”

I can’t hold back the smile or the laugh that breaks free. “Okay! Okay, I’ll come. Want me to carry your lunchbox for you?”

Willow hugs me tight. “Yes, please. Just until we get to school. Then I can carry it by myself.”

Again, Demyen shrugs at my perplexed expression. “Kid’s independent. And strong.”

They both flex their muscles for me, then laugh and hold hands as he leads her to the bathroom to go brush her teeth. As I watch them stroll along the walkway between the two buildings, I can’t control the overwhelming and confusing mix of emotions that swarms my vision and stings my eyes.

No. I’m not going to cry. If I keep crying at every little thing, I’m going to die of dehydration.

But, maybe just this little bit, I can shed a tear of happiness over my daughter finally finding a father.

CLARA

We sit in the parking lot of Willow's school for only a second—it's all she'll allow us before she grabs her backpack and lunchbox and tries to unbuckle her booster seat with one hand.

Demyen hops out of the driver's side to help her. She holds still for just long enough to get unbuckled, then he pulls her out, she bounces on her feet, they clasp hands, and it's off to school they go.

Except they stop on the sidewalk, then turn and wait for me.

Can I do it? Can I make myself get out of the car?

Demyen doesn't signal for me to stay or join them, but he's also not telling Willow to just "come along, let's go." He just stands there, patiently waiting, while Willow waves for me to join them.

I can do this.

For her, I can do this.

I slowly slide out of the car. Willow celebrates with a "Yaayyy!" and bounces up and down in her new sneakers. She holds her hand out to me, and once again becomes the middle of our little family sandwich.

Oh, God... I just thought of us as a *family*.

I steal a quick, worried glance up at Demyen. He just smiles at me and continues to hold her other hand as we walk to class together.

He doesn't know my thoughts. I haven't violated any of our unspoken boundaries. Good.

"Bye, Mommy!" Willow reaches up for me, so I crouch and give her a hug and a kiss at the classroom door. "Bye, Demmy!"

When she does the same for him, and he crouches down to give her a hug and kiss on her cheek, I don't know if I'm overwhelmed with love, relief, or arousal.

Because let's be honest: there is something insanely attractive about a gorgeous man who's also a great father.

Demyen waves to the teacher in the classroom, who smiles and waves back—then looks at me with surprise and joy and waves even harder. I lift my hand, feeling a bit awkward, but then I remember what Demyen had mentioned about Willow's progress in school. The staff knew about my disappearance and helped her work through the emotional trauma as much as they could.

"Do they...?" I don't know how to ask what I'm not even sure I'm asking.

"Word is that you were the victim of an abduction," Demyen quietly confirms as we turn to walk back toward the parking lot. As if it's the most natural thing in the world, he reaches down and takes my hand in his. "Obviously, they don't know the details, but we felt it was better to diffuse the gossip with a bit of truth so everyone would know to treat you with care. And respect."

"Because the only other possibility is that I abandoned her." It makes me sick to my stomach, but I can't blame anyone for wondering.

"Don't worry," he reassures me with a gentle nudge. "Between the subtle gossip campaign and Willow's not-as-subtle declarations about how you're the best mommy in the whole wide world, your reputation is safe."

That makes me smile. I can imagine Willow making poster signs all about it and shouting with all her little voice's might that she has the best mommy in the universe.

I pray I can continue to be that for her.

“Hey,” Demyen says softly when we reach the car. His hand cups the side of my face. “You okay?”

I think about it. “Honestly? Yeah. I think I am.”

He furrows his brow with concern. “You’re sure? I know this has been a lot, and I don’t want to throw you into something you’re not comfortable with, but I—”

My hand covers his and I lean into him a bit more. “Really, I’m fine. I’m just... I’m playing catch-up. It’s a lot to follow, but I’m doing it. And I’m so...” I glance around to make sure we’re truly alone for the moment. “I’m so fucking happy.”

Because I am. At least where Demyen and Willow’s relationship is concerned. I’m so fucking happy, and I’m so fucking *relieved*.

He smiles. “Good. Because I want to take you somewhere. Is that okay?”

I nod. I’m not going to say I’m leaping at the opportunity to be out in the open where anyone can just shoot at us, but I need to keep up this practice of baby stepping.

Sometimes, baby steps stumble into a run.



Demyen’s taken me to one of my favorite spots in all of Las Vegas: the outdoor botanical garden, complete with museums and pathways winding through eight beautiful acres of exotic plants.

I’m so happy, I could honestly cry.

But I don’t, because I’m determined to finally stop crying over every little thing.

I’m a big girl. I can handle my shit.

Demyen doesn’t take my hand this time. In fact, he seems like he’s feeling a bit uncomfortable under the open collar of his Henley shirt.

We walk in silence for a decent stretch of the main pathway. I want to ask him what's on his mind, but I also don't want to break this therapeutic quiet. Birds chirp in the Joshua tree overhead where we find a bench to sit and rest on, out of the desert sun.

"Okay." Demyen sighs and rubs the back of his neck as he stares out at the foliage. "So... I owe you a big fucking apology."

The snark in me wants to say, *Understatement of the year*. But I shove that down and simply look at him. "What do you mean?"

"I found the voicemail."

I swear, even the birds go silent. My heart definitely does.

Gulping, I slowly nod and lean back on the bench. "So... does this mean you believe me?"

"Yes." His answer comes without an ounce of hesitation.

A huge weight suddenly leaves my chest. I didn't even realize I've been carrying it around until right now. Strange, how absence can make us discover something we've always had. "Do you trust me?"

At this, Demyen does hesitate. I shouldn't be surprised or hurt. Maybe I stepped too far by reaching for the mile when he only gave me an inch.

But then he sits up and scrunches his nose. "I'm not the best at trusting people. I never have been, not even as a kid. I figured out pretty early on that no one is as good as their word. I trust evidence, though." He sags back against the bench and finally looks at me. "I always have. Funnily enough, I used to want to be a detective when I grew up."

That catches me completely by surprise. "What? Really?"

Demyen chuckles and nods. "Made the announcement when I was like, seven? Eight, maybe? I was gonna be a full-blown police detective and solve murders and capture thieves."

"Oh my god. I bet your parents were just..." I shake my head.

“Pissed as hell? You bet. Except for my mom, who wasn’t around to hear my announcement or witness the way my father literally beat the idea out of me. No one carrying the Zakrevsky name would ever go into law enforcement. Not if he could do anything about it.”

I try to imagine Demyen with a badge. Hell, even him in a basic blue uniform as a rookie cop is almost impossible to conjure up.

But then I realize something. “Can you imagine? Being on the same squad as my father? As *Martin*?”

He makes a face and laughs bitterly. “Yeah, I’m not exactly heartbroken over missing my chance to do a ride-along with Greg Everett or abuse my power with Martin.” His smile fades into something far guiltier. “So, to answer your question, I can’t promise that I’m suddenly able to trust you as much as you deserve. But I can absolutely promise, without question, that I believe you. Trust will come. I’m trying.”

I shouldn’t milk it; I really shouldn’t. But this is one of those discussions that warrants serious clarification so no one is on the wrong page. “What do you believe?”

“I know you didn’t kill Michael Little. Not intentionally, and definitely not with any knowledge of that stupid poison or the coffee or... just...” He rubs a hand over his face. “And I know you didn’t have a choice when you testified. It’s become pretty fucking obvious that Greg beat that testimony out of you to cover his own ass.”

I nod and swallow hard. I’m glad we’re sitting on a bench because I’m pretty sure I’m about to drop to my knees in gratitude.

Instead, I slump against the stone back with a heavy breath that feels like I’m exhaling every molecule of tension, stress, and anxiety that this whole ordeal has wrought within my body.

Someone finally believes me.

Demyen finally believes me.

I don't know how long we sit there like this: me completely silent and breathless, Demyen frowning at the desert flowers like they're judging him.

When he speaks again, I'm jolted back to the here and now to find him kneeling on the sand at my feet. His hands rest on my knees as he looks up at me, eyes bright and glistening. "Clara?"

I blink. "Yeah?"

"Remember that night we met? At the hotel?"

"Of course," I whisper. "How could I forget?"

"I want to go back to that."

I don't want to frown at him and put him off, so I touch his hand instead. "What do you mean?"

He sighs deeply. "Before I put two and two together, before I knew who you were... I wanted you. I wanted *you*, Clara, and not just in my bed."

All air disappears from my lungs. I can only swallow and blink at him, hoping he'll continue so I don't start wondering if I'm dreaming. Or hallucinating.

"You were so beautiful, then and now. But somehow, I could tell you have this beauty on the inside, and a strength and a fire in this perfect combination that I didn't know I was looking for. I wanted you by my side, as my woman and my lover, and I just..."

I really, really don't want to start crying. But dammit, it's not fair. It's not fair to find all this out, to hear this directly from him, when it's too late.

When I'm beyond redemption.

Demyen tucks my fingers inside his fist. "I fucked up, Clara. I fucked up so bad. I shouldn't have, but I did—and I treated you like shit. I want you, I *need* you like I need air, and I still treated you like shit."

Only when his voice breaks do I realize he's crying.

“I am so fucking sorry. I’m so fucking sorry, Clara. I don’t deserve your forgiveness, so I can’t ask for that. I just want to know if we still have a chance. Any chance at all to start over.”

Start... *what?* What did he just say?

“I...” My mouth struggles to form words. And then out of nowhere, some switch flicks in my brain and I can’t shut the hell up. “I don’t know, Dem. I really don’t. I want to say we can, I really do. I want to tell you that it hasn’t been all bad, that we actually have some pretty wonderful memories.”

And that I’m pregnant with your child.

“But that’s what abuse is. It gives promises and takes them away. It’s what Martin did all the time to me—hell, it’s what my father used to do.” I draw in a deep, shaky breath and look out at the desert flowers so I can keep myself focused. “I’ve heard such pretty lies. I’ve been promised so many beautiful things, perfect futures, and every single time without fail, I’ve been a goddamned idiot for believing in them.”

Fuck. Here come the tears.

But sometimes, you just have to let them come.

They blur my vision when I look back down at Demyen. My voice chokes around the growing lump in my throat. “You promised me the world. You promised to keep me safe. You said I was yours and that you’d never let anyone touch me. And then *you sold me*. I know you didn’t hold the gavel. You didn’t call out the prices or even lead me to the auction block. But you organized the whole event. You *hosted* it, Demyen!”

My voice wobbles when I start to remember the faces of women who will never be seen again. Because of *him*. What *he* did. What *he* chose.

Fuck. I’m shaking.

I ball my fists at my sides and try to focus on breathing. In, out. In... *Not going to lose my shit out here in public...* Out... *Or take it out on him while he’s apologizing.*

Demyen looks grim. But he hasn’t moved, hasn’t pulled away or even looked away. He’s still kneeling there, touching my

legs, accepting every word that flies out of my mouth for better or for worse.

“I know,” he finally says after what feels like the world’s longest pause. “I know, and I don’t have the right words to tell you how deeply I will regret that for the rest of my days.”

He’s already told me so. But it does help to hear it again. And again, and again, until I actually start believing it.

Better yet—until I actually start *seeing* it.

“You want to make it up to me?”

His eyes spark with hope.

I push myself up off the bench, effectively pushing him away as well. “Start by treating me like a human being. Cut this alpha male bullshit and treat me like a fucking *equal*. That’s what I want. That’s what I need.”

I don’t wait for a response. I don’t know if I want one right now. All I want to do is stomp down the path until the urge to scream isn’t as strong anymore.

DEMYEN

I've just had my ass verbally handed to me.

I deserved it—there's no question about that. I'm still sitting here, still in shock over it.

And then, out of fucking nowhere, a grin spreads across my face.

Her fire...

It's back.

It's back and it's aimed squarely at me. But I don't fucking care—I'm honored, even, to be the one stoking her flames and drawing her back closer to her former self.

She's right on all accounts, too. Especially the part she didn't say out loud but had etched all across her face: my involvement, my complicity, cost dozens of innocent women their lives.

Who knows how many children will never see their mothers again?

I know I have a shit-ton of work to do to make things right.

The first thing on that list: make things right with Clara.

And that starts with laying out all our cards on the table and breaking the web of miscommunication we're constantly tangled up in.

I find Clara walking through one of those labyrinth rock gardens that people say is supposed to help you find an answer

to the question you asked at the beginning of the maze. I'm not sure if she asked a question about me, like whether or not she should put my balls in a jar on the mantel, but I'm pretty damn certain I've come to a decision about her.

"I didn't seduce you just to punish you," I tell her without preamble once I enter the labyrinth path. Some random pair of tourists glances our way, but I couldn't care less. "I mean what I said: I wanted you. Just you. *Clara*. Not Clara Everett, Key Witness. And, shit..."

I have to tell her. I have to be honest with her and this is going to involve being honest with myself. Even if it's making me feel like my chest is about to implode.

"I kept coming up with reasons to hate you, to *not* want you, because I couldn't handle the fact that I wanted you. That I actually cared about you. That I..."

Clara pauses mid-turn on one of the maze's branches. She doesn't look up at me, but I know what she's waiting for me to say.

What *I'm* waiting for me to say.

"I had to keep telling myself all the reasons why I wasn't allowed to love you. Because damn it, I loved you the moment you walked into that hotel room."

I meant what I told her a moment ago: I do not trust people. Trust is danger. Trust is vulnerability. Trust is ripping your chest open and letting the world flay you alive from the inside out.

That's what I saw my parents do to each other and that's what I assumed came with love, a package deal. You couldn't get one without the other.

But what I've decided is...

I no longer fucking care.

Clara Everett can rip me to pieces if that's what she chooses to do. I'll let her. I'll stand in the middle of this stupid labyrinth and surrender myself to whatever may come out of this.

“I love you, Clara. I’m fucked up in the head and I have no idea how to be a good man or a good partner. But I love you. And even though I’m shit at admitting or even accepting it, I know that loving you means I can’t ask you for anything. I can’t ask you to forgive me, or even love me back. All I can do is offer. So this is that. This is me offering. Laying all of me at your feet and saying it’s yours to do with as you please. Love me back or don’t. Accept me or exile me into the desert. It’s your choice. Your power.”

Silence.

A bird chirps. Rocks shift over sand.

More silence.

She very slowly, very quietly, shuffles her feet toward me. She’s hesitant and afraid, and I don’t blame her.

So I drop down to my knees and show her that I’m dead serious.

I’m done taking from her. All I am ever going to do from now on is *give* to her.

The silence stretches so long, I’m almost certain she’s done talking to me. But then she toes at a pebble and sighs. “I’m so scared, Demyen. No, scratch that—I’m fucking terrified. Not just of waking up to find out this has all been one long dream and I’m actually back in that... that...”

When she starts to choke up, I bound to my feet so I can pull her into my arms. There’s no fight in her body. Just fear, anxiety, and need.

She lays her head on my chest. Then buries her face in it.

“I’ve been so scared to love you. And it seems like every time I finally feel like we’re in a good place... *Boom*, just like that, we’re not.” I can feel the dampness of her tears on the skin at my throat. “I don’t care about money, or prestige, or swimming pools with marble fountains.” Clara sighs and pulls her face back to blink up at me. “All I’ve ever wanted was just you. And your respect. Not like, ‘Bow to me’ or anything. Just the respect you give to an equal. It’s all I’ve ever wanted from anyone in my life, and I just... I thought you’d finally be the

first to give it to me. So if you're going to give me anything, give me that. Just treat me like a human being. Like a person with thoughts and feelings, with dreams worth pursuing. Like someone who might actually be right once in a while." Her voice grows very quiet very suddenly. "Like someone who loves you and only wants what's best for you."

I tilt her face up to look at me. *Fuck*, those long lashes sparkle with her tears and I want to kiss each and every one of them away. "I'll do you one better. I'll treat you like a queen. *My* queen."

She blushes. She shakes her head, but oh, I definitely saw her blush. "I don't want or need all that. I just want to be part of your world. Your life. Your team."

I press my lips to her cheek and taste one of her tears as it rolls down her soft skin. "I love you, Clara Everett." I press another kiss to her brow. "You're not part of my world; you *are* my world. You and Willow both. I can't believe I was stupid enough to almost lose you. I'll never stop proving to you that I mean it."

She pulls away, but only enough to study my face. To see that every last bit of this is real.

And then, *sweet merciful heaven*, she kisses me.

CLARA

My world is spinning on a broken axis.

And yet somehow, I'm still in orbit.

Demyen loves me. He *loves* me. He straight up told me, in no uncertain terms, that he loves me. That he's been in love with me since that very first night at The Meridian.

We kissed, even though I didn't say it back. He didn't ask me to. I'm not sure I can right now, and somehow, it feels better knowing that he's actually okay with it.

It's not that I *don't* love him.

It's just... I don't know if I'm able to give him the kind of love he deserves when I'm struggling to give it to myself.

The kind of love that *forgives*.

That *heals*.

That *forgets*.

So what I did instead was kiss him. Kiss him, and pray that somehow he could feel in that kiss that I just need some more time to work through things.

I think maybe he did get a little bit of that? Because when we stepped back, we still held hands and stood close together. We walked out of the labyrinth together, side by side, and further down the path.

And then we kissed again.

And again.

We might have done a bit more if it weren't for another small group of tourists crunching down the path toward us. Demyen laced his fingers with mine and led both of us out of there before anyone could stumble upon our naked, writhing limbs in the middle of make-up sex.

Now, we're in the car, sitting in a semi-comfortable silence. Still holding hands, too, even though he's driving.

It's not that there's any awkwardness between us. I think the "semi" part comes from the fact that we both know we have a mountain of issues to overcome if we're going to make this work.

So I decide to take a big step of my own. "Hey."

Demyen smiles and lifts the back of my hand to his lips, pressing a kiss there. "Yeah?"

"Do you maybe... want to go out sometime? Just you and me. And a candlelight dinner."

I'm really more of a cheeseburger and fries girl, but I'm also a "let's date abusive assholes" girl and old habits need to die.

Baby steps.

He grins. "Yeah? You sure?"

"I'm sure." My heart squeezes at the notion that he's even asking. No, I'm not loving the idea of being in a restaurant full of complete strangers who could all be armed...

But I'm also *hating* the idea of not being in control of my own goddamn life.

Demyen looks so proud of me. There's no way I'm backing out of this now. He opens his mouth to answer, but then the car's system alerts him to an incoming call from Pavel.

He lets go of my hand just to tap the "Accept" button. "Everything okay, Pav?"

I glance at the clock. Willow's school should be letting out right about now.

"I'm not liking this," Pavel's voice rolls low through the car speakers. "I'm here at the school, I have Willow, but..."

I take in a sharp breath.

Demyen glances at me. “But what, man?”

“I think I just saw a caravan of black SUVs pull in through the back—”

POP-POP-POP. Gunshots. Screams.

Oh, God.

“Pav?”

“They’re here!” Pavel shouts into his phone. “They’re here and—run! Willow, *run!*”

Willow screams.

The line goes dead.

My world is spinning on a broken axis.

The only thing tethering me to it is Demyen’s hand squeezing mine. The sound of his voice promising me that we’re going to go get Willow “right fucking now.” Even the sound of his voice shouting orders in Russian is better than the dead buzzing of the ended call.

I do my best not to puke all over the leather seats while he pulls a U-turn so fast that it lifts us on two wheels before we crash back down.

We peel up front-and-center at Willow’s school, Demyen ordering me to stay inside the car while he grabs a gun out of fucking nowhere and bursts into the fray.

I get it—he wants me to stay where it’s safe. He loves me.

But this place looks like a goddamn battlefield and my baby girl is somewhere in the middle of it.

I’m not staying put.

“Clara!”

I ignore his shouts and beeline straight for Willow’s classroom. There are bullet holes lodged in the adobe walls and piercing through the glass windows.

Oh, God...

No. No time to be sick. My baby is in there.

I duck low and peek through one of the still-intact windows. To my relief, I recognize one of Demyen's hired guards standing between the door and the group of small children huddled behind their teacher. He's poised and ready to take down whoever comes through that door.

This is not the time for my heart to fill near to bursting. But it still does.

Demyen promised he'd make sure no one would ever harm Willow in her own school. And here, in the worst possible scenario, he's held up his word.

I catch the guard's attention and he immediately recognizes me. His eyes widen with surprise, then darken with concern when I mouth the question, *Willow?*

He shakes his head.

She's not in there.

Don't panic. Fuck. Don't panic! She could be anywhere.

I dart across the small courtyard toward the set of offices where the administration must be hiding. Demyen shouts after me again, this time with good reason—a few bullets whizz past me.

The bodies I try not to trip over tell me exactly what's going on.

Yakuza. Raizo.

Revenge.

The Yakuza soldier shooting at me yelps in pain, then drops dead with a bullet between his eyes. Over my shoulder, I see Demyen lowering his gun only slightly. He glances at me, his face a mask of focused rage, but he nods.

He gets it. He's pissed, probably worried all to shit, but he gets it.

And he's got my back.

I fumble my way into the main office. The receptionist yelps in fear and is quickly hushed by her colleagues, and everyone stares at me in pure shock when I tiptoe over to them.

“Willow? Have you seen Willow?”

The receptionist quickly shakes her head. “Her uncle, Pavel, came and signed her out. We figured they must have gotten out before all...” Her voice catches. “All this... this...”

I nod so she knows she doesn’t need to struggle through the words. I completely understand what trauma can do in times like this. I’m shocked I’m holding myself together as much as I am right now, to be perfectly honest.

Taking a side door back out makes more sense than drawing attention to the main entrance, so that’s where I sneak next. I don’t care if I have to tear this place apart—I *will* find Willow.

So long as the Yakuza didn’t already take her.

No. Don’t think like that. Not yet.

Demyen meets me outside, gun lowered by his side. “We’re in the clear. Security managed to take out the majority before we got here; the stragglers are either gone or dead now.” He scans my body, clearly checking me for injuries. “Any sign of Willow?”

I shake my head. I feel myself ready to burst into sobs, but he clasps my shoulder and gives me a loving little shake.

“Hey. She’s here. She’s safe. There’s no way Pavel would let anything happen to her, okay?”

I nod. I take a deep breath, nod again, and we both head back to the parking lot where we think Pavel must’ve made the phone call. It makes sense, right? He picked her up, signed her out of school, and had to have been at least halfway to the car with her holding his hand when the attack started.

Think, Clara. Ignore the surging panic and fucking think.

“M-Mommy?”

Willow’s small voice sounds even tinier, but *oh my God* is it music to my ears. Demyen whips around the same time I do.

She slowly climbs out from behind the HVAC system at the side of the building closest to our car. Which, now that my brain is allowing me to process actual details, I can now see is only a few spaces away from another one of Demyen's cars.
Pavel.

"Mommy!"

"Willow!" I sprint to her, scooping her up into my arms. Now feels like the perfect time to let those choked-back sobs run free. "My baby! Oh, my baby! My sweet baby!"

She clings to me, shaking like a leaf.

"I've got you. Mommy's got you. You're safe."

I hug her so tight, I might as well be reabsorbing her back into my body. At the moment, that feels like the best way to keep her safe from this horrible world.

Demyen comes up behind me and hugs both of us tightly. He presses a kiss to Willow's forehead. "Thank God," he breathes. For a millisecond, his hand that cups her face actually trembles. "You okay, little cub? Are you hurt?"

Willow shakes her head.

"How about Pavel? Where's Uncle Pav?"

At this, she hesitates. Then she points back at the HVAC system. "He hid me," is all she whimpers.

He did. And he did a fucking phenomenal job of not only hiding her, but truly protecting her. Both Demyen and I can see the dents where bullets ricocheted off the thick metal that makes up most of the processing units when we make our way over. There's a small space in the middle of all those huge metal units that's just big enough for a small child to tuck inside.

A few yards away, we find Pavel.

He's been shot.

And it's *bad*.

"Pav." Demyen drops to his side and lightly smacks his too-pale face a few times. "Come on, stay with me. This is not

how you go out, man. Not on some preschool playground.”

“Kindergarten,” comes the softly-groaned reply. Pavel slowly blinks his eyes open as much as he can muster the strength to do. “It’s fucking kindergarten. Big kids. Get it right.”

Demyen rolls his eyes. The majority of the blood seems to be pooling around his stomach and that is not a good place to take a hit.

“Clara,” Demyen barks without looking up at me. He hands me his gun, which I take with no small amount of hesitation while still carrying Willow in my arms. “Take my car and get Willow home. I’m taking Pav to the hospital.”

Sirens call out in the distance. Finally, help is arriving—but I’m going to make an educated guess that a Bratva-versus-Yakuza firefight at a school means a delay in getting Pavel help and a shit ton of interrogations, paperwork... and dealing with my father.

Or Martin.

I’m not sure which is worse.

“We’re coming with you.” I take the keys he’s holding out, but I refuse to just run home and hide.

“Clara—”

“Demyen. He risked his life for her. For *us*. We’re going to be there when he wakes up.”

He distracts his own frustration by hoisting Pavel into his arms. When he’s about halfway up, he grunts and gives me his best warning look. “Oleg might find you.”

“Good thing I’ve got a gun.”

I see the corner of his mouth twitch. Then he sighs and uses the breath to lift Pavel up the rest of the way, at least enough to drag him to the other car. “I’d rather you go home where it’s safe.”

“I’d rather not be on the open road without security,” I counter.

That lands how I want it to. Demyen grunts another bout of frustration, but we get Pavel into the car and buckle him in,

careful of his wound.

Next thing I know, I'm pulled into a searing kiss that almost makes my teeth hurt.

Demyen breaks it off and stares me directly in the eyes, his hand in my hair to hold me in place so I don't look away. "You ride my ass all the way to the hospital, understood? I can't lose you again. I can't..." He blinks. Clears his throat. Then turns to Willow and gives her another kiss to her sweet face. "You make sure Mommy does as she's told, okay? I'm counting on you."

Willow nods.

"Good girl."

He looks at me again, very clearly warring between saving his friend and protecting us. But we have a plan, and we made our promise. So he ducks into the car while I get Willow buckled in, and then peels out of the parking lot with me following close behind.

I try to ignore the gun lying on the passenger seat while I drive.

I try to ignore the way it actually makes me feel better—safer—than I've felt in weeks.

I try to ignore how much still hangs in the balance.

CLARA

“Hey, sweetie, do you want any more of your water?”

Willow shakes her head.

I try not to sigh because I’m not frustrated with her or anything like that. I’m just...

Okay. I’m worried. I’m *beyond* worried.

Willow is my sweet little chatterbox who never hesitates to share every detail about her day with me, good or bad. Won a gold star for being helpful in class? I’ll receive a play-by-play of the official “ceremony” during which said star was bestowed upon her Good Behavior Chart. Kid at recess was mean to her? By the time she’s done with her story, I’ll not only know what they were wearing—I’ll know the brand name of their shoelaces and who they had a crush on last year.

She hasn’t spoken a single word since we left the school.

She also hasn’t cried.

Truth be told, Willow hasn’t made a peep.

It might be the hospital that’s scaring her. I’m ashamed to admit that we’ve had our visits, more than once—for me, not her, thank God. Martin never laid a hand on her, at least not until the last few days before we finally left. But when we did have to come to the hospital for anything other than her checkup and vaccinations, it was because I’d broken yet another finger or suffered yet another concussion.

Of course, nurses whispered questions to me.

Of course, my suspicious condition was reported.

And of course, Martin would always be the responding officer.

She was quiet then, just like she's quiet now and was quiet on the way here. Not humming or singing to herself or talking to the birds as they flew past her window. She just... sat there.

Silent. Numb.

My baby is too young to develop numbness. She's too young to be in a shooting. They all are.

Demyen walks back over to us from the nurse's station, his hands in his pockets but his stride calm and unhurried. "He's in surgery right now," he explains once he sits down next to me on the arm of the couch Willow and I have settled ourselves into. "Not much to update, but they said that usually means things are going well."

Demyen looks exhausted. He's always on alert, always ready to go whether it's a meeting or a dinner or a fight. But right now, as he sighs and stares off into space, it's like that one single breath exhales what little energy was keeping him upright.

"How are you?" I ask him. At first, his hand feels limp when I take it. But then his fingers lace with mine and his thumb brushes over the back of my hand.

"Pissed. Worried. More pissed." He sighs again and covertly slides his gaze over to Willow. "More worried."

I can empathize. I don't know if I'll ever be able to forget the way he kicked that car door open and barreled out into the gunfight without a moment of concern for his own safety. No vest, no shield, not even a partner to check his six. He had no idea where any of the Yakuza shooters were and yet he didn't care.

All he knew was that Willow was in trouble.

And that's how he responded.

My heart squeezes, so my hand in his does, too.

Bambi bursts through the elevator doors, not a stitch out of place but clearly breathless. “Where is he?”

“In surgery,” we both reply at the same time.

She blinks, a bit startled. Then quickly shakes her head. “Good. If he pulls through, they better keep him in there, because I... I...”

Demyen slides off the couch to give her shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “He’ll pull through, okay? He’s tough. Way too tough to let anyone get the drop on him in a schoolyard.”

“Which is *so* fucked up!” Bambi hisses. She quickly glances around, covering her mouth. After a moment, she clears her throat and straightens. “Sorry. I’m just... Who *does* that?! Who wakes up and thinks, ‘Hey, today’s a great day to mow down a preschool?’”

“Kindergarten,” Demyen and I say in unison. Again.

“I don’t care if it’s fucking Harvard. People are fu—uh, messed up in the head.” She pulls out her cell phone and taps the screen a few times. “So far, the reports are coming in with no casualties on the school’s side. A few administrators were either grazed or hit, but nothing lethal. All children accounted for and unharmed. All of the dead belong to the Yakuza.”

I glance at Willow. Is this sort of talk too much for her?

But she just stares at the floor, kicking her feet back and forth.

“What’s LVPD have to say about all this?” Demyen asks.

She snorts. “Very little that doesn’t have to do with covering their own asses. Parents and the general public are demanding to know why it took them so long to respond.”

“And?”

Bambi shrugs and tucks her phone away. “Who knows? All I know is that there’s no way you should have been able to beat them to the punch. But you did. That’s enough to keep their PR department busy for a few days.”

“And clean house,” I mutter.

Both of them turn to me. I didn't realize I said that as loud as I apparently did, so I awkwardly shrug my shoulder. "I mean, look at who we know on the force. One guy, *one*, who's actually decent. Two who are dirty as hell, and one of those two has been on the take for literally decades without reprobation or notice. Either they're blind, or they've been turning a blind eye. It doesn't surprise me that people who ignore corruption drag their feet to save the innocent."

Whew. Have I been bottling that up inside me all this time? Honestly—probably. That same blind eye looked right past my bruises on the witness stand. Right past my mother's black-and-blue face day in and day out.

Bambi's phone buzzes in her pocket. After a quick glance, she holds up a finger. "I left a message with the school admin that I'll happily represent any disgruntled parents and teachers in a civil suit against the surviving shooters. Looks like they'll take me up on the offer."

Demyen frowns. "A civil suit?"

Her face suddenly breaks into the most wickedly delighted grin I've ever seen on a human being. "Oh, yeah. Wanna know the best part? They used a cover to scope out the premises and get on site past the first layer of security. A shell company... owned by Raitan Industries."

Demyen's eyes widen, and he takes a step back. "No. You're not serious."

"I am!" Bambi cackles. "Biggest mistake that man has made in *years*."

I am so confused. "What does that mean?"

Demyen turns to smile at me. "Raitan Industries is owned and operated by Raizo Watanabe. It's his public, completely legal, front."

Bambi nods. "Which means that while he can't be charged with anything criminal, I can bleed him dry through this little side business via negligence and liability. Know who you hire, verify background checks, all that sort of thing."

Fucking brilliant.

She notices Willow and walks over to her, kneeling by her side. “Hey, sugarplum,” she coos softly, “I heard you had a rough day at school.”

Willow doesn’t look at her. Only nods.

“Wanna talk about it?”

Willow shakes her head.

“I don’t blame you. But...” Bambi gives her a conspiratorial little smile and wink. “I’m gonna need a *lot* of energy to help take down the bad guys. Can you help me pick out the best ice cream for that?”

At first, Willow doesn’t respond at all. But then she slowly lifts her head, looks at Bambi, and nods.

“Oh, thank you!” The woman sighs with dramatic relief. “I know this one place that has, like, forty-eight different flavors and even more toppings and I just get so overwhelmed...”

Her voice fades as the elevator doors close, Willow’s hand in hers as she quietly walks beside her. I don’t get a goodbye wave. Or a hug. Just an empty stare that slowly shifts to the closing doors.

And then nothing.

Demyen fills the empty space on the couch and rests his arm on the back behind me. It feels like he’s holding me while giving me space at the same time.

I appreciate it more than I know how to say.

“How are you holding up?” he softly asks.

I shrug. Good Lord, that movement alone feels heavy. Everything feels so *heavy*. Am I just as exhausted as he is?

“I should be over the moon that Willow is safe and unharmed, but now, I’m wondering... is she? Or is she permanently traumatized?” Tears sting my eyes. “Did I still lose her?”

“Hey, hey now... Shh...” Demyen pulls me close and kisses the top of my head. I take that as my cue to go ahead and let the tears fall, and he lets me. “None of this is your fault, okay?”

None of it. If anything, it's *my* fault. My war with Raizo should never have reached either of you. Least of all Willow."

"What? No! It's not your fault!" I wipe my tears away with the back of my hand and look at him like he's lost his dang mind. "And it's not like they're the only ones out there threatening her. Martin, even Oleg—"

He stiffens. "What about Oleg?" he asks, his voice suddenly dark.

I sniff and take a deep breath. Plucking the hem of my shirt helps to calm my nerves just a little bit as I dip a toe into the part of my life I'm desperately trying to forget. "He kept asking if I had kids. I tried to pretend like I didn't, to protect her, but he didn't believe me. He wanted to find her and bring her to me." I hesitate. I don't actually know how far that monster's depravity goes because I didn't stick around to find out. "For himself, I think."

Demyen's entire demeanor darkens. And then, like a light switch just flicked on, he brightens again with determination. "You don't have to worry about that. That much I can swear to you."

"I know he's your father, but—"

"He's a fucking monstrosity. I don't care who hears me say it: I will end him before he even gets close enough to breathe anywhere near her."

I know he means it. I know that that level of cold fury should send me running for the hills.

Instead, it makes me caress his face and lean in to kiss his cheek. "Thank you," I whisper.

Demyen nuzzles into my hand, closing his eyes with a sigh. Again, that awareness of how truly tired he must feel, both physically and emotionally, creeps into my mind. I don't even think about it—I just instinctively pull him into my arms and hold him. No kisses, no moves to tempt or seduce. Just holding him.

Sometimes, even the king of the underworld needs a place to lay his head.

“He’s my best friend,” I hear him quietly groan into my shoulder. “He’ll pull through this. He has to.”

I don’t say anything in response. I simply hold him closer and lightly scratch his back the same way I do whenever Willow is upset.

Dem sucks in a shivering breath, holds it, then lets it out in a heavy sigh. The way his body seems to collapse on that exhale tells me everything I need to know. And because of it, I decide not to ask any questions.

“Pavel was the first to even suggest I take over, after everything with Otets and Tolya.” He lifts his head, but loops his arms around my waist so I don’t pull away.

Not that I was going to.

“We were just kids. I thought he was insane. But he thought we could do something better, something greater with all the resources just lying around the compound.” Demyen huffs a small laugh and rolls his eyes. “He’s always pushed me to be a better man. Put the Bratva to good use. I was ready to turn it all into my personal army of vengeance. He wanted me to be Robin Hood with a band of Merry Men.”

“Would that make him Little John?” I ask.

That gets a stronger laugh. “Do *not* let him hear that one.”

We sit together in comfortable silence, just waiting for news on Pavel’s surgery and praying it’s the only news we’ll have to deal with for the time being. I can’t even believe it’s all been one continuous day. It feels like I’ve lived eons since the sun rose.

This morning, I woke up wondering if I could get through the day without disappointing my daughter yet again.

By mid-morning, I’d successfully sent her off to school and agreed to a public outing with the man I have both dreams and nightmares of.

By early afternoon, I’d confronted him without holding back and had my world rocked with his confessions.

It's only been... what, two hours? not even three?... since our walk in the botanical garden.

I get why Demyen seems so exhausted. Days like this exist on repeat for him.

I'm about to lean up and kiss him in an act of heartfelt appreciation when the elevator doors open...

... and my father steps out.

CLARA

“Clara,” Dad says, completely stunned.

Demyen quickly stands and steps between us. “The fuck are you doing here, Everett?”

“I heard about the shooting. Willow wasn’t there when I arrived, and then someone said they saw you.” He tries to look around Demyen at me. “They saw you, and I couldn’t believe it.”

“So you just, what?” Demyen wraps his arm around me as I move next to him, though he keeps himself in the line of fire. “Thought you’d come pretend you care?”

Dad narrows his eyes. “This is between me and my daughter.”

“Oh, no. No, no, no.” Demyen’s chuckle is dark. “You and I both know you don’t give two shits about your own family. Even if you’ve suddenly decided you do, it’s too little, too late.”

“I don’t care who you think you are—”

“I’m Demyen Zakrevsky, corporate CEO and the primary financier of the new surgical wing we are currently standing in.” His grin doesn’t meet his eyes, which stay cold and utterly venomous. “Now, give me one good reason why I shouldn’t call security in to throw your ass out.”

Did I seriously miss that little detail? A quick glance at the gold letters above the elevators doesn’t say “Zakrevsky,” but who knows? At this point, Demyen could tell me he sponsored the sunset and I’d believe him.

Dad is doing everything he can to stop himself from blowing up and causing a scene. I know all his tells: reddening face, flaring nostrils, narrowed eyes. Clenched fists down at his sides. Slow, rattling breaths deep in his torso.

He's being put in place.

No one ever dares put Greg Everett in place.

But he knows that Demyen is an unstoppable force. I wish he would try, just so I could watch Dem snap him like a twig. But even my bullheaded father knows better than to throw himself headlong into an unwinnable battle.

So instead of flying into a rage and throwing punches—like he used to do with Mom—he takes a deep breath and gestures to me. “Can I speak with my daughter?”

Demyen calmly shakes his head. “Not without me or my lawyer present and cameras recording every word.”

Dad tries to bypass him again by stepping toward me. “Clarebear, this is ridiculous. I'm not some monster—”

Demyen intercepts him. “I'm going to stop you right there and give you three seconds to back the fuck up.”

Dad glares at Demyen and gets in his face. “Or you'll what? Assault an officer?”

Demyen's face suddenly brightens into a delighted grin. “Oh, so you're on duty? That does make things simpler. Unless you're here to arrest either of us, we're going to need you to step back, Detective.” He says it loud enough to catch the attention of the nurse's station, and a few turn their heads to see what's going on here.

Dad's caught and he knows it. So does Demyen. If Greg is trying to flash his official badge to get his way, then Demyen's lawyers—a.k.a., Bambi—will rip him an official new asshole with every last legal method in the book.

And if he's admitting he's off-the-clock, then there's nothing in the world stopping Demyen from breaking his face in.

“I just want to know where you've been,” Dad concedes with a sigh. He's still trying to talk around Demyen, like I'm the

weak link here. “I was worried. Martin’s beside himself with worry. He’s been tearing apart the whole city just to find you.”

My brow arches. “He didn’t look very hard.”

At first, I meant it as a reference to the fact that Oleg kept me within city limits the entire time, so any claims of “tearing apart” Vegas is a gross exaggeration.

But now, Dad’s glancing between me and Demyen and I realize he’s coming to a whole different conclusion. And it’s not the worst angle to take, either.

So I lean into Demyen and slip my arm around his waist with a contented sigh and smile. “I’m fine, Dad. I just needed some time to process everything. You threw us for a loop at the cocktail party. And after Martin attacked me—”

“He did *not* attack you!”

“Were you there?” Demyen snarls. “Were you standing there, watching him, to make that determination, *Detective?*”

Dad’s mouth snaps shut. He’s not winning any ground and he knows it. He knows it and he *hates* it.

Truth be told, I completely forgot all about my father the second Oleg bought me and spirited me away for his sick games. I’ve been so worried about protecting Willow from the monsters in my world that I forgot I have my own monsters to deal with—and my father is probably the biggest of them all.

Except instead of facing him head-on, bracing myself for a backhanded comment or literal backhand to the face...

Demyen’s standing guard, shielding me from him. Protecting me.

Just like he promised he would.

I am not used to this. But I definitely like it.

“You need to show me some respect, boy,” Dad snarls in Demyen’s face. “I don’t care what you think you’re doing with *my daughter.*”

Demyen only meets him nose to nose and scoffs. “What are you going to do, old man? Smack me around? I invite you to

try.” He steps into Dad’s space so close, so fearlessly, that Dad actually takes several steps back. “It won’t work on me and it won’t ever work on ‘your daughter’ ever again. Are we clear?”

Nurses are watching on full alert now, but no one has called for security since neither of the men have raised a finger against each other.

Though part of me kinda wants to see Demyen chuck him across the room.

How does it feel, Dad? Can’t take what you dish out?

The rest of me—the part that’s tired of all the violence—just wants some peace and quiet while we wait for Pavel’s surgery to end. I rest my head on Demyen’s chest and smile serenely at Dad. “Thanks for coming by, Dad. I’m great, really. I’m safe, I’m happy, and Willow’s loving her new home.”

Dad glances around. “Where is she, anyway?”

“With our friend,” I reply before Demyen can jump back in on the defense. It’s not that I don’t trust him to defend Willow with every fiber of his being. I just think things will be more effective if we approach this on a united front.

Judging by the look on Dad’s face, I’m right.

“You left Martin for *him*?”

“I left Martin for all the same reasons you gave Mom to leave you.” Now, it’s my turn to take a bite out of his ego. “I just decided to do what she should have done ages ago. I’m ashamed I even let it go on for as long as I did. Now, unless you have official police business here, it’s time for you to leave.”

Even though I’m shaking, I’m not afraid. Not with the way Demyen’s tucking me into his embrace.

Not with the way every nurse and now a few quiet security guards are watching the exchange, waiting for some signal to jump in.

Not with the way Dad, for the first time in my entire life, actually looks a little afraid.

“You think you know what you’re doing?” He sniffs and nods once. “Fine. Have it your way. But don’t come crying to me when this all blows up in your face.”

Demyen’s brow lifts. “Is that a threat, Detective Everett?”

But Dad only waves his hand at us in disgust and shuffles onto the elevator. The doors shut between us and it feels like a literal severance of whatever twisted connection we used to have.

“You okay?” are the first words to fly out of Demyen’s mouth.

I turn to him and offer a sheepish smile. “You stood up for me. Like, really, truly stood up for me. I... No one’s ever really...” I sigh. “Thank you.”

He cups my face in his hand and holds me there so I have no choice but to look him in the eyes. “I told you, Clara: I’m going to make this right. I’m going to make *everything* right. You’re safe with me and I am never going to let him or anyone else lay a finger on you, on Willow... No one.” He glances over his shoulder toward where Pavel had been wheeled away for surgery. “I can’t claim perfection, and I’ve definitely made a mess before. But...” He turns back to me and rests his brow against mine. “I can promise that I will fight for you. Always.”

DEMYEN

I told myself I'd get some work done at the office, where it's quiet and devoid of reminders of everything going on at home. I got here about an hour ago. And since then, all I've managed to do is sink three shots of crumpled scrap paper into the wastebasket. The rest of my attempts are scattered around on the floor, as messy as my thoughts.

Pavel pulled through surgery and spent the past few days recovering in his private hospital room, the very best my money could afford. Doctors said he was lucky the bullet missed his major internal organs, but they still had to stitch some important pieces back together and make sure any and all bullet fragments were removed.

Once he was awake and alert enough to tell me what happened, I wanted to hug him and kick his bed over at the same time.

Was he directly shot? No. He's never that clumsy or unaware.

Was it a bullet that ricocheted off the HVAC while he lowered Willow into that tiny space? It sure was. Lady Luck despises noble sacrifices, apparently.

Does he feel stupid about it? More than a little bit.

We still don't know exactly why Raizo's men shot up Willow's school. It's such a risky move for a traditionally cunning, careful man. Pavel is certain they were after Willow specifically, but again, it doesn't make sense for them to risk harming her by shooting so close. What does injuring or killing an innocent little girl accomplish?

One thing Raizo *did* manage to accomplish is deeply traumatizing her. That pisses me off more than anything. She's physically unharmed, but what that asshole did to her mind is enough to make me want to burn his entire organization to ash.

I've seen grown men get shell-shocked from their first violent skirmish. It takes a few days to shake it off. Bloodshed has a way of lingering in your memory. Eventually, though, most men recover and bounce back ready for the next fight.

None of them are five years old, though.

Willow and her classmates are far too young to witness such atrocities or experience such deep-seated fear. So her version of shell-shock is darker. Deeper. The light is gone from her eyes. She no longer wants to do our crossword puzzle at breakfast. She barely eats. She hasn't spoken a single word.

I grab my phone and do a cursory search for trauma therapists in the area. While I'm at it, I should find a separate trauma therapist for Clara. She's been championing through for Willow's sake, but there's no missing the subtle cues that she's hanging on by threads.

