



SONATA
of Lies

ZAKREVSKY BRATVA BOOK TWO

NICOLE FOX

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BOOK 2

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SONATA OF LIES

Demyen stole my freedom to lock me in the worst cell imaginable.

His bed.

I get it: I'm the liar who put his brother behind bars.
And I'm paying for my betrayal, one moan at a time.
He promises he's going to ruin me.
So why does he pull me into his bed every night?
I see the truth behind those icy eyes:

He's addicted.

Unfortunately for me...
So am I.
And unfortunately for both of us, there's no ending this now.
No clean break.
No walking away.
Because I've got Demyen's baby in my belly...
And he just put me up to auction for his enemies.

***SONATA OF LIES* is Book 2 of the Zakrevsky Bratva trilogy. Demyen and Clara's story starts in Book 1, *REQUIEM OF SIN*, and ends in Book 3, *RHAPSODY OF PAIN*.**

CLARA

“Clara...”

I can't breathe.

I can't breathe.

I can't breathe.

“Clara.”

A hand presses to my chest. It pulls me into the moment, out of the blurry fog I'm swimming in.

Demyen's eyes meet mine.

I'm somewhere... Not the squad car. No, I'm in someone else's car.

Not a car. Something bigger. An SUV, I think.

He presses his hand to my chest again and rests his brow on mine. I realize I'm sitting in the passenger seat and he's leaning over the center console. At some point, he cut the tie around my wrists. They still sting a bit, but I'm free to move around.

“Breathe with me. In... out...”

I breathe with him. Slow, steady. When I start to spiral, he presses again.

In... out...

In... out...

When I'm finally not hyperventilating myself unconscious, he kisses my forehead.

"Where are we?" I croak. Wherever it is, it's cool and dark and kinda comforting.

"The Meridian." Demyen sits back in his own seat. "Parking garage."

I feel exhausted. So I slump in my seat and stare out at the mostly-empty garage. "What happened?"

"I saved your ass. Again."

I should probably glare at him. I don't have the energy to. "You were keeping tabs on me?" I scrunch my face and sigh. "Ugh. The guy with the newspaper. He was so obvious."

Demyen looks at me in disgust, like he's offended I'd ever even dream he'd be that unsubtle. "No. Gladys. The waitress."

The waitress. I laugh. It's weak and raspy, but I have to. Of course he'd have someone watching me, just in case I fucked up and shit went south. I just didn't expect the sweet lady in the pink dress and perfect curls to be a Bratva informant.

It's only a few seconds before my laughter turns into tears. I start sobbing. I'm sobbing, I'm shaking, and I hear Demyen jump out of the SUV and slam his door shut. I don't blame him—I hate how I am, too.

But then my door opens and he's right there, scooping me up into his arms. He kicks the door shut and carries me through the parking garage into a quiet hallway between the dock doors and a side entrance to the hotel.

I know I shouldn't feel soothed and comforted in his arms. I know it's a dangerous way to get attached to someone who does not—and will not and physically *cannot*—feel the same way about me.

But I can't help that I do.

My shaking stops almost immediately. My sobs quiet down until I'm only sniffing. His warmth, his steadiness, his heart beating in his chest... all of it, all of *him*, wraps around me like a security blanket.

“You’ll have to walk from here.” Demyen carefully sets me down at the double doors leading into the hotel. “You good?”

I nod. I also don’t overlook the fact that he’s still touching me, first by pressing a hand to my back as we enter the side lobby of the hotel, then by taking my hand in his to lead me wherever we’re going. I’m doing my damned hardest not to read into any of it.

He leads us to a part of the hotel I haven’t seen yet. Greenery peeks through windows lining the arched ceiling and the doors are gilded with vines etched into the panels. Demyen tugs on one of the handles and ushers me through.

It’s... a greenhouse?

It is. It’s a lavish greenhouse, complete with cooing tropical birds and waterfalls that trickle over rocks into a stream that crosses through the room under stone pathways. At first, I can’t believe that these are all living, growing plants—it looks so surreal. But one touch of a *Mimosa peduca* and the sight of it curling away from my fingers confirms that these are, in fact, real.

Real and exotic. My personal heaven.

“Where is this place?” I ask Demyen. I sound breathless. I *feel* breathless.

“It’s the center between the casino and hotel. We call it The Oasis.” Demyen casually paces along a parallel path until the foliage veils us from each other. “It’s open to guests to come and unwind, relax. But hardly anyone ever comes here.”

“Too drunk to appreciate it.”

He chuckles. “Probably.”

I sigh wistfully at the sight of a blooming cattleya orchid. “I would have practically lived here as a kid.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah.” I’m grateful for the thin veil of leaves and branches between us. This way, he can’t see how suddenly self-conscious I’ve become. “I was already a loner at school. Kept

my nose in the books and tried to avoid the bullies as much as possible. But when the trial happened...”

Demyen remains silent. I take that as a cue to keep talking. Why not? He might as well learn more about me before he suddenly decides I’m not worth all the effort.

“You’d think I’d be hailed as some hero for taking the stand. Or at least congratulated for surviving a kidnapping attempt.” I sigh and flick a pebble inside one of the planters. “Not those kids. Their parents worked for the Zakrevsky empire and *hated* me for the things I said against Tolya. They blamed me for tearing the family apart.”

The silence is much heavier now. I realize what I’ve said too late. I clear my throat and try to lighten the mood when we meet each other at the junction of the paths.

“And that’s how I became a plant nerd,” I say with a flourish of my hands to the foliage around us. “Lonely, ostracized kid with time on her hands. Uncle Mike—Michael Little—bought me one of those *Discovery Encyclopedia* books about exotic flowers and I spent all my time memorizing the names.”

Demyen’s studying me. I’m not sure if I like the intensity of his gaze. But then he tilts his head to one side with a subtle smirk on his lips. “All of them?”

“Well, don’t give me a pop quiz.” I laugh, just so I don’t feel like a butterfly pinned to the board by his stare. “But I remember my personal favorites.”

“Tell me.”

I scrunch my nose. “Bleeding hearts were top of the list. *Lamprocapnos spectabilis*. I also love the color of autumn crocus, *Colchicum autumnale*. Wolf’s bane was a surprising one—”

“Why?”

I blush and roll my eyes at my younger self. “Because I thought they were only in fairy tales. You know, to fend off werewolves.”

Demyen chuckles and shakes his head. “You would.”

“So would you!” My childhood self stomps my adult foot on the stone path. “It’s not like it grows in the local garden center.”

“Fair enough.”

We stroll down another path in silence, either enjoying the serenity of the greenhouse or avoiding awkward conversation. Probably both.

“So, did you continue your studies, Miss Botanist?”

I want to smile and blush. But the truth pulls a shadow over my face.

He notices. “Let me guess: Martin.”

“He didn’t think it was worth pursuing,” I explain in an ashamed murmur. “Called it ‘a waste of time.’ Wouldn’t even let me grow a small garden in the windowsill.”

“You should have done it anyway. Fuck him.”

“It’s probably best I didn’t.” Demyen looks at me in confusion. I sigh and shrug my shoulder. “My favorite flowers? They’re beautiful.” I kick a loose stone down the path. “And very, very poisonous.”

It would’ve been so tempting. There were two things Martin demanded I do without question: fuck him and feed him. How easy would it have been to slip a few bleeding hearts into the coffeemaker?

“I have to admit,” Demyen says, “it’s that same reason why I’ve stayed away from serious relationships. Women can be very beautiful—and very, very poisonous.” He quickly glances at me. “Except you. Which... surprised me.”

I... I don’t know what to say. I thought I was his Number One Enemy, or at least his favorite prisoner. He thinks *he’s* surprised? I’m floored. “Oh. Er, thank... you.”

“Don’t get me wrong. I still think you’re pretty fucking dangerous.”

I whip my gaze to him. He’s already staring at me, that cocky smirk melting into something more... well, *more*. My breath

catches. When he leans in closer, I think he's about to—

He stops just short of the kiss that might change things for both of us forever. Instead, he straightens and runs a frustrated hand through his hair, exhaling wearily as he does.

“I need a drink,” he blurts. “You do, too. Come with me.”

DEMYEN

I lead her to a leather lounge chair in one of the more private corners of the High Roller's Lounge. The bartender already knows what I prefer, and I signal for him to make two. Both of us need something stiff.

The thought was innocent, but my dick doesn't care. It's immediately reminding me I have more than one stiff thing I can give her.

We sit in silence, each to their own chair. It's just as well; being so close to her does a number to my senses. I can't think straight and yet, at the same time, there's so much clarity.

Maybe she's right—maybe she *is* poisonous.

And I'm fucked. Because nothing can stop me from drinking her in.

Her nose scrunches when she sips the bourbon. Fucking adorable. She gingerly sets the tumbler on the end table. "I'm sorry, by the way."

I mask the sudden cough on my own sip with a sniff. "For what?"

Clara sighs and leans her head back against the chair. "I should have listened to you. You were right. It was a trap, and an obvious one."

I down my tumbler and signal for another one. I have a feeling I should just make him leave the bottle. "I didn't want to be right. It would've been nice to see someone with a decent father for a change."

Her head rolls just enough for her to peer at me through her long lashes. “You never talk about your parents.”

I’m not sure if that’s a question or an accusation. “What’s there to talk about? My father was a selfish asshole and my mother was a cheating whore.”

Clara sucks in a sharp breath. “Dem...”

Yeah. Gonna need that bottle. “I’m not saying that out of malice. It’s a fact. My parents only put themselves first; fuck the well-being of their kids. Eventually, my mother—if you could call her that—ran off with one of her boyfriends. And my father just decided he was done being responsible for anyone at all and just fucked right the hell off.”

“How old were you?”

I scoff. “Old enough to know what was going on. Young enough to still need a caretaker. Tolya stepped in as the new *pakhan* and was able to file for guardianship over me.”

I know what she’s thinking. Or imagining, given the tears brimming those lashes. She’s envisioning some wide-eyed, innocent child lost in the world, abandoned by his parents, clinging to his big brother’s hand. She’s imagining me as some weak, helpless little thing.

Hardly.

Truth is, I was already a teenager when Dad gave us and his Bratva a giant middle finger and vanished. We could not have been more relieved; hell, we practically threw a party just to celebrate our newfound freedom.

But with his absence came a new set of responsibilities for Tolya.

Clara’s watching me quietly. “Sometimes, I wonder if things would have been different if I had a sibling,” she muses. “Mom did her best. But... I don’t think it’s the same. Not like you and Tolya.”

I wonder if things would have been different if my mother gave a damn about us. But I don’t ponder this out loud; no use delving into feelings I’ve never bothered to have.

“So you can understand my fury.” I don’t mean it as an insult; I genuinely want to know if Clara understands why I hated her so much.

I wish I understood when “hate” became a past-tense word.

“Yeah.” She sips her bourbon and looks away. “Can’t say I blame you.”

“It wasn’t just you. Tolya’s wife—”

Her head whips around. “He’s married?”

“She left him the second he was convicted. She believed—” Now, it’s my turn to blow out a breath. “You. She believed you and she didn’t want him hurting their future children. She sat in that courtroom, took one look at you, and got the hell out of Dodge. Sent him a Dear John letter in prison basically telling him to fuck off and die.”

Even in the dim lighting of the lounge, I can see Clara’s skin pale. She swallows hard and looks at everything but me.

“I almost put a hit out on you, you know.” Again, I watch her swallow hard. Her fingers begin to tremble. But I need to her know. I don’t know *why* I need her to know, but fuck. Here we are. “You and your father. But then Bambi came along and explained to me why committing murder against public star witnesses wouldn’t exactly help Tolya’s case.”

I mean it lightheartedly, but Clara doesn’t share my dark sense of humor.

I nudge her foot with mine so she’ll look at me. “I was a moody teenager when Tolya went to prison. One of those moods was rage. One second, all I had to do was go to school and keep my nose clean. The next, I’m sixteen years old with a fucking compound in the middle of the fucking desert filled with men with guns who needed income and a plan. Not exactly the recipe for rational decision-making.”

She finally quirks the tiniest smile. “Probably not.”

I nod and toss back still more liquor. “Bambi’s explanation helped me understand that, too. That there’s a time and place to decide things.”

“She’s quite something. How did you meet her?”

I know what she means by “something.” Bambi is a force to be reckoned with, that’s for damned sure. “I was nineteen when we started the escort service. Tolya had me recruiting beautiful young women off the streets with promises of better pay and better living conditions in exchange for their loyalty. I found Bambi working the back Strip.”

I remember not being particularly attracted to Bambi in the way other women tempted me into their beds. With her, the attraction was profoundly different. New. It was like one look at her told me she would be the best investment I’ll ever make and I couldn’t drive away until she was buckled in the backseat of my car.

Even after she called me an asshole and told me to eat my own dick.

Come to think of it, that actually made me want her on my side even more.

“She had a rough life up until then, but she was smart. She’d been turning tricks since she was fifteen to get away from her shitbag of a stepfather, pay her way through high school, and keep up appearances until she graduated. With honors.”

Clara snorts. “Somehow, I actually believe that.”

“I asked her if she wanted to become my lawyer. Paid for her education, set her up on retainer. She never looked back.”

“Unlike you.”

I know she didn’t mean that as a jab. Still works as one, though. “I might have a problem with letting things go. Especially when nothing’s actually been resolved.”

Clara concedes with a little shrug. “I guess that’s fair.”

More silence. I don’t know if I love it or hate it this time. Things are tense between us, but not in the usual, anger-filled way. More like we’re both standing at the edge of something terrifying... and wonderful.

And wondering who’s going to jump in first.

“I’m going to do whatever it takes.” Clara’s voice is suddenly firm and clear, and she looks at me with full determination in her body. “Whatever it takes to prove I’m not who you think I am. I’m not a liar, and I’m not someone who rips families apart.”

Should I tell her I’ve already started to figure that out?

No. I like where this is going.

She leans in closer to me. Maybe it’s the bourbon fueling her courage, maybe it’s the post-panic clarity. Whatever it is, it’s dangerously tempting.

“I’m on your side, Dem. Whether you believe me or not. Whether you like it or not. So it’s time to get used to the fact that we’re allies, not enemies.”

I swallow. She may be right; I’m just not going to tell her.

So instead, I lift my tumbler in agreement.

DEMYEN

“Again, I cannot express how deeply sorry we are for the misunderstanding.”

The superintendent nervously twists a pen between her fingers. Even though she’s flanked by two of her administrators, it’s clear she’s terrified of us. Of what we could—*should*—do.

Good.

“‘Misunderstanding’ is such a dull way to describe terrifying a little girl and trying to get her mother arrested right in front of her.” Years of public diplomacy keeps my tone calm, though my blood is still fucking boiling.

“Again, I—”

“You cost her the most important day of her life.” Clara’s voice is much softer than mine, but filled with every bit as much controlled fury as I’m feeling. *Fuck*, she’s giving me an erection at the worst possible time. “My little girl dreamed of her first day of school and there’s no making up for that. You can’t just rewind time and give her back the joy she should have felt. Instead, I had to spend the rest of the day explaining to my sobbing child why she couldn’t go to school. Why people who are supposed to protect her and her family made it impossible for her to start her education.”

With every sentence that comes out of her mouth, Clara leans forward more and her voice grows thornier. I don’t remember seeing Willow cry, but I’m also not going to challenge Clara’s word on it.

Sometimes, it's best not to poke the mama bear.

The superintendent slowly holds her hands up in surrender. "Our full intention was and always has been to ensure the safety of our children. Which is why—"

"Is there something wrong with your new security?" I lean back in my chair, gesturing to the men—*my* men—patrolling the hallways outside the office.

She blinks. "Pardon?"

"Your new security. The tech, the guards, the whole new system Zakrevsky Industries installed into this academy and your affiliate locations in order to improve the safety and well-being of your children. Have there been any problems I should know about?"

One of the administrators nervously clears his throat. The superintendent thinks on it for a moment, then shakes her head. "No. Why—"

"So when your guy saw my name on Willow's contact list, you figured, what? That some other Demyen Zakrevsky must be driving the car?"

No one has anything to say. I'd be surprised if they could justify what had to be the most ludicrous acts of misjudgment I've seen in a long while.

I'm not a private person by any means—part of having a solid cover for the Bratva involves being one of Vegas' most respected corporate executives. There's no man, woman, or reading-age child who hasn't seen my face plastered on a newspaper or posted in a local news alert about one merger or another.

"Here's what's going to happen," I grit out. "Everything set up with the security personnel and tech systems will remain in place." I pause, enjoying how they're hanging on every word, waiting in terror to see if I'm going to rescind my generous donation I made the day I took Willow in for her admissions review. "As will the scholarship contribution made on behalf of Zakrevsky Industries."

Everyone but Clara visibly relaxes and breathes a collective sigh of relief. She, however, side-eyes me with curiosity.

Just wait, my impatient minx. I'm getting there.

“There will, however, be a thorough investigation into this institution’s financial books, personnel, and operations.”

The superintendent composes herself and straightens the sleeves of her blazer, trying to gain back some shred of authority. Too bad she doesn’t stand a fucking chance. “Mr. Zakrevsky, I don’t think—”

“You’re absolutely right about that: you don’t think. You *didn’t* think. If you had, we wouldn’t be sitting here, discussing the measures we are willing to take in order to protect our child and the children of this school.”

She furrows her brow above a fake smile. “I’m sorry. I feel as if I misunderstood something. Are you Willow’s father?”

I shove down the internal voice that wants to shout to the whole damn world that Willow is my little girl. The fact that I even feel that urge is deeply unnerving. “I don’t think you have the fucking right to ask me that question.” I pause, then plaster on a beaming CEO face and say, “Besides—I’m merely a businessman protecting my investments. Children are our future, aren’t they?”

“Of course,” she answers immediately. It’s both an agreement and a surrender.

“Wonderful.” I rise from my seat and take Clara’s hand in mine. “Then I think we’re done here. My accountant will be in touch.”

I don’t wait for her response. I lead Clara from the office, the stunned administrators left in our wake with their jaws hanging wide open.

I’m happy to pour money into this school as long as Willow goes here. But I smell a rat somewhere. And that office stinks of underhanded dealings and cooked books, something I’m all too familiar with in my own line of work. If there’s anything shady going on behind closed doors, *I* will be the one keeping tabs and making sure everyone stays in line.

Willow was able to start school this past Monday, after Pavel called up his old buddy—the police commissioner—and had a chat about AMBER Alerts. I don't know what all was said, but the alert vanished and so did the hunt for Clara and Willow.

“Hey... Dem?” I glance over at her. Clara's staring at her phone, looking very confused. “Why...? What's... Why is there so much money in my bank account?”

I bite back a smile. “What do you mean?”

“I mean my checking. And my savings. I checked the app yesterday and I was like, yeah, okay, fine, that's normal. But now, I'm...”

“Disgustingly rich?”

Her eyes bug from her head and she gestures for me to keep my voice down.

I chuckle. “As much as it pains me to admit it, you won that money fair and square. We just made sure to put it to good use before releasing the bulk of the funds.”

Clara frowns. “What do you mean?”

I open the passenger door for her and usher her into the car. “There's a college fund for Willow, fully funded, plus retirement and a few more odds and ends. Let Bambi know if you want your paycheck routed to any of those accounts. You ought to be fine, provided you don't suddenly start buying Malibu mega-mansions left and right. Willow, on the other hand, couldn't burn through all her money even if she had several lifetimes to do it.”

I close the door before she can ask any more questions.

I decided the other day to give a show of trust while simultaneously testing how much I can actually trust Clara to keep her word. Now that she has her winnings at her fingertips, which is more than enough money to hire a private jet and fly off to Reykjavik if she wanted, the big question is...

Will she?

Or will she remain true to her word and stick this through? Help me, help Tolya, and prove that she's our ally and not our

enemy?

I slide into the driver's seat and pretend not to notice the way she's staring at me. I'm enjoying this way too much.

"Hey, Dem?"

"Mhm?"

"These windows are tinted, right?"

"Yeah. Why?"

Her sugary lips latch onto mine before I have a chance to buckle myself in. Clara cups my face in her hands, then drags her fingers through my hair when I growl with delight and deepen the kiss.

Goddamn. If we weren't in a school parking lot...

But the windows are tinted. I can get away with a little bit. I rub my hands along her sides, up to just below her tempting breasts. My thumbs rub over her soft flesh, teasing those sweet nipples through her bra. She shivers and feeds me a whimper of pleasure.

When she drags her teeth along my bottom lip and tugs, I'm damn near close to pulling her all the way onto my lap.

Reality check, asshole.

The last thing we need is an indecency charge right after ripping the school a new one for treating us like criminals. So, with a groan of frustration and immense regret, I ease Clara back enough to catch my breath and let a bit more clarity sink in.

I want to ask what that was for. But I also don't want to know. I'm loving the spontaneity, the way she's taking more charge of her life, the way she's seeing what she wants and goes for it without asking for permission anymore.

"Thank you," is all she breathes against my lips before collapsing, breathless, back into her own seat.

I don't know what to say, so I just nod and turn on the car. And, at some point between the exit gate and the coffee drive thru, I lace my fingers with hers over the center console.

I have no idea what the fuck I'm doing. Or what the fuck this is. Or if it's even a good idea.

The part of me that can't trust a damn thing is waiting for the other shoe to drop.

The part of me that's been waiting a lifetime for something like this doesn't fucking care.

DEMYEN

I fucking knew it.

I knew things were too good to be true.

I've been ignoring the way Clara keeps having secretive conversations on her phone, ducking away when she sees me or anyone else approaching. I figured it was probably Roxy, which wouldn't be a problem. I've had the woman checked and she's clean as can be.

So I'm doing my best to not explode with the sudden rage and betrayal I'm feeling as I watch Clara sneak out of her room at 1:30 in the goddamn morning. She's the most obvious at it, too—glancing around, ducking into shadows, carefully tiptoeing just out of sight of the cameras she's clearly mapped out ahead of time.

I'll have to rearrange those.

Something kept me unsettled in bed. I couldn't stop tossing and turning. I even tried jacking off to the hot moment we shared in the car earlier today, but no such luck. My dick wants what it wants and now that it knows how incredible Clara feels, my hand just isn't enough anymore.

So it's when I stormed out of my room in frustration that I spotted the treacherous little nymph slinking through the shadows and out of the main courtyard.

I should sound the alarm.

I should have my men tackle her at the gate.

Or... I could follow her and see where the hell she thinks she's going.

I trace her movements through the darkness. I tell myself I'm only handling this without getting the guards involved because I want to see where the security around the compound needs to be improved before Clara's next escape attempt.

And I know there's going to be a next attempt. Willow is sound asleep in her room, which means Clara's probably doing a test run before going for the full sprint. I just want to see how far she'll map it out—and how stupid she plans on being when they're marooned out in the middle of the damn desert.

When she scales the wall, I pause. I'm actually impressed.

I wait until she's gone, then I'm over the wall after her. A hundred yards ahead of me, Clara tiptoes down the road.

Something large and dark sits beneath a Joshua tree. She tiptoes up to it, then opens a side door and slides in.

It's a car.

With a man sitting in the driver's seat.

The dimming light shows them talking, Clara nervously glancing around. She doesn't see me or she would be falling over herself trying to flee the vehicle by now.

She should. If she knows what's best for her, she should get out of the fucking car *now*.

The light fades. Now, they're in total darkness. Together. In a car.

I swear to God, if that thing starts rocking—

But then she's back out and carefully shutting the door so it doesn't slam and make a loud noise. I duck behind another tree to stay out of sight, though she's too focused on where she's going to look up and see me.

I'm seething. My fists are clenched so hard, my nails bite into my skin. I want to shake her like a ragdoll and ask what the *fuck* she thinks she's doing. But I need to wait until she's within range.

She gets closer... closer... closer...

There.

Her yelp of surprise is muffled by my hand firmly clamped over her mouth. If she were anyone else, I'd break every bone in her body for such a betrayal.

But she's not anyone else.

And that's the whole fucking problem.

I practically carry her into a better-lit pathway and spin her around to shove her back against the column. It's a few seething moments before I can unclench my jaw enough to grind out, "What. The hell. Are you doing?"

Clara blinks at me. And, surprisingly, she's not shedding a tear.

Which pisses me off even more.

"Dem—"

"I swear to God, Clara Everett." My rage wants to strangle her. The part of me that's still marginally logical whispers for me to hear her out. "If you're fucking around on me—"

"What?" She frowns. Then... laughs. She fucking *laughs*. "Oh my God, Dem. *No*. I'm not—I wasn't even in there long enough for *that*."

Okay. She might have a point.

Not like my fury was keeping a timer.

"Then what the fuck are you doing sneaking around—sneaking *out*—in the middle of the goddamn night?. Do you have any idea what time it is?"

"Okay, Daddy. Jeez."

Fuck. Her calling me that should not, in any way, make me as hard as it does. I'm blaming the adrenaline.

Clara is unfazed by my anger. Which, while irritating as hell, is a typical sign of someone who has nothing to hide.

She digs into the pocket of her shorts and pulls out a folded piece of paper. "I checked the public records of Michael

Little's death certificate and noticed something weird. There's two of them."

I frown. "Two?"

And how did we miss that if it's true?

"Yeah. Two certificates. At first, I thought it was a glitch, you know, like how those genealogy websites get records mixed up with identical names. But the location, dates, all that matched. I think it's still a glitch, but the kind the police department didn't plan on slipping into some family tree search database."

Now, my hands are completely off her. Well, not completely. More like they're just resting on her waist because even when I'm simmering with rage, I have this stupid craving to constantly touch her.

"What did you find out?"

"There are two certificates because the first one was erased. Or they tried to erase it. I tried calling the medical examiner on the first one, but she no longer works at the lab."

I frown. "How do you know?"

Clara holds up the piece of paper between us. "Because the guy in the car was her assistant. And he still works at the lab. He was there when they fired her and replaced her with a medical examiner who redid the autopsy and signed a new certificate."

"But why—"

"Because the bullet didn't kill Michael Little. Not... not like everyone's been saying."

I tug the paper from between her fingers and unfold it. Damn these stupid solar lights; I can barely make out an address under a name prefaced with "Dr."

But I can clearly make out another word: *Fiji*.

Clara leans back against the column and sighs. "He was already dead when he was shot."

I look up at her face. She's not lying. Or at least, she believes every word coming out of her mouth. "The hell does that

mean?”

“Read the first death certificate. The one I printed out and put on your desk with a sticky note before I snuck out of the compound to meet the lab tech to get the address of the original M.E. so we can question her.”

I should punish her for being so smug. Turn her over my knee and spank that bare ass from pink to red, and then—

Focus, dammit.

My hand still on her waist rubs down to the curve of her hip and squeezes. Not hard, but firm enough to let her know I mean business. “Tell me everything. Now.”

She tries to hide the subtle bite of her lip, but I see it. And damn if I don’t want to make good use of all this adrenaline in the best way possible.

Clara clears her throat and takes a deep breath, probably to clear her head of the same fog mine keeps wanting to drift into. “The original cause of death was listed as a myocardial infarction due to toxins found in his bloodstream. Which he ingested.”

My frown deepens. “The fuck?”

She slowly nods. “Yeah. Whether Tolya shot him or not, the truth is: Michael Little had a heart attack because someone poisoned him. He probably died before the gun ever went off.”

DEMYEN

I'm not holding Clara for my own selfish needs anymore.

I'm clinging to her just to keep myself grounded as the world spirals around me.

He probably died before the gun went off.

Which means someone severely fucked all of us over. Michael, Tolya, me...

And Clara most of all.

She offers me the tiniest smile and lifts her hand to touch my arm, then seems to think better of it. "I told you: I'm on your side. And I'm not going to rest until we figure out what the hell actually happened to Michael Little. So we can get Tolya out of that prison and back home where he belongs."

I stuff the paper into my pajama pocket and scoff. "You could have done that just by recanting."

"Could I?" She arches a brow. "You've met my father, the arresting officer. And you've dug up enough of my life to know exactly how well *that* would go. Even if the court believed me, what would stop him from punishing me behind their backs?"

"I would." Both my hands firmly hold her hips and pull her just a little bit closer to me. "You know I won't let him—or anyone—get near you."

She smiles softly at me. "I know."

A thousand contradictions are swirling around in my brain. I knew for a fact that Tolya wasn't there—until he confessed that he was. I knew for a fact that Clara was a selfish, lying bitch—until I found out she wasn't. I knew for a fact that Michael Little was shot and killed—until now, with a new lead on an entirely different cause of death.

Clara breaks through the whirlwind with her gentle voice. “Now that we have this new lead, once we have the testimony and evidence, I can help you file another appeal. With my statement and their evidence, there's no way a judge can ignore the obvious.”

“You would do that?”

“Go in front of a judge and courtroom full of people who adore my father and tell them how he beat me until I said what he wanted me to say?” Clara's fingers lightly stroke over my chest. She smiles and looks me in the eye. “Yeah. I will. Because it's the right thing to do. And... because I know you'll be there with me when I do it.”

I don't know what shakes me more: her newfound courage or her implicit trust in me.

Trust that I'll stand by her.

Trust that I'll protect her.

“You're damn fucking right I will.”

It's the only thing I'm able to grind out before my mouth collides with hers.

I tell myself this is to take the edge off my frayed nerves. This is just a way to work out some seriously pent-up tension. For both of us.

This is just another one time thing, I promise.

Then I hear her needy little whimper and my lips travel to her neck to suck on that sweet pulse I can already feel quicken for me.

Yeah fucking right.

She breathes my name, and it only fuels the fire heating my veins. I don't know how she does it, how she manages to make my blood run so hot it feels like I'll burn through my own skin if I don't ravish her until it cools down.

I'm supposed to be pissed at her for sneaking around on me. Not proud as fuck of her courage to do it to save my brother.

I'm supposed to be scaring her into submissive obedience. Not wrapping her legs around my waist and carrying her into my bedroom to drag that side of her out another, better way.

She fits so perfectly in my arms. I can't stop tasting her sugar-sweet lips or sucking on that sinful tongue, and the way she clings to me makes it easy to carry her into my room without breaking away from her for a second.

I kick the door shut behind me and only then do I drag my lips from hers to taste her jaw, her neck, the line of salty sweat that trickled down between her breasts when she was out being my good little spy.

Clara lets go of me long enough to peel off her tank top and throw it to the ground. When her arms wrap around my head, I take the opportunity to bury my face between her breasts.

I roll my tongue, then flick, and she rocks her hips in my arms to grind herself against my waist. When I touch her, I see she's wet. She's wet, she's hot, and she's so fucking needy.

If I wasn't riding such a surge from everything that's happened tonight, I'd probably take my time to torment her with more until she's sobbing my name and begging me to soothe the ache inside her.

But I'm the one who's aching.

And it's all her damn fault.

So "taking my time" isn't gonna happen.

I tumble her back onto the bed and rip off her shorts and panties with one swift yank. When I cup her mound, I grin. It's dark in the room, but I can feel her, and I definitely feel her grind her hot, swollen, now-dripping slit against my palm.

"Demyen," she breathes. "Please..."

I press firmer. Clara shudders and groans.

I lift her leg to my chest to open her up more for me. She's going to need it, because I'm not going to be gentle tonight. The only warning she gets is the feeling of me lining up with her slit.

And then she's arching, crying out, and sobbing with relief as I impale her on my cock.

I lean forward to taste her skin, which pushes her leg back and makes her open up even more for me. I bottom out inside her and groan.

Fuck. She feels so fucking perfect around me.

All I can see is shadowy glimpses here and there of her writhing beneath me. All I can hear is the wet slapping of my hips against hers, our panting and groaning, her mewls whenever I push particularly hard or deep.

All I can feel is her reaching for me, clinging to me. Pulsing around me. Milking me into her.

I need more.

I need so much more.

I grab her other leg and wrap both of them around my waist, grinding into her as I do. Clara gasps and shudders and I work my cock into her until she's sobbing for me to keep fucking her.

She's at the edge of the bed, right where I want her. I reach down and cup her ass, pulling her onto me so every single stroke hits as deep as I can go.

When she comes, I kiss her hard. I want to taste her screams. They're just for me and I'll be damned if I don't drink them straight from the source.

The way she ripples and spasms around every inch of my throbbing cock nearly pulls my own orgasm from me. But I'm not done with her. Not yet. I need to own her, claim her. Mark her as mine.

Mine.

All fucking *mine*.

I tear my lips away and kiss a path down her body, as far as our joined bodies will let me. It's far more intimate than I ever intended to be with this woman, but fuck it. I want it. I want *her*.

And I always get what I want.

She shivers so deliciously when I pull myself from her. I love the way she softly whimpers at the empty feeling—and I love knowing it's me, and only me, who can fill that void.

Don't worry, baby. I've got you.

I flip her over onto her stomach. Clara yelps in surprise, but doesn't ask me what I'm doing. In fact, I only have to guide her hips to where I want her on the bed—she instantly spreads her knees and arches her ass up to me the moment I settle behind her.

God fucking damn. She's too fucking perfect.

I chase away the whispering thoughts that *all* of this is too fucking perfect to last by driving myself into her. I drown my senses in her muffled cries as she bites my pillow.

When I kiss a fiery path along her spine, I can feel her fucking herself on my cock. Does she know what she does to me? Does she know how easy it is for her to bring me to my knees, like I am right now?

When Clara comes again, I don't know what I whisper in her ear. I don't think she does, either. All my mind can clearly process is the need to cover her, be with her, remind her that I'm right here.

I'm right here and I'm not going anywhere.

“Goddamn, baby...” It's all I can manage as my own breath quickens to a peak. I sink my teeth into the curve of her neck. The last of my self-control goes *snap*.

I shove myself balls-deep inside her, as deep as I can go. Grunting, groaning, giving her every single fucking drop of me until she's filled to the brim and I feel drained emptier than I have in days.

A thought suddenly occurs to me. I'm not wearing a condom. And she's not on birth control.

The thought should scare the absolute shit out of me.

Instead, it makes me shudder and groan and surge one more time inside her as if my body needs to make extra sure. As if I want her, *need* her, to carry a part of me inside her.

Fuck.

I'm losing my goddamn mind.

But I'm not going to care about that tonight. All I care about is staying inside this woman as long as possible. And then, when I finally have to ease out of her, all I care about is tucking her into my side and making sure doesn't go anywhere.

Because of course, the first thing she does after she regains her senses is try to slide out of bed.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" I mumble as I wrap my arms around her tighter.

I feel her hesitate. "Um... to my room?"

"You're *in* your room." I nuzzle her neck and breathe her in. She smells like me, and not just because she uses my body wash. I should fuck her before she goes to trial just so the whole courtroom knows she's mine.

"Dem—"

"Hush. I'm trying to sleep." I tuck a light blanket around us and drape a leg over hers. There's no way I'm letting her slip away again.

I'm not sure if I whisper that out loud. I might, because for some reason she lets out a soft giggle. But then she relaxes and turns in my arms enough to get comfortable, her breath fanning over my skin as we both drift to sleep.

CLARA

I keep chanting to myself that all I have to do is get through the day.

This totally normal, totally mundane, just-like-every-other day.

It's just not as easy to do when my legs are still a little wobbly from last night.

I figured I was doing Dem a favor when I woke up this morning and decided to untangle myself from his limbs, let him sleep in, and go get Willow ready for school. For one, he definitely needed the sleep.

For another... I don't know if he remembers what he whispered to me while he... ah...

How does that saying go?

Rode me hard and put me away wet.

I know the meaning is entirely different, but I can't honestly think of another way to describe it. One moment, Demyen had me pinned to a wall, pissed as hell, demanding answers after he caught me sneaking off the compound.

The next minute, he had me pinned to his bed, giving me exactly what I've needed for...

Well, ever since that one time in the laundry room.

The fact that it was too dark to see him only heightened the whole experience. I never knew how mind-blowing sex could be with a man like him. Or any man. At all. But Demyen took my body to whole new heights of pleasure. I'm still shivering.

And the fullness. *Fuck*. I still feel so... so... *full*.

In my body, yes. That's an obvious one. But in my heart as well, from the sweet nothings he breathed along my skin to the way I woke up completely wrapped in his arms, his face practically buried in my chest, his soft snores rumbling between us. And when I started to pull away and he instinctively tried to tuck me back into him...

God help me, I was so tempted to stay. I wanted so much to stay in his arms and watch the sunlight dance over his face. I wanted to be the first thing he saw when he woke up—and, maybe, the first thing he tasted before starting the day together.

But then I remembered myself.

And I remembered how quickly Demyen can change his mind on things. Like me.

So I pulled myself away, quietly got dressed, and snuck out of his room.

Bambi offered to take Willow to school. She immediately jumped with glee and made it impossible for me to say no. Not that I have any problems with Bambi taking my daughter anywhere; I know I can trust her.

I was just really hoping to have that excuse to get away from Demyen for a while.

I'll just... start cleaning, I guess.

I should have known better than to start my rounds with the kitchen. I usually do, but if I'm to successfully avoid Demyen and the awkwardness sure to hang between us, that's the last place I should be.

Autopilot is a bitch, though. And it has me wiping down counters and checking inventory in the kitchen right around the same time Demyen emerges from his room and shuffles in for his morning coffee.

He's so deliciously disheveled. I'm actually glad it's just us; I'm not sure how I'd feel if any of the other women were around to see the way his hair is sticking out in all directions,

partly from sleep but mostly from my fingers. Or the way his bare chest and back still bear the faint pink lines from my nails dragging over his skin.

I busy myself with scrubbing a nonexistent stain off one of the breakfast nooks so he doesn't have to see my blushing face.

"Morning." Demyen's voice is low and groggy.

"Good morning." I try not to sound too chipper. Like a woman who had her back blown out in the best way possible.

He shuffles around the kitchen until he finds one of his favorite coffee mugs. He sets it on the counter, then shuffles over to the coffee maker and points at it. "Is this fresh?"

"Yeah. I made it about half an hour ago."

Demyen nods and slowly pours himself a cup of coffee. He usually takes his with two sugars and an ungodly amount of creamer, so I subtly slide the sugar bowl down the counter to him and duck into the fridge for the bottle of creamer.

"Nuh-uh." He mumbles behind me. "The other one."

"The other one" happens to be a bottle of imported Irish cream. Sure, technically, it's creamy, but it's also *liquor*. At nine o'clock in the morning.

"You sure?"

He snorts a laugh and nods. "Positive. It's gonna be one of those days."

I nudge the fridge door close with my foot and bring the bottle of Irish cream to where he's leaning against the kitchen island. "You're not forming an addiction, I hope? We'll have to stage an intervention."

I set the bottle down and turn to leave, but I don't get far before his arm slips around my waist and pulls me back against him. Demyen buries his face in my messy bun and breathes me in.

"Addicted? No. Not to alcohol, at least."

My heart pounds against my ribcage. If he says anything more, it might burst through and run off into the Sierra Nevada.

But that's all Demyen says before hugging me close, sucking in one last, deep inhale, then releasing me to return to his precious bean water.

And that's all he says to me for the rest of the day.

I catch him watching me closely, but from a good distance, several times throughout my cleaning rounds. At the pool, arranging freshly laundered towels and bath sheets, I spot him leaning against a column and watching me work.

In the main entrance, as I dust the windowsills and clean the glass, I catch him in the reflection, pausing in the archway to watch me when he thinks I don't know he's right there.

And during lunch, when I decide to sit by one of the fountains to eat my sandwich and bask in the last of the summer sunlight... I feel his eyes on me.

I'd be lying if I said I didn't like it. I love it, actually. I love the way his gaze caresses my body, the way he actually blushes when I do catch him in the act.

He's so freaking adorable, and I'll never in a million years tell him that. Demyen is meant to be this big, bad, intimidating crime lord running a dual-natured empire of fantasy-fulfillment and smuggled goods. Authority seeps from his pores and confidence is the very thing stitching his being together.

So when I catch him wavering around me? Well, yeah. It makes me feel pretty damn special.

I just can't admit to it out loud. Ever. Not if I want to keep it.

Not if I want to keep *him*.

I polish off my sandwich and check my watch. It's only a little after noon now, which means I have a couple of hours before I need to suck it up and remind Demyen we need to go pick up Willow. Or maybe I can ask one of her guards to do it.

Her guards. What a concept. As weird as it is, it's actually comforting to know my baby girl has her own private army. Martin doesn't stand a chance.

On my way back to my room to quickly stash my now-empty lunch bag, Gloria stops me and lets me know that we actually finished early today. So now, I'm free to change out of my uniform and relax until it's time to get Willow.

"Go find something to do, *mija*," she says with a mischievous and completely unexplained wink. She saunters away before I can ask what's making her smile so big.

I trade one dress for another—my uniform for a light sage sundress with tiny floral patterns stitched into the linen. I slip on my sandals after checking the transparency of the dress—nothing's showing through, thank goodness—and head out to go relax by the pool.

But Demyen's right there, at my door, fist raised like he was just about to knock.

"Clara." He clears his throat and lowers his hand.

I smile and rock on the balls of my feet, waiting for him to continue. He stares at me for a long, silent moment, his eyes slowly taking me in.

Note to self: wear this dress more often.

"This way." Demyen turns on his heel and walks away, fully expecting me to follow him.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

No answer.

We make our way across the compound to his massive garage. I don't know why a man would ever need eighty cars, but Demyen isn't in a hurry to answer any of my questions right now, so I don't bother asking.

"Over here."

I don't realize I'm not paying attention, just staring at the cars, until I hear Demyen's voice echo a few rows down. He's standing next to a black Lexus LX 600, according to the emblem stamped on the back door.

"It's got off-road capabilities and excellent gas mileage, but there's a gallon stored in the back just in case." Demyen

smacks the side a few times as he walks around it, pointing out different features. “Safety lock custom installed, so no one can open the doors unless you want them to. There’s a gun stashed inside the headrest of the passenger seat—just use the knife stashed below the driver’s seat to rip the stitching. Or stab the guy, I don’t care.”

I try not to laugh at his dark joke. “Um, okay? But why are you telling me all this?”

Demyen circles back around and pops the back door open. “There are two safety kits stored in the spare wheel well, along with the wheel. Hopefully, you’ll never have to use them, but they have meal rations, foil blankets, and should last at least three days with the water filtration system—”

“Dem.” I run a hand through my hair until my fingers tangle in the curls. “What’s going on?”

He leans against the opened door. “This is yours. I’m giving you a car.”

“Oh, no.” I blanch. “No. I can’t... Just, no.”

“Why not?”

I scoff. I must be dreaming. Yeah, that’s it. I’m still in his bed, it’s still dark out, I’m just fast asleep and dreaming about Demyen Zakrevsky giving me one of his luxury vehicles like it’s a stick of gum. “It’s... I’m not—I mean, I...” I take a deep breath. “Thank you. Really. But I can’t. I barely drove a tin can, and this... This isn’t even a car. It’s basically a tank!”

“If you want a tank, I’ll get you a tank.”

He waits a beat, then lowers himself into the backseat. I wait a beat of my own before I follow him in.

“Why are you doing this?” I blurt.

I cringe immediately. *What ever happened to ‘Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth,’ dumbass?*

I blame my trust issues. Good things never come without a price, in my experience.

Demyen picks at a piece of lint on the overhead lining. “I want you and Willow to be safe. And I promised you I’d never let anything happen to you. This is part of keeping that promise.”

I’m not going to cry.

I’m not going to cry.

I’m not going to cry.

His eyes meet mine. I’m almost taken aback by the intensity in them. “I need you to promise me, Clara: if shit goes down and someone, anyone, raids this place... promise me you’ll grab Willow and drive this thing as far the fuck away as you can.”

My breath is caught in my throat. “I promise. But...” I pick at my lip uncertainly. “How will you find us?”

Demyen grins. “There’s one more little secret. This thing is bugged, wired, tapped. I can hear it, see it, follow it. So there will be no escape plans hatching, got it?”

I roll my eyes with a dramatic sigh. “Why on earth would I want to escape? Everything I’ve ever wanted is right here.”

I scoot closer to him. We’re not exactly... Well, shit, I don’t know what we are. But he’s giving me a huge gift that has to do with more than just a luxury SUV built for war. I’ve got to give him something in return, to thank him.

So I lean forward and kiss his cheek. “Thank you,” I whisper softly.

I mean to pull away, but Demyen moves just enough for our brows to press together. And maybe that’s all he meant to do. But... I can’t *not* press my lips to his.

Again.

And again.

Demyen growls and threads a hand through my hair, deepening the kiss as he pulls. *Fuck*, it’s insane how quickly the man can take me from uncertainty to overwhelming need. And even though I’ve been aching all day from last night, I can already feel myself grow wet inside my panties.

It's the way he touches me. The way he kisses me. Like he's hungry and not just wanting me, but *needing* me. Like I'm the only woman in the world who can give him exactly what he wants.

And God help me, I want to be that woman for him.

I don't remember pushing him onto his back, but I must have. Sometime between sucking on his tongue and nibbling his bottom lip, I not only pushed him to lay down on his back, I ripped the buttons from his shirt. I can still hear one or two of them bouncing on the cement floor outside the car.

"Thank you," I whisper again. I straddle his waist so I can lean down and kiss him. Over and over again, because *my God*, do I want him.

"You do this to me." Demyen grabs my wrist and guides my hand to rub over his bulge. "You do this to me all the fucking time. Every fucking day."

I don't know what comes over me. What succubus suddenly possesses me.

But without thinking, and without hesitating, I flick his pants button open and tug the zipper down.

Demyen sucks in a sharp breath the moment I slip my hand beneath the waistband of his boxers and wrap my fingers around his shaft. As far as they can go, at least.

"Fuck. Yes. Baby."

I blush hard. I love hearing him say things like that. I carefully ease him out and do my best to give him long, full, slow strokes even at this odd angle of being halfway twisted around. And it seems my best is working, because Demyen lets out a punched groan and rocks into my hand.

"Fuck. Just like that." He closes his eyes for a moment. When his mouth curves into a smile, I can't help it. I lean down to kiss him again. Kiss him while I stroke him.

After a solid minute or two of stroking him until he's literally throbbing against my palm, Demyen groans and wraps his

hands around my waist. “Fuck. That’s it. I need you. Right now. Get on.”

I hesitate. My hand completely stops. “What?”

“Ride me. Climb on my dick and ride me, baby.” Demyen spans my ass.

“Um, I don’t... know...”

He almost hits his head against the roof of the car, he sits up so fast. “Have you never been on top?”

Well, this sexy moment is officially over. I pucker my lips and stare at the far corner of the stow-and-go seating. “Well... no. Not exactly.”

I figure that’s the end of this conversation, so I move to slide out of the vehicle. But Demyen grabs my wrists and tugs me to him, hard enough that I can’t stop myself from falling onto him.

And then he’s devouring me, lips and tongue, moans and whimpers as he works his seductive magic all through my senses. In a split second, he manages to take my insecurities and drown them in a flood of desire.

He’s everywhere at once while still being under me. I barely register the way he hikes my dress up over my hips and massages my thighs until I’m straddling him. Not his waist this time, but lower. Right where I can feel his hard length rub against my panty-covered mound.

“That’s it, baby. Just like that.” His words of encouragement make me realize I started grinding myself on him without thinking. Pure instinct. I feel him and I want him. “Roll those hips for me. Good girl.”

Unh, fuck. He said the magic phrase.

My panties are officially ruined.

Demyen’s hands slide over my ass and give my cheeks a squeeze. Then his fingers tug at one corner of my panties and rip them apart. The sound of fabric tearing, the feel of his strength baring me to him... I don’t know how it’s possible to get any wetter for this man, but that’s exactly what happens.

“Better?” His grin is so cocky, but I know exactly what he means the moment he tosses my ruined panties aside. His long, pulsing shaft is now pressed along my bare slit and oh my God, does it feel so much better.

So I nod. I whimper, I shiver, I struggle to catch my breath. And I nod.

He squeezes my ass again. “Do it just like you were before. That’s it. Yes... good girl. That’s my good girl.”

I’m blushing; never in my life have I ever ridden a man. I’ve never been allowed to. I’m always pinned down and made to take, or flipped around to take it from different angles.

But always beneath. Always under. Always *lesser*.

Now, I’m on top, straddling Demyen and grinding myself on his cock, and I’m so distinctly aware of how much more he must be seeing. I’m still wearing my dress, but my breasts are so close to spilling out of the top at this angle.

I don’t realize he’s reached down between us until I push back and suddenly feel the tip of his cock spear into me.

“Fuck.” Demyen grits his teeth as his breath quickens. “Yes. Sit on that cock, baby. Sit on my fucking cock.”

Even with me on top, he’s still the one in control. His hands pull me down onto him and I cry out, gasping, panting. Bracing my hands on his chest for balance as he moves me to work his shaft deeper into me.

And when I’m finally, fully seated on him? *Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.*

I thought I felt full *before*.

This? This is a hundred times more.

I’m vaguely aware of Demyen moving his hands up to cup my face. He guides me down to kiss him. I feed him my moans, my whimpers, my shivering mewls, and he devours each one with a hungry growl that rumbles through his chest.

I know what he’s waiting for. And I don’t know if I... Wait. Yes, I can. Yes...

Yes.

Yesss.

Oh, fuck. Fuck, this feels good.

This feels so fucking good.

“That’s it, baby.” Demyen spansks my ass with one hand and grips it with the other. “Ride me.”

As he guides me, I sit down fully on his length, making us both gasp for a moment as I let him really push in deep. I close my eyes for a moment, taking in the full sensation of his balls pressing against my ass, his shaft throbbing against my inner walls as they stretch around him.

“Just one rule, beautiful.” Demyen grins up at me. “Keep your eyes open. I want to see you.”

He’s so demanding.

I love it.

Demyen wasn’t lying. The more I chase my own pleasure, the more he seems to be enjoying what I’m doing. And what I’m doing is basically rubbing one out. *On* him.

He breathes in deeply and clenches his jaw. I feel his fingers tighten their grip, digging into the soft flesh of my ass. “Yeah, baby. That’s it.”

Our eyes meet. I’m terrified to name what I see in his, but it’s there all the same.

“That’s it,” he coos between his own panting breaths. “Take it. Take it. It’s all yours.”

Mine.

“Dem...” I don’t know what to ask him to do. I’m taking him just like he says, and I’m getting so close to that sweet edge of release.

But no matter how close I get, it’s just out of reach.

Demyen studies my face, then gives me a knowing smile. “Come here, baby.” He wraps an arm around my waist and smooths his hand up my back, pulling me down onto his chest. “Give me that sweet pussy.”

I try to move like before, but I can't. He's holding me in place. And when he starts pistoning in and out of me, all I can do is sob his name into his neck.

"Come for me, baby." Demyen grips my hair and pulls so I have to look him in the eyes. "Be my good girl and come."

And then, without warning, he presses a finger to my asshole.

I'm shuddering. Sobbing. My hips are a fucking blur as I use him to get myself off and he presses that finger in just enough to make my toes curl so fucking hard and I'm seeing stars.

I think I black out. I *definitely* go limp. Demyen braces me to his chest and takes what he wants from me, riding out my orgasm until he grunts and pushes in extra hard and I feel the warmth of his own release spread through me.

We lie there, just like that, in the newly christened backseat of the souped-up Lexus. Demyen's arms around me, one hand stroking my hair, the other rubbing my back slowly. I breathe him in, his cologne mixed with his body wash mixed with something so uniquely *him*... and now, me.

He smells like me. I've marked him just as much as he's marked me.

The realization makes me spasm just a little around his softening shaft.

I don't know how long we stay like this. I don't really care, if I'm being honest. It's a rare moment of having everything I want right here, in my arms, and no one is doing anything to rip it all away from me.

Not even Demyen. Who probably doesn't realize *he's* everything I've ever wanted.

I sure as shit didn't realize it until now.

He takes my hand in his, then raises my arm. I frown, only to realize he's maneuvering my wrist so he can see my watch. "Willow will need us soon."

I sigh. He's right. Reluctantly, I ease off him one bit at a time. I'm still a little woozy and disoriented.

“Where are my...? Ah, shit.” I find my thoroughly destroyed panties and dangle them on one finger.

“I’ll take those.” Demyen plucks them from me and stuffs them into his pocket before I have a chance to even try a protest. He calmly tugs his pants back into place and zips himself up the same time he climbs out of the back.

I’m not able to move as quickly, for more obvious reasons. Reasons that I have zero regret over and would gladly do again. So I gingerly roll myself as upright as I can manage, then carefully scoot closer to the edge. My face heats when I realize how much of a... ah, *mess*... we’ve made.

I’m just praying that my dress hides my sins.

Demyen looks at me for a moment. Then shrugs off his open shirt—buttons still scattered all over the place—and reaches for me.

I’m not prepared for the way he tugs me to the very edge of the seat, and even less prepared for how he suddenly spreads me open on either side of his legs. But then he uses his shirt to clean me up. Slowly. Tenderly. Not saying a word while studying my face and then glancing down to make sure he did a thorough job.

And then he tucks the shirt under his arm and walks away. I swear, just before he rounds the corner, I hear the sound of him whistling.



I’m still vibrating by the time I pull into the school parking lot. I take a moment to check Willow’s new booster seat setup is in place, then shut the door and practically skip up the steps to meet the emerging classes.

One of the admins from our “meeting” smiles at me, but she looks a little confused. “Ms. Everett! How can I help you?”

“I’m just here to pick up Willow,” I respond with my own genuine smile.

“Oh! Oh.” Her brow furrows and she glances back at the office.

My heart drops into my stomach. “Is something wrong?”

Another glance. Her frown deepens. “He didn’t call you? Or anyone from the office?”

I am going to throw up.

I am going. To throw. Up.

I shake my head the few inches I can without actually vomiting on her shoes. I don’t want to hear what I know she’s about to tell me.

“I’m so sorry about the confusion, Ms. Everett. But Willow’s father already picked her up. He said it was police business. We didn’t have a choice.”

DEMYEN

I toss my swimming trunks into the suitcase as a last-minute thought. Fiji beckons.

Pavel offered to make the trip for me, but this is one of those things I need to see through myself. Whoever this disgraced medical examiner is, they have information that could lead to my brother's freedom.

I swore to Tolya that I would not rest until he's freed.

I intend to keep my promise.

I haven't told Clara about my little trip. But just the daydream of her in a bikini on the warm, sandy beach is distracting enough to make me forget what I'm doing. I really can't afford that.

Shit. What was I grabbing? Toothpaste?

My phone suddenly starts buzzing under the hardshell lid of my suitcase. When I see who's calling, I answer immediately. "Hey."

Silence.

Then a loud, wheezing sob. Followed by more.

I drop whatever was in my hand and freeze. "Clara. Talk to me."

"She—he—he..." Clara hiccups and sucks in several shaking gasps. "She's gone. My baby's gone."

I'm already halfway down the pathway to the garage. "What? What the hell happened?"

"He t-took her! He—he fucking *took her!*"

Pavel's in the garage, waiting for me by one of the sedans. When he sees the look on my face, he immediately jumps to his feet and grabs the keys for one of the Hummers. All I have to do is give him a silent nod; in seconds, he's got Bambi on the other end of his line and a handful of my *vors* rush into the garage. They signal to me that they're right behind us and I make a swipe for the keys in Pavel's hand.

He dodges my grab and shakes his head. I want to punch him for challenging me, but I get it.

I am way too pissed to be driving this actual tank into a school parking lot.

"Clara, listen to me."

She hiccups some more. I can practically hear her shaking from head to toe.

"Clara." I slide into the passenger seat and lower my voice as I buckle in. "Baby, listen to me. I need you to listen to me, okay? I'm right here."

Pavel glances sideways at me but I pointedly ignore him. All he should be focusing on is getting us the hell out of here and straight to Willow's school.

"O-okay..." Clara whimpers.

"Take a deep breath." I wait until I can hear her do it. "That's it. Big breath in... Good. Good. Just keep taking those deep breaths. We're on our way, okay?"

"Okay..."

"We're gonna get her back. I promise."

Clara's breath shudders and her tears start up again. "How? He took her. He took my baby and he's too powerful—"

"I promised I'd take care of you, didn't I?"

"Yes... but—"

“And I promised I’d never let anything happen to you or Willow, right?”

“... Right...”

“So what the hell makes you think I’m not on my way with an army to obliterate Martin Patterson’s sorry ass as we speak?”

Silence. And then she lets out one soft laugh.

I glance at the dashboard. Pavel has the pedal floored, and I catch a glimpse of my men following close behind. “Just hang tight, baby. Where are you right now?”

“In the car.”

“Stay there. Stay there and stay low. Don’t go anywhere until I get there. Understood?”

“Yeah.”

I need to hang up so I can coordinate with the security detail at the school who are supposed to make sure shit like this doesn’t happen. Heads will fucking roll for this. But the thought of Clara all alone? It doesn’t sit right with me.

“I’ll be there in ten.”

I hang up before she has the chance to ask. She doesn’t need to know how fast we’re driving.

She doesn’t know just how far I’m willing to go.



Clara flies out of the Lexus the second she sees me pull in with Pavel. Her eyes are red and swollen. She’s no longer crying, but she still says my name with a sob. “Dem!”

I wrap her up in my arms without a second thought. Fuck anyone who sees—all that matters is making sure she’s okay, she’s safe, and she’s not going anywhere without me glued to her side.

When she buries her face in my chest, I kiss the top of her head. “I’m here. I’m right here, baby. We’ll get this figured out.”

Pavel's already beelined for the security supervisor, who looks a combination of sheepish and terrified for his life.

Good. I want answers and I want them now.

"Come on." I nudge Clara toward the office. "Let's go get our girl back."

She nods and shifts enough to walk with me, but she doesn't pull away and I won't let her if she tries. She's mine, and people are about to find out what happens when they try to take what's mine.

"The fuck happened?" I ignore the pointed glares I receive from the school staff awkwardly pacing around the perimeter. The kids are long gone, so I'm not going to hold back. And if I weren't comforting Clara, I wouldn't be holding back off the security team lead when he's within arm's reach.

The man winces. "We weren't going to hand her over, I swear. But he pulled all the stops and had the credentials—"

"The fuck do you mean?"

He sighs and pulls out his phone to show me the camera feed. Sure enough, Martin fucking Patterson strolls into the camera's view with one hand on his belt and the other holding up his badge. He goes to the desk, chats up the secretary, and flashes his badge again. She does genuinely look uncertain, and at first, it looks like she's refusing him access or information. But he flashes his badge again, tosses something onto the counter, and whatever he says makes her visibly pale. She slowly nods, then picks up the phone.

The guard fast forwards until we see Willow being led to the desk by a teacher.

I want to crush the phone in my fist.

The kid looks terrified. She's quiet, she nods and takes his hand, but that is pure *fear* plastered all over her face.

When they get to the door, she suddenly digs her heels in and refuses to leave with him. He has to pick her up, kicking and screaming, just to get her to his car.

I'm going to murder someone. And right now, glancing around the increasingly silent school campus, I see a lot of viable candidates.

"What's his excuse?" I growl.

The guard hands Pavel a stack of half-rolled papers. "This is the warrant he served, claiming it was in the interest of protecting the child."

Pavel frowns as he reads the warrant. "Fuck. This is legit."

"Who signed it?"

He squints at the signature. "Oh." The way he says it, and the way his face suddenly ticks into something between amused and surprised, gives me hope. "Judge Cartwell."

Bingo.

"Get Bambi on the line. And are you still on good terms with Rick?"

Pavel nods. "Already on it."

In the not-too-far-off distance, my *vors* are rounding up the school administration—receptionist included—and interrogating them about every detail of this fucking disaster.

"What's going on?" Clara looks at the group, then peers up at me, fresh tears drying on the tips of her long lashes. "What're we doing?"

I can't help myself—I cup her face in my hand, then lower my lips to her face and softly kiss her tears away. I still feel like ripping the superintendent limb from limb, but I have to admit—something about taking care of Clara calms the fury inside me.

A little.

"Exactly what I said I'd do," I respond before kissing her sweet lips soundly. "I'm getting Willow back."

DEMYEN

Clara hasn't said a word since we got in the car.

It's only a ten-minute drive between the school and the precinct, but we're stuck in traffic. Half of me wants to scream at the lights to fucking turn green already. The other half recognizes this as an opportunity for both of us to calm down enough to not get arrested.

Fuck that. I'll burn the place down if I have to.

I have to tell that part of me to shut up before I start listening to it. The part that revels in chaos and destruction, that craves the feeling of throats crushing in my fist whenever someone thinks they can fuck with me and mine.

But Martin... I might actually make an exception for him. I might actually fucking kill him right there in the precinct for the shit he's pulled.

He's not doing this because he wants Willow; not really. She's just a means to an end for him, and that end is Clara crawling on hands and knees begging him to take her back just so she can be with her daughter.

So why are you doing this? I ask myself.

I can't think of any answer I'm actually willing to admit.

I should be at the hanger finalizing the flight plan with my crew. I should be boarding my private jet to Fiji, reviewing the questions I have for this mysterious person who is obviously hiding from LVPD. I should be focusing on getting Tolya out of prison, not... whatever the fuck this is.

She's not even my kid.

But the moment that thought crosses my mind, it feels wrong.

I glance at Clara, who is staring numbly out the window. There's no way I'd let her go into the lion's den alone. Not with everything I've been learning about her father, about Martin, and about the sickening negligence of LVPD when it comes to protecting her from those monsters. They'd rather protect their own—and sacrifice an innocent woman and her daughter in the process.

We pull into the station parking lot several tense minutes later. I feel Clara stiffen beside me.

“I should go handle this. Alone.” She glances at me, but mostly stares at the console.

I snort. “Fuck that. You're not doing any of this alone.”

“But—”

“Clara.” I make her turn her face so she looks me in the eyes. “You are not going in there alone. And you're sure as shit not facing Martin, or your father, without me there. Understood?”

She looks confused, but she slowly relents and nods.

I give her hand a reassuring squeeze before sliding out of the car. I hold the door open for her as she gets out on her side; it's important everyone sees who the fuck they're dealing with.

Bambi is right there with us as we approach the steps to the front door. She meets us in one of her sharpest pinstripe jumpsuits, padfolio and tablet tucked under one arm. The other reaches out to Clara to give her another reassuring squeeze, silently telling her, *We got this.*

I don't see Pavel anywhere, but I have a hunch as to where he may be. And if I'm right, Martin Patterson is about to eat his career.

I hold the door open for both women and glance behind us toward the parking lot. Right on cue, I spot two of my *vors* casually leaning against their cars, talking while eyeing the station.

The rest are probably still back at the school, spelling out the gravity of this fuck-up to the administrators.

The receptionist glances up at us and is about to ask us what our entourage is about, when—

“Clara?”

Again, she stiffens next to me, but I tuck her closer to my side. We both stare down Greg Everett as he slowly approaches, his expression fading from strict determination to surprise and fear.

I feel a thrill shoot through my spine.

Greg Everett is afraid of me.

Perfect.

“What are you doing here?” he asks, now eyeing the rest of our ensemble.

“We’re here to return a kidnapped child to her mother,” Bambi curtly replies. “Immediately.”

The receptionist raises a brow, but wisely ducks off to the side to let Greg handle this on his own.

“Kidnapped?” He chuckles nervously. “Hardly. You know as well as I that Martin has the right to his daughter—”

“Oh, he absolutely does not.” If Bambi’s smile could inflict physical damage, Greg Everett would be dead. She calmly pulls an envelope from her folder and hands it to him, not once breaking eye contact. “As you can see here, not only has Detective Patterson exercised gross misuse of police resources and abuse of power, he has officially kidnapped a child by basing his warrant on false charges.”

Greg waves away the accusations with the envelope. “Ridiculous! Judge Cartwell—”

“—is about to be apprehended for solicitation, assault, bribery, and a slew of other serious misdemeanors. Including signing off on warrants he knew were illegitimate.” Bambi flashes her teeth with her smile. I swear, the woman could sprout literal fangs and it wouldn’t surprise me. “I called it in myself. The

evidence is going to keep your CSI division busy for quite some time.”

The older detective looks like he’s going to throw up.

Perfect.

Bambi doesn’t give him an ounce of mercy. “I’m sure you had no knowledge of anything related to Cartwell’s misconduct. As a detective, you’re legally bound to report such matters to your superiors. So rest assured, I let the DA’s office know that there’s no way you were complicit, despite the interestingly high number of cases you testified in Cartwell’s courtroom.”

Translation: it’s probably the first thing she told the district attorney to look into.

“Furthermore,” she adds as she pulls out a second envelope and hands it to him, “Martin Patterson has no legal, paternal claim over Willow Everett. He never married Ms. Clara Everett prior to the birth, nor after, and he did not sign the birth certificate.”

Now, Greg’s good-natured chuckle sounds more like a frantic wheeze. “This is definitely a mistake—”

“See for yourself. Intentional or not, Detective Patterson was negligent in seeing to his paternal rights and duties.” Bambi softens her vicious smile into something far more patronizing and tilts her head to one side. “He couldn’t sign a piece of paper, Detective Everett. What makes you think he’s fit to be a parent?”

I wish I could take a picture of Clara’s face right now. It’s fucking priceless.

Greg tries to diffuse the situation by appealing to his daughter. “Clara, sweetheart...”

She slowly shakes her head. “No, Dad. I’m not backing down on this. And you should be backing *me* up, not Martin. I don’t care if he’s your partner or your protege. I’m your *daughter*. You should have called me the second you saw him bring Willow in.”

“I—”

“Mommy!”

All heads turn to the sound of that sweet little voice calling from across the lobby. Willow’s sitting in a desk chair, undoubtedly Martin’s, and she lights up the moment she sees us.

When she sees me, she gasps and jumps to her feet. “Demmy!”

Her little feet fly across the tiled floor. I’m quick to meet her halfway. I scoop her up into a giant bear hug that makes her squeal and giggle with glee. When she hugs me tight, I’m struck with the sudden, intense realization that I’m not letting this kid go.

Ever:

Except to let her go hug her mother, which is what she should really be doing right now. So I slide her down to her feet and nudge her toward Clara, who chokes out a happy sob and sweeps Willow into her arms.

“Oh, my sweet baby! I was so worried about you!”

I turn to give them a little privacy...

And find myself face to face with a very pissed Martin Patterson.

“Mr. Zakrevsky,” he grinds through his teeth, eyeing me up and down. “What a surprise to see you here.” He flicks his gaze around me. “With my family.”

“Not as surprising as finding Willow here.”

Martin grunts and shoulders past me. “Willow, honey, come here.”

It’s not difficult to see the way she instantly stills. Her little fingers start to tremble, and she leans in closer to Clara.

“Martin—”

But he doesn’t listen to her, and he doesn’t fucking care. He just barrels over to them and yanks Willow by the arm, hard. She cries out in pain and fear, but he only pulls more. “I said *now!*”

He turns to drag her away.

I meet his face with my fist.

Fuck, does that feel good.

Martin stumbles backward, his grip on Willow instantly loosened. Clara takes that opportunity to snatch her back, which I take as *my* opportunity to finally give this asshole the beatdown of his life. I don't fucking care if we're surrounded by cops. I don't fucking care if I get arrested or shot or even killed.

I'm taking this motherfucker down with me.

I grab the front of his shirt and swing at his face again, this time cracking his nose. Blood spurts everywhere; he shrieks and falls to the floor when I drop him.

Which I only do because Greg, the receptionist, and about three other cops have their guns trained on me.

"Dad!" Clara quickly stands and tries to lower his arms.

"He's a bad man, Clara!" Greg only briefly glances at her, unwilling to lose track of my movements. "I don't know what you two have going on, but it ends now! You need to leave him and come home."

"Dad!" She repeats her plea and tugs on his arm harder. "Demyen's been taking better care of me than Martin ever did! And you saw what just happened. He's only protecting Willow, *your granddaughter*."

That makes him hesitate. At least he has the decency to nod to his colleagues to put their weapons away, and then he very slowly lowers his.

He stares at me with no small amount of disdain and disgust. "You don't know what this man is capable of."

"And neither do you." Clara keeps her voice gentle, but she slowly steps between us and stands her ground. "Demyen is a good man. Who do you think enrolled Willow in her school? Who do you think drove me here to get her back?"

Greg wavers. I can see it in his eyes: he's losing whatever ground he thought he could stand on. "Even so, it's wrong to stand between a family. You need to make things right, Clara. Give Willow the family she deserves—"

Clara sucks in a sharp breath and backs into me. "I'm not going back with Martin."

"Everyone makes mistakes, Clara. You know that. Will you be so selfish and unforgiving to the poor man?" Greg gestures to where Martin has managed to crawl to the side and nurse his probably-broken nose. "And what about your daughter? She needs her father—"

"She needs a father, not a one-pump sperm donor."

Bambi's brows meet her hairline. She does her damned best not to smirk.

I, however, am done listening to this selfish bastard's gaslighting. "It's understandable for you to not recognize the difference. Fortunately, Clara and I do. Now, unless there's any other bullshit reason to keep us here, we're leaving."

I turn Clara with me and quickly scoop Willow up with one arm. She is all too happy to cling to me. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch Bambi staring at me with a weird look on her face, but I brush it off and focus on steering my girls to the door.

"Wait!" Martin stuffs a tissue up his nose and angrily storms after us. "Wait a goddamn minute!"

"Detective Patterson!"

Martin freezes. What little blood he has left drains from his face.

Mine, however, breaks into a shit-eating grin.

The police commissioner casually strolls toward us, hands in his pockets but sharp eyes focused squarely on Martin. Next to him is Pavel, chuckling about something they must have just been talking about before they decided to join us.

About damn time...

“Mr. Zakrevsky!” Commissioner Richard Jackson, affectionately known to his lifelong family friend—Pavel—as “Rick,” grins at me and holds out his hand. “What a pleasure!”

I shift Willow to my other arm and shake his hand. “Likewise. Pav tells me you’ve been struggling with your driver off the tee.”

Rick chuckles and playfully nudges Pavel in the ribs. “I’m just letting him win so we don’t have to wait six hours for a beer.” He smiles at Willow and lifts his hand to gently shake hers. “Well, hello, young lady.”

“Willow, this is Police Commissioner Jackson,” I explain to her.

She blushes a little, but takes his hand and shyly says, “Hello.”

“Pavel’s been telling me all about you. Sounds like you’re really liking school?”

Willow nods, then buries her face in my shoulder.

Rick chuckles and extends his hand to Clara. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you, Ms. Everett. You have a beautiful daughter.”

Clara looks awestruck. And confused. She keeps glancing at me, but she shakes his hand and graciously smiles. “Thank you.”

“I’m sure she’s ready to go home, too. It’s been a long day, and I know from my own experience what that can mean for bedtime later on.” He winks at her, then turns to Bambi. “Bam! I hope you haven’t flayed Patterson too severely. I still need him in one piece to handle desk duty.”

Martin sputters. “B-but—”

“The *only* reason—” Rick suddenly whirls on Martin and drops his tone into one even an idiot can recognize as non-negotiable. “—you’re on a two-week desk bound suspension and not handing in your badge and gun is because Detective Everett explained to me the struggles you’ve been dealing with lately. But I swear, Patterson, one more wrong move and I will have I.A.B. down your throat faster than you can pack your desk.”

“Sir, if I can explain—”

“I hardly have the time to personally clean up your messes. I definitely don’t have the time to hear your excuses. Pull yourself together and act like someone who actually cares about their duty to the public.” Rick turns to Clara and offers a small, but sincere, smile. “I am terribly sorry for the whole mix-up. Please rest assured that there will be no more misuse of police procedure against you by Detective Patterson or anyone else in this precinct. Not if they intend to keep their jobs.” He straightens up and smiles. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I do have a meeting with the captain about all this... shall we say, ‘oversight.’”

Willow shyly waves goodbye as he leaves. Once he does, I watch her quickly glance over at Martin and she clings tighter to me.

Don't worry, sweetheart. I've got you.

“Hey,” I murmur in Clara’s ear. I wrap my free arm around her waist. “Let’s go home.”

She sighs, smiles, and leans into me.

And I know, as we walk past the two glaring detectives, that this is the biggest middle finger I can flip them.

DEMYEN

I decide to make a pit stop on the way home.

Three hours of making it rain tokens at Mazzo's Madhouse and stuffing her face with pepperoni pizza later, Willow has crashed hard in her booster seat. Clara used the giant plush unicorn I won for her to cushion her head.

I can't hide how fucking *good* I feel.

Every squeal of glee when I handed Willow more tokens, every gasp of surprised delight when the tickets streamed from the games... it stroked my ego. I love being the source of her happiness.

What I like even more are Clara's stolen little glances my way when she thinks I'm not looking. I see the way she bites the corner of her bottom lip, or how she blushes when she's stared for too long and catches herself. More than once, she's grown misty-eyed while her daughter and I celebrated a new victory.

Now, we're in the car together, on our way home. It's quiet, but it's nice.

I'm still waiting for her to ask me if every car in my garage now has a child's booster seat in the back. I wonder how long it will take for her to notice. Because the answer is yes.

We pull into the driveway, but instead of driving straight into the garage, I circle around the front drive where Gloria and Pavel are waiting for us. Gloria quickly unbuckles Willow and helps Clara carry her—and the unicorn—to her room.

Pavel nods to me and then signals to a guard to take my keys when I join him.

“You definitely broke his nose,” is the first piece of news Pavel gives me as we walk through the main entrance.

“He’s lucky that’s all I broke.”

“And *you’re* lucky you didn’t get arrested. Or shot.”

I cock a brow at him. “Are you criticizing me?”

Pavel scoffs. “Hell no. Shit, I’d have done the same thing. But it’s not exactly the best image to give Rick right after I reminded him what an upstanding citizen you are.”

I want to roll my eyes, but he has a point. I’m just not going to acknowledge it. “What’s Bambi say?”

“All of Cartwell’s current and recent warrants are being combed through under a microscope and then some. Judgments he presided over are also under examination, including the appeals overturn with Tolya. It’s going to take time, though.”

“Figures.” I should feel grateful, not irritated. We’re making leaps and bounds in the right direction after so many years of hitting dead ends. But right now, nothing is sitting right with me. “Have the flight plan adjusted for tomorrow. We’ll leave by noon.”

“‘We’?” Pavel arches a brow and gives no effort to hide the small smirk.

I narrow my eyes at him. “Just get it done, man.”

He leaves with a quick nod and I head to my rooms. I need to finish packing and I need to make sure everything is in place for when I arrive on the island. Now that we’ve started showing our hand, I can’t afford to miss any minor details—or people.

Judge Cartwell was a card I’ve been holding for a while but, to be honest, I’ve been hesitant to play it. It didn’t take long for his high-rolling habits to reveal a penchant for a particular type of escort. I made sure I had them in plentiful supply.

Between the cameras in the comped suites, their mics, and the texts between Cartwell and the escorts' burner phones, we had what we needed in a week.

The fact that Cartwell grew addicted was just a pleasant bonus.

The way he soothed his addiction? Less pleasant.

I ended up letting his favorite escort go after paying for her medical bills, a hefty severance package, and bonuses for every night she spent with Cartwell. Not because she did a bad job—on the contrary, she was spectacular. One of my best.

But Judge Cartwell is sick. He's a sick motherfucker who gets off by inflicting pain and fear and treating his women like slaves. He was careful not to hurt her face or do anything permanent, but he went too far. More than once.

So once we realized we had the motherfucker over a barrel... we went to work.

I don't know what this will mean for Tolya's case. It is possible that the appeals decision will still hold, that we're still back at square one.

It's too early to call it a victory just yet.

But it does feel good to rid the world of one more bloodsucking, woman-abusing leech.

I zip up my suitcase and set it by the door. All I need to do is get a good night's sleep and wake up early enough to grab some coffee, triple-check security, and make the drive to the airport hangar.

Sleep, though... that's not gonna come easy. Every time I close my eyes, I see Clara's terrified face. I hear her voice in my ear telling me that Willow's gone.

And despite what I tell myself, I can't shake the feeling that no matter how many guards I put up or how many times I run security checks, someone is going to pull some shit and steal my kid while I'm gone.

I frown. She's not—fucking hell, Willow's *not* my kid.

And so follows two hours of tossing and turning in my bed, chanting to myself that Willow is *not* my daughter and Clara is *not* my wife.

These are facts.

So why don't I believe them?



I'm careful to be slow and quiet when I open the door to Willow's room. It's late, well past bedtime. Willow should be sound asleep and I don't want to wake her. I just...

I just want to check on her. Maybe that will help me sleep better.

Clara is curled up in the small bed next to Willow, lightly stroking her hair back from her brow. She looks up at me as I approach and offers a small smile.

"What are you doing here?" she whispers.

"Just checking in on my girls," I whisper back. I kneel down next to the bed and tuck the blanket around Willow more. "How's she doing?"

"She woke up and had a lot of questions, but she's pretty worn out from all of it." Clara reaches for my hand and squeezes it. "Thank you."

I nod. "And how are you doing?"

Clara lets out a heavy sigh. She doesn't answer for a long moment. "I'm... terrified, honestly. I know... I know we're safe here. I don't doubt that, or you, for a second." She swallows hard. "But I'm so scared that if I blink, she'll be gone. I can't... I can't stop reliving that moment when they told me he took her."

I grit my teeth. I said heads will roll for this, and they will.

But that won't undo the pain she's feeling right now.

"I hate him." Clara's voice comes out a little louder, just above a whisper. "I hate him so much. But if he takes her—if he takes her and I can't get her back..." She blinks back tears. "I'll have no choice. I'll have to go back to him."

“Clara—”

“I’ll have to, Dem.” She squeezes my hand again, lacing her fingers with mine. “Not because I want to. I’d rather die than let him touch me again. But I can’t let Willow suffer him alone. I can’t let him use her like...”

At the thought of my courtyards standing silent—no little girl laughs, none of Clara’s soft singing as they skip rope or play games... My fucking heart goes to stone.

Fuck. What is wrong with me? Why do I care so fucking much?

I shouldn’t. I really shouldn’t.

I can’t afford to.

“I’m leaving for Fiji. Tomorrow.”

“Oh. Oh.” Clara snuffles and nods. “Okay.”

“So I’m gonna need you to pack a suitcase for you and Willow.”

She sits up. “What?”

Good question. I’m wondering the same thing.

This is supposed to be a work trip. And it will be. I’m going to spend the majority of my time running investigations, checking warehouse inventory reports, chasing down every possible lead. I don’t have time to entertain guests.

But I refuse to keep gambling with their safety. I won’t say this out loud, least of all to Clara, but the thought of coming back to an empty house is scaring the fuck out of me.

“I’m not going to let Martin get his hands on either of you.” Even though I try to keep my voice a whisper, this comes out in a low, possessive growl. “He’s never taking our kid again. Ever. And that starts with making sure you’re not around for him to try.”

I tug on her hand to help her up out of the small bed. Clara follows my lead, but not before quickly tucking Willow in and kissing her cheek.

She grabs a few things from the matching dresser and stuffs them into Willow's backpack. A few outfits and sandals later, we're hand-in-hand on the way to Clara's room to get her things packed as well.

Once we're inside and the door is locked behind us, she lets out a shaky laugh. "Fiji. Wow. I've never even left this state."

I'm going to ignore how delighted that makes me feel. I like being the man who gets to show her the world.

"Can I just ask... why? I mean, I know we—"

I cross the room in two strides and pull her into my arms. "Why" is a very loaded question I'm not sure I have the best answer to, and I'm not gonna try to make some shit up.

So instead, I kiss her.

This is easier.

This makes a hell of a lot more sense.

I mean to only kiss her this once. One solid, reassuring kiss to seal the promise that as long as she's with me, there's nothing to be afraid of.

But God help me, she tastes so damn good. Like honey and wine, and I can't drink my fill.

And so one thing leads to more things. Hands pulling apart clothing, kisses turning to bites and muffled moans. I devour her until there's not a shred of fabric left between us and when I slide into her, both of our inhaleds seize up at once.

I kiss her when she comes. I swallow down her screams of pleasure, the moans that follow as she spasms and grinds herself on my cock.

I grind back, giving her every solid inch as deep as I can fucking go.

And soon, I'm feeding her my own grunts and groans. Shuddering and pushing even deeper as I feel my body pour into her.

Mine.

This is how we fall asleep together. Tangled, gasping, trembling, but sated. Satisfied.

Safe.

CLARA

“Wow...”

I let Willow do the awestruck talking for the both of us. Mainly because my jaw refuses to lift from the floor.

When Dem said “private jet,” I imagined something like a small... I don’t know... like, propeller plane?

I dunno. All I do know is that the jet we’re walking toward is *huge*. Yet another testimony to how insanely wealthy Demyen actually is.

Don’t get me wrong; I don’t actually care about money. He could be scraping by on minimum wage, and he’d still light my insides on fire. But damn, does it feel good to be taken care of by someone who actually wants to share his wealth and resources with us.

“Ladies first.” Demyen holds his hand out to Willow, who giggles and takes it as she steps onto the boarding stairs. He makes sure she gets up halfway before the flight attendant holds her own hand out and helps Willow the rest of the way.

He turns and holds his hand out to me next. I take it, and instantly feel heat surge through my fingertips and straight to my core.

“After you,” he murmurs in my ear. I feel my cheeks blush as he guides me up.

Inside the jet, it’s basically a palace. Willow can’t stop gasping and pointing at everything, from the black marble coffee table to the luxurious leather couches and several overstuffed lounge

chairs that rotate. There's a small kitchenette and mini bar, a flat screen television, and a small corridor that looks like it leads to the bathroom and—

“There's a bedroom in the back,” Demyen mentions with a nod to the corridor. “King-sized bed, vanity, small closet, et cetera.”

“*Et cetera*,” I mutter under my breath with a giggle. “You're out of your mind.”

“Mommy! Mommy! Look!” Willow literally jumps onto the couch and continues to jump, her pigtails swinging around her face.

My heart drops into my stomach. “Willow! Get down!” I hiss. Mostly for her safety, but also because her shoes are now all over Demyen's expensive leather and oh my God, I don't even know how to clean real leather—

My panicked thoughts are interrupted by Demyen swooping around and catching her mid-jump around her waist. “Hey there! How about we let the plane do the flying, huh?”

“Okay!”

I swear, he could tell her to eat brussels sprouts and she'd do it without a fuss. Willow is so enamored with Demyen, it's like he hung the moon in the sky just for her.

My heart squeezes. Not just because of how much she loves and trusts this man...

But because I swear, every day, I see him wrap himself around her little finger more and more.

The flight attendant signals to Demyen, who nods and carries Willow over to one of the plush chairs. “Alright, time to buckle up, *malysh*.”

We settle in for takeoff, Willow nestled between Demyen and I. Her little feet can't stop kicking with excitement, and I don't blame her. My heart is racing with the reality that we are, in actuality, about to leave the ground and the nation behind.

For the first time in my entire life, I'm about to be somewhere that Martin and Dad will never, ever find me.

It feels good.



We've been in the air for about an hour, arching over the mountains so we can enjoy smooth sailing over the Pacific. Shortly after we leveled out enough to unbuckle, Demyen let us know that he had work to do for most of the flight. I completely understand; I can't expect him to constantly drop everything for us.

Willow... doesn't quite understand.

It started with her asking him if he'd color with her. Demyen gently reminded her that he really needed to do some work on his laptop, but when her face fell, he quickly invited her to sit at the table with him and color while he worked. This seemed to cheer her up, and she got right to it with the activity book and fresh box of crayons they just "happened" to have on board.

But then she got stuck on a puzzle. She very quietly asked him for help, and he was more than happy to take a quick second to point out a possible solution.

A few minutes later, she was stuck again.

And again.

Now, they're doing a crossword puzzle together, and he's into it more than I think he'll ever want me to point out. His laptop has been set aside so he has more room to peer at the puzzle, and he keeps flipping to the cover to check the age group the book was designed for.

"Need any help?" I offer from the couch where I'm actually way too comfortable to get up.

"No. We got it."

"You sure?"

Demyen narrows his eyes at me. "I think I know a four-letter word you say when you stub a toe."

"Does it rhyme with 'duck' or 'couch'?"

He opens his mouth to retort, then stops. Then scribbles the kid-appropriate answer down with a crayon. “Alright, kiddo. Seven letters, something with two wheels but sometimes four.”

Willow furrows her brow. “Hmmm...”

“She may not be too familiar with this one,” I tell him while she thinks it over. “She’s never had one.”

Demyen frowns. “What? Seriously?”

I nod.

He rolls his eyes and blows out a low whistle. “Alright. I guess I know what we’re doing once we get back, huh?”

Willow peers up at him. “What? What are we gonna be doing?”

“Solve the riddle and you’ll find out.”

She scrunches her face at him, but he does the same to her and she bursts into a fit of giggles.

Oh, my heart. I can’t... No, I won’t even begin to imagine the day we’ll have to leave. I don’t know why we would; nothing comes to mind since I am technically employed by him. He’s invested so much into Willow, from her education to her safety and well-being, and the way he reacted to her disappearance made it very clear he cares deeply for her.

So why am I afraid of losing him?

Maybe it’s because I’ve never had it so good. I don’t know what it’s like to relax and just enjoy life, and I definitely don’t know how to trust that anything good will last.

Because it can’t. It never does and it never will.

And yet I find myself so foolishly, hopelessly *hopeful*. Like there could be the possibility that Demyen might actually care for me, *want* me, more than just as a means to an end or an extra housekeeper or a... *ahem*... bedwarmer. It’s just something in the way he looks at me lately, and the way he touches me. Whispers to me.

Kisses me.

Makes love to me.

I give myself a little shake. *Nope*, that's not what happened last night. Last night was just, I don't know, a... a reassurance. Yes. A reassurance that I'm here, he's here, we're all here and fine and everything is going to be okay. The fact that he was more tender and intimate than he's ever been before was just part of the mood we were in.

The fact that he woke me up before dawn with his head between my legs was just a bonus.

A really, really nice bonus.

After several more minutes of Willow and Demyen figuring out the crossword puzzle, he makes a victory fist and high-fives her. "Boom! We did it."

Willow wiggles out of her seat to bring me the activity book and show me their conquered puzzle. "Look, Mommy! Demmy helped me!"

My heart squeezes again. Sure enough, Dem's neat handwriting is in several of the squares spelling out the answers to riddles. Willow's much less legible attempts also fill the spaces, but what gets me choked up are the margins where he took the time to show her how to write different letters.

I try not to make my glance up at Demyen too obvious. He's back in his laptop, and probably buried in work he needs to catch up on now. I don't even know what kind of work a powerful crime lord-slash-legitimate casino owner does remotely, but I'm sure it's hefty.

I just can't equate the dangerous, badass mob boss with the guy who draws daisies and smiley faces in a coloring book.

"Can we watch a movie?" Willow's sweet voice breaks me out of my thoughts, and it's probably best that she does. Before he catches me staring.

"Sure! I think...?" I glance at him because I don't know how that works up here.

“We have Netflix,” he responds without looking up from his computer screen. “And popcorn in the kitchen.”

Willow grins at me, and I stretch as I roll onto my feet. “Alright, popcorn and a movie it is.”

“Could you grab me a beer while you’re at it?”

I smirk at him. “Yes, sir. Is there anything else you would like, sir?” I ask in my sultriest flight attendant impression.

He pauses. I see his eyes widen a bit, and the corner of his mouth curves up. “Several things, but... I’ll have to take a raincheck.” He side-eyes Willow, and I blush.

“I’ll circle back later,” I tease.



I don’t remember drifting off, but apparently, I did. So did Willow, who is snuggled with me under the large throw blanket. The now-empty bowl of popcorn is on the coffee table.

Demyen comes over and very carefully lifts Willow into his arms. She fusses a little in her sleep, but he hushes her and rocks her in his arms until she nestles close and calms.

Fuck. The things he does to my heart and my ovaries.

He gestures with his head to the door that leads to the bedroom, and I take that as a cue to follow him.

Holy shit. It’s easy to forget we’re on a plane—this place is massive. The king-sized bed takes up most of the room, but there’s a closet like he said and plenty of space to relax at the vanity, if needed. The bed itself looks luxurious with silk sheets and a velvet duvet, and an optional fur blanket is folded at the end of the bed.

Demyen carefully lays Willow down on the bed. He tucks her under the velvet duvet and fluffs the pillow under her head. Then, after only a moment’s pause, he straightens and takes my hand to lead me back out of the room, closing the door behind us.

I want to thank him for everything. For being so wonderful to Willow. For taking us along on this incredible trip in this incredible private jet...

And yet I can't find the words.

He sits down on the couch and tugs my hand so I'll sit down with him. But instead of taking the spot next to him, he pulls me onto his lap, my back against his chest.

"Dem!" I giggle and gasp with surprise.

"Shh." He holds a finger to my lips. "You don't want to wake up Willow."

I playfully narrow my eyes at him. Then I suck the tip of his finger past my lips.

I love the way he groans in his chest. Eventually, he pulls it from me, but only so he can grab the blanket and drape it over us. Once he does, he turns my face to his and presses a warm, sensual kiss to my lips.

"Now," he murmurs after he steals my breath away, "about you 'circling back' to see to my needs..."

My eyes widen, and I glance toward the bedroom. Then the cockpit. "What if someone sees?!"

"What if, indeed?" Demyen gently latches his teeth to my earlobe and tugs.

Unnhhh fuck...

"Seriously. What if?" He kisses, then sucks again before whispering in my ear. As he talks, his hands begin to roam over my body underneath the blanket. "What if the flight attendant walked in here while I had you bouncing on my dick?"

I shiver. And writhe on his lap, which is exactly what he wants me to do. I can feel him press against my ass, and he lets out another low groan when I purposefully give him a little grind.

"What if..." His fingers slowly inch my dress up my legs, up until the hem is high enough for him to smooth over my bare thighs. "What if the pilots came in to watch?"

He firmly grasps my thighs in his hands and spreads me open, until my legs are on either side of his. I feel so lewd, so exposed, and yet we're still covered by the blanket. He can't see below my neck any more than anyone else can.

"You know what I would do?" he asks, trailing his fingertips closer and closer to my mound.

I try to steady my breath, but it's hard. "What?"

Demyen gives me a wicked grin and nips the skin just below my ear. "I'd fuck you so hard, until you screamed my name. So they'd know exactly who you belong to."

His fingertips stroke my outer lips now, just around my slit. I do my best to swallow back a moan, but there's no holding back the shivers of pleasure he keeps sending through me.

"And I'd make them watch as I took you again... and again... and again..."

One finger circles my clit in time with his whispers. I bite my lip so I don't mewl.

"But don't worry, baby. You're mine. Only mine. I'm the only one who gets to taste your sweet kisses or fill your pussy. Understood?"

I nod. I nod and nod and nod because I do understand and I'm relieved. I know this is just a fantasy, a foreplay of sorts, and it's hot to imagine. But to hear him promise me that he's not the sharing type...

Well, let's just say there are a few threats Martin almost made good on.

I grind my ass on Demyen's bulge, and he growls with approval. "Mm, my needy little kitten. Wanna play a game?"

"Always," I gasp.

"Good girl." Demyen removes one hand from under the blanket and smooths the hair from my brow, gently pressing my head back to lay on his shoulder. "No matter what, you can't make a sound. If you do, you lose the game. And you might wake her up."

That is the last thing I want: having to explain to Willow what Demmy and I are doing on the couch. Under a blanket. Red-faced and panting. “Okay.”

His legs keep me spread open while his one arm holds me in place... and then his other hand delves between my thighs.

I buck on his lap, but he holds me firm. His two longest fingers stroke, then plunge into my wet slit. They slowly work me open, bit by bit, knuckle by knuckle, until he presses in all the way and rubs against that delicious spot deep inside me.

Ohhh fuck... what did I agree to?

I’m panting through my nose. Swallowing my whimpers and moans. My eyes roll back a little when the heel of his hand starts massaging my mound the same time his fingers work that sweet spot and *ohmyGod* I want to cry out, I want to ride his fucking hand, I want to—

“Knock, knock!”

I freeze. Demyen chuckles in my ear.

The flight attendant steps into the room from the cockpit, a gorgeous smile on her face to match her gorgeous figure. I’d be jealous if I didn’t have Demyen’s fingers buried in my pussy right this moment.

She approaches, but keeps a respectful distance. “I just wanted to check in on you and see if there is anything you need?”

I try to pretend I’m asleep. Easier said than done, especially when *someone* won’t stop moving their fingers. Even if he has slowed down, he’s still stroking and teasing me to insanity.

“I could go for a martini,” Demyen says with a voice as calm as the ocean beneath us. Like he’s not at all rock-solid against my ass. “What about you, honey?”

“Hmm?” I feign sleepiness, then suck in a sharp breath that I do my damned hardest to disguise as a yawn when he tweaks my clit between his fingers. “Oh, ginger ale is fine. Settles my stomach.”

“First time flyer?” she asks innocently.

Sure, let's go with that.

“Yeah.” I can't help the blush, and I hope she attributes it to my being a grown woman with zero travel experience. And not, you know, because she's looking at me while Demyen's massaging my nether regions.

“I got you. No worries. I'll even add some grenadine to help it go down easier.”

“Thanks.”

Demyen's face could not be any more smug if he tried. He's the epitome of professionalism on the outside, but underneath the blanket, he's slowly working me to pieces.

It feels like an eternity of sensual torture before the flight attendant returns from the mini bar with our drinks. Mine even has a little umbrella speared into the maraschino cherries. It's cute, and I want to thank her for her extra touch.

Talking is just a little bit hard right now.

She sets the drinks down on the coffee table, careful to use coasters on the luxurious marble. “Is there anything else I can help you with?”

Oh, thank God. She's leaving.

“Could we get some straws?” Demyen casually asks with a calm smile. “Please?”

I hate you so much.

“Sure thing!” She beams and goes back to the mini bar to search the supply cabinet.

I try to shoot Demyen a glare, but it's gotta be the weakest attempt ever. He gives me that same calm smile and kisses my brow. “How are you feeling, babe?” he asks oh so casually.

Fuck. You.

That's how I'm feeling.

Which is probably exactly what he wants, and would have, if we weren't surrounded by a flight crew and a child.

“I'm okay,” I manage to sigh.

“Just okay?” He feigns a frown, but his fingers massage either side of my clit while his palm goes back to that deep rubbing on my mound I loved earlier. “I think we can do better than just ‘okay.’”

The attendant returns with the straws and places one in each drink. “You’ve got drinks, you’ve got straws... Anything else?”

I will murder him...

“No, I think we’re good for now.” Demyen flashes her a charming grin. “Thank you, Katy.”

She gives us one more smile before ducking out and closing the door behind her. I wish I could lock it with telekinesis.

“Now...” Demyen shifts me on his lap, spreading me wider with his knees and gently wrapping his free hand around my neck. “Be my good girl and come on my hand.”

That’s all it takes. I’m off and exploding as soon as he gives me permission. The orgasm lasts an eternity, but when he finally lifts his glistening fingers to my lips, I don’t hesitate. I wrap my lips around one and suck it into my mouth, stroking my tongue around to clean myself off him. I look him in the eyes as I do it, wanting him to see how much I truly want this with him.

“Fuck,” is all he manages to breathe.

“If we have time...”

Demyen grins. “Oh, trust me. If it was just you and me here, I’d have you over that coffee table already. Hell, I’d have you screaming in bed by now.”

I suddenly hope this isn’t the only trip we ever take together. Because I very much want both those scenarios. “But—”

“But there are some talks I’m just not ready to have with a five-year-old.”

I grin and kiss him again. “Want me to ‘circle back’ later?”

“Again and again and again, baby.”

DEMYEN

“I thought you said we’re staying at a ‘little place in Fiji,’” Clara accuses as she stands next to me on the charter boat.

I shrug. “‘Little’ is just a matter of perspective.”

Right then, the boat pulls up to the dock of the literal private island, where the villa resort sprawls across ten acres of lush tropical paradise. As expected, our own private staff awaits us, including my hand-selected guards who flew in a day early to prepare for our arrival.

Willow gasps and waves at one of the guards. “Mako! You’re here!”

Mako breaks out of his usual stoic mask to wave back at his new favorite person. “Hi, little lady! How was your flight?”

“Good!” She grins and bounces on her feet. “I got to watch a movie and eat popcorn and then I slept a lot.”

He laughs and holds a hand out to help Clara and then Willow out of the boat once we’re tied down. “Sounds like a perfect journey.”

I can’t fault my once-toughest guard for melting into mush around the kid. He used to be stationed outside her room during the day precisely *because* he was my most stoic and unmovable soldier.

She turned him into a cupcake in no time.

He falls behind the awestruck entourage to update me. “We swept the perimeter and checked the whole place for bugs, sir.

It's clean and it's suited up for our use.”

Translation: cameras fucking everywhere.

“Any word from the States?” I mean to ask about Martin specifically, but I don't want his name staining the first five minutes of our stay here.

Mako shakes his head. “Not a peep from anyone. No reported activity, either. My last check-in was an hour ago and our eyes on Patterson confirmed he's working desk duty at the precinct and hasn't made any significant financial moves.”

“Good.”

“Also, I have this...” He pulls out a slip of paper. “I'll warn you: it's not much. Our rogue M.E. has done a damn good job staying hidden. But I can confirm you'll want to look in Suva and work the rounds there before hitting any other spots or islands in the vicinity.”

I take the paper. It's a set of coordinates to narrow down the starting point of my search. It's better than flying blind, that's for sure. “Sounds good. Have security close in ranks here. I'll be leaving in a few.”

Mako nods and quickly departs to carry out my orders.

Clara and Willow are already through the front door, spinning in place as they take everything in. Their awe and wonder at what I consider normal for my world does make me stop and appreciate it a little more.

I clear my throat. “There are a few house rules we need to follow while we're here.” Clara grabs Willow's hand so she'll pay attention as I explain. “I'm not going to stop you from sightseeing. But I am going to stop you from going alone.” I nod to where Mako is standing outside talking with another guard. “If you want to go anywhere, you find Mako or another guard and you don't leave until there's at least three of them going with you.”

“Done.” Clara sighs with relief. “ You don't have to tell me twice.”

I nod, satisfied. I'm going to have an easier time focusing on my investigation if I don't have to constantly worry about her trying to make a run for it. "If you need anything inside the house or on the island, Fetuani is the head housekeeper and she'll help you out."

Clara frowns. "Are you leaving?"

Somehow, that question and the way she asks it, holding Willow to her, both of them looking at me with increasing disappointment...

I give myself a little shake. *Not my family. I don't do family.*

"Yeah. I have a lot of work to do here and not much time to work with. But I'll be back in time for dinner."

We landed in the early hours of dawn; the sun is barely rising over the horizon as we speak. So essentially, I'm ditching them here and running off to hunt down the medical examiner for the rest of the day.

At least Clara seems to understand this. She's the one who discovered the lead, after all. She nods and strokes Willow's hair. "Be safe."

I nod. Then duck outside before I do anything stupid...

Like kiss her goodbye.



The shopkeeper shakes his head again. "Listen, man, I don't know anyone who goes by Helen Cooper. Tourists, maybe, yeah, but no one permanent."

I want to bash my face onto his counter. Fish guts and all. This is the fifth dead end in the past hour.

"But if she's here, and she's hiding," he adds, "maybe let her stay hidden." The man raises a brow and shrugs before he returns to fileting a mahi mahi.

"This is a matter of life and death." I'm not usually so open about my reasoning, but I'm itching for *something*. Crumbs. Threads. Something that gets me closer sooner rather than later. "I don't have the luxury of letting her 'stay hidden.'"

“What she do?”

“She’s got information that could—”

“No, I mean, what does she do for a living?”

I sigh. “Medical examiner.” Although, now that the question has been asked, I don’t actually know what she does right now. Is she still in anything medical-related? Or did she leave that all behind to become something different? Like a surf instructor?

Fuck. I’m fucked. We’re fucked. This whole plan is fucked.

The shopkeeper hefts another huge fish onto his counter and then waves his cleaver at me. “Like I said, I don’t know anyone by that name. And we get lots of American tourists around here. Same with Australians. But we don’t get too many who stay for good.”

I straighten up as something occurs to me. “Where’s your immigration office?”

He leans against the counter and gives me a look. “Do I look like Google Maps?”

I lay the equivalent of two hundred American dollars on the clean part of the counter. “No, but you do look a bit wealthier.”

He shrugs and only glances at the money. “Go down this way for three blocks, then take a right and follow to Rodwell Street. You can’t miss it.”

I thank the man for his help and add another bill to the pile. He grunts and manages a smile before pocketing the cash.

At least one thing is universal: cash is king.

That same unease itches beneath my skin as I make my way down the street. No one from the villa has texted me or called to report anything, and the silence is grating on me. I’d almost rather there be something to report so I’m still in the loop of what Clara and Willow are up to.

I do have the camera feeds. I can check those.

I pull up the app on my phone and do exactly that, logging into the feeds so I can take a peek at my girls. Most of the cameras

show empty rooms or household staff going about their business.

No sign of Clara or Willow.

My heart leaps into my throat, and I feel my palms go clammy.

And then, suddenly, there they are. Willow darts past a camera, shrieking with laughter without a stitch of clothing on her. Clara is close behind her, reaching out with one hand and clutching a towel in the other.

“Get back here, you little nudist!”

I burst out laughing before I can catch myself. I’m not going to tell Clara about the cameras, at least not now that Willow has officially streaked past at least four of them. Seems like the woman has her hands full as it is.

Something in my chest squeezes tight. It whispers, *We need to go back*, and other annoying, tempting suggestions.

I shake my head. No—I have to see this through. This can’t be a wasted trip.

It’s not long before I’m at the Migration Services building. If my hunch is correct, they will have records of American immigrants dating back at least ten years or so. Helen Cooper may not be Helen Cooper anymore, but she was when she moved here.

And how many American medical examiners could be living on the island, anyway?

“None” is the answer I’m given at the front desk. The receptionist sighs and shakes his head. “I’m sorry, sir, but we don’t have anyone by that name in our database.”

“That’s impossible.” I drum my fingers on the counter as I try to think of a new angle. “Helen Cooper was from Las Vegas. She would have arrived around ten years ago.”

He shrugs with a sigh. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what to tell you. Frankly, I wouldn’t be able to tell you if we did.”

I sigh as well. I’m starting to feel like I’m chasing a ghost.

“Except...”

I whip my head up. “Except?”

He shakes his head. “Sorry. I can’t—”

Like before at the fish shop, I pull out a wad of local cash and wave it under his nose.

He narrows his eyes at me. “Are you trying to bribe me?”

“I’m just trying to help us come to a mutual understanding.”

“Americans,” he mutters under his breath. “Keep your money. And don’t let the others see you flashing that around.” He casts his gaze around the room, where several local police are chatting and generally scanning the place. “I can’t help you. But I can tell you that sometimes, people find it easier to do a layover in Hawaii before going full-push. Spend a few years there, reinvent themselves...”

“Change their names.”

He shrugs. “It’s possible. It happens. This is just speculation, of course.”

“Of course.”

Of fucking course. It’s brilliant, really. Hawaii is still an American state, so she wouldn’t have needed a passport to get there. And after a year or two living as a resident, she’d be able to legally change her name, establish the new identity with a Hawaiian address, then order a new passport and get the hell out of Dodge.

Which only cements the need to find her. For someone, anyone, to go through *that* much effort to flee the Las Vegas Police Department?

Something went seriously wrong.

I thank the clerk for his time and not-so-accidentally “forget” a few of the bills on his counter.

“Pav,” I bark into my phone as I charge out.

“What’s up?”

I squint in the tropical sun and duck beneath a coconut tree for some shade while I call Stateside. “I might have a lead. I need

you to do some digging for me. You might have to rope Bambi into this one.”

“Ooh, I do love a good challenge. Hit me.”

I rub the bridge of my nose. “I need to know if we can access any name change records in Hawaii roughly two to three years after Helen Cooper left the medical examiner’s office in Vegas.”

“Sure thing. What are we looking for?”

“I need to know if she changed her name, her identity, her hair color while she was living in Hawaii. Pull court records, find passport copies, anything.”

“On it. Anything else?”

Make her magically appear in front of me. “Let’s start there. It’s something. But get it as soon as possible. I can’t be here too long.”

“Got it.”

When we hang up, the first thing I check is the camera feed from the villa. Again, I have to wait a few heartstopping moments before Clara and Willow appear. It looks like they got the wardrobe issue figured out and are now reading books on the back porch overlooking the ocean.

I check my watch. It’s just after noon.

Fuck this. I’m not going to run around chasing dead ends until I hear back from Pavel. And my nerves are damn near shot from constantly wondering where the girls are, what they’re up to, will they still be there when I get back.

Which... is a problem.



I should be hitting the pavement and hunting through every inch of Suva until I find the former Helen Cooper.

I should be bribing half the police force and bitchslapping belligerent desk clerks into obedience.

I should *not* be running up the dock to the villa, burning with the need to see Clara and Willow.

I just need to know they're safe. That they're here and they're safe.