And even though I'm determined to hold her so tight it all heals itself back together, I'm very aware that I'm one of the people who tried to rip her apart.

I frown at my phone. "Family counseling" shows up at the top of the search results.

Do we need family counseling?

Are we... a family?

Truth is, I'm fucking terrified to say yes. I'm terrified that the moment I accept it and envelop myself in the one thing I've always wanted and never believed I deserved, I'll do something to fuck it up.

Like Martin did.

Who, think of the devil, is waltzing his smug ass right through the front doors of my casino like he fucking owns the place. A text from one of the concierges drops down on my phone screen alerting me to the asshole's presence and—

You know what? I'm good with this. I'm *happy* he's here.

I've been needing an excuse to hurt someone.

It's tempting to turn him away, but it's even more tempting to allow him into my casino and straight up to my office—which is, according to the concierge texting me, where he's demanding to go—so we can get a few things clarified.

If that clarification involves me throwing him through the plate-glass window onto the main floor, then arrest me for assault.

I do not give a flying fuck.

The few minutes it takes Martin to ride the elevator up to my floor feel like an eternity. It's plenty of time, though, for me to drum up several different ways I can eject him from my office once he starts pissing me off.

Which, incidentally, happens to be the second he bursts through the door.

"Where are they?" Martin demands. He immediately begins to look around the room as if anyone could be hiding behind the couch, in a closet, in the hollow of my desk. "Where the hell are they, Zakrevsky?"

"You'll have to be more specific."

"My wife!" he shouts, red-faced and literally spitting mad. "My daughter! Where are they?"

"Congratulations are in order," I answer coolly. "I didn't know you got married."

He spins on me, more spittle flying from his mouth as he does. "Don't play your fucking games with me! You know exactly what I mean!"

My calm is just a veneer over the rage bubbling up inside me. It's simmering, but it's about to become a roaring boil if he doesn't calm the fuck down. "I'm sure I don't. Now, what is it exactly that you want? I have a lot of business to take care of, so let's wrap this up quickly."

“Hand them over.” Martin jabs a finger at my face. He’s lucky he’s several feet away and out of reach, or that finger would be snapped, severed, and set in a place of honor on my mantel. “Hand my wife and kid over before you make me do something we’ll both regret.”

“Like violate your position with the LVPD by assaulting an unarmed civilian on private property?”

He glares at me. “You and I both know you’re not unarmed. I know who you are. I know the kind of business you deal with.”

I nod. “As I know yours.”

My gaze levels with his, and at last, he shuts the fuck up. I don’t have to say what we both know I’m thinking: *You were at the auction, and not for police business. Please try to explain that to your boss.*

Martin’s seething, but he takes a moment to force himself into a modicum of calm. “They’re missing. I can’t find them anywhere. Last I saw my wife, she was with you.”

“You keep talking about some ‘wife’ you supposedly have.” I crumple up another sheet of paper and toss it into the wastebasket just to pretend like I don’t care about his personal problems. And also, I’m imagining that’s his head slinging in a neat circle before plummeting into the trash.

“Clara.” He grinds his teeth. “I’m talking about Clara. And you know it.”

I do. But poking at his patience is far more constructive than what I really want to do, which is punch him in the face every time he refers to Clara as his “wife.”

“Well, you should have said so. She’s not married. You can see my confusion.”

Maybe he’ll grind his teeth down to the gums before he leaves my office. He’s on the right track with the way that jaw keeps working as he glares at me.

I decide to help him along. “When I met her, it seemed like she was running from something. *Someone*, rather. You

wouldn't happen to know anything about that?"

"It's none of your fucking business."

"It is if you want information from me."

Martin hesitates. But he's sniffed the bait and he's going for it. "We just had a minor disagreement. She gets overly dramatic about shit."

I roll my eyes with a small chuckle. "You're telling me."

"Right?" The idiot leans in like we're suddenly friends sharing secrets. "It's like she's begging for it. Nothing I ever do is good enough for her, just nag, nag, nag."

"So you just pop her one to get her to shut up, right?"

"What can I say?" His face contorts into this creepy little smile and he shrugs a shoulder. "She loves it. Like it's this kink with her. Just push, push, push until I have to put my foot down and lay her over my knee. Then it's the hottest fucking sex I've ever had in my *life*. Daddy issues, amiright?"

I clamp down to keep from erupting. *Not yet. Wait until the moment is right.* "Good thing your daughter has you to keep things in line."

Martin sighs. "Yeah, well, it can't all be a walk in the park. Willow's starting to get mouthy like her mother. I've been easy on her 'cause she's so little, but she's starting to get old enough for the belt."

I will not murder a cop. I will not murder a cop. I will not murder a cop.

... *yet.*

"Have you talked with Greg? I'm sure he'd be happy to help you."

"My father-in-law doesn't know where they are. Otherwise, I wouldn't be here, would I?"

Interesting. That's a turn I didn't expect. I figured the first thing Greg would have done after our little encounter at the hospital would be to contact Martin and tell him all about Clara and Willow and the shooting.

Speaking of which... the shooting.

Martin hasn't mentioned the school shooting.

Very interesting.

"I'm sure you've both been busy with everything that happened this week," I muse with feigned empathy.

"What are you talking about?" He frowns at me like I've suddenly sprouted a second nose.

Where has he been this whole time? Did someone bury his head in the sand somewhere way out in the Mojave? "The school shooting? It was all over the news."

"Oh. That." He shrugs like it wasn't a direct threat against his own child's safety. "Nothing we can't handle. Nothing that can or will distract me from finding my wife and child."

There are two options standing in front of me: either he's a complete dumbass who is too unobservant to carry a detective's badge, or he's trying to play me for information. Either way, I'm not loving his tone or the way he refers to *my* family.

Because fuck it—that's who they are to me now.

I push my chair back abruptly and stand. "Great to hear LVPD's finest cares so much about the safety of our children," I rumble with sarcasm dripping off every syllable. "Since you can't seem to find your own job, let alone your child, allow me to direct you to the exit."

"Hold on." Martin holds a hand up to stop me from pushing him out. He's dangerously close to me breaking his fucking wrist like a matchstick. "I think we got off on the wrong foot here. I came to negotiate."

I arch a brow. "Probably should have led with that."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. Anyway. I know you've got your own family problems you've been dealing with. Tolya, right?"

I freeze and say nothing.

He seems to take my silence as an affirmative. "I can help you get him out. Just work with me here. Give me Clara and

Willow and I'll give you your brother."

Did I just hear him right? Did he just go from not knowing about a massive school shooting in his own jurisdiction to acting like he can free a convicted murderer from prison?

"I'm listening." I shove my hands inside my pockets and lean against the desk.

Martin glances around suspiciously. *Yeah, like I'm gonna keep all my recording devices in plain view. Dumbass.* "I know the coroner's report was doctored. I can work with that."

He pauses, so I nod for him to continue.

"Say the case gets reopened. Say new evidence is discovered. Say the arrows start pointing away from Tolya and towards someone else who had a stake in the whole thing, like Raizo Watanabe... or even Greg."

One big benefit of being the owner of a casino is having the best poker face in the house. That's the only way I'm able to hide my surprise—my utter fucking *shock*—at this man's eagerness to throw his own mentor and supposed "father-in-law" under the bus.

Something else catches my attention, too. "What stake did Raizo have in it?"

"Oh, come on. You were there. You saw the business Greg's been helping him with all these years. Michael Little was gonna blow the whistle. Everyone knew it."

I'm so glad I didn't kick him out when he walked through those gilded doors. This has proven to be a very fascinating and informational barge into my peace and quiet. "So if I'm understanding you correctly, you'll reopen the case and fabricate new evidence to exonerate my brother?"

Martin nods. "In exchange for Clara and Willow."

"Hm."

I pretend to think about it. I pretend like it's tempting.

I don't have to think about it, though.

Because it's not.

“Unfortunately, I don’t know where they are.” I push myself off the desk with a casual shrug and head for the bar in the corner. “Thanks for the offer, though.”

Martin stands there, stunned. “What...? What do you mean, you don’t know where they are?”

“Exactly that.” I pour myself a shot of whiskey and let the burn slide down my throat. “I don’t know—and I don’t think I’d tell you even if I did.”

“You can’t do that! You can’t just kidnap my wife and daughter!”

I knock back another shot, set the glass down, and stalk toward him like a predator cornering the world’s dumbest prey. “You don’t *have* a wife. Legally, you don’t even have a daughter. I did some digging on you as well. Do you honestly think a clumsy, egotistical cop too self-important to remember to sign his own baby’s birth certificate is going to tempt me with fabricated evidence and promises of freedom?”

His eyes widen as he quickly stumbles backward. “You don’t have a choice! Everyone thinks he did it! Without me, your brother will stay in there forever!”

“I *do* have a choice. I made the choice the moment I met Clara, and that was to help her. To help her get the hell away from bastards like you.” I grab Martin by his shirt collar and slam him against the door. “And the second I met that sweet little girl, I made the choice to give her everything her deadbeat, son-of-a-bitch sperm donor never did, never would, and never could. So when I say I don’t know where they are, what I really mean is, ‘Fuck right the hell off.’”

It’s easy to “accidentally” drag his face along the wall and ram it into the door as I escort him roughly out. When he stumbles to the ground, my only disappointment is that he’s only falling onto the plush velvet carpet in the hall and not off the edge of a cliff.

I’m going to have to figure out a plan to get rid of Martin for good. Something permanent that will get him off of Clara and Willow’s trail for the rest of eternity. I’m sick of dealing with

him—I can only imagine how terrifying it must be for the girls every time he pops up like a fucking weed.

This one time is the exception. Idiot that he is, he did give me some useful information.

And I did, in fact, get it all on tape.

I turn to walk back to the desk to grab my phone and make sure everything loads from the hidden microphones onto the cloud database so I can send a copy to Bambi.

Between his offer to fabricate evidence in a major murder case and his confession of abusing Clara, plus plans to abuse Willow, replacing Tolya's spot in prison with the dumbass may actually be an option on the table.

A door in the private bathroom clicks.

I whirl around—

And Clara's soft lips latch onto mine.

CLARA

Demyen stood up for me.

He *protected* me.

And he gave up a chance at Tolya's freedom... for *me*.

I don't care what might happen when he finds out I've been eavesdropping. I don't even care if Martin comes back through that door and sees I'm here.

All I need is *him*.

And when I yank open the bathroom door to fly into his arms, I make that abundantly clear.

Demyen's surprise lasts only for a second before he's kissing me back, his hands cupping my face and tangling in my hair. I kiss him like I need him to breathe. I taste him like he's the only thing that will sustain me in this life.

And when he pulls away, just enough to rub the tip of his nose with mine, I breathe him in like he's the best scent in the world.

"Why?" I blurt.

Great. Very eloquent, Clara. Just... lead with that, I guess.

I pull away so I can blink up at him. "Why? Why did you do that?"

"Do what?" Demyen glances at the office door. "Throw Martin out on his ass?"

“Yes!” I throw my hands in the air like it’s the most obvious thing. “And lie about where Willow and I are! You had an in! Martin was going to get Tolya out of prison!”

Realization, then understanding, dawns on Demyen’s face. He smiles at me and shrugs. “I already told you. I promised you, actually. I will always protect you. Especially from assholes like him.”

“But... but Tolya! You could have traded me in—”

“Stop.” Dem pulls me close again and tilts my face up to his. “Look at me. Listen very, very carefully.” His eyes sparkle up close like this. “I am not trading you in. Not for anyone or anything. Alright?”

“But he’s your family—”

“So are you.”

My mouth drops open. I... I don’t know what to say. His thumb gently rubs my bottom lip as I stand there, gaping like a fish, clinging to his arms desperately.

I’m actually kind of worried that if I let go of him, I’m gonna drop to the floor. “But... Tolya...”

“Clara.” Demyen kisses the side of my brow. “Are you *trying* to trade yourself for him?”

“I... I just want to do the right thing. I want to help you get him out. I don’t want to go back to Martin, but if that—”

“Absolutely not.”

I shake my head, still fumbling for the right words. “Dem, I need to make this right. For both of you.”

His smile is breathtaking. His lips hover over mine, so close and yet so far away. “Then don’t make me choose between you. Because I won’t. You’re mine, Clara.”

The distance closes. His mouth claims mine and it’s like a physical seal to his promise that I feel all the way inside my heart. When I flick the tip of my tongue between his lips, he lets out a groan and welcomes me in.

We're moving. Or, more like, he's moving us. The backs of my thighs hit the edge of his desk, and Demyen trails his kisses along my jaw to my ear.

"The only decision I need to make," he growls between nibbles of my throat, "is whether to lay you across this desk or bend you over it."

I decide to help him out a little. I push myself up onto his desk and spread my legs around his hips.

Demyen's hands instantly grab my ass and pull me to the very edge. *Fuck*, he's so hard. I can't hold back the low moan that bubbles up in my throat. The wicked grin that floats across his face is the only warning I have before he smooths his hands up to the small of my back, hooks his fingers into the waistband of my leggings, and drags them down in a single rip.

I let him ease me onto my back. I feel more vulnerable this way, but... I like it? I think I do. As exposed as I am, I've never felt safer than when he drapes my legs over his shoulders and starts kissing his way down my calf.

My panties are the next to come off. Dem takes his sweet time to peel them away. And then I'm spread, wide and bare for him, exposed to his ravenous gaze.

"Dem..." I moan.

He cocks his head to one side and drags one finger, long and slow, through my slit. It makes me shiver and gasp with pleasure, and I just know I must be dripping around his fingertip.

"I want to do so many things with you, baby," he murmurs. "I can't make up my mind where to start."

I push myself up onto my elbows and give him my own slow, hungry once-over. "We have time," I purr, locking my ankles over his ass.

That must have been the invitation that he needed—that this is no longer a series of "one time only." We're no longer playing pretend.

This is real; this is us. We have plenty of time to bring to life each and every one of his delicious, depraved ideas.

And a few of mine.

Demyen's mouth seals to mine in a searing kiss. I'm melting under his touch as his hands wander over every inch of me. I tug at his shirt because I need to feel him, warm and bare. Hard and smooth everywhere, from his carved-in-marble jawline down to the throbbing bulge firmly pressed against my pussy.

I want him.

I need him.

I love him.

At some point amidst the kissing, my shirt and bra disappear. "I should... close the blinds..." Demyen mutters between kisses to my neck.

"Don't." I arch into him, blindly fumbling for the fly of his pants. I don't care who sees us. In fact, the wickedest part of me wants the whole fucking world to watch so everyone knows to never, ever touch me again. "Let them see. I want them to see."

"Fuck." Demyen groans. "I am trying... to be... romantic..." He kisses another fiery path to the valley between my breasts. "And you... are being... very... naughty."

"Are you gonna spank me?"

Demyen grins. "Don't tempt me."

I roll my hips to tease him. Big mistake—I end up dragging my pussy along his hard, bare shaft and it teases *me* far more than I intended. I let out a whimper of need.

"You're playing with fire," he warns.

"I don't care. Burn me up."

His mouth latches onto my breast. That's the only warning I get. The next thing I feel is the fucking incredible, mindblowingly delicious sensation of his cock filling me to the absolute brim.

“That’s it, baby,” he breathes after releasing my breast with a wet smack of his lips. He kisses his way over to the other. “Work that sweet pussy on my dick. Show me what you need.”

“Dem...” I whine. I want to tell him all the things I want him to do to me, but I can’t seem to get past those first two words before my brain turns to mush. *I want...*

Lucky for me, he knows without me having to say a damn thing.

He scoops me up in his arms and fucks me mid-air. My hips crash into his again and again as he impales me on his cock. His breath fans across my skin as he loses himself in me.

It’s almost embarrassing how fast I come. My orgasm sweeps over me without warning. I’m clutching at his shoulders, his neck, scrambling to grab something to hang onto while my body spasms and my senses burst on overload.

And then the world is spinning. I’m spinning. I’m suddenly empty and rolled over and I’m just about to whine and beg for him to let me ride the rest out—

SMACK! A hard spank at the perfect time to send me to the moon.

I cry out. *Fuck!* I’m coming even more. I can feel my juices trickling down my thigh as Demyen croons in my ear, “Spread those beautiful legs for me, baby.”

I don’t know why or how, but all I want to do is be his good girl who does exactly what he says because I know, I know, I *know*, he’s always going to give me exactly what I need.

He pulls out of me, sets me on my feet, spins me around, and licks me from bottom to top. His tongue plunges inside me and all I can do is squeeze the hell out of the desk and pray I don’t implode.

I’m facedown with my ass up and my thighs spread as wide as I can manage. Demyen holds me to his face and he licks, sucks, nibbles every inch of my ultra-sensitive core like it’s the last meal he’ll ever have.

“Dem...” When his lips wrap around my clit, I buck and scream. “Dem!”

He’s got me pinned in place, so I can’t pull away. I can’t even wriggle. I can only writhe and pant and claw at the desk, begging him wordlessly for more. For mercy. For release.

SMACK! Another vicious spank that intermingles with the buzzing, swirling orgasm. I feel my eyes roll back into my head as the world dissolves into beautiful pixels.

Another smack. Another tug of his lips on my clit.

I’m seeing stars.

Demyen growls with deep satisfaction. I’m shuddering, quivering, gushing.

And he’s lapping up every single fucking drop.

I barely have time to recover before he’s kissing up my spine, taking his time to caress my trembling, still-spasming body, caring for me while also moving me into the perfect angle.

Facedown, sprawled across his desk, legs hooked around his waist as he drives himself balls-deep inside me.

I love the way he grips my thighs to keep me up. I fucking love knowing that in the morning, I’ll have reminders of our time together speckled all over my skin.

I love the way he loses control with me.

I know it should scare me. After everything, it really should.

But somehow, in some beautifully messed up way, Demyen’s wildness fuels my own self-confidence. *I’m* the one making him this hungry. This wild. This feral.

I do this to him.

His chest presses to my back and I feel him sink inside me even deeper. But instead of picking up the pace, he actually slows down into this long, solid, rhythmic massage of his thick shaft along every single inch of my quivering inner walls.

And yet, as brutal as this is, Demyen’s still holding me. Comforting me. Kissing my neck and shoulders and

whispering sweet promises that we can have this any time we want, anywhere we want, forever.

“I love you,” he breathes. I feel him shudder, hear his breath catch as he holds himself back from tumbling over that sweet edge without me. “I fucking love you. So damn much.”

My vision blurs. My heart skips a beat and pounds against my ribcage in time with his slow, deep thrusts. Through the window, I can just see the tops of people’s heads as they move around the main casino floor, completely oblivious to the naked couple writhing and rocking on the owner’s desk.

I can’t believe I have the strength to push myself up on my arms. But I do.

And I push myself onto him the same time he slides back into me.

“Fuck,” he groans, panting. The sound bolsters my confidence and I do it again, and again, soaking in every shuddering gasp and basking in every growl and groan that rumbles through his chest. “Clara, baby, I’m gonna...”

“Do it,” I beg. I don’t even know if I’ve stopped coming this entire time—my body is on fire and every nerve ending exploding over and over since he drew the first one through me. “Do it, please. I need... I love...”

His arms wrap around me like bands of steel and he holds me there, driving into me harder than ever before.

He sinks his teeth into my shoulder.

And then we’re falling, tumbling, crying out... giving each other every drop of our love.

CLARA

It seems the sensation of falling was a literal one.

Because when I'm finally able to open my eyes and steady my breath, I realize we're on the floor.

More like Demyen's the one on the floor, offering himself up as the sexiest cushion a woman could ask for. He's still inside me, still wrapped around me, still basking in the afterglow. His face is buried in my hair and he just lies here, holding me. Breathing me in.

Loving me.

I wince when he slowly pulls out of me. I hate that feeling. I know it's necessary, but I still hate it. In a perfect world where I can have my way, we'd be able to stay locked together like this for as long as we want.

Forever, ideally.

Demyen laughs as he rolls us onto our sides, still cushioning my head with his arm. I turn to face him and curl up into his warmth as much as humanly possible.

"I've never seen my desk from this angle," he chuckles.

I giggle. "We should carve our initials there. No one else will see it."

"And if they do, I know who to fire."

I nudge him playfully and he squeezes my ass. Then he spends the next few minutes caressing me. We just lie there, on the carpeted floor of his office, naked and glistening and covered

in each other's scent. Just taking the time to learn every curve, every angle, every ticklish spot on our bodies.

Something catches in my throat. I need to say it. I don't know if I'm really ready to, but it feels wrong to hold it back.

"I love you, too, you know," I breathe. I'm almost too scared to look him in the eyes, but I manage.

Demyen's gaze is so full of warmth and love. "Clara..." He sighs and tucks a wild curl behind my ear. "You don't have to say it just because I did. If you're not ready—"

"I've *been* loving you." I stop him before he starts spiraling down a path we both don't want to go. "I just... I was too scared of being vulnerable. Of being taken advantage of."

His brow furrows. "What changed?"

"You did." I think about it for a moment, then let out a soft little sigh. "And I did, too."

Demyen kisses my brow, then my eyes, then my lips. His hand glides over my waist and I get this insane idea to just tell him. Tell him that we will always be connected no matter what happens. Tell him that a part of him is growing inside me, waiting to be just as loved and cherished as their big sister.

I open my mouth to say it, but before I can—

"We need to go see Tolya."

My train of thought screeches to a stop on the tracks. "What?"

His face darkens. "I have to tell him. *We* have to tell him. About the case, about what we've found, the Yakuza, your father... and us."

Us.

Fuck. Tolya is *not* going to like that.

I sit up faster than I intended and it makes my head spin. Or my anxiety does. Probably both. "I don't... I don't think it's a good idea for me to go."

Demyen sits up behind me. "Clara..."

“I mean it. He *hates* me. How do you think he’s going to react when he finds out my father’s the one who put him in there? And that you’re... you’re...”

“Dating his daughter?”

I turn my head to peer at him. “Is that what this is?”

A laugh bursts from his lips. “Well, it sure as fuck isn’t casual. What else should we call it? Courting?”

Damn it. This is supposed to be a very serious discussion, but once again, this man has managed to fuck me into a state of liquid bliss. Even my anxiety and fear are no match for his charm. Or his dick.

“Whatever we call it,” I say when my giggle fades, “you know your brother is going to hate it.”

Demyen rests his chin on my head and thinks about it. “Either he deals with it, and accepts it, or he can sulk in his cell until he does.”

I turn all the way around to stare at him. “What?”

“I mean it,” he insists. “I’d rather leave him there than let him lay a finger on you. We’ll go see him tomorrow and tell him everything. If he’s good with it, great. If not, I’ll take my sweet time until he comes around.”

“But—”

“Clara, I told you: I’m not choosing between you. I love him, yes, but I love you, too. I swore to never let anyone lift a finger against you—and that includes my own brother.”

I tilt my head to close the distance between us, pressing my lips to his. Then, despite every whisper of fear in the back of my mind, I agree.

“Okay. Let’s go see him.”

DEMYEN

“Nope.”

Tolya immediately spins on his heels to face the guards who just brought him in.

“Tolya, please.” I pull a chair out for Clara to sit in and gesture for him to join us. I don’t know what good that will do since the man is trying to leave, but fuck it. Worth a try. “Just hear us out.”

“Oh, so it’s an ‘us’ now?” He does turn back around, but not because he’s particularly happy about our little revelation. “What, is her pussy made of solid gold?”

I shove my hands into my pockets because they’re balling into fists. This is the worst place to get into a wrestling match with my brother.

“I’m going to very nicely ask you to show some respect,” I growl.

Tolya eyes Clara. “How am I supposed to feel about my little brother fucking the girl who ruined my life?” He approaches the table, but instead of sitting down in one of the cheap plastic chairs, he braces his fists on the tabletop and leans in close to her face. “You’re the one who should be in here. Not me. So unless you’re here to confess, I don’t have anything to say to you and I sure as shit don’t have any reason to listen to you.”

“What does she have to confess?” I ask.

Tolya stares at us for a long, silent moment. Then, for whatever reason, he decides to sit down. “Okay, fine. Let’s play your little game.” Leaning forward, he rasps, “*You* killed Michael Little.”

“Ah.” I lean back in the chair. The puzzle pieces are falling into place. “Oleg’s been here.”

“That’s ‘Otets’ to you, little brother.”

“I think I’m perfectly capable of deciding what I call the man who kidnapped my woman and tried to assault her, *big brother*.”

Tolya stills. His face betrays nothing before he looks at me warily. “I’m listening.”

I like to think I have the patience of a saint, despite being the devil. It’s the only reason I haven’t throttled my stubborn ass sibling yet.

“As I was saying,” I explain through gritted teeth, “we’re here because we have updates. News.”

“Yeah?” Tolya arches a brow. “So did Otets. He told me he finally caught Michael Little’s murderer.” He looks at Clara again. “And that if the American legal system failed, he’d take her to Russia to try our luck there.”

Clara pales. She doesn’t say anything, but she doesn’t have to. The slight lean in her body tells me she’s either about to throw up or pass out.

I wrap an arm around her shoulder to help steady her. “If that’s all he told you, and that’s what you genuinely believe... then you’re a fucking idiot.”

Tolya shoves the chair backwards with a screech as he stands halfway. “I don’t have to listen to—”

“Sit the fuck down and shut the fuck up.”

Tolya turns his fury against me. *Good*. “*You* don’t get to tell *me* what to do!”

“I’m doing exactly that, as your brother and as the leader of this family. *Our* family. So if you want to actually leave this

place for good, grab your ears and firmly remove your head from your ass so you can listen better.”

The corner of his mouth twitches. He won't admit it, but it's as good as a laugh.

I stole his old line.

“Of course that's what Father told you,” I continue as we both lower back into our chairs. “He knows exactly what to say to get you to agree with him. He always has.”

Tolya subtly nods, conceding the point. I'll take it.

I reach into my pocket and pull out the only device the prison guards would let me bring through: an old-school tape recorder with no internet access.

“The fuck is that?” Tolya grumbles as he eyes the device.

“Just listen.” I press the play button.

Greg's voice comes through the speakers. “*Watch your tone with me, young lady...*”

We sit there in complete silence while the tape plays the full conversation between Clara and her father the night of the auction. I study Tolya's face as he listens to his arresting officer confess to abusing his family, to being on the take, to manipulating the evidence with the full intention of framing Tolya for what ultimately was an unintentional suicide.

When the recording stops, he's silent. I slide my gaze to Clara, who only stares at the table. The tension is so thick in the air, I can't blame her for ducking beneath it.

Finally, Tolya sucks in a deep breath. “So. What's being done about this?”

“I'm recanting.” Clara blurts it before I have a chance to open my mouth. She meets his hard stare with her own guileless one. “I'm taking back my testimony and telling the courts what really happened. That my dad beat me into a forced confession and I gave my testimony under duress. Bambi is confident that, between my recanting and this recording of his confession, we should be able to get you out.”

He listens. Folds his arms across his chest. He's not leaping at the good news, but he's not as pissed as he was fifteen minutes ago.

"I have to know..." He looks at her suspiciously. "What's changed? You've had all this time to recant. Recording or no recording, you've known the truth this whole time."

Clara takes a deep breath. I squeeze her hand under the table to silently encourage her.

You've got this, babe.

"My father..." She lets out that breath in a heavy sigh. "He's been abusing me my entire life. Me and my mother. She's dead now. He basically sold me to his little protégé when I was sixteen and I don't know for sure, but I have a gut feeling it was so he could keep me under his thumb."

Tolya frowns, but says nothing.

"That would be my ex, Martin. Martin Patterson. He... he's on the force, too. He basically took charge of me when I was eighteen and kept it up for years. When he got me pregnant, I didn't... I didn't know where to go. Where was safe to go, I mean. I tried to report him a few times and I just..."

I rub her back gently. I don't want to speak for her, but she needs to know she's not alone.

That I believe her.

"I've never had a safe place. I've never known who to trust. My father's the leading detective in the LVPD and no one did anything about the very obvious abuse going on in his home. You saw me in court. *Everyone* saw me. And they chose to ignore it. They ignored me. Now, I have a little girl and... and... I had to get her out of there." Clara's voice catches. She takes another deep breath and wipes the corners of her eyes. "I've wanted to recant ever since I realized what my dad did. Even before I got that recording. But without the ability to prove anything, I'd be putting my daughter in danger."

She quiets. It takes a moment before I realize that it's because she's trying not to burst into tears.

“She’s already in danger,” I add quietly. Tolya whips his gaze to mine, so I explain, “Yakuza. They shot up her school. Pavel just got out of the hospital after taking a ricochet trying to keep her safe.”

He utters a curse in Russian that doesn’t translate. I see the rage and distrust leave his body. “How old is she?”

Clara musters a tiny smile. “Five.”

More cursing. I silently agree with him. Tolya and I may not be from the world’s most humanitarian family, but children are important to us. Children are top priority in our culture. To threaten one, to threaten *any*, is a crime far beyond anything either one of us would ever dream of committing.

“Not to belabor the point,” I quietly slip in, “but you were just about to believe an eight-year-old purposefully murdered a police detective. With cultivated poison.”

I realize this is the pot calling the kettle black, but he doesn’t know that.

Tolya rubs a hand over his face. Then, slowly, begins to laugh. “Oh my fucking God. I’m an idiot.”

Clara’s mouth twitches. I’m pretty sure the thought that just went through her head is along the lines of, *Runs in the family*.

She’s not wrong.

“Bambi is drafting up the appeal as we speak.” I pull out a folded stack of papers and slide it across the table to him. “She’s working with the lawyers to make sure it’s a sure thing this time.”

“*This* time,” he snorts. But before I can snap at him for being ungrateful, he holds up a placating hand. “Forgive me. After a dozen-plus failed attempts, a man tends to lose faith in the system.” He looks at Clara again, this time with an actual edge of sympathy. “I suppose you would understand that.”

She nods.

Tolya glances between us. I don’t know what my brother is thinking, and there’s an ever-growing part of me that doesn’t

actually care unless it involves welcoming Clara into the family.

“I don’t usually say this, so consider it a one-time deal.” He steadies his gaze on her. “I am sorry. For everything. What your father—and I use that term *very* loosely—did to you is unforgivable. What my father did to you is unforgivable, too. I am truly sorry for allowing my anger to cloud my judgment.” He sighs and slumps in his chair. “Given a chance to do it all over again, I know I still would. Dem and I grew up in this country, but that doesn’t change our culture. Children are everything. You fuck with kids, you’re asking for a death sentence.”

I should have taken that into consideration. While I was always trying to be everything our father was not, Tolya had always been the one to try and emulate the best in him in exchange for some molecule of approval from the old bastard. He embraced the language, the culture, the food... everything that reminded Oleg of home.

It explains a good chunk of Oleg’s favoritism for Tolya.

And it definitely explains why Tolya risked his life to save Clara, some scared little kid he didn’t even know.

It’s what our people do.

Now, it’s fueling his fire as he speaks to both of us. “Right. So there’s that. And there’s another kid in trouble. You said the Yakuza are behind the shooting?”

We both nod. Again, I squeeze Clara’s hand. I don’t know how the reminder of Willow’s brush with death will be received until she simply laces her fingers with mine.

Tolya rubs his jaw. “Any survivors? From the Yakuza, I mean.”

“Only a couple, but they were arrested.”

“And will undoubtedly be sent to prison.”

The lightbulb in my head clicks on. “You’re thinking...”

Tolya’s face breaks into a wide grin. “They get sent here. Word spreads why they’re here. A lot of fathers with young

children in these cells won't take kindly to that."

Clara's eyes widen. "What are you going to do?"

Both of us cast a quick glance at the nearby guards, who are trained to pretend they're completely ignoring us. Tolya chuckles. "Best leave that to the imagination." He kicks his feet up on the chair next to him and makes himself comfortable. "It sounds like we've got quite a few ducks to get in line. Since I'm stuck in here with limited resources, I'll give you what I know so you can find something to do with it."

I wasn't expecting this. Truth be told, I also wasn't expecting him to shift gears so quickly even after listening to the recording.

Because, after all, he's a Zakrevsky. Those men have a tendency to be stubborn dickheads.

I would know.

"Oleg's got a full operation up and running here in the States. It's huge. Business is good, from what he tells me, so you know what that means."

I do. I'm not going to spell it out in front of the guards, but my nod suffices to convey that yes, I understand that Oleg is operating a human trafficking ring that's thriving with plenty of customers and even more victims.

"I wondered. He dropped fifty million on a recent acquisition."

Tolya's jaw drops. "Fifty million? Shit. That's fucking insane. I take it he's not getting a refund."

"More like... paying reparations."

He chuckles grimly. "Good to know. Anyways, it's not just here in the States where he's working."

"I did hear he's got a whole base office back home."

He nods. "So he did tell you. Yeah, and it's huge. Bigger than what's going on here, and way more... how do you say, 'lucrative.' But the key is, they're interconnected. One does not operate or exist without the other." His brows lift as if he's trying to emphasize something. "You know?"

It takes me a hot second to catch on. But then... “So anyone... *involved*... in one ‘office’ is involved with the other?”

“Exactly.”

“Like... supplies. Resourcing.”

Kidnapping, coercion, blackmail... everything Greg has been doing to procure slaves for Raizo. I wish I had that on recording as well, but Clara assured me that a few of his past victims were still on the streets. Pay them enough, we’ll have testimonies.

The pieces are starting to come together.

“Bingo.” Tolya taps his finger on the table. “If you can prove a third ‘office’ connecting to the one here in the States? It’s a slam dunk in the courts.”

Translation: if we can somehow prove that Raizo is feeding slaves into Oleg’s ring, that will connect Greg to the darker operations in Russia.

And, simultaneously, threaten to bring down the entire international circuit.

“It won’t be enough.” Clara’s voice is soft. She clears her throat and sits up straighter, pulling more confidence into herself. I pray every day I can keep instilling more of that into her—one way or another. “I mean, definitely do all that. Please. But my father? He doesn’t care. That’s just a job to him. He’ll talk his way through any investigation and be back on the streets before the next case file hits his desk.”

I despise that she might have a point.

“But,” she quickly adds, “he does have a weak spot.”

We both look at her, remaining silent so she’ll continue.

She ducks a little under the attention, but I feel her squeezing my hand back for that added boost of support. “He’s a hero. He wears that imaginary cape more prominently than his badge. He’s the guy on the news telling people he caught the bad dude. He’s the detective giving talks to kids in elementary schools. He’s the man who runs into fires to save puppies and

he's literally overturned rubble with his bare hands to dig out the elderly from a collapsed building."

I grimace. Such bullshit. They tell you never to meet your heroes. In this case, I'm going to do one better than simply steer clear of Greg Everett—I'm going to bury him so deep that no one ever finds him again.

"You want to hurt him? You want to *cripple* him?" The tiniest of smirks dances across her face. "Ruin his image. Take all of that away from him. Expose him for what he truly is so no one will ever see him the same way again."

Tolya looks impressed. I can tell he's feeling a sudden, growing respect for her. "Damn. Alright. How do you suggest we do it?"

She instantly deflates. "I have no idea."

"It's okay, *kiska*." I press a kiss to the side of her brow. "We'll figure something out." Leaving my mouth close to her ear, I whisper, "Do you want to go back out to the car? I need to chat with Tolya a bit more. I'll be quick."

She looks up at me. I see the doubt, the uncertainty and self-consciousness in her eyes, and I feel sick to my stomach that I'm the one who put that there. So I tug her close and remind her that I love her with an unabashed, not-at-all-discreet kiss.

"Okay," she murmurs a bit more dreamily. To Tolya, she blushes again and looks down. "I am sorry for everything."

"Me, too." He reaches across the table to offer his hand. To both our concealed surprise, she takes it. "I am grateful to you for taking care of my little brother. If he ever gives you trouble, just remember: he wet the bed until he was nine."

"You fucking *mudak*..."

Clara's giggle makes the humiliation worth it. Tolya winks at her, and I'll take his teasing if it means mending bridges between them.

She stands. Then, before she leaves, she wraps her arms around my neck and kisses my cheek. "Don't worry," she

whispers in my ear. “I can think of a few better ways to ruin your sheets.”

And with that, she follows one of the guards out of the visiting room.

I’m glad I decided to stay behind.

I need a few minutes before I can stand up again.

DEMYEN

“She is not at all what I expected.” Tolya pauses for dramatic effect before he adds, “... She’s way hotter. Too hot for your surly ass, that’s for damn sure.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Watch it.”

“Oh, I am definitely watching that sweet ass walk away.” Tolya grins. “Please tell me you’re taking every opportunity to enjoy that insane body.”

I’m not loving this turn of conversation.

He can tell. “Listen, little brother. It’s been fifteen years since I was thrown in here and fourteen years since my last conjugal visit. Forgive a thirsty man for eyeing an ice-cold glass of water.”

I sigh and roll my eyes. “Just try to keep your thoughts, *and your hands*, to yourself.” I tilt my head to one side and smirk. “So how is Narissa doing these days?”

“Fuck if I know,” he snorts. “Bitch divorced me before they even finished probing my ass for contraband. No love lost there.”

“I’m sorry to hear it.”

“Don’t be. I’m better off without the stress of wondering how many men she risked getting STDs with. At least I’m still clean.”

I really was sorry to hear about Tolya’s divorce in the wake of his arrest. They’d only just been married a year before, young

and in love—or so I thought.

Come to think of it, she did always give me weird vibes. Nothing I could put my finger on, so I never said anything.

I guess she was the gold-digging whore my gut whispered that she seemed to be.

No. No. Need to work on not thinking that way about women. Even if there is a fair point.

Because, biological or not, I'm Willow's father now. I need to set a good example of the kind of behavior that's acceptable in men so she doesn't end up with assholes like...

Well, like me.

That starts with making things right with Clara and openly treating her like the queen she is and deserves to be. It continues with no longer objectifying the women around me.

Rome was not built in a day.

"She's good for you." Tolya is suddenly serious, but in a way I haven't seen since we were kids. Since... before. "I can tell. You have this... this... glow about you."

Now, it's my turn to snort. "I'm not fucking pregnant."

His brow twitches. "Is she?"

I damn near choke on my spit. "God, I hope not."

I'll be over the moon the day she becomes pregnant with my baby. But that's an "in the future" thing, for when everything blows over and we're finally in our happy little slice of paradise far, far away from all the bastards trying to tear us apart.

The thought of her being pregnant, *with my child*, during the auction and her enslavement and shit—or even before, when I was a total fucking idiot shunning her and Willow...

Fucking hell, that's a sobering thought. I shudder.

Tolya is thoroughly entertained by the myriad of expressions I'm sure are flitting across my face. "I have no idea what

panic-fueled train you just boarded, but relax, man. You'll be a great father. She has a kid, right?"

"Yeah."

"So, hey, there you go. Practice. And don't fuck it up."

"Might be a bit too late for that."

He shrugs. "Think of it this way: it's literally impossible to be worse than the asshole we spawned from. So pull yourself back together and do the best you can for that kid. What's her name?"

"Willow."

"Willow." He works the name in his mouth, then smiles. "I like it. Spunky, but elegant. She a good kid?"

I genuinely smile. "The best."

"Look at you. Now, look at me." He points two fingers at his own eyes and leans in close. "I mean it, Dem. Look at me."

"I'm looking right at you, *mudak*."

"Good." He leans in even closer. "You fuck this up with her, with Clara and her sweet little girl, you better pray I stay here in prison. Because I will kick your ass to kingdom come, brother. And I've got nothing better to do than shadowbox six hours a day. You got that?"

I chuckle. "Yeah, I got it." I push my chair back, as does he, and we clasp hands across the table. "Thanks, bro."

I don't catch what he mutters in Russian, but I know it's his way of cursing me with a blessing. The extremely rare times we ever got to meet our grandparents, our grandmother would do the same thing to us before we returned back to the States.

Love you, too, Tol.



We left the prison ten minutes ago.

Clara hasn't said a single word.

It's starting to unnerve me. "You okay?" I ask as gently as possible, even if just to break the silence. "You're quiet."

"Just thinking."

"Is it Willow?" I won't be surprised if it is Willow occupying her thoughts. Even though we were inside a prison for the better part of an hour, it was still a reprieve from the kid's melancholy and silent clinging to us—and Pavel.

Not that he minds her being clingy. She's still silent; she just sits there in his room coloring or flipping through her picture books.

The part that bothers me, and I know bothers Clara, is that the moment she leaves Pavel's room, she's back to being listless. Vacant. What little signs of life that still exist in her seem to only come out whenever she's near the man who literally saved her life.

I'll be the first to admit—I'm a bit jealous. I'm eternally grateful to him, of course, but... I want to bring that spark of life back into her, too.

Clara sighs and shakes her head. "It's not Willow."

More silence.

"Care to share with the class?"

"It's us. I don't... I'm not..." Clara sighs with frustration and thumps her head back against the seat. "Are you gonna pull away again? Now that we've seen your brother. In prison. Where I accidentally put him."

Ah.

I deserve that.

Our last visit did not conclude in a way that left a good impression on her memory.

I reach over the console and take her hand in mine, then bring it to my lips to kiss. "No, baby. I'm not going to pull away again. I'm done doing that shit, believe me."

A quick glance at her face tells me I've said the right thing. She's smiling, and it's genuine.

So I take it a step further. “In fact, I’m on strict orders from my big brother to never ever fuck shit up with you again, or he’s gonna kick my ass. Consider me on my best behavior.”

Clara giggles. I fucking love that sound. “I’ll be sure to remind you of that. You know, just in case.”

“If we ever reach a ‘just in case’ situation, you have full permission to kick my ass yourself.” I shoot her a mischievous little grin. “If you can.”

“Oh, I can. Among other things.” Her hips do a little wiggle in her seat and *fuck* if I’m not hard all over again.

“Stop that,” I warn her. “Stop that shit right now.”

Her lips pucker in a playful little pout. “Aww, did I get you all hot and bothered doing *this*?” She does it again, grinning seductively.

Fuck. I’m starting to break into a sweat and she hasn’t even touched me. Not beyond holding my hand, which she actually stops doing now that we’re in a full-blown conversation. “You got me distracted. I’m driving. Focus is key.”

“Mhm. But yours is unbreakable, right? I mean, being a big, bad *pakhan* and all, you’d have to be pretty good at keeping your eye on the prize, I’m sure.”

I glance at her. She’s smirking. Giggling, even. “Precisely. I am literally trained to not let any distractions—*blyat*, what are you doing?”

Her hand is in my lap.

Rubbing.

“Go on,” Clara says without missing a beat. She bats her long lashes at me innocently. “You were saying...? You have impeccable focus?”

“Unbreakable.” And now, my button is open.

“That’s fascinating. Tell me more.”

My fly is being tugged down. Slowly. Agonizingly slowly. “I, um... what were we talking about?”

“Your professionally trained, unbreakable focus.”

“Right.” I take a deep breath and fix my eyes on the road. Even when her fingers push inside my jeans and rub over my dick. “Mind of steel.”

“You know, you sound mad. But you *feel* very happy.” She giggles again and *goddammit*, my dick throbs against her hand.

“I’m not mad. I’m... ha... shit.” I’m white-knuckling the steering wheel because this temptress has deftly freed my cock from my boxer briefs. “I’m... I’m...”

“Tell you what,” she interjects. “Let’s put your money where your mouth is. Or, really, where *my*...”

Fuck.

God. Fuck. Mercy.

Fuck.

I’m driving, going at least seventy down the desert highway, and Clara Everett’s sugary lips are wrapped around the head of my cock.

Her silky curls rub my arm as she slowly works her head up and down, taking her precious time to suck inch after throbbing inch into her warm, wet mouth. I want to fist my hand in her hair, but I can’t.

I want to hold her head in place to control the speed of her lips, but I can’t.

“Clara,” I croak.

“Mhm?”

Oh good God, I almost burst from that sound and vibration alone. It’s the sound of my woman, my beautiful woman, unable to answer me with her mouth full of my dick.

This is a special kind of heavenly hell.

I make sure cruise control is on before I try to slip a hand from the wheel to tangle in the roots of her hair. But before I have

the chance to get a good grip, she pops off my cock to lightly scold me with, “Hands on the wheel, safe driver.”

And then she plunges deeper. Half of my cock sinks into her warm, wet, slurping mouth and I can't thrust because I'm buckled in and I can't push her head down more because if she disengages for even one fraction of a second to tell me to put my hands back on the steering wheel, I'll go apeshit.

“Clara. Fuck. Baby.” I focus on breathing. I focus on the road.

I focus on not nutting inside her gorgeous mouth before I'm ready.

Her tongue swirls around the edge when she pulls up. Traces my pulsing veins on the way down. With every dip of her head, she takes more in. More, and more, until I feel the breath from her nose fan around the base.

I'm not proud of the strangled groan that rips through my chest, but she sure fucking is. I feel her mouth, lips stretched as they are, move around my shaft into what's definitely a smile.

And then, mercifully, she pulls off with a slurping gasp.

Clara Everett is a fucking vision. Curls tumbling wildly around her face and down her shoulders, lips swollen and glistening from working magic on my manhood, face flushed and chest heaving with very proud, satisfied gasps.