As much as I hate admitting even to myself, Martin fucked shit up for us. I was so certain I had that school on an ironclad lockdown, but he still managed to kidnap Willow. And now, with Clara confessing her deepest fears, those fears have quickly become my own.

That Martin will take Willow when we least expect it.

And that Clara will go back to him, just to keep her baby safe.

The silence in the foyer is unsettling. But it's a big place, I remind myself, so before I start panicking, I quickly check the family room, the living room, the dining room... the kitchen...

No. Fuck... no...

I'm about to grab a gun from one of my stashes when I hear a familiar giggle carry into the kitchen. One of the housekeepers opens the patio door leading to the pool and Willow's voice grows louder. When the door shuts, it quiets.

Oh, thank God. Now, just be cool. Calm. Aloof.

I'm back, and they're here. I might as well get some work done and just... keep an eye on them. From a safe distance.

Like the deck. Which is where I set up my mobile office after quickly changing out of my suit for more casual boardshorts and a tank top.

"Demmy!" Willow waves to me from where she's sitting in the grass with Clara. It looks like they had a picnic lunch outside and decided to soak up the sunlight and cloudless blue sky on their blanket.

I smile and wave back. I *am* going to get some work done. There's a whole spreadsheet of imports I need to review, and I need to start looking at the calendar to schedule a new appeal for Tolya. Plus, it's almost time to review the household budget, and I want to see about giving Gloria a raise...

But my thoughts trail off the second I see Clara stand. The sunlight makes her dress practically translucent, and the shadow of her figure is mouth-watering. But when she slides the straps over her shoulders and drops the fabric to the ground, I'm damn near close to wheezing.

That... that is a very sexy bikini.

It's simple and black. But the fabric clings to her perfectly rounded ass just enough to give her coverage while still teasing the absolute fuck out of me, the ties resting on the tops of her hips and flopping around with every motion like they're begging me to rip them undone.

Willow needs help taking off her own swimsuit coverup dress, so Clara bends over to help peel it over her head.

Fuck. I want to bite that ass so fucking hard.

"Demmy!" Willow waves to me again. "Come swimming with us!"

I give her a regretful smile. "Wish I could. I've got a lot of work to do."

And I don't think I can stand up for a few minutes.

Clara says something to Willow that eases her pout and they walk hand in hand to the infinity pool with another quick wave.

I stare at my computer screen.

And then at the pool, where Willow waves to me yet again, all toothy grin and splashing fun.

At my screen.

At the pool.

Screen. Pool. Screen. Pool. And then...

Fuck this.

The only warning I give them is my encroaching shadow that covers Clara right before I cannonball into the deep end.

Willow is ecstatic. When I slice over to her, she squeals my name and wraps her little arms around my neck. "I wanna go

in the deep end!”

I shake my head. “Not so fast, kiddo. You can’t swim.”

“I know how to swim.” She pauses and adds, “Kinda.”

“It’s that ‘kinda’ that has me worried.”

“But you’ll save me.” She turns her bright eyes to me. The unwavering confidence is almost unnerving. “Right?”

I know she’s just talking about swimming in this pool. But when I open my mouth to answer, something far more serious comes out.

“Of course I will. I’ll always be there to save you, Willow.”

Even if it’s from myself.

I look over my shoulder at Clara where she’s seated with her feet in the water, and all I can think is, *I want her to wear that all the damn time.* She looks like a dream, skin shining in the sun, water droplets in her hair catching the light and turning to a veil of diamonds.

Then Willow sends a wave crashing into my face. I turn on her with a growl, grateful for the distraction as I snatch her up and launch her playfully across the water.

And that’s how we spend the rest of our afternoon. Willow, our princess mermaid who has no shortage of games for us to play, splashing and laughing in the warm Fijian sun. Clara, sexy pool goddess doing her best to be a good, attentive mother while shamelessly flirting back every time I manage to cop a feel under the water.

I almost forget why we’re here. I almost completely forget all about Helen Cooper and Michael Little and Martin Patterson and all the other names I never wanted to learn in the first place.

I almost forget that Clara’s not my wife, Willow’s not my daughter, and this isn’t the life I’ve always wanted.

I almost forget this isn’t our happily-ever-after.

It’d be so, so easy to forget.

DEMYEN

“Hey, Dem?” Clara’s voice calls from the room next door.
“What’s this?”

“It’s your suit for today.”

“Okay... but why?”

“We’re going surfing.”

Clara’s head pokes around the corner through my doorway in a millisecond. “I’m sorry—what?”

“You heard me.” I finish tying my boardshorts and flash her a casual smile.

Her jaw drops. “But... but... Willow’s too young—”

“I hired a nanny to watch her, plus Fetuani is here and agreed to keep an eye on her while we’re out.”

Clara doesn’t seem to know what to say. She just ducks back into her room, hopefully to change into the new bikini I had Ani go into town for when I decided this was what we’re doing today.

Not that I don’t love that sexy, black string bikini she had on yesterday. I just don’t love the thought of a wave hitting her and knocking the strings off.

She’s mine to enjoy—no one else’s.

Sure enough, only a few moments later Clara returns wearing the new swim gear. It’s more solid and secure, with no strings

to be snapped apart by waves—or by me—and it does tamper down her curves enough to not be quite so distracting.

To others.

Me, though? I'm never not distracted by her.

"I don't—I mean, I'm not..." Clara breathes in a bit shivery, her fingertips picking at the edge of her bikini bottoms. "Are you sure Willow will be okay?"

I cross the room to pull her into my arms. Tucking a finger under her chin, I make her look up at me. "When is the last time you've done something just for yourself? Not to get something done, not to take care of Willow, and not to make someone else happy. *You*. Just you."

She opens her mouth to say something, then closes it again. "I... I don't know." She lets out a soft, self-conscious laugh. "I don't know if I ever have."

I press a warm kiss to those sweet, flustered lips. "Now, you will."

"But I've never been surfing before." Her gaze lingers on my mouth and I'm half-tempted to forget about surfing and do other things just for her. But when her words register in my ears, I grin.

"Perfect. I'll teach you."



We're standing at the water's edge, with boards tucked under our arms. "Are you sure—"

"Ani's got everything handled, and you saw how Willow instantly loved Leila. They'll be fine."

A few more minutes of anxious silence from Clara passes, then she glances back again. "But what about—"

"Mako is on sight with security on full alert. And even though we're technically alone, we still have people surrounding us just in case of an emergency."

The sand is hot and speckled with seashells, sparkling almost as much as the water in the late morning sun. But Clara's too

busy chewing her lip and glancing back toward the villa which is now just out of sight.

I give her hand a little tug to pull her attention back to me. “Are you worried about Martin?”

Clara immediately scoffs and shakes her head. “Oh, no. He’s the least of my worries.”

“Then what is it?”

“I... um...” She looks out at the ocean. And then at me. “I’m... I’m scared.”

“Of what?”

She blushes. “The ocean,” she mumbles.

I try not to laugh. “What?”

“I’m scared of the ocean, okay?” Clara sighs and throws her head back to declare it to the sky. “It’s big, and it’s... it’s... blue, and it’s... it’s *so big*.”

“You’re pretty good at handling big things,” I tease her.

She narrows her eyes at me. “You know what I mean.”

“No, I really don’t.” I rub her back, hoping it will soothe her nerves. “Talk to me. Walk me through it.”

Clara sighs. “I can handle big crowds. Strangers. New experiences in general. I just... look at that. That’s not just water. That’s... that’s our whole planet. That ocean is literally all that stands between us, here right now, and any given continent. It’s like... if I step into that water, I’m stepping into the same water someone else is swimming in over in Peru. Or Australia. And that’s not even getting into the vast nothingness between this tiny island and North America. My home. Nothingness that we don’t know what it actually contains. What’s down there. What could be lurking right where I’m swimming.”

I can’t stop my brow from lifting. “You really gave this some thought.”

“I didn’t sleep much last night.” She smiles sheepishly and toes the sand. “I probably sound crazy.”

“Not at all.”

“Really?”

I nod. “It makes sense. But you know there’s only one thing we can do to get you over this fear so you can live a little.”

Clara scrunches her brow. “What’s that?”

“Something like... *this*.”

Our surfboards drop to the sand when I suddenly scoop her up around her waist, throw her over my shoulder, and run for the waves. Her shrieks of surprise and laughter spur me on until we crash into the gently rolling tide. I have a firm grip on her ass just so she won’t fall, but I’m only human, so I can’t resist giving it a good smack and squeeze as I spin her around and tread for deeper water.

“Demyen! Put me down!” I pretend not to hear her and just keep wading through the water. “Dem!”

Finally, I let her down—but only by sliding her down my chest until she’s standing in the ocean with me. But now that she’s here, this close, this tangible...

“What?” She laughs and blinks sea spray from her lashes.

I didn’t realize I was staring. “Nothing. You’re just...”

Beautiful. Breathtaking.

Unbelievably perfect.

“You’re a lot heavier than you look.”

Clara gasps playfully and splashes me. “Excuse *you*!”

I scoop her up again just to throw her into the waves, which makes her face widen into a shocked expression that has me doubled over laughing.

Does she truly not know how fucking wonderful she is?

“Sorry, my bad,” I casually announce as she splashes and sputters back over to me. “You’re actually the perfect weight.”

“Oh?” She grins and slicks her wet hair back from her face. “For what?”

“This.”

This time, when I pick her up, it's underneath her thighs, hoisting her up with ease until her legs wrap around my waist and her arms around my neck. My hands wander beneath her bikini to grip her ass, and she doesn't complain one bit.

Probably because her mouth is too busy being devoured by mine. The salty-sweet of her lips paired with the innocent flick of her tongue drives me wild, and I'm more than happy to float us both in the water forever like this if it means I can continue to taste her. Enjoy her. Drown myself in her.

“Dem?” Clara breathes softly, somewhat panting. “Weren't we supposed to be surfing?”

“Hmm?” I have to pull myself from the haze of her sweet seduction to remember what she's talking about. “Ah, right. If you insist.”

She blushes again. “Well, I mean...” She looks out at the distant horizon again and that trembling fear comes back in her eyes.

“Hey.” I smooth a hand up her back. “It's okay. I've got you.”

“But we're so far out—”

“Hey,” I say again, firmly this time. I rest my brow on hers so she has no choice but to look at me. “I've got you. I'm not going to let anything happen to you.”

Her heart really is racing inside her chest. But I'm determined to wash those fears away, along with everything else keeping her up in the lonely hours after the sun has gone down.

I want to be the only thing that keeps her up at night.

“Clara. Focus on me, okay? Have I ever let anything bad happen to you?”

She pauses. I realize that is a very loaded question, and I probably shouldn't have asked it. I'm sure she's coming up with a sizeable list of moments when yes, in fact, I did.

“No.” At least she acknowledges the irony with a small chuckle. “I know. You're this big bad Russian mob boss with

several bones to pick and I've been top of your hit list for years. But..."

"But?"

Clara tilts her head as she looks at me. Like she's seeing me for the first time. "You're a good man, Dem. And... you took care of me. You've always taken care of me."

"I'll always take care of you." I grind out the words like an oath, same as I swore to Willow yesterday. Now, my own heart is racing, but the fear is a different kind. "I'll always keep you safe."

This time, she's the one who seals the promise with a kiss. I take the momentary distraction as a way to ease her out into even deeper water, until the gentle rolling wave caps reach our necks and I'm not able to keep my feet on the sand as easily.

Clara lets out a soft whimper of fear. "Dem..."

"Feel that?" I smile against her lips. I hold her as close and as tight as possible, letting the waves carry us toward the shore.

She hesitates. Then smiles, and as that smile grows, she nods. "I do. I do!"

"Good." I kiss her again as another wave lifts us, then drops us even closer into the shallow water. "That's what we'll be riding."

DEMYEN

An hour later, Clara has surfed a grand total of one wave, though that's stretching the word "surf" to its absolute limit. Still, she's beaming ear to ear, even as her eyes flutter closed with exhaustion when we lay back on the sand as the tide laps at our toes.

"Where did you learn to surf?" Clara murmurs.

"Tolya taught me," I admit. "Whenever we went on vacation, he'd take me out."

"Did you go on vacations a lot as a family?"

I take a deep breath and remind myself that she's asking totally normal questions that any random person would ask. She doesn't know how loaded they are.

"Did we go on vacations? Yes. As a family? Not so much."

"Oh." I expect her to ask me to explain that, but she doesn't.

"Our father loved to travel. I'll give him that much. He'd take us around the world, to all these exotic places with beaches and private resorts..." I sigh.

"But he wouldn't spend time with you?"

I shake my head. "Too busy with his work or his women. And when he was around, he and our mother would fight. It was better for him to just dump us there and leave."

Clara nods and turns on her side to look at me. "I can understand that."

I believe her. She doesn't exactly have the world's greatest father, either.

I'm not looking right at her; I don't know if I can right now. The wounds are ripped open and feel too fucking raw.

I swallow and change the subject. "So anyway, that's how Tolya wound up teaching me how to surf. We had the time, we were bored, and sometimes, if we were lucky, we'd run into some locals who gave us pointers."

"At least you had fun?"

"Something like it, at least."

It's a long, heavy moment of silence between us. The waves slurp at the sand. Seagulls caw overhead. I keep my eyes on a lock of Clara's hair where the wind is tousling it dry.

"Is the stuff with your mom why you hate women?" she asks suddenly.

If I'd been drinking something, it would've shot straight up my nose—her question catches me *that* off-guard. "What? I don't hate women."

"Well, maybe not Bambi. But she's different. I mean, like, women in general."

I don't like how this conversation is going. I like even less the way it makes me feel *guilty*. I have nothing to feel guilty about.

Right?

"I don't hate women," I repeat. But it feels like a clunky lie. "I just don't *trust* women. In general."

Clara is silent. Then: "I can see that. Makes sense. You don't want to repeat history."

Even that simple assessment stings. I stare up at the cloudless sky and wonder if the sun is bright enough to blind me just so I don't have to look her in the face after this talk.

She sighs when I still don't answer. "Well, I get that. I can promise you that repeating history sucks. And I can't tell you how many times I've wished I could just go back and kick

Martin in the balls when I had the chance. So I do get it. I really do get what you mean.”

I want to look over at her, but I don't. I'm pretty sure it's the saltwater stinging my eyes and I don't need her asking me if I'm okay. Because I'm perfectly fine. My chest feels like a boulder is crushing it, but I'm fine.

“If it's any consolation, you'd definitely be a way better father to your kids. Without question.”

The invisible boulder just got heavier. I sigh. “If my mother had been half as good as you are to Willow, I'm pretty sure I wouldn't have turned into... into what I am.”

Gulls caw as my words fade, swallowed up by the surf. Even breathing feels hard.

When I finally manage to glance over at her, Clara is leaning on her elbows and squinting at the sapphire horizon. She doesn't steal a glance my way, and it's almost as if she knows I'd rather she didn't.

All the same to me. I stand up, brush the sand from my legs, and pick up my board. I want to say something, but I don't know what. Or if anything that could be said, should be.

So I just start walking back toward the path to the villa, only slowing down a little when I hear her follow after me.

We're both still silent. The weight on my chest has only marginally eased. I wish I knew what was causing it. Or rather, I wish I wasn't such a fucking coward and could actually stare it in the face and call it what it is.

But since I'm a closeted coward who can't handle a single heart-to-heart with a beautiful woman like Clara, I do the next best thing I can think of: I reach for her hand, then lead her down a fork in the path that takes us to a different wing of the villa.

Along the way, I set our surfboards up against a tree for someone on staff to pick up, then take her hand again and continue on.

When I booked this villa, I made sure there would be a guest house not too far from the main building but far enough for some privacy. I'm glad it's private, too, because when we get there, it's less of a "house" and more of a large, modernized hut. Instead of walls, curtains are draped and tied to each post for when the occupant is ready for bed. The bed itself is a king-sized testament to island luxury, laden with pillows and silk sheets and on a low platform. A mini-bar is fully stocked, and beach loungers with more of the same decorative pillows and soft towels are perfectly positioned for guests to enjoy the sunset.

Which is exactly what I plan to do.

I help Clara ease onto her lounger and then lie back in mine. I'm both enjoying and hating the silence still wasting away between us. There's so much I want to say, and so much I want to hear her say in response, but... that fear. That same fucking fear won't allow my tongue to move or my lips to form the words.

I want her, and it's terrifying.

I need her, and that scares me, too.

But what keeps me from uttering a sound because saying it out loud would make it real, and making it real is something that can't be done or I'll lose everything I have...

I wasn't careful. I got too close.

And I'm pretty sure I've fallen in love.

CLARA

Well, I sure as shit don't know when to shut the hell up.

Except for right now. Right now, I know better. Right now, I know that opening my big mouth to ask Demyen another question is just poking a sleeping bear who already warned me not to get too close.

It's just that I got excited. Excited and curious. I wanted to see beyond the walls around his heart, and for a brief moment, it was almost like he actually just opened the gate to let me through.

He told me things I never thought he'd ever share. He confided in me.

And then I had to go ask a stupid fucking question.

Is that why you hate women?

The hell did I hope to gain from an answer?

Maybe I just wanted to know why a guy like him was still single. Like, yeah, okay, he's this big criminal overlord or whatever, but... he's a gentleman. And he's so sweet, and funny, and compassionate, and my God, is he incredible with kids. He's everything I ever wanted for Willow in a father. He's everything I've ever wanted for myself in a partner.

So it's puzzled me why, with all he's got going for him, there was no one in his life when I crash-landed in it. Not even a recent ex-girlfriend.

Now, I know.

I kinda wish I didn't.

I need to apologize to him for bringing it up. Clearly, it's such a sore subject that now he's too raw to speak. And that's my fault. I open my mouth to say sorry, but before I can—

“Would you really go back to Martin? If he took Willow?”

I blanch. That's unexpected. But fair, I guess. My turn for the inquisition.

I sigh and settle into the lounge more, staring off into the breathtaking sunset. “Yup. Without question.”

“Why?”

I cross my arms over my chest, suddenly chilly. “I don't want to. I'll never *willingly* go back with him. He's a disgusting excuse of a man and I can't believe I ever...” I shiver with disgust at the memory of him touching my skin at all, let alone in places I never wanted him to touch. “But if he takes Willow, to the point that I can't get her back, I'll have no choice. I won't leave her alone with him. I know he'd probably end up killing me, but better me than my baby.”

Demyen's face twists into a scowl. “Fuck that. You shouldn't put yourself in danger like that.”

“But I should let Willow take it instead?”

“Of course not.”

“So you understand.”

He settles back, scowling. “Actually, I don't. I don't understand how all this with you and Martin even started.”

“And you want to know what horrible series of bad decisions led to where we are now.” I sigh again. “Well, it started when he joined the force. Dad was assigned to be his mentor; I guess at the time, they didn't think they'd end up as partners or whatever. I don't know. All I know is, one day, Dad came home with news of his new ‘protégé’ and he told Mom we're inviting him over for dinner.”

“How old were you?”

At the time, it didn't seem like that big of a deal. Now, as a mother to a daughter, my stomach turns just saying the number. "Fifteen."

Demyen practically shoots out of his chair. "*Fifteen?!?*"

I hold a hand up before he storms off to find a gun and personally shoot Martin in the head—because that's exactly what it looks like he wants to do right now. "Nothing happened. Not right away."

He narrows his eyes at me. "Define 'right away.'"

My heart squeezes. Something inside me knows that Demyen would absolutely destroy any man who dares to touch Willow before she's grown. "He barely acknowledged my existence other than when he came over for dinner. At least until I was sixteen. Then he started taking me out to dinner, to the movies—"

"The fuck?"

"Nothing happened." I sigh and close my eyes, pretending it's to enjoy the last warm rays of the sunset and not at all to hide from Demyen's infuriated face. I know he's not mad at me; I just feel increasingly mad at myself. For not having seen what he so clearly picks up as I tell my story. "I mean, nothing like full-blown sex happened. He copped a feel once, at the movies, but I told my father and he had a talk with Martin to cool his jets."

"Did no one ever point out he was way too old for you?"

"My mom did say something once, to my dad. She wasn't comfortable with a guy in his mid-twenties spending so much time with me since I was still underage. But Dad told her it was better for me to spend time with a cop under his supervision than some random boy at school who might get me pregnant."

Demyen leans back in his lounge. "Fucking *mudak*."

"Yeah, well, I was a loner who loved the attention. After..." I glance over at him to see if he has any reaction to me bringing up Tolya's trial. "After everything that happened when I was a kid, my reputation kinda tanked. No one wanted to hang out

with me. So when I started getting picked up at school by a hot guy with a badge and gun who brought flowers, it felt nice. People started noticing me, and they were... well, they became afraid of me. It definitely stopped the bullying.”

He screws up his face in disgust. “Then what happened?”

I shrug. “Nothing else outright. After the one incident, he kept his hands to himself. But as I got older, he’d start making comments on my appearance and treat me like I belonged to him. Like, if I wore a skirt he thought was too short, he’d make me change out of it. He wanted me to be this perfect, proper lady for him. I couldn’t chew too loud or he’d call me a cow and ask me if I wanted more cud. In a restaurant, and loudly.”

I hear Demyen mutter something under his breath. I think it’s in Russian and I’m pretty sure it’s a swear word. “Ignore that,” he says after a moment and a swipe of his hand over his face. “Please, continue.”

“On my eighteenth birthday, Martin insisted on taking me out for a special dinner. Mom didn’t want him to. She begged Dad to tell him we had other plans; he can wait until the next day. But Dad said I was a grown woman now and Martin had the right as my man to take me wherever he wanted.”

“What did *you* want?”

I swallow back the sudden lump in my throat. The truth hurts too much. The memories hurt even worse. I’ve never told this to anyone before; I’ve never spoken the honest truth out loud before.

“I didn’t want to see Martin at all. At least, not that night. I just wanted to stay home with my mom and eat the cake she baked for me.”

The cake she spent all day making for me. That she tried to hide in the fridge as a surprise. The cake I didn’t get to eat, or even blow the candles out on, because Martin practically dragged me to the door for our date. All while Dad stood there and told us to “have a great time.”

I gulp. “We went to a fancy restaurant and he let me order whatever I wanted. Got me a big, fancy dessert, too. I just...”

I don’t know if I can tell him the rest. I’ve barely been able to cope with it myself. At the time, things were different. My perspective was different. I didn’t know then what I know now.

Demyen sits up, then reaches for my hand and tugs it. At first, I don’t know what he wants, but then he tugs again and I realize he wants me to go over to him. So I do—and the second I’m close enough, he pulls me onto his lap and then lies back down on the lounge, holding me to him.

“You don’t have to keep talking if you don’t want to.” He strokes my hair back behind my ear. “But I’m here, if you want. I’m listening.”

Tears sting my eyes. I don’t want him to see me cry, so I blink them back and clear my throat to make my voice sound as normal as possible.

“I didn’t know the restaurant was connected to a hotel. Or that he got a room for us.”

Demyen’s hand stills in my hair. “Did he—”

“Yes.”

“Did you want to?”

I swallow back that annoying lump again. “No.”

“That fucking—”

“I didn’t stop him, either.” I can hear my regret choking my voice, so I know he can, too. “I didn’t know what to say. And I didn’t want to insult him or make him feel bad. He spent so much money on dinner, and I thought... I thought it would be rude to turn him down.”

“Clara...”

“I know. I know, and I still hate myself for it.” I close my eyes and wonder, if I squeeze them shut hard enough, will that blind away the memory of Martin pinning me to the bed? “It hurt so bad. I wasn’t ready and I didn’t know what to do. He

just kissed my tears and kept telling me how beautiful I was when I cry. How much he loved hearing my screams for him. It's like he didn't know I was in so much pain."

Demyen is silent. It's the kind of silence that I imagine comes right before his fist connecting with someone's face.

"He didn't take me home until the next morning. I barely got to sleep. Every time I did, he just... woke me up to go again. He didn't care how much I cried or begged him to let me rest, he just kept telling me I was his and I needed to give him what he wanted."

At least he let me go home in the early morning. I could barely walk. He didn't get out of the car to help me. Parts of my clothes were torn, and I didn't have the chance to take a shower or clean up. So when Mom opened the door and saw me, she thought the absolute worst.

In retrospect, she was right.

"That was the first time I ever saw my mom hit my dad." I actually manage a small laugh. "She went at him like a bat out of hell. He was so shocked, he didn't do anything in retaliation."

Demyen chuckles. "Runs in the family?"

"Yeah. Mom always did try to protect me, even when she couldn't. She'd take my beatings, or take the blame, and just made my life as easy as she could manage. But that morning, she was done with Dad's bullshit. Her exact words, by the way. Somewhere between 'how could you' and 'do something.'"

"So did your dad actually do anything?"

I shrug. "He must have. Martin didn't call me for two whole weeks. I actually thought we were done, and honestly? I was relieved. So was Mom. Even Dad was nicer to both of us right after it happened. I guess he never imagined Martin would go that far."

Demyen's fingers are tracing slow circles along my back. It feels so nice, so soothing. I don't know how he managed to do it, but somehow, he figured out just what I need to keep me

grounded in the present even when I'm spiraling in my memories.

I don't know how or when he became the one person I can open up to like this.

I'm just glad it happened.

"Obviously, it didn't last." He sighs. "Martin came back."

"He did." And not because I wanted him to. He just showed up one day, flowers in hand and apologies for any misunderstandings falling from his lips. That was really the only clue I had that Dad really did talk to him. "At first, it was like how he used to be. He'd shower me with gifts and take me out."

"But..."

"Yeah. *But*. He started feeling me up more. Kissing me more, and never when I actually wanted him to. I'd get so embarrassed the way he'd fawn all over me in public. Then one day, he picked me up from school, took me to his place, and locked the door. Said it was time for me to stop teasing him and give him what he wants."

I feel Demyen's arm tense around me. It's sweet. I press my face to his warm, bare chest just to breathe him in and remind myself I'm here, with him. Martin is so far away, in time and in space.

"I get the feeling that I don't want to know what he made you do," Demyen grumbles.

"You really don't." I sigh and trace a finger along the ridge of his abs. He's so strong, so incredibly carved from marble. Does he know what he does to me? Even now, I feel so safe in his arms. "I guess my one reprieve was that he's not that, ah... well, let's put it this way: he's not you."

He chuckles, but it's empty of any real humor. He tucks another wild curl behind my ear. "So why didn't you leave him?"

"I tried. Really, I did actually try. When graduation came around, I had acceptance letters from three different colleges

all across the country that I didn't tell him about. Mom knew, of course. But we kept the secret from Dad, too. Just in case."

"Smart."

"Yeah. By that point, they were basically partners, so who knew? So I did my best to stop answering his calls as often, and I'd try to make plans when I knew he'd ask me out for a date. When I couldn't avoid him completely, I did my best to be as boring for him as possible. Especially in bed."

Demyen scoffs. "You'd have to limp fish your way through that to be boring."

I try not to beam at the compliment. This is a serious discussion we're having about the past with Martin, not about the present heat between us. "Well, I did. I'd just lie there and stare at the ceiling and hoped he'd get bored. Whatever we did, I wanted him to know I was checked out and done."

"I'm guessing it didn't work."

I slowly shake my head, then lay it down on his chest to stare off at the sandy shoreline as dusk settles over us. "I finally got the courage to tell him I was leaving. I tried to have a serious conversation with him—this was a few days after my graduation—and I told him that this would be better for us. He could find someone who actually wants him and I wouldn't be such a burden to him."

Again, his hands still. Probably because he can hear the trepidation in my voice.

"We were in a restaurant. He was so calm and understanding, and I figured that was the safest place to break things off. You know, because we were in public surrounded by people. Martin said he understood, and offered to give me a ride home." I suck in a slow, deep breath. "I should have waited until he left. Called a taxi. Something other than take him up on his offer and trust him."

Demyen remains calm, but it's that same dangerous calm as before. "What did he do?"

I've spent the last six, seven years or so trying to forget it ever happened. Trying to convince myself it was all just a bad

dream. “He drove toward my house, then turned off down some alley. Kept driving and wouldn’t tell me where we were going or what he was doing. And when he finally parked, it was in some abandoned area he knew about where no one would be at that time of night. He dragged me out of the car... and that was the first time he ever hit me like that. So hard I fell into the hood of the car. I was just so surprised. Even then, I didn’t think he had that in him. That kind of evil, you know?”

If it weren’t for Demyen’s sunkissed body beneath me, I swear I could feel that cold metal bumping into me over and over again. The sting of his hand on my cheek.

“Then he yanked my hair again, told me it was time to ‘grow the fuck up’ and learn my place once and for all. He shoved me back in his car, drove me to his house, and dragged me inside. He just kept saying this was my home now, and I was his woman.”

Demyen is completely silent. Completely still. I’m almost afraid to look up at his face; I can feel the tension in his body. His fists curl at his sides, but he doesn’t try to touch me. I actually appreciate that. I don’t know how I’d respond to anyone’s touch right now.

I let one tear fall, but no more than that. “Mom died a week later. Dad said she was in a horrible accident. I didn’t get to see her face because it was a closed casket. Martin paid his respects and allowed me a few days to grieve. But by the following week, he had all my things moved out of Dad’s house and into his. It was like I just woke up one day and it was official. I belonged to him, period.”

Demyen remains silent once again. So I keep talking. Keep reliving the worst days of my life.

“From that point on, I was Martin’s live-in servant. We didn’t go out anymore because he didn’t like the way men looked at me. He stopped working out because why did he need to? He already had me. During the day, I cleaned his house, did his laundry, cooked his food. And at night...”

Stars begin to appear overhead. Out here, far away from the city lights, they scatter across the sky like a blanket of glitter. I don't want to leave here, ever.

"I found out I was pregnant a few weeks later. And then, what choice did I have? I couldn't leave for college with a baby in my belly. I couldn't even leave the house without Martin breathing down my neck and supervising my every move. I was trapped, in every way that mattered."

Demyen cracks his knuckles as he lays there with me, staring up at the heavens as well. "I'm gonna kill him."

"Dem—"

"I'm serious, Clara. I am going to fucking kill him. Slowly."

"He's a cop."

"Never stopped me before."

I am going to completely gloss past *that* statement and pretend I didn't hear it. I'm also not going to run through the unsolved deaths of Dad's colleagues he's mentioned and wonder...

Nope, I'm not gonna go there, either.

"After Willow was born, she became his bargaining chip with me. I couldn't take her and run because what kind of mother takes a child from her father? Or he'd remind me that I had no money, no job, no resources, no way of taking care of her on my own. I was poor and pathetic, and lucky I had him to take care of us. But when I fought back—like, *really* fought back and tried to leave—he would..."

I stop. I don't think I should finish that story. Demyen's worked up as it is.

He sits up a bit, just enough to get a good look at me. "What did he do?"

I shake my head. "Just forget it—"

"Clara." He tips my chin up to look me in the eyes. He's pissed, but not at me. He's pissed *for* me. "What. Did. He. Do."

After all this baring myself and my past to him, it's this that makes me break. The way he's ready to go to war for me over something he can't change. Tears spill down my cheeks as the memory comes back all too fresh.

"He picked our baby up from her crib—she was so young and so small and frail—and he reminded me that I could run, but Willow couldn't. She was vulnerable. And no matter what, he'd never let me take her from him."

Now, Demyen sits up all the way. It's almost as if he was ready to go murder Martin right now and suddenly remembered the distance between us and him. The vein in his jaw ticks as he studies my face. His own is a mask of fury. He's so pissed, he can't even speak.

I press a soft hand to his chest. "Maybe I deserved it, Dem. After everything I did, maybe it was karma coming for me. Punishing me for being so stupid, so naive, so easily manipulated into destroying the lives around me. Maybe—"

He suddenly cups my face in his hands. One thumb presses to my lips as the other brushes my tears away. "Clara, I'm going to tell you something, and I want you to listen to it very closely: shut the fuck up."

The words are so gentle, I'm almost confused.

"Look at me. Look at me and listen to me." When I meet his gaze, he moves one hand from my face to stroke my hair back. "You were young. You were so fucking young, and the people who were supposed to love you and protect you fucked shit up for you. Your father used your trust and obedience to make you do terrible things because he knew you would do anything to make your daddy happy. He conditioned you for the abuse, Clara. He trained you to learn that pain is love. And I promise you, he knew exactly what Martin was doing because he probably did it to your mother."

I don't know which part breaks the dam. All I know is, I'm suddenly sobbing and collapsing into his arms. Demyen holds me close, his arms around me and cradling me to him as he kisses the top of my head and strokes my hair.

It's not that I'm sad. Or that I feel any pain.

This is what release must feel like. A heavy burden suddenly gone, lifted from my body, because someone cared enough to listen to me. And believe me.

I think that's what it is: Demyen *believes* me.

"I fucked shit up, too," he whispers into my hair. "And I am so fucking sorry, Clara. I am so deeply, terribly sorry. In so many ways, I'm no better than them."

I cry until I can't anymore, until my tears turn into hiccups. That's when he gently eases me away just enough to look at me.

"But I can swear to you one thing: I can't undo the past, but I'll rewrite our future. I'll fight every single fucking day to be better than them."

I choke out a sob, but this time, it's from happiness. "You already are, Dem. You always were."

CLARA

He tastes like sunlight and the ocean breeze, and I want to keep drinking his kisses forever.

His lips trail a fiery path along my jaw to my neck. When I tilt my head back to give him better access, I open my eyes to see a canopy of stars above us. It's breathtaking.

I can't remember how I became straddled on his lap, but suddenly, here I am. Demyen's hands smooth over my thighs, then up my back. I think it's to support me, but then I feel his fingers deftly undo the hooks of my bikini top.

"Dem!" I gasp.

"Private beach, baby." He murmurs against my skin as he peels the top away and tosses it onto my abandoned lounge next to us. "No one is around to see us. It's just you and me."

I want to ask how that works with his security detail, but my brain suddenly becomes fuzzy when he wraps his lips around my nipple and suckles. His tongue rolls and flicks, sending shockwaves of pleasure straight to my core.

When he moves to my other breast, I can't help the slow grind of my hips. He groans in response, grabbing my ass and pulling me onto him more.

He almost reluctantly pulls away, his eyes following the path of my aroused blush from the tops of my breasts all the way up to my cheeks. When his gaze meets mine, he smooths his hands up to my waist and gently caresses me there.

“Tell me what you want,” he rumbles. His eyes are full of warmth and something I’m scared to put a name to. “Anything.”

“Anything?”

“Anything. You want to go back to the house and go to bed, we’ll do it. You want to go eat a tub of ice cream until dawn, I’ll show you my secret stash. Just tell me what you want, Clara, and I’ll give it to you.”

How does he manage to do this to me? Make me feel so emotional and cherished and horny all at the same time? “What if... what if I don’t want to do any of those things?”

“Oh?” His brow lifts, but I can tell he’s suppressing a smirk.

I offer a shy, coy smile and trail a finger down his chest. “What if I don’t want to go back to the house just yet?”

He smiles. “We don’t have to go back.”

“What if... I want to stay here?” I lean in closer. “With you?”

“We can do that.”

“And what if...” I give his lap another roll of my hips. “What if I want to enjoy you from now until dawn?”

Demyen hums a pleased rumble in his chest. “I did say ‘anything,’ didn’t I?”

He stands and my legs instinctively wrap around his waist as his hands firmly grip my ass. He never stops kissing me. Every kiss is searing, hungry, demanding for more. I’m at his mercy and there’s nowhere else on planet Earth I’d rather be.

But when he carries me into the ethereal room with all its drapes and torches we should have probably lit a while ago, he doesn’t throw me on the bed and have his way with me. Not like I expect him to.

Instead, Demyen sits me on the edge of the bed and kneels between my legs. He dips his head to my thighs and slowly, tenderly, kisses every inch of exposed skin between my knees and the juncture at my hips. First the left, then the right.

When he reaches my mound, he smiles up at me. Then, without a word, he uses his teeth to tug my bikini bottoms down to my knees... and then his hands pull them off the rest of the way.

“Lie back, baby,” he whispers between soft kisses pressed to my pussy lips. “Lie back and enjoy.”

Even after everything we’ve done together, he still manages to make me blush. I arch back on the soft bed at the same time he drapes my legs over his shoulders and bands his arms across my waist. It’s like I’m being held to him more than under him.

It’s so loving and intimate, I want to cry.

The first touch of his lips to my clit makes me gasp softly. The second kiss is firmer, and his tongue sweeps through my wetness.

Oh. My. God. He’s making out with my pussy.

The thought makes me suddenly wetter than I was before. I’d be embarrassed if it weren’t for the sudden growl of approval he lets out, or the way he begins to lap at my juices.

“Dem...” I gasp. My hand reaches for his hair, wanting to grab onto something—preferably, him.

“Tell me what you want, *kiska*,” he murmurs between long, slow licks along my slit. “Tell me exactly what you want.”

“I want...” I want everything all at once. I want *him*. “I want your fingers. Please.”

He chuckles and kisses my clit. “‘Please.’ So polite. So submissive. Such a good little kitten.”

I let out a mewl of pleasure and relief when I feel him sink two fingers inside me at the same time. I’m still tight considering I’ve given birth, but Demyen has certainly helped me adjust to his size. He knows he needs to work me open if I’m going to take him all the way, and by the way he starts working his fingers inside me, he’s all too eager to help.

I’m quickly sailing past the point of conscious thought. Demyen’s free hand presses down, keeping my waist down on

the bed and limiting my ability to buck on his fingers like I want to.

Which only makes the pleasure more intense. That pressure, that control... it makes every sensation home in on the exact spot I'm not allowed to relieve myself.

I want more.

"My clit," I manage to gasp out. "Please... suck on my clit..."

Fuck, I'm blushing again. I'm not used to being the one giving the orders in bed. It sounds so dirty hearing myself say things like this.

But it tastes so fucking good on my tongue.

Demyen latches on without hesitation, swirling his tongue around my bud before wrapping his lips around it and tugging gently, pulsing his lips with slowly increasing pressure.

"Fuck! Yes!" I mewl and grab his hair. "Right there!"

I feel him growl with delight against my pussy as he works his fingers and sucks on my clit. But then he does something that makes my toes curl and *ohmygawd* I'm so close to coming already.

My moans have officially melted into whines. I'm begging him for release. Writhing for it.

He does it again, this time a little harder. It's dancing on the edge of danger and my body is singing for it. My thighs are quivering. I don't know how much longer I can hold back.

I don't want this to end.

I don't ever want this to fucking end.

When his thumb and forefinger give my nipple a soft pinch, then rolls it, he sucks harder on my clit at the same time and massages that sweet spot deep inside my body.

I shatter.

One hand tugs on his hair; my other claws the sheets. But he grabs my wrist and pulls my hand to his head as well, so now,

both are pulling, tugging, and I'm riding my release on his fingers and tongue.

I'm shuddering.

Gushing.

Gasping for air, because I literally forget how to breathe.

Demyen slowly eases his fingers from me, then immediately returns to licking and kissing between my legs. But this time, he's lapping his tongue along my slit as if to soothe me, to help me calm from such a sudden and delicious release.

After several breathless moments just like this, he carefully eases my legs from his shoulders and kisses a path up my body to my lips. I taste myself on his tongue, and it's so fucking dirty.

I love it. I want more.

More, more, *more*.

But instead of mounting me and destroying me like I want, Demyen kisses my face and slides onto the bed. He stretches himself along my side and simply smiles at me.

"Has anyone ever told you that you taste like watermelon candy?"

I giggle deliriously. "You would be the first."

I don't understand what's happening here. He's hard as a rock—he kicked his boardshorts off a while ago and I can feel him throbbing along my hip. Why isn't he pounding me into oblivion? Instead...

"What next?"

I blink in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"Just like I told you." His smirk turns sultry, which is even sexier right now with the way my juices glisten on his lips. "Whatever you want, we'll do. I'll give it to you. Just name it."

"Wait... seriously?"

He nods, slowly, and only once. "Seriously."

This is new. Very, very new to someone like me, who's almost never had a choice.

I reach down and glide my fingers along his shaft. He sucks in a sharp breath and holds it, waiting for me to continue. I do it again, enjoying the way his body responds to my touch. His stomach clenches, pulling in whenever I rub my thumb over the tip. His fingers are twitching on his thigh where he's doing his best to remain casual.

I lift my gaze to his. "I want you on your back."

Demyen arches a brow for a moment before he lets loose an exhale and collapses back against the pillows.

I straddle his legs. I'm so tempted to lean down and lick his shaft, to suck him into my mouth the way he sucked me into his. But deeper.

I should.

But instead, I look up at him through lowered lashes and slowly, sensually, crawl up the length of his body. He's waiting patiently—well, as patiently as a man this hard can wait. But he's not taking me the way he usually does.

He's really letting me make the choices.

I don't know why, but it's the hottest thing he's ever done.

"Put your hands behind your head. Or hold the sheets. But..."
I glide my tongue along his jaw. "You can look; you just can't touch."

Demyen's laugh comes out more like a wheeze. "Are you serious?"

I grin. "Deadly."

"But—"

"What's the matter? Don't think you're up for the challenge?"

He narrows his eyes at me. I've hit the perfect button to activate his competitive mode and get him to play this game with me.

He stretches his arms up and clasps his hands behind his head with a playful, knowing smirk. “Give me all you got, baby.”

Shit. Now that I have him right where I want him, I don’t actually know what to *do* with him. Explore, maybe?

The way he’s gazing at me, it’s like he’s giving me permission to do exactly that.

I straddle his waist and trail my fingers across his chest. When my fingernails lightly drag over his nipples, he sucks in a sharp breath and lets it back out in a low growl. But he doesn’t say anything to stop me. His hands haven’t moved from behind his head.

I shimmy down his body. He’s throbbing against me, and I have this suddenly wicked idea to enjoy every part of him... except for *that* part. Not right away, at least.

My lips press to the skin of his V-cut. He sucks in another deep breath when I drag my teeth along the skin between his groin and his thigh. I do it again to the other side and hear him let out a strangled groan.

“Clara...”

“Hmm?” I half-kiss, half-suck around the base of his shaft. It jumps in response, and I do my best to hide my self-indulgent grin.

“*Fuck.*” Demyen is clenching his fingers in his hair. “What are you doing?”

I casually roll a shoulder. “I don’t know.”

His jaw twitches with tension. But, true to his word, he keeps his hands away and lets me continue.

There’s so much I’m feeling emboldened to try. How will he respond when I glide my tongue from the base to the tip of his long, thick shaft? What do those pulsing veins feel like under my tongue?

More teasing licks. More growls. And to my surprise, I’m enjoying this too much. When I see a clear bead of liquid at the very tip of his cock, I lift it to my lips and take my time to

slowly, languidly lick it off. Then I massage the ridge beneath the head for more.

“*Fuck.*” The word hisses through gritted teeth.

Out of curiosity, I let his cock drag down my body to rest between my breasts. I’ve heard this is something men love, but I can’t say I’ve ever tried it before. Not willingly, anyway.

Nor with someone as huge as Demyen.

Cupping a breast in each hand, I press them around his shaft and slowly lift them up, then slide them back down. I do it again, and again, and notice that same fluid leak from his tip a bit more. When I press around him tighter, he groans and rolls his hips. It’s easier for him to slide in my cleavage now. And I have to admit—it’s thrilling to see him lose a part of his control because of what I’m doing to him.

I look up at him through lowered lashes and wrap my lips around the head of his cock at the same time. He watches me, eyes wide with lust and desire.

“Clara...” He’s practically pleading with me.

I pull my mouth off with a soft slurp. “Yes?” My voice sounds sultrier than I intended. Probably because all this exploring and teasing has me aching between my legs.

“You’re... you’re fucking *teasing* me...”

“What?” I pretend to not know what he’s talking about. “I’m just exploring. Enjoying you.”

I bite back a grin. And I decide to ease off, at least this much, so I release his cock from my breasts and slowly stroke him with my hand. He’s so thick, my fingers can’t actually touch each other all the way around.

As I stroke, I take his balls into my mouth. Just like that day in the kitchen, he practically crumbles at the sensation. My lips wrap around one side of his sack as I gently apply pressure. Sucking, caressing, laving with warmth and wetness inside my mouth.

As I do, I feel him grow even firmer. Fuller. Heavier.

And the frustrated half-groan, half-growl of pleasure that fills the hut is pure music to my ears.

I move to the other side and do the same, taking my time to really make sure I'm doing a good job. I can't begin to describe how he tastes—it's a combination of traces from the ocean, traces of himself, and a less tangible but more powerful *feeling* imbued in this moment that makes me moan with delight.

“Fuck. Clara. Mercy...”

I pull my lips off his sack and lean up to smile at him. “Hmm? Mercy? Is that what you asked for?”

Demyen's clutching the sheets and staring at me like he's about to devour me if I don't give him some reprieve.

My smile widens into a grin. “Oh. Um... no. Sorry. I'm fresh out.”

The wave of lusty frustration that tears across his face makes me feel even bolder. I want to know how far his self-control, and staying true to his word, can actually stretch.

My nipples drag along his skin as I slowly crawl back up his body, and his abs quiver with restraint. When I straddle his hips, I roll my own hips to feel his throbbing length along every inch of my slit.

Fuck, I want him.

Fuck, I need him.

Those two thoughts play on repeat as I grind on him. Back and forth, gliding my clit along his shaft until I'm whimpering with my own need. Demyen's gaze is glued on me, watching every single move I make while panting through his nose.

When I reach down between us, I meet his heated gaze with my own.

When I sink myself down onto his cock, my choked gasp echoes his.

Fuck. Yes.

This. This is what I want. What I need. He fills me so fucking good, to the point that tears spring in the corners of my eyes just from the sensation of being stretched and rubbed all in the right places.

I never knew this is what sex could feel like.

I never knew this is what *life* could feel like.

Only now do I realize that the roof overhead has a series of glass panels providing a full view of the stars glittering through the coconut trees. My head is thrown back with pleasure, my body arched as I press down and take Demyen all the way inside me.

I want to feel his balls rubbing against my ass.

I want to feel the base of his cock spread me open.

I want to watch the stars as I begin to ride him.

So I do all of that at once.

My hands slide from his chest to his thighs, which allows me to arch even more and really focus on working myself up and down his dick. The new angle sends shiver after shiver of deep pleasure up my spine, and I'm panting. Moaning. Feeling him rub over and over against that sweet spot deep inside me that makes my toes curl and my eyes flutter shut...

But not tonight. I want to see the stars.

"God, baby..." Demyen's voice breathes through my haze. "You're so fucking beautiful."

That does it. I don't know how, or why, but those words snap the tether on my control and I'm flying, shuddering, spasming around him. My hands leave his thighs to cup my breasts and squeeze, kneading them through my release. I can't... I *won't*... stop my hips from bucking and riding him even as I feel the orgasm start to wane.

It's too good. I don't want it to end.

By the time I'm able to pry my eyes open and look down at Demyen, I'm a quivering mess and gasping for air. My thighs

twitch with aftershocks. Part of my hair hangs in front of my face, a thin veil of wild curls damp with humidity and passion.

Demyen's clawing the bed. The vein in his jaw is pulsing and the tension is visible from his neck all the way down his chest to where we're joined.

"Clara... please..."

Did he just beg? I brace one hand on his chest while the other pushes my hair back from my face, and I lick my lips as I gaze down at him.

I. Feel. So. Fucking. *Powerful.*

"Please, what?" I murmur. I'm still panting, so the words come out huskier than I expected. "Baby?"

He drags his clenched fists over the mattress, the sheets tangled between his fingers bunching with the movement. It's obvious he's fighting with every ounce of control he possesses, and it's looking like he's losing the battle.

I roll my hips again, pushing back on him.

"Clara," he grinds out through clenched teeth.

"Yes, Demyen?" I do it again, and again, leaning over him now, my hands flat on his chest. Even though he's not allowed to touch me, it doesn't feel right not touching him. "Yes... *yessss...*"

Our gazes lock. I'm determined to drive him within an inch of sanity. I squeeze my inner walls around his shaft and revel in the way he growls a string of curses and bucks up into me.

When I suddenly cry out, he grins.

He found a fucking loophole in our little agreement.

His hips start grinding up into me. Slow and firm, deep strokes that I sit back on and grunt with every solid thump of my ass to his hips. *Fuck.*

But then he starts moving faster. Rolling his hips with mine so his cock rubs at different angles, working me open. Working me closer to another orgasm, faster than before.

“Dem...” I whine.

“Yeah, baby?” He grins and watches my face as I start to lose control. I’m gasping, shuddering, bucking on him for more. More. More.

More.

It’s so close, but I can’t reach it. That wonderful ache deep in my core wants to burst into a flood of pure ecstasy, but it’s missing something to push it over the edge.

“Dem...”

“Tell me what you need.”

Everything. “You.” I grunt and shudder as a bolt of pleasure curls my toes. “Fuck. I need you.”

Understanding fills his eyes. And then a wickedly impish grin spreads across his face. “You need me to... what?”

I don’t know! I feel my bottom lip pout, then tremble, as I struggle to figure out what it is I do actually need from him.

“Touch me. Please, God, Demyen...touch me...”

“Oh, thank fucking God.”

Demyen’s hands fly to my hips and pull me onto him with a ferocity I’m not ready for but *oh my god yes yes yessss* that’s exactly what I need. I feel his thighs lift behind me, angling me toward him even more, and he pulls me down harder.

But then he’s sitting up. He doesn’t break our rhythm and hell if I know how he manages, but suddenly, his chest is pressed to mine and he’s cradling me to him at the same time he’s bouncing me on his cock.

“I’ve got you, baby,” he pants against my lips. I’m drowning in a sea of kisses, one after another as he caresses my tongue with his and drinks my moans while feeding me his own.

We chase that sweet oblivion. And when we reach it, we do it together—limbs tangled, skin slick, our cries echoing into the night until they’re muffled by our need to taste each other once more.

DEMYEN

For a second there, I actually think I've died.

But *goddamn*, what a way that'd be to go.

Buried deep inside Clara, clutching her to my body as I feel the warmth of her release and I fill her with my own.

It's the bed beneath us that assures me I'm very much still alive. I fall back on it, pulling her with me and rolling onto my side to cradle her in my arms as close as humanly possible.

Her beautiful face winces as I slowly ease from her. I honestly don't know if there's a single expression she could make that doesn't make my heart skip an extra beat. Right now, seeing her swollen lips parted with her gasps, flushed cheeks beneath her long, fluttering eyelashes...

My ego could not get any bigger.

And in a few minutes, I'm pretty sure my dick is about to follow suit once again.

There's no way we're getting any sleep tonight. Not with the way she's lying in my arms, gazing at me through half-lidded eyes with wonder, desire, and gratitude. If she thinks this is it, she's in for a delicious surprise.

But I'm in no rush. We have all night. The sun only just set maybe an hour ago, and I want to savor every starlit second with this beautiful woman while I can.

Which is new. I'm not sure how to describe the feeling. I've slept with other women in the past, sure, but that always felt...

transactional. I got mine, they got theirs, and we each went our own separate ways.

I expected my first time with Clara to be similar. That first night when she stumbled into my hotel room, her ankle swollen and her body filled with fear... I figured that once I gave her a good orgasm and had my own, we'd both feel better and just walk away.

But the moment I heard her moan my name, I knew I couldn't let her go. Feeling her come apart on me, around me, beneath me... the addiction sank its claws into my skin and her voice filled my head with temptation for more.

Every time after, I kept telling myself it was a different type of transaction. She owed me. The fact that I'd rather extract her debt through a solid fuck than imprisonment was my gift of mercy to her.

Lies. All of it.

All fucking lies.

The longer I lie here and watch her recover, wrapped up in my arms with one of her legs draped over mine, the more I have to face reality.

I have to finally admit to myself that I've wanted her since Day One.

What's eating at me is the question that no one will ever be able to answer: *which* Day One?

We were far too young for feelings like this when we first met. I was sixteen when she took the stand against Tolya, and she was only eight. I didn't know who she was, other than some kid who whimpered rehearsed lies in front of the judge and got my brother locked behind bars for the rest of his life.

But from then on, our lives were always intertwined. Greg Everett knew who I was, who my family was. Every court appeal, every attempt at parole, every moment of my investigation and pursuit for Tolya's freedom kept us within arm's distance of each other.

Which means Clara was always right there, right in front of me.

And I never fucking noticed.

Clara blinks up at me, her gaze dreamy. “What are you thinking about?”

“You.”

Even in the moonlight, I can see her face blush. I’ll never get tired of that, or ever stop being amazed at the way she can still blush even after we do so many dirty things together.

I use my other hand to twirl a strand of her curls around a finger. “I owe you a very serious apology.”

Her brow furrows. “What for?”

“Everything.” I sigh and smooth my hand from her side to her hip. “Mainly, for ever thinking you owed me.”

Clara leans up on one arm, her frown deepening. “But I *do* owe you. I—”

I silence her with a languid kiss. “No, Clara, you don’t. You never have. And I was so wrong to ever assume you did.”

“I don’t...” She blinks, then shakes her head. “I don’t understand.”

I don’t know how to explain the new ache in my chest. The ache that’s quickly turned into pain at realizing that, had I paid better attention to the world around me, instead of absorbing myself with anger and hatred and vengeance... I might have seen her. I might have noticed her. I could have saved her.

Willow could have been mine.

“Your father used you.” I wrap my arms around her as she nestles into me, her back to my chest and our legs tangled together with the sheets. From here, we can see the bioluminescent waves roll across the sand, framed by low-hanging leaves of the ferns and coconut trees. I kiss the top of her head and breathe her in before tucking her under my chin. “He used you to get what he wanted. Martin used you to get

what he wanted. I used you to get what I wanted. And you don't owe any of us a single goddamn thing."

Clara turns her head to protest, but again, I silence her with a kiss. Only when I feel her relax into me do I pull away from her sweet mouth.

"I'm so fucking sorry, Clara," I whisper. I wish she could feel how every fiber of my being pushes into that one sentence. "I'm sorry, and I won't stop making it up to you. Ever."

I gently lift the thick curtain of her hair from her shoulder and sweep it over the other. She's pure silk and satin, soft and luxurious and everything I could ever dream of.

I don't deserve her. At all.

But damn it, I can try to be the man that *she* deserves.

I smooth my hands down her arms to lace my fingers with hers. My thumbs rub over her soft skin and I can't stop burying my face in her neck. If this is the last night I get with her, I want to sear every single second to memory. Every smell, every touch, every taste, every sight. I want to drown my senses in her until all that's left is an imprint so deep, I'll never be able to sleep with anyone else.

The sudden thought of anyone else sharing my bed turns my stomach. It's her or no one for me.

But if I'm going to prove my point, I have to give her the choice.

"This," I murmur against her shoulder, "isn't a transaction. Your body isn't some currency to be traded. You don't have to give yourself to me, or anyone, just to keep yourself and your daughter safe."

Clara bites the corner of her lip for a moment, her brow returning to that confused frown as before. "I don't understand. Are you getting rid of me?"

"No! No. God, baby, never." I nuzzle the curve of her neck. "What I'm saying is, it's your choice. It's always been your choice. Sex isn't meant to be a bargaining chip or a means for

survival. And I don't want you to feel like that's all you're good for."

Her eyes widen a fraction. She stares out at the ocean. I wonder if the reality is crashing down on her like the glowing waves are crashing on the shore. I don't push her to reveal her thoughts; I get the feeling I've done enough to last us a long while.

"So..." She sighs and turns her head to look at me. "What if I just... want... you?" Her gaze is low, like she's too afraid to look at me.

As if I'd ever reject her.

"Hm." I pretend to give it some thought, even though I already know the answer. "I think I might be able to help with that."

Her mouth curves up in a shy little smile. "And if I just want to walk away? Do my own thing?"

"I'll suffer the worst case of blue balls in human history. But I'll manage."

That makes her giggle. She contemplates it, then nudges me gently with her elbow. "And what if I want something in-between? Like... sleeping next to you. Fully clothed."

I chuckle. "If that's what you want."

"What do *you* want?"

I trace the edges of each fingernail with my thumbs, one after the other. It's not that I don't know the answer—I just don't know how to wrap it up in simple words. "I want..."

Clara turns in my lap a bit more. "Yes?"

Her guileless eyes blink up at me and I'm ready to drown in their depths. "I want you to want me. To want this. Us. Not because you're afraid of losing something or afraid of upsetting me or because you feel like you owe me."

I wrap my arms around her tighter as I whisper words that scare me shitless but I know she deserves to hear.

"I want you. I want this connection with you. I want to worship every inch of your body and remind you every single

day how incredible you are. I want to brand every part of you with me until you can't even remember that other fucker's name. I want you to come to me when you want me, when you need me, and I want you to trust that I will do everything in my power to lay the world at your feet."

Tears trickle down her face. I kiss them away one by one. She shivers and more tears spill, but I know it's the kind of release she's been needing her entire life.

"I want you to scream my name when I'm giving you the pleasure you crave. I want you to cry because you're so damn happy that it's all you can do." I press my brow to hers. "I want a thousand nights just like this one—but only because it's what you want, too."

Clara nods. Then she nods some more, laughing through her tears. "I want that. I want all of it, with you."

This time, there's more in the kiss than just comfort and desire. It's an oath, a promise, and a surrender.

I ease us to our knees on the bed, untangling our legs and fingers so I can caress her body the way she truly deserves to be caressed. My palms slide down her torso and spend time massaging over her womb. The fleeting thought of her growing my child makes me instantly harder than I ever thought possible over something like that.

The desire only grows hotter when I slide a hand between her legs and gently stroke her swollen lips there. I can feel my seed slowly drip from her slit and *fuck*, does that rip a growl of possession from my chest without warning.

Clara sucks in a breath. "I love when you do that," she murmurs.

"Do what?" I grin and nip the lobe of her ear. I dip a finger inside her just to feel how full she is, and she squirms with a soft whimper.

"Growl." Her face flushes. "For me. Because of me."

I scoop a bit of our mixed cum with my finger and use it to rub her clit in slow, firm circles. "Does it turn you on?"

Again, she nods. “So much.”

My other hand grips her a bit firmer, pressing in to turn the caress into a rub. “Do you like it when I touch you like this?”

Clara’s breath hitches. She hesitates, but nods again. “So much.”

“You hesitated.”

She lowers her head. “I’m embarrassed.”

I slide my hand up her back, pressing along her spine in a slow, deep caress until I reach the nape of her neck. And then I thread my fingers through her thick hair, fist the silky tresses, and give her a firm pull back until her body arches to meet my gaze.

“You have nothing to be embarrassed about.” I mutter the words an inch away from her lips. At this angle, her beautiful breasts are pushed out and her thighs naturally spread wider for better balance as she kneels.

Fucking gorgeous.

Another whimper sounds in her throat. Her bottom lip trembles. “Dem...”

“Yes, baby?” I kiss just that sweet lip. “Tell me what you want.”

She reaches for my arms, holding onto me as I thrum her clit between my fingers. When I still, she sucks in a quivering breath. “Make me forget his name. Make me forget he ever touched me.” Her eyes flicker away, but I give her hair another small tug. When she looks back up at me, her nipples visibly harden. “I want you to own me. Only you.”

The surprised little yelp she makes when I suddenly push her forward makes me grin. She falls onto the bed and I follow quickly behind, covering her with my body as my mouth latches onto her shoulder to brand her with a lovebite.

By the time I’m done with her, the only marks on her skin will be from me. Because she begged me to give them to her.

And she does. Over and over again, Clara sobs my name and begs me to mark her, to brand her, to own her body and possess her soul.

Throughout it all, I constantly remind her that she has all the control. When I pin her to the bed, I ask her if this is what she wants. When I start fucking her harder than I ever have before, I pant in her ear that she can tell me if it's too much.

When her response is to wrap her arms around me and dig her nails into my back, I damn near explode. I manage to hold back, barely, even when her voice pitches into near-screams of my name over and over.

It's when I have her impaled on my cock, her body twitching from her third or fourth orgasm, her lips swollen from my kisses and her face streaked with tears from sobbing with intense pleasure, that she looks up at me and reaches for my face.

I'm so fucking close to the edge. "Clara..."

"Please, Dem," she manages to whimper. "I need you. I trust you. I want you."

Fuuuck.

Stars explode behind my eyes. If it's possible, I think she sucks my soul through my dick and straight into her body.

I have never in my life felt like this.

I must have groaned that out loud, because when I collapse on top of her, she strokes my hair and whispers, "Neither have I, Demyen. Neither have I."

DEMYEN

It's a miracle I can still feel my legs.

It's an even bigger feat that, even after everything we just did, I can still carry Clara in my arms to the private bathhouse right behind the guest house.

The natural stone shower has a bench carved into the wall. That's where I set her down, careful not to bump her head on any of the protruding rocks, so I can turn the shower on and get us cleaned up.

"Can you stand?" I try to bite back the shit-eating grin, but I mean... come on. If her answer is "no," my ego will officially be too big for this room.

Clara blushes brightly and curls up on the bench. "I might need a few minutes."

Still grinning, I turn and grab the sea sponge from one of the storage ledges, lather it up, and scrub at my skin.

It's only when I'm rinsing off under the waterfall showerhead that I notice Clara staring at me, her mouth partly open. I flash her a smile. "What?"

"I'm, um..." She scoffs and shakes her head. "I'm just wondering if I'm still asleep. Because this is a pretty awesome dream I'm having if I am."

"Oh, you're definitely awake."

Instead of that making her even happier, it suddenly makes her frown. Just a little, but enough for me to notice.

“What? What’s wrong?”

Clara sighs and leans back against the stone wall. “This doesn’t change anything.”

I do my best to pretend my heart didn’t just drop into my gallbladder.

“Oh, goddammit, that came out all wrong.” She groans and rubs her face with both hands. “I mean... I’m still going to help you with Tolya. That’s what I mean by not changing.”

My lungs resume function and I let out a laugh that sounds more nervous than I want it to. “For a second there, I thought—”

“Fuck. Sorry. I just meant that... Even though you said I don’t owe you anything, I’m still going to try to make things right. I messed up and I want to make it right.”

I walk over to her and hold my hands out for her to take. When she does, I guide her to the waterfall and let the warm water cascade over her body. “Clara, listen to me. You were eight. A child. Only an idiot would hold a literal child responsible for the life of a grown man.”

One of her brows creeps up her forehead.

“Yeah, I know,” I continue. “I’m the fucking idiot. I’m owning that one. But so is Tolya, and anyone else who couldn’t clearly see it’s been your father to blame this whole time.”

Clara thinks about this. She presses a hand to my wet chest and traces the droplets clinging to my skin. It’s distracting in the best kind of way. “You mean it?”

“Every word.”

I make sure to follow through with my word by soaping her up and cleaning every inch of her curves with the sea sponge. I’m extra careful between her legs, when she winces and sucks in a sharp breath. “It’s okay, baby,” I coo up at her as I kneel on the shower floor. “I’m just gonna clean you up.”

She smiles and strokes my wet hair back from my forehead. “Wanna hear something crazy?”

“Always.”

“My body’s like, ‘Ugh, no more, I can’t even.’ But the rest of me still wants you to pin me against this wall and fuck my brains out.”

I laugh and press a warm kiss to her stomach. “I’m right there with you.” At her look of surprise, I laugh. “What? You thought I could just keep going and going without my dick falling off?”

“Well... you seem like the kind of guy who would try.”

That’s a fair assessment. She’s not *wrong*. “Well,” I assure her as I rise to my feet, “you’ll be happy to know you are officially the only woman in the world who can actually drain me dry.”

Clara wraps her arms around my neck and presses her slick body to mine. If I had even an ounce of spirit left below my waist, I’d probably make a play for her ass. As it is, however... “I shall aspire to exceed your expectations regularly,” she purrs.

I kiss her brow, then her eyes, and then her mouth. “You won’t catch me complaining.”

CLARA

Something's wrong.

I feel it in my sleep, comfortable as it is. After our luxurious shower and some considerable pampering from Demyen, he wrapped me up in a soft bathrobe and led us back to the main house. "As much as I love the guest house," he explained, "I think we thoroughly ruined the sheets."

He reminded me that there's no "walk of shame" in his household as we snuck inside the sleeping house and past quiet security guards who pretended not to notice us. Demyen wasn't ashamed to have the world know he just blew my back out three ways to next Sunday, so why should I be?

And that's how we ended up in his bed, tucked under blankets and sound asleep after only a few minutes.

I was sure we'd sleep in until at least late morning. But something in my gut wakes me up from a wonderful dream.

I pry my eyes open to see that it's barely dawn out—the sky is a bit lighter, but the first rays haven't yet breached the horizon. Demyen is sitting on the side of the bed, phone in hand.

"What's wrong?" I ask because I know it's something, even without getting a good look at his face.

He sighs and turns the phone in his hand.

"They found her."



A few hours later, Demyen and I are walking through one of Suva's residential neighborhoods, scanning the houses for signs of the right one. I suggested we wait until it's a bit later in the morning, but Demyen's determined to knock this out as soon as possible.

At first, I thought he was going to tell me she was dead. The way he reacted to that phone call sure made it seem that way.

But he explained that Helen Cooper is very much alive, very much in hiding, and we very much can't afford to lose track of her.

It's a harsh reminder that this isn't supposed to be a vacation. We're here on business, not pleasure.

Which is why my stomach keeps lurching with guilt every step we take down this road.

"Sorry," I mumble.

Demyen keeps scanning the houses, but frowns. "For what?"

"Distracting you." I kick a pebble with my sandal.

He turns to look at me. Then, for the first time this whole morning, his expression softens. "Clara," he says as he takes my hand in his, "don't be. I..." He sighs and swipes his free hand through his hair. "*Blyat*". I've been a dick all morning. I'm the one who should be sorry."

I'm not going to rub salt in the wound. I appreciate that he acknowledges it and is openly owing up to the fact that he hasn't stopped slamming doors or aggressively drinking coffee or ripping toast apart like it's the limbs of his enemies since he got that phone call. The only reason why I'm even walking with him right now is because he stormed past me with a "Let's go" and marched out the front door while the sun was only halfway up.

"Bambi keeps warning me about my blinders causing a crash one of these days."

I halfway laugh, still feeling weird about it all. "Well, I just wanted you to know. I never meant to—"

He gives me a look. “I think I can be responsible for what does and does not distract me. Fair?”

I manage a small smile. “Fair.”

He checks his phone for the eightieth time and nods at a house with a green door. “It’s this one.”

It’s a quaint little house with a bed of flowers planted below each of the windows. It could use a fresh coat of paint, but overall, it doesn’t look too shabby. The thatched roof is actually kinda cool. We quietly walk up the lava stone path to the front door and Demyen rings the doorbell.

“Do you think she’s even awake?” I whisper to him.

“If she’s not, she will be,” he grumbles. I shoot him a scolding look and he rolls his eyes. “Fine. I’ll be nice. Ish.”

He rings the doorbell again after a few more minutes of silence. This time, we hear shuffling coming from the back of the house, followed by the sleepy grumbings of a woman’s creaky voice.

The wood door opens. Helen Cooper, now known as Alice Tremaine, squints at us through the partial opening. “Yes?”

Demyen stands tall. “Helen Cooper?”

Her face pales. She opens the door a fraction wider, glances between us, then focuses on Demyen.

Her eyes widen.

And then she slams the door in his face.

“I think she knows you,” I mutter.

“Family resemblance.” He tries the doorbell again, but this time, we hear her shout at us to go away as she retreats to the back of her house. Demyen blows out a low breath.

“Dem,” I interject, “we really need her to like us.”

“We really don’t.”

“Do you think she’ll respond to intimidation?”

He throws a hand at the door. “She’s not responding to a fucking doorbell. Intimidation is the next option.”

Fair point. I sigh. “Alright. Do your Bratva boss thing, I guess.”

He gives me a sarcastic bow. “Thank you.” Then turns around and with one swift kick to the doorknob, knocks the whole thing in.

Helen/Alice screams. She grabs a frying pan from the stove and swings at Demyen when he approaches. He quickly ducks out of the way before she can knock him out cold.

Well, not *cold*. I notice the way she’s gripping the handle with a potholder.

He doesn’t.

“Dem—”

Now, it’s his turn to howl. His grab for the pan proved my guess accurate: she’d been cooking breakfast.

“*Sonofabitch!*”

She spins on her heels to face me, her expression nothing but fear and sheer determination to live through this encounter. “Get the hell out of my house!” she screeches at me.

“Helen! Wait!” I hold my hands up in surrender as she storms toward me. “Wait! We’re here to help you!”

“Yeah?” She laughs and holds the pan over her head. She must be reaching her later years, but damn, she’s strong. “Well, I got news for you, sweetheart. Helen Cooper is dead!”

Demyen’s slumped against the wall, nursing his burned hand and hissing through his teeth what I am absolutely certain are every curse word invented in the Russian language. He’s not exactly in the right mindset to interrogate our witness at the moment.

“I know!” I back up to avoid a potential swing, but I keep my hands up and bow a little deeper. “I know! We know. Sorry. Alice. Alice Tremaine, right? Helen Cooper died in Hawaii.”

She blinks, then slowly lowers the frying pan. “Yeah. That’s right.”

Demyen squints at me and mouths what looks like, “*The fuck?*”

But here’s the thing: I get it. I get *her*. Lord knows I’ve thought about doing exactly what she did: setting her old life on fire and running for the hills. It was high on my list of options the night I ran into Demyen in that hotel suite.

“I am so sorry for the mix-up.” I carefully crouch and pick up her broken door. “We just have a few questions, and we’re kind of desperate.”

Alice blows out a skeptical laugh. She turns and points at Demyen. “I know you. I know what you do. What your family does. Come to personally make sure your hitmen don’t miss this time?”

“The fuck are you talking about, lady?” Demyen grinds out between deep breaths. He flexes his hand and hisses again.

“You’re gonna look me in the eye and tell me you didn’t put a hit out on me a week after Tolya’s sentencing?”

I look at Demyen, who’s now just as curious as Alice is. His eyes widen and he holds up his good hand. “That was not me. I didn’t even know you existed until a few days ago.”

Alice narrows her eyes at him. Then turns to me. At least she’s set her pan down on a table. “And what about you? Your daddy send you to finish me off? Everetts and Zakrevskys working together to silence the honest M.E.?”

I slowly shake my head. “My father and I are not... shall we say, on speaking terms. He doesn’t know I’m here.”

She cocks a brow and shrugs. “Well then. Even if you *are* lying, it’s too late now. I’ll be dead by tomorrow morning. Tea?”

Again, Demyen looks at me and discreetly gestures to her like he’s asking if she is literally out of her mind. She might be, to be honest. All this time hiding from people who—apparently—tried to kill her could have done a number on her sanity.

“No, thank you,” I answer with a gentle smile. “We don’t want to trouble you.”

She eyes the broken door I've propped up against the doorframe. "Right. Just nice, normal, pleasant guests who don't leave a mess."

Demyen clears his throat and steps forward. "We're here because we have questions about your original report."

"Of course you are." Alice quirks her mouth in a wry smile. "The report that made it impossible for your brother to be guilty of murder."

He sighs with relief. "Yes. That. Do you—"

"No. I am not going down that road again." She shakes her head and slumps into a worn armchair. "Not unless you plan on relocating me to Tibet. And I actually like it here, so... thanks but no thanks."

"It's just LVPD," I try to reason. "They don't have jurisdiction—"

"Honey." She interrupts me with a patronizing eye roll. "Jurisdiction only matters to people actually following the rules. Obeying laws. You know, the kind of people who *wouldn't* threaten me to change an autopsy report and fake a death certificate."

I frown. "Who threatened you?"

Alice chuckles. "As if you don't know. You're cute, you know. You were adorable back then. Grew up nicely. Still as gullible as ever, though."

I want to thank her for the part that was a compliment, but she adds the insult and it lands on the part of me still stinging with guilt.

Demyen takes one look at me and spins Alice's chair around. He cages her in with a hand on either side of the backrest, his face inches from hers. "I'm not fucking around," he snarls. "You want to waste time with insults? I'll start, you fucking coward."

Her eyes widen. She clutches the armrests. "I-I'm n-not scared of you."

"Keep this up and you will be."

Part of me wants to remind Dem that we need to be on her good side so she'll help us.

Part of me hopes he scares her shitless.

"Alright! Alright." Alice lifts her hands in surrender. She sighs, her eyes closing as she slumps back into her chair. "I'll tell you what I know."

"Great." Demyen smiles and backs off to lean against what must be the dining table. He folds his arms across his chest and makes it very clear he's not leaving any time soon. "Start from the beginning."

I pull up a wicker chair and quietly sit down. Demyen glances over at me, and I motion to him that I'm fine. Better to focus on getting answers now that Helen Cooper/Alice Tremaine is willing to talk.

She sighs again and rubs her forehead. "As you already know, I was the chief medical examiner for the Las Vegas Police Department back in the day. And even though I had assistants and techs to help with caseloads, priority cases always fell into my lap. Michael Little, being on the force, was an immediate high priority case."

I gulp painfully. I should have accepted the tea. I don't know if it's the tropical heat or being this close to answers that suddenly has my throat dry.

"They said it was a gunshot wound that killed him, and they just needed confirmation on the trajectory, organs punctured, et cetera. Normal things. But legal requirements as an examiner, meant I had to run bloodwork, check stomach contents, the works." Alice picks at a piece of lint on her chair. "And that's how I found out Michael Little was poisoned."

"The bullet wound masked the heart attack, right?" I try to remember what her former lab tech told me when we met outside the compound.

Alice frowns at me. "What? No. The bullet didn't even graze his heart."

Demyen stills. "Come again?"

She turns her chair to look him in the eye. “Oh, yeah. That’s the worst part of this whole thing. Your brother hit him square in the chest, don’t get me wrong. But that bullet missed every vital organ and went clean out the back. Luckiest shot in the world, if you ask me.”

“My brother didn’t shoot him.”

“Sure. Maybe not. Whether he did or he didn’t doesn’t matter. What I’m saying is, even if he did? Michael Little would have pulled through just fine.”

I lean back in my own chair. “If it weren’t for the poison.”

Alice nods. “Exactly. But that wasn’t what they wanted to hear. Tolya Zakrevsky needed to go down for this murder, one way or another. Could I prove he’s the one who poisoned Michael Little? No. I can’t prove who did, either, not without a hell of a lot more evidence to go off of. All I could do was test the substances, write up my official report, and file the death certificate.”

Demyen looks like he wants to punch something. Instead, he shoves his hands in his pockets. “So? What was the poison?”

“A weird one, that’s for sure. I’ll never forget it. Used to only hear about it in fairy tales.”

I pause as something occurs to me like a bolt of lightning. “It was wolfsbane, wasn’t it?”

She nods. “That’s the one. *Aconitum*. Poor guy drank it that afternoon and had no idea what was in his system. Judging by the damage to his heart, he went into cardiac arrest the same time that bullet ripped through his chest. Lucky shot, but an unlucky guy.”

“How do you know he drank it?”

“Stomach contents. He didn’t eat much that day, but he had coffee in his stomach. Judging by the amount, the timing of his death matched up with the digestive timing of the coffee, I figured he drank a cup of poisoned coffee sometime around four or five in the late afternoon. Just one, too, because otherwise, he would’ve died within minutes. That poison works fast.”

Demyen runs a hand over his jaw. He moved so quickly this morning, he forgot to shave, so his face is a bit darker with a five o'clock shadow. "And you wrote all this in your report?"

Alice nods. "Every detail. And then I was told to rewrite it or risk losing my job."

"By who?"

She looks over at me. "Who do you think? Tolya's arresting officer, of course. It was *his* case."

I swallow hard. Now, her original animosity toward me makes sense. "My father threatened you?"

"Professionally. Said we couldn't 'risk allowing a mob thug back into the streets,' and if I valued my job, I'd do as he said. Of course I refused. I filed my report, and two days later, I was fired."

"On what grounds?!"

She shrugs. "Fabricating evidence. The new medical examiner was quick to play ball with Everett and managed to make it look like I was the one falsifying documents and altering evidence to help an organized crime family. Rumors said I was in the Zakrevsky pocket." She turns to Demyen. "Apparently, you owe me a few paychecks, young man."

Despite everything, Demyen manages to smirk. "I do owe you for a door."

Alice drums her fingers on the armrests and sighs. "A week after your brother's trial, I woke up to bullet holes through my bedroom window. Two days after that, I had the presence of mind to remote-start my car to turn my A/C on while I grabbed my purse. Blew up my car and tore apart my favorite avocado tree."

"Someone wanted you to assume it was a mob hit." Demyen does *not* look pleased about this.

"It worked, didn't it? I fled the state, the continent, then the country. Helen Cooper died of drowning and Alice Tremaine set up shop as a basket weaver on a small island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean."

“We’ll keep your secret,” I promise her.

Demyen shoots me an exasperated look. “Unless we need her for trial.”

Alice shakes her head. “Oh, no. You’re on your own there.”

“But—”

“You want to nail the real murderer? Find out who gave him the coffee.” She slides a very pointed stare to me. “And ask yourself why it mattered so much to your father that Tolya took the fall.”

It’s obvious that Alice is done sharing what she knows. After all of it is said and done, she looks ten years older than she first did when we arrived. The wrinkles in her brow are a bit deeper, and the silvery streaks in her hair look more ashen than before.

My heart breaks for her. She just wanted to do the right thing, and this is what she was rewarded with.

Exile.

Demyen doesn’t say another word. But he pulls out a roll of cash, unwraps the band around it, then thinks again and rewraps it. He sets the whole roll on her table and nods for us to leave.

“Thank you,” I say over my shoulder. It feels rude not to.

The shell of Helen Cooper gives me a sad little smile. “I am sorry, honey. We all are. I used to wonder what happened to Greg Everett’s poor little girl. Wondered if you ever survived to adulthood.” Her eyes flick to Demyen. “I’m glad to see you did.”

Demyen stares at her for a moment longer, then presses a hand to my back and ushers us down the stone path to the road. He still doesn’t say a word and I don’t press him to.

If he’s feeling what I’m feeling? We’re both in utter shambles.

DEMYEN

For the first time since Tolya's arrest, I want to throttle him.

Do I blame him for all this?

I didn't. Not really.

Now, though? Maybe. Kind of.

What the fuck were you thinking, brother?!

I look over at Clara, who's basking in the Fijian sun as our boat glides over the water back to the villa resort. I remember what Tolya said about that horrible, fateful night: that he saw a little girl get kidnapped, stuffed in the back of a car. And he couldn't stand by and just let them take her.

Did he know who she was?

Did her kidnapper know he was following them?

I want to be furious at Tolya for being so stupid and sticking his nose in someone else's business. For trying to play the hero when we were raised to be the villains.

But that little girl was Clara.

And I can't imagine myself sitting idly by while she, or Willow, was suddenly snatched in front of me and stuffed into some random guy's trunk.

No. Who I should be furious with is whichever *mudak* poisoned Michael Little. Whoever gave him that fucking coffee and started this whole chain of events that now has me

glaring at tropical waters while a gorgeous woman does her best to avoid poking at my frayed nerves.

Motherfucker is ruining my trip and I don't even know his fucking name.

I scrub a hand over my face and reach for Clara. "Come here."

She looks at me, uncertain at first, but eases into my side and sighs. "You doing okay?"

I want to laugh. "Fucking terrific. My brother is either the best or worst shot in Las Vegas history, and some dickhead is out there probably sipping coffee from the same mug he handed to Michael Little."

Clara doesn't say anything in response. She simply rests her head on my shoulder and wraps an arm around my waist.

Which doesn't make the next bit of news any easier to give. "Since we found what we came for, it's time to head back to the States. We'll leave tomorrow morning."

I expect at least a small protest, but she only nods. "Sounds good."

"You're good with that?"

She sits up to smile softly at me. "Yeah. This was a business trip, right? You didn't have to bring us, but I'm so grateful you did. It's your time and your resources you've shared with us. We'll take what you offered and appreciate what we have."

I don't deserve this woman. I really don't. "Want me to break the news to Willow? Or you?"

Her mouth twists in a wry smile. "I'm pretty sure you could tell her we're leaving for Antarctica and she'll go without a fuss. She adores you."

And I adore her. More and more, I'm finding myself agonizing over the fact that she's not biologically my kid. That she could have been, if only I'd paid better attention when it mattered.

Giving Martin Patterson a lead implant between his eyes is top of my To Do list once we get back home.



As Clara predicted, telling Willow we're going back home tomorrow goes easier than I anticipated. She's excited to see Gloria and Bambi again, and wants to show off her new mermaid doll and matching seashell necklace I picked up in the market between Helen Cooper's house and the docks.

Plus something else for Clara while she wasn't looking.

I spent the rest of the day actually working on my laptop while the girls had their picnic lunch and splashed in the pool. For dinner, I pried myself away from the computer so we could grill burgers and make sandcastles on the private beach while the sun set over our last full day in this island paradise.

If I could have my way, I don't know if we'd ever leave. No Martin, no Greg, no Raizo—

Fuck.

Raizo.

He's going to be pissed when I tell him he can take his auction and shove it up his ass.

Clara tiptoes into the bedroom from the hallway, no doubt celebrating her success at finally getting Willow to lie down and at least pretend to fall asleep. I tried my best five stories and three songs ago, but the kid kept popping up like a daisy pumped with energy drinks. I lied and said I had to use the bathroom just so Clara could take over.

Now, she's in my—*our*—room and shutting the door behind her softly.

“Is she—” I begin to ask, but Clara waves her hands at me like the slightest sound will wake the Kraken.

She peels off the oversized shirt she's been wearing over her bikini and carefully hangs it up on the back of the door. Since she won't let me talk, I sit up in bed and fold my hands behind my head, perfectly content to watch her little striptease number.

I'm pretty sure she's unaware of her rapt audience, because her shimmy-kick of her bottoms is not the sexiest attempt and she hisses a curse word when her top doesn't untie at her back.

“Need help?” I whisper across the room.

Clara spins around, eyes wide. Mine widen, too, but with delight at the full frontal view of her. I draw the blankets back as an invitation to come join me in bed.

She does crawl in, naked and warm and mouthwatering, but she presses a finger to my lips before I can pull her in for a kiss. “We have to be quiet. Willow’s in the other room.”

“I can be quiet.”

“Yeah, well, you’re not me. Taking you. It’s a bit of a different challenge.” She grins and finally lets me kiss her. “But if you want, I can see about waking up early, and, you know... be your alarm.”

I loft a brow. “Even with the little one next door? Aren’t you worried we’ll wake her up?”

Clara winks. “Not with my mouth full.”

Fuck. Let it be morning now, please. “You know, we could just—”

She kisses me again, then taps my nose with a finger. “You need sleep. We both do. And we both know that once we get started, we won’t stop for a *while*.”

I both love and loathe how right she is. So I sigh and wriggle my way back down under the blankets and sink my head on the pillows. “Fine. Be a responsible adult.”

“You’ve been doing that for both of us. I figured it’s my turn to help shoulder the burden.”

I roll onto my side and curl around her, tucking her into me. “When we get back home, we’re going to need to do some rearranging.”

“Oh?” She snuggles into me and closes her eyes, but her smile says she’s still listening.

“I want you to move your stuff into my room. If you want,” I quickly add.

Clara stills. *Shit.* I might be moving too fast. The island sun has fried my brain as it is—

“I’d love to.” She smiles up at me. “If you’re sure.”

I kiss her brow and caress her stomach, my own smile growing wider by the second. “I’ve never been more sure of anything.”



The bed is moving.

Someone kicks me in the shins, hard.

Fuck! Ow!

I sit up, ready to grab the gun taped to the back of the nightstand, but I stop when I realize it’s Clara.

She’s frowning, twisting and kicking in her sleep. Muttering something I can’t quite make out, but whatever it is, she’s suddenly very scared. Her breath quickens and she starts whining. Then she shakes her head, slowly at first, then furiously. “No... no! No! I won’t go! Don’t—”

“Clara.” I grab her by the shoulders and try to gently shake her awake. “Baby, wake up!”

Her frown deepens and she starts to fight me off. “No! Get away from me!”

“Clara!”

I don’t want to hurt her, so I do the only thing that makes sense in the moment: I kiss her, hard, until I feel her gasping.

She scrambles back on the bed and I let her. She needs to gather her bearings and absorb that this isn’t a dream. When she blinks, then focuses on me, she shudders. “Oh, God, Dem. I don’t... Thank you. I thought it was all happening again until I felt... that...” She actually laughs a little. “That was new.”

“You okay?” I reach for her, but she still shies away. I try to not let that bother me as much as it does. “You were having a nightmare.”

Clara slowly nods. Then starts curling in on herself.

That’s not a good sign.

“I... I dreamed I was a little girl again. At first. I thought it was *just* a dream, but then as it went on, I realized it was a

memory.” She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear and looks away. “It was the day I was kidnapped.”

I nod for her to go on. To tell me more. To ignore the way my pulse is beginning to race.

“Remember how Uncle Mike left work early that day?”

I nod again.

“I completely forgot. Dad... he left work early, too.”

“Why?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know. I just remember... and dreamed... that Dad came home early and it surprised Mom and me, and he acted like it wasn’t a big deal. He actually came home close to lunch time. I remember because it was the first time he offered to cook instead of Mom.”

Given what I know about Greg Everett, that does seem a bit odd. “And you dreamed this?”

“Yeah. Then, later on, Uncle Mike came over.” She sucks in a deep breath and hugs her knees to her chest.

“Clara...” Again, I try to reach for her. When she flinches, I rest my fingertips on her knees for a brief moment. “What’s wrong?”

When her eyes finally meet mine, I can see her trying to blink back tears.

“Uncle Mike... he came over for... for *coffee*.”

I slowly sit up.

“And...” She sniffs and rubs her nose, looking away again. “I remember bringing him the mug.”

I don’t realize I’ve slid to my feet until I feel the cool floor beneath me. My fists clench at my sides; my mind is racing a mile a minute.

Wolfsbane.

Clara’s favorite plant.

She brought him the mug that killed him.

She... She... What if she did more than she ever knew she could've done... and then made herself forget?

"Demyen, please..." Her voice cracks with fresh tears. She reaches for me, but I quickly step away.

I can't. I can't let her touch me. Not right now. Not while I'm struggling to put the pieces together and the picture that keeps coming up is her feeding Michael Little a cup of poison.

Poison that she knew all about, thanks to her strange love for exotic plants and that book that Little himself gave her.

Did he know he was giving her a How To for his own murder?

That boulder is back on my chest, making it hard to breathe. Hard to see. Hard to stand her presence in my room.

"Go to your room." I mumble the words between numb lips. I'm amazed I have enough air in my lungs to utter them.

Clara hiccups a sob. "What?"

"You fucking heard me." I glare at her. Or what looks like her silhouette in the dark. "Get the fuck out."

"But, Dem—"

I've had enough fucking around. I'm done. I'm done falling head over heels for someone I should have kept far the fuck away from since the beginning.

So I grab her, throw her over my shoulder, and storm out of my bedroom into hers.

She's lucky I feel a little mercy, at least enough to throw her on the bed instead of the floor where she belongs.

"Get your shit together. I don't want to see you or hear you until we leave. Understood?"

Her sobbing is her only vocal reply, but I see her manage a nod. I shouldn't care either way. I tell myself I don't, and I say that again and again until I believe it.

I don't care.

I don't care.

I don't fucking care.

I shut the door behind me and storm back into my own room, making sure to lock it before I go back to bed.

Except now I can't sleep. Her scent is all over my sheets, and it only makes the pain in my chest hurt even more.

DEMYEN

I didn't sleep at all last night.

I sure as shit won't be getting any sleep on the plane ride home.

I successfully avoided breakfast with Clara and Willow, plus all the packing and loading at the dock that would have put us within speaking distance. I actually had them go ahead before me, taking a different boat while I stayed behind under the pretense of having work shit to wrap up.

I just can't stomach looking at her.

When I do finally board the jet, it's deathly quiet in there. Clara is reading a novel and Willow is coloring in her activity book. When she looks up and smiles at me, I turn away.

And I pretend to not see the way her face falls in the corner of my eye.

When it's time for takeoff, I buckle into a seat as far away from them as I can manage. I stare at the wall in front of me just so I don't have to look at the sadness in Willow's eyes.

She doesn't try to speak to me. It's like she knows something's wrong.

Fuck. She probably thinks it's something to do with her when that's so far from the truth.

The actual truth? She looks too much like her mother. And she looks way too much like the little girl who poisoned Michael Little and framed my brother into a life sentence.

Once we're leveled out, I unbuckle and look around for something to busy myself with that doesn't involve interacting with them.

Willow inches toward me. "Demmy?"

"Clara." I don't look up. But I sense her attention focusing on me. "Why don't you take Willow into the bedroom. Put on a movie there."

It's the closest to "nice" I'm able to manage right now.

When Willow suddenly bursts into tears, I feel like absolute shit. I want to take it back, but it's too late. The damage is done.

Clara shoots me a quick glare and wraps her arms around her daughter. "Come on, sweetheart. Let's go snuggle up with a movie, hm? That sounds like fun."

But Willow is inconsolable. She just sits there, looking at me and crying.

I just sit here, trying to act like what's on my laptop screen matters more than the broken heart of a five-year-old little girl who used to think I was her hero.

Clara picks her up and rubs her back, humming a soft lullaby as she carries her back into the bedroom and closes the door behind them.

I should feel relieved.

Instead, I feel worse than shit.

Several long, aching silent minutes later, Clara reemerges and walks over to me. "I hope you're fucking proud of yourself," she whispers. "Do you feel better? Or do you want to give her a puppy and kill it in front of her, too?"

I ignore her. Let her throw her little tantrum and tire herself out. Maybe she'll take the hint and go back into the bedroom and away from me.

But Clara's having none of it. She shuts my laptop right in my face and leans in close. "I'm talking to you, asshole."

Fuck this shit.

I shove my chair out from under me and tower over her. “Watch it.”

“No, *you* watch it.” She meets me nose-to-nose, not an ounce of fear in her furious eyes. “I want an answer. Do you feel better now that you’ve made my daughter cry?”

“She’ll get over it.”

“Fuck you.”

I clench my fists at my sides. Not because I have any inclination to raise a hand against her—I’m just at the end of my patience. “Go back into the bedroom. I don’t want to see your face until we land.” I turn and walk away, or as much as the cabin’s limited space will allow.

Clara follows me, her voice crackling with emotion as the anger gives way to her own heartbreak. “What the hell is wrong with you? Is this all because of some stupid dream?”

“No. It’s because of some stupid memory you’ve suddenly rediscovered about murdering someone and framing my brother.”

She scoffs. She actually fucking *scoffs*. “Do you hear yourself? Do you actually hear yourself right now?”

“Yes. And it’s the first time in a while I’m actually listening to the voice of reason in my head!”

Clara freezes mid-step. And then she laughs, exasperated, and throws her hands in the air. “You don’t *have* a voice of reason! If you did, you’d realize how fucking *stupid* this is!”

I spin on her, dangerously close to shaking a finger in her face. “I told you to watch yourself, Clara Everett. Don’t forget who you’re talking to.”

Tears drip down her face as she smiles without a trace of humor. “How can I forget? You’re the guy in the courtroom who took one look at my bruised and beaten body and decided you’d hate me forever. Forget the fact that I was an eight-year-old little girl fucking terrified of the man standing next to me.”

I’m not going to let her win this. “Clara—”

“No, Demyen. Oh, I’m sorry—*Mr. Zakrevsky*. I’m not done. Because yeah, I know exactly who I’m talking to. You’re this big, bad criminal overlord hellbent on making the universe pay for what’s basically the worst luck your brother could ever have *despite the fact* that it all ended up being the best luck for *you*.”

She might as well have slapped me across the face.

It almost feels like she did.

I’ve got nothing to say. So I continue to silently glare at her, hoping it’s enough to make her shut the hell up and leave me the hell alone.

“Don’t worry.” She folds her arms across her chest and rocks on her heels. “I won’t forget who you are. Especially the fact that you’re the kind of man who whispers sweet promises as long as you get exactly what you want. How did you put it? Oh, right: you wanted me to trust that you’d ‘do everything in your power to lay the world at my feet.’” She tilts her head to one side and fights back the fresh flow of tears. “Was that because of the sex before? Or the sex after?”

I swallow. Hard. I don’t need this. I don’t need any of this shit from her.

I nod toward the corridor and simply tell her, “Go.”

Clara covers her mouth as a sob bursts out, but she turns and begins to walk to the bedroom door.

Then she spins back around and cracks her palm against the side of my face.

I don’t remember doing what I do next. I just sort of “come to” with my hand around her throat and her body pinned against the wall. I’m squeezing—not too hard, but hard enough to make her body shake with rasping sobs.

She doesn’t even try to fight me. Clara just stares at me through tear-filled eyes and shakes her head. “Do it. Go ahead and do it. At least I’ll still be right about one thing. At least I’ll know you’re just like them.”

My hand peels back like she's burned me worse than that fucking frying pan at Helen Cooper's. That feels like a lifetime ago.

I stare at Clara in horror. *No*. I can't—I'm not—I swore I'd never be like them. I'd never be one of them.

But I've been making a lot of promises I've barely managed to keep.

This time, I don't have to tell Clara to go into the bedroom. She struggles to wipe her tears away but she can't stop crying, which now sounds like a pathetic series of wheezes that rip at my heart despite my best efforts to ignore the sound.

She runs into the bedroom and locks the door behind her, but it's not soundproof. So now, I get to listen to Willow frantically ask what happened, is she okay, and then both of them crying together while Willow asks her mommy why this is happening.

Honestly? I wish I fucking knew.

DEMYEN

The plane landed a week ago.

It feels like a century.

Raizo is pissed beyond reason that the auction's been delayed yet again. He can eat my goddamn pistol if it means that much to him. He keeps blowing up my phone demanding answers, demanding a new schedule, demand demand demand.

So I finally respond with a single text: *The auction is this weekend.* It gives me around five days to figure shit out to the best of my capabilities.

Which, since we landed, have been minimal at best.

I haven't seen or spoken to the girls. At all. I made sure I was off that plane and in my own separate car before they had a chance to exit the bedroom.

I told myself it was because things would just be easier this way.

I ignored the voice inside my head that kept chanting, *Fucking coward.*

Their rooms have been relocated to the other side of the compound. The solarium is back to its intended purpose and all of Willow's things are in some room near the other pool, next door to her mother's new housing arrangement.

It's finally quiet around here.

I hate it.

I'm busy staring at a spreadsheet full of data I don't give a shit about when Bambi bursts into my office. She's clutching papers in one hand and white-knuckling her tablet in the other.

"Can I help you?" I ask.

She slaps the papers down on my desk. "My notice. I'll have my things out by the end of the month."

"Whoa." I close my laptop and hold a placating hand up. "Hold on. Bam, sit down and talk to me." I gesture to the chair she'd shoved aside when she barreled in.

"Oh, you want to *talk? Now?*" She folds her arms and glares at me, but at least she does sit down. "Sure, let's talk. Let's talk about the little girl who hasn't stopped crying since she got home and had her *whole fucking bedroom* uprooted and shoved into some tiny closet clear the fuck across the compound."

I stare at a fleck in the enamel on top of my desk. "Things have changed."

"Mhm. Like what?" Bambi is quivering with anger. "What could have possibly changed so much that you're officially the world's biggest asshole?"

"Careful, Bam. You're dangerously close to insubordination."

She widens her sharkish smile. "Oh, I'm far, far beyond that. But there's nothing you can do about it because I fucking quit." She lifts the papers to remind me and slaps them down on top of my closed laptop.

"You can't quit. I need you."

Her brows shoot up and she barks out a laugh. "Me? Nah, you don't need me. Lawyers are a dime a dozen and believe me, you pay well enough to have your pick of the litter. Who you *need* is currently hiding those ugly fucking bruises around her neck that I swear to God, Demyen, better be from rough sex or I will make sure they *never* solve your cold case."

Well... shit. I've seen Bambi fired up, but... *fuck*.

And Clara's got bruises around her neck?

I close my eyes and urge the bile to go back down my throat. “Is that a threat, Ms. Watkins?”

I hate talking to her like this. But I have to maintain order or this whole Bratva will go to shit. Especially if word gets out that the lawyer in stilettos has my balls tucked neatly in her briefcase next to her depositions.

“Of course not, Mr. Zakrevsky.” She stands and extends her hand to me. I’m hesitant to take it, but I do. She gives me a little shake and uses her best “lawyer voice” when she hisses, “It’s a fucking promise.”

Then the whirlwind that is Bambi Watkins leaves my office the same way she entered, pissed and ready for war.

I just never thought she’d declare war against *me*.

I carefully skim through her resignation papers. Then I stack them neatly together, make sure everything is in order, and rip them into tiny little pieces until my desk is covered in confetti.

Bambi’s not just my lawyer. She’s family. She’s practically a sister to me.

Which is probably why she knows I won’t put a hit out on her even though she just threatened me, the *pakhan*.

The door opens again. What is this, Office Hours?

Pavel walks in, his own expression grim. At least he’s significantly calmer than his colleague. Not that I’m loving the way he’s glaring at me as he slowly sits down in the chair facing my desk.

“We need to talk.”

“We’re not even fucking and I’m getting the breakup speech?”

He manages a tiny smirk, but sighs and gets right to business. “You’re about to lose the Bratva.”

I freeze. I know I didn’t just hear what I think I just heard. “Excuse me?”

Pavel chews on the inside of his cheek and stares out the window before answering. “Word is spreading about how you’re treating Clara. And Willow. And why.”

“It’s no one’s fucking business,” I grumble as I reach for a flask inside my top drawer. I need a stiff drink.

“It is when it demonstrates a clear inability to make rational decisions based on evidence and facts.”

“What are you—”

“She had a *dream*, Demyen. A fucking *dream*. And you’ve uprooted and upended their lives because of it.” He remains calm. He doesn’t raise his voice a single decibel.

But that’s always been what makes Pavel an intimidating force to reckon with.

I narrow my eyes at him. “She said it was a memory. She remembered poisoning Michael Little.”

Pavel nods and thinks on it. “Okay. Fair.” He leans back in the chair for a quiet moment, then laughs. “Man, speaking of dreams, I gotta tell you about the one I had just the other night. It was *wild*.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. So fucking hot, too. I woke up just dripping with sweat.” He chuckles and shakes his head. “I can totally understand your infatuation with her. If my dream was any indication, Clara is a *freak* in the sheets.”

I’m suddenly seeing red. “The fuck did you just say?”

Pavel leans forward and lowers his voice. “You heard me. I had a sex dream about Clara Everett.”

My jaw sets. He’s goading me, and I’m not going to take the bait.

“What are you gonna do, Dem? I mean yeah, you can go ahead and march me outside and shoot me in front of your *vors*. Then you can explain to them how your new strategy for the Bratva’s future is to base major, life-altering decisions on people’s dreams. Oh, and the word of traumatized children. Both those things make total sense as strong foundations for effective leadership.”

I want to tell Pavel the same thing I told Bambi: he's pretty fucking close to insubordination.

Something tells me he won't care either way.

"I heard Bambi quit." He jumps topics, but we both know they're connected to each other.

I lean back in my chair and make a face. "She just needs time to cool off. She doesn't know the full story."

"Does it matter?"

"What?"

"Does it matter if she knows the whole story or not?" Pavel shrugs a shoulder. "I mean, I know the whole story and the only reason why I'm not quitting is because I've always believed in a good comeback. And because I know you're good and fucked if I do quit."

I can't ignore the warnings he's dropping left and right. Even if it's all undermining my authority as *pakhan*. "Things can't be that bad."

"Mako tried to resign the day after you came back. I convinced him to ride this out for Willow's sake. Three of your *vors* have been talking about hiring a psychologist for you. Four of them are wondering if you've actually lost your actual mind. The rest are bracing themselves for shit to hit the fan and the whole Bratva to go tits up because their *pakhan* would rather listen to the nightmares of a deeply traumatized woman and utilize our valuable resources to pursue a personal vendetta than to focus on actually strengthening the Bratva."

My logic is truly listening to what he's saying. And wholeheartedly agreeing. Said out loud, it's ludicrous. It's terrible leadership. It's downright irresponsible.

My pride, however, wants Pavel to shut the fuck up so I can go back to contemplating the ninety different ways I can make Clara's life a living hell.

Pride assures me that I'm always right and I never make bad decisions.

Logic is laughing its ass off.

“What do you think I should do?”

He steeples his fingers together and studies me. “Let the white whale go, Ahab. Before your crew mutinies and the whole goddamned ship sinks to the bottom of the ocean floor.”

I purse my lips. Then shake my head. “I can’t give up on Tolya.”

“I’m not talking about Tolya.” Pavel tilts his head in the direction of Clara’s new room. “I’m talking about the woman who went out of her way to get you the information you have because she’s a good, decent, kind person. Not some prodigy murderer who started killing in grade school.”

I grind my molars together. He’s not going to let this go. No one, it seems, is going to let this go.

“Oh, and just so you know,” he continues, “I got full reports back on her mother. She was *murdered*, Dem. Beaten to death and barely recognizable. I’ll spare you the readthrough of her autopsy—but trust me, you won’t want to eat before reading it if you do.”

I frown. “She said her mother died in an accident.”

“She also said her mother committed suicide. Her story changes because she doesn’t actually fucking know, Demyen. And that’s what I’m trying to tell you. Her own mother was murdered, probably in her own house, by someone who definitely wasn’t Clara and definitely has no problems with killing people who inconvenience him.”

“You’re not suggesting Greg Everett poisoned his own partner and killed his own wife, then lied about both, are you?”

Pavel looks at me incredulously. “It’s a far more plausible theory than an eight-year-old learning how to brew coffee just so she could poison the one guy who was actually nice to her.” He sighs and slowly eases out of his chair. “You know, I honestly thought you loved her. Really, the signs were all there—and man, I was so happy for you.” He gives me a sad little smile. “Now, I’m glad I was wrong. She deserves way better than you.”

My second-in-command calmly leaves the office, but he takes my sanity with him.

CLARA

The first morning in Fiji, I was pretty sure I just didn't travel well.

The second morning, I figured my nerves were shot because Demyen was being so dreamy and perfect and romantic.

The third morning, I was so sickened by the sudden whiplash of Demyen's anger.

And the fourth... and the fifth... and every morning for a week.

Maybe it's because I'm sobbing myself to sleep every night. It's become my new routine: wake up, throw up, sit in this empty room and stare at the wall. Then, greet Willow when she comes home from school like nothing's wrong, eat dinner by the pool, try to tuck her into bed without her asking me why Demyen hates her.

What she did to make him hate her.

What she did wrong so she can fix it.

When that's done, I turn out the lights, close her door, and try to make it to my bedroom without bursting into tears along the way.

And then I curl up in the corner and cry until I pass out.

Lather, rinse, repeat.

The day we came back, Demyen's staff was just finishing moving Willow's room from the solarium into a windowless guest room near the second courtyard. She was so confused

and so terrified to see all these people just hauling her things from her favorite little paradise into a tiny, cold room far away from her Demmy. I carried her in my arms as she cried and kept asking me what she did wrong.

When she ran up to Mako and sobbed apology after apology, he at least had the decency to crouch to her level and promise her she didn't do anything at all.

I managed to convince the staff to move Willow's things into what would have been my new room, since that one was a bit larger and at least had one window overlooking the smaller pool.

It was during the move that Gloria came up to me and quietly let me know that I've been "let go." She said we're still obliged to stay here, of course, for our safety. But I'm no longer employed by the Zakrevsky household.

She squeezed my hands and reassured me that everything will work out for the best. "God won't abandon you now, sweetheart—and sometimes, people just need a solid cosmic backhand to knock some sense back in."

I've been in this room ever since. One bare twin mattress, no windows. A basic bathroom with a tiny shower but no toiletries. I don't technically need any, but I don't want to smell like Demyen anymore.

Every time I do, I just start crying all over again.

Pavel's been taking Willow to school. I tried joining them our first morning back, but he discreetly stopped me and just said, "Sorry. Boss's orders."

So I'm a bit surprised when Bambi shows up this morning, car keys in one hand and a friendly wave in the other. "Hey, sweetie!" she calls to Willow. "Can I drive you today?"

That actually manages to cheer Willow up. She grins and nods, then patiently waits in the shade when Bambi gestures that she wants to talk to me for a moment.

"Hey," Bambi breathes quietly when she walks up to me. Her eyes land on my neck and harden. "Clara? Is that—"

“It’s nothing.” I subconsciously reach for my neck and cover the faint bruises of Demyen’s fingers with my own. “What happens in Fiji, ya know?”

She narrows her gaze at me like she thinks I’m full of shit, but she doesn’t press any further. “I see there’s a lot of changes around here. I’ve been in the city mostly, prepping for a new round of appeals. Looks like you guys moved?”

I nod. “Demyen decided we’d be better off here.”

“Did he now? Hm.”

“Yup.” I glance over at Willow, whose face has fallen back into the shadow of sadness that’s been there since the plane ride. “He’s the boss.”