“Sorry,” she breathes. “I need a second.”

I'm about to ask her if something is wrong as she frowns down at her hands, but then a hair tie materializes on her wrist and she uses it to twist her hair up into a messy, sexy-as-fuck bun.

Clara grins at me. “Much better.”

She is absolutely right.

Because now she's got all the freedom and air to go to fucking town on my aching, throbbing, hard-as-fucking-steel cock.

I try commanding myself to focus, to stay away from that tempting edge, but when she adds two twisting hands to the mix, I feel my resolve crumbling.

It's the sounds in her throat that do the most for me. The soft *glurks* of her efforts that make it impossible for my brain to focus on anything other than the absolute sex goddess sucking my soul through my penis at seventy-five miles per hour.

I'm close.

I am so fucking close to bathing her beautiful throat with my seed.

So I pull us the fuck over and turn the car off.

Clara slurps her mouth off my shaft once more and looks around. "You okay? What's wrong?"

I don't answer her. I don't think I have words to work with right now. I just throw my seat back, grab my vixen by her waist, and yank her over the console onto my lap.

She doesn't need any convincing—her mouth instantly latches onto mine and our tongues dance in a sloppy, wet tangle while my hands yank her dress up and her panties aside. I'm so fucking grateful that she went with the dress instead of jeans because it only takes me five seconds to impale her sweet pussy on my dick.

When she cries out, it's fucking music to my ears.

When I bottom out inside her, it's like finding home.

"Demyen!"

"That's it, baby," I growl as I feel her slide up and down, up and down, grabbing her ass to help her slam home a bit harder. "Ride it. Ride it for me and scream my fucking name."

No one is around to hear us. She can scream her pleasure to her heart's content.

I want to make her fucking *hoarse*.

The only sounds in the car are the wet smacks of her pussy meeting the base of my cock over and over again... my balls slapping her juicy ass... both of us panting, gasping, groaning and grunting wordlessly as we make the whole fucking vehicle rock.

It's still not enough.

I want her to come apart at the seams.

I want her to forget where she is.

I want her to forget her own fucking name because she's too busy screaming mine.

So I grab her by the ass and pull her down *hard*. I love the way her moan wheezes through her chest, which is flushed a beautiful pink and tempting me with the bouncing sway of her breasts inside that fucking dress. That goddamn curve-hugging dress that's been driving me wild since she walked out to the car this morning.

I hold her there. I can feel her trying to lift back up, but I hold her there, my cock sheathed to the hilt inside her incredible pussy. Her inner walls are rippling up and down my shaft and *fuck* I'm gonna need to start moving again soon or I'm going to bust before I'm ready.

Though truth be told, I'm never ready. Never have been. Sure as hell looks like I never will be.

My fingers fist in her hair, making her look me in the eyes. "Look at me, baby."

She does. Her eyes are glistening with tears of joy, of exertion, of bliss, and her lashes keep fluttering at me as I slowly grind into her. I'm tempted to keep doing this just to watch her lose control.

"I've got you."

"I... I know..." Clara moans, her lips quivering.

"Do you?" I roll my hips for emphasis. "Do you know I've got you?"

"Yeeessss..." she breathes.

I'm not convinced we're talking about the same thing. That's okay—I can remain focused for the both of us.

"You. Are. Mine." I slide out, long and slow, then push back deep inside her, using my other hand to press her down on me. Anything less than balls-deep is unacceptable. "You are mine,

and I've got you. I will always protect you." A wicked smile tugs at the corners of my mouth. "Say it back."

Clara whines. Her hips writhe against mine with her sweet impatience. But like the good girl she is, she tries to obey. "I'm yours. *Unh*, fuck! I'm yours, Demyen. All yours."

"And?" I slide back out.

Her lips pout and her brow knits with needy frustration. "You'll always protect me."

I push back in and savor the way her breath leaves her lungs. So does mine. "Fuck yes, I will."

She kisses me again. Her naughty little tongue wraps around mine and I suck on it, pulling yet another delicious moan from her. And as I let go of her hair and ass to caress her gorgeous body, I feel her take control and work herself on my cock.

"That's it, baby," I breathe between kisses. "Give it to me. Give me that sweet fucking pussy."

I'm irritated with her dress enough to yank it over her arms. The bra joins it in the back seat. Now she's naked and warm and riding me, taking me, giving me every ounce of her passion and need and I do not care if we die of heat stroke out here in the middle of fucking nowhere.

If this is how I die, I'll be coming in my queen while I'm going.

"Anyone who fucks with you fucks with me," I growl. I don't know where this is coming from. Maybe it's the way the seat's leaned all the way back and the angle makes her look like a fucking queen riding her king on some handstitched leather throne. I smack her ass just for the fun of it. "And anyone who fucks with me won't live to talk about it."

Clara moans. Her pussy quivers on my cock.

"You like that, baby?" I grin up at her. At least, I hope it's a grin. My mouth is also gasping for air since she keeps stealing it from my lungs.

"Fuck. Yes." She grunts. She reaches over my head to grip the headrest and the new angle takes me closer yet to erupting.

“Say it. Tell me. Please, baby.”

Fuck. I smack her ass again, then grab it, just to have something to hold onto while she takes complete control because I am quickly discovering I fucking love it when she’s like this.

“I’m gonna fuck you so fucking hard, baby. Right in front of them. In front of all of them.”

She shudders. She moans. She slams her hips down and grinds her clit against my pelvic bone and good fucking heaven do those pussy ripples massage my dick in the best way imaginable.

“I’m gonna make you scream my name. You’ll be sobbing how good it fucking feels while they all watch. Your father. Martin. Oleg. Show them how a real man makes love to his woman.”

Clara is lost in her own world of pleasure. Her eyes roll back and I take the advantage to kiss the racing pulse in her throat. My hands smooth over her stomach, up to caress and squeeze and knead her fucking incredible breasts. When I lightly pinch her nipples, I feel her spasm. So I do it again.

She’s so fucking sensitive. I love it.

I love her.

“I’ll fuck you until you can’t stand. You’ll come so many times you’ll forget your own name. That’s okay, baby. I’ll remind them. I’ll remind them by shouting it out when I pump your belly full with my seed.”

A deep shudder of pleasure rolls through her entire body. She’s close.

Good, because so am I.

“And when you’re sweaty, and full, and completely, utterly satisfied...”

I slide my hands up to her hair. Pull her face to mine.

“I’ll kill them all. For you. One...”

Thrust.

“By...”

Grind.

“One.”

I seal her lips to mine so I can taste her scream. I pull her head back by her hair so I can hear her sobs as she flies apart.

I hold her to me, make her look at me, so she can see what she does to me when I pour my own release inside her.

I love her.

I love her.

I love this beautiful, broken, beyond-my-wildest-dreams woman.

It's a mantra on my lips as I feel myself surge and pulse inside her. As the liquid warmth spreads through her, around me, and reminds us both that I mean it when I say it.

I love her.

And I will kill anyone who tries to hurt her or take her away from me again.

CLARA

I wake up in Demyen's bed to a text pinging on my phone.

DEMYEN: *SOS*

I take in a sharp breath. Is it...?

DEMYEN: *Willow*

My heart drops into the pit of my stomach.

DEMYEN: *In my office*

DEMYEN: *Come now*

I throw on the closest clothes that I can find—a shirt and shorts of Demyen's—before I fly out the door and down the pathway to his office.

Willow is supposed to be at school by now. I should have been woken up to get her ready, to see her off or even take her there. Why didn't my alarm...?

Demyen. He let me sleep in. He probably thought everything was going to be fine and that I needed the extra few hours of sleep after last night.

Since we didn't do much sleeping.

Focus! I give myself a little shake and pointedly ignore the delicious ache between my legs—the kind that's a result of having one's bed rocked into the wall and then some.

Really, it was his bed. Because that's where I apparently live now.

You. Are. A. Terrible. Mother.

I shake that thought from my head, too. Because no, I am actually a fantastic mother who's finally found someone who is a fantastic father to my—*our*—beautiful daughter.

Who, I discover before even opening the door to his office, is screaming her head off at the top of her lungs.

Bambi meets me on her way out, flustered and doing her damned hardest not to show her frustration. "I swear, Clara, everything was fine! She was fine! We ate breakfast, we got into the car, we drove into the city..."

Oh, no. This was meant to be her first day back to school since the shooting.

The shooting that happened at that exact same location.

"Did it start when you pulled in?" I ask, already knowing the answer.

Bambi nods with a heavy sigh. "Yes! Just screaming and clawing at the seats and window and I couldn't even park, so I just whipped a U-turn and drove straight back here." She grabs my arm and shakes her head. "I'm sorry, Clara. But even I have my limits. I'm tapping out and you're tapping in. Go help the reigning champion."

I don't get a chance to ask her what she means. She's out of sight and earshot before I can say, "What?"

My heart breaks and bursts and breaks all over again when I step into Demyen's office.

Everything that used to be on his desk is scattered all over the floor. Willow's "project," a colorful collage of painted flowers and stick figures in the wall facing his desk, remains unfinished and forgotten ever since that horrible day. Those art supplies, too, have been thrown across the room.

Willow is screaming, and sobbing, and trying with every ounce of her strength to wrestle free from Demyen's embrace. But he's holding her in a bear hug from behind, murmuring comfort into her ear, reminding her that she's home. She's safe.

“Look!” He turns both of them so she can see me. “Mommy’s here!”

Willow instantly goes limp.

The only sound coming from her now are the shaking, rasping sobs that slowly, gradually fade into the melancholy silence she’s embraced as her new normal.

Demyen scoops her up into his arms and cradles her to his chest. He rocks her, still whispering those promises of safety and protection, and nods for me to sit down on the loveseat.

Once I do, he gently lowers her into my arms and sits down next to me, wrapping me up in his.

I can’t cry. I won’t cry. I need to be strong for her. For my baby.

But I want to, so badly. I want to sob into her pigtailed hair and weep for her, for every child who now has to face the waking nightmares of never being safe in their own school again.

Somewhere in the distance, I hear Demyen whisper, “It’s okay. I’ve got you.”

So I let it all out.

I don’t know how long we sit there, Willow curled up and tucked into my chest. Demyen holds me to his while my tears soak her hair. Well, with one arm he does—the other is wrapped around Willow, reminding her that she now has two parents who love her so very much.

After both of us have somewhat drifted into quiet exhaustion, Demyen kisses my head and whispers in my ear, “Go get dressed. I’ll watch her.”

“Huh?”

“We’re going out. Family day.”

My heart squeezes hearing him refer to us as “family.” But my brain and my nerves don’t care. “I wish we could, babe. But... she won’t handle the mall, or zoo, or—”

“We’re not going there.” He gestures toward the door with his chin. “Just trust me. Go get dressed. And grab your swimsuits.”

Again, I’m so very confused. But I trust him.

That’s a miracle in its own right.



The whole ride to wherever the hell we’re going is filled with Willow’s panicked breathing. It only stops when hell freezes over—by which I mean, Demyen starts singing.

I’m gaping at him in utter shock, because not only is he singing, but he’s singing *well*. Like, shockingly well.

It quiets Willow, too. Or at least, she stops hyperventilating in her booster seat.

He glances at me, then at her through the rearview mirror. And then the most brilliant, beautiful grin spreads across his chiseled face.

By the time we pull up to what appears to be a luxurious cabin on a private lake, Demyen has serenaded us through three love ballads, one of which was in Spanish.

He shuts up the moment we see the guards park behind us and that familiar, icy coolness slides back over his face.

I grin. He doesn’t have to worry. His secret is safe with me.

“Alright, kiddo. Time for some fun.” He jumps out of his side of the car and immediately goes for her door. Like I’m not even here, ready and eager to cradle my precious baby and whisper encouragement to her as we slowly navigate through this strange new place.

Willow starts to whine a little, but he bounces her in his arms and carries her toward the edge of the lake. Panic rushes through me and I scramble out of the car to join them.

“Dem!” I tell myself I’m breathless with worry and not because that short sprint winded me. *Shit*, I’m well on my way through the first trimester. Gotta slow down. Gotta... *whoo!*... pace myself.

When I finally catch up with them, he's murmuring into her ear. "... see? It's just us. All alone. Mako and the guys are helping keep this place secret and safe, just for us."

"Secret?" I glance around. We are surrounded by thick pine trees and dense forest. If I followed the drive accurately, we're up somewhere high in the Sierra Nevada. "Really?"

Demyen shrugs. "If you doubt me, let's go check out the cabin. See if any monsters are lurking in there."

I don't miss the way Willow suddenly clings to him and whimpers. I'm about to protest, when Mako appears out of nowhere and gives her a serious little salute.

Then he ducks inside, signaling for three other guards to follow him.

"All clear!" he shouts after a few tense moments.

Well, tense for me. Demyen simply glances at me and winks. "Hear that? All clear. Probably because I own this cabin and have the world's strongest security system built in." He rolls his eyes again and looks at Willow. "Oh, ye of little faith."

I blink. I know I imagined it. There's no way Willow quirked a tiny smile.

Demyen leads us into the cabin and I'm suddenly struck by how utterly inaccurate that word is to describe this place. *Cabin*—yeah fucking right. It's more like a manor, with vaulted ceilings and an open floorplan with a second story that wraps around like a balcony overlooking the main living area.

"Everything the light touches is ours," he explains as he carries Willow through the first floor. "Bathroom's right by the kitchen. Upstairs, there's one between the two guestrooms and another in the master suite."

"Dem..." I'm breathless. I don't know what to say. The fireplace has a freaking *waterfall*, for Pete's sake! "This is your... cabin?"

When I look up, I see his face and Willow's peek over the wood railing of the balcony. "Came with the lake."

“The lake.” I try to process what I think I just heard. “You own... the lake.”

He rolls his eyes yet again and scoffs. “What good is a cabin without a lake?” He lofts a dramatic brow at Willow. “Are you hearing this? Some people...”

And then he shakes his head with a sigh and carries her out of sight.

But not before I see her quirk that tiny little smile again.

I’m left standing here, in the ginormous living room... or space... or whatever insanely wealthy people who have waterfalls over fireplaces call it. Completely dumbfounded. In awe.

More than a little intimidated.

Mako grabs a bottle of water from the fridge and gestures to me to ask if I want one. “It’s sparkling mineral water,” he adds.

Because of course it is.

“So... you guys come out here often?” I try to sound as casual as possible. Cool and calm. Not at all like I’m feeling overwhelmed or nervous as fuck about being high up in the mountains far away from civilization.

Mako rolls a shoulder. “Yes and no. It’s a beautiful getaway, obviously, but with everything that’s been going on down in the city...”

“Ah.” I try to ignore the pang of guilt that hits my stomach. I don’t want to be the reason Demyen doesn’t get to enjoy this slice of paradise as often as he should.

“It’s not like he’s dying to come up here all the time, anyways. Childhood memories and all that.”

Ah, okay. Now, the pieces are falling into place. It’s definitely been updated, but the more I look around, I can see signs in the architecture of an older presence. Like it’s been here for much longer than I originally assumed.

Demyen comes back down the carpeted stairs, Willow now walking on her own while holding his hand. He grins at me. “Well, what do we think?”

Mako swiftly takes his leave. I try to pretend not to notice the surprised little smile that suddenly appears on his face.

“It’s... breathtaking. Beautiful.” I don’t know what else to say.

“Thank you, but I was talking about the cabin.” He winks at me, then leans in for a sweet kiss. “Really, I’m glad you like it. We’ll have to come up here more often. That is, if you want.”

I really need to stop crying. But I’m so fucking happy that my heart just wants to burst and flood my eyes with the love I’m feeling and seeing and... *gawd*, I’m a mess.

“I do,” I manage to whisper. “I really do.”

“Good.” He nuzzles me, then steps back and smiles down at Willow. “I saw a trail going through the woods when we pulled in. Should we go check it out?”

Willow looks uncertain. But she’s been breaking out of her shell in leaps and bounds since this morning’s fiasco, and it’s a hundred percent due to Demyen’s positive reinforcement.

So I step back and gesture gracefully to the door. “Shall we?”

She nods.

It’s a response. Communication. *I’ll take it.*

Baby steps, right?

CLARA

We crunch our way across the gravel parking area and toward the opening of the path that very much leads into the deep, dark woods. Mako and his men stroll at a reasonable distance, but they remain visible to us at all times.

It doesn't really matter to Willow. She stops at the beginning of the path and stares fearfully into that lush green void.

Demyen holds her hand tight. I take her other hand and give it a reassuring squeeze as well.

I take a step onto the path. So does he.

Willow hesitates. She's shaking. I'm going to call this off—

But then she takes that first step.

Demyen winks at me.

She's still shaking. Still fearfully glancing around. But she sees Mako, and the others, and she glances up at Demyen and me.

I smile and nod to the path to encourage her.

She steps again. And again. And again, until she's walking at a slow but steady pace along the pine needle path. Her eyes dart around and I'm ready to assume she's afraid, but then I realize she's looking at the birds. The squirrels. The pinecones and dancing sunbeams.

It's only when the tiniest smile plays across her lips that I can finally breathe again.

We walk for a while before we come to a small clearing in the woods. It's just big enough for us and the guards to sit comfortably for a break—which, apparently, was the plan all along.

Because there's an actual, literal, teddy bear picnic spread out over the grass.

I gasp.

So does Willow.

And before I can register the sound she just made, she breaks free from our grasps and beelines to the ring of plush teddy bears sitting around an elegant tea party. Without a single word, she tucks her legs under herself and immediately spreads a tiny, lace-trimmed napkin on her lap, carefully grabs the teapot, and pours herself a cup of what looks like juice.

I don't know what to stare at: the picnic or Demyen.

So I choose him. Because, let's face it—I will always choose him.

I'm sure it's a play of light dancing on his face that makes it look like he's blushing. He shrugs and slips his arm around my waist.

“Who could've done something like this?” he muses. “Good timing, though, because I'm hungry.”

I don't know what else to do, so I join him. Demyen lays a soft blanket on the boulder for us to sit on and flourishes a turkey and Swiss cheese sandwich wrapped in one of those beeswax cloths.

“I've got chips, too. And water. You like blackberry, right?”

I nod. I don't trust myself to speak.

He seems to understand, because he just smiles at me and joins me in quietly eating sandwiches while we watch over Willow. She, for her part, is quietly pouring juice for her new friends and making sure everyone at her tea party receives a cucumber sandwich and colorful macaron.

“You didn’t have to... I mean...” I shake my head at myself.
“Thank you. Really. This means the world to her.”

Demyen grins. “Thank Mako. He got it all on video, too. Worth every penny to see grown Bratva men delicately arrange stuffed bears and lace doilies.”



Willow emerges from the woods with newfound confidence, courage, and an armload of fuzzy new friends. She still hasn’t spoken a word, but the fact that she’s interacting with the world around her and communicating her appreciation is leaps and bounds beyond my wildest expectations.

I have to help by grabbing a few of the bears off the top before she runs into the low step up to the door of the cabin—she can barely see over the tops of their fluffy heads. Demyen holds the door open for her, and she proudly carries them up to what appears to be her newly designated room.

Which... is filled with toys. And games. And puzzles.

“I may have sent an alpha team ahead of us,” Demyen whispers behind me.

“Is there anything you didn’t do?”

He smirks and shrugs. “One or two things. Like remember to schedule some time to rock your world in the master bedroom. Next time we’re here, I guess.”

His pat on my butt is discreet, but the message is clear: there *will* be a “next time we’re here.”

And we’ll probably be alone. Out of necessity.

Either that or he’s already soundproofed the master bedroom.

“Alrighty, kiddo, ready for the lake?” Demyen asks Willow, who nods and grabs her swimsuit from the small backpack I put together for her.

She shuts the door on our faces. I’d be a tad insulted if I wasn’t over the moon about her progress.

Demyen chuckles and takes my hand, leading me into the master bedroom. “Lovely preview of the years to come. Can’t

wait until she's a teenager." His voice is dripping with playful sarcasm, but he still manages to trip me up with his casual indications that he's been thinking about our future together.

A very *long* future together.

I watch him strip off his clothes and tug on a pair of swim trunks he apparently packed for himself. It's almost a shame we don't have a few minutes to ourselves. With the way he's being Dad of the Year to my child, I'm ready to ride him like a bull.

Okay. Maybe more than a few minutes are needed. I want to show him just how thoroughly appreciative I am, starting by tonguing every swirl of every tattoo on his incredible body.

"You good?" he asks me when he turns around, casually tying the knot to his trunks. "You haven't changed yet."

I blink. "Oh! Sorry. Yeah. Just... got distracted. Mind wandered." I blush and wiggle off my leggings, treating him to an eyeful of the lacy thong I decided to wear today.

"Miss Clara Everett. You might just be the death of me."

I bite my lip and pretend like I'm not intentionally giving him a little striptease while I change into my bikini. My back is still turned to him, but there's a lot of bending over and arching up involved with slipping on the swimsuit and tying the strings securely.

"Can you get my back?" I ask sweetly. Innocently.

Demyen lets out a low growl right into my ear when he comes up behind me to "help." He smooths his hands along my sides and pretends to suddenly not know how to tie a simple knot. "You are a temptress, you know that?"

His bulge lodged firmly between my bikini-covered butt cheeks confirms this.

"I'm sure I have no idea what you're talking about," I giggle.

"Of course you don't. Well, thanks to you," he grumbles playfully along my neck while he finally does tie the knot extra-securely around my ribcage, "I now have to go take a cold shower. Much appreciated."

My giggle melts into a laugh and he tickles my sides before swatting my ass.

“Put a goddamn cover-up on or something. I can’t afford to fire every guard on the premises,” he calls over his shoulder before disappearing into the bathroom.

I catch my reflection in the full-sized mirror by the door. The bikini does hug my curves in the best possible way, but I notice something a little different.

It’s subtle, but it’s there.

Between the newer fullness of my breasts and the ever-so-slight swell of my stomach, I’m actually kind of surprised Demyen hasn’t noticed anything. Or said anything.

I’m still too scared to tell him. But not because I don’t think he wants a baby with me.

I’m too scared that he does—and that finally, maybe, I’m living the life I never felt allowed to dream of.

CLARA

“Fuck! Ow!” Pavel braces a hand to his side and wheezes through his laughter. “Damn near tore my stitches!”

Bambi snickers and tucks her phone back into her bag. “Worth it. Look me in the eye and tell me that wasn’t worth it.”

I just got done showing them the video of Demyen’s “badass men” carefully arranging a tea party in the middle of the woods. It’s not necessarily that they took the time and care to set it up as authentically as possible. It’s more that, to our shock and delight, we have discovered a few hidden talents among Dem’s otherwise silent and stoic guards. Like folding napkins into origami swans. A fight between Mako and Fyodor over whether teaspoons go on the left or right has us all howling.

I love Dem more and more. And with each passing day, my love for him extends to the people around him who continue to show unwavering care and affection for Willow.

I know they care for me, too. It’s just easier to focus on her so I don’t spiral into overthinking my own situation.

“Look at them.” Bambi shields her eyes with one hand and holds her cocktail up with the other. “I can’t believe it. Seriously. I’m having a very difficult time believing what I’m seeing.”

Following her gaze out over the lake, I have to agree.

Demyen talked Willow onto a jet ski and is now zooming over the water with her. They’re both wearing life jackets—hers

was obviously required, but she refused to go unless he put one on, too—and he keeps leaning down to tell her something. I’m guessing they’re instructions because *oh my fucking Lord*, my baby is driving the jet ski—

“Breathe, Clara.” Bambi laughs and gently nudges me. “Remember to both inhale *and* exhale. You haven’t done that in a while.”

“He’s... They... You’re seeing this, right? *She’s driving the jet ski!*”

Demyen must hear my shriek across the water because he grins at me, waves, and throws his hands up in the air.

Though he very quickly returns them to the handles when Willow hits a wave on the rebound curve and sends them soaring into the air.

I’m gonna pass out.

“Poor Mama Bear. You need a stiff drink.”

“Nah, I’m good.” I sit back down on the deck chair and try to sound as casual and calm as possible. And not at all like a pregnant woman avoiding alcohol.

Bambi still squints at me. “You sure?”

I nod. “Need to keep my wits about me. Since he’s apparently lost every last one of his.”

Pavel stretches out on the lounge, careful to not overextend his side where the stitches are still holding him together. “Ah, *l’amour*. It hits different when there’s kids involved.”

“Kid. Singular.”

He winks at me. “Sure.” He reaches for his own drink, which Willow silently but affectionately adorned with a crazy straw on her way out to the dock with Demyen. “I’m telling ya, that kid’s gonna have to become a nun when she grows up. Ain’t no way he’ll ever let any man get near her.” He takes a long sip, completely unfazed by the bright purple curlicues of his straw.

Bambi rolls her eyes. “What if she’s into women? Then he won’t have to worry.”

“Oh, *he’ll* worry either way. It’s the nunnery for eternity for that little hellion.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s called an ‘abbey.’ And Demyen’s not *that* overprotective.”

We both look at her.

She concedes with a slow nod and a sip of her cocktail. “Okay, fine, you might be right. I’m just hoping we have a few years before we’ll need to stage an intervention.”

I’m glad Bambi had a spare pair of sunglasses on hand because I’d go blind from staring at the lake otherwise. I’m so worried that something’s going to happen to my baby girl, or Demyen, like them flipping the jet ski or slamming into a hidden sandbar or—

“You’re doing that thing again. Exhale. C’mon, breathe with me. In, out.”

I laugh and cringe at the same time. “Shut up. I can’t help it if I’m worried.”

Pavel snorts. “That’s so cute. And sweet. The cop’s daughter worried about her mobster boyfriend.”

“I’m more worried about my five-year-old out there zipping carefree across the deep water on top of that mobile death machine.” I tuck my feet under my knees and try to hug them to my chest. It’s becoming increasingly difficult these days to do it comfortably. “But also, yes. I *am* worried about my mobster boyfriend.”

Bambi grins at me. “I love it. I love seeing you guys together. I love even more knowing how much it must drive your father insane knowing you’re boinking his sworn enemy *and* a criminal overlord.”

I’m so glad I’m not actually drinking anything because I’d snort it up my nose at the choice phrase “boinking.” “Yeah, well... Go big or go home, as they say.”

“Cheers to that!”

The two clink glasses around me, then hum their respective delights over the boozy concoctions I'm suddenly jealous of.

Before I can get too envious, Demyen and Willow pull into the dock and hop onto the platform.

"Mommy! Mommy!" Willow runs down the dock to where we're lounging on the cabin patio. "Daddy let me drive! Did you see? Did you see me?"

I'm stunned.

Speechless.

So is literally everyone else.

Daddy. That's what she said.

Willow is completely oblivious to the fact that my heart has officially stopped inside my chest. I blink and give myself a small shake so I can at least pretend like she hasn't just completely flipped my world upside down.

"Yeah, baby girl! Look at you! So... so daring! So dangerous!"

"It's okay." Willow proudly takes Demyen's hand and swings it by his side. "Daddy said he'd make sure we were safe. Didn't you, Daddy?"

Demyen's recovery time is way better than mine. He blinks away the shock on his own face and beams down at her. "That I did, little cub. Did you have fun?"

"So much fun! Let's do it again!"

He chuckles and winks at me. His other hand, however, has a slight tremble. "We will. But first, I think it's nap time. How about we—"

"Okay!" Willow spins around and skips off into the cabin, not even waiting for his attempt to negotiate what I usually have to wrestle her over.

Demyen just stands there. Staring at the door. Then he slowly turns to look at me.

I can't breathe. Or think.

I just... I mean...

“What alternate universe did I just fall into?”

Shit. I said that out loud.

“We,” Demyen corrects. “*We* fell into. I don’t fucking know.” He blinks, then grins. “And I don’t fucking care. Because wherever we are, whatever just happened... I’m ‘Daddy’ now.”

He holds up a finger before Bambi or Pavel—or even me—can say anything about it.

“Nope. Shut up. All of you.”

And with that, he follows her into the cabin. I swear there’s a proud little strut in his gait I’ve never seen before.

It suits him.

DEMYEN

My original plan was to take everyone back home once the day was done.

Fuck it. Makes more sense to just stay here. Let the kid get some rest. Let everyone else get some, too.

If anything, we all need some time to recover from the absolute bombshell Willow dropped on us after I brought her back from jet skiing. One moment, she's traumatized all to shit—the next, she's claiming me as her daddy and acting like literally nothing ever happened.

At the moment, I can hear Clara singing songs with Willow as they get ready for bed in the upstairs bathroom. My little cub has just gotten out of the bathtub and the angel who turns into a demon in my bed is combing her hair into French braids to sleep in.

And I'm standing here, leaning against the doorway, grinning like an absolute lunatic.

"There! All done," Clara announces with a quick peck on Willow's cheek.

"Thank you, Mommy!"

I step out of the way so Willow can bounce past, but she stops at the doorway and looks up at me. Then, wordlessly, lifts her arms up to me.

Some things don't need words to communicate. "Up" is definitely one of them.

I scoop her up into my arms and give her a kiss. “Ready for bed?”

Willow nods. “Will you tell me a story?”

I pretend to really have to think about it, lips pursed and humming thoughtfully, until Willow bursts into a fit of giggles and I finally agree. “Okay. You convinced me.”

We saunter into her bedroom and I plop down on the side of her bed, turning to ease her in under the warm blankets I made sure the alpha team brought ahead of our arrival.

Truth be told, I’d wanted to take them both here for the weekend, so I had already sent some people ahead of time to clean the place up, add new furnishings and Willow-specific touches, the works. The fact that we needed it for today after her meltdown was just fortuitous timing. One quick call to confirm the cabin was prepared, and I bundled my new little family into the car like we were off to an early weekend getaway and not at all scrambling to figure out how to handle Willow’s trauma.

She curls up under the blankets as I tuck them around her and smiles up at me. “Story! You promised a story, Daddy.”

“Such a demanding little cub,” I playfully grumble, much to her giggling. *God*, how I missed that sound. “Okay. Once upon a time—”

“Daddy! It’s ‘In a certain time, in a certain place.’ Remember?”

I feign smacking myself in the forehead. “You are absolutely right. My sincerest apologies. In a certain time, in a certain place, there once lived... a princess.”

She grins. She knows it’s her. And as the story goes on and I tell her about the queen and king who keep the princess safe, and all the king’s men who go to war with the Baba Yaga to save the princess, Willow’s eyes droop lower and lower and lower. By the time I reach the end, she can barely keep them cracked open.

“... and then they all lived happily ever after. The end.”

No response. Willow snores softly. Smiling, I extract myself from her and retreat toward the door. I'm just about to leave when I hear two words that melt my heart.

“Goodnight, Daddy.”

“Goodnight, little cub,” I murmur. “I love you.”

Then I turn off the light and step out into the hallway. Clara is out there waiting for me. Her face is unreadable, but her eyes sparkle in the soft light.

And then I'm whisked away to the master bedroom by Clara's hand tugging mine.

DEMYEN

It's not rocket science to figure out what Clara wants. We barely make it across the threshold before her lips are on mine, her hands cupping my face, and it's all I can do quietly shut the door behind us before she launches herself at me and wraps her legs around my waist.

I can get used to this.

I grip her ass in my hands while I regain my balance. She's not heavy, but she did catch me by surprise. Once I have steadier footing, I blindly fumble our way over to the California king-sized bed in the center of the room.

I have half a mind to rip off her tiny pajama shorts and slide her onto my cock just like this.

But I also want to tumble my sexy, beautiful woman onto our bed and feast on her flesh first.

The second option wins. Clara squeals and giggles when I toss her onto the mattress and fall with her, immediately smothering her sunburnt chest with kisses.

Goddamn, I love this. I love her softness, her firmness, her total dichotomies that exist on her body and in her mind. I love the way she writhes beneath me. I love the sounds she makes when I press my knee between her legs and make her show me just how needy for me she really is.

I love how the answer to that question is always, *So fucking much*.

“Dem,” she breathlessly laughs. “Dem! Mmmm, we—*fuck*—we need to talk...”

“Don’t say that,” I grumble with my mouth hovering over a delicious nipple just begging to be sucked. “No one ever says that when they have good things to talk about.”

She giggles some more. “It’s all good! I promise.”

I bury my face in her cleavage. “Fine.”

“It’s about Willow.” Clara strokes my hair back and uses the motion to lift my face up to look at her. She’s misty-eyed and grinning from ear to ear. “How did you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Break her out of her shell! Get her to talk.” Her voice catches. “You know. Help her overcome everything.”

I sigh and nuzzle her warm cleavage some more. “I didn’t do shit. Not really. And she’s got a long road ahead before anyone can say she’s ‘overcome’ what she’s been through. *But,*” I add, peppering kisses along her collarbone, “I do know a thing or two about redirecting focus. Distractions are useful.”

Her smile lights up the room. “Is that what I am to you?” She writhes under me like she’s trying to get comfortable, and maybe she is. But we both know what it’s doing to me. “A distraction?”

The low growl of desire for this insanely beautiful woman rumbles in my throat as I flick my tongue up her neck to her ear. “You are *the* distraction. The only one I want. Don’t ever stop distracting me.”

Her hands rub along my back, pulling me closer to her. I roll us onto our sides so I can tuck her in closer to me without crushing her under my bulk. At this angle, I have a much better advantage to explore her soft curves and memorize every inch of her silky skin.

I won’t ever say it out loud, but I’m so relieved to see her putting on weight again. Finding her the way she was at my father’s place... I shudder involuntarily at the sudden memory flashing through my mind.

“What?” Clara frowns. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

I peck her lips with mine and run a hand through her curls. “Nothing. Just a chill.”

The corner of her mouth curls in a playful smirk. “I can think of a few ways to warm you up...”

I lazily drag a finger down her arm, catching the thin strap of her camisole and pushing it down at the same time. I don’t know what the point of these pajamas are—they’re doing very little to actually cover up anything.

Then again, I won’t complain about unwrapping gifts.

That nipple I wanted earlier is now bare and puckering in the sudden chill that comes from being disrobed. It’s demanding my attention. And who am I to deny it?

As I suckle it into my mouth, Clara gently tugs at my hair. I want to tell her to pull harder, to fight and claw, I can take it—*fuck*, the sudden unexpected image of her taking complete charge over me in bed has me throbbing along her thigh.

I’m not the kind of man to surrender control to anyone.

She’s not the kind of woman to demand it.

That’s probably what makes the concept so fucking hot.

Tonight, though, I want to simply enjoy her. I want to pound in the notion that this is her home as much as it is mine. I want her to sob my name into my shoulder as we both struggle to keep quiet because, at the end of it all, we’re good, responsible parents who don’t want to wake our little one up.

I smooth a hand over her stomach and tease myself once again with the thought of her carrying another little one. Even the soft swell of her recovering body right where a baby would be is enough to make me groan with a new aching desire.

I want to drown myself in these daydreams until they become reality.

She helps me slip her camisole off by wiggling her shoulders through. My hands get rid of her matching shorts with a quick

tug of the flimsy fabric. As soon as she's free, our mouths crash together.

"Dem..." I hear her moan in playful protest at the sound of shredding silk.

"I'll buy you new ones," I growl lightly as I kiss a fiery path down her body. "Fuck, I'll buy you a whole new wardrobe every day of your life just so I can rip it off you."

Her giggle melts into a gasping moan when I press a kiss to her mound—and then lightly bite it, sucking the soft flesh between my teeth to add another lovebite where only I will ever see it.

"Dem..." is now a plea rather than a protest.

She thinks she wants me to drive into her already. To fuck her into the mattress until she forgets anything else but the blossoming heat where we melt into each other.

But what she truly *needs* is something that can't be rushed.

I take my precious time trailing warm, loving kisses over the juncture of her thighs where they meet her hips. More than a few times, I can't resist flicking my tongue over her delicious skin. I'm rewarded with another sigh, another pleading moan.

She needs to know that I'm going to take care of her. That I *want* to take care of her.

And, truth be told, I need that, too.

I need to know I'm redeemable.

The look on her face is worth the time it takes to kiss a path from her hip to her knee. Clara is in a whole other world of her own, and I feel a unique swell of pride at being the one to send her there.

I switch to the other leg and kiss my way back to her center, never once taking my eyes off her beautiful, expressive face.

It's so tempting to dip my tongue inside her. I want it, she wants it, so why not? But I'm determined to make every moment with her better than the last—and that includes all the

moments in bed, or in my office, or bent over the hood of my car... everywhere.

How does the saying go?

Any flat surface will do.

But I keep teasing. More kisses, more nibbles, more tiny, nipped bruises just so she can remember tomorrow how good this feels right now.

Then, finally, I take pity on her whimpers and lap up her honey. Slow, languid. Liquid. My eyes roll back in my head at the sheer pleasure of tasting her sweet juices, at smelling her incredible scent.

She's everything I've ever wanted. Everything I never knew I needed.

I keep her firmly in my grasp but I coax her hips into motion as I push and pulse and swirl my tongue in and out of her warm depths. *Fuck my face, gorgeous.* Her fingers have a death-grip on my hair and I fucking love it.

With one deep scoop of my tongue inside her, I drag it up until I can circle her clit, flick it once, twice, three times... and then latch my lips around the sweet nub.

Clara's thighs snap tight around my head. I know exactly how to shove her over the edge of oblivion from here. I slip two fingers inside her and time each stroke to her panting breaths.

And then she's flying apart.

The only thing anchoring her to this realm of existence is the way I hold her to me, giving her enough space to writhe and buck and shudder through her release, but not letting her escape my mouth's reach.

If she's the only wine I ever drink again, I will die a happy man.

I ease off from sucking but continue to caress her with my tongue. Long, slow, broad strokes meant to soothe and comfort while letting her know I'm nowhere near done with her.

I'll *never* be done with her.

I'm a man obsessed. There's no denying it. No getting around it. Not that I want to. I still catch myself watching her on the security cameras just to reassure myself that she is still here, that this is real, that I'm not about to wake up and find out she's still lost—

No. I need to drive those dark thoughts from my mind.

Fortunately, that's not difficult to do with the way she's breathing my name between satisfied purrs and shivering aftershocks. I hold her to me, kissing my way back up her body. I want to cover every inch of her body with my kisses. I want to chart a map in my memory so I can know each scar and freckle blindfolded.

More than that, though—I need to be inside her.

Right goddamn now.

I capture her gasp in a deep kiss when I push myself inside her. She fits so perfectly around my shaft; this is by no means our first time together and yet somehow I'm always amazed at how *exactly right* she feels around me.

Clara's fingers dig into my shoulder blades. I welcome the pain—I want those scars, so I can saunter into a fire with my skin covered in proof that my woman, my beautiful, loving woman, is as fierce as I am.

"I love you," are the only words I can find enough breath to voice. They're the only words that really count, though, so I let them do all the talking. "I love you. I love you."

She meets each proclamation with a kiss. I meet each kiss with a deeper thrust. If I could bury myself completely inside her, I would. Since I can't, I do my damned hardest to bury every solid inch of my cock inside her quivering heat and work us both into a frenetic rhythm that is pushing me closer to my own release faster than I intended.

But that's okay. I also intend on taking her a few more times before dawn.

Words pour from my heart into her ear as we move together. I'm pretty sure she's making me whisper two different languages, and I barely speak Russian anymore. Not

consciously at least, but when I'm in here, it flows from me effortlessly. It's a fucking testament to how mindblowing she is, how—

Clara suddenly freezes.

“What did you say?”

What did I say? I slow to a stop and brush back hair from her brow while I try to remember what just flew out of my mouth.

I told her I love her.

I told her how beautiful she is to me.

How much of that was in English?

“What's wrong?” I try to laugh it off, pressing a kiss to her furrowed brow. “What—”

“What did you just say, Demyen?”

She's trembling, but it's not from pleasure. Her eyes are filled with fear.

I sit up. “I called you my good girl. *Umnitsa.*”

Flat palms suddenly shove against my chest and it's a frantic scramble to pull myself from her so she can quickly roll away. Which she does, clutching a hand to her chest.

“Clara? Baby, what's wrong?”

“Don't.” She bats away my attempt to rub her back. She just sits on the edge of the bed, breathing faster and faster. “Don't say that.”

“Say what?” I am so fucking confused. “*Umnitsa?*”

Instead of answering, she bolts for the bathroom.

The door is slammed in my face before I can even attempt to wedge my foot in there. I have no fucking clue what just happened. No idea what to do next.

All I can do is just stand here like an idiot while she starts sobbing loudly behind the locked door.

The shower turns on. *Fuck.* I thought we'd kicked the scrubbing-her-skin-raw habit. But my gut says she's cranking

up the heat and sinking back into the darker recesses of her mind.

“Clara?” I knock on the door, hard enough for her to hear me but not so hard it will scare her. I hope. “Talk to me. Please.”

“Go away!” More sobbing.

“I want to help you. I don’t... I don’t know what I did.” I run a frustrated hand through my hair. “Fuck, Clara, tell me what’s wrong. Please. Tell me what I did so I can make it right.”

I don’t understand. We were in tune; we were more intimate and synchronized than ever before.

What the fuck happened?!

“Clara, please.” I’m trying to ignore the way my heart fractures at the sound of her crying. I want to help her. I want to save her from whatever it is that’s causing this.

“You...” Clara’s voice calls out weakly over the roar of the shower. “You sound just like him.”

DEMYEN

I fucked up.

The immediate cause was an unthinking slip of the tongue. A sin for which Clara is now scrubbing off every remnant of our lovemaking in some boiling hot shower.

I knock on the bathroom door one more time. “I’m stepping out. Give you some space.”

I need her trust and her respect, and earning both of those things requires me to step back when all I want is to step in. So, in lieu of getting either of those...

I go get a fucking drink.

I yank on the first pair of sweatpants I can find and shuffle my way toward the kitchen. Before I go down, I check on Willow just in case she happened to hear the drama or the dramatics that preceded it.

Thankfully not. She’s sound asleep in her bed, one of her new teddy bears tucked under her arm and the rest of them snuggled warmly around her. A light snore hums through her nose and manages to make me smile just a tiny bit.

I love this little girl.

I love her mom, too.

But what if my love isn’t enough to overcome my failings? Love doesn’t change the blood running through my veins. It doesn’t erase the mistakes I’ve made again and again. It doesn’t—

I turn away and continue to the kitchen before I let any more dark thoughts compound in my mind. Though I'm growing increasingly tempted to just walk into the lake and let fate decide what happens to me.

I grab from the stash of liquor without bothering to see what I pick. As long as it's in a glass bottle and pretty damn big, it'll do. I dangle it from loose fingers at my side as I walk out to the patio, fully determined to overthink my life and drink all my guilt and sorrow away.

Or, at least until I'm unconscious.

"What happened?"

Good fucking hell, I damn near drop the bottle.

Bambi is curled up in one of the overstuffed papasan chairs, cocktail in one hand and her phone in the other. She clicks her phone shut and sets it on the end table next to her, then looks up at me with a tight smile. When I continue to just stand there, she gestures to the chair next to her.

I slump down and immediately pop the bottle open for a deep swig.

Vodka. Yet another lovely reminder of my father. Fuck me.

Bambi waits for me to get comfortable before she repeats the question. "So? What happened."

"Nothing."

"Liar."

I'm too drained to glare at her. "How would you know?"

"Luxurious lakeside cabin up in the mountains where there's tons of privacy, all the amenities, and no rush to be anywhere or do anything. A soundproofed master bedroom, California king bed, and Clara inside it." She lifts her glass to me. "You should not be down here. But you are. So... what happened?"

I sigh. It feels like my soul gives up on my body and simply exits through that breath. "I fucked up."

"You're gonna have to be more specific."

“You do remember that I am your boss?” I ask her with a scowl. “I—”

“Don’t even try to pull rank with me.” Bambi says it with a smile, but there’s a hint of venom in her eyes and her tone. “You’re also the same guy who carelessly risked my entire career by putting me into a position where I had to choose between maintaining my license with the State Bar of Nevada or maintaining my professional relationship with you. Obviously, I chose you. But if anyone finds out I didn’t report any of a billion things I’ve witnessed and overlooked in your employ, I’m done. I’m not just disbarred—I’m thrown into prison, do not pass Go, do not collect two hundred dollars.”

I prop my arms on my knees and bury my face in my hands. “Fucking hell. I’m sorry, Bam.”

She gives me a tiny shrug. “I guess I can forgive you. There may be a surcharge, though.”

“I would expect no less.”

“Nor should you. So...” She takes a long sip of her drink and studies me. “Something happened. You might not want to talk about it, but you need to.”

I grab my own drink and slug a shot back. “She’s locked herself in the bathroom. Crying. Right in the middle of some of the best sex we’ve had in a while.” Another deep swig. “Shit. I don’t fucking know what happened.”

Bambi nods like she does know. “She was triggered.”

“She was what?”

“Triggered, dude. You know, like something was said or done that immediately body-slammed her brain into a point in her life that’s hella traumatizing.” She hides the next sentence behind a feigned sip. “Did you breathe? That’d be enough to do it.”

I shoot her a contemptuous glare. Mostly because she’s right, and I deserve the reminders of how right she is.