“He sure is.” Bambi runs her tongue over her teeth as she stares at the pool in thought. “You know you can come to me, Clara,” she suddenly blurts. “For anything.”

Honestly, I’m not sure I can. But I smile and nod my thanks. “I appreciate it. And you.”

“Yeah.” She turns and walks over to Willow, holding her hand out. “C’mon, princess. Our chariot awaits.”

I wait until they turn the corner out of sight. Then I go inside my room, shut the door, and drop to a seat on the floor.

I’ve been sitting there ever since.

At least it’s quiet. I don’t have to hear Demyen’s voice on the phone walking by, or run into him in the kitchen. He doesn’t come out to this part of the compound much, and Gloria’s been kind enough to stock the secondary kitchen with enough for Willow and me to get by.

I feel sick.

I feel sick in so many ways.

The only other man I’ve ever been able to place my trust in, without any fear, was Michael Little. “Uncle Mike” to me. Something instinctual in me just knew that he was a good man, and he never did anything to prove me wrong.

When he saw the bruises from Dad's treatment of me, he'd ask about them and make sure Dad knew he was concerned. Of course, Dad always played it off like I was some clumsy kid with terrible balance. It would give them both a good chuckle.

I just... I can't remember, not clearly, that afternoon he came over for coffee with Dad. But somehow, I dreamed it like it was happening all over again? Pulling the coffee mug off the counter and walking it into the living room and handing it to Uncle Mike...

But why?

"Clar-Bear, can you grab our coffees for us?"

Dad sent me. I remember him asking me to go fetch their mugs from the kitchen. It was a matching set, one of those kinds that come with the boxes of inexpensive dish sets at the megastore.

I grabbed one and handed it to Uncle Mike. Then I went back to get the other one for Dad.

Mom wasn't there. She was napping.

Which means...

Another wave of nausea rolls through me, and I'm barely able to make it to the toilet in time. It's a dry heave, but it has me on my knees nonetheless. I quickly tie my hair back and cling to the edges of the porcelain bowl for dear life.

I haven't been this sick in years. I should call someone, like Bambi or maybe even Pavel, but what am I going to tell them? It's probably just some bug I caught after so much traveling. I hear that can happen, right?

The last time my health was like this, Martin stood over me and demanded to know what the hell was wrong with me. Like I was damaged goods he might end up returning to the seller.

His tune changed when we found out I was pregnant. Come to think of it, those were some of the best months of our relationship. He was still a monster, but a monster who valued the health and safety of his brood. He knew as well as I did

that I would do anything to keep my baby safe, happy, and healthy.

So I did. Day after day, night after night, I bartered housekeeping and cooking and sex in exchange for better treatment.

When Willow was born, I sold myself to him more times than I could count just so he'd redirect his frustrations to me. If she cried too loud at night, I'd rock her back to sleep and placate him as best as I could. If she spilled something or broke something of his, I'd say and do anything to keep him away from our baby.

I'm willing to do it all again.

Only this time, it's not Martin I'm contending with.

I stumble from the toilet back to my chosen corner of the room and slide back down into a crumpled fetal position against the wall. Things feel more comfortable this way. Like I don't deserve any better.

I was too trusting.

Too relaxed.

Too attached.

I let Demyen become part of me and my life in ways no man should have any business being, if I weren't so stupidly desperate for an ounce of love.

Now... now, the memory of what we might have had is growing inside me.

And as the door suddenly opens, as Demyen's tall frame darkens the doorway, I decide that if I do go down...

I'm going down fighting like the hell he's putting me through.

DEMYEN

I'm going to diagnose the sudden churning in my gut as indigestion. Bad shrimp, or whatever the fuck.

Surely nothing at all to do with the sudden realization that Clara is, and has been, living in this tiny closet of a windowless room since we returned.

Nothing at all to do with the sight of her huddled in the far corner, in the dark, shuddering when she glances up at me.

And nothing at all to do with how she instantly looks away like I repulse her.

I expect her to snap at me. "What do you want" or "Go away" or "Leave me the fuck alone." Something imbued with the fire I've come to know she keeps hidden inside herself.

But instead, she's silent. I can barely hear her breath, she's staying so still.

I like that far less than her snark.

"Bambi will schedule a court hearing for your recantation." I might as well plow ahead with what I came here for. "You will appear before a judge and tell them you lied—"

"I didn't lie."

Her voice is so quiet, I almost don't hear her. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me." Clara still doesn't look up at me or raise her voice. "I didn't lie."

I sigh and resist the urge to pull my own hair out. “Yes, you did. We’ve been over this—”

“I was coerced. My testimony was coerced. Under duress. But I didn’t *lie*.”

“Fine. Whatever you want to call it, it happened. It happened, and it tainted Tolya’s entire court proceedings, so you’re going to go in front of a judge and undo everything your testimony did. And then you’re going to tell them about the coffee and how you were the one who actually killed Michael Little.”

Clara picks at something on her knee. “No.”

I run my tongue over my teeth and take a deep breath. “And why not?”

“Because I didn’t kill him.”

I need her to cooperate, so I decide against punching my fist through the door. That annoying whisper in that annoyingly achy spot in my chest keeps whispering to not be such an asshole.

Get over yourself. Listen to Pavel. Listen to Bambi.

Listen to Clara.

“You handed him the poisoned coffee, didn’t you?” I draw in another deep breath. *I’m going to keep a cool head... I’m going to keep a cool head... I’m going to keep a cool head...*

Clara suddenly laughs. “Yes, Demyen. I’m going to go in front of a judge and court officials and police officers and tell them that I, as an eight year-old little girl, took what I knew from a kids’ book on plants and grew, cultivated, harvested, extracted from, and utilized what I knew to be an organic poison that would specifically mimic a heart attack in coffee I taught myself to brew—all so I could poison the only adult in my life who gave two fucks about me.”

I narrow my eyes at her. I’m not appreciating the sarcasm.

“That’s what you want, isn’t it?” She rests her head against the wall and glowers at me. “You don’t care what’s true or realistic. You just want me to take the fall for Uncle Mike’s murder.”

I kick the door close behind me and flick the light switch on. Then I fold my arms across my chest so I don't start balling my hands into fists. She's really pushing my fucking buttons. "That's not what I want and you know it."

She steadies her gaze on me. It's just this side of unsettling. "But it's what you'll get."

"I want my brother out of prison. That's all. I want wrongs to be righted and Tolya freed."

"Well, guess what?" Clara's voice suddenly pierces the room with a ferocity I am not expecting at all. "You don't get to have everything you want!"

"Careful—"

"Or what? You'll what?!" She climbs to her feet, staring at me with a wildness in her eyes that came out of nowhere. "What will you do to me for telling the truth, Dem? Or is it only *your* truth I'm allowed to speak?"

How long has she been inside this room?

For fuck's sake, she's already coming unhinged.

"Because here's the truth: you want me to kill myself and my daughter just so you can have your precious brother back. Fuck everyone else as long as you can have your happily-ever-after, right?"

"You know damn well that's not—"

"Yes, the *fuck* it is!"

I almost take a step back in shock.

Clara has never screamed at me like that before.

She takes a few heaving breaths, glaring at me as her fingers curl into her palms. "If you make me go to court, you will make me discredit my father and cast doubt upon his entire career. They will *have* to arrest me for murder after I basically confess to doing it. And what do you think happens to children when one parent gets arrested, hm?"

That nausea is back. I reach out to touch her arm, to calm her, but she flinches and quickly ducks away. My hand hovers

awkwardly between us before I let it fall to my side again. “I told you, nothing will happen to Willow.”

“You don’t get a choice! There’s nothing you can do! The second you drag me to court, you might as well hand her over to Martin and forget either of us ever existed. Because if my father doesn’t kill me for turning on him, the convicts in prison who hate him definitely will.” Clara snuffles hard and shakes her head, looking away from me again. “And if Martin doesn’t kill her within a year, he’ll drain her of everything she is until she chooses to die on her own.”

The irritated side of me that just wants this all to be over thinks she’s being overdramatic. That this is just a ploy to delay the inevitable.

The side of me that might actually care for Clara and Willow is terrified that she might be right.

I despise the position she’s put me in. I’m not supposed to be questioning my own decisions. This is my house, my Bratva, *my fucking rules*, and I’m not going to let her or anyone tell me what to do.

“You’re the one who doesn’t get a choice,” I snarl at her. “You’ll pay for what you did, and what you refuse to do, one way or another.”

Clara shakes her head and looks at me with a sadness I can’t afford to pay attention to. “Go ahead,” she says, suddenly back to her weakened state. It’s like her thirty-second outburst drained what little energy she had left. She leans heavily against the wall and all but turns away from me. “What’s worse than hell?”

And just like that, I register it as a challenge.

She thinks she knows what hell is like? She thinks she’s already paid her dues?

I don’t tell her. I don’t give her the dignity of a response. I just leave her in that room and make my way back to the office, throwing out a few texts to get things prepared for this weekend.

She doesn’t want to go to court—fine. Fucking *fine*.

There are other ways to get what I want. And what I want is for Clara Everett to beg me for a chance to make things right...

And the pleasure of telling her it's too damn late.

CLARA

It's been days since I lost my shit on Demyen.

Part of me wishes I never went off on him like that.

Another part of me feels lighter. Relieved. Vindicated.

He has no idea what he's asking—demanding, really—me to do. But how could he? I'm in no mood to tell him what I've only just figured out for myself. What I'm still struggling to grasp in the middle of all this heartache and bullshit.

Because that's exactly what it is. It's painful heartache and total bullshit.

And keeping my pregnancy from him is about the only card in my deck left to play.

I've just put Willow down for bed. She's still trying to process all the changes, and it continues to break my heart to see her so sad, so confused, and so betrayed. She doesn't understand why Demyen doesn't want to be her friend anymore. She doesn't understand why she can't be in her old room.

I wish, so much, that I could do the understanding for her. But I can't.

I'm sitting in my usual corner of my room, waiting for sleep to knock me out because my mind won't stop running a mile a minute, when the door opens.

It's Demyen.

And I *hate* how my heart skips with excitement as if I actually want to see him.

He's clutching fabric in one hand and gripping the doorknob with the other. "Get dressed. We're going to a thing." He tosses the fabric onto the unused bed.

"A 'thing'?"

"A black tie event. You're coming with me as my date."

Stupid heart. It skips again, and I have to suffocate it with my brain's reminders that Demyen hates me. That there's no way I'm actually going to be his "date" in a romantic sense.

I eye the fabric now pooled on the bed. It's a soft, pale pink, almost a champagne color, and looks like it's made of the most delicate silk and accented with diamonds.

He either wants me to dress like a queen or a whore, and either way—I have a feeling I'm fucked.

"Do I have an option?" I'm stupid enough to ask.

Demyen narrows his gaze at me. "No."

"What about—"

"Bambi will be here to watch over Willow. As will several of my men."

There's no warmth in his voice when he says it. Not like there used to be—reassurances that no matter how haywire my nerves may be, he's always going to keep Willow safe and sound and away from her monsters.

Now, he makes it sound more like a threat. As in, "Do what I say or the kid gets it."

My heart breaks again—as if there was any of it left to shatter. I have to hope and pray that some part of him still cares enough for Willow that he won't do anything to her, regardless of how he feels about me.

"Dem—"

"You have one hour."

And then he's gone. He doesn't shut the door; in his place, Bambi quickly appears. She silently gestures to me to follow her, so I grab the dress and figure, *Why not?*

Whatever's about to go down will still be better than court.



The curling iron feels warm when she wraps my hair around it close to my scalp. I almost wish she'd just burn it all off. Make me look as damaged as I feel.

On the other hand, I'm beginning to understand why the warning tag says, "*External use only.*" Someone once felt like shoving the hot end up their ex's ass, I'm sure.

Fuck. Now, I'm referring to Demyen as my "ex." As if we were ever anything to begin with.

The worst part is, the pain in my heart feels like we were.

Bambi tries to smile at me in the mirror, but it's filled with sadness. "You look beautiful," she murmurs quietly, wrapping another strand around her barrel.

I wish I could feel as beautiful as she says I look. Unlike the last "dress" Demyen gave me to wear, this one is an actual evening gown of literal silk that swirls around my legs every time I take a step. There's a slit up one thigh that goes nearly to my hip, and the way the fabric drapes around my curves leaves little to the imagination. Once again, I'm not allowed to wear any underwear.

At least this time, I can bend over without flashing half the desert.

In happier days, I could see myself easily tempting Dem into forgetting about everything under the stars in this dress.

Now, I just feel like some disregarded trophy he's dusted off for show.

Bambi lays the final curl gently along my shoulder, then sets the iron down and unplugs it. She reaches for her makeup bag, pulls out a brush and shimmery makeup palette, then turns me around in my chair to face her.

I can tell she's trying not to look right at me. Not in the eyes, anyway. She looks like she hasn't smiled in days.

“Willow is safe.” She dusts some golden shimmer powder over my collarbone. “I’ll keep a close eye on her and make sure she’s okay.”

There’s something in the way she says it that has me leaning back. “Bam...?”

She avoids eye contact and dusts the shimmer to my other shoulder.

My worst fears are starting to materialize right in front of me. “I’m... I’m not coming back, am I?”

Demyen’s right-hand woman pauses mid-stroke. For the first time since I’ve been here, I actually think she might not be on the same page as her boss. The way her sadness flickers into anger, and then something that reminds me of rage...

But then she blinks and shutters it all behind her typical mask of professionalism.

“I know—” I decide it’s worth trying for her help, anyway. If there’s a shred of her on my side, maybe there’s hope. At least, hope for Willow. “I know you’re loyal to him. I can’t ask you to betray him, and I know that telling me things is an act of betrayal in his eyes.”

Bambi’s jaw sets for a moment. At least she spares me a quick glance.

“But... if anything looks like...if he seems like he’s going to hurt Willow... can you get her out?”

This yanks her gaze to mine. “I swear it.” No hesitation. She sighs and her face falls. “Honestly, though, I don’t see that ever being a problem. Yeah, he’s being a complete asshole, but he’s in a lot of pain—”

I actually snort. I don’t mean to, but it flies out without warning. “Demyen? In pain? Right.”

She wouldn’t look me in the eye before, but now, Bambi won’t let me look away. “People hurt in many different ways for many different reasons, Clara. Don’t be so selfish to assume you’re the only one in misery.”

I...

Don't know what to say to that.

It honestly never occurred to me that Demyen could be hurting as much as I am. Or that he had anything to feel hurt over.

But before I can even open my mouth to ask what's really going on, Bambi sighs and flicks her brush to one side. "In any case, you have my word. Pavel and I will always make sure Willow is safe and sound."

At least that's taken care of. I hope. "Thank you." I manage to muster up a tiny smile.

Someone knocks at the door. Bambi throws a quick glance over her shoulder, then stands behind me and runs her fingers through my hair to loosen the curls and tousle them into sensual waves.

She wraps her arms around me in a warm hug from behind. "I'm so sorry, Clara," she whispers. For the first time since... well, *ever*, I hear her voice catch. "There's nothing I can do."

I'm right—this is it. I'm not coming back.

Bambi is saying goodbye.

I reach up to give her hand a squeeze and force myself to smile through my tears. "It's okay. I know."

Another knock. We both jump a little at the sound. She grabs her phone from the vanity counter and checks it for messages—probably from Demyen—then looks at me through the mirror.

I pretend to not see her slip her phone into the clutch that came with this dress.

The knocking grows impatient, and Bambi snaps into her usual self. "We know! Shut the hell up! Or do you want me to drop a hot iron on her and turn this into an ER trip?"

No more knocking. I'd laugh if I could feel an ounce of happiness right now, but no such luck.

Bambi takes my hands and helps me to my feet. She holds me there for a moment, searching my face for something. I dare to

wonder if it's forgiveness she wants—and if so, I've already given it to her.

“Well, you know what to do,” she mutters as she squeezes my fingers.

“I wish I did.”

“Yeah.” She sighs and nods before stepping away. “Me, too.”

She opens the door to let me out. Demyen is nowhere to be seen. He's probably already in the car, waiting for his guards to escort me to whatever luxury showboat he's chosen for the evening.

My hearse, basically.

I quickly turn to Bambi before the door closes. “Please, Willow—”

“I promise, Clara.” She reaches for my hand and squeezes it. “With my life.”

CLARA

I'm half-right: Demyen is near the car, not in it, as his men lead me to the driveway. He's pacing back and forth, glancing at his screen every other second, running a hand through his hair before he seems to remember we're going somewhere nice. Then he subconsciously smooths it back into place, but nothing can help the few stray strands now falling into his face.

He's so tragically beautiful.

My avenging angel.

My king of the underworld.

My dream-turned-nightmare.

I feel my legs start to give out on me. *No*—I'm going to get through this. I'm going to power through whatever decadent torture he's whipped up for me and I'm going to show him I'm no longer the terrified, helpless victim he first dragged into this mess.

Demyen glances up at us. Then does a double-take, his eyes lingering on me. I feel him scan me head to toe and I have to look away before the heated appreciation in them tears things from deep within my chest I don't want pulled out.

When I'm close enough, he reaches for me, but I flinch. I can't help it. I'm not scared of him the same way I've been scared of Martin or my father... but I *am* still scared of him.

I could at least trust them to hurt me.

I can't trust him. Period.

Demyen frowns. Something behind the pain in my chest flickers to life, but I'm quick to snuff it out. I can't afford to let a little thing like hope weaken the walls I've built around me.

He opens the car door and ushers me inside. I don't read into the gesture; some people are just hardwired that way. It's a luxury SUV with plenty of space for me to slide far the fuck away from Demyen, which is exactly what I do the second I get in there.

I listen to the doors slam shut and find something fascinating enough to focus on... like, I don't know, the back stitching of the driver's seat... so I don't have to look at him, either.

We ride for a few moments in silence. We might get through this without another fight.

"When we get there," Demyen breaks the silence with his smooth voice, "you're to play the part of my perfect girlfriend."

I just continue to stare at the stitching and pretend like I don't hear him.

"This isn't a request."

"Nothing ever is." I barely hear myself talk; I don't know if he hears me.

But he pulls in a breath and shifts in his seat. Then, "You are to be nice, pleasant, and respectable. You are representing me and my estate. We have a lot riding on tonight and I need you to be cooperative. Don't cause trouble."

I can't help myself. My pain-turned-grief is now shifting into anger once more. I slide on the most seductively coy smile and slowly flutter my long lashes at him. "Oh, I wouldn't dream of it, Mr. Zakrevsky. I'm always happy to *escort* you... for the right price."

"How about Willow's safety?" He calmly plucks a piece of lint from his sleeve and flicks it away. "Is that a fair price?"

My stomach drops. So does the act. "You wouldn't."

Demyen meets my gaze with steely coldness. “Do not presume to know what I would and would not do, Ms. Everett. I’m a monster, remember?”

A lump suddenly forms in my throat. “No. You’re not.”

That glacial facade fractures for the briefest of moments. His face almost softens; he looks like he wants to say something else. Something different. But then it’s back in the blink of an eye.

“As usual, Ms. Everett, you’re wrong about that.”

I return to studying leather stitching and pray that offering my life to Demyen on a silver platter is enough to keep my daughter safe. He doesn’t even need to ask the question, not really.

I’d give anything for my girl.



The second he opens the car door, I feel like I’m gonna puke my guts out.

It’s all an act. I know it is.

That doesn’t make it any easier when he steps out ahead of me, plasters on a brilliant smile, then offers me his hand to help me out like the doting boyfriend he’s pretending to be.

All of this would have been so much easier to endure a month ago.

Back when I didn’t know who he was behind the name, behind the glamor and the charm, behind the mask he wears within his own world.

Back when I didn’t have the memory of his arms around me, his lips on my skin, permanently seared like a brand I don’t want to get rid of but can’t stand to see.

Or the whispers caressing my ears, reminding me that he’ll never let me go.

I am his, and he is mine.

That's what we're supposed to make everyone believe—and as we walk under the golden statue of the Goddess of Fortune, Lady Luck, whatever she's called, I feel like I need all the luck in the world to pull this charade off.

Men in white tuxedos greet us in the foyer and immediately lead us away from the main floor to a quieter, more private hall. A few turns later, with some stiffened support from Demyen's arm as I navigate in these stupid stiletto heels, we're led into an immense ballroom with crystal chandeliers and gilded columns.

It's... a cocktail party.

All this, for a cocktail party?

Demyen takes my hand in his and wraps his other arm around the small of my back. The gesture is intimate. Borderline affectionate.

And entirely fake, I have to remind myself.

The room is full of what looks to be foreign dignitaries and beautiful women—Demyen's escorts, probably—all talking and sipping on expensive champagne while not-so-discreetly staring at each other.

Well, more like, the men keep staring at the women. And the women either don't notice or they don't care.

"Stay with me," Demyen mutters in my ear. He squeezes my hip to get his point across. "Don't leave my side. For anything. Understood?"

I want to break his fingers just so he'll stop touching me. "Of course, Mr. Zakrevsky."

He very much looks like he wants to glare at me. But he maintains his "loving boyfriend" act and presses a kiss to my brow. "Good girl."

Fuck.

You.

A waiter circulates the section we're casually strolling through and offers us flutes of champagne, which I automatically turn

down the same time Demyen accepts them.

When he arches a brow at me, obviously wanting an explanation, I muster up a small, fake laugh. “I’m having a hard time balancing on these heels sober!”

Demyen seems to accept that plausible reason, so he takes only one flute for himself. Then he knocks it back in a single gulp and sets the empty flute on the tray.

The waiter pretends to not judge him and silently walks away.

I find that interesting. “Nervous?” I sweetly ask.

Demyen scowls. “No.”

“You seem tense.”

“I’m fine.”

Now that I’m genuinely looking at him—like, really taking a moment to study him...

He does not seem “fine” at all. That vein in his jaw keeps ticking whenever he forgets he’s supposed to be smiling. His eyes keep sliding back and forth like he’s scanning the room for faces he doesn’t want to see.

And it’s either my imagination or he’s holding me a bit closer and a bit tighter.

“Fuck,” he suddenly whispers.

I follow his frozen stare and almost blurt the same word, but much louder.

Dad and *Martin* are here.

Worse—they’ve spotted us.

CLARA

It's too late to run and hide, which I know because Demyen's hand on my back keeps me rooted in place when I do actually try to slip away and make a run for it. My only consolation is knowing he doesn't want to deal with this any more than I do.

"Detectives Everett, Patterson." Demyen greets them, oddly emphasizing the word "detective." Several faces glance our way, and even more of the foreign dignitaries take very obvious steps away from us as they nervously eye my father and ex.

Martin scans me up and down, pissed as hell. Unlike Demyen, who can contain his rage behind a mask of civility and a small tic in his jaw, Martin turns beet red and flustered almost instantly.

"Clara! What the hell are you doing here?" he spits, casting his glare between me and Demyen.

For once, Demyen doesn't interject to answer for me. Is it a test of my loyalty to my own word? If so, I intend to pass with flying colors. So I smile demurely, lay a gentle hand on Demyen's chest, and keep my voice soft. "Demyen thought it would be wonderful to have an evening out. Isn't that right, baby?"

Demyen manages a smile and tilts his head in a slight shrug. "Seemed like a good idea for a weekend. Get away for a little bit, take a break from parental duties." He brightens his smile a bit more and focuses on Dad. "You have such a wonderful granddaughter."

He may be feeling tense, but he's also ready for a fight. Those words might as well be his fists. Martin sputters with rage while Dad tries to keep the peace with a calming hand to his partner's shoulder and a politically placating smile to Demyen.

"That she is," Dad agrees.

As if he would fucking know—he's barely given her the time of day, let alone spent enough of it to get to know her.

Tears threaten to sting my eyes. I'm realizing right now, at the worst possible moment, that Demyen has spent more time and actual care with Willow than her father and grandfather *combined*.

And yet here we are. Pretending like it hasn't all gone to shit.

Dad skims my appearance and frowns. "Really, Clara, is that dress appropriate?"

"It's as appropriate as your attendance here, detectives," Demyen quips. He manages a tight smile, grabs another champagne flute that he knocks back like a shot, and pulls me away from the increasingly uncomfortable conversation.

"Thank you," I mutter to him once we're well out of earshot.

"Fucking idiots," is his only reply.

This does seem like a strange event for either of them to be attending. Dad's never been much for social events—he'd only ever go to dinners if he was ordered to by superiors or it benefitted his career with LVPD.

And Martin? Please. I'm shocked he owns anything other than the standard-issue detective suit he's been struggling to fit into recently. My guess is, he's currently wearing a rental.

Which further begs the question: *Why?*

"What are they doing here?" I ask Demyen, careful to keep my voice lower than a whisper.

He shakes his head, not once looking away from the crowd. "Leave it alone, Clara."

I'd argue with him if it weren't for the clear warning in his tone. It's not something he's throwing at me just for shits and

giggles—he’s really warning me to mind my own business.

And again, that grip around my waist grows a bit tighter. Almost as if he’s afraid if he loosens, he’ll lose me in the crowd.

Something is definitely wrong.

We wander through the ballroom for a while longer, leaving the pleasantries and introductions to Demyen while I smile and laugh and compliment our way through the crowd. One man reaches out to touch the ends of my hair and says something about “excellent stock,” to which Demyen responds by easing me away and shooting him a look. Not a glare, but a warning.

“Ah, is she yours?” the man asks, nonplussed.

“Exclusively.” Demyen keeps himself calm, but again—I hear that warning in his voice.

And again, my stupid fucking heart that will never learn skips a beat and smiles up at him, hopeful.

“Well, do let me know if you’re ever in the market.” The man winks at me even though he’s addressing Demyen. “Such an exquisite beauty. She’ll make you a very wealthy man.”

I don’t know what the hell he’s talking about, but I’m getting a very bad vibe from him. And it seems like Demyen does, too, because his smile is tight and his nod even tighter. When he pulls me away, he practically carries me by my arms.

“This was a bad fucking idea,” he mutters to himself. Once we’re away from the strange gentleman and his demure entourage, Demyen looks at me. “We need to leave. Now.”

“But we just got here.” Not that I’m arguing the notion; I’m more than happy to leave this strange gathering and go back to my windowless room next to Willow. I just can’t put my finger on what’s going on. Why this feels so *wrong*.

Or why Demyen is acting like coming to this party was the worst idea he’s ever had.

“Don’t argue with me.” He plasters on his best smile but grumbles through gritted teeth while simultaneously ushering me to the far end of the ballroom.

“I’m not—”

“Mr. Zakrevsky.”

A pair of men in all-black tuxedos casually cut us off before we reach what looks like a back exit. They smell like expensive cologne and regard Demyen with a combination of respect and forced civility. Like they don’t want to piss him off, but they’re also in no mood to argue.

“Mr. Watanabe wants to speak with you.”

“He insists,” the second man quickly adds.

Watanabe? I know that name. Where do I know it from?

Watanabe...

Wait. Raizo.

Raizo Watanabe.

Shit.

These men are Yakuza. They have to be. They’re Yakuza, intercepting Demyen, and Dad’s right over there...

The feeling that something’s not right has just turned into a blaring alarm complete with bright flashing lights and a deafening siren.

Demyen clenches his jaw as he thinks it over. Then he turns to me and practically grabs my chin to make me look him in the eyes. “Don’t move. Don’t move from this exact fucking spot. Do you understand?”

I nod. I feel like I’m being the world’s biggest idiot by trusting him yet again, but here we are and here I am. Nodding and listening to the part of me that “knows” he’s gonna do right by us. He’s gonna protect me.

Hopefully.

Maybe.

“I’ll be right here,” I promise him. There’s a lounge chair for me to sit on, so I do. It does seem to ease a small bit of his tension, because he lets out a sigh and nods to the men.

Once they leave, I start praying that no one approaches me. *Leave me alone, world.* I'm no one, I'm not here. I'm not worth anyone's curiosity.

God or Lady Luck or whoever seems to be hearing me, because for the most part, I am left entirely unbothered. One or two waiters swing by to offer me champagne, but I graciously thank them and shake my head.

I don't know where Dad's gone off to and I don't feel like finding out. For one, I don't want to gamble with Demyen's good side by immediately breaking my promise, and his trust, by leaving this exact spot.

But also, I just straight-up don't want to know why Dad is here. He's definitely not undercover, but he's also obviously not everyone's friend, either. And since I don't see anyone else from LVPD here—as far as I can tell—it means he's here in an unofficial capacity.

But doing what?

Nope, I don't want to know. I don't *need* to know.

What I do need to know is where the nearest restroom is.

I've been ignoring the growing pressure in my bladder since we got here, mainly because I had a lot more on my mind and a man's iron grip on me adhering me to his side. But now that I'm alone, sitting down, and somewhat relaxed, my body is urging me to go find a bathroom quickly and rush back here before Demyen returns.

I glance around to make sure he's still gone before I duck toward that same back exit he'd been gunning us for. The doors open up into another quiet hallway, this one a bit smaller and clearly designed to be a restroom area for guests to powder their nose in.

Thank God. This will be the fastest pee break I've ever—

A hand grabs my arm and yanks hard. Another hand clamps down over my mouth.

“You little slut.”

My blood runs cold.

Martin buries his face in the curve of my neck and inhales deeply. He hums his approval, then drags me back into the shadows where we both know no one will see us.

CLARA

“You little slut. You little fucking slut.”

“Get your hands off me!” I hiss, pulling away from him.

Martin grabs my arm again and uses the momentum to slam me up against the wall. “Shut the fuck up, or I’ll give you something to scream about.”

I freeze. He’s said that many times before.

He always follows through.

“You’ve been fucking around on me with that Zakrevsky bastard.” He grabs my chin and forces me to look at him. “Spreading your legs for the mob, huh?”

I try to pull away again, but he presses harder.

“Not a fucking chance, Clara.” Martin’s other hand wanders over my body. “It’s time you finally learn who you belong to.”

“Not... you...” I manage through clenched teeth.

He rubs a hand up my waist to my breast and squeezes hard. When he pinches my nipple between his thumb and forefinger, my whimper of pain makes him smile.

“See?” he says, as if I’m enjoying this with him. “I know what you need. A firm hand. A daily reminder of who owns you. That’s me, baby. Me and no one else.”

I shake my head as much as his hand will allow. “Never. Fuck off.”

The slap comes without warning. I hear the crack against my face before I feel the hot burn of the blow bloom across my cheek. The other side of my face smashes into the wall.

Martin yanks my dress up and shoves a hand between my legs to palm me. “This is mine, you selfish bitch. All mine. You got that?”

Stars explode in the corners of my vision. His voice blurs in my ears at times. But most of all, I feel him grabbing and squeezing me where I least want him. It’s bad enough he feels like he’s allowed to touch me there. It’s worse when he starts rubbing his fingers around and pressing into me.

“All. Fucking. Mine.” Martin grins and pulls his hand away, thank God. But then he licks each finger clean and grins. “God, I missed you, baby.”

“Keep missing me.” I spit at his feet. “I’m not going back with you.”

He hits me again, but this time, I’m prepared. I roll my head with the blow so it glances off—but it still hurts.

“You’re coming back with me. You’re coming home and I’m putting a ring on that finger and a baby in your belly.” Martin grabs my hair and pulls me close to his face. “Over and over again. By the time I’m done, no one—not even Zakrevsky—will want to touch you.”

I shudder. Not because I’m accepting that as my fate—but because it’s clear how much he actually believes that to be true. He genuinely intends on this life for me. Breeding stock. And, of course, picking up his messes and begging him for scraps just to feed his power hunger.

“Actually, you know what?” Martin chuckles as if he’s had the most brilliant idea. “Let’s start now.”

Oh, God, no...

Now would be the perfect time for someone, *anyone*, to stumble upon us. But he chose to ambush me here for a reason: it’s dark and quiet and well-removed from the rest of the party.

Martin yanks up the skirt of my dress again. The fabric tears and beads scatter on the carpet. His face contorts into an ugly, greedy grin when he sees how much easier it is to push my legs apart.

And then it contorts into furious pain when I snap my knees shut and kick him in the groin.

He doubles over, and I use that to my advantage, whipping my knee up to connect with his chin. Martin's head snaps back with a strangled cry through clenched teeth. I hope to God he bit his tongue clean off.

Blood and spittle trickle from his lips. Before he has a chance to rebound, I plant both feet against his chest and shove.

I don't consider myself to be particularly strong. Lord knows I could benefit from joining a gym.

But something inside me is powering every fiber of muscle. Something that tastes like rage makes me give one more swift kick to Martin's face before I run away to find Demyen.

Something deep, deep down is savoring the way that, this time, it's Martin gasping for air and wondering how he ended up there on the floor.

How do you like that, motherfucker?

I don't allow myself to linger any longer, even if it feels incredible to be the one on top for once. If I can't find Demyen in the next five minutes, I'm ordering an Uber, grabbing Willow, and getting us the hell out of Vegas.

I follow the hallway to circle around the ballroom—I don't want or need to run into Raizo's men. I don't care what business he has with Demyen, I just don't trust him.

And, truth be told, I'm having a hard time trusting Demyen right now, too.

I'm almost to the double doors that lead to the side lobby of the casino when a door to my left opens.

"Clara."

Fuck. I can't win.

Dad clears his throat and gestures for me to follow him. “We need to talk.”

“But—”

“*Now.*”

CLARA

“I really need to go,” I plead.

“No shit.” He leads me into what looks like a small lounge room with doors that must lead to the men’s restroom. “What the hell are you doing here?”

Time to lie. “I’m... Demyen’s date.”

Lie better than that.

Dad narrows his eyes. “Bullshit. That man doesn’t even hire his own escorts for events like this.”

I shrug. There’s a lot about Demyen I can’t begin to explain, much less figure out. “I don’t know what to tell you. I’m his date, and I’m just waiting for him to get back from a meeting.”

“A ‘meeting.’” Dad scoffs and shakes his head. “Right.”

He sits down on one of the leather loveseats and stretches his limbs out like he lives there. But that’s always been his way: making himself at home wherever he doesn’t belong.

I don’t know what he wants to talk to me about. But as I look at him, I get this nagging feeling that this time, I’m the one who should be leading the conversation.

“I’m surprised to see you here, Dad. Official police business?”

He chuckles, genuinely, like it’s a funny joke I’m not in on. “Something like that.”

“Explains why Martin is here.”

Dad shifts his hard glare to me again. “You need to stop tormenting that man. Give him a chance.”

I am not riding this godforsaken Ferris wheel with him. “It’s over between us. It should have been over years ago. And *you* should have stood by me this whole time instead of—”

“Of what? Supporting my partner?” Dad throws his hands in the air, exasperated. “What do you want me to do?”

I focus my attention on fishing for a tissue in my handbag to dab at the tears stinging my eyes. I’m shaking, but not from fear. Maybe a little. But mostly, I’m shaking with adrenaline at realizing that now, here, we’re about to have the conversation we should have had years ago.

My eyes land on Bambi’s phone.

And I get an insane idea.

“I want you to kick Martin to the curb and actually be a loving, supportive father and grandfather to your own fucking family.” I snuffle and pretend to struggle with the cap of my lipstick. In reality, I’m swiping the phone screen so it starts recording.

With any luck, it will save whatever happens in here to Bambi’s cloud storage.

“Watch your tone with me, young lady.”

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

Dad stills. For an unexpected second, he actually looks regretful. “Clar-bear...”

I snap the top latch of the purse shut but leave the zipper open. “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?”

He freezes. Then he laughs, but it’s uncomfortable to say the least. “What are you talking about?”

“I think you know.” I’m gripping the edges of the small bag so hard, I’m pretty sure my knuckles are turning white. Whatever

I need to do to hide the fact that my fingers are trembling and my nerves are beyond shot. I know what this man, my own father, is capable of.

Dad fakes a chuckle and shakes his head. “Enjoying the free champagne a little too much, huh?”

“Michael Little was poisoned.”

His face falls. Those cold eyes focus on me, and I’m suddenly glad I decided to remain standing near the door. “Michael Little was shot.”

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

“And you know this how?”

“I don’t.” I slowly tilt my head to one side and return his stare. “You just told me.”

It’s a long shot that my bluff will pull through. Dad didn’t actually say anything, but he doesn’t need to know that. All he needs is a strong dose of confusion with a side of self-consciousness.

“I didn’t...” Dad starts to protest, then stops. His glare softens and then, finally, he relaxes back in his seat with a heavy sigh. “Shit. I didn’t think it would ever get out.”

Oh. My. God.

This is it.

This is the confession we need.

I don’t breathe a word. I don’t want to risk breaking the spell that’s clearly settled over him, compelling him to talk. Maybe he’s the one who drank too much free champagne. Or maybe he’s been carrying this for so long that he just can’t do it anymore.

“I didn’t poison him.” Dad levels his gaze at me again, but there’s none of the deathly chill like before. “I swear it, Clاربear. I want—no, I *need* you to know that. I know how much he meant to you.”

I try not to frown. I can’t tell if he’s lying. “But you came home early that day. And then he came over for coffee...”

“Yeah. To off *me*.”

I suck in a breath.

... *What?*

Dad must see that I’m thrown, because he musters a tiny, wry smile and nods again. “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 me having some marital problems and I guess he decided killing me was better.”

““Marital problems.”” My snorted laugh comes out completely unbidden. “You mean he found out you were beating the shit out of her.”

“Clara—”

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

He concedes without argument. Damn, he *must* be drunk. “You’re right. I fucked up. A lot. And Mikey found out and, well, 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—”

Dad suddenly smiles at me. Like, genuinely smiles. It’s fucking creepy. “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*.”

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

He laughs. Again, it’s genuine. And again, it’s unsettling because of how genuine it is. “An eight-year-old committing murder by poison? I have seen some twisted shit in my career. But you, honey? Please.”

“I could’ve. I had the book.”

“That damn book.” He scoffs and shakes his head. “It was his first, did you know that? Got it at one of those school book fairs 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.”

I slowly settle onto the far end of the loveseat, right on the edge of the armrest. The more Dad feels comfortable sharing with me, the more he’ll open up. He’s not even looking at me, just staring off into space and reminiscing.

“Ah, Mikey.” Dad rubs a hand over his jaw. “I miss him. Really, I do. He was a nosy motherfucker, but he had twice as many brains as that dumbass Martin. And sad thing is, that’s what did him in.”

I keep my voice soft and gentle, like I’m on his side. “What do you mean?”

Dad looks at me. “I let him give you that book because it was fun, harmless shit, and he loved you like you really were his niece. I never let you garden, of course. Too much of a mess, too expensive, and I didn’t want shit growing all over my lawn. But you begged, and pleaded, and begged some more. So Mike started his own little garden for whenever you visited him. Don’t you remember?”

No, I don’t—well, vaguely. It’s not like I went over to Uncle Mike’s on a regular basis. But as I try to remember anything Dad’s talking about, I do have very faint images in my mind of going over for dinner. Mom carrying a casserole dish, Dad stubbing out a cigarette on the driveway.

And Uncle Mike swinging me into his arms and showing me his new hanging planter.

“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?*”

I close my eyes and swallow back a small lump growing in my throat. *Poor Uncle Mike.* “He grew the poison for you.”

Dad nods. “That’s what I figured. Or he just liked how it looked and got the idea later on. Meant to kill me, make it look like a heart attack. But the mugs got switched and he either forgot which one or didn’t notice. Fuck if I know.”

My head is reeling with all this... this... I can’t call it “bullshit” because there does exist the weirdest possibility that Dad is actually telling the truth. That Uncle Mike fell victim to his own murder plot.

“So why cover it up? You didn’t kill him.”

“Didn’t I?” Dad laughs again. “Fuck, that’s the irony of it. Who would believe Michael Little ‘accidentally’ drank his own poison? 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.”

I lean my head back against the wall. “And they’d find out you were on the take. And abusing your family.”

He shoots me a guilty glare. “Don’t say that word, honey. I love you. And I loved your mother.”

“Right.”

“The fact that Tolya Zakrevsky happened to show up out of nowhere? It was like the universe just wanted me to get away without breaking a sweat.”

I stiffen. There’s a nasty, greedy gleam in Dad’s eyes. “What do you have against the Zakrevskys? You *knew* he was innocent and you threw him under the bus anyway.”

“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. The old man, Oleg—he knew how to play by the rules. But Tolya? He was a wild card. He was out of control.”

“So you made sure he stayed out of the picture.” My stomach turns. I feel sick.

“It wasn’t part of the original plan, but yes. Everything worked out beautifully. Mikey’s report was never filed, he killed

himself, and stupid fucking Tolya just happened to show up at that warehouse and *fuck*, if I didn't panic for a hot second—”

“Wait.” I'm officially going to throw up. “You were there?”

Dad smiles at me like I'm the sweetest, stupidest thing on the planet. “Oh, honey. Of course I was. I had to make sure everything went smoothly.”

I'm glad I'm sitting on the armrest. I might drop to the floor if I wasn't.

Dad was there? I don't remember him being there. I never did, not even when he “helped” me remember for the court. Tolya was there. So was Uncle Mike.

But...

Who kidnapped me?

“It was you.” I've stopped shaking. Now, I'm just numb. “You were the one who kidnapped me.”

“Better me than some stranger. Some *actual* kidnapper.”

Dad is trying to play this whole revelation off like it makes the most sense out of all his insanity. He smiles at me, and even has the balls to reach over and pat my hand.

“You were always safe, Clar-bear. I just needed it to look like a kidnapping so Mike would show up at the warehouse—”

“So you could kill him.”

He nods. “I called him, told him I saw you get stuffed in a trunk and followed you to the warehouse. You were supposed to stay asleep through it all and wake up safe at home in your bed. All I needed was for Mike to show up so I could shoot him, plant enough evidence to lead the kidnapping his way, and take you home.”

I swallow back the bile creeping up my throat. “But Tolya was there. He tried to save me.”

Dad barks out a laugh. “Imagine that! A Zakrevsky, playing hero! I told you, he was out of control. Didn't know when to keep his nose out of other people's business. He tried tackling

me and saving Mike, too, but man, does that kid have the worst luck.”

“He didn’t shoot Michael Little, did he?”

“Not intentionally. Gun went off in our hands. Scared him shitless, too. If I didn’t know any better, I would have guessed that was his first kill.”

“So...” I close my eyes and try to breathe through the nausea. “You let him take the fall.”

Dad sobers up a bit and returns to staring at whatever on the wall. “I did what I had to do. The collapse of the Zakrevsky empire would’ve meant the rise for so many others. New blood, new partnerships. New government in the streets. His kid brother was too young and Oleg... well, that man had his own problems.”

That’s the only spark of joy I feel right now: the knowledge that Dad’s best-laid plans ended up opening the doors for Demyen. My Demyen, who defied everyone and everything and now stands as a constant reminder of just how badly Dad fucked up.

I turn my attention back to my father.

“So... did you at least get what you wanted? Your ‘new blood’ and ‘new partnerships’?”

I ask it like I’m proud of him. Like I hope he did.

Dad considers me for a long, silent moment. My heart slams inside my ribcage.

“I did,” he finally says. “And now, I’m here, drinking his champagne and helping him sell his merchandise.”

That puzzles me. “But I thought you hated Demyen?”

He snorts. “Not Demyen, honey. Raizo. Raizo Watanabe. Yakuza. That’s who I work for.”

DEMYEN

Among the thousand other things I hate about Raizo is the fact that he loves the sound of his own voice.

I've been in the hotel suite-turned-office way too long. All he wanted to talk about was the evening's transactions so far, criticize my waitstaff, and remind me of how wealthy Clara's sale is going to make me.

It's all I could do not to spit in his face and tell him to go fuck himself. I don't need wealth—I already have plenty of that.

What I also don't need is a bloodbath in my hotel, which would undoubtedly happen if I told Raizo the truth: there's not going to be an auction for Clara. I don't care how many private bidders are willing to pony up every last dollar in their pocket.

Clara Everett is no longer for sale.

I don't know when I came to that decision. I want to say it was the moment I saw her emerge from the villa in that dress like a goddamn wet dream. Or when the asshole made a play for her in the ballroom and I realized I'd sooner break my own furniture over his head than let him lay a hand on her.

But if I'm going to be honest with myself, I don't know if I ever actually was going to sell her in the first place.

All talk, no action. Like a fucking amateur.

Like a man who can't admit when a woman's stolen something he never thought he had.

I plow through Raizo's guards without a second glance and make my way back to the ballroom. If Clara listened to me, she'll be right where I left her. And while she almost never listens to me, I still have this hope that she might actually shock me for once.

I sneak through the back hallway so I can get to her faster, snatch her away from these vultures, and get us the hell out of here. Let whatever happens while I'm gone, happen. I'll wash my hands of it all later.

But before I reach the double doors, I see movement in the far corner near a dead end.

"You... mother... fucker..."

I pause. "Martin. You look..."

He looks like his ass got handed to him. He stumbles out of the shadows, blood trickling from one lip. "Keep your fucking hands off my woman."

"She's not your woman. Take the loss and move on."

Martin laughs and shakes his head, wiping the bloody spittle from his chin. "Not *my* loss. I made sure of that."

Ice shoots through my veins. "Where is she?"

"She's just having a little chat with her daddy, that's all." Martin sniffs back another trickle of blood. "Once he's done with her, we'll be a happy little family again. And you can go back to fucking right the hell off. Until I arrest you for something, of course. I'll figure something out."

Once he's done with her...

Fuck.

I have to find Clara.

I have to find Clara and get her the hell away from these men.

I don't spare Martin another second of my time. He's not worth it. But when I spin on my heels to go find her, his hand shoots out and grabs my arm, yanking me back.

My fist is the first thing to follow.

Martin's head snaps back with the blow, and *fuck* does that give me a rush. I've wanted to beat him to a pulp since the moment we met, and now, there's no one around here to stop me.

So I don't stop.

At all.

"Where the fuck is she?" I demand between punches. "Where. The. Fuck. Is. She?" His head repeatedly snapping back into the floor is music to my ears.

He manages to wriggle me off of me, spraying blood in every direction as he spits, "Back the fuck off, Zakrevsky! She's mine!"

I actually laugh in his face because my god, is he delusional. "What part of 'no' do you not understand?"

"You kidnapped her! You stole her from me!"

"And there isn't a thing you could do to stop me. Does that keep you up at night, friend? Do you wonder why it was so *easy* for her to turn her back on you?"

Martin's glare darkens. "Shut your fucking mouth."

I scoff. "That's why you're so hellbent on keeping her, isn't it? You couldn't bring a woman to orgasm with a roadmap. If Clara won't fuck you, who will?"

The tackle comes without surprise. Martin dives for my stomach to throw me off my feet, but I see it coming from a mile away in the hatred glinting in his eyes.

Which is exactly what I want. A man who acts in his fury is a man who doesn't think his moves through.

I grab him around his back when he lunges for my middle, and we roll onto the floor together, a tangle of flying fists and scything elbows. Images of Willow come to mind, and the thought of him near her—let alone scaring her—spirals me into a mission to break his fucking jaw. Or arm.

Hell, when I'm done with him, it'll be easier to count the bones I *didn't* break.

“You better hope you didn’t get her pregnant,” Martin wheezes as he tries to wrestle me into a headlock. “Or I’ll kill her. I’ll kill her and your bastard inside her.”

Now, I’m the one not thinking straight. I don’t even know where the image in my head comes from, but the thought of Clara pregnant with my child fills me with something I never thought I’d feel. Ever.

And he wants to take that away from me?

Fuck.

That.

I’m so blinded by the influx of anger that I don’t see him grab a stone vase from a nearby end table.

And I definitely don’t see him swing it at me.

It’s the sound of my ribs cracking that registers first. The pain shoots through me a second later.

He brings the vase down a second time on my head and I drop to the floor. Everything goes black, then fades back in, then fades back out again.

I’m not going down like this.

I’m not letting him win.

I’m not going to let him take Clara and Willow and... fuck. I can’t keep my eyes open.

By sheer force of will, I manage to roll onto my back out of the way from one of his kicks. It throws him off-balance, but he only chuckles and regards me from where he stands.

“Tough luck, Zakrevsky.” Martin wipes his mouth and sniffs. “I’ll tell Clara you said hi.”

He moves to step over me.

Big mistake.

It’s all I need to grab his ankle, twist his leg into my arms, and yank him to the ground with every ounce of strength I can muster. The sound of his head cracking on the carpet is

beautiful; the fact that he goes limp almost instantly is a huge relief.

I pull myself to my feet and he groans. In one sense, it's a pity he's not dead yet. In another, it means I get to do *this*.

I kick him a few times just to make us even. Pain shoots through my side when I do, but it's nothing compared to the pure rage and adrenaline pumping through my veins.

"Arrest me now, motherfucker."

I give him one more wingtip to the solar plexus. Then I grab my suit jacket and stumble off to find Clara. She's got to be around here, somewhere, and I need to find her before anyone else does.

Before *Raizo* does.



I stumble into one of the men's restrooms to splash cold water on my face and clean up a bit. I need the shock to clear my head—as much as I hate to admit it, Martin clocked me good. For all I know, I walked right past Clara in this fucking daze.

"He didn't shoot Michael Little. Did he?"

I freeze. It's faint, but I hear it. Clara's voice.

"Not intentionally."

Greg. He's with her. Martin was telling the truth.

Shit.

I inch closer to the door that opens into a private smoking lounge, but I don't open it. From what it sounds like, they're talking about Tolya and I need to fucking know what Greg Everett did, or plans on doing, or... *fuck*, my head hurts so fucking bad.

"Gun went off in our hands. Scared him shitless, too. If I didn't know any better, I would have guessed that was his first kill."

"So..." Clara sighs. I half-expect her to act shocked, or enraged, but she doesn't. She sounds pretty apathetic, actually.

“You let him take the fall.”

“Pretty much. The collapse of the Zakrevsky empire would mean the rise for so many others. New blood, new partnerships. New government in the streets. His kid brother was too young and Oleg... well, that man had his own problems.”

My hands ball into fists.

What the fuck?

It's him. It's been him this whole fucking time. Greg Everett and his underhanded, backstabbing method of getting whatever the fuck he wants.

The urge to burst through this door and throttle him is strong.

But the throbbing against my skull is stronger.

“So... did you at least get what you wanted? Your ‘new blood’ and ‘new partnerships’?”

Clara sounds... hopeful? Like she actually wants him to say yes. Like she *wants* that for him.

A new sort of pain lances through me. Then fury. I stumble back, away from the door, just so I don't topple in and throttle her, too.

Of fucking course. She's been playing me this whole time. Pretending to be a victim when in reality, she's Daddy's Little Girl.

She'll do anything to make him happy.

She'll do *anyone* to make him happy.

Including me.

Fine. Fuck this. Fuck her. Fuck all of them.

I grab my phone and shoot Pavel a quick text. I'm leaving. I'm getting out of this shitshow and away from the Everetts and their fucking mind games.

And I'll drive, fly, *swim* as far and as long as I need to go until the pain in my chest that has nothing to do with broken ribs finally goes away.

CLARA

I try not to trip over my own stammering tongue. “What? Why... the Yakuza?”

“They’re not all that bad.” Dad absentmindedly scratches his neck. “You know, for a second, I thought your mother was screwing around with one of them.” He laughs. “But that would have been fucking insane. My wife? A cop’s wife? Sleeping around with the Yakuza?”

I pray to God that my face doesn’t give away the fact that pieces are swiftly falling into place inside my mind.

Mom.

Raizo.

All those secret visits to our home while Dad was away.

“It wouldn’t be the first or only time I was wrong.” Dad chuckles. “I mean, look at Demyen. I was so sure—we both were, Raizo and me—that the kid just wasn’t cut out for Bratva business. We didn’t need to lay a finger on him; all we had to do was bide our time through the court proceedings and wait for him to flounder.”

Demyen. I feel the corner of my mouth tug upward and it’s all I can do to press it back down. “It looks like that didn’t happen.”

Dad scoffs. “Right? Who knew the kid was so fucking resilient? Not only did he hold his shit together, he ended up becoming the most powerful *pakhan* that Bratva’s ever had. Go fuckin’ figure.”

Pride swells in my chest. *My Demyen.*

“Anyway.” He shrugs and slowly rocks up onto his feet. “We’ve wasted enough time here. Part of my deal with Raizo is to make sure everything goes smoothly without any trouble. You know, overzealous bidders and all that.”

“And the other part?” *Look interested. Sound interested. Pretend like hell you’re on his side.*

Dad hesitates. When he smiles at me, it almost seems a little... sad. “I didn’t get into the business because I wanted to. Just so you know. Your mom got sick, and then you got it, too... I needed money. And I had what they wanted to buy.”