“My guess is, it was something your father said to her.” Bam stirs her drink with the paper umbrella and gazes out over the

dark lake. “It was probably said a lot, too. I don’t know, honestly, but I’m guessing since you were... ah... doing the horizontal mambo, you’ve might’ve said something that reminded her of—”

“Russian,” I groan. “I started speaking Russian to her. Terms of endearment, just simple stuff, but that’s when she lost it.”

Umnitsa.

“You sound just like him.”

I glare at the bottle of vodka now sitting abandoned on the ground by my feet. I want to chuck it into the lake. No—I want to chuck it at Oleg’s house and light a fucking match.

“I can’t...” I slump back in the chair with yet another groan. “*Fuck!* I can’t run from my own shadow! How am I supposed to make things right when I’m the literal embodiment of everything that’s gone wrong?”

I suck at being a hero. I’m not about to slide back into being a villain, but, for God’s sake, I need a break. I need someone or something to just throw me a bone already. Or a tip. A guidebook.

Anything.

“You start by not stopping.”

I squeeze my eyes closed. “I’m too tired for riddles, Bam.”

Bambi leans in. “Listen. I’ve got shit from my past still fucking up my brain in ways you really don’t want or need the details for. But I’ll tell you some right now: I can’t listen to old gospel hymns. And whenever I hear one on accident, I seize up like a fucking iceberg.”

“That’s...” I don’t know how to phrase it, so I just go for it.

“That’s oddly specific.”

“It’s also what my mother listened to on full blast while her man-of-the-day was busy ‘babysitting’ me in my room.”

The alcohol turns into hot bile in my stomach. I’m officially done drinking for the night. And also eating for the foreseeable future. “Shit. Bam. I’m so sorry.”

She brushes it off with a shrug. I've always admired and respected her for her tenacity, but more often and more recently I'm noticing the subtle differences between her natural personality and the thick layers of armor she wears at all times.

My mind does the worst thing possible and imagines Willow in a situation like that. Far away from me, from Pavel and Mako and everyone else who protects her with their own lives. Just sequestered away in some hovel, terrified of hearing the door open because the one person she's supposed to be able to trust allows the worst monsters of this world to use her—

Shit. I can't. I'm gonna throw up.

"If you ever need anything, a therapist or your own lawyer..."

Bambi smiles. It's genuine and full of gratitude. "Thanks. Really, I'm good. I'm the type of person who believes that the greatest revenge is to be better than they ever could. To live the life they tried to steal from me." She polishes off her cocktail with a dramatic little slurp. "Of course, if I were ever to run into the bastard who tried to pimp me out, I might need your help hiding a body."

"Done. Say no more."

"And hey, when it comes to Clara? Just give her time. Things are still fresh. She's still navigating her own mind, on top of putting up a strong front for her daughter and trying to be an amazing girlfriend for you."

That doesn't sit right with me. "She doesn't need to do that, though. I love her just as she is."

Bambi looks at me like I'm slow to catch on and it's adorable. Maybe it is. To her.

"I know that," she sighs patiently. "Deep down, she knows that. But she was raised to be a people-pleaser. She was beaten into submission and literally trained to make everyone else happy. Do you want to help her?"

"Of course," I say without hesitation.

“Then teach her to be strong. Show her she can be assertive and demanding and dominant without consequences from you. Let her draw her boundary lines, and then respect the hell out of them until she’s ready to re-map.”

In a weird sort of way, it does make sense. It’s partly what my gut’s been saying to do.

It’s a relief to know I’m at least stumbling down the right path.

Bambi yawns, stretches, and slides out of her chair. “I’m gonna go make sure Pavel hasn’t fallen out a window or otherwise re-hurt himself. Still can’t believe it—a fucking *ricochet*.” She snorts a laugh and shakes her head.

“He will never live that down.”

“Not at all. I won’t let him.” She grins, then softens and rests a hand on my shoulder. “You’ve got this. You’ve got *them*. Don’t let your father destroy everyone’s lives without even being here. Just imagine the kind of man you wish he was—and then be better than even that.”

She pats my shoulder, then walks off to the cluster of private cabins I haven’t yet shown Clara or Willow that are nestled in a stretch of woods down the side path. Far enough away to give me privacy, but close enough to attend any emergency that might come up at the main cabin.

Like the love of my life hyperventilating in a boiling shower.

I sigh.

I should go check on that.

CLARA

It takes me a few minutes to find my breath again. When I do, I realize that Demyen's stopped knocking on the door.

I'm not even in the shower this time, which is a huge step in the right direction. I was going to get in; I was going to crank up the heat and scrub every inch of my body until I felt clean again.

But I already feel clean. I actually feel... loved.

Protected.

Safe.

So it doesn't feel right to rid myself of Demyen's trace on my skin. I love the way he touches me, the way he kisses me. The way he whispers reminders of his love in my ear as his hands work all sorts of wonderful feelings throughout my body.

It was just that one moment. That one whisper.

One solid, horrifying second when he wasn't Demyen anymore.

When it was *Oleg* on top of me.

I need to get a handle on this. I need to pull myself together. I need to take inventory of my fucked up mind and figure out a way to deal with my shit.

But first, I just need to curl up in Demyen and fall asleep covered in him.

I peek my head out of the bathroom, spirals of steam curling out at my feet. He's not in the bedroom. I don't know why I thought he'd still be here. I probably scared him and drove him away with my crazy.

Worse yet—I'm fairly certain he's going to give up on me. If he hasn't already. It's not his fault that he resembles his father sometimes. I can no sooner ask him to stop being the man's son than I can ask the stars to stop showing up in the sky.

But no one signed up for my brand of psycho. Demyen sure as shit never volunteered for all the drama and intrigue my whole life has thrown at him. First, his brother, then Raizo, and now, this?

I can't blame him if he decides I'm not worth it.

I grab the shirt he wore earlier today and pull it on. The waft of his scent feels better to my senses than any shower or hot tub could give me right now. When I close my eyes, I can almost feel his warmth inside the fabric from where it pressed to his skin.

Tears drip from my eyes.

I fucked up.

I fucked everything up.

I'll wait until we get back to the compound before I tell Willow anything. I can pretend, I think, until then. Her little heart has been broken too many times, and after all the progress she made today...

Crawling into bed seems like the only thing I can do right. I don't know if Demyen will come back; I don't know which room is safe for me to go into without disrupting anyone else. If he does come back and needs me to leave, I will.

Until then, I hug his pillow to my chest and sob until I can't make any more tears.

I don't know how long I lie there, half-asleep and mostly just drained of all energy. I've cried it all away. I can't sleep, either. I'm too afraid that if I let myself wander into dreams,

they'll quickly become nightmares all reminding me why I don't deserve a life with Demyen.

Or with anyone.

When the bedroom door opens, then closes, I'm almost not sure I heard anything at all. But then the bed dips under someone's weight...

And I'm pulled into Demyen's arms the same time he crawls into bed next to me.

He doesn't say anything. But he doesn't throw me out, either.

Instead, he kisses my hair and rubs my back, tucking me under his chin and close to his chest. I curl up into a ball and he just helps me do it, making sure I'm connected to him by as many points as possible.

"I'm sorry," he quietly says after a long moment of silence. "I'm so sorry, Clara. I never meant..."

I just bury my face in his chest. Breathe him in. Let time handle the rest.

"I never meant to hurt you. I only ever meant to hurt myself. I know, it's fucked up and it doesn't make any fucking sense, but I'm working on trying to understand why I..." He stops, then sighs. "Why I always try to destroy every good thing, every good person, in my life. You and Willow are paying the price and it's not... it's not fucking fair. It's not what I wanted. At all."

He rubs my back with both his hands and burrows his nose into my hair. Just like I'm comforting myself with him, he seems to be needing me to give him the same.

The fact that he's not asking for it, or for anything from me, means a lot.

"What do you want?" I don't know if he can hear me; my voice is muffled against his chest.

He does. And without hesitating for a second, he answers, "You. I want *you*. You and Willow." He tightens his embrace around me. "I want us to be a family. I want... I want all of

that with you. And I'm so fucking terrified that I don't deserve any of it."

I don't move from my spot, mainly because it's too comfortable. But also so he doesn't see my face just yet. "You don't want me to leave?"

"What?" Demyen eases me back so he can squint at me in the moonlit dark of the bedroom. "No. Of course not. Never." He smooths my hair back and tips my face up to his. "Why would you ask that?"

"Because..." I clear my throat; I don't have enough tears left to start crying all over again. "I'm damaged goods. I'm fucked up in the head. I'm... tainted."

Demyen cuts off my explanation with a kiss. Nothing pushy or overly passionate, but more solidifying and permanent. "Shut the fuck up, baby. You are *not* tainted."

I don't know how, or why, but that somehow makes me laugh a little. "Right."

"You are beautiful. Incredible. Smart and strong and brave and—"

"I'm your father's sex slave." I suck in a shuddering breath. Better lay it all out now so we don't have to drag through it later. "I did... things. He did things to me. I don't know... shit, I don't even have memories half the time of what all he actually did to me. I'd just wake up and be covered in... in... I don't know!"

The memories are flooding back. I'm clinging to Demyen to anchor me into the here and now, so I don't go catapulting back to the nightmares of the past.

"Hey. Hey, shhh..." He pulls me back into him and slowly rocks me in his arms.

My stomach clenches again. He's going to be an incredible father to our baby.

And still, I don't have the guts to tell him.

"You did what you needed to do in order to survive. I know. Fuck, Clara, *I know*. A few weeks in his household is terrible

enough, but I spent sixteen long years under his thumb. So when I say I know, I get it, I understand... I really, truly do.” He draws in a long, shuddering breath. “Oleg doesn’t just want to ruin your body; he wants to control your mind. He’s always been like that. It’s never enough to physically break someone. He enjoys playing all these sick mind games until you don’t even know which way is up.” Demyen nuzzles my hair with a sigh. “I know what it’s like to hear him call you kind things, to praise you for random accomplishments and treat you like a human being. And then he yanks it all out from under you and reminds you of the demon he really is.”

Only a few moments ago, I was clinging to Demyen for comfort. Now, I’m holding him to give him comfort. Not because he’s asking for it, or necessarily because he needs it.

Simply because my heart is breaking for the little boy who just needed his daddy to love him.

“I kept telling myself, my whole life, that my mother didn’t care about us.” Demyen’s voice cracks slightly. “I’ve been telling myself she was a terrible mother. Gone all the time. Having parties and sleeping around. But... sometimes? I wonder. And I don’t want to know the answer. But I wonder if Oleg used her the way he uses everyone else. The way he planned on using you.”

Now, we’re both clinging to each other.

And it’s okay. Because I’m here.

I’m here and I’ve got him.

I will always be here for him.

“The whole time I was with him, I...” I almost choke on the words. “I thought you hated me. But I didn’t care. I just wanted to get back to you. I fought to get back to Willow, but I... I prayed to get back to you. Maybe your mom did the same.”

I never met the woman. It’s a stretch, I know. But after seeing the way Oleg is and how completely different Demyen is, and tries to be? I have to believe that the good in him, that glow

that exists even when he's trying to be intimidating, comes from the other half of his parentage.

And I want to believe that, no matter what, she'd be proud of him.

We run out of words to say. It's fine by me—sometimes, our kisses, our touches, convey more than anything we could say. So that's what we do; we kiss and caress and hold each other as moonlight dances through the window, speckled by the branches of the trees.

I don't realize I'm straddling him until I come up for air. Demyen simply strokes my sides, feeling my hips before smoothing back up. He gazes at me with eyes full of love and promise.

They quickly darken with lust when I sink myself onto him.

His shirt is quickly tossed to the side; I need to feel him on my skin in the most direct way possible. I don't have to wait, either, because his hands quickly envelop my breasts and massage me there while I push down more. *Fuck*, even now he feels so big inside me.

Everything is a heady blur, like I'm drunk on his love and thirsty for more.

But right now, I just need him. Like this.

My hands brace on his chest and I slowly lift, then push back down. Again. And again.

"You're mine," he breathes. His hands move from my breasts to touch my whole body, from the curves of my sides to my spread thighs wrapped around his hips. "No one else's."

My bottom lip trembles. I think I understand what he means. "But I—"

Demyen firmly grasps my lower back and pulls me down hard onto him. It's so sudden, and I feel so fucking *full*, that I can't help but gasp and let out a grunt of pleasure and surprise.

"Mine."

I writhe, impaled on him. “Uh-huh” is all I’m able to get out as I start to grind right there.

“Say it. Say it, baby.”

“Yours,” I gasp out.

Because I am. I so, so fucking am... even when I don’t feel like I deserve him.

Demyen captures my wrist and pulls my hand to his face, then kisses my palm. It’s so loving, so intimate, so out of place while I’m busy rocking and grinding and fucking myself on his huge cock.

His eyes never leave mine. He kisses my palm again. Then he lets me cup his face as I pick up the pace, my breath catching in my lungs when I feel him rub against the best spots inside me.

I love him.

I love him so much.

“That’s it, baby,” he breathes. He rubs my hips and strokes my thighs, but otherwise doesn’t move to thrust inside me. “Give me all you want. Take what you need. I’m right here.”

“I need...” My brow furrows. I don’t know what I need. He feels so good, rubbing all the right places inside me and stretching me and filling me and holding me...

Why does it feel like there could be more?

“I need you.”

Demyen doesn’t hesitate or ask for clarification. In one swift, smooth move, he braces his arms around my back and sits up, holding me onto him as he does. His mouth covers mine and I feel only the slightest shifts between us but then I’m on his lap again. Still grinding. Still pulsing.

“I’m here,” he breathes. “I’m right here, baby. I’ve got you.”

I nod. It’s harder to fully slide up and down at this angle so I just grind and writhe and *ohmygawd* does that make my toes curl.

“You’re not his sex slave.”

I freeze.

But Demyen holds me to him, kissing my neck and sucking on my earlobe as he continues to whisper things I need to hear right when I literally cannot run away from him.

“You’re not his sex slave. You are not anyone’s slave. You are strong, you are beautiful, you are so fucking smart... and you are mine.”

I kiss him again. I need to taste the lips that form such sweet words.

When we come together, it’s not intense or earth-shattering.

But it might just be the best one yet.

We bathe each other in the glistening aftershocks, kissing and caressing each other long after he spills the last of himself into me. Deep down, I think we both needed this. Together.

“I’m going to spend the rest of forever making it up to you,” he whispers after a while.

I grin and kiss his bottom lip. “Be careful what you wish for. ‘Forever’ means you’re mine for just as long.”

Demyen returns the grin and rubs my hip. “Do you promise?”

I go still.

Then, a beat later, I nod.

Because yeah, I do. I really do want forever with him.

I am Demyen’s. Demyen is mine.

Forever.

DEMYEN

“Identities confirmed?”

Mako’s voice crackles through the walkie-talkie. “Confirmed. This is the spot.”

I scan the abandoned factory through my binoculars and count at least seven Yakuza guards strolling the eastern perimeter facing me. “Head count?”

“Ten on the north side. Fifteen between south and west.”

“And we’ve got seven here on the east. I’m guessing double the total on the inside.”

“Roger that.”

Raizo, you idiot. Had he continued to attack my warehouses, I’d have been irritated but strategically patient. Had he kept attacking my men, I’d have been pissed and taken it out on his men as well, but that patience wouldn’t change.

But Raizo Watanabe chose to be a goddamn barbarian and attack small children.

So “patience” can get fucked.

It’s time for war.

It didn’t really hit me in a visceral way until I tried taking Willow to the school a few days after our cabin vacation. I swore to her that the second she felt afraid, I’d scoop her up and take her where she felt safe. That seemed to work, because she clung to my hand like she wanted to break my fingers, but she still managed to walk to her old classroom.

The fear in her classmates' eyes is what got me.

No child should look that terrified. That worn.

That traumatized.

And there should never, ever be taped-over bullet holes in any child's classroom.

So that's why I'm sitting in my Rezvani, gleefully counting the number of Yakuza assholes who are about to take their last breath.

Behind me, parked in more tactical SUVs and polishing their weapons, is every man of my Bratva, plus a few allies from the local Italian families who are just as pissed about the shooting as I am.

"Movement on the north slope," one of Don Fontinelli's men sounds off over the radio. "Looks like a group of women."

"Fucking hell. Mako," I call to Pavel's stand-in, "you getting this?"

"I heard. Can confirm. I see a handful of them over here, too."

"We're not here for them," Don LaGrezzio's gravelly voice interjects.

"I know." It takes what's left of my patience to not snap at the Italian. "I didn't count on Raizo keeping his 'merchandise' this long after his last sales push. We're still going in, but we'll need to adjust."

Mako comes to the rescue. "I've got a team here ready to extract. We'll grab the women while the rest of the operation continues as planned."

I stamp down the sudden swell of pride I feel in my chest.

This is no longer a murder spree. Well, not *just* a murder spree.

This is also a rescue mission.

"Alpha team, stand by. Bravo, sweep the perimeter."

Like ghosts haunting the sands, a dozen of my men flanked by Fontinelli's and LaGrezzio's contingents silently swoop in and begin to take down the Yakuza guards who literally do not see

them coming. Silencers muffle every shot, and anyone who doesn't drop dead immediately receives a snapped neck or second bullet. A dozen Yakuza lives snuffed out in moments.

Good fucking riddance.

“Alpha team, head in.”

That is my own cue to step out of the Rezvani and join the other mob bosses as our best men collectively storm the old bottle factory. The sound of shattering glass adds to the music of angry, surprised shouts and unsilenced gunshots.

One of Raizo's men runs out of a side entrance; I drop him before he can lift his gun. Fontinelli has my back and kills another runner, while LaGrezzio shouts orders to his men to start placing the charges.

I'm caught off-guard by yet another runner, who flies at me and slams me into the ground. Fists fly at my face, my sides, and he pulls out a knife—

Blood sprays everywhere. He drops on top of me, half his head missing.

Fontinelli holds his hand out to help me up. I don't know exactly how to thank him, so I just take the offer and clap him on the shoulder.

“Boss, you'll wanna get in here.” Mako mutters through my earpiece.

I'm in no hurry; this is the calmest I've felt in days. But the urgency in his voice has me picking up the pace.

Soon, I'm inside the factory, navigating through rusty corridors and across swinging chain-link bridges while he gives me directions. All around me, Yakuza are screaming and falling to their deaths, one way or another, while the band of pissed-off fathers, grandfathers, uncles, and generally decent men angrily avenge our collective children.

When I spot Mako in one of the narrow corridors, he shakes his head at me. “It's fucking sick,” he mutters under his breath before pushing the door open for me. “Just warning you.”

I grit my teeth and go in.

He's right.

It's fucking disgusting.

There's no air in here. It's stifling, which makes the smell a thousand times worse. I don't know exactly what I'm seeing. There's a good chance my brain has activated some sort of sanity preservation mode and won't let me fully process the horrors contained in this one room.

Several women of various ages, most of them in their late teens and early twenties, chained by their wrists to the walls.

None of them are alive.

"What should we do with them?" Mako quietly asks. He looks a little green around the collar. If he turns and vomits, I won't hold it against him.

What I want to do is carry them out. Identify them. Notify their families, next of kin, whoever may be out there desperately searching for them.

What I want to do is give them, and their loved ones, closure.

What I *need* to do is keep things moving so our men can get out just as quickly as they got in.

"Leave them." I hate the way the words taste. "No one needs to see this."

Mako nods and pulls the door shut. The solid thud reminds me of those heavy marble doors at a mausoleum. It might as well be.

A few doors down, more of my men are quickly ushering terrified women out of another, near-identical room. Several more women are chained to the walls, and it's a struggle to break them loose. But after a few carefully aimed shots at the chains and multiple reassurances that we are, surprisingly enough, the good guys, we manage to get every last one of them out.

A handful are too weak to walk. My men carry them without complaint, and I count how many legs I need to break on the surviving Yakuza men we capture in order to even the ledger.

“Round them up,” I order through my earpiece. “I want as many of them alive as possible.”

“You said we were—” LaGrezzio jumps in again.

“We are. But we need to have a chat first.”

Mako’s mouth twitches into a grim smile. He’s as thirsty for their blood as I am.

Once I personally confirm that all surviving slaves have been evacuated from the building, I navigate the building to where our collective teams have gathered the remaining Yakuza. The air conditioner is running in here. I take a moment to cool down before I rip into the group of men waiting, bound and gagged, on their knees.

They’re oozing blood and fear sweat. The stench is unbearable. I lean against one of the dusty tables and casually slip my hands into my pockets. “Who’s in charge here?”

They glance at each other. One of them inclines his head, so Mako yanks his gag down.

“You killed him,” the man spits by way of an answer.

I nod and think carefully about my next question. “Does Raizo come out here often?”

He looks away.

“Look at me when I’m talking to you.” I nudge his chest with my foot. “I don’t see or hear him sending reinforcements to come rescue your sorry asses. I’m guessing you’re not even that high up on the food chain. So do yourself a favor and answer the fucking question. Does he come out here often?”

“Only to get his dick wet.”

The other Yakuza chuckle. One of them, who looks like he can’t be much older than eighteen, does not join in on the laughter. He just looks away, no malice or fear on his face. Like he’s resigned to his fate.

I make a note to circle back to him.

“What do you know about the school shooting?”

The man in front of me chooses to remain silent.

My patience is running thin. “Look around you. Each and every one of us volunteered to be here because your boss, your *leader*, decided that terrorizing and threatening the lives of innocent children was a good idea. So if someone doesn’t speak the fuck up, my associates and I will assume you were all there and are all equally guilty—”

“He’s fucking crazy!”

The young man at the end, the one I noticed a moment ago, is wild-eyed. “He’s lost his fucking mind!”

I glance at Mako, at Fontinelli and LaGrezzio, and slowly walk over to the boy. “Go on.”

He doesn’t even look at his companions before spilling his guts. “I’m in it for the cars, man. The cars! But Raizo has us snatching women and pushing drugs on them like it’s a fucking game to him. And then he gives these orders to go shoot up some school and I’m like nope, I’m out. I—”

The man next to him shoves into his side, hard. The boy falls over, but I catch him before his head cracks on the cement. He’s the most valuable talker thus far.

Once I help him back up, I backhand the asshole who shoved him. My knee connects with his face on the rebound for good measure. He doesn’t move after that.

“You were saying...?” I implore the young man.

He starts sniveling. By the way he glares at the others, I can tell there’s no love lost here. “I wanted out. I swear, man, the second I heard Raizo tell us to kidnap some little girl and shoot up her school, I wanted out.”

“Did he say why?”

He shakes his head. “Not to me. But I didn’t ask, either. I just wanted to make a run for it.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “You’re still here.”

And that’s when his entire body slumps. It’s like whatever fire, whatever fight was just in him, evaporates immediately.

“Yeah,” he whispers toward the floor. “They caught me. And then they... they...”

I don't like where this is going. I glance at my men, who all look ready to murder these motherfuckers at the slightest twitch of my hand. Soon enough, they'll get that chance.

“They made me do it. I swear. I didn't want to. But they told me if I didn't, they'd kill my mother and sister, and she just had a baby...” He sniffs. His voice cracks.

I'm not supposed to feel sympathy for the enemy. But I'm also not supposed to find someone this young in a place like this.

“What did they make you do?” I ask quietly.

The boy bursts into sobs. “I didn't... I said I was sorry. I kept telling her I was so, so sorry. But if I didn't do it, they'd kill us both. So I had to. I had to do it.” His head suddenly whips to the side. “And they still fucking killed her. Told me I was now a man and laughed about it.”

The gnawing pit in my stomach is a combination of sorrow for the poor girl, whoever she was, and unbridled fury at these sick motherfuckers who are all glaring at the boy. One of them snarls something through his gag. A Fontinelli man smacks him upside the head and threatens to do worse with the butt of his gun.

Taking pity on Yakuza recruits was not part of the plan.

But I also don't feel right forcing him to endure the same fate as the rest of the men here.

“Take him,” I order my men. “We need him for follow-up questioning. Leave the rest here.”

Mako does the honors and escorts the boy, still bound and now thoroughly cowering, out of the room.

“Here's the thing,” I say to the rest of the group. “I came here pissed about the shooting. I have now seen the sick fucking shit you have all been complacent to. Not a single one of you can look me in the eye and honestly say you had no idea about what's been going on here. Which makes you guilty by

association or bad judgment or just plain stupidity, whatever the fuck you want to call it.”

Behind me, someone brings up a large can of gasoline and begins to splash it on the group.

Who, now that they can smell and feel how fucking serious their situation is, are now all too eager to tell me anything I want to hear.

Too bad. They should have thought about that while they had the chance.

“See, I have a kid. I’m always telling her to treat others the way she wants to be treated.” I pull out a lighter and flick the lid open. Shut. Open. Shut. Really, I’m just enjoying the way their eyes widen in absolute terror with each pass of the lid. “And her mother? Insanely beautiful, inside and out. So much so, that your leader made the dumb mistake of trying to sell her into slavery and ripping my family apart.”

I stalk over to them, still flicking the lighter open and shut. Open and shut.

“As you’re probably imagining, I’m beyond pissed.”

Open.

“And then I saw that room of yours. That sick, disgusting room that told me everything I need to know about you and your sick fucking minds.”

Close.

“So I’m going to practice what I preach. I’m going to do to you what you did to them.”

Open.

“And make this room your grave.”

Light.

I have no personal attachment to the lighter—I picked it up at a gas station on the way here. That’s why it’s so easy to toss it into the gasoline-soaked group.

I won’t be needing it back.

Fontinelli and LaGrezzio follow me out, but not before spitting and cursing at the screaming men as they burn. They signal for their own men to leave, and it only takes a minute or two for us to reach the open desert air.

The screams fade behind us. The darker side of me wishes I could listen to them a bit longer.

But we have shit to do. There are victims who need to be reunited with their loved ones and a Yakuza recruit who might actually be redeemable. I've got a family to hold and a woman to fuck the rest of my adrenaline into.

And there are more bodies that need burning.

Once all our vehicles are loaded, I wait for them to pull out. I don't leave until the last one signals that we're all good to go.

I left the explosives switch with Mako. I could tell he has some buried rage that could use a little catharsis.

And I must admit—when he hits the button, the giant fireball that plumes up behind us as that factory of nightmares turns to ashes is about as cathartic as it gets.

DEMYEN

Son of a bitch.

I got grazed. Again.

I've been so pumped full of adrenaline since blowing Raizo's fucked-up slave factory to smoking bits that I didn't notice the pain or the blood coming from my ribs until we parked in the garage at home.

"Motherfucker," I snarl as I press a palm to my torso and it comes away smeared with crimson.

"Daddy!"

Clara and Willow peek through the garage door leading into the side room of the main house, then gasp when they see me. The door slams against the wall as my two ladies burst into the garage and rush to my side, covering me with kisses and fussing over the way I'm clutching my side.

The pain is suddenly not important at all.

"Look at you!" Clara clasps my face in her hands and turns me every which way. "You're a mess!"

Willow pulls at my bloodied fingers, her breath catching. "Daddy? Daddy! You're bleeding! You're hurt!"

I'm about to tell her it's nothing to worry about, when she bursts into tears.

Immediately, I crouch down beside her, ignoring the pang of fresh pain, and pull her into a hug. "I'm okay. See? It's just a graze."

“B-b-but you’re c-c-covered in blood!”

“It’s not my blood, sweetheart. See?” I turn my face side to side so she can do her own inspection.

Willow, just like her mother, is very thorough. Even my ears do not escape her careful scrutiny, and I’m only allowed a clean bill of health after she makes me stick out my tongue to check me for a sore throat.

“Where did it all come from?” she asks at last.

I glance up at Clara, who seems to have the exact same question on her mind. So I sigh and stroke Willow’s cheek with a clean thumb. “You know those bad guys who came to your school?”

She takes a step back, new fear filling her eyes. “Uh-huh...?”

“Well...” How do I translate “*I killed them all*” into kid speech? “They were monsters living in a cave. Mako and I went to go find them. We did, and now, there are no more monsters.”

Willow thinks this over. She looks at me again, at the blood splattered all over my shirt and face—*good God, I must look terrifying in her eyes*—and then just nods. Plain and simple.

“Good.”

Damn, kid. I’ll make you Bratva yet.

I pull her in for another hug and kiss her cheek. “I love you, princess. I’m never going to let the monsters get you. They all have to come through me first. Okay?”

She turns and kisses my cheek. “Okay! I love you, Daddy.”

And then she’s off, playing her games or coloring or doing whatever precocious little five-year-olds do. Just leaving me here to grapple with the even more precious reality that she loves me.

I’m her daddy, and she loves me.

Clara helps me back up, no less fussing over me than our daughter. *Our* daughter. As far as I’m concerned, that might as well be Zakrevsky blood running through Willow’s veins. To

acknowledge any other feels like an insult to her beauty and kindness.

Plus, that kid showed more guts in the last five minutes than her sperm donor ever has.

“Are you hurt?” Clara pats me down with her worried hands. “I know you’re putting on a brave front for Willow, but—”

“I’m fine. I promise.” I flash her a charming smile and tip her face up for a sweet kiss.

When she breaks away, she whispers, “Did you really...?”

I nod. “This should cripple Raizo into doing something stupidly desperate. But this time, he’s gonna have to do it with half the manpower. And a good chunk of his funds missing.”

She frowns. “What do you mean?”

I debate whether or not to tell her. But now’s as good a time to test the waters as any. “We found more slaves there. From the final headcount taken at the safehouse, fifty made it out alive.”

Clara sucks in a sharp breath. “And the others?”

Those images will be eternally seared into memory whether I want them or not. I slowly shake my head and try to swallow back the bile that rises. “We tried. But some of them had long since passed. I tried, baby. I swear—”

“Shhhh.” She presses a finger to my lips, then kisses me. “I know. And you saved everyone else.” Another kiss, another caress. “You’re a good man. It’s one of the many reasons why I love you.”

My heart swells. “I love you, too. Deeply. Eternally. And plenty enough to bring down Raizo’s empire just so you’ll feel safe again.”

Her face suddenly twists into a mischievous grin. She lightly rubs her hand over my chest and bites the corner of her lip. “Hmm. Well, let’s get you stitched up and bandaged. And then, when we’re in the shower, I’ll get on my knees and show you how truly grateful I am.”

Fucking hell.

I love my life.

DEMYEN

“There’s still time to go to the breeder and—”

“Kill shelter, Dem.”

I sigh. Life didn’t prepare me to lose arguments this often.

Despite Willow’s amazing progress with her new therapist, and her ongoing support from everyone at the compound, Clara and I still can’t shake the feeling that she needs something more. Something that will make her feel safer than seeing armed guards or hearing promises.

Like something that walks on four legs and slobbers a lot.

But my suggestion to get a top-of-the-line animal was shot down with a vengeance. Clara said, “Kill shelter or nothing.” So now, that’s where we’re going.

I begrudgingly see her point when we arrive. It’s not a good place for anyone, dog or human, to be.

The cages are pressed together, with barely enough room for the animals to stretch or walk around. The whole place is dank and dim and vaguely disgusting in a way I can’t put my finger on.

It reminds me too much of Raizo’s factory.

Willow walks between Clara and me as we make our way up to the main desk. “We’d like to adopt a puppy,” Clara explains, turning on her brilliant smile.

The clerk is less than enthusiastic. “Everyone wants a puppy. We only have grown dogs.”

Clara's smile doesn't waver once. "We'll take a dog then."

He waves a careless hand through the air. "Have a look around. It's pitbulls, mostly. No one wants 'em. Too violent and damaged. But you might find something that'll work."

Clara is chewing at her lip as her enthusiasm dissipates by the second. "Is it just this room? Or..."

The clerk sighs. "Look. I'm gonna be honest with ya. I wish we had a bigger space. Hell, I wish we had a bigger budget. But it is what it is, and what you see is all we're able to do with the limited resources we have."

I grab Clara's elbow. "We'll look around. Come on, Will—" I glance down... but Willow is not there.

Shit.

Clara shares my panicked expression and we both immediately scan the shelter for her. "Willow? Honey?"

The clerk slides off her stool, then swiftly curses under her breath and rushes down one of the narrow aisles. "Gosh dammit! This is supposed to be closed!"

My heart slams inside my ribcage. "What? What's wrong? Willow?"

"Willow!" Clara calls, her voice pitching with panic.

We follow the clerk to where a kennel door is wide open, the latch lifted. She claps a hand over her mouth to stifle the yelp of surprise—then looks over at us, worry etched all over her face.

Fuck. No. Willow!

I practically bowl the clerk over to look inside the kennel.

Willow's sitting there, giggling, on the receiving end of a very thorough, loving bath of dog kisses straight to the face.

The thing is *huge*. Pitch black, without a single spot of color anywhere on its sleek fur. Its eyes glint golden brown and I immediately know I'd hate to run into this thing in the middle of the night without warning.

For its part, the dog definitely looks like it's run into more than a few dangerous things in its lifetime. Scars mar an otherwise muscular body, with one ugly, knotted gash striped down the left side of its face and narrowly missing the golden eye. Its right flank looks like something tried to take a chomp out—failed, but still tried.

The clerk slowly shakes her head. "I don't... I am so sorry. I don't know how she got in here."

Clara grips my arm. She's forcing a smile for her daughter, who is just having the time of her life, but I can feel her nervous terror through my shirt. "What's, ah, his story?"

The clerk scratches her arm and shakes her head again. "One of our marked ones. *She*, by the way. And she's scheduled to be put down tomorrow."

"Why?" I ask at the same time as Clara.

"Too violent. Too aggressive. Was a fighting dog, one of those rescues I was telling you about. But no one could rehabilitate her to the point where she was ready for... a family." Her voice drops off in confusion as she watches Willow whisper into the dog's ear, giggle, and receive a few more gentle licks. "I don't... I mean, we had another family in here just the other day. Scared the kid so bad, he peed himself."

Clara stifles a nervous hiccup. "Willow? Honey? Don't you want to take a look at the other doggies?"

Willow smiles and kisses the dog's face. "No, I'm good! I want this one."

Even I'm sweating under the collar. "She's a bit violent, isn't she?"

"No. She likes kisses and hugs and I'm gonna show her all my new bears and dolls."

And without any preamble, Willow crawls out of the kennel, the dog following closely behind.

This thing looks like it could eat Willow for a snack. And yet... *and yet...* here it sits, patiently waiting for Willow to pick out a collar and leash.

She decides against all of the ones on display and instead opts for a harness set, quietly promising her new friend that she “won’t hurt her neck” and waiting for the dog to either approve or reject the color choice.

It licks her face. *Approved.*

Clara looks to me for help, but what the hell am I supposed to do? The poor thing was scheduled for execution tomorrow. I’d feel like shit if we tore Willow away and sent this dog to its doom.

So I pull out my wallet and turn to the clerk. “How much?”



Clara hasn’t spoken a single word since we left the shelter. Willow, on the other hand, keeps cooing and talking to her new best friend, who she has declared shall be named “Princess.”

Princess sits patiently in the seat next to her, watching the world go by without making a single fuss. Not a growl, not a grumble. Not even a yelp. All she does is pant, whine in response to something Willow says, and lick her face.

We pull up into the parking lot of a big box pet store. Clara just looks at me, at the store, and sighs.

“Look, Princess! All those toys are for you!” Willow squeals excitedly.

And I’ll be damned if Princess’s tail doesn’t start wagging just as excitedly.

I step out of the car and help Willow out of her booster seat, half-expecting the dog to try to bite my hand off. But Princess just looks at me, waits for Willow to slide out with my help, and then follows right behind her.

Clara watches it all, scowling.

“C’mon, Princess.” I lead the group into the store. “Let’s get you set up for your new home.”

“Ooohhh, look at this!” Willow exclaims, running to a pile of plush dog beds. “They’re so fluffy! Princess, look!”

Princess trots over as far as her leash will allow. I'm more focused on Clara, who is eyeing the shopping with a raised eyebrow. Sliding over to her, I murmur in her ear, "Our little girl is happy and has a new friend. This is what we wanted."

Finally, Clara relaxes with a sigh. "I know. I know. You're right. I just... I was thinking something more like a chihuahua. Or a goldfish. Maybe a pet rock."

"Chihuahua? We're trying to scare away the nightmares, not give her new ones."

That earns me a snorted laugh. "You know what I mean, asshole! She's a sweet little girl who needs someone to play with, and I just..."

I wrap my free arm around her waist and tuck her close to my side. "She does. And look at them."

Willow has figured out one of Princess's learned tricks: she sets a toy bone on her nose, tells her to wait, and then... "Go!"

Princess tosses the bone, catches it, and wags her tail.

Fighting dog, my ass.

I step away to get a cart. When I return, Willow is overloading her arms with every toy Princess gets excited over. I stoop down to catch the few that are about to fall and toss them into the cart.

"I think we've grabbed the whole aisle," I tell her. "Did you pick out a bed?"

"We want a pink one."

"A pink one it is." I grab the cart and wink at Clara, who seems to be warming up to our new family member.

She just sighs in response.

Apparently, Princess is a nightmare-black fighting machine who prefers bright pink, glitter, and bows of various colors. Or at least, that's what Willow is picking out for her and so far it seems like Princess is happy.

As Willow interrogates Princess about what foods she likes best, Clara leans into me and blows out a contented little

breath. “I have to admit,” she says, “it’s kinda fun watching you be all soft and mushy over a dog.”

“I’ll have you know, I am a dark force of reckoning.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone. But to be clear, you’re about as dark as a toasted marshmallow. And just as warm and gooey on the inside.”

She giggles when I snarl and pull her close. “If you keep talking about warm and gooey insides,” I rasp breathily in her ear, “I will not be responsible for the things I do to you when we get home.”

She nips the exposed curve of my neck and not-so-accidentally lets her fingertips brush over the bulge in my crotch.

I seize her wrist and hold it at arms’ length. “Bad girl. No treat for you.”

Clara’s eyes flash with mischievous fire. “Awww, but I was looking forward to playing with your bone.”

I’m not allowed to respond to that because we’re at the checkout counter, our kid’s within earshot, and I have to pretend like I’m a respectable, responsible father and husband who is absolutely not imagining bending his wife over the conveyor belt and making a warm, gooey mess of her insides.

Husband.

Wife.

I like those words.

I look over at Clara, who is creating a new store profile for Princess in their system, and smile.

I *really* like those words.

CLARA

I can't sleep.

I have every reason to be able to sleep just fine. The whole afternoon was spent running around the villa, chasing Willow and Princess in various games of catch, tug-of-war, and tickles. At some points, Princess would start growling and nipping at me, but Demyen or one of the guards would quickly swoop in to reassure me that she's protecting Willow.

They were right. The more we played, the more at ease with me Princess became. As long as I played with "her human" in a safe and appropriate manner, we had no issues.

Okay. I kinda love this dog.

Demyen and I have eased into a familiar rhythm in our home life. We have dinner together, read books to Willow together, tuck her in together. And then we slip away to our bedroom to talk, make love, take a shower, all of the above...

Tonight has been an "all of the above" sort of night. Demyen seems to be far more relaxed and happier than he's been in a long time. And, to be honest, so am I.

So why can't I sleep?

He's fast asleep next to me, one arm draped around my middle, the other cradling a pillow under his head. Even when he's trying to get himself comfortable, he always finds a way to hold me close while he sleeps.

I love it.

I still can't sleep, though.

Very slowly, very carefully, I slip out from under his heavy arm and try not to disturb the blankets too much. I don't want to wake him; I just need to go for a walk around the grounds to make me tired.

It's a beautiful, starry night out here in the Mojave. The villa is quiet, softly lit by the solar lamps that line each pathway. A few guards pace around the designated areas, but otherwise, the staff and majority of Demyen's men are either at their homes or asleep in their rooms. Aside from the wind, the only other sounds are the trickling fountains...

... and Princess.

I frown and try to peer across the courtyard to where Willow's solarium is. We took off Princess's neon pink harness for the night, so the only way I'll be able to see her is if the light catches on the metal heart-shaped tag hanging from her matching pink collar. Otherwise, Princess is virtually invisible in the dark.

And, I can hear as I tiptoe closer, she's growling like *mad*.

My stomach twists into knots. *This is it. This is what they warned us about.* Less than a day with us and already we're having aggression issues with the bully mix. I don't want to break Willow's heart, but we can't have—

I stop in my tracks.

Princess is squarely in Willow's doorway, every fiber of her fur standing on end. Her teeth are bared, and she is growling a *very* deadly warning to something in the shadows.

Something not illuminated by any of the solar lamps.

"Princess?" I whisper. I want to keep her calm, but my heart is racing. I don't want her to attack one of our guards, but at the same time... I can't shake this feeling.

This same feeling that wouldn't let me sleep.

"Princess? Good girl. That's a good girl."

I reach my hand out to stroke her soft fur.

She snarls, lets out one ferocious bark, and lunges straight at me.

Except the impact doesn't come. Nor do her teeth, or her claws, or anything I expected to suddenly start mauling me.

Instead, she's tearing into a man dressed in black tactical clothing, who is now writhing and screaming for someone to help get her off him.

Lights blaze on all over the compound. Voices start shouting, men start running, and even Willow sleepily shuffles out of bed and flicks on her bedroom light. "Mommy? Princess?"

The short whistle and tongue clicks I hear behind me instantly put me at ease. It's Demyen, his face a mask of rage but his tone gentle enough to order Princess off the intruder.

She hesitates, her mouth clamped firmly around his shoulder. But then she sees Willow and lets him go so she can check on her human.

Best.

Investment.

Ever:

Demyen yanks the man up by his tactical vest and slams his fist in his face. Once, twice, then on the third time, I subtly remind him that our daughter is watching. He throws the intruder onto the pavement and rolls his shoulders as he considers our next moves.

"You okay?" he asks, sliding his gaze to me.

"Yeah." I nod. "So is Willow. Princess spotted him before any of us did."

He turns to see Willow hugging Princess's neck. Our new best canine friend is standing squarely between her and the intruder, but intermittently gives Willow a few reassuring licks while she waits for our next commands.

"Good girl," Demyen praises with a rub to her ears. "Very good girl. C'mon, let's get back to bed."

That's my cue. I scoop Willow up into my arms to tuck her back into her bed, but she suddenly wraps her arms around my neck and clings to me.

"I'm scared, Mommy," she whimpers.

I look to Demyen. He flicks the dripping blood from his knuckles and forces himself to give her a gentle smile. "Why don't we have a little sleepover tonight? Willow and Princess, with us in our bed. Would you like that?"

Willow nods.

He caresses her hair with the less bloody hand and kisses her brow. "Sweet dreams, little cub. And Princess?" The dog of the hour perks up her ears. Demyen points at me. "You keep an eye on my ladies. I'll take care of this."

Princess dips her head and nudges my leg. The whole way back to our bedroom, she maintains contact and makes sure that nothing else emerges from the shadows.



Willow is curled up in my arms, sound asleep, by the time Demyen returns from "taking care of" the intruder.

To be fair, I've been drifting in and out of my own sleepiness for the past half-hour or so. I don't even know how long he's been gone, but I'm guessing it's been a couple of hours. Princess has been curled up on the bed next to my feet, her eyes glued to the door, while I sang lullabies to Willow and prayed for sleep to finally come.

So when I feel Demyen press a warm kiss to my forehead, my eyes flutter open. "Hm? Dem? Wh... what's going on?" I shift Willow in my arms to tuck her under the blankets next to me. "Is everything okay?"

Demyen sighs a heavy, exhausted sigh and crawls into bed, curving himself around Willow and draping his arm over her sleeping form. "Everything's fine. I took care of it." He lifts his head to blow a quick kiss at Princess. "I owe you all the treats, good girl."

Princess gently thumps her tail on the bed a few times. She sees Willow sleeping, the bedroom door securely shut, and her new little family tucked safely into bed. Whatever tension kept her alert is now gone, so she lays her head on her paws to drift into her own dreamland.

“Who was he?” I ask, because my brain will not let me rest otherwise.

Demyen sniffs. “Fucking Yakuza. A spy. Raizo’s pissed as hell about his factory and his lost slaves, so he sent recon to check out this place.”

I try not to let him see the way that scares me. “Just the one guy?”

He shakes his head. “Nah. There was another, but he must have seen or at least heard Princess go apeshit because all we found of him were the tire tracks peeling away in the sand.” He looks at our new dog, then at me. “How would you feel about getting another dog? Or two?”

I roll my eyes good-naturedly. “How about we get used to having one first? Besides, she did a pretty good job flying solo.”

“That she did. Pavel is pretty stoked we have a bully mix. He grew up with a pit bull and swears they are the best guardians for children.” He smirks. “Apparently, they bond with one particular human and just tolerate the rest of us.”

“Gee, I wonder who she picked.” I stifle a giggle and stroke back a few curls from my baby’s brow.

Demyen watches my gentle movements with an even gentler smile. “I want to get Princess trained with the men. Figure out what commands she already knows and which ones she needs to learn. That way, God forbid anything like this ever happens again...”

I know what he means.

He goes quiet. Contemplative. I don’t know what he’s thinking about, or where his mind has decided to wander. All I know is that he’s here, we’re safe, and that’s all that matters.