I vaguely remember a time when I was little that Mom and I both contracted pneumonia. We were miserable. I thought I was dying. It was actually one of the few good memories I have of my father. He was caring, worried, attentive...

I almost didn’t recognize him.

I frown. “What did you sell?”

He looks me over and gently rubs the tops of my arms. “I really wish you’d worn something more appropriate, Clarbear. The wrong kind of men will get the wrong idea.”

I try not to wrench away from him so obviously; my side-step is as subtle as I can manage. “I’m fine, Dad. Really. I’m also a grown woman who can wear whatever I want—”

“Watch your tone with me, young lady.” He softens. “Sorry for snapping, baby girl. I’m just on edge tonight, and I worry about you. So does Martin! He was looking for you earlier—”

“Oh, he found me.” I can’t hold back the scoff. Or the eye roll. “Trust me, Dad. Please. Martin is not the man you want for a son-in-law. You said it yourself: he’s not even the best partner.”

Dad sighs. Then, like it’s a huge weight on his shoulders, he nods. “Fine. I’ll have a talk with him. Just... go easy, okay? Willow needs her father and you need a man’s support in your life.”

I super fucking don't, but I'm not about to argue with him. This is one of the first somewhat sane and peaceful conversations I've had with my father in ages. I still need to get the hell away from him, but I'm not about to break this tentative bubble of peace. He keeps switching topics and I know it's an avoidance tactic, one that he uses when he interrogates people. Like he said, it's all about control.

Plus, the fact that he thinks I need anyone or anything tells me that he doesn't know about my recent windfall.

Which means neither does Martin.

For the first time in over a week, relief settles into my veins.

And then quickly vanishes when I realize that Dad is working with Raizo—who is double-dealing behind Demyen's back. Knowing Dem, he's probably sniffed out the hints that something is wrong with everything going on here—but then again, maybe he doesn't see the full picture yet.

He seemed distracted in the car. And when we got here. And most of the night since.

Is he too distracted to see the danger surrounding him?

I need to find him. I need to leave this room, slip away from Dad, and find Demyen to warn him. Whatever is going on, it involves my father and Raizo and some sort of plot to bring Demyen down. If they banked on him failing in the wake of Tolya's imprisonment, there's no way they're happy with letting him rake in the bulk of Vegas' underworld's successes.

Dad holds his arm out to me, and I slip mine through his.

But then the latch of my clutch clicks open.

Bambi's phone falls out.

And it is, very clearly, recording every word we say.

I don't move. Neither does Dad. But I can see, in the corner of my eye, his face slowly contorting into a mask of anger.

“Clara.” His hand twists until he's gripping my arm. Hard. “What the fuck are you doing?”

For a second, I'm terrified. The little girl inside me cowers with fear in the shadow of her father's fury, ready to beg and plead and sob for him to not be angry. *I'll be good; I promise I'll be good...*

But then, suddenly, I'm not. Echoes of things Demyen used to tell me whisper in my mind, and I'm reminded that I am not, in fact, a helpless little girl.

I'm a full-grown woman.

A full-grown woman with a bone to pick.

I wrench my arm from Dad's grasp and quickly snatch the phone from the floor. "What does it look like I'm doing, Dad? I'm getting the truth from you and making sure the right people hear it."

Blood drains from his face. His anger waivers into fear, and then back into rage. "You... you little fucking bitch—"

"Watch your tone with me." I hold my hand up to stop him when he moves to grab me again. This time, I'm not scared of him. This time, I look him dead in the eyes. "I'm not your Clar-bear. I'm not your helpless little punching bag anymore."

Dad sidesteps my arm and grabs my hair from behind, yanking it back hard. "You are my daughter! And you will do whatever the *fuck I say!*"

Like with Martin, I know he means it.

And like with Martin, I no longer have a problem with fighting back.

I reach behind me and claw at his face, his neck, any part of him I can touch. When I get a good idea of how close he's standing behind me, I grab for his neck and squeeze. It does nothing. He even chuckles at my failure.

But then I figure out where his windpipe is and I jab my thumb into it.

Dad coughs and gags all at once, letting me go as he stumbles back. I spin around to face him, to glare at him, and to slap the shit out of his sputtering face. Once, twice—a backhand and a

bitch slap, just like he used to do to me whenever I talked back to him as a kid.

Tears sting my eyes. *Fuck*. I can't show weakness. I can't let him see me get emotional over this.

"Clara..." Dad coughs and slumps against the couch to regain his footing. "Baby, sweetie... I'm sorry."

What? He never apologizes to me. Not with words, anyway. "I don't have time for your mind games, Dad. Just... have a good night."

He grabs my arm again when I try to leave. "Clara. Let's start over. You're my little girl, and who knows? Maybe I underestimated you. Maybe—"

I bark out a laugh. "Maybe? Fucking hell, Dad! Wake the hell up. You're an abusive son of a bitch who'd rather throw his own daughter to the wolves than man up and be a father."

He frowns. "That's not fair. Now, you know I love you—"

I shake my head. "No. You don't. The sad thing is, I don't think you even know what love actually is. To you, it's possession and control and getting everything you want; fuck who it hurts. But that's not love, Dad." I sigh. I'm too exhausted for this conversation. Too weary in too many ways. "Love is putting aside what you want for someone else. Love is going to the ends of the earth to do right by them. Love is learning how to let go and move on so everyone can be happy, not just you."

Tears sting my eyes again.

I mean it. Every word. It's just too little, too late for Demyen and me. This is the worst time ever to tell him how I feel and I'll never get the chance to. I just have to find him and warn him about Raizo; my feelings will have to wait.

And he's made it painfully obvious he doesn't feel the same way about me, so it wouldn't make sense to go there, anyway.

"Yeah, well..." Dad sighs and reaches for me. I think he might actually be gentle this time, but I am wrong yet again. He

grabs me by my jaw and squeezes tight. “I’m your father, and that’s the end of this discussion. Understood?”

I don’t give him a response. I try to pull my head away, but he squeezes harder.

“I said, *Do you understand?*”

Still, not a word from me. I won’t give it to him.

But a wad of spit? I’m in the mood to give *many* of those.

The back of his hand cracks against the side of my face almost the same time my spit lands on his. For a dizzying second, I wonder if he gives Martin tutorials on how to hit a woman and it kind of makes me laugh.

He would. And Martin would eat that shit up.

The ground suddenly hits the back of my head. Dad must have shoved me while my head was still spinning, and now, he’s standing with one foot on my chest.

Like he owns me. Like he’s conquered me.

“You make me do this, Clar-bear.” His voice cracks with emotion. Tears actually form in the corners of his eyes. “Why do you make me do this? Why can’t you just do what I say?”

I say the only thing that comes to mind: “I’m sorry, Daddy.”

“Oh, baby girl...” Dad moves his foot off me and helps me to my feet. “Come here. Give me a hug.”

I’d rather hug a rattlesnake. But I do what he says and I let him wrap his treacherous arms around me.

And then, when he steps back, I grab his face and shove his head hard against the stone wall.

It’s not the blow that gets him—it’s the surprise. Surprise, and a small amount of fear, when he sees that I’m not stopping there. I twist my waist so I can hit up under his chin with my elbow, the back down with my other against the back of his neck as he crumples to the floor.

I may have been watching Demyen train with his men. Once or twice. I’ve just never been brave enough to try this shit out.

And now that I have—on my own father, no less—I don't know how I feel. Relieved? Scared of the repercussions?

I don't waste precious time to mull over my emotions; I just dash out of that room. Once I'm outside behind the building and it looks like I'm in the clear, I tap what might be the passcode to Bambi's phone and try to unlock it.

Lady Luck smiles on me this time. Whether by coincidence or a recent change, it's Willow's birthday.

I scroll through the contacts until I find Pavel, which actually takes less than half a second to do. He's right at the top in her priority contacts, so I tap his name and wait for it to ring.

And ring.

And ring.

Fuck.

"Hey, Pav, it's me." *You probably don't want to hear from me, but tough shit.* "Listen—I sent a recording to Bambi's cloud. Make sure she hears it. Please. Demyen, too, if you can get him to listen. It wasn't just my father in on it; it was Raizo, too. And they're planning something—"

I hear something scuffle a few yards away. Probably a stray cat. I hope.

"Anyway. It's all there. I don't know..." My voice suddenly catches. *Dammit, keep it together!* "I don't know if or when I'll be back, so please make sure this gets to everyone. Bambi, Dem, a judge, everyone. And please... tell Willow I love her."

I hang up before the sobs take over. I can't afford to lose myself in this rush of fear and panic and grief and just... everything. Everything, too much, all at once.

More scuffling. It's footsteps, and they kind of sound like Demyen.

But when I turn to greet him, a sharp pain blooms inside my head.

And everything goes dark.

CLARA

“Hey. Psst, hey. You awake?”

I groan. I try to blink, but that hurts.

A gentle hand touches my arm. “You really need to come out of it. Like, now.”

It’s a woman talking to me. Soft, hushed. She seems nice. I do my best to peel my eyelids open, then immediately squint in the light. “Ow. Where...?”

“In the garden. Or wherever, I don’t know. But you need to wake the fuck up.”

The urgency mixed with fear in her voice does the trick. I remember going outside and calling Pavel, then something hitting me in the head.

Someone, apparently.

I manage to blink my eyes open, finally, and sit up. Those same gentle hands help me, and I muster a smile at whoever this is sitting next to me on the low stone wall. “Thanks.”

She scrunches her face and eyes my appearance. “You look like you’ve been through hell.”

I almost laugh. “Yeah, well... just got back.”

Her cornflower blue eyes soften with pity. “Hate to break it to you, but I think you actually slid into a deeper circle.”

I look around the room to see what she means. We’re inside The Meridian’s atrium—I recognize the exotic flowers

Demyen pointed out to me the last time we were here. Back when we actually spoke to each other and shared our secrets with each other.

This time, he's not here. Instead, the place is filled with beautiful women in sparkling gowns and various forms of sensual evening dress, their hair all perfectly styled and makeup flawlessly applied. No one seems happy.

'What's going on?' I whisper my question just in case it's not as bad as my gut says it is.

My new companion sighs. "Fuck. You're not here willingly, are you?"

That's a weird question to ask. "Is anyone?"

Another woman slides into our conversation, her voice chipper even though her face is etched with worry. "Oh, you know how it goes. You try to make a livin', get arrested for it, cop strikes a deal with you. Suck him off, maybe let him bang you on the interrogation table, then go play dress-up for some high rollers at a club."

"And then, when it's auction time," adds my pseudo-friend, "we play nice and do our best to not get sold to a complete asshat."

I swallow the dry lump stuck in my throat. "'Sold'?"

They both frown at me. "Yeah," the second woman says. "Didn't you know?"

The first one sighs and looks at the other. "I don't think she's here on her own."

"Well, fuck. That sucks." She folds her arms around her waist. "I'm so sorry."

I can't wrap my mind around what's going on. It's throbbing a little too hard to make heads or tails of it, anyway. "I need to get out of here. I gotta go find..."

Ugh, fuck me. I'm just now realizing that the person who could and would actually get me out of here is the same guy I just cold-clocked in the face back in that lounge room.

“Everett. I need to find my dad, Greg Everett.”

The second woman, a stunning brunette beauty with track marks on the insides of her arms and signs of early aging creeping around her face, lofts a dark brow at me. “Everett? *Detective* Everett? He’s your father?”

I nod, then instantly regret it. *Ouch*. “Yeah. You know him?”

Both the blonde and brunette scoff and roll their eyes. But I can tell it’s not directed at me.

“Yeah, we know him. Fucked him, too. Or, well, I should say I sucked him and then he made me an offer I couldn’t refuse. Man is a beast between the legs and just as sloppy.”

Ew. I don’t need to hear this about my own father.

But the blonde who helped me nods her agreement. “Yeah, for me it was either face twelve-to-twenty behind bars, or get on my knees and beg him to sweep it all under the rug.” She side-eyes me. “Without words.”

Nausea blooms in my stomach.

“I guess he uses that as some sort of tryouts, ya know? Like, if you can suck his soul through his dick, he’ll save your ass from the judge and get you set up with a nice owner at auction.”

“Well, ‘nice’ isn’t the right word. More like, the least dickish. Some buyers actually do take care of their women, and I’m counting on landing one of those.”

Merchandise. Dad was talking about merchandise, about having something the Yakuza wanted to buy...

My stomach churns when I look around again.

Slaves is a better word. Dad had sex slaves to sell. An endless, endless supply.

“So, what’s your story?” Blondie nudges me with her elbow. “No judgment here, by the way. Not like we have the ground to talk. It’s okay if he made you ‘try out’—”

“What?” I whip my head around, damn the headache. “No! No. No, he...”

Fuck.

He was trying to get me out of here this whole time.

Murdering bastard that he is, Dad was still trying to do the right thing and get me out of here and away from these monsters.

I glance down at myself. I may be bruised and bloody, and my dress is torn, with bloody spatters all over it, but it's not as bad as it sounds. I'm actually...

Double fuck.

I'm dressed for sale. Which is what that weirdo at the cocktail party earlier must have meant when he called me "exquisite stock."

"Hey, you're lucky. Maybe." The brunette shrugs. "He might come looking for you. Most of us here don't have any families who will miss us. I sure as fuck don't. All I have is a love for heroin, a pissed-off dealer, and now, a Japanese pimp about to sell me to the highest bidder."

The way they're so... blasé? Calm? I can't put my finger on it. "Wait. Do you *want* this?"

She narrows her eyes at me. "No one 'wants' this. But we can't fight it, either. Where else are we gonna go? Back to the streets to get arrested again? Because sure as shit no one's gonna hire me and give me a job so I can go legit and have that white picket fence life." She snorts a derisive laugh and shakes her head. "This may come as a shock to you, princess, but some of us don't have lives. We're already dead. We're just waiting for the next stage of the underworld."

I look to the blue-eyed, golden-blond woman sitting next to me. She silently nods, but I see the tears glistening on her lashes.

And it's right now, in this godforsaken pit of hell, that I'm struck with the realization that yeah, my life has been shit since the day I was born. Yeah, I have a terrible father and a dead mother, an abusive ex and a capitulating whatever-he-is. I've been beaten within an inch of my life. I've been taken advantage of. I've been worn down to the very bone. I've had

my heart ripped from my chest and shattered into a million pieces only for it to be glued back together and shattered once more.

But.

But.

Goddammit.

I'm still alive.

I'm still fucking *alive*.

"I'm getting out of here." I quickly stand up and ignore the way my head spins. I'm alive, I'm not broken, and I'm not going to stick around to find out what the next stage of hell looks like.

But my dramatic escape plans are interrupted by the opening doors at the front of the atrium, followed quickly by a hush over the crowd of women in here. The doors close again, and a cluster of Japanese men in tailored suits walk toward the center of the room.

Raizo Watanabe.

He takes his place as the leader on the small bridge that arches over the room's manmade stream, bracing his hands on the railing like it's a podium. "Welcome, ladies. I assume you've all had a pleasant evening so far."

It all makes sense now: the glitz, the glam, the attentive servers and quiet "models" strolling around during the cocktail party. My father has been sourcing Raizo's slave trade with drug addicts and prostitutes. Homeless ones. Forgotten ones. Women who might actually *want* to be slaves if it means three square meals, decent clothing, and a roof over their heads.

The nausea punches me in the gut harder than before.

Oh, God. That's me.

I've been a slave to Martin. I didn't care what he did to me in the bedroom as long as it meant I had food, shelter, clothing... a life off the streets for my baby and me. I served him hand and foot in exchange for the meager scraps he'd give me.

And my father sold me to him. Maybe not with money, but all the same, he did.

Raizo smiles as he listens to the low murmur of women agreeing, some of them thanking him for the expensive champagne. “Now, I know this can be a very stressful event, but I promise you, as long as you continue to be the beautiful angels you are, no one will have any problems and soon—”

“Raizo!”

He stops. If he’s irritated by my interruption, he doesn’t show it. But he does turn to the side where I’m running up to the bridge.

“Raizo!” I only stop when his personal guards grab my arms. But then, to my surprise, he lifts his hand and signals for them to let me go.

“Clara!” He gives me a quick once-over, then frowns. “My God! What happened to you?”

For a moment, I forget where we are. I forget who I am, and who he is.

For a moment, I’m a little girl at home, and he’s my Uncle Raizo who brings me sweets from Japan and makes my mother laugh.

And it’s easy, oh so easy, to slip into those memories when he reaches out and gently grasps my shoulders just like he used to. “Clara. Who did this to you?” he asks. He’s genuinely concerned.

My heart twists. Tears fall from my eyes without warning.

“Dad. And Martin.” I take a deep breath to hold myself together. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, but there’s been a terrible mistake.”

“I’ll say there has.” Raizo looks pissed, but not at me. Whenever he looks at my face, there’s a gentleness I remember so well. He might actually help me out of this mess. His glare sharpens when he turns to his men. He snaps something in Japanese, but I recognize “Everett” and “Patterson.”

His men all nod, then a handful quickly leave. I don't know what's about to happen, but I can't imagine it's anything good.

"Clara, I am so sorry for this treatment." He gingerly touches a cut by my lip and sighs. "Had I known you were here, I would have had you escorted to my office immediately."

I sigh with relief at his compassion. Then—

Wait. What did he just say?

"Oh, I'm..." I look around the room. Maybe he misheard me, or misunderstood. "I'm not here for... this. I'm not part of this."

Raizo smiles and pats my arm. "You're right. These women are here for the general auction. But you, my beautiful Clara..." He tucks a stray strand of hair behind my ear. "You're our prized lot."

I still. Then slowly back away. "What?"

"He didn't tell you?" He clicks his tongue and shakes his head. "Demyen's had this whole thing arranged for such a long time now. Months, even, if I'm counting right. Though I've been counting so much money already, my numbers could be off."

He shares a chuckle with his men. Clearly, I don't find any of it funny.

So he sobers up and presses his palms together in front of his chest. Like he's imploring me to understand this insanity. "Listen to me, Clara. You are a wonderful, beautiful young lady and my God, do you look so much like your mother. So much that I was tempted to buy you for myself. My heart aches every time I see you because you remind me of her."

I hate how he says it like he means it. I hate knowing that he probably does.

Somehow, that just makes it worse.

"But you owe a debt. A life debt, to be specific. Demyen and Tolya agreed that this would be the best way for you to repay them for the life sentence you caused. And I agreed to ensure you'll go to the best possible bidder. Well..." He shrugs. "Best *paying* bidder."

Again, he chuckles with his men. And again, I find absolutely nothing hilarious about this.

He has to be lying. He has to be. Demyen brought me here, yeah, but he also seemed to have a change of... well, at least his mind, because he couldn't get us back out fast enough.

What's worse than hell?

I slowly close my eyes against the echoed memory. It wasn't Demyen who said that.

It was me.

He just took me up on my challenge.

"Don't you worry, Clara." Raizo smiles at me and pats my arm again. "No one will lay a finger on you until your auction begins. But..." He leans in close. "I suggest you go along with it. Because after the auction ends..."

He doesn't finish the thought.

And with that sudden, wicked gleam in his eyes, I really don't want him to.

Raizo turns back to the other women and smiles. "Now, ladies, you will be escorted out when it's your turn to be on the stage. Remember: be beautiful, be charming, and behave."

He claps his hands twice. Somewhere outside, in the halls, a gong rings out.

"Let the auction begin!"

DEMYEN

If I had it my way, I'd put this whiskey on an IV drip straight into my veins. As it is, I need both hands to bandage my chest, so I chug half the bottle down and let the burn settle in before I grab the roll of gauze.

I should probably just call the Bratva doctor to come take a look at this. But I'm in no mood to deal with people right now.

Truth be told, I'm in no mood to deal with *consciousness* right now. I'm hoping either the pain kills me or the whiskey knocks me the fuck out.

No such luck on either front.

Twenty minutes and twice as many curses later, I'm wrapped and bandaged and every bit as miserable as I was before I started the process.

I shuffle aimlessly down the pathway. But instead of going to my rooms for the night, I find myself wandering across the villa to where I'd had Clara and Willow moved to.

Clara. Fucking... *Clara*.

This is what I get for falling head over heels for a pair of guileless eyes and silken curls—I tumbled head over heels into the abyss.

She's back at the party with her daddy dearest while I'm here at home, *pretending* to be a daddy dearest to a kid I never asked for.

To be fair, the kid never asked for this shit, either.

Willow is sound asleep in her tiny room. I lean against the doorway, not wanting to wake her, but unable to leave. Unable—and unwilling. It's like standing here is somehow paying penance for the sins I've committed against her.

Shit. I'm a fucking asshole.

I don't deserve a child. I don't know how to treat one who's been nothing but perfect from the moment I met her.

I don't know what to do with Willow at all, really. I'm pretty sure her mother isn't coming back any time soon, but I'm definitely sure she shouldn't be going to Martin fucking Patterson.

I can't keep her for myself, though. No matter how much I actually want to.

In a perfect world, this would be easy. I would keep Willow safe and sound here in my home, spoiling her with her heart's desires and mapping the stars through the ceiling of her solarium bedroom.

Hell, in a perfect world, I wouldn't even be standing here right now, nursing what's left of this bottle of whiskey and watching the kid sleep. I'd be in bed, submerging myself in Clara, bathing myself in her moans and tasting her skin as she shattered around me.

In a perfect world, we'd have several more kids to worry about. Kids that looked like the best of her and the best of me combined.

But this isn't a perfect world.

In this world, I'm the leader of a lethal Russian mob family. I've amassed an ungodly amount of wealth and fortune on the backs of greedy gamblers and even greedier black market antiquities dealers. I've killed men for blinking at me wrong.

And instead of burying myself inside the most beautiful woman I've ever laid eyes on, I'm standing here in the doorway of her daughter's sad excuse of a bedroom, trying to figure out what the actual fuck I'm supposed to do.

Fuck my life.

Willow frowns, then groans in her sleep. I don't like the way it contorts her sweet face. She shouldn't be frowning in her sleep; she should be smiling, laughing, and dreaming about things like ice cream and sunflowers.

It's my fault she's not.

I don't know what to do with her in the long term, but I do know I need to make a few things right. She didn't deserve the things I've done to her. First thing in the morning, after she goes to school, I'm going to make the staff move her stuff back into the solarium and then fill it with even more toys and games and things that silently say, "I'm sorry."

And I'll have Pavel look into Clara's network of family and friends. See if there's someone who can eventually take Willow far the fuck away from here.

Someone who can give her a better life than I ever could.

CLARA

As promised, Raizo personally escorts me into his office—or, at least, what he calls his “office.” It looks eerily similar to the suite where I ran into Demyen that fateful night, back when I thought I had a chance to escape Vegas and start a new life.

My God, that feels like forever ago.

I’m surprised to see I’m not the only woman here. Unlike the women in the atrium, however, these ones don’t look like they’re nervous or eager or really anything at all.

Truth be told, they look... dead. The lights are on, but nobody’s home.

There are only three of them here, but it already feels like three too many. Their dresses look more like what Demyen made me wear to his outdoor cocktail party: just enough to tease the imagination, but not enough to actually conceal anything. No shoes, not even heels, on their feet and their makeup all looks a bit smudged. Smearred lipstick. Mascara running ever-so-slightly like black tears.

“Don’t mind them,” Raizo murmurs in my ear. He’s standing behind me a little too closely and rests his hands on my arms. “They’ve been busy providing entertainment for my men.”

I don’t ask him to clarify.

I’m pretty sure I get the picture.

He leads me to the vanity mirror lining an ornate desk and presses on my shoulders until I sit on the stool. I’m holding out hope he’s going to leave me here, but he doesn’t.

Instead, he starts stroking my hair back behind my shoulders. Caressing the curve of my neck with his fingertips. Tracing the shell of my ear.

“You are so incredibly beautiful.” Raizo breathes it like a prayer, gazing at me in the mirror. “It is amazing how much you look like your mother.”

I don't know what to say, or if I'm supposed to say anything at all. So I try to at least curve my mouth in the tiniest of smiles so he can see I'm docile. Complacent. Not about to run away.

Because I really can't. I can't run away without getting Willow first. And I can't get Willow without leading Raizo right to her.

“I meant what I said,” he tells me. “I wanted to buy you for myself. Keep you by my side, in my home and in my bed. I'd take such good care of you, too. My beautiful Clara.”

I try not to shudder.

He sighs. “But Mr. Zakrevsky made it exceptionally clear that he doesn't want to see you anywhere near Las Vegas. And I have far too many holdings here to just up and relocate for the sake of my own satisfaction.” Raizo sighs again and gazes at me longingly in that stupid mirror. “I'll just have to content myself with this little time we have.”

I gulp and croak, “What's going to happen to me?”

Raizo smiles. I hate the way it turns his handsome face into something so disgustingly sinister. “I took extra special care to make sure only the wealthiest and most powerful men attending would have a chance at you. Narrowed it down to six, to be exact. And I have a very good idea of who the winning bidder will be.”

His hands wrap around my shoulders, then slowly slide over my collarbone in a caress that only heightens my nausea. As he continues to speak, he slowly edges the thin straps down my shoulders and works his fingers closer to the tops of my breasts. Back and forth, back and forth, touching me like he owns me.

For these horrible few moments, I guess he does. I blink slowly, hoping I look demure and doe-eyed while I'm really just trying to close my eyes against the sight of this man touching my body.

And praying. I'm praying, furiously, that Demyen won't give Willow to Martin.

Please let Bambi get her out first...

"I strongly recommend..." Raizo murmurs into my ear once again, leaning down and caressing my skin with his lips. "... that you do whatever your new master says, when he says it, like the good girl I know you are. These men have voracious appetites, and you, my sweetness, are so delicious. I'd be surprised if you ever see the outside of his bedroom, at least for the first few months."

I wince, but I don't let myself make a peep, even though what I want to do is scream like I've never screamed before. I'll do whatever I have to do to survive.

Whatever I have to do to survive.

Whatever I have to do to survive...

Raizo breathes me in with his nose in the crook of my neck. "I'm so tempted to taste you for myself. I'm dying to know if your moans sound just like your mother's. Will you scream on my cock, like she did?"

This time, I can't hide the shudder. And I'm not too sure I can hold back the vomit much longer, either.

Before he can remark on it, someone knocks at the door. My savior, even if they don't mean to be.

Raizo grumbles to himself, then peels his hands from my body and strolls over to the door. If he's angry at being interrupted, I can't tell. The man has a hell of a poker face.

A man speaks with him quietly. Raizo seems to agree to something, then gestures for the man to come inside the room.

"I must leave you for now, Clara." He says it mournfully, like I'm going to be bothered by his absence. "Be good, and maybe we'll get our special time together before this is all over."

I'd really rather not.

But I nod. No smile, no promises, but at least an agreement to be on my best behavior. I need to touch up my makeup anyway—on principle, because being bitchslapped can definitely do a number to a woman's contouring.

If I'm going to face demons, I want my war paint on.

Raizo leaves the room. His man doesn't pay any attention to me, but he does brush his suit jacket aside so I can see the gun holstered underneath.

Point made. Point taken.

I sift through the random pots and bottles of makeup in the desk drawers, wondering if this is what these women put on for their job as the "entertainment." In the reflection of the mirror, I catch a glimpse of New Guy taking one of the women to the loveseat. I don't see what he does, but I do hear the distinct sound of a zipper coming down and a belt buckle unlatching.

And as she stands waiting for whatever he's about to do to her, her eyes meet mine in the mirror.

The fact that she doesn't actually *see* me... just takes it, vacant and staring off into nothingness...

I almost think that's the most terrifying threat I've ever received.

Be good...

Or become this.

DEMYEN

The pain wakes me up.

I should probably call the doctor, but I'm too stubborn for that. Even though the bandages I'm unwrapping and rewrapping around my torso are caked with an ugly shade of dried crimson blood.

I'm trying to figure out a method of tying the gauze that doesn't make me want to carve out my own lungs when the door bursts open and Bambi storms in.

Not for the first time, it occurs to me that her name is completely fucking wrong for her. It says, "docile." It says, "sweet." The Bambi darkening my bedroom door is none of those things. Not by a long shot.

"I see you're home." She pointedly eyes the three empty bottles of random booze on my nightstand. "Where's Clara?"

"Fuck if I know."

"Bullshit."

I look up at her. She's lucky she's my lawyer and I need her. This is the kind of tone and attitude that gets larger men shot between the eyes. "It's none of your business, Bam. And I don't know why you think it is."

She tilts her head to one side and dramatically pretends to think about it. "Hm, let me see. Because I care about her? And no matter what you say, you do, too."

I choose to ignore that. “You knew the plan. From the very beginning.”

Bambi stares at me.

And keeps staring at me.

Fuck. I actually prefer the tongue-lashing. “What?”

She folds her arms and shifts her weight on one foot. “She called, you know. She called Pavel, actually, who was too busy swinging transport around to pick you up to hear his phone buzz. She got some pretty juicy evidence for you. So again, I’m gonna ask: where is she?”

I frown. “What evidence?”

“The kind that would get Tolya out of prison. Tomorrow.”

Shit. I jump to my feet, then immediately regret doing that when the pain whacks me in the head like a nightstick and makes me sit back down. “What? Where? How?”

“Nuh-uh.” Bambi shakes her head, and a finger, at me. “Not this time, *boss*. You don’t get to use her and abuse her and then discard her like some used garbage. Especially not in exchange for shit this good.”

Now, I’m seeing red. She’s pushing my damn buttons and she knows it. “What. Do. You. Have?”

She sighs and lowers her guard enough to be one percent less bitchy. “Raizo’s been in on it the whole time. Raizo, Greg Everett... they’re setting you up. They’ve *been* setting you up.”

“No.” I refrain from shaking my head because it still hurts like a motherfucker where Martin cracked that vase over my skull. I wince in pain and at the memory. “There’s no way. She’s lying.”

“Right.” Bambi chews on her bottom lip and glares at me. “Because there’s no way Clara would actually try to do the right thing and get the information you’ve been so desperate for.”

“I heard her. Talking to her father. She’s encouraging him. She wants him to do all this shit. She’s been playing me—*us*—from the start.”

“And part of her master plan was to leave her kid here with you?”

I pause. “Listen—”

“No, Dem, I think *you* need to be the one to do some more listening. Because I wasn’t even there and I can already tell you, you didn’t hear what you think you heard.”

I narrow my eyes at her. “And how would *you* know?”

Bambi leans down and hovers her own glowering face inches from mine. “Because I know what it’s like to say whatever needs to be said, to sound however I needed to fucking sound, so my daddy wouldn’t beat me to a pulp. Or worse.”

I swallow. I don’t like where this is going. Worse—I don’t like the increasingly strong possibility that she may be right. “Clara is a master manipulator, Bam.”

“Of course she is!” She leans back with a laugh. A humorless, calculating laugh paired with a joyless clap of her hands. “Who do you think taught her? And it’s not what you think, even though yes, it was her father. I promise you, Dem: Clara Everett is a *victim*. A *vic-tim*. Not a predator. Not a murderer. She’s been prey her whole fucking life, and just like prey in the wild, she learned how to adapt. She learned to do what she had to do to *survive*.”

The only sound for a while is Bambi’s furious breathing and my labored inhales and exhales. My head hurts—both physically and from considering all the possibilities at play.

The thing about all this that has me the most frustrated, the most pissed off, is that openly admitting that she’s right is the same as openly admitting that I was wrong.

That I made some bad fucking decisions.

My standing with the Bratva is on thin ice as it is, given Pavel’s latest report. My decision-making skills have been

called into question amongst the ranks, and it's shit like this that underlines their concerns.

Valid concerns.

Agreeing with Bambi means admitting that shit out loud, though. It means saying I was wrong, and stupid, and blind, and short-sighted. I can either cop to all that...

Or I can hold my ground.

And a lifetime of my father's training means I always, *always* hold my ground.

So instead of listening to the whisper in my mind and my heart that says I need to get the fuck back to the casino hotel *rightfuckingnow*, I shrug it off.

"What's done is done." I pop the cork off the nearest bottle with my teeth, spit it out, and take a swig. It's a nonverbal "fuck off," and Bambi knows it.

She straightens, then folds her arms and shakes her head with a sigh. "Watching you is like having a front row seat to a fucking Greek tragedy. The worst part is, you're thinking this whole time that you can't trust Clara, Clara lies, Clara's a murderer, Clara, Clara, Clara. But *she's* the one who can't trust *you*. *You're* the one who lies. *You're* the one who kills. *You*, Demyen. And you lie so goddamn pretty, I almost started believing it myself."

She doesn't slam the door shut behind her, but I wish she would have. The limp silence following her departure is almost worse.

I sit there on my bed in the lamplit dark. My head's swimming with throbbing pain and terrible realizations. My heart is threatening to shrivel inside my chest and leave me with nothing but a ghostly reminder of what could have been.

As I lie back to try and get something remotely close to sleep, I tell myself that it's the pain of my broken ribs that hurts more than anything.

And that it's the pain of my broken ribs causing the tears to fall from my eyes.

CLARA

It's another hour before I'm finally summoned to the stage.

I'm glad to be out of that room—if I had to watch that woman's dead eyes in the mirror as she serviced Raizo's man for a moment longer, I was going to be sick to my stomach.

Now, I'm out of that hellhole, although God only knows how deep and disgusting the next one will be. A silent man with a gun is escorting me down a long hallway. A very, very long hallway, like one in a nightmare, where it only gets longer the further you move down it.

I wish I could run. But the armed escort has made it very clear that that's not an option. And even if I was willing to take the chance for myself, there's a baby inside me I refuse to risk.

I feel the spark of life inside me the same way I felt Willow's. I'll suffer anything it takes to keep that spark safe.

I wonder idly if my pregnancy would have changed anything with Demyen. If maybe, crazy as it sounds, he might actually *want* a child of his own.

He's been a monster to me. A nightmare. An avenging angel.

But he's also been a light in the darkness. A father to my daughter. A protection against demons known and unknown.

So yes, I wonder about things. I have questions. But I'll never find out the answers to all those would haves, could haves, should haves.

He made his choice.

I have to make mine.

As heartbreaking as that is, though, I don't have time to cry. The guard opens a door and I'm ushered through, instantly thrust into a literal spotlight.

It takes me a moment for my eyes to adjust—it's so much brighter here than anywhere else in the hotel. Dozens of men in tuxedos fill the room with laughter, leering, and liquor. And smoke. *So* much repulsive, cloying smoke. Tendrils of the stuff rise from the ends of expensive cigars poised in mouths that now turn upwards in hungry sneers as they get a good first look at me.

Wait—was that...?

Did I just see Demyen?

I blink. I swear I just saw him standing there in the crowd, but now, I can't tell if he is or isn't. Or if it's just my eyes playing tricks in the chaos of the auction room.

Because that's exactly what this is. *An auction room.*

This is where I'm about to be sold.

“Sold! To the gentleman from Belarus for fifty thousand dollars!”

A young woman in a pale pink gown whips her terrified gaze to me. Her fingers tremble as she lifts them to her face, partly covering her mouth in horror. But before she has a chance to burst into tears, a pair of men flank her and drag her off the stage.

Someone nudges me in the back.

My turn.

As I step forward into that burning spotlight, I realize that the full weight of the reality of my situation has not actually settled upon me once this whole night.

How do I know?

Because it feels pretty damn heavy as it falls down on top of me right now.

“And now, what you’ve all been waiting for...”

The auctioneer is milking his showmanship like this is a goddamn circus and I’m some main attraction the audience paid good money to see. It would be weirdly funny if none of this had anything to do with actual human trafficking. Like someone’s gonna hand me three chainsaws and tell me to start juggling instead.

The crowd falls quiet. A thousand eyes bore into me, scanning my body up and down with a kind of appreciation and hunger I really don’t want.

Not here.

Not now.

And *not* from *them*.

“Our ultra-exclusive featured lot for this evening, with a high starting bid for obvious reasons.” He teases the last few words to pull a chuckle from the onlookers. “She’s in excellent health—and, as you can see, *fine* physical condition. George, if you will?”

A man suddenly appears at my side and jerks my right arm out away from my body.

“Look at that muscle tone. That creamy, yet somehow caramel-y, skin. Doesn’t she look simply delectable?”

The man—George, I’m assuming—lowers my arm and makes me turn around so my back faces the crowd.

“As you can see, Lot Three Sixty-Seven has a figure perfect for child-bearing. A beautiful taper at the waist, with an ideal flare at the hips and firm, rounded buttocks.”

George suddenly slaps my ass. I want to yelp in surprise, but I quickly swallow it back down because I will not, in any way, give these bastards the satisfaction.

“George, could you please...?” It sounds like the auctioneer is making a gesture. My guess seems to be correct, because George kneels down and yanks at the tear in my dress until the fabric falls away from my leg.

And then he lifts my foot in his hand so my bare leg is exposed, all the way up to my ass.

“Look at that, ladies and gentlemen! Exquisite, sumptuous beauty. Truly a work of art worth every penny just to feel those thighs wrapped around you, am I right?”

The crowd murmurs their agreement, a few chuckle at the teasing—and I feel like I’m going to throw up.

George lowers my foot with all the gentleness of an actual gentleman. He stands, turns me back around, and then steps behind me.

More laughter. More leering. More indignity.

“Now, to the wary buyers amongst you: you may have noticed a few cuts and bruises on our beauty here.” The auctioneer lifts a hand to placate the suddenly disappointed crowd. “But before you start changing your mind, our benevolent host wants to reassure you all that this was the result of unwarranted attacks by unwanted guests who have been dealt with accordingly.”

I’m not sure how to feel about that. Did they kill Martin? Dad?

Would I feel bad if they did?

“And, for those of you who *love* to break in a good and stubborn filly, you will absolutely *love* this: she took each of them on. By herself. Believe me when I say, ‘You should see the other guy.’”

The ones who aren’t laughing at the auctioneer’s jokes are now staring at me and licking their lips. One man in particular makes my stomach turn into knots when I lay eyes on him. He’s older, though not much more than his early fifties, and built thick. A manicured beard covers half his face, drawing the bulk of my attention to his eyes.

Cold, dark, deadly eyes.

Eyes that are staring at me with dark promise.

“Do I hear a bid for eight hundred thousand dollars? Yes! I have eight hundred thousand. Do I have—”

“One million dollars!” A woman dripping with diamonds and pearls, and clearly not much younger than seventy, calls out at the same time she lifts a numbered card.

“Do I hear—”

“One-point-two million!”

“Three million!”

Several people groan and lean back in their chairs. Those with the cash to burn lean forward, their eyes firmly planted on me.

“Seven million dollars!”

More groans. A few good-natured chuckles. Several hisses of defeat.

The auctioneer beams. “Seven million! Do I hear seven-point-five million?”

“Ten million!” The man from Belarus, who I recognize from the sale right before me, grins at me and licks his teeth.

“Fifteen million!”

More fall out of the bidding war. As people sit down to watch the rest of this play out, it becomes clear that Raizo’s preapproved bidders are the only ones remaining.

The man with the beard, who keeps staring at me with increasing hunger in his icy gaze, is one of them.

God, please... let someone outbid him.

I don’t know this man. I don’t recognize him from anywhere. And yet I do? In a very weird, uncomfortable way.

And while it’s clear that every person in this room is sick as fuck and should go to prison for the rest of their miserable lives, not everyone seems to be sadistic. The elderly woman is being doted upon by who must be her current slaves, a man *and* a woman. They keep feeding her bites of food and whispering things in her ear. The man from Belarus is laughing and chatting with his colleagues while writing out a check for a waiting attendant. I don’t see any slaves with him, but I also don’t feel like he’s the worst person in the world to be purchased by.

But *this* guy? The bearded man?

The way he looks at me doesn't just say he wants to break me. It promises me that he *will*, slowly and surely, bit by bit—and he will enjoy every moment of it.

The auctioneer clears his throat. “Do I hear—?”

“Fifty million.”

At that, the room falls completely silent. All heads turn to stare at the bearded man, who didn't shout or yell or even hop out of his chair. He continues to stare at me, unwavering.

The auctioneer actually stutters. “Y-you heard it here, folks. Fifty. Million. Dollars. For Lot Three Sixty-Seven. Going once?”

The other bidders shake their heads and sit down.

“Going twice...”

Seriously. Where do I know him from? Is he—

“Sold!”

CLARA

I don't remember walking back to Raizo's room. It's just one moment spliced into the next, with jarring skips in between.

The eyes of the bearded man.

Sold. The gavel strikes.

Then I'm walking in a sick sort of processional line of women. *The Lots.* The woman in the pink dress sobs as she walks, her shoulders shaking in front of me.

I should cry. I feel like I should cry.

I just... can't.

All I can think about is Willow. Is she sound asleep? Is she safe? What will happen in the morning when she realizes I'm not there? Will she ask about me? What will they tell her?

Will Demyen keep her? Or will he throw her back at Martin the first chance he gets?

I shiver with fear at that last thought. No—Demyen despises Martin too much to give him anything close to what he wants. Even if just out of spite, Dem won't hand Willow over.

Maybe Roxy can take her. He's got her number. Is that where Willow will end up?

I'm sorry, Roxy. I never meant to burden you with my problems.

A momentary thought crosses my mind: *Where is Dad?* I'm having a hard time believing Raizo killed him. Especially now

that I know that Dad's been a top supplier of "merchandise." I can't see Raizo getting rid of a business partner like that.

My one consolation here is knowing that, despite his twisted understanding of love, and despite being a despicable human being, Dad never meant to sell me. He seemed genuinely surprised, and horrified, to see me here.

I cling to the memory of his face a bit longer than I should.

My whirlwind thoughts are interrupted by the guards impatiently pushing us inside the large hotel suite. The three women from earlier are gone, but the air is still filled with the unmistakable stench of perfume, cologne, liquor, and sex.

And piled on top of the vanity is a shit ton of money.

Once all of us are pushed inside the room, Raizo's men curtly leave and shut the door behind them.

I'm so tempted to bolt the door. But knowing the Yakuza, it will only delay their return—and piss them off to dangerous levels.

So instead, I find a spot to lean against the wall and stand there. I don't want to sit on the bed because I know what's been happening there. I don't want to sit on the lounge chairs for the same reason. The other women don't know, so they sit and contemplate their next stage in life. Or they cry.

Or they just... calmly finger-comb the tangles from their hair, like the blonde I met earlier in the atrium.

She notices me watching her. With a soft smile, she slides off the edge of the bed to join me at the wall. "I heard you're pretty damn expensive," she muses.

I laugh miserably. "I'd rather be priceless."

"Yeah, well, tough luck there. Not to be mean," she quickly adds. A flicker of worry mars her brow. "I mean, just... this is what we've been dealt. No takebacks or redos."

"You seem... okay? With all this."

Blondie slowly shrugs. "I've never had a good life. Parents were broke addicts, and I've been on the streets since I was

twelve. I guess... I don't know. The guy who bid for me didn't seem so bad. I figure he's gotta be better than working the backside of The Strip, right?"

The way she says it looks and sounds like she's asking me to confirm her theory. To reassure her that yes, totally, becoming someone's personal sex slave is way better than prostitution in the wrong side of Vegas.

She doesn't know I'm the worst person to ask. I tend to have poor judgment when it comes to ranking the lesser of two evils.

"Anyways." She sighs. "Now's a good time to relax and rest up. I overheard one of the cronies say we're being processed. It's gonna be a day or two before our new owners collect us."

I frown. "Really? Why?"

"Heck if I know. If I had to guess, making sure all the payments clear. No honor among thieves, ya know?"

"Yeah," I whisper. "Sure. No honor."

A stampede of memories rushes through my head out of nowhere. *Demyen carrying a giggling Willow on his shoulders. Demyen stripping off my clothes and lowering me into a hot bath himself. Demyen's eyes, glowing like they were lit from within, as he buried himself into me in the middle of the night.*

He isn't an honorable man.

But there's a good man in him. Somewhere.

"Hey." Blondie gently nudges me with her elbow. "You okay?"

I don't realize tears are in my eyes until I blink and one of them trickles down my cheek. I quickly wipe it away and nod.

"Yeah. Just... I don't know. Processing myself."

She nods with understanding. "Me, too. As much as I've been telling myself I'm totally okay with this, I'm still a slave. It's the twenty-first century, and I'm a fucking *slave*."

So am I. That part is the hardest to grapple with. All of us in this room are standing in the land of the free, the home of the brave, and we're quietly, fearfully waiting for our new owners to slap their chains on us.

And there's no police swarming the hotel. No S.W.A.T. team, no nonprofit organization pulling a sting operation. No one and nothing is standing between us and our impending lives of sexual slavery.

However long or short those lives may end up being.

I shiver again and wrap my arms around my middle. Suddenly, I'm grateful for the waiting period before the bearded man comes for me. I know why he bought me, and that look in his eyes promised I won't enjoy it for a second.

That's what he wants—for me to cry, scream, and beg for mercy while he breaks my body into submission. He wants me to become like the women who were here earlier. Vacant. Lifeless. Wholly compliant to every dark desire he has in store for me.

What will he do when I finally break?

I can't let things get that far. I have a little girl waiting for me. I have a new little one growing inside me.

I can't let him break me.

And I won't. I've survived this long. I survived Dad's temper and Martin's torment. I can handle this.

The door opens. All heads turn, apprehensive, to see who might be joining us. Another round of slaves, maybe?

To my horror, it's Raizo—followed by the bearded man.

Both of them instantly find me among the women and their lips curve into jack o' lantern smiles. Raizo saunters over to his desk and settles into the leatherback swivel chair with a sigh. He beckons the bearded man to him, who quietly grunts and sets a large duffel bag on top of the desk.

"It's all there," he grumbles.

Raizo unzips the bag and begins to pull out stacks of hundred dollar bills. “It’s not that I don’t trust you...” he calmly explains.

Bearded Man sighs and opens his suit jacket, pulls out a few more stacks of cash, and sets them on the desk as well. “Plus the surcharge, as agreed.” His voice comes out in a thick, Slavic accent. I can’t quite place it, but it makes his words rumble from his mouth in a deep baritone.

Raizo flips through the new stacks and nods. “Once I have this counted—”

“The extra fee is for *immediate* retrieval.”

The Yakuza boss eyes Bearded Man for a moment, then nods again. “Alright. But mark my word, if a single bill is missing—”

“You know where to get it.”

Raizo suddenly breaks into a chuckle. “That I do! That I do.” His gaze slides to me, and he beckons me forward with a quick flick of his fingers.

When I don’t immediately approach, one of his men grabs me by the arm, turns me, and shoves me forward toward Bearded Man.

“I could offer a significant reduction in fees in exchange for...” Raizo scans my body, which instantly makes my skin crawl. “A slight delay in handing this one over. To ensure she meets your standards, of course.”

Bearded Man’s face twists into something that’s half-sow, half-bemused smile. “If you didn’t do your ‘quality check’ before the sale, that’s your problem. Not mine.”

The host’s smile wavers on Raizo’s face for a quick moment. Then he sighs, nods his assent, and snaps something in Japanese to the man who shoved me forward. “Very well. I must remind you, no returns or exchanges.”

I feel Bearded Man rest a heavy hand on my shoulder, and he squeezes almost painfully hard. “That won’t be an issue.”

“I should think not.” Raizo cocks a smile at me. “You’ll be good for him, won’t you, Clara? I sang your praises and promised your new master here the best we have in stock.”

Translation: don't fuck this up or you'll regret it.

I can't help but close my eyes now, just in time to avoid looking at the man who bought me when his hand slides from my shoulder to grab and squeeze my ass.

“I think you’re right, Watanabe,” he chuckles. “I’m going to enjoy breaking this one in.”

DEMYEN

Bambi's words keep echoing in my ear.

Clara's face keeps flashing in my mind.

I thought it would be easier to wash her clean from me, like I could suddenly no longer be addicted to her touch, her taste, her smell. I went cold turkey, and now, I'm lying in bed, tossing and turning because I can't shake the feeling that something is very, very wrong.

That I did something very, very wrong.

"Raizo, Greg Everett... they're setting you up. They've been setting you up."

"She's been prey her whole life... She had to adapt."

I sit up and run a hand through my hair. Then, on a sudden, violent whim, I yank it hard by the root, hoping the pain will distract me from my own thoughts.

Spoiler: it doesn't.

There's a saying I've heard Pavel say before, and it's echoing in my head alongside Bambi's irritated voice.

"Better to believe and be wrong, than to not believe and be wrong."

If I believe Clara is innocent, and it turns out that I'm wrong... well, yeah. I can just get rid of her as easily as I did tonight. And then I'd definitely be able to wash myself clean of her.

But if I don't believe Clara is innocent, and it turns out that I'm wrong...

I jump out of bed and shrug on the first shirt I see.

In a matter of minutes, I'm grabbing keys to whichever car beeps in response to the fob in my hand. I don't need to text my men for backup; the fact that I'm barreling through the compound is alert enough.

The Bratva is coming.



The first Yakuza hand that touches my chest to stop me gets broken.

The next one gets the same.

That's all it takes to get the message across. As two of their comrades howl in pain, clutching their ruined fingers to their chests, the other Yakuza guards step aside. They recognize me—and, more importantly, they recognize that I'm not fucking around. One of them is wise enough to open the door and step aside to let me through.

The suite is filled with women, half of them sleeping in various corners and the other half staring listlessly off into nothingness. I quickly scan their faces, hoping to find Clara...

But she isn't here.

I make my way over to where Raizo's set up camp at the desk. The man himself is reclining in the chair counting stacks of cash. He smiles at me knowingly when he sees me approaching.

"Demyen! Decided to get comfortable, I see." He eyes my plain t-shirt and sweatpants with a chuckle. "The night's been a massive success. You and your staff did an excellent job. Well worth the wait."

Soft sobs catch my attention. Down on the floor, nestled between his legs, is a woman on her knees with ruined makeup.

My heart leaps into my throat the same time my stomach bottoms out.

Clara?

No. Not Clara, but the resemblance makes my blood chill. This woman has similar dark curls and almost the same creaminess to her skin. But, unlike my Clara, the woman cowering beneath Raizo is all skin and bones, her cheekbones jutting from a worn face.

Is this what she'll become?

I'm no stranger to the sex industry. I have an entire team of professional escorts, for fuck's sake.

But I've never dealt with *slaves* before. I never had a taste for it. My father did, but I'd seen enough glimpses of that nightmarish world to want to avoid it in general. He tried to loop Tolya into the business, but my brother returned from that singular outing with a churning stomach and renewed hatred toward the man.

He never told me what he saw.

"You should have been there," Raizo says with a wolfish grin. "She was magnificent! Drove the price higher than even I anticipated, and the condition of her face only helped the bidding—"

"What condition?" I snap. *What the fuck did he just say?*

Raizo lifts a brow. "Didn't you see her before you left? She took quite the beating from those detectives. Best part is, she gave in kind. I almost called off my men from teaching them a lesson because she did half the work for us." He chuckles and slaps a counted stack of hundreds down on the desk. "I don't know if I'm thrilled over her sale or pissed I missed out on breaking in such a treasure myself."

I glance around the room with feigned disinterest, but the reality of what I've done slams into me with all the crushing power of a freight train. These women are here because of me. Here, in this room, watching a Yakuza crime lord count the profit of their sales to strangers who believe people like them hold the same value as livestock.

Each of these women are someone's daughter. Someone's sister. Someone's friend. Maybe even someone's mother, like Clara is.

At one point, each and every one of these slaves were sweet little girls with the hopeful promise of starlight lulling them to sleep. Just like Willow.

And I gave Raizo and his sick fucks the perfect venue to strip away their clothes, their humanity, and sell them into the kind of slavery there's no escape from.

"Come, have a seat," Raizo offers with a gesture of his hand to one of the lounge chairs nearby. "Stay a while. Don't think I forgot you're the one to thank for such a wonderful evening."

Don't fucking remind me.

He stares at the money in front of him. His own eyes are almost void of any emotion at all, save for a cold gleam of satisfaction. The woman at his feet keeps sobbing.

"Sadly, not all of our lots sold tonight." He sighs and shrugs. "This one failed to perform during the meet-and-greet. Tried to run, too. Go on—get out of my sight. I'll deal with you later."

The woman's sobs slow to hollow breathing as she struggles upright and totters away. It's like whatever fight she might've had in her earlier is gone, beaten from her body until she became this glassy-eyed, strung-out shell slowly walking by me. She doesn't even look at me, even though she has to move past my chair.

She's not Clara.

But she's a horrifying preview of what Clara will become.

... I fucked up.

I fucked up.

I fucked up *bad*.

CLARA

The Bearded Man hasn't said a word to me the whole way to his car.

"Where are we going?" I ask it quietly enough so he might not hear me. I don't know what sets this guy off, so I don't peek at him. Best to look out the window and enjoy the sights of Vegas' midnight before I never see it again.

"I still have some business to finish up before we head home." He talks to me like I'm just another normal passenger in his car. "We'll spend a few days in one of my properties just outside the city."

I'm too scared to say anything in response. So far, aside from the ass-grab, he's been a surprisingly perfect gentleman. He even held the car door open for me.

Maybe he's one of those people who looks terrifying and is actually decent.

Wake the hell up, idiot. No one "decent" buys another human being.

"We need to go over ground rules," he suddenly says. His voice is deep, but it doesn't sound angry or threatening. Just calm, casual, like we're talking about the weather. "First, while we are here in Vegas, you will not leave the premises. Everything you need to take care of yourself is already stocked, so I don't want to hear any whining or begging."

"Okay."

"Try again."

I try not to look confused. What does he mean, “try again”?
Oh. “Yes... sir.”

He sighs and grips the steering wheel with both hands. “You will call me ‘Master’ when we are alone, or when I specify it is allowed in front of certain people. In public—if we ever go out in public—you will address me as ‘Sir.’”

“Yes... Master.” It tastes so bitter on my tongue. Like the bile I keep swallowing back down.

When I breathe in, I feel my chest rattle. *Shit.* I think I’m actually going to cry, and I don’t know if I can stop myself.

“Better.” He turns us off The Strip and drives down a darker side road. If anything were to happen to me here, no one would know. “You will speak only when spoken to, and only if I give you permission. Otherwise, keep your mouth shut. You will do exactly as I say the first time I give the order. If I have to repeat myself, it will be the last time I ever do. Understood?”

“Yes, Master.”

“You will take what I give you. No more, and no less. You are my property, and I will take care of you. But the second you start to argue with me, you will wish you hadn’t.”

I stare out the window. “Yes, Master.”

He glances at me, a smirk playing across his lips. “We’re off to a good start, *umnitsa*. Keep this up, and I might turn your collar into a necklace a bit sooner than I planned.”

My eyes widen. *Collar?* Oh, God... am I going to be chained up?

“I’m kidding.” He chuckles and reaches over to pat my thigh. “I don’t like the way collars cover the neck. I need somewhere to sink my teeth.”

I wince and that only makes him laugh more. He squeezes my leg, taking advantage of the tear in the dress to feel my skin and wander his fingers further up. Out of reflex, I snap my legs shut.

He moves his hand back to the steering wheel. “Let me make something perfectly clear.”

The way his voice suddenly drops makes me steal a glance at him. He’s staring out at the road, but even in the dark, it’s easy to see he’s just this side of pissed.

“I own you. Which means I can do whatever the hell I want to you. Piss me off, and I’ll chain you up in the basement and let my men take turns with you. Piss me the *fuck* off, and there won’t be any turns. And I doubt there will be anything left of you when they’re done.”

The messed-up thing is, I know he means it. These aren’t empty threats meant to scare me; this is the new reality I’m living in.

A tear rolls down my face as the weight of this new reality settles over me. There’s no escaping him. If I tried, he’d probably catch me before I left the grounds. Even if I succeeded, I’d never be able to see Willow again. Doing so would lead this monster straight to her, and I have no idea what he does to children.

Nor do I want to find out.

Another tear, and then another, falls down my face until I feel myself start to shake with sobs.

I told myself I wouldn’t give up. I wouldn’t lose myself to the pain and sorrow like the other women did. But I’m already beginning to feel myself crumble before this new shadow of a life begins.

I hear the crack right before the stinging pain blooms across my cheek. His backhand hits me so hard, my head clacks against the window. I cry out, but the sound is as weak as I feel.

“Shut the fuck up,” he snarls. “I haven’t begun to give you a reason to cry.”

I suck in a deep breath and will myself to stop shaking.

“We can do this the hard way or the easy way, *umnitsa*. Easy way: you recognize I’ve been pretty fucking nice to you this

whole time and we have a pleasant first night together. Hard way: you keep this shit up, and I pull this car over and teach you what real crying feels like.”

My head starts nodding frantically before I’ve even processed a response in my head. “Yes, Master,” I blurt. I try to smile, too, as I quickly wipe my eyes. “Thank you.”

He reaches over again, this time to caress my hair almost tenderly. “I will admit,” he sighs wistfully, “I do want you to fight me. I want you to defy me. I want to break your body and your mind, and I want you to make it a challenge. There’s nothing sweeter than the tears of a broken woman, don’t you agree?”

Don’t cry. Don’t cry. Don’t cry.

I swallow back the bile that slowly creeps up my throat. Nothing about this tastes sweet.

“Yes, Master.”

DEMYEN

“Your cut, as agreed.” Raizo slides a tall stack of bound hundreds across the desk to me. “Thirty million dollars.”

My arms feel heavy. I can’t lift my hands to touch it. “That’s sixty percent?”

I don’t actually care. It could be zero percent and a big part of me wishes it was. But I can’t think of a better response that doesn’t let Raizo on to the fact that I’m loathing literally everything about tonight, this auction, and him.

Raizo nods with a knowing smile. “I told you, she did amazing. And we both know how incredibly beautiful she is.” He tilts his head as he looks at me. “You know, I’m sure her daughter—”

“Not for sale.”

He holds up his hands in mock surrender. “Fine, fine. I know it’s not everyone’s cup of tea. Just figured I’d offer.”

If he doesn’t shut the fuck up about Willow, I might actually rip his tongue from his mouth.

I rub a hand over my jaw and stare at the cursed money stacked in front of me. “Who ended up buying her?”

“Now, now, Mr. Zakrevsky. You know as well as I do that these sales remain confidential.”

Of course they are. I was banking on Raizo’s need to brag to do me a favor and feed me a few breadcrumbs. “Fair enough. Can’t blame me for wondering who I should be selling to more

often.” When it’s clear Raizo buys my excuse, I roll a half-shrug. “Is she here?”

He chuckles and shakes his head. “Believe me, I tried to get a few spare moments with her myself. But the bidder paid a premium for immediate retrieval.”

My stomach drops.

Immediate retrieval? She could be anywhere by now. Anywhere in Vegas, at any air strip waiting for takeoff to who the fuck knows where...

She’s gone.

Clara’s really gone. And it will be near impossible to bring her back.

What’s shocking to me is how I feel about this. In a word: devastated. But it’s even more than that—it’s in the way my blood suddenly turns to ice, my heart stops beating, and my gut turns to acid.

I want to scream. I want to rage.

I want to burn this whole fucking world down until all that remains is a clear path from me to her.

But I can’t let Raizo see that any of this bothers me. If anything, I have to pretend like I’m thrilled to hear it. Or at least mildly amused. So I manage to twist one corner of my mouth into something resembling a smile and make him believe all this news is great.

Just... fucking... *great*.

Raizo leans back in his chair, finally able to stop fingering the money he’s so goddamn obsessed with. “So, you’ve exacted your revenge on the Everett family and in such a delicious fashion. Sold Greg Everett’s daughter into slavery and kidnapped *her* daughter for whatever the hell you’re planning to do. Do you think this will be good enough for Tolya?”

I pause and level my gaze at him. There’s something in the way he says it—like he’s almost too happy that all this has gone down the way it did.

Raizo's been playing you...

Does he know? Did he figure out, at some point, who Clara is to me? What she means to me?

Or is it possible that Bambi might be right?

And if she's right... that means Clara was, too.

"I can't speak for Tolya," I respond coolly. "Although I'm looking forward to sharing the news. I'm sure he'll sleep better."

Tolya might sleep better, but I'm pretty sure I'm about to become an insomniac until I get enough answers to settle the unease in my gut about Raizo. I can't just confront him about the accusations outright because I have him right where I need him to be: close, confident in our business transactions, and reliant on my goodwill as a host to lend him my venues.

I lean down and pick up a discarded duffel from the floor. With a single sweep of my arm, I manage to get most of the money into the bag. I want to just leave whatever's left on the desk and get the hell out of here, but that would make Raizo instantly suspicious. So I do one more sweep and stuff it all into the bag, zip it up, and sling it over my shoulder.

It's not technically heavy. But somehow, it feels like it weighs the exact same as Clara would if she were in my arms instead.

Raizo grins, wide and unsettling. "Pleasure doing business with you, Mr. Zakrevsky."

CLARA

It's no villa in the desert, but it's also not exactly what I expected from a man like him.

It's nice, don't get me wrong. But as we pull up into the driveway, I'm struck by how *normal* this place seems. The outside walls are a mottled pattern of stone bricks, an adobe archway over the front door, and long panels of glass where windows hint at vaulted ceilings inside.

No signs of slaves, guards, or anything that would suggest a human trafficker lives here.

Again, The Bearded Man—“*Master*”—opens the passenger door for me, and even holds his hand out for me to take and steady myself on my heels. When we walk to the front door, he wraps his arm around my waist and acts like this is totally normal for us. Like there's an “us.”

Which I guess is smart. No telling who might be watching, even though the nearest neighbor isn't close enough to see or hear anything.

“We'll be staying here until my business is done,” Master informs me once we're inside. He shrugs off his suit jacket and unclasps his cufflinks, rolling his sleeves up to just below his elbows. To my relief, he loosens his tie instead of his belt.

I don't know what he wants or what he wants to do to me first. What I *do* know is that silk ties hurt a lot less than leather belts.

“I need a drink,” he grumbles. He flicks two fingers at me to follow him, so I do. “Take those shoes off. You’ll scuff up the floors.”

The sigh of relief catches in my throat when I slip off the heels and stretch my ankles. I set them aside in the foyer and quickly pad across the marble floor, following him into the dining room.

A low fire glows in the brick fireplace. Master pokes the logs with an iron poker a few times, and for a moment, I’m terrified that he’s going to turn around and hit me with it.

But instead, he sets it back in the rack, wipes his hands on his pants, and turns to the minibar nearby. He pulls out two shot glasses, then fills both with what looks like vodka. With one gulp, he knocks the first one back. Then he grabs the second and turns to me.

“My... but you *are* beautiful,” he murmurs. His eyes roam my body from head to toe, taking time around my midsection before returning to my face. When he approaches, I force myself to lean against the dining table so I don’t give into my urges and run for the door.

“So fucking beautiful.” Master slowly runs his fingers along my bare thigh, then pushes my dress up and to the side until both my legs and my ass are exposed to him.

Don’t start shaking... Please, don’t start shaking...

I can’t let him see how scared I am. I can’t let him know how much this bothers me—how his touch makes me want to run away to the opposite side of the room.

“They were right: I am going to enjoy having these legs wrapped around me, *umnitsa*.”

His rumbling laughter makes my skin crawl. The way his fingers dip between my legs makes me shudder. But I have to be good. I have to play my part.

I have to keep Willow safe.

Even if I never see her again.

He turns and barks out an order to men I didn't know have been standing by the door. At least four file into the room and approach the table we're standing in front of. None of them look like they're surprised to see me there. Thankfully, none of them look at me with any sort of desire. I don't know if I could handle that kind of introduction to this new life.

Master rumbles another order.

I'm suddenly yanked by both arms and dragged onto the table. Instinct has me kicking to right myself, but the other two men quickly grab my legs and hold me down.

"Now, now, *umnitsa*," Master croons in a sickly soothing voice. He pats my thigh and I hear the flick of a blade. "Hold very still. I'd much rather cut up this pretty dress than your skin, understood?"

A whimper of fear is all I can manage. I want to rip myself free and run, so bad, but the first touch of cold, sharp metal to my hip makes me freeze.

"There's a good girl." He cuts and rips at the fabric, following the seam up one side. When he reaches the strap, a quick flick snaps it apart—he does the same to the other side. One of the men pulls the ruined dress from my body with a hard yank.

Now, I'm completely naked, pinned face-down on this sick man's dining table. Trembling, trying not to cry, and terrified of what he's planning to do to me. "What are you doing?" I finally squeak out between deep, panting breaths.

"I told you, *umnitsa*: I'm going to mark your body. You belong to me. You are my property. My prized possession."

His voice moves across the room as he speaks. Something metal clanks and scrapes.

"You are lucky. This happens to be one of the better designs. I've seen some ugly motherfuckers back home, so count yourself blessed."

I don't know how he does it. How he takes what should be kind, compassionate statements and somehow twists them into something dark and threatening. I don't even know what he's doing right now, but something in his voice, in the way he

approaches me from behind, has me struggling against the men holding me down.

“Deep breath, *umnitsa*.”

I shake my head. “No! Please, don’t!”

The man holding my left leg pulls it up higher on the table, forcing my knee to bend. Exposing me to every eye watching.

Master’s hand rests on my knee. Something hot hovers over me.

No. No. No.

“Please! Master!”

“Shhhh, *umnitsa*.” He squeezes my knee and pushes down. “Do what I say and take a deep breath.”

I don’t do it because I trust him. I draw in a deep breath because I’m too fucking terrified to find out what will happen if I don’t.

White-hot pain sears my skin.

I scream.

The pain is almost blinding. He holds it there, on the back of my thigh just below my ass, and I scream louder. Only when he pulls it off me does my scream cut off into a choking sob.

And then I’m wheezing. Sobbing. Shaking uncontrollably against the men holding me.

“Now, it’s official,” Master says proudly. He brandishes what looks like a red-hot poker in front of my face, but my eyes are too watery to see it clearly. When he turns it, I realize by the bulk that it’s not a poker at all.

It’s a brand.

I’ve been branded.

“You’re mine, *umnitsa*. Mine forever. Don’t ever forget that. If you do, I’ll be more than happy to remind you.”

The men release my wrists and ankles. Master returns the brand to the fireplace. I have every chance to scramble off this table and make a run for it.

But I don't.

I can't.

Not just because my leg hurts too much to move.

Not just because I'm so terrified of what he could do to Willow.

Mainly because I can't see through my tears. I can't stop shaking. I can't stop sobbing.

He's going to break me. He's going to break me inside and out. He won't be satisfied with just my body, either—he'll want my mind, and my soul, crushed under his weight.

Even if he kills me.

Which, let's be honest... he probably will.

DEMYEN

It's been... two days? Weeks? Lifetimes?

I don't even know.

But I'm out of bourbon, so I signal for the bartender to top me off and glare at him when he asks me if I'm doing okay.

Sure, dumbass. I'm doing fucking fantastic. That's why I'm sitting here in this shithole, doing my best to drown my guilt in shitty liquor.

It's empty in here. Probably because it's in the middle of the day, and everyone who didn't have to explain to a five-year-old where her mother went is out living normal lives.

I thought I was in the clear when Willow didn't ask questions the morning after the auction. Bambi got her dressed and ready for school, and Pavel took the kid for donuts as an extra bribe to buy me time.

The second she left, I had the household staff move all her things back into the solarium and make it look even better than it was before. New toys, new plants, everything she could want in her little slice of paradise.

It kept her busy when she came back from school. She was too excited to notice that only her things were moved, and to my relief, she didn't try to go into what used to be Clara's old room.

Rinse and repeat the next day.

But this morning? No such luck.

This morning, Willow found me making coffee in the kitchen and bluntly asked me where her mommy was. Why Mommy hasn't come home yet.

Fuck. I still don't know how to answer that. I made up some half-assed excuse about an emergency and Clara needing to go take care of things for a while, but I kept it vague as hell and I don't think she bought it. The only reason why she didn't ask further was because Bambi dashed in and snatched her up for school.

I've been sitting in this dive bar ever since. Drinking away all consciousness so I don't have to face the consequences of my actions for however long a blackout will last.

Whatever issues Clara and I had, there's no denying that she's a good mother. A great mother, really.

Did I project my own trauma from having a shitty mother on her? Probably.

Did she deserve it? Probably not.

Selling Clara Everett seemed like such an easy plan in the beginning. Let her serve her sentence at someone's feet or wherever they wanted her. A life for a life. Hers for Tolya's.

But I never factored in the consequences of that plan. I never considered who would suffer from her absence. Even though I knew she had a child, I never once figured that what I did with Clara would affect her daughter.

I definitely never counted on growing attached to Willow so... so fucking *easily*.

And now, I get to watch the light fade from her eyes. The sadness settling in. It's already happening—I saw it dim this morning right before Bambi came in. Willow's soft little "oh," the slump of her shoulders, the slow hanging of her head as she held Bambi's hand and walked away...

It's more than I'm prepared to deal with.

The guilt that comes with it is even worse.

I signal for the bartender to bring me another bourbon. I'll buy out his whole damn shelf if I have to. I don't want to stop

guzzling down liquor until my men have to shovel me off the floor and pour me into the car.

I'd rather stare into the abyss than into the heartbroken eyes of a little girl who deserved better.

My phone vibrates on the counter. It takes a few swipes for my clumsy fingers to actually grab it, but I manage. It's a text from one of my connections inside Raizo's Yakuza—someone I've been buttering up for years. The text is exactly what I did not want confirmed.

International buyer. Left Vegas the same night. No records or names of buyer or destination.

“Hey.” I wave down the bartender. “Gimme a round of Mind Erasers.”

The bartender cocks a brow, but doesn't argue or ask me if I'm hoping those shots will live up to their name.

I am. I sure fucking am. I need to scrub my brain clean of every memory I have of Clara Everett before I start to grieve her loss.

Because she's as good as dead. And I can't afford to start admitting how much she means to me, or how much I might actually...

No. I can't go there. It's too little too late.

I toss back the first shot and pray it might be the one to knock me out. *Cheers.*

No such luck. I'm still upright. I can still read, still think, still breathe.

I can still remember the way Clara feels in my arms. The way she smells, the way she tastes. The way her face does that cute little scrunching scowl when she hears a bad joke. Or how she'll constantly tuck this one particular strand of curls behind her ear no matter how many times it pulls free.

How that same strand feels between my fingers when I tuck it back *for* her.

I rub a hand over my face and wonder if I can just go the rest of my life blindfolded. Fuck it, maybe I'll just carve my eyes out myself. I've been so blind to the obvious even with my eyes firmly attached to my brain. What difference would it make to go without them?

Some asshole who can't tell when a guy needs space sits down on the stool next to me. The whole bar area is completely empty, but this fucker chooses to get up close and personal even though I'm clearly three sheets to the wind.

"You look like you could use a drink."

Oh, he's got jokes. I don't humor him with a response; I just knock back the next shot of Mind Erasers and set the shot glass down on the counter a bit harder than I mean to.

"You also look like you could use some company."

"Listen—" I turn to tell him to fuck right the hell off, then freeze.

Shit.

A face I haven't seen in over fifteen years gives me a very patronizing smile. I hate that fucking smile. It's the same one he'd give me every time he knew I'd fucked up and needed his help to get out of whatever mess I created.

Because we both knew how much I *hated* asking him for help.

"I'm listening, *malyshonuk*." He grabs one of the shot glasses from the tray in front of me and knocks it back, smacking his lips with his tongue as he sets it back down. "I have a feeling you've got quite the story to tell."

I do, but not to him. Never to him.

"Listen," I repeat, "I don't know who the hell let you back into this country or what the hell you're doing here. But I don't give a flying fuck either way. *Dasvidaniya*, asshole."

The man's hand grabs my shoulder and shoves me back down into the stool before I have a chance to slide off toward the door. The painful squeeze he gives brings back way too many memories I thought I'd *already* erased from my mind.

He chuckles. “Is that any way to speak to your father?”

DEMYEN

“You stopped being my father the day I was born.”

Oleg Zakrevsky shrugs and loosens his grip from my shoulder to pat my back. “I admit, I wasn’t always the best parent—”

“You don’t even know what being a parent *is*.”

His eyes narrow at me. “I’ve had time away to think, *malyshonuk*. A repentant man can be forgiven for his transgressions, surely?”

Funny enough, that’s exactly what I’m dying to hear right now—from anyone but him. “You’re assuming the shit you did is forgivable.”

Oleg signals the bartender over and orders a round of vodka shots with a side of pickled eggs. He grumbles something about them not having pickled beets on the menu, but shrugs it off.

The old man always was one for more traditional fare. “*A product of the old country*,” he’d say in that thick accent that did start to fade throughout my childhood, but is apparently back in full force. He made sure Tolya and I bore Russian names, learned to speak fluent Russian, and our hired cooks were always experts in Russian cuisine.

Which is exactly why I do my best to speak as little Russian as humanly possible, avoid the food at almost every chance I get, and essentially Americanized the shit out of my identity.

The further away from my father I can get, the better.

What irritates me—when it doesn't scare me—is how he still manages to slip through the cracks of my persona. Small words, here and there, uttered before I have a chance to think about what I'm meaning to say in English. Grooming habits, like the way he oils his hair and meticulously manicures that thick beard of his.

The one time I let myself grow a beard, I saw *his* face in the mirror. I shaved it off so fast I cut my cheeks to fucking ribbons.

"I figured you'd tucked tail and ran." I keep my voice as calm and casual as possible.

"Feds didn't give me much time to pack." Oleg shrugs a shoulder and downs a shot of vodka. He chases it with a pickled egg. *Disgusting*. "Not if I wanted to keep my assets, anyways. They dug up so much shit with Tolya's case, I didn't need them sniffing around once they figured out my visa expired."

I snort. "Wow. Big, bad Bratva boss couldn't manage basic filing."

"Shut your mouth and show some respect, boy. I didn't come here to listen to your backtalk."

"Why *did* you come here?"

Oleg does another vodka-egg shot and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. "Their fifteen-year ban against me just lifted a few weeks ago. Took me longer than I wanted to make arrangements, but the Feds are too busy chasing other criminals to notice an old bear loping back across the border."

"I meant why did you come *here*, *Otets*. You and I aren't exactly on speaking terms."

He gives me a sidelong glance. "No, we're not. But that needs to change, now that I'm back—"

"If you're thinking about reclaiming the Bratva, you're out of your fucking mind."

He chuckles and shakes his head. "Don't worry, *malyshonuk*. I've done more than well enough back home. You can keep

your little gang.”

The way he emphasizes the word “little” makes me want to backhand him off the stool. He’s always trying to one-up me, ensuring that he maintains his position as the “alpha” male in the family. I used to think it was because he wanted to keep Tolya and I in place as his sons, always second, always subservient.

It became obvious pretty fucking fast—when I took over the Bratva he abandoned—that it was because he’s not as confident in his leadership abilities as he wants everyone to think. He overcompensates on multiple levels.

Even though I was incredibly young at an unprecedented level when I stepped into Oleg’s shoes, I made it my mission to be a thousand times better than him.

Now, I don’t have to demand respect from the people around me—they just give it, willingly and without question.

Oleg turns in his seat to face me. “You want to know why I’m here? I’m here to get your brother out of prison.”

“How?” I scoff and gesture to the bartender for a bottle of beer. I need to slow down to keep what’s left of my wits around this asshole.

“I have my ways. Obviously better ones than yours, since you’ve failed to do even that.”

“What the fuck did you—”

“Here you sit, drowning whatever fucking sorrows you think you have,” Oleg snarls in my face. He leans in close and keeps his voice low; I almost wish he’d burst into one of his infamous temper tantrums just so I’d have an excuse to chuck him across the goddamn room. “While your brother rots away behind bars.”

I smirk in his face. “He’s doing just fine, *Otets*. He’s had plenty of time to hit the gym and more than enough anger to fuel his workouts. They’re feeding him well, and he’s made plenty of friends. Don’t get me wrong—I want him out just as bad as you do. But he’s hardly suffering.”

Oleg studies me for a hard, long moment. “I see. I see you, *malyshonuk*, and I see right through you. You’d rather keep Tolya locked away so he won’t threaten your position among our men.”

“*My men. My Bratva.* I will never begrudge my own brother all the wealth and resources he rightfully deserves, but I worked my ass off to get where I am. Everything I have is *mine*.”

The second that word flies from my mouth, I feel bile threaten to quickly follow.

Not because I’m pretty drunk. But because the sound of that word reminds me of a similar proclamation I made to Clara Everett. About her. Alongside a promise—several promises, actually—that I’d never give her up to anyone else. Ever.

I used to think Oleg was the biggest fucking bastard on the planet.

Now, I think I’ve usurped him for that title as well.

“What do they say in this country? *Slow your fucking roll.*” Oleg laughs and claps me on the shoulder. “I was only kidding, *malyshonuk*. You shouldn’t be so serious all the time. It’s bad for your blood pressure.”

I narrow my gaze. “You’re deflecting.”

“And you’re getting on my last fucking nerve. I spent fifteen years away from my sons and now that I’m back, this is the welcome I receive? I’m here to help you, Demyen. You, Tolya, and everyone else in our family.”

Realization slaps me in the face. I lean back, studying him with new eyes. He’s right—he looks like he’s done very well back in “the old country,” which can really only mean one thing. “You got in good with the *pakhan* in Russia.”

Technically, my Bratva is an off-shoot of a much larger, much older Bratva seated in the dark forests and even darker cities of Russia. It goes back all the way to a time when families wore crests on their shields and hunted their enemies through the cold with jagged knives.

Krov' i bratstvo. Blood and Brotherhood. Ancient words.
Primal words.

Violent, destructive words.

Just like the men who still believe in them.

“We’ve had a few mutually beneficial arrangements.” Oleg quirks a smile and finishes off the last of his vodka. “I’ve done well for myself. And I did it without the gutless men you call your ‘vors,’ so you can keep your sharp tongue sheathed inside that insolent mouth of yours.”

The fact that he keeps emphasizing how little he regards the Bratva has me on full alert. I’m sure he wants me to believe he’s not interested in taking it back. He wants me to get good and comfortable with his presence—until my guard’s down enough for him to make his move.

He’ll be waiting until hell freezes over.

My guard will *never* be down with him around.

Oleg claps my shoulder again and slides off the barstool with a satisfied groan. “I need to get going. I’ve got a sweet little beauty waiting for me; I don’t want to be rude.”

Now, I do roll my eyes. “I can only hope she’s old enough for a cryptkeeper like you, *Otets.*”

He’s always had a taste for younger women—*much* younger women. The thought of him pawing some barely legal eighteen-year-old makes my already-volatile stomach churn.

He chuckles and winks at me. “Don’t begrudge an old man his joys, *malyshonuk.* She keeps me young. Reminds me of the old days with your mother.”

With that sickening thought firmly planted in my mind, he tosses a few bills onto the counter and lopes his way out of the bar.

I don’t have the stomach for another drink. I don’t have the stomach to go back home, either. So I pick up my phone and make a call.

“You’ll never guess who’s back in town,” I say with a grimace when Pavel answers.

He pauses. “I really don’t want to guess, judging by the sound of your voice.”

“Fresh off the boat from the motherland.”

“Fuck. What do you need?”

This is why Pavel is my righthand man. He knows exactly when to jump into action. “I need to know how long he’s actually been in this country and everything he’s done since he arrived. I mean *everything*. I don’t want a single fucking bathroom trip unaccounted for.”

“Gross. But I guess if his prostate is bad, he might not be long for this world.”

“Don’t get my hopes up. He’s already trying to pull the blinds on me and I’m not buying any of his shit for a second. Find out who he’s been talking to. Who’s suddenly wealthier after being in the same room with him.”

“You got it.”

I pause. So does he. My question hangs in the air and I hear him tense up as he waits for me to ask it.

Finally, I succumb to the urge. “How’s the kid?”

Pavel sucks in a deep breath. I’m pretty sure whatever response immediately came to his mind is not one I want to hear. It’s probably what I deserve, though. “The school counselor called. They’re concerned about her sudden mood swings and want to schedule a parent-teacher conference.”

Shit. Add that to the list of obvious shit I didn’t take into consideration.

I wish with every fiber of my being that I could bring Clara back. Better yet, I wish I could turn back time and not take her to that fucking auction. Or ever agree to host it for Raizo in the first place.

Hell, I wish I could just go back to those precious few nights in Fiji. Those rare, beautiful days when I actually had my head

screwed on straight.

But if I could have my own wishes granted, I sure as shit wouldn't be sitting in this dim, foul bar reeling in the aftermath of spending more than ten seconds with my own father.

What I *can* do is do right by Willow. Make her life as easy and joyous as possible. Distract her from the pain of being separated from her mother.

And, hopefully, forever hide the fact that *I'm* the one to blame.

CLARA

It's only been a few days in this place, but it already feels like an eternity.

Master gave me this bedroom shortly after he branded my thigh, acting as if this was some great and wonderful gift he expected me to be excited about. All I could do was wince and whimper.

I thought for sure he would hurt me then and there. But he didn't.

And he hasn't. Instead, he's only come into my room to check my wound and keep the bandage clean. His touch is gentle, and he keeps asking me if it's still tender. As if he actually cares about my well-being.

He doesn't. I know for a fact that he doesn't. Aside from being a sick, perverted bastard who buys women to use as toys, he barely sends me enough food to get through the day. It's a miracle if he remembers to send water with it. If it weren't for the small bathroom attached to this bedroom and the tiny sink inside it, I'd be struggling to swallow the dry crusts of toast his men set on the dresser by the door.

I'm not sure what would be worse: forgetting to feed me until my unborn child and I starve to death...

Or giving me far more attention than I want.

I lie on the bed with several decorative pillows stuffed underneath my foot so my burned leg doesn't rub against the duvet. The canopy bed has mirrors installed in the frame,

which means I can easily see the bruises and cuts still on my face from that horrible night.

I shouldn't have gotten in that car with Demyen.

I should have told him to fuck right the hell off.

My hand smooths over my stomach as I stare at myself in the mirror with another "should" percolating in my head: *I should have told him the truth.*

Even now, my stupid heart squeezes painfully at the thought of Demyen taking back every hateful word he's ever said and welcoming our baby into this world with the same warmth and enthusiasm he welcomed Willow with.

Willow...

No. I can't think of her. I can't bring her sweet memories into this terrible place. I don't want the torture Master will put me through to be filled with echoes of my sweet little girl's laughter.

I grab one of the pillows next to my head, clamp it over my face, and scream.

This time, I scream in rage.

This time, the pain is from deep within.

I hate him. I hate him. I hate him for everything. For being so caring and compassionate even when he swore he wanted to hurt me. For making me believe we actually had something, that we *were* something.

I hate Demyen Zakrevsky so fucking much—because loving him hurts even worse.

But even so, I can't stop the horrible pain in my chest where my heart used to be. I can't stop crying over the memories of being in his arms, listening to his sweet, whispered promises of forever spent in paradise with him.

I want you to come to me when you want me, when you need me, and I want you to trust that I will do everything in my power to lay the world at your feet.

Liar.

Cruel, vicious liar.

The bed gently shakes as I sob into the pillow. When I'm done screaming, I pull it down and hug it to my chest so I can at least breathe in the air of my prison cell. It smells like cedarwood and cigar smoke, laced with wisps of food wafting in from the kitchen that I know I won't be allowed to eat.

My stomach rumbles and twists painfully with hunger. I rub my hand over my not-yet-swollen womb.

And I pray—oh, how I pray—for God to keep me alive long enough to save my baby.

DEMYEN

My phone vibrates on the desk, breaking me out of a daydream I can't afford to be having. "Yeah?"

"We need you out here, stat." Mikhail, one of my *vors*, sounds like he's stuffing down panic. "It's bad."

Mikhail has been overseeing one of the shipment warehouses near the Las Vegas airport for the past few months, tracking inbound antiquities marked for upcoming auctions in the black market. It's one of our safer operations, thanks to TSA focusing on drugs and weapons more than handpainted vases, so I'm genuinely surprised to receive a call like this. "What's going on?"

"Half the warehouse is gone. Bomb went off the same time we were gunned down by a surprise attack. Luka, Sven, and Henri are dead. I took one in the leg. I don't even know how many we lost in the explosion yet."

I jump to my feet, knocking my desk chair over. "Who?"

He knows what I mean. My men almost never need an explanation. "I know they're our allies and all, but I promise you, boss. The cars, the guns, the clothing, even the way they attacked... It screams, 'Yakuza.'"

I take a few deep breaths just so I don't throw my phone across the room. "Call Erik and get his men down there to help pull out everyone you can find. Forget the merch for now; focus on lives. I want a headcount by the time I arrive."

"You got it."

The phone feels heavy when I set it down on the desk. I brace myself on my hands so I can take a moment to ground myself. I have to focus on right here, right now before I lose my absolute shit.

Too late.

Paperwork and office supplies go flying off the desk with an angry sweep of my arm. I don't know what's louder: the stapler crashing against the wall or my soul-deep bellow of rage.

I need to break things.

I need to break *faces*.

Pavel opens the door right when I'm about to throw the overturned desk chair through the window. "You called?"

"You were right. She was right." I drop the chair to the ground and just stand there. *Breathe in, breathe out. Slower than that.* "Everyone was right. Everyone but me, okay? Is that what you want to hear?!" I shout at the ceiling.

I don't need to look at him to know that Pavel is suppressing his facial expressions as best as possible. "I take it you want me to bring a car around?"

"I want you to unwind time and bitchslap me before I do anything stupid." Now, I do look at him, and I'm very aware of how unhinged I appear. "Do that, and I'll give you a huge raise."

"Man, I would if I could, believe me." He holds his hands up to keep me calm. "But I can't, so tell me what you need so I can do something in the here and now."

I wipe my face with my arm. My eyes suddenly sting. My throat is tight. "Clara tried to warn me about Raizo. Before the auction, before everything... She fucking knew and she tried to warn me and what did I do?"

He knows better than to answer that question for me.

"I swear, Pav, if it's true that Yakuza just attacked our warehouse, I'll fucking kill each and every one of them myself."

“Starting with Raizo?”

I shake my head with a laugh. “Oh, no. Save him for last. Let him watch me burn his empire to ash. And then feed him his own balls as vengeance for Clara.”

Pavel folds his arms across his chest and tilts his head to one side. “Interesting. I thought we were exacting vengeance *on* Clara. Now, we’re doing it *for* her?”

That stops me mid-tirade. I know what he’s getting at and I hate it. But I can’t deny it.

I sigh and slump against the side of the desk. “I fucked up. I know I fucked up beyond fixing. So yeah, we’re getting vengeance for her. Because she’s been right all along. And Raizo’s the motherfucker who needs to pay for what happened to Tolya. Not her.”

“I agree.” He rubs his jaw in thought. “I don’t have a clue how it all stitches together, but Raizo being responsible for Tolya’s incarceration makes a hell lot more sense than Clara. What does she have to gain from it? Nothing. But what does he have to gain from it?”

I laugh because now I want to kick my own ass. “*Everything*. Oleg said it himself at the bar: the investigation into Tolya got him deported. Between him being out of the country and Tolya in prison, it looks like a good wager to place on this Bratva failing. No more competition for the Yakuza, and no more so-called truce to worry about.”

“So where does that place Clara? As an accessory?”

That’s exactly what I’m afraid of. Somehow, Raizo must have orchestrated the murder of Michael Little and placed the blame on Tolya, leaning on Clara’s involvement for leverage.

She was eight. A literal *child*. No way are any Yakuza making up murder plots with children in lead roles.

Because, unlike *me*, they can clearly see that children don’t typically commit murder.

I suck in air through my teeth and stare at the wall. It would be great if the stucco pattern would start forming solutions to all

my problems.

But it remains stubbornly still.

“We need to tread carefully when we get to the warehouse. And in all our dealings with Raizo’s men. As much as my gut’s screaming it’s all his doing, I don’t want to burn any bridges without confirming.”

An idea suddenly strikes. I slowly lift my head as it settles in.

“And to do that... we need to talk to Greg.”

CLARA

When the door finally opens again, it's just after sunset. I haven't moved from the bed. Just haven't felt the need to.

It's easier not to move. Not to think. Numb inside and out, top to bottom—that is the way.

Master walks in with a bowl and bandages in one hand and fabric in the other. "On your stomach, *umnitsa*."

I do as he says, rolling onto my stomach in the center of the bed so he has room to sit down and examine my wound. When he does, his touch has the same gentleness as before. It's confusing, and I hate it.

"How does it look?" I ask, my voice partly muffled by my arms propping my head.

He smiles as he lifts the old bandage and takes a peek. "Beautiful. Still no infection, and the redness has gone down. Nice and clean, too. I was afraid I might have nicked you with the outer edges, but thank goodness I didn't. There's no do-overs with something like this."

I'm sure it would be funny if it wasn't my flesh he seared like a steak. "Thank you."

Hold up—*what*? Why did I thank him? What the hell?

Master swaps the bandages with meticulous care. When he's done, he sighs and holds a hand out to me. "Come, stand up. I have something for you."

As much as I do not want to take his hand, I do it anyways just to keep him in this decent mood. Once I'm on my feet and standing in front of him, he holds up the fabric to me.

“Put this on.”

It's not much more than a satin nightgown, but I'll take it. Even though it hugs my body and reveals every dip and curve to his heated gaze, I feel better with something on to cover me even a little.

I don't know if I'm supposed to thank him or remain silent, so I mutter, “It's beautiful.”

Master smiles, then stands and takes both my hands in his. “Not as beautiful as you. Now, shall we?”

I'm unsettled by how nice he's being. It's harder to track his moods or anticipate his next move when he's acting like a decent human being—a gentleman, even—and leading me on into a comfort zone I'm pretty sure is going to turn out to be a facade.

Just like someone else I know.

He leads me back into the dining room and I immediately suck in a sharp breath. My gaze flicks around to search for any men he might have hiding in the shadows, ready to throw me down onto the table and inflict some other form of torture on me.

But Master only chuckles and pulls a chair out for me. “Relax, *umnitsa*. We're just going to have supper. I'm sure you're very hungry.”

I gingerly sit down in the chair as he takes his own seat. The table is already set with platters of food and bowls of what looks like corn chowder sit in front of us.

“Go on,” he encourages with a flick of his hand. “Eat.”

I take a very tentative sip of the soup. *My fucking God, that's delicious.*

“Whoa, slow down there!” Master laughs and pulls me out of my reverie. I didn't even notice how fast I've been scarfing it down. “I'll be sure to give my chef your compliments. Just don't make yourself sick. This table is Amazonian teak.”

My face heats. I take slower sips and grab a dinner roll to dip into the creamy broth, mindful to be slow with that, too.

Master sits back in his chair as he watches me. “So tell me, pretty one: what did you do before you came here?”

You mean, before you bought me to be your slave? I dab my mouth with a cloth napkin. “I was a housekeeper.”

“Hotel?”

I shake my head. “Private residence.”

He grunts his acknowledgement. “I have a hard time imagining you working as someone’s maid. But I do have a much easier time imagining you in one of those sexy French maid outfits.”

“Sorry to disappoint,” I say as a test of a joke. “My uniform was pretty boring.”

Master laughs. *Thank God.* “There’s nothing about you that is boring, believe me.” He rips a bite from his dinner roll and chews before asking, “Any children?”

I can’t freeze, because that would give away my answer before I even say it. So I force myself to keep taking small bites of food so he won’t notice the way my limbs suddenly feel heavy with deep panic.

“No.” I clear my throat and sip some water. “No kids.”

Something in the way he looks at me gives me the sense that he doesn’t believe me. Not quite.

“You’re what, twenty? Twenty-one?”

“Twenty-three.”

He nods. A knowing smile slowly spreads across his face. “A pretty thing like you would never go unnoticed. And you’re not a virgin, or they would have told me at the auction.”

What is he getting at? Why does it matter? I’m here, he owns me, and that’s all that matters.

Unless... it’s not enough.

Unless he's one of those especially sick bastards who are never fully satisfied.

I return to my soup just for an excuse to not look at him. Dad was a terrible father and husband, a dirty cop, and a backstabbing asshole... but shit, there were things he confronted as a cop that sickened even him. Things that made him sit up on the couch at night, blankly staring at the static on the screen as he tried to drink away whatever horrors he witnessed that day.

Is that who Master is? The kind of monster to go after children as well as adults?

Even if he is, I won't let him get Willow. I can't. I'll kill both of us before he ever reaches her.

"Looks aren't everything," I counter, keeping my voice placatingly soft.

Master chuckles. "Looks are enough to get the job done. You can't look me in the eyes and tell me no man has plowed between your legs and planted a baby in that belly of yours."

I can and I will, you sick fuck. "Modern medicine is a marvel."

He exhales through his nostrils. He takes a long sip of what looks like beer as he studies me, then tilts his head to one side with curiosity. "Why are you lying to me?"

My heartbeat feels like it's screaming in my ears. *Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh, God*—over and over again.

"What makes you think I'm lying to you?" I ask before shoveling another spoonful into my suddenly-dry mouth.

He studies me a bit more. I'm sure that subtle smirk of his is going to twist into something violent—maybe the steak knife next to his plate will get called into action to give me a matching brand—but then he just shrugs.

"Simply a hunch." He pauses again, swirling the drink in his hand with subtle turns of his wrist. "You know, I'd hate to separate a mother from her child. Or children. We could bring yours here—"

"No!"

Everything in this room stops. I swear, even the clock stops ticking.

I fucked up.

And the evil grin that slowly spreads across his face confirms I played right into his hand.

“You see, *umnitsa*, I am a very powerful man. I have connections, spies, informants—whatever you want to call people who are too loyal to me to hide anything. Either I pay them very well for their information or they’re too terrified of me to try my patience. The difference is not so important.”

I set my spoon down. Suddenly, I’m no longer hungry. If what he says is true... if what he’s implying is real...

He not only knows about Willow—*he knows how to find her.*

Call his bluff. Do it. I have to keep my head on straight. I have to remind myself that we’re playing a very dangerous game here, and he’s holding all the cards. “Why does it matter either way?” I croak. “You don’t want some kid running around, getting in your way. A big, important man like you doesn’t have time for children.”

“I can see why you’d think that.”

“Do you have children?” I don’t know why I ask that. It flies out of my mouth without warning, but I’ll say anything to get his attention off mine.

Master slowly nods once. “I do.”

Interesting. I lick my suddenly-dry lips and try for a placating, but small, smile. “I can imagine you wouldn’t want them around this.”

“My children are grown.” He sighs again. For a moment, he looks almost wistful. “I did my best. As any parent could hope for. They didn’t turn out how I wanted, but it is what it is.”

“Did they know about your... um... ‘business dealings’?” I subtly gesture to myself. The fact that he has a fucking *brand* ready to go suggests I’m not his first slave.

“Not in the most specific terms. Not until they were old enough to understand the delicate nature of the skin trade. But like I said: they didn’t take the paths I wanted them to.”

Translation: there’s a solid chance his grown kids aren’t complete fucking animals who buy and sell women like cattle. Children who—maybe, if they ever happen to visit their father—might actually help me.

Still, I need to know something for my more immediate future. “Have you ever thought about having more children?”

Master barks out a laugh. Then he looks at me a bit more thoughtfully, heat flooding his gaze. “Why do you ask? Eager to be bred?”

I try to hide the shudder of disgust. “Hardly. But whatever happens is going to happen, isn’t it?”

“That it is.” He smirks. “Which is why, for now, I’ve decided against finding your child, or children, to bring them with us. Now that you’ve planted the seed in my head, *umnitsa*, I’m imagining how delicious it will be to plant my seed in you.”

Fuck.

My head starts swimming. I’m already pregnant, so I’m not worried about carrying this monster’s baby... yet... but he’s making it very clear that he’s going to do everything he can to make sure I do.

I shouldn’t be surprised. Martin took a similar route with me when I threatened to leave him.

Now, it’s my turn to smirk. My head is still feeling weird, but I’m also feeling a bit bolder. A bit braver. “How do you know you still can? You’re not exactly a spring chicken. You could be shooting blanks.”

His face suddenly darkens. *Shit*. But instead of lunging at me, he just watches me struggle through my growing haze. “Be mindful of that mouth, *umnitsa*. I don’t need to use duct tape to silence you.”

“And I have people looking for me. Cops. Detectives. Important people.”

It's a slight bend of the truth, but not a total fabrication.

Master chuckles. "If that were true, I'd know."

Double shit. Also, my eyelids feel super fucking heavy. So do my hands. And my feet.

I stare at my corn chowder. Most of the bowl is gone; I'd chugged it down like the starving woman I was.

I glance over at his bowl. He's barely touched it. Realization dawns on me. He sees it, and that evil grin is back.

"What... did you... do?" My words sound slurred. And like they're not my own words. Not from my own body.

Master slowly slides from his chair and walks over to me. He strokes my hair back with one hand. "It's more about what I'm *going* to do. I'm going to teach you a very important lesson, *umnitsa*. One that you need to learn quickly now that you belong to me."

He scoops me up into his arms like I weigh nothing to him. And even though I want to fight him, I want to wriggle out of his embrace and run the fuck away...

I can't.

I can't move. I can't think straight.

"Everything you have is because of me. Everything you are is what I tell you to be."

To my horror, he starts to carry me down an unfamiliar hallway. One that very clearly leads to *different*, as-yet-unseen bedrooms.

"If I decide it's time for you to shut the hell up, I'll make you. And if I want to enjoy your sweet body without a fight, that's exactly what will happen."

He nudges a door open with his foot. It's a bedroom. A very large, very masculine bedroom that smells just like him.

"You are mine, *umnitsa*. Mind, body, and soul. Allow me to prove it."

DEMYEN

I think I have a drinking problem.

As in, there's not enough drinks in my system to help me forget all about my problems.

Twenty men.

Twenty. Fucking. Men.

Gone.

And those are the ones we couldn't recover. There's another ten in the hospital right now, with at least three undergoing intensive care who—per the text updates I keep receiving from Pavel—may not survive the night. It's been touch-and-go since we pulled them from the rubble and loaded them into ambulances.

Normally, I'd organize a much smoother, covert cleanup. But this time is different. This time, I don't care if tongues start wagging about who I am and what I do in the shadows.

This time, I want the public eye to focus squarely on the very obvious Yakuza attack.

I stare at the bottom of the pool as I sit on the edge of the lounge chair, watching the way the slight ripples of the water make the moon's reflection dance.

I wonder what Raizo will look like down there, staring up at me as he fights for his last breath. As he struggles to free himself from the cement shoes I will personally fit on him.

No one fucks me over.

No one.

Clara's face suddenly appears in my mind and I try to shut my eyes against it. I can't. There's a voice inside my head asking me if I'm angrier that Raizo is probably the bastard who killed my men...

Or that he's the bastard who kidnapped and sold my woman.

No, not "kidnapped." I brought her there myself. I might as well have tied her up in a large satin bow and added a gift tag.

For Raizo. Love, Demyen.

The thing is, I didn't bring her there to sell her. Not really. I made Clara dress up to dangle the carrot in front of Raizo so his hunger and greed would blind him to my own ambitions.

No, that's not true, either.

Be honest with yourself for once, asshole.

I brought her with me to that stupid auction to test myself. Was I really so pissed at her to sell her as a sex slave? Or would I pull my head out of my own ass and finally acknowledge what she's come to mean to me?

I'm the one who I dangled the carrot in front of.

And as soon as that *mudak* called her a slave, I knew she was mine, now and always. I knew I couldn't go through with it. I knew I needed to become the man that Clara and Willow needed me to be.

I tried to get her out. I did.

But I failed.

Maybe I'm the one who deserves to wear cement shoes.

The soft sound of little feet pitter-patters across the cool pavement toward me. In an instant, my heart leaps into my throat and I don't need to look up to know who it is.

"Mister... Mister Zak-zakrem—"

I clear my throat to choke back the anguish. "Willow, you can call me Demmy. It's okay."

This is the first time she's actually spoken to me since Fiji. There's no escaping *that* guilt.

"Mommy said I shouldn't." Willow is staring at the ground. "In case you get mad again."

Fucking hell. I am officially the worst fucking human being on this goddamned planet.

She wipes her nose with the back of her hand. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"I don't know."

I sit up straighter to get a better look at her. It's past ten; she's in her nightgown and clutching one of her stuffed animals in her hand. "Willow," I gently ask, "what's going on?"

Tears brim in her long lashes and she still avoids looking at me. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry for whatever I did! I'm sorry I made you mad! I don't—I don't know what I did but I promise I won't do it again!" She hiccups, then bursts into tears.

The pieces fall together in the worst way.

Fiji.

The plane ride back.

The way I coldly shoved her aside and acted like she was just extra baggage.

How I forced her into that tiny closet of a room without a second thought.

I've been a monster to a girl who was raised in a world full of them. I was the knight she needed—and I've failed her, too.

"God, Wills... come here." I hold out my hand to her. When she doesn't move, I hold out my other hand until I'm basically begging her for a hug. Because... well, I am. "*Dorogaya*, please. Just come here."

She dares a quick peek up at me.

Then she sprints into my arms to cry some more, her little face buried in my chest.

At first, I mean to just pat her back and reassure her that we're good. But something inside me snarls, *That's not good enough!* and instantly pulls her into my arms to hug her tight. I scoop her up onto my lap to cradle her as she cries, kissing the top of her head and murmuring things she deserves to hear.

"You didn't do anything, Willow. At all. I'm the one who messed up. I'm the one who was mean, and I am so sorry. I am so deeply sorry. You didn't deserve that. You didn't deserve any of that. I made a huge mistake and... God, I am so fucking sorry."

Yes, I dropped an f-bomb for this kid. She needs to know how deep my guilt—and my sincerity—runs.

Willow snuffles and hiccups a bit more. "I miss you," she manages to whimper.

"I miss you, too." Saying it aloud makes me realize I really mean it. I've missed my sweet little Willow and hearing her laughter, watching her play, and just...

Fuck.

I miss being a family.

The fact that it's taken losing Clara and smashing the innocent heart of a little girl to realize what I had—and how good I had it—is just a testament to how much I deserve that life.

Which is: none at all.

"I miss Mommy."

Shit. I'm not ready for this conversation. I can barely have it with myself, let alone with this mini-Clara who officially has me wrapped around her little finger.

"Why did Mommy leave without me?"

Because I'm a dumbass, kiddo.

I tuck her into my chest more as I slowly get up off the lounge chair. "Come on; it's bedtime."

Willow doesn't protest. She simply nestles into my warmth and lets me carry her back to her solarium bedroom. But

before I can put her down, she clings to my shirt. “Will you stay with me? Please?”

I’m instantly tired. I want to sleep. I don’t want to walk an unsteady tightrope over the delicate-yet-vague details of her mother’s sudden disappearance.

But who else will make sure she falls asleep? I’m the asshole who got rid of the woman who used to do this on a nightly basis.

So I stifle my groan and settle us into the hammock. It’s the perfect choice: it’s comfortable, it rocks, and it’s easy for Willow to snuggle under the warm blanket I wrap around her while I stroke her hair and gaze up at the stars.

As if they’re going to help me.

“Demmy?”

“Yeah?”

“When’s Mommy coming home?”

I truly, deeply wish I had an answer for that. “I don’t know, kiddo.”

Willow seems to think about that for a while. “What if she never comes back?”

“What makes you think that?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know.” Her voice is so soft and low, like she’s scared to tell me. “Please don’t make me go back with Martin.”

I go still. Then, with every ounce of sincerity within me, I make her one promise I know I will keep without hesitation. “I won’t make you go back there. And I won’t ever let him get you.”

Willow peers up at me. I know she’s looking for any sign of deception in my face, and I don’t blame her. I’ve broken far too many vows for her to believe this one is any different. “You promise?”

I tuck a curly strand of hair behind her ear and nod. “I swear it. And the oath of a *pakhan* is something that cannot be broken.”

Big words from an even bigger liar. At least, that's how I'm feeling these days. It's true—when the *pakhan* of a Bratva makes an oath to his people, it's unbreakable.

I'm definitely seeing the flaws in my leadership. I'm not supposed to have any flaws to begin with, and I was pissed as hell when Pavel told me that the Bratva was considering mutiny. But if I can't keep a promise of devotion to a woman under my protection, how can they trust my word when I promise them their lives and livelihoods?

I can start with the kid. It's not a complete overhaul, but it's a start.

And it's better than I did by her mother.

Willow nestles into my chest and gazes up at the stars with me. "Do you think Mommy misses me?"

"I *know* Mommy misses you."

"How?"

"She's your mother. You're her baby. She loves you more than anything in the world."

She seems to consider this very thoughtfully. Or, she's fallen asleep. But then she sighs and says, "Mommy misses you, too."

I'm so glad she can't see my face right now. "How do you know?"

"Because." Willow says the word like that's the only explanation I need.

"Because...?"

"Because she likes you."

I'm not sure that's an accurate statement anymore. Somewhere, out there, Clara is probably cursing every inch of ground I walk on. "I don't know, Wills. I messed up. I messed up a *lot*."