After a long stretch of silence, he looks up at me. “I love you.”

I smile at him. “I love you, too.”

“I can’t begin to tell you how fucking scared I was when I heard the shouting.” He reaches his hand up to touch my face. “You weren’t here, and I just...”

I hold his hand to my face, then kiss his palm. It never occurred to me how he might be dealing with some of his own trauma—when *The Ordeal* went down, I really did vanish from his sight.

One moment, I was there, and the next... gone.

“I’m fine,” I reassure him. I stroke the back of his hand with my fingers and pour all my love into my smile. “Really. I’m right here, I’m unharmed, and we’re all safe thanks to you.”

Demyen stares at me like he’s committing me to memory. Then he gazes down at Willow and manages a smile.

And that’s when—and how—sleep finally arrives. Warm, safe, tucked into a huge bed with Demyen and I curled protectively around Willow while our fiercely protective dog guards us.

CLARA

“Clara, for the last time,” Roxy laughs, waving her hand to shoo me away, “I’ve got this. *We’ve* got this. You go have fun.”

I’m balancing on one heeled shoe while I try to slip on the other. It’d be so much easier if these damn things didn’t have straps. “I just want to make sure you know where everything is.”

Bambi rolls her eyes playfully at me. “We’re fully staffed, Clar. Fully staffed and fully stocked. We’ll make sure to stuff Willow full of pizza and junk food, give her all the soda her heart desires, and then shake her up just in time for you to put her to bed.”

“Oh, ha ha.” I do actually laugh, though. “You do that and you’re on bath and bedtime duty for a week.”

Roxy tosses the tennis ball across the courtyard for Princess to go fetch while we talk. Well, really, it’s more me putting on the finishing touches while I worry like hell over leaving my baby girl behind.

Tonight is a real, formal date night with Demyen. We’ve never actually had a chance to dress up, go out to a fancy dinner, and just be a couple. Not since we decided to give this relationship a solid go, and definitely never in a truly genuine way. Any other time I’ve dressed up for dinner with him, I was playing a role.

Things are *real* now.

“How do I look?” I step around in a slow turn for my two best friends to check. “Anything out of place?”

Roxy grins. “If we get a call from that man stating that you’re getting a room for the night, we will not be surprised. Hell, I’ll be surprised if he survives through dinner!”

I blush. I don’t want to dress too inappropriately, and I really can’t now that I’m starting to show. It’s super faint, barely noticeable to the general eye, but my clothes are definitely starting to feel a bit snugger around the middle.

Maybe I’ll tell him tonight.

Pending dinner.

I’m shooed out of the courtyard and into the main house. It’s time to meet Demyen out front, like he suggested, so I take a deep breath and remind myself that we are already a couple. I’ve got nothing to prove. I don’t need to impress him or woo him, just enjoy his company.

Right when I’m about to open the front door, the doorbell rings.

What in the world?

My heart pounds in my ears. I’m not sure, after everything else going on, that opening this by myself is the best idea.

But I do it anyway.

Demyen is leaning against the threshold archway, a bouquet of exotic flowers in his hand. “I’m here to pick up my breathtakingly beautiful date,” he murmurs as he looks me over.

“Well, I should go let her know you’re here.” I start to turn, then squeal with laughter when he tugs me into his arms and nibbles the curve of my neck.

“Naughty minx. I should bend you over my knee.”

“Buy me dinner first, and I’ll even let you pull my hair.”

Demyen rumbles his approval at my suggestion. But, ever the gentleman, he makes sure to hand me the beautiful bouquet with an elegant flourish. “For you, *kiska*.”

I breathe in their fragrance and smile. “They’re beautiful. Truly. Thank you.”

Do we really *need* dinner?

Would it be uncouth of me to drag him to bed and ride him until we both scream each other’s names?

But then my stomach lets out a very embarrassing and very audible rumble. Demyen chuckles and holds the car door open for me; I’m grateful for the bouquet to hide my face.

Dinner it is, then.



The place he takes me to is a beautiful Russian restaurant owned by old friends of his family, a little off the beaten path. The menu is as thick as a book and the wine list even thicker, with silk tablecloths and candlelight adorning every table.

Demyen insisted on sitting next to me, instead of across from me, at our little table off in the darker corner of the room. “So we can talk,” was his explanation.

But his hand rubbing over my thigh suggests an entirely different motive.

I chose to wear a body-hugging dress that ends just above my knees for two reasons: one, it does show off my figure that I won’t be able to enjoy for several months once I enter the second trimester. And two, this is the desert. Even in the fall, things can get hot.

Things are definitely getting hot under the table.

He’s so cruel. He’s lightly stroking his fingertips along the inside of my thigh, just back and forth without applying any pressure. The tablecloth is luxuriously long and thick, so no one can see what he’s doing. Or that he’s doing anything at all.

“Would you like an appetizer?” he calmly asks me.

I clear my throat and sip my water. “I trust your judgment. Whatever you recommend.”

That smile twists into a knowing little smirk. “They have a delicious smoked salmon with mascarpone spread. Tastes

great on their homemade rye bread.”

“Sounds good.” Really, I’m only able to register “delicious,” “spread” and “tastes great.”

It’s not fair. Demyen looks like sex on legs and smells like seduction poured straight from the tap. The whole entire ride here, he had his hand between my thighs and my dress hiked up over my hips.

But I wasn’t allowed to come. Not yet. Not until he said so.

And then we were pulling into the parking lot. He calmly smoothed my dress back down, announced our arrival, licked his hand clean, and acted like he wasn’t just fingering me into what *might* have been a heady orgasm.

I’ve been on edge ever since.

Right. On. The. Fucking. Edge.

“You look a little flush.” Demyen slowly drags his gaze over my face to the tops of my breasts. “Are you warm? Should I let the server know—”

“No!” I grab his hand. Then remember we are in public, so I hush my tone. “No, I’m okay. Just... a little worked up, is all.”

By you. You and your damn magic fingers.

“Don’t worry,” he murmurs in my ear. He gently takes my hand and guides it under the table to his lap. “I know exactly how you feel.”

Oh, wow. He is not exaggerating in the least bit. I can feel him through his suit pants, hot and hard and throbbing. When I give him a tentative rub, he sucks in a breath and takes a long sip of wine.

“Careful,” he warns in a throaty rasp. “I like coming here. I’d hate for us to get arrested for public indecency.”

I snatch my hand back and pretend to pout. “If you say so.”

He chuckles. “I had something more dramatic in mind. Like laying you out on this table and eating an appetizer off your naked body.” He takes another sip of his wine. “Just to start the evening on the right note.”

I squirm in my seat. I don't mean to, but he is tormenting me with promises of a good time.

But you know what? Two can play that game.

"I've always preferred to be a little subtler," I purr in his ear. "Like making good use of this tablecloth. No one would see me under it."

Demyen maintains a calm composure, but I see him swallow hard. His heated gaze flicks to mine, and his mouth twitches again.

I have him. We both know it.

If I can keep playing his nerves in my favor, maybe he'll insist we at least go out to the car to finish what he started.

"Have we decided what to order?"

Fuck! The waiter is just doing his job, so I can't be mad at him. I can, however, be frustrated with how Demyen slips his hand from my lap and acts like literally nothing but pleasant conversation has been going on here.

"We'll start with the smoked salmon," he says in the most clear and concise, unbothered tone.

"Very good, sir. I'll give you two a few more minutes to choose your entrees."

I expect Demyen to return to teasing me with his touches once the waiter leaves, but he doesn't. He just peruses through the menu, murmurs to himself, and then sets it down and smiles at me. "What looks good to you?"

"You." I clear my throat and glance at the menu again. "I mean, whatever you decide. I'm not sure if I can read half the menu." Which is true. What's not in actual Cyrillic is spelled out phonetically.

"They have a caviar harvested from the northernmost shores of the Black Sea that is to die for. But you can't go wrong with the beef stroganoff."

I blink.

Beef... stroganoff. I know those words, but right now, it sounds like alien language.

My panties are thoroughly ruined, my body is on fire, and all he can think about is *beef fucking stroganoff?*

“You are a confusing man,” I mutter under my breath.

The waiter returns with our appetizer and sets two small plates down for us. And then, once he leaves, Demyen dips his mouth to the spot just behind my ear.

“I’m just getting started.”

Shivers of pleasure roll through my body when he nips that same spot. Then, of course, he has to return to the food like he’s not sitting here seducing my panties off.

I don’t know how much longer I can take this.

“Open.” Demyen holds a small piece of rye bread smeared with mascarpone and topped with smoked salmon to my mouth. I do as he says, and I’m fed the most delicious bite of lox I’ve ever had.

But I’m not too distracted to miss an opportunity. I wrap my lips around his fingertips before he can fully pull away, and swirl my tongue to clean them.

Demyen’s gaze darkens into that hungry lust I know and love.

“Mmm,” I moan. “Delicious.”

He looks ready to devour me instead of the appetizer, but once again, we are interrupted by our attentive waiter. Demyen orders the beef stroganoff for both of us and throws in an order of beet caviar.

I try to get through a few more bites of the salmon and mascarpone, but I’m far too distracted. I need him.

I need *something*, at least, to stave off this heat until we can get home and I’m able to devour him.

“Be right back,” I whisper into his ear. I make sure to rub my ample curves along his body as I wriggle out of my seat, then cast only a single furtive glance over my shoulder to see if he’s watching me walk away.

Oh, he is definitely watching.

And planning.

I know that look. He is planning something, and I have the feeling I'm going to love it.

The bathrooms are set up as individual rooms, or "one-butt situations," as Roxy calls them. There's a row of four, so I take the last one on the end in the hopes that no one will notice if I'm in there for a while.

I need to take off the edge, so I might be in here for a hot minute.

First things first—these panties have got to go. I don't know why I thought black lace was a good idea in the first place; I should have opted for something silkier.

I'm just about done stuffing my soaked panties into my wristlet when I hear the door open behind me. Didn't I lock it? "Sorry! I'm in—"

Heaven. I'm in here, in heaven, the second Demyen's lips crash against mine. I faintly hear him turn the lock in the door but I don't fucking care if the owners themselves find us like this.

I need him.

I need him.

I *need* him.

He grabs me by the waist and helps me sit on the wide counter. Almost immediately, his hands shove my skirt up over my hips and then his eyes widen at the sight of my bare, freshly-shaven pussy.

"Touch yourself," he breathes. "I want to watch."

He shrugs off his dinner jacket and undoes the top few buttons of his shirt, not once looking away from the slick core between my legs. "Touch yourself. For me."

"Dem, we don't have the time—"

"You were going to do that just now, weren't you?"

I blush. I've been caught. So I slowly nod and look away.

Demyen turns my face back to his and peppers it with ultra-soft kisses. "So do what you came in here to do. I just want to watch."

My face grows even hotter. I've never... I mean... Could I?

Should I?

I bite the corner of my lip, suddenly feeling immensely shy. My hand slowly slips down to between my legs, but I just... I can't...

Demyen kisses my lips and nips at my ear. "Would it help if I did it with you?" And without waiting for me to respond, he quietly undoes his pants and eases out his cock.

Oh. Yeah.

That *definitely* helps.

I press my hand over my slit just to warm up a bit. My eyes never leave his glorious shaft now partially encompassed by his own hand.

Holy fuck. He's delicious. Tantalizing. Every stroke is aimed at me, and I'm so fucking tempted to get on my knees to enjoy the real appetizer I've been wanting. His fingers twist in a sort of milking massage, and his thumb pays special attention to the underside of his ridge.

I'm taking so many notes.

"Your turn," he murmurs.

Ah. Fuck. Right.

I spread my legs wider and try to lean back enough for the best angle, lightly stroking my outer lips. Demyen watches closely, his breath hitched and held while I massage my aching center and show him just how wet he's made me.

His hand picks up speed. I purr with satisfaction at the sight.

"More, baby," he breathes.

I watch his face as I dip one, then two fingers inside my slit. It's not the same as feeling *his* thick fingers inside me, but I

still manage to work my clit at the same time and that's what it's really about. I shiver with pleasure and watch him stroke a bit faster, a bit harder, as I listen to him swallow back his groans.

When I finally rub my clit, it's all I can do to swallow my own moans.

“Fuck. Yes.” Demyen licks his lips. His mouth hangs open in wonderment as I show him exactly how I love to be touched here. “Work yourself for me, baby. Work that sweet pussy and show me how beautifully you fall apart.”

I am. Oh, fuck, I am.

But it's still not enough.

I know what I need but we're in a restaurant and even though the door's locked—

Demyen captures my lips with his.

And then, in the same move, impales me on his thick fucking cock.

He drinks my cry of surprise and grabs me by my ass to lift me up enough on the counter for better leverage. A better angle. Whatever he's doing, it's *so much better*.

I swear, my eyes roll back in my head. Demyen kisses my neck and thrusts into me, over and over, softly grunting in my ear between his breathless panting.

Oh my God, I'm so close. So fucking close. He's driven me past the point of insanity, so now I'm already on that blissful edge, silently begging him to push me over so I can ride it out him.

It's like he knows. Or he's just as hungry for that release as I am. His thrusts deepen and quicken; I have to bite his shoulder so my grunts don't get too loud.

And then he holds me there. Deep inside me, every single inch, throbbing and filling me to the brim.

Stars burst in my eyes. I explode.

The sensations intensify with the heat surging inside me and I realize he's coming with me. We're clinging to each other, devouring our cries of pleasure. Shuddering and quivering as we both chase that high together.

I don't know how long it takes for it to subside. Long enough, maybe, for the waiter to wonder where the hell we wandered off to. Hopefully, not long enough for someone to call the police and have us arrested for public indecency.

Demyen rests his damp brow on my bare shoulder and breathes for a long moment. Then he chuckles softly. "Do you think the stroganoff is ready?"

I snort so I don't laugh too loud. He grins, snatches my panties from my wristlet, and stuffs them into his pocket.

"A little keepsake for me," he explains with a wink. Before he leaves, he whispers, "Count to five, then come back to the table."

Makes sense. I don't think it's enough time for me to regain feeling in my legs, but I can always blame the wobbliness on my heels.

I clean myself up, smooth out my dress, and count to five. It's probably been longer than that by now. When I leave the bathroom, the corner it's tucked into is just as quiet as before and no one seems to notice anything amiss.

Demyen grins at me from our table.

Yes. The beef stroganoff is, in fact, ready.

And *holy shit*, is it fucking incredible.

CLARA

This has been one of the most perfect nights of my life. It's certainly the most perfect date I've ever been on.

The stroganoff was exactly as he predicted—to die for—and the strawberry dessert introduced me to a whole new way to eat the fruit. I managed to keep Demyen from noticing I wasn't drinking my wine, and we both managed to have a lovely, proper evening, as if we never snuck into their bathroom for a quickie.

We're pulling up the long driveway of the villa compound, and Demyen has me laughing over some stupid joke he just told. He claims he read it in one of Willow's books.

I'm about to tell him one of my own lame riddles when he frowns. He slows the car's speed and peers through the windows at the main house.

"What's wrong?" I ask. I can't see anything that looks out of place.

But I do have that feeling again. The same kind of feeling that warned me about the spy that Princess saved me from.

Demyen's frown deepens. "Could be nothing. I just noticed there's a few lights out. And I don't see some of the guards I usually do at their posts."

He parks the car inside the garage instead of leaving it in the driveway. "Just in case" is the only explanation he gives, but I'm not about to question anything.

He's right—something feels off.

I look to him and he grabs my hand. “Willow,” he mouths, to which I emphatically nod. I need to check on my baby girl. I need to know that we’re just being overprotective and she’s completely fine.

We get as far as the living room of the main house.

Sitting on the couch is Oleg, smoking a cigar and making himself right at home.

“Well, well. Would you look at this?” He eyes me up and down. Then casually turns to Demyen. “I want to say I’m surprised. But I’m not.”

Demyen starts to say something, but Oleg lifts a hand to cut him off.

“What I am is *pissed*. Fucking *pissed*, Demyen!”

A vase goes sailing through the air and crashes against the wall. Oleg takes a long pull from his cigar. He also takes his sweet time letting the smoke back out through his nose while he stares at me.

I hate it.

“You fuck her?”

I wince. Demyen notices and his pensive expression immediately darkens. He pulls me close to his side and keeps an arm around me.

Oleg rolls his eyes. “I said, did you fuck her?”

“What’s it to you?” Demyen snaps. “You shouldn’t even be here.”

The elder Zakrevsky clicks his tongue as he stands, stamping out the cigar directly on the end table. “Such disrespect. You’ll do well to remember, boy, that I am your father. Show some goddamn respect, especially when this is technically *my* house.”

Demyen gently rubs my back, trying to reassure and calm me even as he faces his own father down. “You left. You abandoned your house and the people in it. So now, you’re in

my house, and you'll abide by *my* rules. Starting with: back the *fuck* away from Clara!"

I didn't expect him to shout the order. From the looks of it, neither did Oleg. The man winces, stares at us dumbly, then gives himself a little shake.

But—and I can't believe I'm seeing this—he does take a step back.

"I told you," he snarls through gritted teeth, pointing at Demyen with the dead cigar, "to bring her sorry ass back to me. Did I not tell you to do that?"

Demyen shrugs. "Must have slipped my mind."

A string of curses I can't even begin to translate pours from Oleg's mouth. He looks like he wants to backhand Demyen into submission. Instead, he runs a frustrated hand over his beard and glares at his son.

"You fucking fool," he snarls. "She's our key to Tolya's freedom. He'd be here, right here with us now, if you'd just done what I fucking told you to do."

"Forgive me for not trusting your word."

Oleg chuckles. "You underestimate my pull, boy. As always. Patterson knows better than to fuck with me. He won't go back on his word."

Panic lances through me. *What is he doing with Martin?*

Demyen stiffens as well. "The deal was with Everett. No one else."

"Willow." I pull myself out of Demyen's safe embrace and beeline toward her room. "I need to see Willow."

"Don't bother."

My blood runs cold.

I don't have to turn around to hear the fury in Demyen's voice. "What the fuck did you do?"

"What you should have done the second he offered you the deal!" Oleg roars.

What deal?

Where is Willow?

I don't stick around to hear them argue. I need to see her. I need to know she's okay.

The moment I step out into the courtyard, it's extremely clear that my little girl is anything but okay.

Men are scattered everywhere, dead or grievously wounded. Mako is facedown near Willow's room, his hand still on his gun. I race to her bedroom door and have some difficulty opening it—because Bambi's unconscious body is slumped against it.

There's a sizeable gash on her forehead. She's alive, she's breathing, but I don't know if there are any other injuries. I carefully move her enough to squeeze through the door, then do my best to drag her off to the side until we can get help.

The thought of getting help has me instantly worried for Roxy. She'd come over to help Bambi with Willow and our new dog; where is she now?

I don't have to look far. Roxy is crumpled at the foot of Willow's bed. Like Bambi, she's still alive and breathing, but there's no telling if she endured any other injuries while protecting my baby girl.

Who, to my horror, is nowhere to be found.

She's gone.

My baby is gone.

A wail fills the air. I fall to my knees and double over the side of her bed. It's clear she was dragged out, probably terrified out of her mind. Her teddy bears are scattered across the floor and droplets of blood speckle her pillow and fitted sheet.

The wail grows louder.

It takes a solid minute for me to realize—it's *me* making that noise.

I'm screaming. Words fail me as I struggle to breathe, to think, to do anything other than pour out my terror and pain and grief

over losing my sweet baby to some monster.

Is she hurt? Is that her blood?

I never notice the darkening of the doorway. I barely feel Demyen's strong arms scoop me up and hold me to him. I'm numb. Beyond numb.

"I've got you." Demyen whispers as he holds me and gently rocks me in his arms. I don't know how it works, but it does. My screams melt into sobs and I'm bawling, gasping, clutching his shirt like it's my only lifeline. "I've got you. We'll get her back. I swear, Clara, I'm going to bring her back to you."

I hiccup. Gasp for air. "Where... where is she?"

His arms tighten around me. He buries his face in my hair like he, too, is struggling to accept what he sees.

"Martin made Oleg an offer. The same one you heard him make me when he came to my office. Oleg took it. And he gave Willow over to him."

I can't...

I can't...

I think I'm going to pass out.

Demyen notices me go limp in his arms and immediately sets me down on Willow's bed. He tips my face up to look at him, but moving my eyes feels like more effort than my body possesses the energy for. I feel myself wavering.

Oh, God. I'm going into shock.

He presses a kiss to my forehead. Then gently, carefully, he lays me down on the bed so I don't hit my head on something if I do pass out. At least, I think that's what he says. It's kind of hard to tell through the fog settling over my sight and hearing.

The one thing I can make out is his rage.

Demyen is vengeance incarnate.

Once I'm down, he stands back up. Leaves the room. Closes the door behind.

The last thing I hear before darkness takes over is the sound of hell breaking loose.

DEMYEN

I'm praying to God that Clara doesn't notice the blood splattered in Willow's room.

I'm praying to God it isn't Willow's.

When I glance up and see Oleg watching from the archway of the main house, that smug fucking smile plastered on his face...

Something inside me snaps.

My patience lasts only as long as it takes to make sure Clara is not about to roll off the side and hurt herself. She's in shock, and I'm divided between attending to her and finishing some very important business with our unwanted house guest.

But then I turn to look at Oleg again. I see Roxy and Bambi on the floor, casualties in their attempt to protect Willow from him. From Martin.

And then I see nothing but red.

I'm so fucking furious that I don't even register running from Willow's room to the main house. All I feel is insurmountable rage coursing through my veins. All I want to do is beat the living shit out of this sick motherfucker who dared to mess with my family.

My family.

"Ah, there he is. Demy—"

The first meaty smack of my fist into his face catches my father by surprise. Oleg shoves me off him, but I barrel back

for another barrage of blows. He lands a solid punch to my ribs, right where that graze had to be stitched over, and that manages to knock me off-kilter enough for him to shove me away again.

“That’s enough!” he roars at me. “Sit the fuck down!”

“Where is she?!” I ignore his pathetic attempt to order me around. I also ignore the pain radiating from my lower ribcage as I scramble to my feet. “Where the fuck is my daughter?!”

His laugh is officially more infuriating than that smug fucking smile. He literally slaps his knee and acts like I’ve just said the funniest shit he’s heard in years.

“Your daughter? *Your* daughter?” Oleg guffaws. “You’ve lost your damn mind, boy! I gave her back to her *real* father. She’s fucking lucky, too. I wanted to kill that damned dog of hers, but Patterson wouldn’t let me ‘traumatize her more.’” He rolls his eyes. “Now, calm the fuck down and stop playing pretend with that bitch. It’s time to cash in our end and go get your brother.”

He might as well have shot me through the chest.

Willow’s with Martin.

That son of a bitch has *my* little girl.

I have no idea what I grab—all I know is that it’s heavy and feels fucking incredible to swing at this bastard’s head. Oleg manages to duck just in time, but I’m prepared for that. The thing—something decorative, it looks like—connects with his ribcage and I’m able to return his gift of a few broken ribs in one fell swoop.

This is it.

This is the moment.

As Oleg crumples to the floor in a cry of pain, all I can think about is how good this is about to feel.

Because I’m going to kill him.

I’m going to fucking beat him into the floor until all that’s left is his stupid ring.

I swing the wrought iron down on him and relish his screams that quickly follow a sickening snap in his leg. Another blow, another snap, another scream. His arm is broken.

It's also got a few teeth marks puncturing the skin, I notice. That must be Princess's handiwork.

Good girl.

The relief I feel at realizing the blood in and around Willow's room is probably *not* hers, just the signature of Princess doing her job, gives me enough clarity to really relish this moment with my father.

"You stupid, stupid man." I tower over him, shoving him onto his back with my foot on his chest. "I had everything under control. Tolya was going to be free, the *right* way, the *legal* way, so he'd never have to go back there again."

Another blow.

Something crunches.

Oleg screams again, this time through gritted teeth as he clutches the same leg that I'm pretty sure is now shattered to bits.

"But you had to go and ruin it. Just like you always do." I wipe my mouth; some of his blood is starting to spray up on me. The darkness inside me loves how it tastes. Like vengeance made real. "You had to prove you're the big man, the big boss. Well, Otets, I've got news for you."

I crack a few more of his ribs. I don't fucking care if they puncture his lungs. Hell, I hope they do. Choking on his own blood would be a fitting way to go.

"Real men don't sell little girls. They don't terrorize children just to get what they want. And real—" I hit his shoulder. "—fucking—" His other arm. "—men—" His groin, which was not intentional but such a cathartic blow. "—don't buy women. So guess what, *Dad?*"

I step back to let him at least attempt to breathe. I'm enjoying this a little too much; I don't want him slipping this mortal coil before I'm done with him.

“You’re just a sad, pathetic little excuse of a man.” I swish my war club through the air a few times just to feel the satisfying weight balanced in my grasp.

Oleg coughs and sputters, blood misting from his mouth. “Family... is... everything,” he wheezes.

Is he fucking serious?

The sudden gun he pulls out of fucking nowhere and aims at me says yes, he is fucking serious.

He chuckles between wheezes. “Family... is everything...” He coughs, sniffs, then pulls himself upright. “Which is why I’m not blowing your brains out for this, Demyen. You’re a goddamn bastard if there ever was one. But you are still my son.”

That might be the closest he’s ever come in his entire life to confessing he actually cares about me.

Way too little.

Way too late.

“*Family?*” I’d laugh if I wasn’t seething through my teeth. “You don’t know a damn thing about family.”

Oleg shrugs and winces in pain, but keeps his gun leveled at me. “Agree to disagree. Now, I am going to walk out of here. You are going to let me walk out of here. If there’s so much as a stray bullet that hits my car on the way out, I’ll be making a call to Patterson about his little girl and you’ll see exactly how far I’ll go to protect my family.”

I hate him.

I hate him so fucking much.

But I’m too wary for Willow to test his threat out by lunging at him again.

So with that, Oleg chuckles again and slips out the front door, leaving a trail of blood—and bodies—behind.

Along with a gaping vacuum where my daughter should be.

CLARA

I'm only out for a short while. Just long enough to stop screaming and reboot.

Bambi groans. She's still slumped where I dragged her, but she seems like she's pulling around. Roxy is the next to stir. She tries to haul herself upright, but it's too much and she lies back down with another low whimper.

I don't know what went on in here. But I know my two best friends put up one hell of a fight.

That makes my eyes sting with tears.

No. Not right now. Pull yourself together. You've got shit to do.

I heave myself off Willow's bed the same moment Demyen returns. He's covered in blood, wheezing in a way that makes my heart still.

But he's alive. And since Oleg is nowhere to be seen behind him, I'm not sure if this means the demon is gone, or just... pacified. For now.

I'm careful not to squeeze him when I pull Demyen into my arms. He crushes me to him anyway and surveils the room with a dark glare.

"I'm going to fucking kill him," he mutters.

So Oleg's alive. I try not to feel disappointment. Despite everything he's done to us, I have to remember: that's still Demyen's father.

Just like, even after everything Greg Everett has done to me, he's still mine.

"Dem," I softly say. I can feel how on edge he is; how untethered he's about to become. "Babe. Look at me."

Demyen slowly shifts his furious gaze to mine. Like a light switch flipped, he softens enough to at least not terrify me. "I'll get her back. I swear, Clara. I will bring her back. And I will fucking *kill* him."

His jaw feels rough under my fingers, that five o'clock stubble every bit as dark as his aura. I hold him and stroke my thumbs over his cheekbones to hopefully help him calm a bit more.

"I know," I breathe. "I know you will. But right now, I don't need your rage; I need your mind. I need you to be the man who gets us through everything."

All I've wanted from the day we met was for him to be the white knight who saved me and my little girl.

Now, though, I need the opposite: I need him to be the bloodthirsty Bratva *pakhan* who always wins the war.

Demyen sighs and rests his brow against mine. It's a rare moment between us, a new kind of thing both for him and for me: we're both equally as furious and as terrified over what could happen to Willow next.

"I've got nothing," he rasps. He shakes his head and pushes away from the door. I don't know if he knows where he's going; he just stands there in the courtyard to survey the damage.

There's a lot to see. Too much, really. Bullet holes riddle the adobe and marble. Several of the delicate arches of the pool fountain's design are shattered and littering the bottom of the pool. Around us, several of the men have begun to groan and stir.

Mako is one of them. I truly thought he was dead. He's not, but he's in a lot of pain and he is *pissed*. He manages to roll onto his back, hissing a string of curses to himself, but he waves off another man's offered hand.

He refuses to look at me. Given his close proximity to Willow's room, I can understand why.

I hope we'll have the chance for me to tell him that I understand; I don't fault him for her kidnapping at all. It's obvious he put up one hell of a fight—especially when he tries to sit up and blood trickles anew from several wounds I didn't see before.

Demyen and I spin on our heels when we hear shuffling behind us. Pavel lifts a weary hand, gun still in it, and leans heavily against the wall as he limps toward us.

“They were... everywhere.” He sucks in a pained breath. So much progress had been made since his last shooting, and now, he's been shot in the leg and it looks like his stitches ripped open. “I was catching up with Yari out back when they came. Fucking air support, too.”

“Air support?”

Pavel nods. “Oleg's outsourcing. Hired mercenaries. All local, by what I could catch between gunshots. He and Patterson used them to clear a path to Willow.” His gaze lowers. “I'm sorry, Clara. I got here as fast as I could. Got a few shots in but then they were too close to her and I didn't... The risk...”

I rush to his side and loop my arms around his neck. “It's okay. I know. You love her.” I hear my voice break. “We all love her.”

He nods. Then he looks to Demyen again and straightens, forcing himself to limp a few paces to his friend and boss. “I wouldn't gamble with it, but you've got time. Princess won't let anyone near Willow, and Patterson's too chickenshit to do anything about it. He took them both. Had to let Willow hold the leash so he wouldn't get mauled by the dog.”

And to think I had reservations over adopting a battle-bred pit bull to protect my baby.

Subconsciously, I press a hand over my stomach. I've got *two* babies to think about. *Two* babies I'm determined to protect even as my heart races and my gut churns with fear.

Nothing that comes to mind keeps both of them safe. I have to risk one for the other and pray I pull through. Can I?

Should I?

“How many did we lose?” Demyen asks Pavel. He quickly nods to Mako, who is now on his feet and slowly making his way around the courtyard to check on more survivors.

Pavel frowns. “I’ve been taking inventory and trying to get a solid head count. That’s where I was after I heard you lay into the old man. Figured you had it handled.” At Demyen’s curt nod, he sighs and runs a hand through his hair. “Twenty. At least. Boris and Alexandr are gone. I’ve got Lukas, Dmitri, and Vlad resting in my room since they were close enough to drag there myself. The others... I don’t know.”

Demyen spits another Russian curse and kicks at one of the overturned deck chairs. “Boris was *his* man. Alexandr practically grew up with him. How the hell could he do this?”

I quietly slip away from the conversation. I need space and quiet to gather my own thoughts. But I can’t help but feel the claws of guilt sink into my stomach once again.

All this happened—because of *me*.

He’s lost good men—because of *me*.

Pavel, Mako, Bambi, Roxy... none of them deserved this. None of them deserved to be pulled into my world, my personal hell. None of them deserved to be forced to pay this kind of price for simply existing. For fucking *caring*. And—I glance over at Demyen—for loving.

All this is my fault.

I need to make it right.

CLARA

I kick off my heels and pad my way across the courtyard to my own suite. The concrete floor feels warm and soothing to my bare feet, though I have to be careful not to step on any broken glass.

Or bullets.

Or bodies.

It feels strange to be back in here after so long. I've been using it more as an extended closet and for Willow's bath times ever since I basically moved into Demyen's quarters.

The luggage he let me borrow for Fiji is still in the closet. I grab the biggest suitcase first and toss it onto the bed, flip the lid open, and start shoving clothes and toiletries in. There's no rhyme or reason to how I pack—it's more important that I get enough in to last me a few weeks, if possible. And that I get this done quickly.

I'm so engrossed in planning my next few moves that I almost don't notice the door open. But I do, in time to see Demyen standing there with his mouth partially open. He seems surprised, or at least confused.

“What are you doing?”

I wipe my clammy hands on my thighs and swallow the sudden lump of nervousness in my throat. I really, *really* do not want to have this conversation.

But some things can't be avoided.

I take a deep breath. And let it out. *Good Lord*, I feel like I'm deflating. "I'm leaving."

Demyen's brow inches up. "I can see that. Where?"

I toss another shirt into the suitcase just to keep my trembling hands busy. It also gives me an excuse not to look at him when I say the next part. Because my God, I don't have the stomach to form the words, let alone see his face when I let them out.

"Martin's."

The lid to the suitcase slams shut.

Demyen quickly wedges himself between me and the bed, grabbing my shoulders when I try to move away. "What did you just say?"

Fuck. I'm shaking. He's not even holding me that hard—at all—and he's not yelling at me.

But he's not going to let me slip past him, either.

"I have to go back to Martin." I steel myself for whatever wrath is about to come, despite his reassurances. When he doesn't say anything, I feel courageous enough to meet his hardened gaze. "I have to get Willow. And... make things right for Tolya."

Demyen shakes his head. "No. Not like this. We'll think of something else."

"Dem—"

"Not like this!"

I wince, and fuck—I even whimper. I hate being so fucking broken. So damaged.

He notices and immediately drops his hands to take a step back. "Clara, I..." He fists a frustrated hand in his hair and pulls at it. "*Fuck!*"

Again, I wince. It's a hair trigger response, deeply ingrained from my father's bellowing every time he started beating my mother and me. I know Demyen won't do that to me, but my body is less easy to convince.

“We’ll get her back.” Demyen paces back and forth across the room. “I swear to you, Clara, we’ll get her back. I just need you to trust me. Just trust me and be patient while I figure this out.”

My heart squeezes painfully. He looks so tragically beautiful, so desperate and shattered with righteous fury simmering under the surface.

In a move I didn’t expect myself to be able to make so soon in the face of an unbridled man, I walk over to him and cup his cheeks in my hands once more.

He reaches for me, pulling me to him and holding me like I’ll fly away if he lets go.

“I do trust you.” I press a soft kiss to the corner of his mouth. “I trust you. And I love you. I always will.”

His breath hitches. I feel his fingers press into my sides.

“But I don’t trust Martin. I can’t. Not when he’s so desperate to get me back.” I breathe him in. This might be the last time I’ll ever hold him like this. Or the last time I ever smell his heady, intoxicating scent. “He’ll hurt Willow. I have to go back to him so she’ll be safe.”

“He’ll hurt *you*.” Demyen tightens his hold on me. “I won’t let that happen. I can’t.”

I swallow back my tears. “I’m her mother. It’s her or me, and it has to be me. It always has to be me.”

I don’t know what’s going through his head. But something shifts, and a new kind of pain flashes in his eyes. He shuts them tight, burying his face in my hair.

I don’t want to leave him.

I don’t want to say goodbye and live the rest of my life without him. I don’t want to dream of him at night only to wake up back in the horrible hovel of existence Martin has in store for me.

But Willow needs me. And I need to be there to protect her.

I think, deep down, Demyen knows that.

He has to.

“I need to go.” Tears slip from my eyes as I try to ease away from him. “I need to... I have to...” I suck in a deep breath and pry his fingers off my waist. “You need to make sure Martin holds up his end of the deal. Get Tolya out. And then...”

And then what?

I don't know if there's anything to look forward to afterwards. I want to hope there is.

But I also don't want to live on false hope.

Again, something in Demyen shifts. He grows colder. Stands up straighter. And as I flip the suitcase lid back open, I see his fists clench.

“If you wanted to leave so damn bad, you should have done it already.” His voice is just as cold as his demeanor. “You don't need to wait for an excuse like this.”

It comes out of left field, but I know it's his pride stepping up to the plate. It's his need to grasp control of his world that's talking over the hurt I still see in his eyes. “Dem—”

“I mean it.” He takes a few deep breaths and looks at me like I've just backhanded him across the face. “Just tell me the fucking truth before you go running off back to your ex. Give me the dignity of at least that much.”

I drop the last of my clothes into the suitcase and zip it up, hoping the sound masks my sigh. I'm quickly running out of energy to argue. Shit, I'm out of energy to carry this baggage—literally and metaphorically—out the front door. But he asked, and I agree: he does deserve the dignity of the truth.

Most of it.

There's one thing, which is currently the size of a fig inside me, that I can't ever tell him. If anything, I have to act fast to make sure Martin never suspects a thing.

Shit. I feel a wave of nausea sweep over me. I swallow back the bile and brace myself for whatever may come, both now and in the future.

“The truth is, I’m not sure I’ll make it to that door.” I look him in the eyes so he knows I mean every last word. “But I have to. The truth is, I’ve never felt so safe or loved or... or... *home* until I met you. Even when things between us were iffy.”

Swallowing hard, I continue, “And the truth is, I want to vomit my guts out at the thought of setting foot anywhere near Martin. But worse than that is the thought of what he could do to my baby girl. *Our* daughter, Dem. So be pissed at me all you want. Hate me all you want. At least I’ll know you won’t forget me.”

I was supposed to get all that out without choking up. I failed miserably.

But, tears or not, it’s time to go. I can cry in the rideshare. I quickly yank the suitcase off what was once my bed and turn to leave.

Demyen’s hand covers the doorknob.

And then I’m backed into the door, my breath stolen by his kiss.

We cling to each other. Our tongues tangle like it’s the last time we’ll ever have this dance. I pour my heartache into him and drink his down, and for a moment, I’m not sure whose salty tears I taste between our lips. I’m not sure it even matters at this point.

When he pulls away, it’s with a low growl of frustration. I don’t move. Neither does he.

Then he grabs the doorknob again. The handle of my suitcase is in his other hand.

He doesn’t say a word. He doesn’t have to.

And somehow, I know that I don’t have to say anything, either. All I can do is hope and pray he knows how much he means to me, how much I will love him and miss him for the rest of my life.

However short that life may be.

DEMYEN

There are a thousand things I want to say to Clara. A thousand promises I want to make that this isn't the end. I *will* be coming back for her. I love her. I'll never stop loving her or fighting to bring her home.

But I don't say a fucking word.

I'm too pissed at Martin—and too raw from the reality that Clara is, in fact, leaving me—to trust my own mouth.

I'm also too stubborn to let her go that easily. Or let him think he's won that easily, either.

He wants to make a deal? Fine.

I'll make sure he follows through.

The only reason why I don't plow this SUV through Patterson's living room is because I don't know where Willow is. Rezvanis are built for war; Clara and I would be fine.

But Willow is everything to me. To *us*. And she's why I'm pulling into the driveway of Martin Patterson's sad shack of a dwelling as if I'm not imagining his skull becoming my new hood ornament.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me." I glare at the chipped and peeling paint on the side of the tiny house as we walk up. "This? Here? Is it even habitable?"

Clara keeps her eyes on the ground. I should probably ease up. It's hard to do when I'm using every fiber of self-control to not lose my absolute shit.

I knock on the door. It's incredibly tempting to punch the flimsy thing in.

It takes Martin long enough for me to consider just throwing Clara over my shoulder and tossing her back into the SUV. In my mind's eye, it'd be nothing to smash a few windows in, grab the kid, and make for the hills.

But before I can make good on that daydream, the door swings open and Martin glares at me through the dusty screen door.

"The fuck do you want?" he snaps at me. Yet the second his eyes land on Clara, then the suitcase in my hand, he smirks. "It's about damn time. Get your ass in the house—"

"She's not going anywhere," I snarl, moving between her and the door before she takes another step toward him, "until you make good on your end."

Martin eyes me as if he's got any ground to stand on. He's lucky I'm allowing him to stand upright as it is. "You'll get your brother. Once I get my woman."

"How about this?" I rip the screen door open and get in his face just so there's no chance for miscommunication. "I'll stand right here while you go make a few calls. Once I receive confirmation that he's out, we'll consider the trade complete."

He wants to have the upper hand. This is his house, his world, his rules. His woman and his child. I can see it plain on his face, clearer than the pathetic little mustache dusting his sweaty upper lip.

The sudden image of him putting his hands on Clara flashes through my mind.

Fuck this shit.

I'm about to bash his head against the doorway when he suddenly nods. "Fine." He even gestures for us to come inside.

"Where's Willow?" Clara asks. I don't miss how meek she sounds.

Martin nods at a small hallway next to the dining area. "In her room, asleep. We just finished reading stories together." He smiles, so goddamn smug that my breath hitches furiously.

What, do you want a fucking gold star? The Bare Minimum Award?

Clara immediately drops everything to go check on Willow. I don't stop her. We're here to do exactly that—make sure *our* daughter is safe and sound.

Besides, Martin and I need to have a little chat.

He's in the kitchen, texting someone on his phone. I listen to him make a quick call, though his side of the conversation is mostly grunts and affirmations. Either he's on a recorded line, or the other end is so deeply embroiled into this mess that they don't need any details.

Martin hangs up the phone, then stuffs it into his pocket. "It's done."

We'll see. I'm not leaving until I get a text from Oleg. I don't trust a word that comes from that man's body, but Tolya's freedom is the one thing he'll never lie about.

"Before I go," I say as I step into the kitchen, "we need to get a few things established."

He holds up a hand. "Listen—"

"No, *you* listen." I tighten my jaw. "And listen very carefully, because I will not repeat myself."

I make sure he's got nowhere to go. And I make sure to keep my voice low so his ears are the only ones to hear me. The only one who should ever be terrified in their own home is him.

"I have eyes on you. Everywhere you go, everything you do, will be reported to me. One wrong blink in *my* woman's direction, you're done. One errant bruise on *my* kid's body, you're gone. You so much as raise your voice to pass the potatoes, you're gone."

Martin tries to square me off. "You can't—"

"You grossly underestimate just how far I will go to protect my family." I'm so close to his face, I can smell the whiskey he must've drunk before he put Willow to bed. There's a kitchen knife on the counter next to him. It would be so

fucking easy. “Do not make the mistake of tempting me to prove it.”

He’s about to do exactly that when Clara reemerges. Her eyes are rimmed red, her cheeks streaked with wiped tears, and my instinctual reaction is to rush to her side and pull her into my arms.

But fucking Martin Patterson—this goddamn motherfucker on borrowed fucking time—swoops in and gives some sad attempt to do the same.

Clara dodges his advances.

Good.

“She’s... She’ll want to... I mean, if you want...”

I fucking *hate* how goddamn quiet she is. It’s like she’s terrified the next word is the wrong one that will get her backhanded into next week. She’s staring at the floor, hunched in on herself, constantly shifting away from Martin’s attempts to hold her.

Someone needs to give me one solid fucking reason why I can’t break his neck where he stands.

Clara peeks up at me. Then glances at the hallway.

Willow. Right.

I swallow down my rage and go to my daughter.

Willow is sound asleep in her bed, which amounts to a lone mattress on some flimsy metal box spring-frame combo. It’s obvious Clara has done the best she can to make this a safe space for a little girl, going as far as to tape her crayon drawings on the wall.

But it’s not enough. It’s nowhere near enough to embrace Willow with the warmth, love, and safety she deserves from her father.

At least she has Princess, who is curled up protectively around her and watching me closely as I quietly approach the bed.

“Good girl,” I whisper when I crouch and rub her ears. “You keep my baby safe, okay?”

Princess softly whines and licks my hand. We have an agreement.

I watch Willow's sleeping face for as long as I can, studying every angelic feature as if I'll never see her again. I know I have to act like I won't. I have to live as if this was just a short, fantasy-filled blip in my life.

"I'll be back, little cub." I whisper in her ear before pressing a soft kiss to her cheek. "I love you."

My phone buzzes in my pocket.

ASSHOLE: *It's done. We have Tolya.*

I slowly stand. I don't want to leave, but I have to.

"Remember our deal," I murmur to the dog.

Princess whines, then rests her head on Willow's stomach and watches me leave.

DEMYEN

“My boys!” Oleg laughs with his hands in the air. “Finally! At last!”

Tolya eyes me grimly, the visual polar opposite of our father’s glee. He’s finally free of that cursed orange jumpsuit, his hands in the pockets of new jeans and a clean Henley with the sleeves shoved up to his elbows. He’s even shaved, and I have to admit—it’s weirdly satisfying to see him without the facial hair that makes him look so much like our old man.

We agreed to meet at my private hangar, and I can see that Oleg wasted no time in ordering my crew around to prepare the jet for our international excursion. The engines are roaring to life and some sick part of me wonders how hard I need to shove Oleg to make a “terrible accident” happen inside their oscillating blades.

He claps a hand on my shoulder, his other on Tolya’s, and steers us toward the jet. “My men tell me the meetings have been arranged back home. We’ll get this sorted out, and we will return with reinforcements!”

I steal a quick glance at my brother. As much as he’s probably relieved to be out of prison, it doesn’t show in his demeanor at all. Instead of falling in line with our father’s footsteps, he shifts so the old man goes up the stairs first.

“How’s Clara?” he quietly asks me.

“She’s back with her ex. How the fuck do you think she is?”

It sounds harsh, but I don't blame Tolya for what's happened. What could he do? He's been caged like a beast for fifteen years.

But the words still snap off my tongue. I don't feel like apologizing for the mood I'm in, so I yank myself onto the loading stairs by the railing and avoid eye contact with him until we get inside.

Tolya's hand clamps around my shoulder right as I'm about to storm into the jet's living space.

"We'll get her back," he promises in my ear. "Just be patient."

"Fuck patience."

I hear him snort a stifled laugh. "If I can wait fifteen years for this, you can wait fifteen days. We need to get him somewhere he can't follow us from. Until then, your family is safer where they're at."

Very, very few things in my life have ever made me feel so emotional. I'm not allowed to show emotions, let alone have them.

But to hear my big brother acknowledge Clara and Willow as my family? That means he's embraced them as his family, too.

And, like Otets has always said, *family is everything*.

I nod. Tolya takes that as his cue that I've got my shit pulled together. He leads us over to the plush couch and stretches his long limbs out over the coffee table as we settle in.

"Shit," he chuckles, "it's hard to believe I was staring at cement blocks just this morning."

"Be grateful for it," Oleg grumbles through a sip of what I'm assuming is vodka. "Your grandfather spent a decade in the gulag."

"I'll be sure not to complain too much." Tolya sighs and leans back, closing his eyes. "I'm just glad I'll never have to eat mystery meat for lunch ever again."

Even through the fog of my fury, he manages to make me snort a low laugh. "I could remove all the labels from your

fridge. If you ever get homesick.”

He rolls his eyes. “Do that, and I’ll be cooking *you* lunch with it.”

I see the flight attendant signal for us to buckle up. She keeps a wide berth around Oleg, which is a wise choice. Soon enough, the plane cruises down the runway.

I close my eyes and breathe as we accelerate and launch into the air, leaving the whole godforsaken City of Sin below us.

Somewhere in it, Clara and my daughter are clinging to each other.

I just hope to God they’re strong enough to last until I can make things right.

Once we level off, we abandon the seatbelts for the mini bar and, as expected, Oleg snatches the first bottle of vodka he sees. “No use wasting good liquor,” he explains with a wink. As if I give two shits either way.

“So, Otets.” Tolya stirs a few ice cubes into a glass of water. *Interesting*. I guess I figured he’d be basking in freedom and booze right about now. “You mentioned a meeting with the grand *pakhan* in Sochi.”

Oleg nods. “I did. Between the Yakuza doubling up their efforts and the American police planting evidence to falsely imprison our family, it makes sense to get him involved. Who knows? Maybe he’ll let us borrow some reinforcements to raze Las Vegas all down once and for all.”

“I’m sure he’d hate to lose such an important benefactor as yourself,” I wryly muse.

He frowns. “The hell are you talking about?”

I roll my shoulder and pretend like I’m not watching his every microexpression. “You’ve been doing so well with your international enterprise, especially the ring you mentioned you have in Russia. With that amount of wealth and power, it makes sense that you’d be high up in the grand *pakhan*’s list of favorite people.”

“Eh, it’s true the business is going well. But power and money are two entirely different things, *mal’chik*.”

I pour myself a glass of bourbon and use it to mask my sudden suspicions. “You outbid everyone at Clara’s auction. Fifty million, if I recall correctly. That’s nothing to sneeze at.”

Oleg chuckles. Either the booze is hitting me harder than usual, or he looks and sounds a little nervous. “It’s true, I went for a show of power. You see how the Yakuza have turned against us. I needed to remind Raizo who he’s fucking with.”

Tolya steals a side-eye glance over at me. Again, I pretend like I’m not catching the unspoken subtext in every word our father breathes—but if silence could write novels, we’d be reading a fucking saga.

“Fifty million,” Tolya scoffs. “Damn. I’m honored, Otets. How many trades did you have to make to come up with the extra cash?”

Instead of answering, Oleg waves us off with a dismissive hand and jumps topic. “What we really need to discuss is your return to the Bratva. It may be time to expand into new territories, which is always a good thing.”

Tolya blinks. “Where are you thinking? Chicago always seemed like it could be interesting...”

Their voices fade as I sit in my favorite chair of the jet and try to piece together the puzzle pieces that are staring me in the face. The bourbon tastes like liquid ash, but it’s the only thing I’m in the mood to drink. Either it’s going to help me figure this shit out, or it’s gonna get me plastered enough to take a long, much-needed nap.

I tug my phone out from my pocket and scroll through the texts, hoping something will pop out and grab my attention. Pavel said my father has been in the States for longer than we’d originally assumed, which means there’s no telling what the old man has been up to during all that time. I know if I ask him directly, he’ll make it all about Tolya.

The one thing I can’t get past is that Oleg has never, and will never, put his own children before his wealth and power.

Something does catch my eye. It's not in the text messages themselves—it's the timestamps.

There's an overlap.

"Everything okay?"

Tolya's voice yanks me out of my pensive state. I quickly nod to throw both of them off. I know he's not in on anything Oleg's been messing around with, but I can't risk either of them catching onto the fact that *I* just caught on to something.

"All good," I grumble. "Just tying up some loose ends at the casino."

Both men shrug and go back to their conversation.

I return to the texts in my hand and start taking screenshot after screenshot. I quickly create an encrypted file and slide all the screenshots into it, then AirDrop the file to the flight attendant.

"Fucking bourbon is going right through me," I grumble to myself as I stand. After a small stretch, I pocket my phone and nod toward the bathroom. "Be right back."

"When did you become such a lightweight?" Oleg teases. But then he's quick to jump back into the conversation with Tolya, leaving me to do what I need to.

Which is slip around the corridor's corner and trade phones with the flight attendant.

She doesn't ask any questions. She knows better than that. We've been flying together for years, and I've made sure she and her family are well taken care. If I send her something out of the blue, she never touches it until I give the signal or, like right now, come to retrieve it. I flash her a quick little smile of appreciation, then duck into the private bathroom and lock the door.

Look into these, I type out. Let me know what you find.

I don't risk identifying myself in the text, but I shouldn't need to—Pavel is pretty quick on his feet and he'll figure out the unwritten context. I wait a few seconds longer, turn the sink on

and off, then make it sound like I'm drying my hands before I exit the bathroom and check on the others.

"Your water, sir."

Clever lady. I thank the flight attendant for the glass of ice water I didn't ask for and use that moment to slip her phone back to her. She does the same with mine, and I smoothly pivot back into the cabin.

No change in conversation or demeanor occurs with the men when I approach. I relax back into my chair as they continue chattering. The flight attendant catches my eyes and quickly nods.

Pavel understands the message.

I sigh, lean back, and try to take a nap for the rest of the flight. I need the rest for what's to come, but it's hard to silence my brain enough for sleep to take over.

If my instincts are screaming the truth like they usually do, we're in for an all-out war.

CLARA

I wrinkle my nose as I toss another reused plastic bag full of Princess's droppings into the kitchen garbage can.

If Martin wants to maintain both our sanities, he's eventually going to have to let us out of the house for walks. At least into the backyard, bare minimum.

Princess is just waging guerilla warfare to make that happen sooner rather than later.

"Good girl," I coo to my new best friend, who wags her tail at the praise and nuzzles my leg as we return to the living room.

We rejoin Willow on the couch, where we've been reading stories for the better part of an hour. I've been trying to keep spirits and hopes up, but it's easy to see how sad my baby girl is now that we're...

Well, not "home." Just "back."

"Does Demyen hate me?" Willow suddenly asks.

"What?" I pull her onto my lap and curl her into my arms.
"No! No, honey. Demyen *loves* you. You're his little girl, his little cub."

"Then why did he want to get rid of me?"

"Who said that?"

"I don't know." She shrugs and slumps into my arms. "His daddy said he doesn't have time for little girls like me. And I needed to go back to my *real* daddy."

I stifle the angry gasp. *Of fucking course he did.*

“Mommy?” Willow turns to peer up at me, her lashes wet with unshed tears. “I don’t... I don’t like Martin. He’s not my real daddy, is he?”

How do I navigate through what should be a much deeper, more involved conversation? She’s asking heavy questions that even I’m struggling to find answers to.

“Daddies... ” I have to think carefully about my answer. “Okay. So. Do you know where babies come from?”

She scrunches her nose and shakes her head.

Different topic for a different day. “Right. Well... okay.” I take a deep breath and try not to cry when I realize how badly I wish Demyen was here to have this conversation with us. He’d know exactly how to handle it. “It’s really, really easy for two people to make a baby. But—”

“How easy?”

“Easier than it should be. But it’s not so easy being a mommy or a daddy. That takes a lot of work, a lot of practice, and sometimes... sometimes, people can make babies, but they can’t really be a mommy or a daddy.”

Willow stares at me. I’m pretty sure I’ve lost her.

“What I’m trying to say, baby girl, is...” I think about it. “Martin helped me make you. And that’s an important part of everything, so you do have to behave as a way of saying thank you. But—”

“But Demyen’s my daddy?”

I smile. I smile more so I don’t cry. It’s only been a day—less than that, technically—and already everything hurts with the reality that we may never see Demyen ever again. “Yes, sweetheart. Demyen’s your daddy. Your *real* daddy. He loves you, and he wants what’s best for you, and he’ll always make sure you’re safe.”

I know that much to be true. Even if we can never be together, I know Demyen will always have eyes and ears on us to make

sure we're safe. To make sure Willow has everything she needs and I'm at least not nursing any more "sprained ankles."

"Is he gonna come get us?"

That's the question of the hour. *Is he?*

Something deep down, deep where I have to bury my feelings for him in Martin's presence, says, *Of course he is.*

Something else right next to that thought reminds me that Demyen Zakrevsky is not a man who admits or accepts defeat so easily. He wouldn't have invested so much time and energy into keeping us away from Martin just to turn us over without a fight.

"We'll have to wait and see." Because if I tell her he is, she may not waste time in telling Martin the same thing. "In the meantime, I need you to be a good girl for Martin. He loves you, too. We don't want to hurt his feelings."

Or set off his temper.

The fucked-up thing is, I know he actually does love Willow. My own father is the same way. I don't know who in their lives damaged them so severely that this seems normal and right to them, but I can't deny the fact that both Dad and Martin do have genuine feelings for me and for Willow. Just like Oleg loves Demyen.

It's just not enough to make up for the abuse. No amount of gifts or whispers of love can undo a hand around the throat or a kick to the ribs.

We hear Martin's car pull into the driveway. Immediately, Princess settles herself over Willow and me, growling protectively at the front door.

"Shhh, it's okay," I whisper to her. "Willow, honey, why don't you take Princess and go play in your room? I need to get supper ready. I'll come get you when it's time."

Willow nods and nudges Princess off, quickly sliding off my lap and leading her canine guardian to her small room at the end of the hall.

Everything is small here. So small and so... insignificant.

Much like the man who walks through the front door right when I slip on my kitchen apron.

“Hey, honey, I’m home!” Martin sings out like it’s some *Brady Bunch* bullshit we’ve always done. Like I’m actually gonna be excited to see him.

That being said, I have to play my cards right, so I do need to pretend like I care. “How was your day?”

“Oh, so much better knowing you’re safe at home with me.” He grins and swoops into the kitchen to plant a sloppy, wet kiss to my cheek.

“That’s... great.” I quickly add a smile so it seems like I mean it. “Really great.”

“Yeah?” Martin steps up behind me and wraps his arms around my waist. *Please, God, don’t let him notice anything different there.* He presses another moist kiss to my neck and it’s all I can do not to throw up into the pot of water I’m trying to boil. “Did you miss me?”

“I thought we’d have spaghetti and meatballs for dinner,” I respond. I try to make it sound like it’s a “yes” without actually flat-out lying.

“Sounds good. Listen, I’ve been thinking...”

The way Martin has me pinned close to him, rocking us side to side, has me feeling all sorts of nervous. He’s only this affectionate when he wants something I’m almost guaranteed to disagree with. Something like...

“We should get married.”

I damn near drop the whole box of spaghetti into the boiling water, plastic and all. “Married?” I croak.

“Mhm.” He kisses my shoulder and it takes every ounce of self-control not to throw the pot at him just to get him off me. His touch, his breath, his voice... All of it sends shivers down my spine and swirls in my stomach with disgust. “We’ve been together for years. Willow is getting older and she deserves to have her parents together. One big, happy family.”

I push away from the stove and guide him over to where there's no serious heat source or sharp object to threaten me with. When I turn in his arms, I chant to myself that I *have* to put up an act to stall for time. It's the only way I can stomach smiling at his face and rest my hands on his arms.

“Why now? We've never really discussed it before.”

There it is—the flash of irritation in his eyes that tells me I'm pushing his buttons.

He stamps it back down and keeps his smile on, even though I see it waver. “We have, just not as seriously. We should do it. Just go for it. You and me. We can go down to the courthouse, and—”

“What's the rush?” I ease myself away from his attempt at an embrace and make for the fridge. Maybe he'll stop touching me if he sees I'm quite literally busy cooking his dinner. “It'd be nice to have a traditional wedding,” I add to defuse the tension.

“I know, babe. But with everything going on, and almost losing you... We need to make this official.”

My hand hovers over the package of ground beef. I don't know for sure yet what it is, but *something* is pinging in my mind with the way he says it. “Official?”

“Yeah. You know, man and wife.”

I pull the meat out and slowly turn to the countertop where I have a mixing bowl and breadcrumbs ready. “Man and wife.” *That's it. That's the kicker here.* “This wouldn't have anything to do with spousal privileges, would it?”

Martin stops and clears his throat. “What do you mean?” he all but stammers.

I grab the large kitchen knife and set to mincing garlic. “Well, you planted evidence to get Tolya out, right? And obviously, you have accomplices. I know about everything that's been going on, so marrying me would ensure I can't be questioned on the stand when—and I do mean, ‘when,’ Martin—you're caught and thrown on trial.”

He stares at me. The smile is gone, and so is any attempt to woo me with his charm. But instead of flying at me in a rage, he sighs and leans against the other counter. “Fine. Whatever. You’re just as complicit as I am, so I figured this would be a way to protect each other.”

“Makes sense.”

“Really?” He sounds surprised.

I shrug. “I mean, yeah. Fair point. I was part of the trade you made, right? And I was there when you made the offer to Demyen, so—”

“You were there?”

Shit.

Martin’s voice drops into the dangerous timbre that I know means “tread carefully.” If I don’t dance around this with grace, there’s no telling what he’ll grab and throw at me—or if it’s me he’ll throw.

I feel the weight of the knife in my hand.

And then I smile.

“Yes, actually, I was there.” I turn quickly to face him like this is any normal conversation. Like I’m not aware that I’m holding the large, sharp kitchen knife in front of me and gesturing with it as I spill the beans. “I had to chat with Demyen about something and happened to overhear you talking with him. Caught me by surprise, really. I never figured you to follow that far in my father’s footsteps.”

Martin frowns. His eyes have been glued to the knife in my hand, but now, they flicker up to stare into mine. “What? What do you mean?”

“Didn’t he tell you? It’s the same way he got Tolya locked up in the first place. Planted evidence. Even got the poor medical examiner fired.” I let out a laugh. “You wanna know the stupid part? It wasn’t even a murder to begin with. Michael Little killed himself.”

“... Bullshit.”

“Really!” I laugh again, and this one is far more genuine. Martin’s face is worth a quick snap of my phone camera, if I only had it on me. “You can ask my dad. He’s the one Uncle Mike was trying to kill, but ended up drinking the poison himself. And the *crazy* part is, he was dead before he hit the ground. According to the M.E.’s report, the bullet didn’t hit any vital organs. So Dad went and pinned this all on some hapless Good Samaritan who just wanted to save me from what turned out to be a fake kidnapping.”

Martin’s face goes completely slack-jawed. And then he bursts into a fit of disbelieving laughter. “Are you serious? Babe, that’s... that’s so insane, I actually believe you.”

“Hey.” I set the knife down, though I leave it close enough I can grab it if he turns on me. I pull him close, ignoring the disgust bubbling in my stomach again. “Spousal privilege, remember? You told me; now, I told you.” I flick my gaze between his eyes and his mouth. “I’m trusting you.”

My charm works. At least enough to get him to smile and rub the sides of my waist. “We can do this, babe,” he coos. “We can start all over. Make things right. I’ve got you.”

This is the side of him I fell in love with, back when I was a naive teenager who just wanted someone to have my back. He always did defend me from my father, even then, and I know now he’ll still defend me and Willow from whatever Greg might be up to.

This is the side of him that kept me trapped for so long.

“We have to turn him in.” I look away; I don’t have to pretend that the thought scares me. “For us. For our future together.”

“I don’t—”

“He knows I know.” I swallow hard and really play up the drama, making sure Martin sees the tears glistening on my lashes. “Dad, I mean. He told me himself. I recorded his whole confession and then he went ballistic and threatened to kill me if I told.”

Partly true. Mostly true, really. And honestly, as sickening as it is, Greg Everett probably would kill me by accident—even

though the beating that'd do me in would be entirely intentional.

Martin shakes his head. "I won't let that happen. You know I won't."

"I know. And I know it's hard because he's been your mentor, but... that's why they'll believe you."

He considers it. That's all I need.

"Think about it, Marty. You've been his favorite since the day you started. Why would you turn him in unless it was serious?" I rub his chest and wow, has he gotten blubbery. He doesn't feel anything like he used to. He definitely doesn't feel anything like... like...

Like Demyen.

"And think about all the praise and recognition you'll get. Solving a major murder case, uncovering a dirty cop, and unraveling his human trafficking business all at the same time. That's gotta mean a huge promotion, pay raise, the works." I give him a coy little smile. "And then we could afford a real nice wedding, maybe a honeymoon in Hawaii..."

"With you in a bikini?" He smirks.

"Well, with that kind of pay raise, we could have our own private beach and then I won't have to wear anything at all."

Martin eyes me with the kind of hunger that used to get me excited. Again, back before I learned the truth about him. "Tell me something, babe."

"Anything."

"Why now? You spent all this time avoiding me and now, you want to help me?"

Correction: I want you to help me. I shrug and continue to play coy. Sheepish. Contrite. "I don't know. I've just been thinking. About you, and Willow. And you're right. She deserves to have her family back together. I just know we'll never be left alone until, well..."

“Until Greg’s taken care of.” Martin nods. “It kills me, but you’re right. It’ll help clear up Tolya’s name, too, so what I had to do to get him out won’t matter anymore.”

“Right.”

He smiles at me, cups my face, then leans in for a kiss.

I think I’m gonna throw up.

Yeah, I’m definitely gonna throw up.

But right before he presses his chapped lips against mine, the pot boils over and clatters the lid around the stainless steel. It’s loud and jarring and the exact distraction I need to move out of Martin’s grasp without a struggle.

“How about this?” Martin says from behind me as I go to fix it. “You agree to marry me, and I’ll work on turning Greg over to Internal Affairs. Hell, you marry me, and I’ll blow the whistle without a second thought.”

“Then it’s settled.” I hate this taste on my tongue. “We’re getting married.”

“Atta girl.” He slaps my ass, then smacks his lips. “I’m gonna go jump in the shower. Let me know when dinner’s ready.”

I let the pasta cool in the colander and return to making the meatballs, my mind racing a mile a minute just to process everything and assure myself that no, I’m not actually marrying Martin Patterson and settling for a life like my mother’s.

I’m just buying time until the happy ending we all deserve catches up to us. But until that happens, I’m left with nothing but prayers.

Please, Demyen... come back before it's too late.

DEMYEN

I've only been in Russia for three hours and already it feels like three whole goddamned centuries.

The time here is ten hours ahead of Vegas, which means I'll be asleep while Willow's getting out of school and Clara will be asleep while I'm dealing with whatever bullshit Oleg's got us roped into. Any hope of real-time video feed rests on me not getting any sleep—which, to be honest, won't be that difficult.

PAVEL: *This is all I've got from today.*

The camera feed shows the front side of Patterson's house. No movement in or out, and no sign of anyone playing in the meager little yard that lines the driveway.

PAVEL: *No news is good news, right?*

I resist the urge to throw my phone across the room in frustration.

Did I do the right thing?

Did I make the right move by sending them to Patterson?

Or did I send them to their deaths?

Pavel's right: no news is good news. It means no one is in the hospital, no neighbor has called in a domestic disturbance, and there's a solid chance all is peaceful and well inside.

Too peaceful.

Images of Martin pawing at Clara's body flash through my mind, and I suddenly feel the urge to punch something.

There's no doubt he'll try to seduce her into his pathetic little bed and if she resists, I know he will try to force her into it.

He's done it before.

He'll do it again.

I hate not having constant eyes on Clara. At first, it was because I didn't trust her and needed to make sure she wasn't plotting her escape or a way to assassinate me in my sleep.

That's what I told myself. I'll stick by that, even if the thought doesn't feel as genuine as it should.

It quickly became a way to make sure she was okay. First, with her fever and infection, then with her nightmares and general trauma responses to every little trigger. But then it was just a light in the darkness of my day to be able to open my laptop or turn on my phone and see Clara and Willow playing in the sunshine. I could always check on them and it would reassure me that they were still there; this was real.

Now, they're gone. They're gone and I can't just turn on my phone to see them. I can't reassure myself that Martin hasn't stolen them from this world.

I fucking despise it.

Someone knocks on the door. I'm about to tell them to fuck off and leave me alone when Tolya pokes his head around the doorframe. "You good to talk?"

I nod. He's the one person who can't piss me off right about now.

My brother shoulders through the door and quickly shuts it behind him. "I've been digging around."

My brow lifts. "Go on..."

"It's his behavior, mostly. Even when he's talking sports or women or the fucking weather, Otets just has this..." Tolya shakes his head. "I don't know what to call it, man. But I don't trust him. Never have, to be honest—but this is something different."

I sit up from where I've been slumped on the bed. "And you found something...?"

"Well, I've been digging." He strides over to the desk and straddles the chair. "But yeah, I found something. Transfers. A *lot* of wire transfers."

Okay. That might be something. "Did you hack his computer?"

Tolya scoffs. "You think I'm all caught up on that tech shit? No. I found the receipts on his desk. He's just as bad as I am."

"You went into his office?"

"Yes, brother, I went into his office," he sasses. "I'm not fucking ten anymore. Plus, I don't know if you've noticed, but I have the upper hand in a fist fight."

He's got a point. Tolya's bulked up since he was put behind bars. I like to think I'm shredded and ready for a fight, but I have to admit, my older brother is built like a fucking tank.

And standing next to Oleg, he makes the old man look exactly that: old, withered, feebly clinging to the last vestiges of his youth. Father Time is taking a toll that our own father is stubbornly refusing to pay.

But Time is the loan shark of all loan sharks.

He always gets what's coming to him, one way or another.

"Anyways." Tolya digs into his pocket and pulls out a crumpled scrap of paper. "Something seemed off about the numbers. So I tallied them up and wrote down the origination numbers for your guys to research."

"What's the total amount?"

His mouth twists into a wry, knowing smirk. "Fifty million dollars to the penny." He hands me the scrap of paper to show me his math and the account numbers.

I waste no time in snapping a pic to send to Pavel, then I hand the paper back to Tolya. "The fuck does it mean?"

"He's outsourcing. If I have to make a guess, he's outsourcing *everything*. I don't know what all he's been telling you, but the

things he's told me don't add up with a man who has that kind of cash to burn."

Oleg is hiding something. That much is certain. "Did you find anything else in there?"

"It might be nothing, but..." Tolya pulls out another piece of paper, this time neatly folded and whole. "He left his laptop open. Figured you might find this interesting."

It's a word-for-word copy of Oleg's screen, down to a sketched placement map of the browser itself.

What grabs my attention is the log of messages between Oleg and at least three different mercenary groups. I recognize the call signs and symbols used by each.

"Again," Tolya explains, "he's outsourcing. I bet half of these men here aren't even Bratva."

"Uh-huh." I'm listening, but not intently. I can't help it.

One of those chat logs has a final message of *Mission Complete*.

And it's the same day as the school shooting.

Ice fills my veins. I'm not even looking at the actual computer screen, but I don't need to. I'll place a solid wager that I know exactly what Oleg's been up to.

"Keep him busy," I say to Tolya as I pocket the paper. "Let me handle the tech."

DEMYEN

“You’re in high spirits,” Oleg remarks in the car.

I flash him a forced smile. “It’s going to be a good day. I can feel it.”

In true Oleg fashion, we’re driving through Sochi in a hired limousine and enjoying the vials of home-brewed vodka and imported stogies.

Well, *he* is enjoying them.

I’m enjoying the calm before the storm.

Tolya downs his third serving of vodka and smacks his lips. “I’ll take that bet. House always wins, right, Dem?”

Again, I smile and nod. There’s no use expounding on our private joke—all will be revealed in due time.

Like, say... around fifteen minutes or so from now.

The car slows into a turn, signaling our approach to the Zakrevsky head seat. The pavement becomes much smoother and the foliage around us more manicured, shifting from trimmed bushes to sculpted works of art.

When we come to a complete stop, a butler wearing white gloves promptly opens the passenger door for us. He says nothing. I’m happy to return the silence in kind.

Part of me wishes Clara and Willow could be here to see this place. They would have loved the gilded lion statues guarding the wide marble steps, which in turn lead to massive double doors hand carved from mahogany. Half the windows are

painted glass, the other half crystalline testaments to the forgotten days of ancient Russia.

“The grand *pakhan* is waiting inside,” Oleg grumbles to me as he lumbers past.

Tolya and I fall in line after him. It’s a show of respect for the Old World. A father leads his sons, and the sons file in after him in order of birth. We’re here to support him in his cause he’s about to bring to the grand *pakhan*’s attention.

Or so he thinks.

We follow a pair of silent, grim-faced *vors* through the foyer, down a wide hall decorated with oil paintings and marble busts, and through another set of double doors. We step into a luxurious receiving room where the grand *pakhan* and the rest of his *vors* are seated in velvet chairs.

There are no chairs or seats offered to us. We are expected to remain standing until we’ve proven that our business here is worth their time.

The shit-eating smile I woke up with only broadens.

My business is definitely worth their time.

The Bratva is a many-limbed creature. For all intents and purposes, I run my own kingdom. But there are roots to the motherland—and if someone fucks up bad enough, like my father has done, those roots can tighten around a man’s neck like a noose. The grand *pakhan*, head of the oldest Bratva organization on the face of the planet, is the man who gives the order to execute.

Soon enough, he’ll do exactly that.

My eyes land on him. An old man, but not feeble in the least. Thick and bearded and gray and strong, with a face that betrays nothing and eyes as ice-blue as the snow piled high on the eaves of the mansion overhead.

The door shuts behind us with a thunderous clang. No one breathes as the echoes fade out.

Then it begins.

The grand *pakhan* rolls into a stream of rapid, old-school Russian I can't begin to translate. He's looking directly at Oleg, who quickly responds in kind. After a few exchanges like this, he turns to Tolya and me, an expectant look on his face.

I glance at Tolya. He's as lost in the conversation as I am. It's a thick, archaic form of Russian he's speaking, and hard to process.

"Speak up," Oleg grumbles under his breath.

"Apologies, grand *pakhan*," Tolya suddenly says with a slight bow. "I've been stuck inside an American prison for fifteen years with no one to practice our mother tongue with. And this one—" He flicks his thumb at me. "—just never has much occasion to speak it. American kids; what're ya gonna do?"

The men stare at us for a long, silent moment.

"Americans," Grand *Pakhan* Zakrevksy mutters in accented English. Then he laughs, and is quickly joined by his men. "Fine, fine. Your father tells me there are problems in the States that you need help with. I am asking for your experiences, since he's been here for the better part of the last decade." His gaze shifts to me. "You, Demyen, have settled there quite nicely. Do you truly need such assistance?"

I give him a slow nod. "Tensions with the local Yakuza have led to threats against the general public, including a massive shooting at an elementary school."

This earns a widespread wave of disapproving murmurs. I take that as my cue to continue.

"As you may already know, we discovered the truth behind my brother's imprisonment and the involvement of his arresting officer, who has since gone on to live his life unchecked and unpunished. He thrives in his career within the police department and continues trafficking women from the jail cells into the same Yakuza leader's international ring."

"So clearly," Oleg interjects, "it's imperative that we gather reinforcements to end this struggle once and for all. With your permission, grand *pakhan*, we will sever ties with this

treacherous ally and destroy their enterprise. Let Raizo Watanabe be an example to anyone who dares move against our family.”

“Actually...” I open my jacket and pull out the folded stack of papers I’ve been keeping tucked to my side since printing them off last night. “... Raizo’s not who I had in mind.”

Grand *Pakhan* Zakrevsky accepts the papers I offer him with a quizzical stare. I step back and give him a wide berth to peruse the information.

Silence again. Dense. Impenetrable.

“Is this true?” Zakrevsky snaps at Oleg once he’s done reading.

The old man sputters. “Forgive me, grand *pakhan*, but I don’t—”

“You don’t know anything about these funds? Siphoned from what I recognize to be my own trusted men sitting here with me right now?” He snorts and reads the first page. “Lev, did you know about this? Apparently, you gave this man two hundred and fifty thousand American dollars.”

“The fuck I did!” One of the *vors* springs to his feet. Lev, I presume. “I swear—”

Grand *pakhan* Zakrevsky holds up a patient hand and silently urges him to calm himself and sit down. “And Ilya, it seems you’ve been quite the benefactor to our guest. I’m sure you noticed nine hundred and fifty grand missing from your accounts recently?”

Another man seated near him frowns. “I was told there was an accounting error.”

I glance over at Oleg. He’s just standing there, stunned.

Stunned... and terrified.

“If you turn to page five, you’ll notice something quite interesting,” I suggest. “I believe those are the mercenary groups my father financed to falsely masquerade as the Yakuza. Now, my informants have confirmed the involvement

of Raizo Watanabe's men, but it was with the understanding that both parties were working in tandem."

Oleg spins on me. "You shut your fucking mouth—"

"Including," I continue, raising my voice to be heard over him, "the school shooting at the school in Vegas."

He stops in his tracks.

The room grows deathly silent.

I now have the room's undivided attention. I take a deep breath, and a step forward, fully aware that what I say next may quite literally mean life or death. "Grand *Pakhan*, I hold true to our ideal that family is everything. Unfortunately, my father does not honor this code. He attempted to kidnap, assault, and murder my girlfriend. He sent mercenaries to terrorize my daughter's school and then to kidnap her, which in turn cost the lives of many loyal Bratva soldiers. I have had to issue formal apologies and gifts of condolences to the families who are now widowed and fatherless because this man cares for nothing and no one but himself. All this, compounded with several attacks deliberately designed to misdirect my vengeance against Watanabe. But to be honest..." I sigh. "I'd sooner surrender everything I have than lose my family."

The grand *pakhan* listens intently and broods in silence for a long time after I'm done.

After a moment and a few quick glances to either side of his entourage, he nods to the guards standing by the doors.

"What? Wait!" Oleg shouts when they lunge in to grab him by his arms and yank him forward. "Wait! This is madness! I must speak in my defense against these lies!"

"What defense do you have?" The grand *pakhan* seems half-amused, half-enraged. "I see papers that would be difficult to fabricate. I hear stories that make sense in the face of your own lies. My men have been stolen from. And you come in here, into *my house*, to demand resources you have no rights to?"

Tolya sucks in a quiet breath.

“For your crimes against our Bratva, crimes against your family, and crimes which I am sure are soon to be uncovered after my men conduct a thorough investigation... you, Oleg Zakrevsky, who are not worthy of our name... your punishment is death.”

Like an idiot, Oleg laughs. “You can’t do this!” He struggles against the guards, laughing and shouting like he’s losing his fucking mind. For all we know, he probably has. “I’ve given everything to this Bratva! I have done everything for our family! You wouldn’t be where you are without me!”

Grand *pakhan* Zakrevsky arches a calm brow. “*Chestno govorya, ya dazhe ne znayu, kto ty.*”

Damn.

I may not be fluent, but even I understand an insult when I hear one.

I don’t even know who you are.

Oleg is dragged from the room, screaming profanities and promises of retribution we all know he won’t be able to fulfill. This mansion is old—old enough for there to be an actual dungeon in the depth of the structure.

He’s not going anywhere.

“Tell me,” the grand *pakhan* says to Tolya and I once our father is officially gone, “what is it that you truly need?”

I look to Tolya. He shrugs. “I’ve just been released from prison for a crime I never committed.” He rubs the back of his neck and sighs. “I’m still trying to figure out how to use my new phone. It will be a while before I can think of anything I might actually need. And, respectfully, I wouldn’t feel right asking it of you.”

The old bear stares at him. Blinks. Then shrugs. “Fair enough. I’ve heard of your plight, Tolya Zakrevsky, and I commend you for withstanding such injustice with far more dignity than you were raised by. For this, I think we can spare you some funding to help you get back on your feet.”

The *vors* mutter their agreements. Tolya bows his head, probably to hide the reddening in his cheeks. “Thank you, grand *pakhan*. I won’t waste any of your generosity.”

When everyone’s eyes turn to me, I know exactly what to request.

“I need to watch him die. With your permission, of course,” I quickly add.

He regards me curiously. “That is all?”

I hesitate. I want to tell him about how Oleg has haunted my nightmares for the majority of my life. I want to tell him how that man has so thoroughly traumatized Clara that I can’t even speak what little Russian I do know around her. He should know that Willow, a sweet little girl, now has bloodstains on her pillow because Oleg violently kidnapped her from my own home.

Instead, I keep it all to myself and go for the easiest explanation. “Never turn your back on an enemy unless you know for a fact that he’s dead.”

“Agreed.” He nods. “Done. I must admit, Demyen, I’m surprised to hear about this family of yours. You are not married? But you have a daughter?”

I can’t help but smile with pride. “It’s complicated. But I hope to rectify that soon. And, with your blessing, maybe bring them here for a visit someday.”

The old man bursts into a wide grin. “Keep yourself and yours in line as you have, and you will always be welcome here. Now, you will have to excuse us. My *vors* and I have some accounting to do.”

CLARA

Princess whines as we leave Willow to settle in for her new school day. “It’s okay, sweet girl,” I murmur to her as I rub her behind her ears. “It’s just another day at school. We’ll come back for her later, okay?”

I get a huff as my answer. It’s better than nothing.

Willow had wanted Princess to stay with her as the official mascot of her classroom, but without proper licensing—or the proper breeding—it was something we sadly couldn’t allow.

We could, however, be her escorts to and from the car. After everything these children have been through, it’s almost like Princess is the canine guardian angel they need to see padding along the sidewalk, closely watching over them as they hang up their backpacks and find their seats on the apple-patterned rug.

If I’m being honest, I keep Princess by my side at all times for more selfish reasons. I feel better knowing that, even without a gun in my hand or Demyen covering me, I have ninety-five pounds of muscle and fangs watching my back.

“C’mon, up you go.”

Princess hops into the back seat, then climbs over the console and nestles into the front passenger seat.

I sigh. She did this when we left the house, too.

“Alright, fine. But I’m buckling you in.” Thankfully, the leash we bought her to match her harness has an actual car buckle attached to it for moments like this.

Princess doesn't give me any trouble while I buckle her in. She licks my face when I'm done and settles in for the ride to our next destination.

Every day with her further confirms my suspicions: she was never meant to be a violent dog. She simply loves, protects, and wants the same in return.

It's only the assholes in this world who pull out her vicious side.

I do have other places to go, but nothing on an actual schedule, so I take us out for a drive-thru coffee and "pup cup." Much to my surprise and immense relief, I'd completely forgotten all about the debit card Demyen set up for my cash account weeks ago—and how, on a quick trip out with Bambi, I'd left it in the pocket of my yoga pants.

It fell out of that pocket this morning when I started piling my laundry together. I feel like I'm winning the slot machine lottery all over again.

I don't have to depend on Martin for *shit*.

Well, I did have to talk him into using my old SUV still stored away inside the garage. It's not much, but it's something—and it wasn't difficult to point out to Martin that our daughter is in school, we need to be responsible parents available for emergencies, I have to buy groceries, et cetera. He was reluctant, but not unreasonable.

I'm going to abide by his demands and limit my errands.

For now.

But once we've settled into a predictable routine, I'm grabbing Willow and getting the hell out of Vegas. I'll send a text to Bambi once we're in the clear and maybe, hopefully, Demyen will meet us wherever we go.

I was... Well, "happy" isn't the right word. Content? That's not it, either. Able? Yes. I was *able* to sit by and wait for him to return for us—up until Martin started to put the moves on me after we tucked Willow into bed.

I said no.

He said yes.

I said no again.

He pushed me onto the bed.

I kicked him in the groin, shoved him off, and ran into Willow's room.

He tried to follow me.

Princess growled a very clear warning of what would happen if he dared set a foot inside that room.

Martin went to bed. I slept on the floor next to Willow, pillowed by Princess's curled body.

He tried apologizing this morning. I told him he needs to prove it by letting me use the SUV.

And thus, here I am, sipping a decaf latte and pulling up into the parking lot of the Las Vegas Police Department. Martin's waiting for me outside, leaning against the railing and texting someone on his phone.

"Stay," I order Princess. I make sure to roll down the window and pour some water into a little bowl I grabbed from the kitchen before we left. "I won't be long, okay?"

She looks at Martin. Then at me. It doesn't take a genius to read her mind.

"I know. I don't like it, either. But we gotta get this done."

I lock the car after another thorough check that Princess will be fine, then make my way over to where my still-ex is waiting.

He thinks we're back together. I'm letting him think that only for as long as it takes to get the hell out of here.

"Ready?" he asks me. I nod and hope that's enough, but of course, it never is with him. He slips his arm around the small of my back and leads us inside.

It only takes a single phone call from the front desk to get permission to see the commissioner in his office. Martin must have made arrangements ahead of time.

A part of me aches for the man he could have been. *This* man, the one who does the right thing and holds even his own people accountable. Under the right circumstances, we might have been able to be something together. Do something together.

But the scratch marks on my arm remind me that no one changes that easily. And it's foolish to stick around waiting for them to try.

Commissioner Jackson meets us at the door to his office with a grim smile and a firm handshake. "Come in, please. I wish I could welcome you under different circumstances, but let's make do with what we have."

We follow him to his desk and settle into the chairs he offers us. Martin subtly shifts his to be closer to me, so I scootch mine to move away from him. He shoots me a quick little glower, but even he knows not to gamble with the sensitive situation we're currently in.

"So, tell me more about your concerns with Detective Everett," Jackson says with a heavy sigh. He leans back in his own chair and glances between us. "I have to say, the fact that you're here, Miss Everett, does not inspire confidence in his favor."

"I—"

"I've been made aware of his underhanded dealings," Martin interrupts. "As much as it pains me to say, there's solid evidence indicating Greg is a dirty cop."

I wait for either one of them to continue. I'd rather get permission to speak than constantly be interrupted and overridden by Martin's ego. When Jackson gestures for me to contribute, I nod my agreement. "I can't call myself blameless, sir. I wasn't complicit, either, but I can't help feeling I should have reported him sooner."

Jackson shrugs a shoulder. "You're his daughter. You want to protect him. I understand."

No, clearly, you don't. I bite back what I want to say and instead offer up a sheepish little smile. "Thank you. I... I only

want to do what's right.”

“You two have evidence?”

Martin nods and reaches into his jacket pocket for a folder. “I’ve got police logs here—”

I quietly pull out my phone, find the recording file, and set it on the commissioner’s desk.

“Shit. I didn’t think it would ever get out.”

Jackson stills. So does Martin.

The only sound in the office is Dad’s voice spilling every sordid detail of the cover-up he did that sent an innocent man to prison.

“... I found that wolf shit growing in his windowsill. After the autopsy, I mean...”

“... The minute I saw that report, I knew the spotlight would turn on me. It didn’t matter if I killed him or not, Internal Affairs would start combing through my shit and my personal life...”

“... It was like the universe just wanted me to get away without breaking a sweat...”

By the time the recording is finished playing, both men are beyond pissed. Martin’s red in the face, while Jackson hides his glare behind a balled fist pressed to his mouth.

“That’s all I have as far as a confession.” I take my phone back and check to make sure the recording is still there. After all that’s happened, I can never be too sure about the little things.

Jackson nods. “Send it to me.”

I do as he says. A moment later, the damning evidence pings in his inbox and pulls up on his laptop screen.

He continues to glare into nothingness. Then, after a deep breath, he leans back and presses a button on his desk phone. “Caroline? Reschedule my meetings for today. And get me Kowalski, Brenner, Shanti, and Smith. Tell them it’s urgent.”

I swallow hard and glance over at Martin. He's still livid, still that shade of tomato red, but he looks at me and reaches over to squeeze my hand.

He doesn't say anything. He doesn't have to.

When the four Internal Affairs detectives arrive, we're separated into different interrogation rooms and questioned for hours. Shanti and Brenner are the two who sit down with me to take my testimony. They're also the two who make sure to send someone out to check on Princess after it's been a while longer than I initially planned.

I expected this to be a process of questions and answers, circling through the same trains of thought over and over again until they fully understand what's going on. It's unbelievable that their top detective would be so incredibly dirty, but I have the evidence and names of witnesses to verify everything. I expected to give them that much.

What I didn't expect was for the floodgates to open. For me to tell them everything, and I mean *everything*, about the hell my father subjected me to since infancy.

I tell them about my mother. About the yelling and shouting and screams I'd hear when all I wanted to do was hug my teddy bear and go to sleep. About the beatings that started when he figured I was old enough to understand the difference between an accident and intentional. About how he'd backhanded me into submission so I'd say what he wanted me to say and ultimately used me as a pawn to put an innocent man into prison.

I tell them about my suspicions about what happened to my mom. How no one will ever be able to prove that he killed her, but I just *know*. I've always known and could never face the possibility head on until now.

"What's changed?" Shanti gently asks. "Why now?"

What a loaded question.

I blow out a long, heavy sigh and slump in my chair. How do I tell the truth? That a powerful casino owner who is also

basically the king of Vegas' dark underworld taught me how to stand up for myself?

That an organized crime lord showed me what real love is supposed to be like?

That a big, bad Bratva boss demonstrated how real fathers treat their daughters by being for Willow what neither Martin nor Greg could ever be for either of us?

"I've found more friends who understand what I've been going through" is the answer I settle on. "I have a stronger support system. I don't know. I guess... the timing is best now. I'm no longer afraid."

She gives me a reassuring, if not sympathetic, smile. "That makes sense. We see this happen a lot with abuse victims. It's just really disheartening when the perpetrator is one of our own."

"Yeah." I scratch at a bubble on the vinyl tabletop with my thumbnail.

"Well, that should be all we need for now. We really appreciate your time—and please know that we do understand how difficult this must be for you."

"Absolutely," Brenner agrees. He has kind eyes and a warm smile. "If you ever need anything, do not hesitate to reach out to either one of us."

I nod and push my chair out, needing to be done and just... fresh air. I need fresh air.

Martin meets me in the hallway. He looks as worn as I feel, but the fact that no one is escorting him away in cuffs means he probably managed to gloss over his own involvement in my father's dealings.

"Everything go well?" he asks me.

I dodge his attempt to give me a side-hug and nod. "Yeah. I just need to use the restroom before we go."

"Alright. Meet me downstairs, okay?"

"Okay."

I wait for him to shuffle off to the stairs, then duck into the nearest restroom. I do, in fact, need to pee after hours in the interrogation room.

But I also need a moment to gather my thoughts, my wits, and jot down a quick message.

I pull out the sticky note and pen I lifted from the detectives' things and suck in a deep breath.

This has to be done. Now or never.

Martin Patterson tampered with evidence to get Tolya Zakrevsky out of prison.

I stare at the words.

Then flip it over and add, ***He's also been assaulting and beating me for years. Please help.***

I throw the pen into the trash, then fold up the note as small as I can make it go.

My heart pounds against my ribcage as I leave the restroom. Martin is nowhere to be seen; he must be downstairs as promised and waiting for me to join him. I don't have much time.

Shanti emerges from the interrogation room and smiles when she sees me. I beeline directly for her, which makes her brow furrow with concern. "Everything okay?"

"Fine! Great!" I beam at her and hold out my hand. "I just wanted to thank you for helping me through this. It really means a lot."

She shakes my hand. As she does, I press the note from between my fingers into her palm.

When her eyes widen, I know she knows what I'm trying to do.

"Of course, Miss Everett. Please let me know if there's ever anything else."

And with that, we go our separate ways. Detective Shanti slips away to read the note, and I take the stairs down to meet Martin and plan our next steps.

I stop midway down, though. I can see him by the main door, chatting with the front desk officer and paying more attention to his phone than anything—or anyone—else around him.

So I grab my phone and pull up my texts. *It's done*, I tap out. *They're both done*. I almost leave it at that, but something in my gut says to give Bambi fair warning. *Tossing this number. I'll message you from a new one.*

I consider throwing the phone into the trash. At least that way, when Martin comes after me—and he will, once Internal Affairs comes gunning for him—I'll have the excuse of a lost phone that may or may not be found by janitorial staff sometime much later.

But then I see Brenner walking up the stairs. He spots me, smiles, and then—like his partner—notices that I have something to give him.

I quickly remove the lock on my phone and toss it into a nearby trash can. The wads of paper inside cushion the fall, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

“Have you seen my phone?” I ask him innocently. “I can't remember where I put it.”

Brenner stares at me for one unblinking moment. Then he shrugs. “I haven't seen it. But I can let you know if we find it.”

Translation: I'll know when they come for Martin.

I meet Martin where he hasn't moved from the front desk and for once, I let him loop his arm through mine and act like we're actually a couple. Maybe it's partly to throw him a bone after he actually made an effort to do something marginally ethical.

Mostly, it's because I need him to grow confident that this is real. We're a couple, we're getting married, and there's no way I'll ever leave him.

At least, not until the moment is right.

DEMYEN

The execution of Oleg Alexei Zakrevsky is announced throughout the Bratva. For his crimes and his treachery, he will be shot to death and then buried in an unmarked grave.

There will be no ceremony.

There will be no mourners.

Worst of all for a man like him, there will be no glory. Instead of dying in the face of dangerous enemies and going out in a blazing ball of fiery infamy, he will perish on his knees from a single gunshot delivered by someone he's never met.

For a man like him, that's almost worse than death itself.

Tolya and I arrive back at the Zakrevsky estate the following evening to attend the execution. It's my understanding that this would have typically taken place the same day as his sentencing, but the fact that he stole from so many people within the Bratva delayed the process via their investigation.

Judging by the additional seven people lined up on either side of him, I'm going to guess that they uncovered how he managed to pull it off.

Pakhan Zakrevsky nods a solemn greeting to Tolya and I when he walks into the courtyard. "If you have anything to say to him, do it now."

It's a rare favor given under these circumstances. We won't take it for granted.

I step aside so Tolya can have the first say as the eldest. He walks over to where our father is on his knees, gagged and bound.

I'm not sure what I expect Tolya to say. *Thank you? At least I'm out now?*

No meaningful words are spoken. All he does is spit at the ground in front of Oleg, mutter a curse in Russian, and stalk back over to me.

Fair enough.

Between the two of us, I've always been the more talkative one.

"I'd say this is a surprise, but let's be honest." I crouch in front of Oleg so we can at least see each other eye to eye. Probably for the first and last time. "You and I both knew this day was coming. I'm just surprised it's not in *my* courtyard."

Oleg grumbles something into his gag. I'm not exactly inclined to remove the fabric so I can listen to whatever bullshit he wants to spout.

"I don't want to be rude to our hosts, so I'll make this quick. You're a sick son of a bitch and you deserve far worse than this. You're a traitor to your own family. You don't even know what *bratva* means. But worst of all? You're such a fucking coward, you'd sooner trade an innocent child to get what you want than find another way. All this pomp and parading around like you're some international badass and you know what I found? *Lies*. All of it. You've been in debt to Raizo Watanabe for years and figured, what—you'd pay him off by buying my girlfriend?"

Saying it out loud makes everything we've uncovered sound far more ludicrous. It's all true, too: Oleg barely has two cents to rub together. What money he does—*did*—make from his trafficking rings funded his extravagant lifestyle but didn't go toward paying off his debts.

So he lied. He lied, he cheated, and he stole from not only his own men and allies, but from the same people who oversee our operation on an international level.

The other men now trembling on their knees, awaiting their own executions, are the same men who funneled account details to Oleg so he could skim funds without ever being noticed.

“You’re pathetic.” I sigh and shake my head. “And you’re just fucking sad. Sad, small, and insignificant. Once this is over, all you’ll be is a stain in this frozen garden. Was it worth it?”

I don’t wait for a response. I stand back up and rejoin Tolya, who watches everything with considerable trepidation.

Someone shouts a countdown.

“*Tri!*”

Oleg straightens his posture.

“*Dva!*”

Tolya holds his breath.

“*Odin!*”

One by one, and yet somehow all at the same time, heads explode. Blood splatters everywhere. Bodies hit the dirt.

And Oleg Alexei Zakrevsky is no more.

I don’t move. Neither does Tolya.

“You two are welcome to return home to the States,” the grand *pakhan* tells us on his way out. “Get back to your families. Sort this mess out with the Yakuza.”

Both of us sigh like the weight of Oleg’s oppression has finally lifted. In a way, it has.

In other ways, it will remain with us until our own final days.

Tolya rests a heavy hand on my shoulder. “He’s right,” he grumbles. “We got shit to do.”

I hear him. I heard both of them. I guess I just need a moment to process the sight before me, of Oleg’s head scattered around an otherwise elegant courtyard garden. Of his blood pooling in the dark soil patch of a bed of ranunculus.

Clara would be proud I even know what those are called.

She'll be even more relieved to know her worst nightmare is dead.

CLARA

So far, so good.

Martin tried taking advantage of our “bonding time” by putting on the physical romance when he got home, but I fended him off by running to the bathroom and shouting that I had explosive diarrhea.

It’s stupid, I know. But it was all I could think of.

Lucky for me, he bought it. He gave me a strange look after I made several (fake) ungodly noises in the bathroom and asked if I was still able to cook dinner. Willow came out of her room to ask if I was okay.

Princess did me a solid by passing gas when she checked on me in the bathroom. Martin got one whiff and avoided me, the bathroom, and this part of the house in general.

Thank God for small favors.

And for dogs with helpfully rank digestive systems.

Martin leaves me alone while getting ready for work. I’m still sleeping in Willow’s room but he hasn’t brought it up. I’m hoping he figures I just need time to readjust with her. He’s trying to connect with her and make her his “baby girl,” but again—it’s too little, too late.

This time, when I drop Willow off, I convince her that Princess needs to stay home to “guard the fort” while I run a few errands. She pouts but agrees, and we get her settled into her classroom for the day without a hitch.

Martin's at work. Willow is at school.

Time to move.

The truth is, I needed Princess at home to act as a sort of alarm system. If I can hear her when I pull up, I know someone else is here. I can't afford to take any risks with what I'm about to do, so I need all the help I can get.

Despite Martin's best efforts to convince me to finish unpacking, I managed to delay it by making up excuses like "I'm still organizing" and "I'm not sure what I want to keep or throw out."

When, in reality, my gut said today was coming sooner rather than later.

I run into the quiet house and Princess immediately meets me at the door. After a quick head rub and treat, I move past her and start throwing Willow's clothes into a backpack.

Could I just buy her new ones after we leave? Yes.

Do I want to risk a paper trail by using my card right away? Not so much.

My clothes are even easier to pack since I've been essentially living out of Demyen's borrowed suitcase. All I need to grab are my toiletries, and I throw Willow's toothbrush in along with mine.

I stop to take one long, last look at the cramped living room, the small kitchen... the tiny, miserable, caged life Martin wanted me to live.

If arson wasn't a felony, I'd take a match to this whole fucking place.

Princess doesn't need a leash to guide her to the SUV—she books it out of the house and beelines right for her favorite spot in the front seat. When she feels like I'm taking too long to drag the suitcase out, she whines and yips until I pop the trunk open.

"Yeah, yeah. I know. We gotta go."

I'm almost ready to leave when I glance inside the garage. Martin's very abandoned workstation is in there, full of top-of-the-line equipment he swore he'd use but never touched once they were out of the package.

I don't know why, but the toolbox sitting on the workbench intrigues me. I motion for Princess to stay put inside the car while I peek inside the garage.

It's not dusty like the tools.

In fact, it looks like it's been recently moved.

Curiosity gets the better of me. I slip inside and tiptoe over to the toolbox with only the sunlight glowing through gaps in the wall slats lighting my way. I flinch when the latches loudly snap open, but I also remind myself that Martin is away at work.

Holy shit.

This thing is *stuffed* with cash.

I don't even think about it—I take the whole damn thing. There's no time to count or sort it out; I just relatch the lid and carry it with me, practically throwing it into the trunk.

Consider it child support.

The engine barely registers in my ears, my heart is pounding so loud. I peel out of the driveway in reverse, whip the SUV around, and start driving the fifteen minutes it takes to get back to Willow's school.

I'm doing it.

I'm actually doing it.

I'm not going to some casino on a whim or getting swept off my feet by some not-quite-knight in beat-up armor.

I'm getting my daughter and me the hell out of Vegas, just like I'd wanted to from the start.

And you know what?

This feels *fucking incredible*.

I laugh. I laugh and I laugh, and then I laugh some more. That dumbass Martin won't know what to think when he sees that we're gone. He probably won't even figure out I found his toolbox until it's way too late and we're in Canada or Barbados or on the freaking moon.

We're doing this, baby girl. Mama's got you.

Mama's also going nineteen over the speed limit, which I don't notice until the red, white, and blue lights start flashing behind me.

Shit.

Something in my gut tells me to keep going, don't pull over.

But that "something" won't have to deal with the consequences of evading a police officer, especially as the daughter of one. So I do what any normal, not-running-from-her-ex person would do and pull to the side of the road.

Princess feels as unsettled as I do. She whines and shifts in her seat, eager to break free from the gentle restraint of the seatbelt.

The officer steps out of the car.

And my heart plummets.

Fuck.

No. No, no, no...

Martin adjusts his sunglasses and saunters up over to my driver's side window that I already rolled down before I saw who it was. "Well, well, well," he drawls. "Looks like I caught myself a sexy little speed demon. What's the rush, baby?"

Breathe. Fucking breathe.

"Heard a good song on the radio," I lie through my teeth. "Didn't notice I was tapping my foot."

"Oh, yeah?" He laughs and leans on the door frame. "Which one?"

I can't think of anything. My panicked mind is utterly blank. "Er, I don't know. It was just good."

Martin nods and drums his fingers on the top of the car. “I figured you’d be home by now. I’m honestly surprised to see you out and about.”

Please... please don't see the bags in the back. “We’re out of a few things back home. I needed to run and grab groceries.” I’m praying for this to work. “I was thinking about making steak for dinner.”

“That sounds delicious, baby.” He grins at me and leans in through the window for a kiss. “You know you’re my favorite chef.”

I laugh nervously. Anything to get him to back out and leave me alone.

Martin reaches in... and yanks the keys from the steering wheel.

He grabs the back of my head.

Then slams me face-first into the wheel.

My world is ringing. And spinning. And filled with vicious barking and snarling that does seem to keep Martin at bay.

There’s blood all over the steering wheel. All over me.

“You think you’re so fucking clever, huh? Huh?!”

His voice sounds far away. But when I look up, his face is inches from mine. Bright red and spraying spit whenever he talks.

“I tapped your phone, you stupid bitch. Tracked this car, too. I know you’re the one who turned me in. You think you’re so smart? You think you can just play me and then run the fuck away?”

He reaches to grab my hair again. This time, however, it’s Princess doing the grabbing—with her teeth clamped firmly down on his arm.

Martin screams.

Princess takes that as her cue to let him go, but she snarls and braces herself in the tight space to defend me until the very end. Every inch of her is coiled and poised to strike.

“Get out! Get out of the fucking car before I shoot your fucking dog!”

I know he will. I also know he’s wasting time because he’s scared how this will look, an officer pulling his gun on a woman with her dog in broad daylight.

It takes a lot of effort to see through the haze now pounding against my skull, but I manage to open the door and stumble out. Martin grabs me and slams me against the side of the car, fondling me in some mock show of a cavity search, then slaps handcuffs on me.

I’m too dizzy to ask what the hell he thinks he’s doing. I can barely keep myself upright as he drags me over to the squad car.

“We had a good thing going, you and me.” Martin shoves me against the trunk of his car and whispers into my ear. “But you just had to go and fuck it up.”

I can hear Princess still in the SUV, losing her absolute mind. She’s barking, snarling, growling, and all but lunging at Martin who is smart to keep himself away from her. He doesn’t bother going back, but he does grab his radio with one hand while gripping my cuffed hands in the other to tell Dispatch that he found “an abandoned car with a dog inside.”

Mine, I want to scream. *It’s my car. My... my dog...*

He’s not letting me leave him.

“In a perfect world, Clara, I’d fuck you right here and now.” Martin grabs my ass and squeezes painfully hard. “I’d fuck you so hard over the back of this car whether you wanted to or not. But we don’t have the time and there are too many witnesses.”

He yanks on my hands again and I’m stumbling, reeling, then falling... falling... falling...

The trunk door slams shut.

I’m in the trunk of his squad car. Martin Patterson, once the love of my life and the father of my child, has officially kidnapped me.

God only knows what he's going to do next.

DEMYEN

“She’s *what?*” I hold a hand up that Bambi can’t see. My nerves have been shot since we took off from Sochi hours ago, and this is not helping a fucking thing. “Calm down, Bam. What’s going on?”

“Clara is missing!”

I take back what I just said. *Do not calm down. Do not calm down at all.*

Tolya’s gaze snaps to mine when he hears the shouting clear through the phone. I take a deep breath and force myself to not leap to the most immediate conclusions. “Okay. Okay. How do we know this?”

“For fuck’s sake—I’m at the goddamn school, Demyen! It let out over an hour ago and Clara’s nowhere to be found! They had to call me to come get poor Willow who has not stopped crying—”

I can hear my baby girl sobbing in the distance. Her little voice hiccups and for a brief moment, Bambi’s voice muffles as she presumably turns around to ask Willow if she wants to... sounds like something to do with hugs and bears.

“—and Pav just texted me because there’s been a weird call through LVPD dispatch about an abandoned car with a dog—”

At this point, it makes more sense to put her on speaker so Tolya can listen, too. He frowns and mouths his question to me. “Dog?”

I nod, trying to ignore the nausea building in the pit of my stomach. “Did they pick it up yet?”

Bambi snorts with irritation. “Fuck if I know! Listen, I gotta go deal with Willow and see if Roxy has any ideas on what to do. When are you coming back?”

“We’re landing in just a few minutes.” I swallow hard and take a few deep breaths. “We’re coming, okay? We’ll be right there.”

I don’t know who hangs up first and I don’t care. All I care about is getting off this fucking plane and finding out where the ever-loving fuck Clara is.

If Martin is responsible...

He’ll wish I’d kill him. It would be better than what I actually intend to do.

“Yo.” Tolya nudges me with his foot as we take our seats and buckle in for the landing. “I’m right here with you. We’re going to find Clara, and we’re going to make sure your family is safe. Okay?”

I want to hug him. To tell him I’m glad he’s back and I’m sorry it took so long.

But we don’t have time for that. The jet descends, we hit smooth pavement, and as we taxi down the runway, I remind myself that this is not a time to let my anxiety and panic overrun my logic. I have to be cool. I have to be calm. I have to—

I have to find the fucking switch to the hidden cache of weapons on this jet.

Because we’re under attack.

Bullets riddle the side of my Gulfstream and I’m instantly beyond pissed. The flight attendant screams and rushes back inside, her arm covered in blood from a graze in her shoulder. Tolya and I both quickly usher her into the safety of the jet bedroom, then grab our guns from the cache inside the coffee table.

The body of my pilot is blocking the way out. His copilot is slumped against the door to the cockpit. Both of them are dead, their blood splattered all over the boarding area.

Tolya shoulders past me and starts firing. After a few shouts, he quickly nods and motions for me to follow him. “Cleared a path. Let’s go!”

It’s a short-lived reprieve. As we descend down the stairs, more bullets whizz past our heads and bodies and it’s all we can do to duck behind the nearest loading truck for cover.

“Who the fuck are these guys?” Tolya shouts over the loud echoes of gunshots.

“Yakuza!”

This time, it’s literally Yakuza, not some hired stooges cosplaying as Japanese gangsters. Oleg is not around to fuck shit up by adding his mercenaries and I happen to have a few ideas as to why Raizo’s out for my head. And Tolya’s, by proxy.

I take that back—Oleg doesn’t even have to be alive to still fuck shit up. It’s his fault his two sons are now scrambling to figure out just how many pissed-off Japanese mobsters are trying to murder them because he couldn’t leave well enough alone. No, he had to go and use stolen Bratva money to pay mercenaries to *pretend* to be Yakuza, all while actually joining in with the real Yakuza so whatever fucking chaos he wanted to sow would just... just...

You know what? I’m done trying to figure out what the fuck that asshole’s whole game plan was.

I’m also done getting shot at.

I pivot around the loading truck and squeeze a few shots off at the nearest shooters. I miss one, but hit the other square in the chest.

When I pivot back in, Tolya takes my place and finishes the one guy off while knocking off a third.

“You got a car?” he asks.

“God, I hope so.” I check my ammo and toss him a spare magazine I had the presence of mind to grab from the jet. “If it’s not Swiss cheese by now, it’s out back behind the hangar.”

Tolya nods. “Meet you there.” And before I have a chance to protest, he runs out firing and heads for the rear door of the hangar.

Fuck me.

I steel myself for the oncoming onslaught. *Don’t get shot.* I’ve got too much to lose this time.

My own attempt to make a mad dash for the back exit is cut off by some asshole with an automatic. I have to throw myself down to the pavement just to avoid the stream of bullets that fly overhead.

I roll onto my stomach and scan the hangar until I spot him, then squeeze a few more shots until I hear him scream and watch him drop like a sack of potatoes.

A long shadow suddenly covers me. It’s the only warning I get before Raizo’s lieutenant aims his gun right at my head.

I manage to roll away just in time; the sound of the blast is damn near deafening. He readies himself for the next shot but I’m not fucking around—I swing my legs over, catching him behind the knees. He cries out in surprise and I snatch the gun from his hands as he stumbles to the ground.

“The fuck is your problem?!” I demand, whipping him with the butt of the gun. I could just shoot him point-blank where I have him, but I need some fucking answers.

The lieutenant laughs. He fucking *laughs*. Blood trickles from his mouth and his eye starts to swell up pretty quickly, but he apparently finds something about this fucking hilarious.

“You can’t cheat Raizo!” he spits between chuckles. “You owe him a shit ton of money, you—”

“Call your men off and I’ll talk with Raizo.” I cannot believe all this is over something so fucking stupid. Of course, there’s no way the Zakrevsky *vors* in Sochi would just let fifty million slip away.

“It’s too late! You owe him way more than you can afford to pay!”

The attacks. The factory. The slaves.

This is about more than money and a few misunderstandings.

“Don’t worry,” he cackles. “I hear that pretty slut is going for even more now that there’s history.”

“The fuck did you say?!”

But I don’t wait for him to answer. I pistol-whip him again, then press the barrel to his head and pull the trigger.

I’m beyond pissed. The next man who lunges at me doesn’t get the swift dispatch of a bullet to his brain because I need to fucking obliterate something with my bare hands. I grab his gun and toss both of ours aside so I can beat his ass into a bloody pulp.

He gets a few hard blows in, I’ll give him that much. I feel a rib crack when he yanks me down and slams his knee up into my side at the same time. It only fuels my rage and I roar at him, tackling him to the ground to beat his face in until he stops moving.

A quick glance across the hangar tells me Tolya’s dealing with his own set of attackers, one of whom is stupid enough to try and take him barehanded as well. Tolya makes quick work snapping the man’s neck, but he doesn’t see the second one pull a gun from behind his back.

I don’t think; I just aim.

BANG.

The would-be shooter drops dead.

It’s a break in the chaos I need to take advantage of. Whether the Yakuza are regrouping or they’re all actually dead is not something I have the time or willpower to check on—I just need to get to the Hummer stashed away out back.

“Let’s go!”

Tolya falls in behind me, constantly checking our backs for any surprise shooters. “I think they’re regrouping,” he

confirms.

“Let them. We won’t be here when they launch another attack.” I kick the back door open and breathe a sigh of relief. The Hummer is still under the tarp.

And the keys are still inside.

We waste no time loading ourselves in and firing it up. Just like I’ve always ordered, the tank is full and everything on the dashboard indicates it’s been maintained.

I don’t fuck with fate. Lady Luck has never really been an ally, so I always make sure to be prepared for the worst-case scenarios.

Tolya groans and wheezes as he buckles himself in. I quickly glance over at him and notice more than a few trails of blood on him. “You good?”

“Yeah,” he grimaces. “Just feel like I attracted more bullets than I dodged. Don’t worry about me, though. We need to get to Clara.”

He doesn’t have to tell me twice.

I floor the Hummer around the backyard of the hangar and burst out into what was definitely intended to be our second round of Yakuza hell. We catch them by surprise, however, and quite literally mow down a handful who were unfortunate enough to be in the way.

A few more bullets puncture the sides of the Hummer. I don’t try to retaliate. It’s going to take them more than a few minutes to collect themselves into vehicles and pursue us, and by then we’ll be well out of range.

I keep one eye on the road while syncing my phone to the Hummer’s system. The second it beeps confirmation, I hit Pavel’s name on speed dial. “Talk to me.”

“Good news or bad news first?”

“Bad,” Tolya answers for me.

“Raizo’s definitely pissed. He’s also got Clara, no thanks to Patterson. Seems like now that Greg’s out of the picture, Raizo

needs a new ‘in’ and has his sights set on—”

“Wait. What do you mean, ‘Greg’s out of the picture’?”

Pavel’s grin is obvious through the sound of his voice shifting. “Our Clara has been a very busy lady. LVPD is in utter chaos over the investigation she cracked open over her dad’s head. He’s in custody and won’t be seeing sunshine for a very long time.”

“I’m assuming that’s the good news.”

“Part of it.” His voice grows serious again. “You were right. Raizo’s been monitoring her for weeks. Word on the street is he had his own plans to extract her from Oleg, and now that he’s gone and Greg’s under house arrest...”

I frown. “But she’s with Martin. Bambi said he’s the one who took her.”

“Right. And thanks to Raizo’s weird obsession with her, we know exactly where they are.”

I was not aware I’d stopped breathing entirely until that sigh of relief rolls through me. “Please tell me—”

“Willow’s safe. She’s shaken up, but we managed to retrieve Princess from police custody once they saw her instantly calm down around the kid. You also owe me a few hundred bucks.”

“Help me get Clara back, and I’ll give you a permanent pay raise.”

“Shit, I’ll do that for free. Sending you the coordinates now.”

As the map pops up in the navigation console, I feel myself begin to white-knuckle the steering wheel.

Clara’s okay. She’s got to be okay. Martin wouldn’t...

Please, God.

Let her be okay.

CLARA

My head fucking *hurts*.

I'm starting to understand why Demyen's so foul-mouthed half the time. If I was constantly getting beat up and injured like this, I'd be the exact same way.

Bright lights suddenly fill my eyes and do nothing to help the throbbing migraine pounding against my skull. The only reprieve is Martin's dark shadow when he steps in front of them.

Then again, I think I prefer being blinded.

"Up and at 'em, sweetheart." He reaches down and yanks me up by a fistful of my hair, pulling me out of the trunk of his squad car.

I'm cuffed, disoriented, and quickly losing my patience.

And then panic lances through me. *Willow*. It's already sunset and we're apparently at some sort of container truck depot, far away from the city limits and Willow's school.

I was supposed to pick her up.

I quickly remind myself to take inventory before I spiral into a state of panic I won't be able to pull myself out of. Her school knows we have "special circumstances" regarding Martin, after that one kidnapping attempt. Demyen increased security after the shooting. And Bambi—

Bambi. She's on the emergency contact list. So is Pavel and Demyen. Any one of them would have picked her up by now

and figured out something's wrong.

Tears sting my eyes; I'll blame them on my injuries. In truth, I'm so immensely relieved to know without a doubt that no matter what happens to me, Willow is safe with her new family.

I can suffer...

As long as she doesn't.

"Come on," Martin grumbles, dragging me beside him to a small building at the edge of the depot. "I don't have all fucking night."

He shoves me through a group of men who I think might be Yakuza. If so...

Oh, Martin. You absolute idiot.

Sure enough, Raizo Watanabe is sitting behind the main desk, counting stacks of cash and listening to opera music. A woman in nothing but a satin slip and kitten heels massages his neck and shoulders while another one quickly rises from beneath the desk and wipes her mouth.

I quickly look away. I don't need new memories replacing the already old and terrible ones.

"Who the fuck let you in here?" Raizo snaps at Martin.

"*She* did." He finally lets go of my hair, but only to shove me forward onto my hands and knees.

Raizo leans over the desk to peer at me. His brow hits his hairline with casual surprise.

And then he grins.

I *hate* that fucking grin.

"Well done, Detective. Although I am confused. I distinctly remember selling her to... to... ah, right. Oleg Zakrevsky."

"Zakrevsky's dead," Martin grumbles. "Word just came in through informants. Figured you'd want her back."

The air leaves my lungs and for a moment, I can't breathe.

Oleg. They're talking about Oleg.

Now, I'm breathless for a whole new reason.

Oleg is dead?

Raizo seems to consider this for a moment. "Can't say I'm surprised. I will say, however, that I am surprised *you* are the one bringing her to me. Last I heard, you were telling everyone who'd listen that she's your wife. So tell me, *Detective Patterson*, what is a cop doing here handing me his wife?"

"Selling," Martin quickly corrects. "I'm selling you this ungrateful bitch because I'm tired of putting up with her shit. I'll even look into a deal with you just to get her properly trained."

Oh, Martin. You stupid, stupid man.

Raizo leans back in his seat and dismisses his slaves with an impatient flick of his hand. When he fixes his gaze on me, I feel my skin crawl and my gut churn. He gestures for me to approach him, and that nausea only grows.

He swiftly pulls me onto his lap once I'm close enough, then looks at Martin like he's some mouse the cat is about to enjoy playing with.

"Being a bad girl, are we?" Raizo gently strokes my hair over one shoulder. "We can't have that."

"She manipulated me!" Martin spits. "She got me to turn Greg in and now, they're investigating me, too! I'm gonna lose everything!"

"Only a fool can be manipulated. That's not her fault."

I stifle a snort. This is not the time to laugh, or side with despicable assholes.

But Martin's face? I'm loving it.

"But I guess you can't be blamed too much. I imagine her pussy is beyond addictive."

At this, Martin glowers. "I wouldn't fucking know. The bitch keeps holding out on me."

If Raizo looked surprised before, he's downright shocked now. "Really? This whole time?"

"Yeah? What's it to you?"

The Yakuza lord shrugs and casually rubs his hand over my stomach. "To me? Not much. Just a minor inconvenience that we'll take care of when the time comes. To you? I can't imagine what it's like seeing your so-called wife pregnant with another man's baby."

I freeze.

So does Martin.

Raizo drops his hand to my thigh and continues to rub me in all the wrong ways, both literally and figuratively. He's playing some fucked-up game and enjoying every moment of our reactions.

"So it sounds like you're in quite a mess," he calmly continues, no longer looking at Martin even though the conversation is definitely for him. He's too busy touching my hair, stroking my back. "Since you've brought my sweet Clara back to me, and with *bonus* merchandise, I have no problems expressing my gratitude. Tell me, Martin, how can I help?"

Martin stammers for a second, then shakes his head. "I, uh..." He watches Raizo caress my stomach again, his mouth hanging open. Then he gives himself another shake and looks away. "I need to get out of here. Out of the country. I don't care where-the-fuck-ever—just help me get out before they come for me."

Raizo snorts. "That's cowardice."

"No, that's fucking survival. I don't want to find out what they do to dirty cops in prison."

"Fair enough," Raizo chuckles. "I can't say I blame you. Consider it done."

Martin looks surprised. "What? Really?"

"As long as you leave my fucking office right now. Wait outside for instructions. We'll get you on our next shipment out."

The men stare at each other, Martin in actual shock that his request was granted, and Raizo with no small amount of barely-concealed impatience. Finally, Martin nods, awkwardly bows a little, and ducks out of the office.

Raizo pulls me closer and nuzzles my neck. “You have been such a naughty girl, haven’t you?” He purrs in my ear. “I’m so tempted to keep you here with me. Show you what it’s like to be my special prize.”

Something clicks inside my head. Something from long ago, back when I was a little girl.

Back when I knew Raizo as a completely different man.

I shove down the nausea to lean into him, and his approval rumbles through his chest as he starts to kiss the curve of my shoulder. “Can I ask you something?”

His eyes slowly lift to meet mine. At first, I’m terrified that I pushed too far. But then he tilts his head and gives me a little nod. “Of course.”

“What happened to you?”

The silence that suddenly fills the room is heavy. So, so heavy and filled with unspoken secrets I probably have no right digging into.

But if I’m going to be sold again—hell, if I’m going to become *his* personal slave—I think, maybe, I do actually have the right to know what happened to the man I once called “Uncle Raizo.”

He slowly pushes me off his lap.

His touch is no longer sensual or seductive. Instead, it’s enough to let me go and guide me away from his reach as he stares at the top of his desk.

And then he looks up at me.

And for the first time, I see his eyes grow bloodshot.

“Sometimes,” he croaks, “when someone dies, we die along with them.”

He doesn't have to say anything more. I don't need an explanation; I only need the memory of him and my mother. And the memory of him at her gravesite, with white roses in one hand and the other balled into a fist as he glared at my father.

He loved my mother.

And her loss broke him.

Raizo clears his throat and blinks away the unshed tears like they never should have existed to begin with. "I can't help you," he says, "other than to keep you here with me."

"With respect, Uncle Raizo..." I know it's a huge gamble, but I've got no other option. "I wouldn't feel right about that."

He stares at the wall. Then looks at me and nods.

I don't know what he snaps in Japanese to his men. He stops them for a second before they pull me away by my arms, gives them another order, then dismisses us with a wave of his hand.

I'm dragged outside and reunited with Martin, who only glares at me with hatred in his eyes as we're both pushed and prodded toward the shipping containers that fill the depot. We pass several containers with doors open wide enough to see women standing inside; we hear some of them sobbing and crying out to us for help.

One such container is still being loaded. And next to it, a couple of men toss a few bags into an empty one and wave for us to go through.

Martin's shoved inside first. I'm not handled as roughly, but they make sure I get in without putting up a fight.

"Wait here," one of Raizo's men says. "We will come get you when it's time."

He shuts the door.

I should have fucking known.

CLARA

It's too bad total darkness doesn't guarantee total silence.

Martin always has been a heavy breather.

"You..." he snarls. "You fucking bitch."

I roll my eyes. He can't see me do it. "Find a new vocabulary, Marty. You're starting to repeat yourself."

"Shut the *fuck* up!"

I do. But only because I don't have much to say. Not to him, anyway. I carefully move away from the sound of his voice and over to where I'm pretty sure those men left a pair of duffel bags for us.

Bingo. My foot connects with something lumpy and soft, so I crouch down and feel around for the zipper. I don't know what all was put in here and I sure as shit don't trust anyone, so I slowly and carefully fish around in the dark until I feel what might... maybe... be a lantern?

It is. It's a battery-operated lantern. I feel for the switch and turn it on, just in time to see Martin huddled over and sulking in the far corner.

Fine. Whatever. I set the lantern down and use the light to poke through the rest of the supplies. There's a few granola bars and a crowbar, for some reason. The second bag holds several bottles of water and a few more of the same snacks.

"Did you put up a fight for him, too? Or did you just lie back and spread your legs like a fucking slut?"

I sigh. Now, when I roll my eyes again, I make sure he sees it. “Move on. Get over it. I left you, I dumped you—whatever you want to call it, I was gone. So yes, I happened to find a man I actually enjoy sharing a bed with. Not that it’s any of your business.”

I have no idea where any of this newfound courage is coming from. Old Clara would *never* speak to Martin this way.

But, to be fair, I think Old Clara died in Oleg’s house.

“The fuck did you just say to me?”

I sigh again and slowly stand. Might as well get it all out in the open. “Here’s the thing, Marty. Aside from being a manipulative, abusive bastard, you’re not all that great in bed. Even outside the bedroom, your lips are always weirdly wet and your clammy hands feel just *wrong*.”

“You little—”

“Actually, no, *you’re* the little one. Thank God, right? I mean, you’re also a rapist and a predator and some would even go so far as to call you a pedophile for grooming a minor... but at least you have a tiny dick. Makes the trauma a bit easier to endure.”

I am on a *roll*. And I don’t fucking care.

Maybe that’s what this is—I’ve simply stopped caring what Martin Patterson thinks, what he feels, or about what he might do. We’re locked inside a shipping container, for fuck’s sake. Stripped down without his badge or his uniform—because the Yakuza took that off him while they were waiting for me—he’s just a pathetically insignificant man who wishes he could be something he’s not.

I leave the insults where they lay and return to rummaging through the pockets of the first duffel bag.

I don’t see his knee scything toward my face until it’s too late.

My head snaps back. Pain blooms in my nose, which instantly starts gushing blood. I think he broke it. I wouldn’t be surprised.

The backhand comes next. Then the kick to my ribs, which I barely manage to block with my shoulder by curling up and hunching over.

But then he swings his leg and aims for my stomach.

And when he does that, something inside me goes *feral*.

I move like there's someone else piloting my limbs. I don't even realize what I'm doing until it's too late to stop it. But even then, I wouldn't stop.

Because the sickening crack of the crowbar connecting with his skull is music to my ears.

I thrust a solid kick against his chest to give myself some space to stand up. Before he has a chance to lunge at me again, I swing the crowbar again and land a blow against his ribs. More shit goes *pop*.

Martin cries out. "You *bitch!*"

"You're damn right I'm a bitch! I'm fucking pregnant, you asshole!"

I swing again. And again. Every blow lands.

"I'm pregnant! And you're right—I *loved* spreading my legs for Demyen, because you know what? He's a *real man!*"

The next swing snaps his wrist when he tries to block it. He screams in pain, in fury, but shock has him frozen in place instead of diving for me.

"You're nothing but a whiny, selfish, pathetic excuse for a man," I continue, swinging after each word to punctuate the unbridled rage now coursing through my veins. "You're so fucking pathetic, you can't even find someone your own age. You have to, what—beg your boss for his daughter? Prowl the local high school for your next victim?"

Martin balks. Covered with smeared blood and limp with half a dozen broken bones, it's almost kind of comical. "I never! It's only just been you!"

"Oh, please." I give the crowbar a few test swings. I am really starting to understand why Demyen is who he is. This kind of

retribution is cathartic. Therapeutic. “You think you’re the only one who knows how to bug a phone?”

It’s a blatant lie. I don’t know shit about bugging phones. But he doesn’t know that. And the look of shock, then guilt, then horror on his face tells me everything I need to know about just how despicable this “man” really is.

“Clara, please.” He struggles to limp forward, arms outstretched. “Baby, I... It’s not what it looks like. I just... I mentor these girls, and I—”

I cut him off with another swift blow to his back. Something else cracks. His scream is cut off by a wet, sucking breath, his eyes widen, and he looks at me with horror, like he’s actually terrified of me.

Is he?

Is Martin Patterson scared of *me*?

Good. He should be.

“You’re sick,” I tell him. “Sick, pathetic, and not worth my time.” I drop the crowbar and listen to it clang against the metal floor of the shipping container. “Good luck trying to hide from the feds. I’ll be making sure they always know where to find your ass.”

Martin takes the bait and, teetering between upright and sprawled, awake and unconscious, he lets out an angry roar and charges at me.

I duck beneath his swinging arm and slam myself against his legs.

We both go sprawling.

We both scramble for the crowbar.

I grab it first.

A thousand different things flow through my mind. All of them blind me. All of them fuel me.

My childhood, lost to my father’s abuse and terrorization.

My innocence, tainted and stolen by this sick excuse of a man.

All the other girls he's just admitted to grooming, stalking, God knows what else.

Most of all, my girl. My sweet little girl. Her terrified, tear-streaked face whenever she endured the man who claimed to be her daddy yelling at her, shouting at her, and beating me in front of her.

I don't realize I'm swinging. I don't even feel the cracks and dull thuds against his body.

I'm too far lost in my own pain, my own fear... my own *fury*.

I'm so fucking sick and tired of his abusive bullshit.

I'm done being afraid.

I swing and swing and swing until my arms burn like hellfire. The only thing that pulls me out of my blinding, rage-filled haze is the silence that fills the storage container. I no longer hear his shouts, or his cries, or his sobbing pleas.

I don't hear anything.

Martin lies there on the floor in the dim light of the battery lantern. He's barely recognizable; his chest is caved in and his face barely intact. All the places where the hooked end of the crowbar dug into his flesh are now only bloody, oozing gashes.

I didn't mean to.

I didn't mean to kill him.

I didn't *set out* to kill him, at least.

The last several moments come boomeranging back into my consciousness, and I fall to my knees in my own shock. And blood.

And mostly his blood.

I just...

I just beat a man to death.

I killed...

I *killed* Martin Patterson.

Why am I not crying? Or screaming?

Why...

Why do I suddenly feel...

... free?

DEMYEN

I jump out of the Hummer and storm around the front, ready to kick down the gates to Raizo's whole fucking operation.

Tolya grabs my arm and pulls me back. "Patience, little brother. I'd like to not get shot, if it's all the same to you."

I hate that he has a point.

I hate that Clara's in there and I'm out here.

But most of all...

I hate.

Fucking.

Waiting.

Pavel limps his way over to us, leading a group of men who are all armed and ready to storm the depot and end this once and for all. He's by no means in physical shape to lead the charge, but no amount of negotiating could make him stay at home while Clara's in danger.

"Recon just reported seeing both Clara and Martin leave the main office," Pavel quietly confirms. He leans heavily against the front of the Hummer and pulls out his phone. A few taps later, a map of the grounds lights up his screen and he moves it around to show us the maze of shipping containers and walkways. "This is what we've been able to grab from surveillance and zoning records. Mako's team overlaid the current bins on the city's map of the site so we should be able to get a clear idea of how to navigate this shit."

I swallow back the bile threatening to creep up my throat. There are hundreds of shipping containers in this depot. Thousands, maybe.

Raizo could hide her literally anywhere.

“They were last seen being escorted into one of the shipping containers here,” he continues as he zooms in on an eastern section of the grounds. “Left alone, too.”

“Then that’s where we go.” I pull out my gun from the holster to check the ammunition. Backup magazines are latched to my belt; I’m tempted to add a few grenades just for the hell of it.

But Pavel stops me like he knows exactly what I’m thinking. “We have to be careful.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m not gonna blow Clara up—”

“There’s more.” His face is grim. “More women. Same quadrant. Looks like he’s loading them up for export.”

Tolya growls beside me. “If we’re going in full force,” he snarls, “we’re leaving with as many of those women as we can.”

I nod. “My thoughts exactly.” I turn to Pavel. “Spread the word. Exercise caution in the eastern quadrant, and have a team go in for the extraction. Keep our eyes above updating us. Wherever we don’t find slaves, blow shit up. No survivors.”

The one survivor I took from the last raid is still rethinking his life choices in the basement of one of my safehouses. He has no idea how lucky he is to be so young and so naive.

We move like ghosts in the night toward the front gates of the depot. The rest of my men sweep the perimeter and position for a simultaneous attack on all sides. I don’t have as many as I’d like for such a broad territory to cover, but it’ll have to do.

I attach a silencer to my handgun and tiptoe around one of the watchtowers for better aim. One shot takes out the first guard; another nails the second. Tolya silently moves to the opposite side of the main gate and does the same to the guards in that

watchtower, then climbs up the ladder to find the switch that will open the doors for us.

I wait. The silence feels heavy.

A short alarm sounds once and the gates begin to split. I shoulder through the gap first and take out the initial response team—well, as many as I can spot. Pavel covers my six and downs the ones I miss.

I signal for half the team behind me to take a hard left and sweep the western quadrant here. Pavel and I wait for Tolya to rejoin us, then lead the remaining half of the team toward the eastern quadrant.

Recon was right—there's definitely something going on over here. Clusters of Yakuza men meet us with angry shouts and even angrier bullets. Tolya ducks behind a stack of storage boxes while I dive under the cover of one of their cars.

“We need backup!” Pavel shouts over the blazing guns. He reloads his handgun, then snarls a curse and holsters it, grabbing for his automatic instead.

“It'll blow our cover!” I shake my head at him. I know what he wants to do—the exterior contingency is waiting for our signal to swoop in. But if they do it now, and just on this side of the depot, it will give away the fact that we have this place surrounded.

We need—I need—to make sure Clara and the other women are out of here long before we wipe Raizo out for good.

Tolya stares at me expectantly, like I'm supposed to pull some magical solution out of my ass and get us out of here.

But I can't get a good look at the encroaching numbers without risking losing an eye. Or my life. Bullets fly overhead and a few more puncture the sides of the car we're ducked behind.

I return Tolya's stare. He holds up a finger, then shimmies, shuffles, reaches behind him, and pulls out something. It takes me a moment to see what it is.

A grenade.

I shake my head.

He nods.

I shake my head more.

Trust me, he mouths before pulling the pin and tossing it into the oncoming group.

Bright light and a deafening boom quickly follows.

I stand corrected: not a grenade; a fucking *flashbang*.

Tolya pulls and throws another, and just like that, he leads the charge through the now-disoriented Yakuza scrambling around the pavement like blind mice. We make quick work to put down everyone stupid enough to stick around.

“We’re clear,” Pavel confirms after a quick surrounding sweep.

Tolya steps back with a clap of his hand to my shoulder. I have to admit, it feels good to have him by my side again. He’s one step ahead of me tonight—which is a good thing, because my head is not on right.

In any other situation, I would have grabbed a handful of flashbangs and used those without hesitation because it makes obvious *sense*. But this isn’t just any other situation. This is Clara, my woman—my lover and girlfriend and the mother of the sweet little girl I now call my own—hidden away to be sold once again by the same sick psychopath who tried taking her from me before.

She’s got to be terrified out of her mind, and for all I know, trying to fend off the unwanted advances of Raizo and his sick fucks—

Hell no.

Hell. Fucking. No.

He won’t get the chance to touch her ever again.

I quicken my pace through the maze of shipping containers. I don’t care if I leave my own men behind. The thought of anyone laying their hands on my Clara pumps adrenaline

through my veins and I'm ready to rip apart each and every one of them, finger by finger.

Tolya and Pavel keep up with me while the others fall behind to take care of stragglers. One Yakuza guard shouts his surprise when we round a tight corridor between containers, and he scrambles to dislodge himself from an entanglement of one of the slaves so he can grab for his gun.

He's too slow. I'm too pissed.

The slave screams as blood splatters all over her back. She cringes and braces herself to be next, her sobs shaking her whole body as she lifts her hands in surrender.

I immediately holster my gun, but before I can crouch down to reassure her she's not in any danger—not anymore—Tolya swoops in and pulls her into his arms.

“Hey,” he murmurs to her, “it's okay. I've got you. You're safe.”

She hiccups and shivers like a leaf, and I see so much of Clara in her. The shuddering, the panic, the sheer terror that the next man will do worse than the one before.

But I also see the flicker of a dying fire in her eyes.

Dying, but not gone.

“What's your name?” Tolya asks as he gently wipes the tears from her eyes.

We don't have time for this. But I know as well as he does that we can't risk taking a basket case with us, either. She needs to calm down or she'll give away our position to the next wave of guards.

“What's your name?”

“E-Eva,” she whimpers.

“Eva. Beautiful name.” Tolya points at himself, then at me. “I'm Tolya, and this trigger-happy psycho is my little brother, Demyen. We're looking for a woman who isn't with the others. Clara. Have you seen her?”

Eva slowly shakes her head.

I sigh. “Did you see a cop come by here?”

She hesitates, then shakes her head again. But then she stops, tenses, and glances over Tolya’s shoulder. “I... I saw them take a couple... when he...” She looks down at the dead Yakuza.

My heart slams against my ribcage. “Are you sure? Which way did they go?”

Eva nods, slow and unsure of me but certain of her information. “I... I thought it was strange to see them here... They were taken that way.” She points to a cluster of containers across the main walkway and deeper in the shadows of the depot.

Of course.

“Can you walk?” Tolya asks, his whole demeanor still strangely gentle. When her face turns bright red and she looks away in shame, neither of us need her to explain why. He scoops her up into his arms and gestures with his head to the container next to us.

I sigh again.

We do not have time for this. At all. But we also aren’t assholes who leave victims to their own fates. Not when we can help it.

Pavel and I cover Tolya as he carries Eva out of the blood-soaked crevice and ducks over into a cleaner spot on the other side of the container. He sets her down carefully, cups her face in his hand for the briefest of moments, then straightens and rejoins us.

He looks at me and scowls when he sees me watching. “What?”

I shrug. “Nothing.”

Tolya sniffs and grabs his gun, pointedly avoiding eye contact. “Let’s go find your woman.”

DEMYEN

We make our way across the forklift road toward the darkened section Eva indicated. No one voices any concern, but I won't be surprised if each of us is wondering if her information is accurate. Or trustworthy.

She may not be Yakuza, but we're not exactly the Peace Corps.

And yet on we go. Fear fucks up the mind. It pushes us to do stupid shit.

We hear banging. It's sporadic, with no set pattern, but it sounds like a hollow clang of metal against metal coming from inside one of the containers.

Please, God. No.

Not like this.

I move faster. Pray for another sound to guide us to her, but also pray that whatever I'm hearing has nothing to do with her. That Martin isn't in the middle of beating her to death.

That I haven't already lost her.

We round a corner, guns ready. My body smacks into someone else.

Pavel yanks me out of the way seconds before a crowbar would've lobbed my head clean off. I duck and ready myself to block it on the follow-up swing... but it never comes.

Because it's Clara.

She stands there, eyes wide and mouth gaping at me. Her chest heaves with exertion and what is undoubtedly adrenaline, because she's covered head to toe with blood spray and a smattering of darkening bruises.

"Demyen?"

I grab the crowbar to tug her to me. I don't care that she tastes like blood—she's alive, she's here, and she's in my arms. I crush her lips with mine and sweep my tongue in a longing, grateful caress along hers because *my God*, I am so relieved to find her.

Someone clears their throat behind me.

I don't fucking care. I'll shoot the next man who tries to interrupt me reuniting with my woman.

Clara clings to me just as tight. She trembles in my arms but I know, somehow I can just feel, it's not from fear. She's just as relieved as I am.

I wrench my mouth from hers only so I can kiss her eyes and brow and hold her to my chest like I was so scared I wasn't going to be able to do it ever again.

"I'm here. I'm here, baby. I've got you."

Whatever she says is muffled against my shirt. I gently ease her back just enough to tip her face up to look at me. My thumbs caress her cheeks as my eyes drink her in, but I'm also checking for any injuries I'll need to take out on whoever did this to her.

"He's dead," she blurts out.

I freeze. "Who?"

"Martin." The name flies from her lips and her entire body slumps into mine like it's a weight suddenly thrown from her chest and shoulders. "Martin's dead. I... I killed him."

I can tell this is not a proud moment for her. That she's shaken, that she can't believe she just killed a man with what I'm guessing is the crowbar she nearly decapitated me with.

So I hold back from letting her know just how fucking proud I am of her.

“Where?” is all I say, and I quickly nod to Pavel and Tolya to go check things out ahead of us when she points at the container two spots away. They dart ahead. I keep her pinned close to my side as we make our way over in their wake.

The door has a few dents where she must’ve wrenched herself free. Pavel eases it open and steps inside.

He whistles low. “Shit. Fuck. I mean... goddamn.”

Clara winces and steps back. I keep her close and kiss the top of her head to reassure her. “It’s okay,” I remind her. “You did what you needed to survive.”

“And then some,” Pavel echoes from inside the container. He can’t see my glare but I’m pretty sure he knows I’m sending him one.

Tolya’s eyebrow hitches with curiosity. He pokes his head around the door but doesn’t step inside. “Holy shit.” He leans back out and gives her a small bow of respect. “Remind me to never, ever get on your bad side. Ever.”

Pavel reemerges from the container and nudges the door close with his foot. “He’s definitely dead. Leave him.”

I hold Clara at arm’s length and scan her body for signs of any major injuries. I want to do a far more thorough search, but we don’t have time. “Are you okay? Did he hurt you?”

She nods. “He tried. I stopped him.”

“Painted the walls with him,” Pavel mutters as he walks by, checking his ammo.

Shouts echo from the other side of the depot. I’m pulled from my relief as I realize we still have to get her out of here—which means there’s still a chance I could lose her. One stray bullet, one rogue shot...

“We gotta go, baby.” I kiss her face and press my spare gun into her hand. “Stay close. Hide when you can. I can’t—”

Clara hushes me with a finger to my lips when she hears my voice catch. “I’m here. I’m with you. I can handle this.”

I kiss her again. If it’s the last kiss we ever share, I want to make it worthwhile.

Tolya clears his throat again and motions for us to get going. Reluctantly, I tear myself away from my fierce and beautiful woman to lead the way back toward the main gates.

But then Clara steps to the side, aims at the lock of a container, and pulls the trigger.

Thank God I still have a silencer on the thing. “Clara!” I hiss as it spits and the lock clangs loudly. “The fuck are you doing?”

She ignores me and swings the crowbar at the decimated lock. It smashes what’s left of it to bits and she yanks the metal door open.

Dozens of terrified eyes stare out at us from the darkness within.

Fuck.

“Go.” I wave my arm, as do Tolya and Pavel, so the women know they can and should absolutely leave their metal prison. “Go. You need to go.”

Clara moves to the next container and repeats the process.

Shoots the lock.

Smashes it open.

Another dozen or so young women pour out, wide-eyed and barely clothed and huddled against each other for comfort and warmth.

We don’t have time for this, but I don’t have the heart to stop her. She’s a woman on a mission and after everything we’ve both endured, I don’t blame her. I glance over at Pavel and see him messaging Mako and the rest of the team. The extraction process needs to start sooner rather than later.

I reach for Clara and pull her to me again once it seems she’s emptied out all the containers holding women hostage.

“Thank you,” she whispers.

I give her a quick nod. I’m still too on edge to delve into the intense feelings she keeps stirring inside me—pride most of all.

The captives quickly obey Tolya’s gesture to follow the shadows toward the outer edge of the depot, where my team awaits to ferry them to safety. I want Clara to go with them, but I don’t want to lose her again. I can’t guarantee she’ll be okay unless she’s next to me.

Hell, even then, nothing is guaranteed.

She sticks to my side, gun in one hand and crowbar in the other. I don’t have time to tell her how fucking incredible she is, or how insanely hot she looks when she’s bracing for battle.

She’s Bratva, through and through. There’s no denying that now.

We round a corner and should be in the clear to make a steady run for the main gates. Just a short sprint until—

Well, perhaps not.

Because just as I get ready to run, I’m met with a barrel aimed at my forehead.

And a shot blasts in my ears.

DEMYEN

The Yakuza guard drops dead at my feet.

Clara pulls the trigger again, this time at a different guard who lunges at her from the shadows. I shake off the surprise and near-death shock to cover her, yanking her behind me before she gets herself killed trying to protect us both.

A handful of Yakuza appear around corners and beeline toward us, shouting and aiming their weapons. Clara wriggles herself out of my grasp, slips between two shipping containers, and beckons for me to follow her. “Come on!”

I want to. I would follow her anywhere.

But I’ve got shit to deal with.

And there’s a monster that needs to be killed.

“I love you.”

“I—”

I don’t wait for her response; I already know. I rejoin Tolya and Pavel, who have ducked behind another container for cover.

Suddenly, the bullets stop.

The air grows quiet.

And a new voice joins the fray.

“Come on out, boys. Consider this a white flag.”

“Yeah?” I quickly reload a new magazine and check for any shrapnel lodged in the mechanics of my gun. Good to go.

“And why should we trust you?”

Raizo Watanabe laughs. “Oh, come on now. Why would I shoot the man I want to talk to? We have such history together, Demyen. Don’t insult me with your pettiness.”

“I think we’re way beyond that,” I call back. There’s no way he’s this calm and fine over me blowing up his operations yet again.

“True. Which is why we need to talk.”

Tolya arches a brow. Pavel looks pensive—he doesn’t trust Watanabe any more than I do.

But neither of them object to it.

I lift a hand above the roof of the small container. Then I plant it on the metal to hoist myself up. It’s a risky move, but if he wants to talk, let’s talk.

Shockingly, he actually does. All guns are drawn back and Raizo’s just standing there, surrounded by his men. His hands casually rest in his pockets and he’s dressed like he’s going to a garden party, not on his merry way to sell dozens of women into a lifetime of grim sexual slavery.

“Come,” he says with a nod of his head toward what must be serving as his office.

I glare at him. “My men?”

He rolls his eyes impatiently and gestures to his own to move away. “Your men will remain exactly where they are if they want to make it out of here alive. Play by my rules, and no one gets hurt.”

I glance at Tolya. He nods. He doesn’t love it, but we’re a little short on good options here.

So I nod and slowly place my gun on the roof of the container. I lift my hands up so everyone can see I’m not reaching for a backup piece, then ease my way around toward Raizo.

“Round up the merchandise,” he orders one of his lieutenants, who nods once and takes a handful of men with him.

My gut sinks. If they find Clara...

No. I have to keep my mind clear. I have to focus.

I have to end this.

Raizo gives me a cocky little smirk and turns to lead me to his office. “I have to admit, I was almost impressed. Would have been more impressed if you’d actually managed to get out of here.”

“Impressed? Or pissed?” I force myself to match his calm tone. I have to stamp down the overwhelming urge to snap his neck where he stands.

“Both.” He smirks again and opens the door for me. No one else is waiting inside from what I can see, so I go in and wait for him to stab me in the back. He closes the door, locks it, and strolls over to his desk. “Best we handle things just between us.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” I pull out a chair and straddle it. The first man to show unease is the one who loses. “Which is why I took the liberty of retrieving my woman.”

Raizo shrugs and settles into his chair. “She’s still on the grounds. Whether you get to keep her depends on whether I let you leave this room alive. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“What do you even want with her? She’s just another woman.” I study his face for any sign that might give away ulterior motives. “She’s no one.”

“Is that what you think of her daughter?”

I go still.

Raizo quirks a brow, but quickly settles back into his maddening calm. “I might as well tell you the truth. My secrets won’t get out from a dead man’s mouth.” He interlaces his hands in front of him. “Her mother and I go way back. Or really, we did—until Greg murdered her.”

The venom in his words when he mentions Clara’s father doesn’t escape my scrutiny. It does, however, surprise me. “And yet you do business with him.”

“Greg was a mad dog kept on a short leash. As long as he kept sending me new merchandise, I held our professional

relationship over his head to keep him in line.”

Several things start making sense. “You paid him a premium. So he wouldn’t leave.”

“Keep your friends close and your enemies closer. Truth be told, he wasn’t even on my radar until that stunt he pulled with Michael Little.”

I must have hit my head on something. That’s the only explanation for the sudden wave of sadness I see wash over Raizo Watanabe’s features.

“Nora kept many secrets from me. It was how we managed to be together, even when she knew I was... involved with things. But after Little’s death and that horrid court case, she couldn’t hide her husband’s abuse anymore. She couldn’t explain away Clara’s injuries.”

I force myself to remain stoic. Straight-faced.

But the thought of Greg Everett being cucked by Raizo Watanabe in his own home does threaten to put a big smile on my face.

“So there you have it.” Raizo sighs and refocuses his sharp stare at me. “I may have forgotten myself amidst heartbroken memories, but Clara means more to me than you realize.”

I can’t hold back the sarcasm from my voice. “Is that why you trapped her in there with Martin?”

That stupid smirk returns. “Did I?”

I’m about to lunge at him when I realize what he’s getting at. *Did* he trap her in that shipping container with Martin?

Or did he trap Martin in there with her?

He waives a dismissive hand. “In any case, back to business. You, Mr. Zakrevksy, have been doing your damned hardest to ruin mine.”

I suck a breath through my teeth. “I may have been under the impression that you were attacking me first.”

“And two wrongs make a right?”

I rub a hand over my face. “In all honesty, I would have been happy to back off—if it weren’t for the slaves.”

He laughs. The man has the fucking balls to *laugh*. “It never bothered you before. And after your generous hosting of my last auction at your casino—”

“You’re damn right that it was your last auction.”

Raizo snaps his mouth shut to glare at me. And then, in a dangerously low voice: “What did you just say?”

I sit up and lean forward. “You’re done. It’s over. I don’t give a fuck if you smuggle drugs across the border or go back to lifting imported cars in Reno. Panhandle on the Strip for all I care. But you’re done here. And you’re sure as shit done with this sick fucking human trafficking business.”

He stares at me for a very long, silent moment. I’m happy to sit here for as long as it takes for everything to sink through his thick skull.

“I don’t think you’re in any position to tell me what I can and cannot fucking do,” he snaps at last.

Now, it’s my turn to smirk. “Oh, but I think I am.” I casually pull my phone out from my back pocket, which makes him startle in his chair, but he eases somewhat when he sees it isn’t a gun. I flick the screen on, scroll to my messages, and revisit the text I’d received an hour or so before we began the raid. “See, I’m not an idiot. I know better than to lodge a campaign against the Yakuza without good reason. Or permission.”

His hands tighten on the arms of his chair. “Permission?”

“Yup.” I skim through the texts, then flick over to my email inbox. “According to your *oyabun* out in Tokyo, you’ve been holding out on him. A lot.”

He goes pale instantly. “How the fuck—”

“Unlike you, I actually check in with my colleagues.” I tuck my phone back in my pocket and flash him a shit-eating grin. “And they aren’t exactly wanting to ignite an international war over one isolated American boss importing chaos without verifying with his superiors first.”

His throat bobs with a swallow. “Ridiculous,” he snaps. He smacks his hands on the desk and shoves himself to his feet. “You think you can bluff—”

“You made a single fifty million dollar sale—on stolen funds, by the way. How much did you report to Tokyo?”

He pales even worse. He looks like a corpse. In so many ways, that’s exactly what he is.

He just hasn’t realized it yet.

I stand as well, but I am a thousand times calmer than he is. “And you should have seen their faces when I sent the pictures I took during the last raid. It’s not just the disgusting lack of regard for human rights or dignity that pissed off your superiors—that same neglect lost them millions of dollars.”

“Get out.” Raizo thrusts a furious finger at the door. “Get the fuck out!”

“Yeah. I just have to take care of something first.”

He turns at the exact moment I need him to.

And my knife sinks into his gut without much effort.

Raizo’s eyes widen with surprise. His lips pucker, and gape, and snap shut again.

It was a gamble making the blow at this angle, but judging by the blood now trickling from the corner of his mouth, Lady Luck actually backed me up this time.

“Thing is,” I say quietly in his ear as I give the knife another firm shove and twist, “no one thought you’d do it yourself. That requires honor. Loyalty, at a bare minimum. You have none of either.”

I rip the blade out with a flourish. Raizo continues to stare at me. He doesn’t say a word. He tries to remain standing, but the blood flows from the gash in his gut too fast and he drops to his knees.

“That was for your superiors in Tokyo,” I let him know as I grab my phone to take a quick picture. Part of the bargain struck was to provide proof of his execution.

But then I step behind him, grab his hair, and yank his head back.

“*This* is for me.”

The cut across his throat blooms almost bloodlessly. It’s not a necessary move, but it’s cathartic. Poetic.

It’s how I’ll be able to sleep at night for the rest of my life.

With a final shove against his head, Raizo’s body drops to the floor.

I wipe the blood off my knife with my shirt and tuck it back inside the sheath hidden under my belt line. There’s probably a shit ton of incriminating evidence, money, and resources laying around this office that I could pull from to make sure the nails on Raizo’s coffin stay in place.

But I’m not going to be able to focus until I know Clara is safe.

I brace myself for a spray of bullets to fly at my head when I open the office door. Instead, I’m met with silence.

When I make my way back to where Raizo corralled us, I see why.

Mako and his men are escorting the captive Yakuza soldiers to the Hummers and Rezvanis from my fleet, which are now blocking off every possible way out of the depot. More of my men are swarming the area, guns aimed steadily at the remaining Yakuza cowering on their knees next to their dropped guns. With hands in the air, they await their own fates.

“Did you read it to them?” I ask Pavel.

He nods at an ashen-faced lieutenant as he pockets his phone. “Just had Haru here read it aloud in both languages so there’s no misunderstanding. They’ve accepted the order.”

I nod as well. According to headquarters in Sochi and Tokyo, they agree with me: complacency means death.

“Hold off until we get the women out of here.” I scan the area for any sign of *my* woman. “We don’t need to traumatize them

further.”

Pavel cocks a brow. “Are you sure? It could do them some good.”

Tempting. And he has a point. But still... call me crazy, but I’m feeling more and more like maintaining standards and propriety. “Wait until they’re on the other side of the gates. They’ve seen enough horrors to last a lifetime.”

He nods and steps away to relay the order.

I still don’t see Clara. My heart leaps into my throat and I swear, if anything happened to her...

But Pavel didn’t say anything, and he would have if something was wrong. Tolya would be rushing to me, I’m sure. Even Mako would step aside to show me the damage.

She has to be okay.

She has to be alive.

She’s not going to leave me right when everything is finally right.

She can’t.

CLARA

FIFTEEN MINUTES EARLIER

“I love you.”

“I—”

But Demyen is gone. He turns away before I have a chance to say it back.

Before I have the chance to take what could be our last chance to tell him how much I love him.

Something rustles behind me. I whip around, ready for a fight. But instead of a Yakuza or a guard dog or anything else ready to kill me, I come face-to-face with a woman in tattered clothes. Her hands are up in front of her face, and she quickly cowers back away from me.

I’m holding a gun. I don’t know what she thinks I’m about to do, but it can’t be good.

“Hi.” I slowly lower the crowbar and let it fall to the ground. I still keep a grip on the gun, though, because I don’t know if we’ll both need it in a split second. “It’s okay. I’m not going to hurt you. I’m...” Well, I might as well be honest. “I’m one of you.”

She narrows her eyes at me. Gives me a once-over. “You don’t look it.”

I snort a laugh. I can’t help it. “No, I probably don’t.” I self-consciously wipe the back of my hand across my face. No clue if that does anything to clean off the blood. “I killed the guy who tried to sell me.”

Now, she's the one snorting laughs. It makes her wince in pain; I'm at her side in an instant.

"Are you okay?" I check her for any superficial wounds but don't see any. "Where does it hurt?"

She looks away in shame.

"Oh."

She sniffs, wipes her nose with her arm, then nods. "They haven't exactly been gentle since I got here." She looks at me. "That was three days ago."

I force myself to swallow back the bile that just rushed up my throat. "I am *so* sorry."

She shrugs. Like she's trying to play it off as something that simply happens. "That guy you were with? He saved me. And the other guy, the taller one..."

I notice her blush. Even now, in the midst of all this, she still manages to blush. I feel a smile creep up the corners of my mouth. "That's Demyen. The guy I was with. The taller one is his brother, Tolya." And then, before I forget: "I'm Clara."

"Eva." She holds out a trembling hand, then quickly pulls it back.

"It's okay." I offer her a reassuring smile. "I've been there."

She rubs her arm. Then she peers up at me with so much uncertainty in her eyes. "Does it get better?"

I hesitate. "I mean—"

"Does it get easier?"

Gunshots ring out much closer than before. Shouts fill the air, and we can hear the roaring of several engines rush toward us. We quickly huddle together in the darkest part of the shadows to wait out whatever is going on.

I look at the gun in my hand.

And I suddenly have the answer we've both been wanting.

"No," I whisper. "It doesn't get easier. But you get stronger."

Eva nods. Her trembling fingers dig into my arm. But I let her, because I know; I understand.

I remember the other women in Raizo's auction who lent me what little of their own strength they still had. I wonder where they are. If they'll ever see their homes again.

I can be them for her. Just as in those few short minutes with them, I can give her the same support in whatever few short minutes we have now.

The shouting continues, but the gunfire stops.

Now, the shouting is... in Russian.

Demyen.

“Clara?”

It's his voice while not being his voice. It takes me a moment to realize that's Tolya calling for me.

“Clara?” His voice draws closer. “Eva?”

Eva knows better than to shout and give away our hiding spot. Even though I recognize his voice, I don't trust the situation. I can't. Not after everything.

Tolya steps into the light at the end of the narrow gap between the containers. “Eva?”

She nods to me. I nod back. We tiptoe forward, and my free hand grips hers to give her reassurance as much as to receive it. I don't think Tolya would turn his back on Demyen, but I don't know what could turn a man recently freed from prison.

When it comes to the Zakrevskys, I never know if they're friends or enemies with Raizo Watanabe.

Or, for that matter, with me.

The moment the light of the depot spills across our faces, Tolya breathes out a heavy sigh of relief. “Oh, thank God. You scared the shit out of me!”

I peer around his broad shoulders. To my immense relief, what's left of the Yakuza are being corralled into one group and shoved down to their knees by Demyen's men. I recognize

the faces of his Bratva, from his *vors* to the new recruits he's been training these past few weeks, glaring at their new captives from behind weapons poised and ready for any wrong movements.

“Are you alright? Are you hurt?”

The sudden softness in Tolya's voice pulls my attention to a sight I do not expect to see: his fingers gently caressing the sides of Eva's face, turning her this way and that to check for any wounds.

She shivers and shakes her head. “No.” She glances over at me. “Clara kept me safe.”

I give them both a tight smile. This feels like a victory, but we're not out of the woods yet. I don't think I'll feel that way until I'm home with Willow in my arms and Demyen sound asleep beside me.

“We're rounding up the first group for the safehouse,” Mako explains as he approaches us, motioning behind him with his thumb. “I've got Yuri loading up Group B for the backroads just in case there are any stragglers who didn't get the message.”

“I'll go with them.” It's easy for me to volunteer to help these women settle in somewhere safe for the night. I remember what it was like to be scared, alone, confused, not knowing where we were going or why we were being herded like cattle. “I can help.”

Mako looks uncomfortable while still managing a tiny smile. “I know you can. Trust me, you'd be the best one to lead them. But he'll kill me if I let you vanish without notice.”

I didn't think about that. I blush and lower my gaze with a nod. “Right. Sorry.”

“You could help Eva.” Tolya nudges her closer to me and nods at one of the Rezvanis parked nearby. “Take her to my car and get her settled in. We'll meet up at the compound.”

I don't ask him what he's doing. Neither does Eva. She just ducks her head and follows me, stealing a glance behind her at Tolya. He immediately turns his attention back to the gathered

Yakuza and Pavel, who looks like he's flipping through his phone for something.

Eva and I walk from pavement to gravel in silence. I set the safety on my gun and tuck it into the waistband of my jeans.

I guess this is my life now. I'm not... *hating* it?

Definitely will take some getting used to, though.

"Is he good?" Eva glances behind her again.

I smile. Surprisingly, I don't actually have to think about my answer. "He's good. One of the best."

She looks forward again. Nods. Doesn't say anything else.

I add, "He saw me get kidnapped when I was a kid. Risked his life trying to save me. They framed him for it and threw him in prison. Even so..."

The reality of all that's happened suddenly washes over me. I grip the handle of the car door so she doesn't see me teeter under the intensity of it all.

"Even so..." I half-cough, half-laugh, "he doesn't blame me. Well, he did, for a while, and he had every right to. But he got over it so fast and now... well, now, here he is. Helping his brother. Saving me, saving you. So, yeah. Tolya's good people."

It's not that I don't know this; I guess I've just never absorbed it, not really. Not to the level of actually accepting it as a reality.

Tolya forgives me.

He doesn't just forgive me. He *cares* about me.

He shouldn't.

He doesn't have to.

But he does anyway.

I open the door for Eva and give her a stabilizing hand to climb in. She moves gingerly and winces when she sits, but otherwise settles in nicely. "Are you coming?" she asks me, ready to move over and make room.

I shake my head. “I gotta go find my man. Stay here. You’re safe now.”

I leave her there in the tank of an SUV. She looks exhausted but less fearful than before.

I know that look. I’ve *been* that look. I’ve seen it in the mirror far too many times.

And now... I wonder if I’ll ever see it again.

Now that the monsters are gone, as Willow would put it... what do I have to be afraid of?

When I walk back to where Tolya and Pavel have the Yakuza rounded up, I can feel the shift in the air. The women are quickly filing out with a few of Demyen’s men guiding them, while more of his men are slowly but steadily positioning themselves around the Yakuza captives on their knees.

I don’t know if I want to be around for the execution I know is about to happen.

But I also don’t know if I’ll regret not seeing it through. Getting the closure.

I scan the crowd for any sign of Demyen. It’s a bit of a challenge, given that everyone in his Bratva is wearing the same style of dark tactical clothes and heavy utility belts.

But then I see a blood-stained hand run through a mess of familiar thick, dark hair.

And my heart skips a beat.

He’s alive. He’s alive and I think... I think he’s looking for me.

“Dem?”

He spins around. Sees me between passing men.

And in two solid strides, he’s pulling me into his arms and crushing my lips to his in a searing kiss.

Everything falls away. I don’t hear the shouted orders; the engines rumbling to life in Hummers loaded with Raizo’s rescued victims don’t reach my deaf ears.

I hear nothing but the pounding of my own heartbeat. The groan that rumbles through his chest.

I feel nothing but the warmth and strength of his arms wrapped around me. His hands cupping my face and tangling in my hair.

I want nothing other than him.

“I thought...” he murmurs when he’s able to wrench his mouth from mine. He presses kiss after kiss to my face, holding me in place like I’m a work of art to be worshiped. “God, Clara... I thought I’d lost you.”

So did I. For the briefest of moments, the thought had crossed my mind. “I’m right here,” I reassure him. I pull him close for another passionate kiss, and it’s all we can do not to melt into each other right here in the middle of the battle-torn shipping depot.

“It’s over.” Demyen presses his brow to mine as he says the words I so badly needed to hear. “It’s all over. Raizo’s dead. He’s gone.”

Deep, deep down, way down beneath everything in my adulthood and even my teenage years... underneath all that I’ve had to endure and everything Raizo put me through...

I mourn for him.

I grieve the loss of my Uncle Raizo, the man who might have actually loved my mother the way she deserved. The man who resurfaced, even for just a sliver of a second, in order to help me help myself out of the spiderweb Martin intended to trap me in for the rest of my life.

But the truth is, I should have mourned him a long time ago. Because, like he said, sometimes, people die along with the ones they love. When Mom died, so did Uncle Raizo. The good parts of him, at least.

I need to mourn him later. And then move on.

Because right now, Demyen needs to know how much I appreciate his determination to rid my world of the monsters that haunted it.

“I love you.” Demyen kisses the corner of my eye and holds me closer. “I love you so fucking much. Clara. *My Clara.*”

I bury myself in his arms and breathe in his wonderful scent.

I could live here.

I *want* to live here, in his arms, for the rest of my life.

“Let’s go home.”



Neither of us says a word.

I’m not sure what there is to really say.

All I do know is that I want to show Demyen how much I appreciate everything he’s done for me, for Willow, for us as a family. And for those victims he doesn’t even know and yet has already gone through great lengths to protect and give shelter in the middle of the night.

He may call himself a *fallen* angel, but at some point, even he’s going to notice his halo’s starting to glow a little brighter.

I help him peel off the blood-encrusted shirt and use the motion as an excuse to examine his body. He’s a little bruised and beat up, a few grazes marring his skin, but nothing worrisome catches my eye.

When I undo his belt, I try to be all businesslike about it. We’re home, we’re in his bathroom, and we both need to get into the shower and crawl into bed.

But that doesn’t mean my mouth doesn’t water at the sight of him.

When he’s completely naked and successfully passes my scrutiny for grievous injuries, Demyen gently turns me around so he can do the same for me. I stand there and simply let him move me as he wants, enjoying the way his hands knead and press my sore muscles while he strips my sticky, itchy clothes from my skin.

We stand in the shower together, embracing each other as the warm water cascades down over us. I don’t know for how

long. I don't know if it matters. All that matters is being here, together. Alive and safe.

We bathe each other. I do my best to ignore the rust color in the water that pools and swirls along the shower floor until it's swept away down the drain. When a soft whimper escapes me, Demyen instantly stops what he's doing just to hold me close. To remind me that it all really is over, and he's right here.

He's not going anywhere.

We dry each other off and by the time I slip on one of his huge shirts, I'm practically sleepwalking toward the bed. Demyen pulls the blankets back for me as I climb in, and I'm able to muster a sleepy smile for him before I feel myself drift off to sleep.

A few moments later, I hear the bedroom door open. Then shut.

Hot breath puffs against the back of my neck. A heavy, four-legged weight climbs over me onto the bed and quickly curls itself over my feet.

And then a small body is carefully laid in bed next to me. My arm is lifted and tucked around her, and even in my half-sleep, I smile.

The bed dips again. Another warm weight drapes around my waist, holding me as we both curl around our sweet little girl.

"I love you," I hear him whisper.

"I love you, too, Clara," I whisper back. "More than you'll ever know."

EPILOGUE: CLARA

I can't breathe.

I can't hear.

I *know* I've suddenly gone blind because there's no way in hell I'm seeing this machine flash that giant word in front of me.

Jackpot.

There's no way this can happen to me—twice—right?

This time, my victory fists manage to not punch a tray of champagne all over the broodingly handsome man who's currently watching me like a hawk. He's got this strange smile on his face like he's happy for me but also dealing with a bout of constipation.

"I won!" I point at the screen flashing my winnings. "I fucking *won!*"

"Look at you, cleaning out my house." Demyen chuckles and presses a kiss to the curve of my neck. "I hope you know this means you have to give me a chance to win it back."

I giggle and turn to face his mischievous little grin. "Oh, really? Since when?"

There it is again: that flash of uncertainty. Like he's happy, but he's... nervous? He shuts it away and kisses me full on the mouth. "Since forever. House rules."

"Ugh, get a room, you two." Bambi sidles over, cocktail in one hand and Pavel's arm looped in the other. She winks at me

when she sees me blush. When she looks at Demyen, she pauses. “Hey, buddy, you lookin’ a little... backed-up. Need some fiber?”

Demyen narrows his eyes at her. “Shut up.”

Bambi giggles and elbows Pavel, who looks like the cat who ate the canary. “Everything’s good to go,” he informs us. “The arrangements were made and everything panned out smoothly.”

I’m assuming he means the arrangements Demyen decided to make regarding the trafficking victims we helped liberate several weeks ago. After Raizo’s men were executed—and I did end up staying to watch, protected in Demyen’s tight embrace while he called out the command to ready, aim, *fire*—the eighty women we recovered were taken to a small collection of safehouses belonging to the Bratva across the Mojave Desert.

At first, it was meant to be a temporary overnight stay until Bambi could make sure any calls to the authorities wouldn’t lead them to filing unrelated charges against Demyen, Tolya, or anyone else involved in the raid.

But then word began to spread in all the right circles. The more he tried to help these women find their families and regain some semblance of normalcy, the more his phone rang and his email inbox filled with requests for interviews with heads of state and investigative agencies around the world.

Last week, he had a meeting with the FBI.

From what I understand, they may be turning a blind eye to his smuggling operations in exchange for his cooperation as a consultant within the human trafficking division.

Demyen Zakrevsky, internationally recognized good guy.

Never thought I’d see the day.

“I’m proud of you,” I tell him with every ounce of love pushed through each syllable.

Demyen looks at me, confused for a moment. As if he doesn’t know what I’m talking about. But then he smiles and nuzzles

my hair. “You haven’t seen anything yet, baby.”

Bambi coughs on her drink. Pavel elbows her in the ribs and pretends like he’s focused on something on his phone.

I... don’t exactly know what’s going on.

“Tolya just texted,” Pavel says with a nervous little cough. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think he’s changing subjects. On purpose. “Willow is being a perfect little angel and has him wrapped around her finger.”

“As she should,” I laugh. I’m so glad those two are getting along. It took Willow exactly zero seconds to welcome the giant Russian ex-con into her glittery pink world of dolls, crayons, and a pitbull named Princess. It took Tolya hardly even a few minutes to adjust to being The Fun Uncle who dotes on his sweetly mischievous little niece.

My theory? Eva’s been a huge factor in getting his life back to “normal.”

It was the worst possible time for sparks to fly between two people, but they did the moment Tolya stumbled across her at the depot. Nothing mattered to him—not how she was found or what was being done to her, or what *had* been done to her—except getting her out of that hell, simply because something in his gut screamed at him to protect her.

To cherish her.

And then to sweetly crush on her from afar while giving her space to recover from her horrific time in Raizo’s Hell.

Demyen didn’t even ask if she needed a place to stay. He took one look at the way Tolya tripped over himself to make sure Eva felt safe and protected at the villa compound, and the next thing anyone knows, she had her own suite of rooms not too far from Tolya’s.

There’s been no rush for anything since. Now that our worst enemies are gone, we can say that and mean it. Eva knows she can come to me and talk about the nightmares when they get too bad. She’s always welcome into Willow’s solarium room to play with dolls and color pictures that they tape to the walls. She doesn’t have to worry about Tolya pushing her into

anything she doesn't want; he's happy enough just knowing she's okay.

I just haven't told Demyen about what I think I heard the other night as I walked past her room near the courtyard.

I mean, I could be wrong.

I'm just pretty sure I know what a breathless moan sounds like.

That's honestly the reason why I insisted Tolya and Eva both babysit Willow tonight while Demyen sweeps me off my feet to celebrate the new arrangement with the FBI. I want them to have time to see each other in the possibilities that lie ahead.

Just like how I got to see what Demyen and I have now, back when it was only a feverish daydream.

"You know, I could use a good drink." Demyen waggles his brows playfully at me and presses his hand to the small of my back. "Why don't we head up to our room for the evening?"

"Are you sure?" I twist my head around to see if the bar really is that busy. Why can't we just stay here? "They've got good drinks down here—"

"I special ordered a classic vintage. It's waiting for us on ice upstairs."

"Ooohhh." Now, it's my turn to playfully waggle my brows at him. "You don't have to make me beg, y'know."

"No. But I could do that. Later."

Heat blooms in my core and I have to press my thighs together as we board one of the private elevators that lead to the Royal Walkway. It's really just a skypath from the casino to the executive suites of the Meridian's hotel side, but people in this city do love nicknaming things fancifully.

"Have I told you how beautiful you look this evening?" he croons once we're inside the elevator. His arms wrap around me from behind and he nibbles on the shell of my ear.

"Only about a hundred times."

"That's all? I must be off my game."

I try to turn around to tease him, but he keeps me pinned there against the glass, making me keep my eyes on the glittering crowd of the main floor as the elevator carries us toward the top floors.

His lips wander from my ear to my neck. “I’m so tempted to turn on the emergency stop. Enjoy you right here.”

I bite my lip. “Where everyone can see us?”

Demyen roams his hands over my body and for one core-inflaming second, I actually think he’s about to peel my dress off. “The whole world needs to see how much I fucking love you, my beautiful, enchanting, incredible woman.” Each compliment is underlined with a kiss to my skin, with the last one curling my toes as he sucks a lovebite into the curve of my neck and shoulder.

The elevator softly dings.

Dammit.

“Don’t worry.” He definitely heard me huff a small sigh of disappointment. “Wait until you see the room.”

When we step inside the room—excuse me, the *Presidential Suite* of The Meridian Hotel—I immediately see what he means.

The entire wall of the sleeping area is nothing but floor-to-ceiling glass.

But that’s not what tears another, louder gasp from me.

The room, the *whole suite*, is filled to the brim with exotic flowers.

Demyen locks the door behind us and guides me further inside; I’m too frozen on the spot to actually move on my own. He smiles at me. And then that smile wavers into something a little more uncertain as I continue to openly gape at what’s basically a... a...

It’s a sexy greenhouse.

There’s no other way to name it. Or describe it.

Demyen got us a sexy greenhouse for the night.

“Dem...” It’s the only word I can breathe.

“Do you like it?”

“I...” I clap a hand over my mouth to muffle the loud squeal of glee. “I love it! Oh my *gawd*, it’s beautiful! It looks just like—”

I stop. It looks just like the greenhouse down on the main floor between the casino and hotel.

The same greenhouse where I and dozens of other slaves were taken to be processed, auctioned, and sold.

Demyen sounds more than a little uncomfortable. I busy myself with staring at the plants and the incredible view of the Meridian’s etched glass rooftop so I don’t have to see his face just yet. I didn’t mean to damper the mood.

“I, ah...” He clears his throat. “I didn’t want to trigger any bad memories. Especially from my own stupidity. But I know you love these plants, so I—”

“It’s perfect.” I choke back the tears of... of... of everything. Joy. Gratitude. Love.

And yes, maybe a little pain. Faint whispers of a bygone past that still manage to remind me of darker times.

“Really, Dem, it’s perfect.”

I turn around to reassure him—but he’s not standing there anymore.

He’s... oh my God.

Oh.

My.

God.

Demyen Zakrevsky is down on one knee, a small blue velvet box in his hand.

“Dem?” My hand is trembling as I raise it to my lips.

He reaches for my other one and presses a soft kiss to my fingers. “I love you, Clara. So fucking much. More than...” He laughs. “More than I ever thought possible for someone

like me. And yeah, it's crazy to think that at one point, we sat inside this same room and stared at each other and had no way of knowing where that one moment would take us. But honestly? I'm so fucking glad for it all."

I scrunch my brow. He can't mean it. "Really?"

"Crazy, right? But that's what you do to me, baby. You drive me crazy and I never want you to stop." He slowly opens the box. The largest, most intricate diamond ring I've ever seen rests on a bed of white satin. "I love you. I want to be with you for the rest of my life. I want to adopt Willow and... fuck, Clara. I want us to be a family. A *real* family." He gazes up into my eyes and swallows hard. "If you'll have me."

I'm so glad he's stronger than I am. Physically, anyway—because that's the only reason why we don't topple onto the floor together when I all but collapse into his arms.

I love this man.

I *want* this man.

I show him through the thousand kisses my lips dance across his, his face, his jaw, his eyes. "Yes," I breathe. Already, I can feel myself tear up. "Yes! I do. I do, baby. I want to be yours. I want to be your wife."

Somewhere amidst the hungry kisses and greedy groping, he manages to slip the ring onto my finger before tossing the box aside. And then I'm lifted in his arms just to be tumbled back onto the bed—which, to my delight, is covered with the softest rose petals.

Demyen only pulls away so he can shrug off his suit jacket and toss it aside. I take that moment to kick off my heels and try to sit up. But he flashes me a very delicious, wicked grin and grabs my ankles, lifts them to his face, and presses a kiss to the inside of each.

And then we both hear a loud tear in the skirt of my evening dress when he pushes my legs apart.

"Oops!" I laugh, reaching for his tie to tug him closer.

“I could slow down,” he offers. “Take things slow. Gentle. Romantic.” He kisses me between each word as I work his tie loose and slip it from him.

“You could,” I purr in agreement. I tug his shirt from his pants and work each button open with my fingertips. “But... I don’t want you to.”

Demyen arches a brow. “Oh, no?” His knee slides up between my legs to press against my dampening mound. His grin grows filthy when he feels me rub and grind myself against him. “And what does my naughty, sexy fiancée want?”

I rake my fingers over his bare chest and savor the way he growls his own pleasure for me. “I want you to fuck me. Claim me. Make me forget how to say my own name.”

He reaches down to grab fistfuls of my dress and rips the fabric open more.

“And...”

“There’s more?” His voice is low. Breathy. Sultry. Fucking music to my ears that sends such a delicious shiver along my spine.

I blush. “I want you to fuck me against that window. So everyone can see who I belong to.”

So everyone can see who protects me.

Demyen growls again and grabs my thighs, yanking me closer to him. He makes quick work of opening his pants and boxer briefs and *fuck. yes.* I feel him hard and warm and bare and rubbing up and down my needy pussy.

“We have all night long,” he purrs in my ear. “All. Night. Long. And when I’m done with you, baby, you won’t even be able to *remember* your name, let alone say it.”

Fuck.

I want it. I want it all.

I want *him*.

“Yes... Demyen, yes... please...” I’m a whimpering, pleading mess of nerves and need.

“But right now?” He nips at the curve of my breast I know has been driving him wild all evening. I picked this low-cut dress for a reason. “Right now, you’re mine. All mine. *Only* mine.”

I writhe and wriggle with pleasurable frustration. “Dem, please...”

His hand lands on the side of my ass louder than it actually feels. He grins and captures my yelp in a kiss. “Such an impatient minx.”

I pout. “Such a mean, teasing man.”

I eat my words almost as quickly as I say them. Because no sooner are they out of my man than he’s inside me. Filling me. Stealing the breath from my lungs in one long, solid thrust.

“I’m nowhere near as much of a tease as you are,” he snarls in my ear. He doesn’t pull out, not yet, only rolls his hips to work himself inside me deeper. “Making me want to fuck you in this dress since you got in the car.”

“Why didn’t you?” I gasp. My toes are curling and already I’m losing my grasp on sanity, but I can’t stop myself from poking that proverbial bear.

Demyen sucks my bottom lip between his teeth as he slowly pulls himself from me.

“Naughty.”

Thrust.

“Sexy.”

Thrust.

“Wicked.”

Thrust.

“Fiancée.”

The fact that we’re *not* naked drives me more insane with want and need than if we were. My nipples tighten and strain against the silk bodice and he takes that as his cue to suckle one, then the other, while working his thick cock deeper and deeper inside me.

“I’ll fuck you anywhere and everywhere you want,” he promises me. “I’ll make love to you, my incredible woman, wherever you desire.”

His hands rub down my body to grab my ass, lift me higher, pull me onto him.

I can’t think.

I can’t speak.

I can only feel.

Even then, all I can feel is the building tension deep inside where he keeps rubbing and stroking and massaging me with every solid thrust. That, and the tingling sensation in my hands and feet that tells me I’m not going to stay anchored to the bed when he makes me come.

And oh, he doesn’t just make me come.

He makes me *scream*.

He makes me *buck*.

He makes me sob his name over and over until it’s a mantra on my lips and a plea for more.

Because even then, I still want more. I’ll always want more.

More ripping. More tearing. And then I’m warm and naked and rolled onto my stomach, arms outstretched to claw the rose petals he’s fucking me on.

Demyen holds my hips as he drives into me exactly how I want. Exactly how I need. He works us up to the point where all I can do is grunt every time I feel him bottom out inside me, over and over and over again.

I love it.

I love *him*.

I make sure to repeat that over and over again as I shatter once more, this time in tandem with his own powerful release.

He’s filling me. Pouring himself into me.

I love Demyen Zakrevsky.

Demyen loves me.

That's the very definition of *Jackpot*.



I don't know what time it is. It's dark, even in the casino.

We're all but tapped out. The windows overlooking Demyen's empire are smeared with handprints and ass prints and all other sorts of prints because once we started, we couldn't stop.

Even in the shower, when we laughed and promised each other we would only get cleaned up, I still slid to my knees to, as Demyen accurately described it afterward, "suck his soul through his dick."

I smile. I haven't stopped smiling since the morning after everything at the depot.

Since I woke up with Willow in my arms, Princess snuggled along my legs, and Demyen stroking my hair from my face.

He does it even now, half awake and wholly sated. "Can't sleep?" he mumbles.

I rub my face in his bare chest and breathe him in. I'll never get tired of this, of him, of us. "I don't want to sleep. I just want you."

Demyen chuckles. "You've got me, baby. All of me. For all eternity, you crazy lady."

"You're the crazy one," I snort. "What are you thinking, marrying me? I have more baggage than a jumbo jet."

He playfully pokes my side. "We have a matching set."

I snuggle deeper into his warmth with a happy, satisfied sigh. He rubs my back, trailing his fingertips along my spine.

"So... when do you want to get married?"

I think about it for a moment; a few calculations have to run through my brain before I have an answer. "Could we do it in a month?"

Demyen wheezes. "A month?"

I lift my head with a frown. “Is that okay? Do you not want—”

“Baby.” He sits up and quickly pulls me onto his lap so I have nowhere to go or look but him. “Baby. I want to marry you right the fuck *now*. But I also want you to have your dream wedding. Don’t you want the fancy gown and reception and... I don’t know. All that wedding shit?”

“I do. Kind of.” I rub a hand over his chest and take a moment to admire just how fucking *hot* he is. “But I also want to be able to fit into my dress. And enjoy walking down the aisle. You know, before I balloon up.”

He snorts a laugh and rubs my sides. “What, are you pregnant?”

I smile at him.

He blinks at me.

My smile widens.

“No.”

I nod. Once. Slowly.

“No.” Demyen looks down at my stomach. It’s very slight, but it’s there. The baby bump he’s been assuming to be just me getting my health back. “No. No... no, no, no...”

My stomach twists into a knot. “Are you... are you not happy?”

He whips his gaze up to mine. “No! I mean, yes! I’m... I’m fucking *thrilled!*” He laughs, but it sounds choked. “I’m just... shit. Fuck. Baby. Tell me you just found out. You’re only, what, a week or two along?”

My face heats. His desperation to avoid the reality is actually pretty endearing. I stare down at our laps, though, because I don’t know how bad he’s about to spiral. “I, ah...I’m starting the second trimester.”

Demyen wheezes.

Then he rolls me onto my back, quickly pinning me down under his panicking weight.

I burst into a fit of giggles as he flutters kisses down my body to that sweet little swell, where he stops and nuzzles it for a long, quiet moment.

“You’re gonna have to help me here, little one,” he mutters against my skin. “Your mother is fucking *insane*.”

“Demyen! Language!” I laugh and smack him lightly with a pillow.

“You.” He stares up at me, eyes wild and crazy and filled with so much love and awe. “You were pregnant. Through... through all of it?”

I slowly nod again. “I realized it during the auction. A little before, actually.”

“*Before?*”

“You didn’t exactly give me room to formally announce it.”

He thumps his forehead against my swell. Over and over. “I’m a goner,” he groans to our little baby through my skin. “She’s gonna have me by my balls for the rest of my life.”

“Hey!” I laugh. “You happen to like when I have you by your balls.”

A bright, brilliant grin spreads across his face. “Yeah. I do.” He looks at my swell again. “Which is exactly how *you* came to be—”

“Dem!”

He grins even wider and I swear it nearly splits his face. “Goddammit, Clara. I fucking love you. And *you*,” he adds with a quick kiss to my stomach. “And your big sister.” He looks up at me in sudden alarm. “Does Willow know? Does anyone else know?”

I spend the rest of the night explaining to him how he’s the first I’ve officially told, but probably the last to figure it out. And then I rub his shoulders and massage his back with my breasts while he chugs straight from the bottle and we laugh, we cry, we hold each other as we celebrate this wild new adventure we’re about to embark on.

Together.

EXTENDED EPILOGUE

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