"Mommy says we need to forgive people when they mess up."

“She’s right.” It’s not easy in any way, but she’s right. I just wish I could come close to deserving Clara’s forgiveness—and I wish even more I knew how to find her so I could at least have the chance to beg her for it.

It occurs to me, now, when it’s too late to do anything about it, that these words from a little kid ring truer and deeper than I want them to. How much of this mess would have been avoided if I’d just forgiven Clara when she was a kid? Or if Tolya had? We both spent so many years holding a grudge against a terrified little girl who just wanted to survive. Forgiveness never once crossed our minds.

Willow absentmindedly plays with the family crest ring on my finger. “Mommy likes you a lot more than Martin. Like, she *like* likes you. So I think she’ll forgive you.”

I don’t think the Bratva will think highly of me taking on a kindergartener as a new advisor. But shit, this kid is wise. And a little too insightful for someone so young.

“I hope so,” is all I can think to say as a response.

She goes quiet again. Once more, I think she’s finally asleep... until she pops back up with another question. “Can I tell you a secret?”

“Sure.”

Willow sighs. “I wish you were my daddy.”

Something squeezes *hard* inside my chest.

I’m not made of Father Material. I don’t have a paternal bone in my body. I don’t have a good example of what a decent father should be like. Not once, in my entire life, have I ever felt the desire to become a parent.

Until I met this kid.

“I wish I was, too,” flies out of my mouth before I’ve finished processing the feelings flooding my head and chest.

Willow turns so she can hug me with her tiny arms. “It’s okay, Demmy. I still love you.”

No words. I have no words. I also can't see very well through the sudden mist in my eyes. I have to blink a few times before I can see the sky again.

"I love you, too, Willow."

And I mean it.

I'm shocked as shit, but I mean it.

"Tell me a story?"

Kid knows how to keep me on my toes, that's for damn sure.

"Alright." I re-tuck her blanket around her and rub her back as she snuggles in. "But you have to close your eyes, okay?"

"Okay."

"Promise?"

She smiles and closes her eyes. "Promise."

"Okay." I sigh and try to dredge up a story, any story, that doesn't involve violence or blood or families being ripped limb from metaphorical or literal limb. Something finally surfaces from my childhood—and I'm even more shocked when I realize it's a memory of my own father telling me a bedtime story.

An actually *good* memory of my father.

Probably the only one I have.

"In a certain kingdom, in a certain country—"

"What does *that* mean?"

I sigh. "It's how they start stories in Russia."

"Oh."

I open my mouth to start the story again. "In a certain—"

"But we're not in Russia."

Another sigh. I think I've signed up for far more than I bargained for. "Okay. *Once upon a time*, in a certain kingdom in a certain country, there lived and dwelt—"

"What's 'dwelt'?"

Mental note: save the cleaning supplies and headache for the next prisoner I have to torment. Just make them try to tell Willow a bedtime story. They'll spill within five minutes. "It means 'to live in.'"

"But you already said that."

"Well, it's like the person is alive, and they live inside a house."

"So why don't you just say that?"

"Because that's not how the story starts."

"Your stories start weird."

"Well, kid, here's a plot twist: they end weird, too."

Willow giggles. It's that musical little sound that makes me smile rather than start cracking my knuckles in frustration.

"*Once upon a time*, in a certain kingdom in a certain country, alive and living inside a decently-priced cottage, was a princess."

"Princesses don't live in cottages."

"They do if it's tax season."

Willow scrunches her face at me. "Huh?"

I cover her eyes with my hand. "Shush. Close your eyes. *This* princess didn't know she was a princess yet. And so, this princess, even though she was very beautiful, she lived with a very ugly man. One of those men who is ugly inside and out."

"Because he was mean?"

Images of Martin flash through my mind. "Exactly. Very mean. The worst. He didn't like it when she went outside because he knew that whenever she did, other people would see how beautiful she was and try to steal her away. The princess wanted to run away because of how mean he was, but she was also very afraid—"

"Why?"

"Well, she didn't know what the rest of the world was like. She only knew what the inside of her house was like, and so

she figured that all people were as mean as the ugly man.”

Sweet merciful heaven, Willow actually remains silent.

“One day, the princess snuck outside of her house and ran to the nearest village. She didn’t know that that was the day the prince planned to ride through and see his kingdom—”

“Was the prince handsome?” Willow asks, this time a bit more sleepily.

“Very handsome.”

“Because he was good, inside and out.”

God, if only. “He’d like to think so. Anyway, the princess tripped and fell right in front of the prince’s horse and was almost trampled. But the prince stopped and helped her up, and that’s when he saw how beautiful she was.”

“Did... he steal... her away?” She’s fighting sleep. She’s putting up a good fight, too, but she’s gonna lose.

“He wanted to. He showed her his castle and all his gold and treasure and showed her how powerful he was. And when she agreed to come live with him, the prince bragged to everyone in his kingdom about how stunningly beautiful his woman was. Listening to him brag and brag and brag was the evil witch of the woods, Baba Yaga.”

“Who’s Bobby Yay Guh?”

“Baba Yaga was not very beautiful at all. And because of this, she was jealous of the princess and wanted her beauty for herself. So, one night, Baba Yaga distracted the prince with promises of gold and fame... and then snatched the princess up and ran off into the forest.”

Willow’s only response is a soft hum of acknowledgement. I’ll take it.

“The prince cried for his love, and then he began searching everywhere for her. Who could find Baba Yaga? Who saw the witch carry the princess off into the woods? Which way did she go? No one had any answers, but the prince never gave up. Finally, one day, he decided to go deep into the woods until he found Baba Yaga and her house. When he knocked on the

door, he demanded that Baba Yaga give his princess back to him. But the only way she would agree was if he correctly answered three riddles.”

Willow’s breathing is even. She’s no longer responding to the story; I’m pretty sure she’s sound asleep.

So... I wrap up the story for myself. Quickly, and glossing over a lot of detail because there are still some things I haven’t worked out in my head. “The prince got all the right answers and took the princess back to his castle. But she was angry at him for letting Baba Yaga kidnap her, so she made him prove to her this would never happen again. And that’s how she became a princess: the prince gave her a crown and promised her the world.”

I tuck Willow’s hair behind her ear and sigh.

“And, unlike a certain *pakhan* in a certain Bratva in a certain desert city, the prince actually kept his word. He gave his princess the world, and she loved him for it.”

CLARA

I don't know where I am.

My eyes slowly adjust to the dim lighting as I take a deep breath to start taking inventory of my surroundings.

Starting with the fact that I'm naked.

I'm naked, and I *hurt. Everywhere.*

Well... almost everywhere. Thankfully, and I do literally say a small prayer of thanks for this: I'm not hurting between my legs.

It's a weird thing to take stock of, but I can't imagine any other reason as to why Master would feel the need to drug me and make me unconscious. Why use a date rape drug unless he plans on raping me?

I slowly push myself upright and immediately regret moving so fast. My head is throbbing, and every muscle in my arms and torso hurts.

When I swing my legs over the side of the bed, I wince. If I had the energy to gasp, I probably would.

My thighs are covered in bruises.

So are my arms, my breasts, and—I'm pretty sure by the soreness—my ass. The one place I'm not covered in fingerprint-sized bruises and teeth marks is my stomach. Small favors, I guess. But instead of filling me with relief, this fact fills me with dread.

What does he know? *Does he know?*

There's a note on the bedside table in a neat, masculine handwriting. *Umnitsa—I was called away to attend to some personal matters. We will finish our business later.*

So maybe he didn't touch me? Small relief, but relief nonetheless. I still feel disgusting, and not just inside on an emotional level. My skin feels sticky, and damp in some spots. I reek of smoke and vodka. I itch in places that don't make sense.

I don't know what I'm covered in. I don't *want* to know.

I want a fucking shower.

Thank God there's a bathroom attached to the bedroom—and even more, that I'm all alone to do what I need to do. Which is shuffle across the room, stumble into the lavish bathroom, and fumble for the shower knob.

I wonder if I can get the water hot enough to burn the grossness off my body. And maybe my mind, too.

I step into fairly hot water and just stand there, watching the steam rise above the glass door and quickly fog up the mirror.

There are basic toiletries here, clearly meant for a man. I pop one of the bottles open for a sniff and immediately recognize Master's scent.

No.

Absolutely not.

It was different with Demyen. I scrubbed my body in his scent to drive both of us insane with desire. And, sometimes, I did it just to feel safer. Closer to him, even. Being wrapped up in his scent was a constant reminder of how he was always around, always watching out for me, always making sure I stayed out of trouble.

It reminded me that Willow was safe.

I can't bring myself to use this other man's body wash. Not something so specifically his. At least the shampoo is more of a generic mint. I can deal with that.

I wish I could dissolve into steam and float away. It'd be so easy. No more Master. No more slavery. No more mind games or hidden drugs. No more brands or bruises on my body. I wouldn't have to see how far that sick bastard takes things with me, how long he wants to prolong this nightmare.

But...

No.

No. I have Willow.

I have Willow and I have a responsibility to see this through for her sake. I have this baby growing inside me, too, who doesn't deserve to suffer and die inside my womb just because I took the easy way out.

At the center of it all, I'm just done being everyone's meek little poor girl.

I'm gonna survive—out of fucking spite if I have to.

It's that thought that fuels the rest of my shower. I scrub every inch of my body with mint shampoo and rinse off with the matching conditioner. Sure, the water feels hotter than it probably should, but I won't feel clean unless I can be sure everything has melted right the hell off.

I take my sweet time drying myself. I hate, so much that I have to use Master's towels because that means I'm wrapping my body up in something that belongs to him. I hate even more how soft and luxurious they feel.

What is it with criminal dickheads and their linen thread counts?

There it is—that fire inside me I've been trying to keep lit through all this. The one that ignited at some point with Demyen when I decided I was done taking his shit. Or anyone's shit.

When I exit the bathroom, it's with renewed determination to give Master one hell of a fight.

But when I see what's suddenly laid out on the bed for me, that second wind quickly flies from my lungs in a sigh of half-frustration, half-despair.

A French maid's uniform.

A skimpy, "sexy" French maid's uniform.

I check the drawers and closet, but there's nothing else even remotely usable as clothes. I'm sure that's not an accident.

When I finally slide it on, it's abundantly clear this "uniform" is more for Master than for me. The ruffled bloomers are basically just a thong, with tufts of fabric at the top of my ass and barely covering my privates in front. The skirt is barely long enough to cover my hips, and it doesn't even do that much because the tulle underneath it keeps it puffed out to the sides.

The bodice is a lace-up corset that cups my breasts from the sides and presses them dramatically up and in. So much so that my nipples peek out over the upper edge of the corset, and my breasts strain against the stitching.

Set out with this negligee in a pink box are a pair of Fuck Me stiletto shoes that I know I don't have a choice about. It's wear or be worn, more or less. So I brace myself, slip them on, and struggle to balance myself for a solid five minutes before finally gaining my footing and click-clacking my way to the door.

It's clear Master wants me to go find him. Why else would he have clothes sent to me without sticking around to watch me put them on?

Before I do go to find him, I quickly twist my hair up into a neat bun and knot it into place. If he wants the full look, he'll get the full look.

Master is fairly easy to find—my first guess, the living room, was the correct one. He's sitting in a leather reclining chair wearing nothing but a robe and puffing on one of his thick cigars.

"Just in time, *umnitsa*." He gestures for me to come closer, so I do. Slowly, and with great consideration for my ankles. "I was starting to worry."

I force a small smile to my face. I have a feeling that if I want to avoid a repeat of last night, I need to play his sick games.

His darkly heated gaze travels slowly over my body. He flicks his hand to make me turn around, then mutters his approval. “Very good, *umnitsa*. Now... clean.”

I can’t prevent my brow from hitting my hairline. “Sorry, what?”

“You heard me.” He waves a casual hand to the room around us. “Clean.”

I frown. “I don’t understand—”

“It’s simple. You have experience as a maid. I need a maid. You are wearing a maid’s uniform.” He drums his fingers along the arm of the couch. “Now. Clean.”

This is when I spot the bucket of cleaning supplies on a nearby end table.

He *literally* wants me to clean.

Okay...?

I guess it’s better than getting beat up or drugged or branded or whatever sick fucking shit this pervert can think up. So I grab a bottle of spray polish and a rag, walk over to the coffee table, and get to work.

There’s nothing sexy about polishing furniture. Squirt cleaner onto a cloth, rub, repeat.

But the way Master groans and looks at me makes me realize this is a game to him—one that involves me bending over in skimpy clothing and giving him a constant eyeful of my curves.

I focus less on doing an actually good job polishing and more on moving quickly from task to task. Maybe furniture polishing was not the best place to start, since almost everything that needs it requires me to bend over.

I’m wiping down another end table when I hear Master groan.

And then the telltale sound of his hand smacking skin. Repeatedly.

I don’t know why I turn around to look. I really don’t want to. But I think I’m taken by surprise at his openness, and his

boldness, and also mildly curious to see if my guess is correct.

Which it is: he's pulled his robe aside and is now very openly stroking his penis in front of me.

"Keep cleaning." Master nods for me to continue. He slows his pace as I turn, licking his lips with appreciation in his eyes. "Don't miss a spot."

Fear shivers up my spine, and I scrub harder at the first table. I don't care if my breasts fly out at this point—I just want to get this done and over with enough that he'll leave me the fuck alone.

But it's not even five minutes later when I feel his large hand clamp down on my shoulder.

And before I have a chance to blink, I'm shoved down onto my knees.

Master fists that same hand around my bun and pulls my head back so I look up at him. He's holding his cock in the other hand, which he turns toward me.

"You have a choice, *umnitsa*." His tight grip on my hair says otherwise. "You can open that pretty mouth of yours and show me how good you suck me. Or I can open that pretty mouth for you and make you choke on it myself. Which will it be?"

"Yes, Master." I blink slowly, doing my best to show him just how sweet and compliant I can be. His perfect living fuckdoll, if that's what he wants.

He growls his approval and guides my head back. "Open wide, *umni*—"

"Sir?"

Master hisses a curse under his breath. "What?" he snaps at the intruder, who is blessedly standing far off in the doorway and very pointedly *not* looking at us.

"There's a call for you, sir."

"I'm fucking busy—"

"It's urgent, sir. Per your request?" The way the man says it sounds like he's urging Master to remember telling him to do

something so he doesn't have to spell it out.

Master glares at the man, still fisting my hair while slowly stroking his cock. Then, like a light switch was just flipped inside his head, he sucks in a deep breath and nods. "Very well. I'll take the call in my study."

The man nods and quickly leaves.

Master sighs deeply and focuses back on me. "I'm afraid I must leave you yet again. But make no mistake: I'll be back to finish this."

He seems to have more he wants to say, but the same man from earlier pops in through the doorway to discreetly remind Master of the phone call. Master snarls, but he relents and shoves me hard to the ground just so he can walk over me as he leaves.

Another man quickly approaches, taking me by the arm and leading me down an unfamiliar hallway. He doesn't say a word and he doesn't look at me. I don't know if I'm grateful for either of those things. At least he's not too rough?

I'm shoved inside a different bedroom from the first two. It's much smaller than either, but there's still a decent-sized bathroom with a shower.

I know I just took one a few hours ago. Already, I feel like I need to take a scalding hot one again.

DEMYEN

I watch the geisha pouring our tea. I can't help wondering how much is for show and how much is actually real. Is she a normal waitress wearing costume jewelry and cheap makeup...

Or one of Raizo's slaves, with "duties" that extend far beyond serving drinks?

"I've always been partial to sake," Raizo says, breaking the silence before I have the chance. "But I suppose tea is best, being the middle of the day and all."

"Better keep your wits about you." I offer a wry smile and lift my teacup to him. "I'd hate to see you trip over a simple mistake."

Like double-crossing me, you stupid motherfucker.

I was the one who insisted on meeting, and I chose a very public place for us to relax, order some food, and at least pretend like we're not about to murder each other: Raizo's beloved teahouse, filled with unsuspecting tourists and innocent staff members. It's his comfort zone and one of the few places that keeps him in check the same way my casino main floor checks me.

Basic rule: keep crime business away from your legitimate business so you always have a fallback.

And so the cops don't come sniffing around when they investigate the deaths.

Raizo smiles at me. It feels so wolfish. “How are things now that Clara is out of the picture? Are you able to relax more?”

“Funny you should ask that.” I take a soothing sip of tea before I continue. “I *was* planning on relaxing more, but then someone decided to blow up my warehouse and murder several of my men.”

“Oh, God, are you alright?” Raizo frowns. I’ve seen him bluff before, and he’s not very good at it. This is no exception.

Fuck. Clara was right.

“I’m pissed, is what I am, Raizo.” I set my teacup down carefully. “I’m pissed at whoever did this to my men as well as me.”

He raises his teacup to me in a mock salute. “Here’s to you finding the bastard. Or the bitch, I suppose. Whoever they may be.”

Bull-fucking-shit. I blink slowly. Better now than never. “You wouldn’t happen to know anything about the attacks, would you? Word on the grapevine, so to speak.”

Raizo lowers his cup at a snail’s pace, his eyes narrowed at me. “I’m honored that you think so highly of me,” he finally says in response. “But I do not actually know everything about everything that goes on in this city.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, my friend. You have eyes and ears all over Vegas. And hands.”

He chuckles, but I don’t believe it for a second. It’s too forced. Too theatrical. “Not as much as Greg does. We’re not exactly on speaking terms right now, so you’ll need to go after him yourself.”

“I didn’t know you’re friendly with the police,” I calmly remark.

“I’m not.”

Now, it’s my turn to narrow my eyes at him. “Oh, but I think you are. Detective Everett was there at the auction, alongside his little protégé. I sure as shit didn’t invite them. I do hope they didn’t give you any trouble.”

Raizo sips his tea with a shrug. “Nothing I couldn’t handle. I’ve always wanted an excuse to give Marty a good beating, anyway.”

I lean back and brood. Is he doing this on purpose? Or does he really not realize how much information he’s revealing?

There’s a part of me that still wants to hold on to the stubborn idea that Clara lied about everything to save her own skin. Mainly because that would exonerate me from all guilt over losing her to Raizo and his perverted auction.

But I’d have to be blind, deaf, and brain-dead to miss the not-so-subtle clues the Yakuza lord keeps dropping. *He knows what’s happening.*

I’m about to call him out on his bluff and maybe, finally, risk my own public reputation by breaking Raizo’s arm over this low table when my phone buzzes.

OLEG: *We need to talk.*

My teeth start grinding. What does *he* want?

DEMYEN: *No, we really don’t*

OLEG: *Don’t get sassy with me, boy. I have something to show you.*

DEMYEN: *This sounds like it could be a phone call*

OLEG: *Trust me, you’ll hate yourself if you don’t come*

Trust him. As if. That’s the most hilarious joke he’s told in years.

DEMYEN: **Fine. But I’m not coming alone.**

“Who are you texting?” Raizo asks like it’s any of his business. He’s not being aggressive about it, just... nosy.

“Just some family,” I say with a casual sigh. “Trying to make plans to catch up before they go back home.”

Raizo smiles and nods. “I haven’t seen Oleg in years. Give him my regards for me, will you?”

I pretend like my sudden full-body pause is because I’m trying to think of something new to text, and not at all because

Raizo's revealed his trump card.

No one knows my father's in the country. Not even his own Bratva.

So how the hell does *Raizo* know?

"Absolutely." Once again, I slap on one of my signature smiles. "I'm sure he'll be happy to hear from an old friend."

O: *My manor on 78th and 5th.*

Raizo polishes off his tea and munches on a rice cake. "He used to be one of my best customers. Still is. Just not as frequently."

I keep my eyes on my phone screen as a sort of mask over my own internal responses. Because now, my mind is whirring through the possibilities regarding my father. "It's too bad he missed your recent auction."

"Oh, he was there."

"I didn't see him at the cocktail party."

Raizo chuckles. "Well, you know him. Everything has to be so fucking exclusive for his tastes. He never wants to 'mingle with the rabble,' as he so delicately put it when he RSVP'd."

"And you didn't think to warn me?" I'm taking slow, deep breaths and doing my damned hardest to not sound like I'm seething with rage.

Raizo shrugs. "Your family issues are not my business."

"Aren't they?"

This is it—the standoff between us that feels long overdue. Raizo stares at me, his face unreadable. I return the same expression, both of us unwilling to let the other see the cracks in our facade.

We don't move.

We don't speak.

The only difference is, there's fear in his eyes.

Fear, and a rolling realization that the jig is up; the curtain has been yanked aside. I'm onto him. He can't hide from me

anymore.

“In any case,” I say to break the silence, “time for me to run. Business meetings and all. Thanks for the tea.”

The first person to break the silence is the one who loses. I know that and I know he knows that. I want him to feel this small victory, to think that I’m rattled by his revealed control over all the different aspects of my life. My father, my enemies, my woman.

It’s that last part that makes me hesitate at the front door.

Because that’s what she was to me. Clara was my woman. I was too stupid and too blind to see it or accept it, but we had a relationship that deserved far better treatment than I gave it.

And fucking *Raizo* is sitting over there, calmly sipping his tea, as if he didn’t rip her from my arms and sell her to some monster on the other side of the world.

My fists clench.

I could do it. I could turn back around and beat the ever-living shit out of him. I could break both his arms and sear his smug face on the hibachi before his Yakuza swarms the place.

It’s the vibration of my phone in my pocket that saves me from doing something stupid. “What?”

“Something felt like I needed to call rather than text.” Pavel’s arched brow is practically audible over the phone. “Everything good?”

I shoulder through the front door and decide to take a walk around the block to calm my shot nerves. “Clara was right—Raizo is up to something. I need to know how far it goes before we take him out.”

Pavel whistles low. “Wow. Okay, what do ya got? I’ll put my feelers out.”

“He knows about Oleg. He knows Oleg is in town, and apparently Daddy Dearest was an honored guest at the auction. Didn’t think to tell me. Or maybe decided not to on purpose.”

There's a long, heavy pause on Pavel's end. Then, "You don't think..."

"I don't know what to think without getting a fucking migraine. Let's start with Oleg and see just how cozy those two are. Oh, and you're coming with me for a visit."

"Oh. Lovely." No small amount of sarcasm drips from Pavel's voice. "Shall I bring a bottle of wine?"

"Only if it's poisoned."

Pavel chuckles. "I'm not cleaning up that mess. Send me the address and I'll meet you there."

CLARA

“Open.”

I hold back the sigh and do as he says, obediently opening my mouth while keeping my gaze lowered to the floor. He presses the single grape between my lips and I take it reluctantly. At least his grumble of approval means I’ll be spared his backhand for another minute or two.

And at least I’m not kneeling on the carpet this time. My knees have been growing red and raw, and I think Master noticed because he frowned at them the last time I stood. After throwing me a bottle of lotion and telling me to “fix that shit,” he hasn’t made me kneel since.

Today, he’s put me in a silky negligee with lace trim along the collar, which dips so low I’m not sure it counts as coverage. The hem just barely covers my butt cheeks, and of course I’m not allowed to wear any undergarments.

Master wants me “available” at all times. And even though he hasn’t actually taken me to bed yet, he takes great pleasure in tormenting me with constant threats that any moment might become *The Moment*.

Like right now. Master’s hand dances on my thigh, up and down, up and down. His other hand keeps feeding me grapes. When juice trickles from a particularly juicy bite, Master leans in close and drags his thumb along the path.

“We have a special guest coming over today.” Master pushes another grape into my mouth. “I want you on your best behavior.”

“Yes, Master.” I keep my voice soft. It’s no use being anything other than cooperative; I need him to trust me. It’s too soon to try to escape, but once he starts showing signs of trust...

Well, I won’t be waiting around to see how far he’ll go. I’ve got too much at stake and too many people waiting for me to get the hell out of here.

“Don’t get any ideas about asking him for help. He’s the last person in this world who will save you.”

Against my better judgment, my body stills. Does this man know how to read my mind? Does he know I was just now thinking about escaping?

Master’s free hand roughly grabs me by the chin and yanks my gaze up to meet his. He’s not pissed, but he’s also in no mood for games. His grip on my chin tightens to a painful level. I’m pretty sure there will be bruises in a few minutes.

“Listen to me now, *umnitsa*. He will not help you. No one will help you. You belong to me, and no one ever dares steal from me. If you so much as blink at him the wrong way, I will not hesitate to throw you down and fuck you raw right in front of him. And then maybe, if he asks nicely, I’ll let him take a turn on you as well.”

I can’t hide the shudder of fear that rolls through me. It makes his face contort into a sick smile. It’s not difficult to see he’s imagining me acting up just so he has the excuse to do exactly that—and I’m sure his “guest” is just as horrible as he is.

How long will I have to endure this hell before there’s even a glimpse of a chance at escaping?

“Will you let him hurt me?”

Master looks at me like he’s considering the options. His eyes lower to drink in the sight of my deepened cleavage. “All my people are dangerous men. But the one coming today is the worst. Ruthless, heartless, and he will not hesitate to kill you if I allow it. After he’s thoroughly enjoyed making you scream for mercy, of course.”

I bite my lip to stop it from trembling. I believe him. I’ve seen enough to know he’s telling the truth about the company he

keeps.

Master relaxes and chuckles. “But since I paid so much for this sweet pussy, I’m not about to lose it to some petulant boy’s temper. I won’t let him kill you, *umnitsa*. But fuck around on me, and I will let him hurt you until you beg me for death.”

I lower my eyes and nod. “Yes, Master.”

“Good girl.” He rises to his feet. “Then it’s time to go get ready. He’ll be here soon.”

Slow and steady breaths. I need to keep taking slow, steady breaths so I can keep my thoughts in order and not lose any chance of escape because I was too terrified to see it.

I don’t know who Master’s friends are. But I can guess, given his transaction back at the auction, that it’s probably Raizo stopping by for a check-in.

Or worse—one of the other bidders who still wants a taste.

DEMYEN

In an effort to avoid seeing my father for as long as humanly possible, I make a pit stop back at the villa compound to check on things.

Willow is still in school when I roll in, but that's probably for the best. There are a few things I need to adjust in her life to make sure she stays safe and secure, and she's been jolted enough in the past few weeks. I won't upset her with any new changes until everything is in place and the transitions can be made smoothly.

When I walk through the main house to the courtyard, I see Phase One is well underway.

Roxy is sipping on a Mai Tai, undoubtedly a peace offering given by Bambi to placate her demands for Clara. She and Bambi are deep in discussion, their heads bowed together as they flip through something on Bambi's tablet screen.

The moment they hear me approaching, they both smoothly slide off their chairs and calmly walk over to me.

Roxy's slap is a *lot* harder than I expected.

"You son of a bitch," she hisses at me. Bambi shoots her a warning glare and tries to guide her back, but she shakes my assistant off without looking away from me. "You were supposed to keep her safe! You were supposed to *protect* her!"

These women are going to be the end of me. I'm supposed to be an immovable, unshakeable mob boss—but instead, I'm getting my ass handed to me by a five-foot-nothing lab tech.

And I'm not putting her in place. Because I deserve her wrath.

"I'm sorry—"

"You're sorry?!" Roxy laughs and nearly doubles over with exasperation. "You're *sorry*?! What the fuck kind of lame-ass excuse—"

"Careful," Bambi softly warns.

Roxy snorts. "Tell *him* that. All this power, all these resources, all these men, and you couldn't keep my Clara from getting kidnapped? The fuck kind of operations do you have going on here?"

I glance at Bambi, who studiously flips through something on her tablet again. *Kidnapped*? That's what she thinks? That would explain why Roxy only slapped me and isn't currently trying to gauge my eyes out with a jagged spoon.

"We're doing everything we can to track her down and bring her home."

Bambi quickly glances up at me, and I don't miss the swiftly-concealed look of surprise on her face.

Okay. Maybe I haven't been the most proactive in that department.

But I mean what I said just now: we're going to do everything we can to find Clara and bring her home.

Until then, I need Roxy's help.

"The thing is," I say as I turn to her, "I have a pretty good hunch that whoever took her doesn't care about the well-being of kids. Now, think what you will of me, but I happen to love that little girl." I point at Willow's bedroom just to make things extra clear.

Roxy seems to hesitate in her rage against me. She even takes a step back when she sees who I'm talking about. "What do you need me to do?"

"Help Willow."

"I'm all in, for sure, but..."

“But?”

She scoffs with a shrug. “I’m all tapped out, dude. You saw my place. I barely make enough to feed myself, let alone anyone else. I—”

“You don’t have to worry about money,” I reassure her. “You’ll never have to worry about money when it comes to Willow. And neither will she, even after she’s grown.”

It’s a decision I came to the day after I lost Clara. All the cash from her sale feels cursed; I can’t rest while it burns in my own pocket, reminding me of my sins.

But giving it all to Willow means that *Clara* is the one taking care of her. It’s *Clara* paying for her education, her housing, her clothes, and one day, her career or a family of her own.

Right now, it’s *Clara* making sure that no one can find Willow while I hunt down the fucker who has her.

Roxy’s brow nearly touches her hairline. “Do I want to know how? Or why?”

“No. But you need to take Willow and keep her in hiding until it’s safe.”

“Which means leaving Vegas,” Bambi adds. “Keep her away from Martin.”

“Done.” Roxy doesn’t hesitate to agree to that. But then she frowns. “I’m gonna have to quit my job, aren’t I?”

I nod. “It’s for the best. Keeps you out of trouble with LVPD, and you’ll be able to keep a constant eye on Willow. Your own expenses will be covered, of course.”

“Of course.” Roxy sighs and stuffs her fingers into her back pockets. “Well, then. I guess I should start apartment hunting in Reno.”

Bambi taps a few things out on her tablet. “We’ll have a safe house ready for you in Colorado. Something private out by Breckenridge.” She looks up at me. “Mako just confirmed he’s set to accompany them on the flight over. He’s rounding up three more for the rotating watch.”

“Good.” I nod. “Make sure there are exact duplicates of everything ready for Willow so the transition isn’t as intense. And Roxy, let me know if there’s ever anything either of you need.” I quickly tap out a text to her number so she knows how to contact me.

For her part, Roxy remains silent. She glances between Bambi and me, and I’m getting the impression that she’s eating her earlier words. And the slap.

Good.

Because I don’t actually just sit around twiddling my thumbs while people fuck with my world and my own. I have a zero-tolerance policy for anyone laying hands on what’s mine.

Even if it takes me a minute to recover from a blip of stupidity.

“So... I’m just... gonna...” She motions with her thumbs that she’s headed toward Willow’s room, which is fine by me. There’s a lot to catch up on in terms of what the kid loves, what to bring with them, the kind of lifestyle she’s grown accustomed to.

Even if I fail to find Clara, I’m not going to fail Willow. She deserves the best in this world, the best in her life, and even if I can’t be by her side to give it, I’ll always make sure she has it.

Bambi doesn’t look up at me, but I still see that brow of hers do an elegant arch. “Does this mean we’re going to war?”

I don’t answer right away. Not because it’s a “no,” but because hearing it out loud adds a certain weight I haven’t been feeling until now.

If we do this, if I make good on my word to track down Clara and take my fury out on her captor, there’s a strong probability that it will result in full-on war with another Bratva, mafia, or hell—a small country, given Raizo’s extensive guest list.

And Raizo’s own involvement means war with the Yakuza is basically ensured. Whether he’s tangled up with my father on other shady business or not, I’ve got a bone to pick with him.

My sigh is heavy with the knowledge that answering yes to Bambi's question means putting my men's lives at stake. But, at the same time, I've quickly discovered that Clara Everett is worth burning the world to ash for.

And if Bambi's expectant face, Pavel's constant reports, and my Bratva's overall morale is any indication, it seems like they wholeheartedly agree.

"Yeah." I pull my phone from my pocket to call up Pavel's number. "It does."

Finally, Bambi lifts her face to give me the biggest grin I've seen in years. "It's about damn time."

DEMYEN

Pavel falls into step at my side the second I leave the office. “Glad you’re on the warpath, because you’re not gonna like what I found.”

I grit my teeth and remind myself—via my car keys biting into my palm—that there’s no one and nothing here worth beating to dust. Best reserve that energy for those who deserve it.

Like Oleg.

Like Raizo.

Like Martin.

Like Greg.

“Shoot.”

He blows out a puff of air and holds the garage side door open for me. “Oleg has been in the country for a *while*. I’m talking at least a year, if not two whole years, doing God-knows-what in whichever back alley—”

“You don’t know what he’s been up to?”

Pavel shoots me a quick look of irritation that he wipes off almost immediately. “You’re pretty good at covering your own tracks. How easy did you expect your old man to be?”

I grunt. “Fine. Continue.”

“We’re still digging, still handing out bribes, and I did find a weak spot in Salt Lake City with a group of Mormons he pissed off.”

I hate that it makes me snort a laugh. “Fucking figures. What did they have to say?”

“That he needs Jesus.”

I roll my eyes and climb into the passenger side of the Rezvani; it’s best to let Pavel take the wheel since he’s got a calmer head.

I’m going to need the road trip to clear my mind as much as possible. I haven’t felt this tense in a long time, and I can’t afford to be off-kilter when facing down the leading star of my childhood nightmares.

My father is up to something. He always is, always has been, but Tolya and I usually had a pulse on his dealings until everything went to shit with Michael Little. Once Oleg abandoned ship for Russia, nothing he did had any effect on me, Tolya, or anyone in the Bratva.

So it’s been “out of sight, out of mind” for a blessed fifteen years or so.

“I’m guessing he didn’t run into them at a bar,” I grumble as Pavel pulls us out of the garage and peels down the long driveway.

“Stumbling out of one, actually. They said he ‘reeked of booze, sweat, and bad decisions.’ They tried to pray for him and ask him about his faith, but he told them where to shove their religion and swung a few punches. Only reason why he wasn’t arrested was because they didn’t feel like pressing charges.”

“They should have. Would’ve saved us all the trouble.”

“Yeah, well, here we are.”

Here we fucking are, indeed, driving toward the last person I ever want to see. “What else did you manage to find? Bank records?”

Pavel nods. “Only a few, but we’re still digging. You and I both know he’s funneling money through various channels, but I managed to get a guy on the inside of a few offshore accounts.” He pauses. “There’s been a lot of activity in The

Cayman Islands. Recently pulled a shit ton of money in a single transaction for cash.”

I frown. “How much?”

“Millions. Tens of millions. Best as we can tell, between forty and sixty million dollars, American. And this was only a few weeks ago.”

“Before the auction?”

Pavel discreetly sucks in a breath, but I still hear it. The auction is a sore subject for him because, regardless of my status over him, he still blames me for taking Clara there and losing her to the world that she, as he put it, “didn’t deserve to be thrown into.”

He nods only once and adjusts his hands on the steering wheel. “Shortly before.”

Raizo did say Oleg was in attendance. “Are we thinking a single purchase? Or...”

“That’s another anomaly we found with his accounts in Hong Kong.”

I whip my gaze to stare at him in disbelief. “You hacked Hong Kong?”

Pavel scoffs. “I fucking wish. Nah, I got a guy on the inside who knows a guy who owes someone else a favor, so I just... helped a brother out. And then he helped me out.”

I wave a hand for him to go on.

He smirks. “So our guy in Hong Kong says Oleg’s been conducting some pretty lucrative business for the better part of the last decade. Withdrawals and deposits all evenly balanced and consistent with purchase and sales transactions. In the hundreds of thousands, though, so we’re confident it’s bigger than antiquities. Whatever Oleg is doing in the Motherland, it’s pulling in an average of ten million profit weekly, give or take.”

There’s only one black market industry I can think of that pushes that much product, at that price, *that* easily. “Do we know if he supplied any women to Raizo recently?”

Pavel shakes his head. “From what little we’ve been able to glean Stateside, Oleg is here for something else.” Again, he hesitates. “But from what we’re hearing over in Russia, Ukraine, even Bosnia...”

The way he drops off and just stares out the window sets me on edge. “What?”

“It’s...” He sighs. “Well, it’s widely unconfirmed as being definitely him, so just... keep that in mind.”

“But...?”

“But it sure fucking sounds like something he’d do. Catering to a certain type of clientele that pays premium fees for a no-limits experience with his ‘product.’”

My jaw sets and I lean back in the seat. “No-limits experience,” I repeat, mostly to myself.

“I’m guessing you don’t need me to fill in the blanks.”

“No.”

And I’d rather he didn’t. In Oleg’s skin trade, saying “no” is not an option.

My own business has opt-out opportunities at every point along the way. My escorts work as they please, free to give or not give whatever experiences they’d like. They know they have the might of the Bratva behind them, too—the second a misbehaving client raises a hand against any of my women, they quickly find that hand no longer works as well as it once did.

What Pavel is describing is a whole other level of human trafficking. It’s the side that delves far into the darkness of human depravity. The kind that takes place in concrete rooms with walls built to swallow up screams.

My stomach churns at the thought of my own flesh and blood being associated with something like that. Even worse—that I could come from someone who *participates* in something like that.

“What’s his survival rate?” I almost don’t want the answer. Let me dream a large number and pray it holds true.

Pavel stares out at the road, silent for a long, unsettling moment. “Ten.”

“Percent?”

“Ten *women*. Total.” He slides a glance at me. “That we’ve been able to find. It’s rather well-known that once *Khozyain* gets his hand on a girl, she’s never seen again.”

“Then explain the ten.”

“Four crippled, one amputee, two paralyzed from the waist down, and three taking up permanent residence in mental wards across Europe.”

I close my eyes and breathe. I’m gonna fucking kill him. I already wanted to—Oleg Zakrevsky has done enough damage in my life to warrant a death sentence. But something inside me roars with righteous rage at the thought of those women suffering at his hands. If I’ll easily break the fingers of a high roller who backhands one of my escorts, why won’t I easily kill my own father to spare his victims?

“You said it can’t be entirely confirmed that this *Khozyain* guy is Oleg.”

Pavel shoots me another look. “If it looks like a duck and sounds like a duck, it sure as shit ain’t a horse, man.”

I appreciate his attempt to lighten the mood even marginally. It doesn’t work. All I can think about is how Oleg might dare to continue such despicable behavior on my own home turf.

And all I can wonder is which poor woman I saw at the auction is now at his mercy.

I resign myself to staring out at the Mojave for the rest of the drive, unable and unwilling to continue talking about my father’s sick perversions.

Raizo has indicated that he’s veered into no-limits territory himself, which means it’s not a stretch to guess they’re working together on something meant to make them richer, more powerful.

Something vile, built on the backs of anonymous victims no one will miss.

When we breach the outer border of Las Vegas, I shift in my seat to grab my phone and start tapping out a text to Bambi. “Before we go in, have Mako take Roxy to pick up Willow from school and take her to our safehouse in Reno. Don’t let them come back until we have eyes and ears on Oleg for the foreseeable future.”

Pavel nods. “Got it.”

It could be only a few hours, but it could also be an overnight stay for all I know. I don’t want Willow anywhere near these monsters, and I don’t want them catching wind of her presence in my world any more than Raizo already knows.

Above all else, I’m going to make damn sure I stay ten steps ahead of those motherfuckers no matter which direction they go.

I have fingers to break.

DEMYEN

For once, I'm actually pleasantly surprised by my father.

It's not that I expected him to reside in some damp hovel under an overpass, or in some seedy hotel where just the sight of the bedsheets makes me want to update my vaccines. I just wasn't expecting to roll up a cobblestone driveway to a subdued manor that looks like it's owned by some corporate executive, his wife, and two-point-five snot-nosed kids.

There's even an array of flower boxes in the goddamned windows.

On a strategic level, it does make sense. No one will ever suspect what happens in a home like this. It's located near enough to The Strip for supplies and meetings and close enough to the other edge of town for Oleg to make a quick, clean escape if he needed to.

And the size of the lawn means prying eyes have nothing to see.

I can't begrudge my father his cunning. I do get mine from *somewhere*, and it sure as fuck wasn't my mother.

Pavel and I are welcomed into the foyer by a silent butler. We know the drill—no guns, no knives, no bombs. This is a peaceful meeting to discuss family business.

Besides, I don't need weapons to kill Oleg Zakrevsky. If push comes to shove, I can crack his skull with my bare hands.

A young woman in the skimpiest French maid's uniform I have ever seen meets us beneath a large archway leading to

what looks like a sitting room.

“If you’ll follow me, sirs,” she says in a very soft voice, “I’ve been instructed to bring you to his garden.”

Pavel smiles warmly at her and nods for her to lead the way. It’s a miracle she doesn’t slip and break her ankle—or neck—in those gravity-defying heels.

Which, at a second glance... remind me of the heels I made Clara wear to the cocktail party back at my villa.

I feel sick to my stomach.

We follow the “maid” through the sitting room, through a rustically elaborate dining room, and out to what appears to be a courtyard garden. Sitting in a lounge, sipping some fruity cocktail and laughing with another scantily-clad woman on his knee, is Oleg.

I’d bet good money this is exactly where all those tens of millions of dollars from the Cayman Islands went: wine, women, and luxury lodging.

“So good of you to finally make it over,” Oleg remarks without bothering to turn around and look at us.

“I had a few errands to run.”

“And Pavel, my boy...” When Oleg does finally turn around, he fixes his piercing gaze on Pavel as if I’m not standing right in front of him. “It’s been too long! Look how you’ve grown!”

Just because we were kids when he left doesn’t mean he gets to patronize either of us. I can tell Pav’s hackles are instantly raised, but out of respect for both myself and the elder Zakrevsky, he remains silent.

I, however, step between them and fold my arms with impatience. “I’m here. I’m busy, so we need to make this quick. What do you want to discuss?”

Oleg sighs heavily and shoos the woman off his lap so he can roll up onto his feet. He’s by no means obese, but watching him from this angle definitely highlights the extra weight he’s put on over the years.

Good. It means he's slower.

"Always in such a rush." He waves an annoyed and dismissive hand at me, polishing off his cocktail with a loud slurp. "I can't imagine what the fuck is so important you can't spare an hour or two with your own father."

I want to snap back something scathing, like how I can't spare five minutes with his bloated ass. But I have to remind myself: I need him to lower his guard. I need insight into whatever the hell he's up to, especially where Raizo's concerned.

So I pretend to agree and play the role of a dotting son who *isn't* wondering if that wine glass stem could pierce his skull with a hard enough blow. "New shipments coming in and someone blew up my biggest warehouse. I'm a bit on edge."

"Bah. That's what you get for hiring shitty security."

Pavel shifts his weight between his feet, the only sign of irritation he'll ever give in front of Oleg. We know better than to give the man an excuse to gloat his self-perceived superiority over us; he's going to do it without our help or invitation.

"Anyways." Oleg gestures to the two women now standing silently off to the side. "New acquisitions I'm training for sale. Two of my best behaved from the recent crop, but I have six more in the basement who seem very promising."

I steal a glance at Pavel as we fall in behind Oleg's slow pace back inside the house. He gives me a very subtle, quick nod: given the opportunity, we'll see what we can do to help free those women.

Back in the old days, I wouldn't give two shits about people I don't know or don't have personal stock in. But after Clara, after the auction, after everything...

I'm having a hard enough time sleeping with the images of what I witnessed forever burned into my memory.

"We have a great opportunity to expand our empire," Oleg continues. "Between Russia and the states, we're looking at projections of at least triple the normal turnover."

He leads us into a den furnished with leather lounge seats, a leather wraparound couch, and dark mahogany tables. Antlers adorn the stone wall surrounding a flatscreen entertainment system, and I'm pretty sure the ash trays are carved from ebony.

This must be his favorite room. It's a study in masculine overcompensation.

He motions to the couch for us to sit and settles into an armchair with a proud sigh. A few barks of Russian slurs later, a new woman in a negligee silently brings him a tray carrying a lit cigar and a tumbler of vodka.

He grunts when the tray is set down next to him, then flicks his thumb at her. "You want a go?"

"Excuse me?"

"This one has a mouth that can suck your soul through your dick." He smacks her ass and grins when she yelps. "Her fucking still needs some work, though. Figured you could teach her a thing or two about taking a hard fuck."

It's subtle, but she's trembling. I can see her do her damned hardest not to show just how terrified of him—and me—she really is.

I feign disinterest and opt to not even look at her, even though I wish I could let her know she's safe with me. I've never had a taste for purchased pleasure, and my tolerance for the industry is plummeting fast.

"I'm good." I flick my hand in dismissal, which she accurately takes as her sign to leave. "Need to keep my focus. And I prefer the thrill of the hunt."

"A drained dick is a clear head. But suit yourself." Oleg takes a large swig of his drink and relaxes more in his chair. "I've secured a place in the skin trade spanning the southwest market, and these initial women will bring in good money while building our reputation as providers for exclusive clientele."

I force myself to refrain from curling my nose in disgust. "Exclusive clientele?"

Oleg shrugs and takes a pull from his cigar. “Always best to expand into new territory. Once I figured out where the high rollers were in Russia’s oligarchy, the money started flowing like water. I figured, why not tap into America? Bring that same success to my son’s Bratva.”

“I’m doing just fine, Otets.”

“I didn’t mean *you*,” Oleg scoffs.

I study him more closely. *What is he scheming?* “Do you have another son I don’t know about? Because Tolya is serving a life sentence. Running out of options, if you ask me.”

“I don’t remember asking you. And Tolya won’t be in prison for much longer.”

I lean back into the couch and listen to the leather squeak beneath my weight. “Go on.”

Oleg looks pretty pleased with himself as he takes a sip of vodka and goes back to puffing on the cigar. “You and I both know that whole investigation was fucked from the start. Tolya was nowhere near that warehouse. The evidence was planted and the whole thing a scheme cooked up by LVPD to undermine our family.”

I steal yet another glance at Pavel. Oleg *definitely* hasn’t been talking to Tolya. Or Tolya is trusting him with information as much as I am: zero percent.

“I have to admit, I used to daydream about murdering that little bitch right in front of her father.”

It takes a shit ton of self-control to not whip my head around at the mention of Clara. It takes even more self-control to pretend like I’m not suddenly feeling protective of her even now.

“Oh, really?” is what I manage to ease out with as much casualness as possible.

Oleg nods with a shrug. “Why not? The bitch lied on the stand and imprisoned my son. And she used her daddy dearest to help her do it.”

I’m starting to hear what everyone else around me was hearing when I used to go on similar rants about Clara and her

childhood testimony.

It's fucking ludicrous.

So I allow the snorted laugh to slip out. "She was a *child*. Not even ten years old, and what sort of grudge would a kid have against our family, anyways? You're talking like that little girl was some criminal mastermind. With a personal vendetta."

Oleg rolls his eyes like it's supposed to be so fucking obvious to me. "She had help! Do you care so little about your own brother to forget who her father was?"

"I didn't forget, Otets. I'm just not dumb enough to blame an entire murder investigation's flaws on a literal *child*."

Anymore. I'm not dumb enough *anymore*.

"Watch your tone, boy." Oleg narrows his eyes at me. "You can sit here and judge me all you want, but I'm the one who's going to get Tolya out of prison. You had your fucking chance. You failed." He sighs and flicks the ash off the cigar. "But I suppose that's not entirely your fault. I shouldn't have left the Bratva to you. So much weight on your shoulders at such a young age. And you were never meant to lead, anyway."

I force a smile over gritted teeth. "Yeah, well, here we are."

He chuckles. "Here we fucking are. In a few more weeks, Tolya will be right here with us, and then you can finally relax."

That same smile now stretches over bared teeth as I tilt my head to one side. "The fuck do you mean?"

Oleg barks out a laugh and stares at me like I've gone insane. "What, you don't plan on keeping everything to yourself, do you? That's Tolya's Bratva you're running. That's his house you're living in. Once I get him out, all that reverts to him."

Pavel casually clears his throat. It's a reminder to me to keep my cool.

Which is good, because I'm about five seconds away from committing patricide, consequences be damned.

“I think you’re thinking of a different house,” I respond, my voice dripping with fake geniality. “And besides, I already took care of the Everett issue.”

He snorts. “Hardly. If you possessed half the testicular fortitude of one of my *vors*, let alone your brother, Greg Everett would be taking a dirt nap by now. And his little bitch of a daughter with him.”

My molars start grinding together. “These things take time.”

“Oh, I know. At least, I know all about your little side project that’s been taking up way too much fucking time from *my* Bratva and *my* enterprise.”

I sit up straighter. All pretenses and masks fall away. I’m left with raw nerve endings at the sudden realization that he’s definitely talking about Clara.

And he’s smiling at me like he’s done something.

Something I’m going to hate with every fiber of my being.

“I have to admit: at first, I was pissed.” He knocks back the last of his vodka and smacks his lips together with a satisfied sigh. “I kept thinking, *Seriously? Just fucking waste the bitch!* Get rid of her and get back to helping your brother! But then...” Oleg grins wide and playfully wags a finger at my face. “I realized what you were doing. You sly dog. The only problem with your plan was in how long it was taking. So I figured I’d help you out.”

I feel Pavel tense next to me.

Oleg gestures to a guard standing in the doorway. “Bring her in.”

No. *No*. It’s not possible.

“Like I said, I’m going to get Tolya out in just a few weeks. As long as it takes to break the bitch into submission.”

My blood doesn’t just run cold—it freezes the fuck over.

It’s why I can’t make myself turn around when I hear the familiar footsteps enter the room behind me.

Oleg's grin threatens to split his face wide open. "And I am enjoying breaking her every goddamn day." He runs his hand up the back of her thigh, squeezing at the juncture where it meets her ass. "Isn't that right, *umnitsa*?"

My heart is in my throat. *Clara... please...*

But she doesn't look up at me as she whispers in a heartbreaking rasp, "Yes, Master."

CLARA

I was terrified beyond belief when Master told me about his expected guest. Not just because of the threats he made, but because this was the first time he revealed that I'm not the only slave in this house.

I'm just the only one who hasn't fucked him yet.

So when one of his men came to get me from my room and bring me to him, I honestly didn't know what to expect. Would I walk in on an orgy? Would I be forced to join some sick, depraved feast of flesh with his other slaves? With his colleagues? Will this be the moment he throws me down and breaks me—and in front of an audience?

All these different possibilities...

And yet none of them prepared me for the shock of seeing Demyen—and Pavel—sitting there on Master's favorite couch.

"It's almost unfair, isn't it?" Master muses out loud, pressing my hips to turn me around and show me off to his guests. "That someone who spews such filthy lies could grow to be so beautiful."

Demyen's only response is an uninterested grunt.

And now, it makes sense. Master did warn me. *Don't get any ideas about asking him for help. He's the last person in this world who will help you.*

Demyen is the one who sold me to Raizo, who then sold me to Master. He's not here for any other reason than "quality

assurance,” I suppose.

The part of me that died at the hands of his betrayal is too far gone to care.

The part of me that refuses to let hope die—hope that this is somehow all a big mistake, hope that this is just a nightmare, hope that Demyen might still love me—wants to curl up into a ball and cry.

Shit. I feel the tears stinging my eyes already.

It doesn't help that I'm wearing this ridiculously skimpy maid's outfit. At first, I almost thought Demyen wanted me to look him in the eyes... but that was clearly a mistake on my part. He won't lift his gaze to stare at my barely-concealed breasts, let alone my face.

Instead, he's just sort of... studying the tiny skirt around my hips, I guess.

“I was so tempted to fuck her the second I brought her here, but...” Master chuckles. “It's been far more entertaining to draw things out. Break her in, bit by bit. She was a hellcat when we started but, as you can see...”

When he pats his lap, I want to run. I want to leap through the nearest window and just *run*.

But instead, I stick to my original game plan and do as he says. I don't want to test his temper while the tensions are high. I carefully lower myself onto his lap.

Master is putting me on display. Like I'm some trophy he wants to brag about.

And Demyen just sits there, staring at me. Glaring at me.

Hating me.

“This is also why I haven't killed Greg Everett yet.” Master slowly rubs his hands on my thigh. “I'm going to enjoy the look on his face when he sees what I might do.”

Oh, God. Is that what this sick bastard is planning? Kidnapping my father so he can torment both of us at the same time? If that's the case, I honestly don't know if I'll survive it.

Or if I'll allow myself to survive long enough for him to see it through.

Demyen watches the trail Master leaves on my skin with his nails, the faint red marks joining several darker bruises on the insides of my thighs. "I have to admit, you've disappointed me there," he remarks.

He doesn't sound disappointed, just... disinterested.

Master's hands stop. Just for a moment, but long enough for me to catch the fact that he's a bit thrown. "Oh?"

"All your power, all your resources, all your intel... and Everett's walking around without a scratch on him." Demyen rolls his shoulder. "Well, none from *you*, anyway."

"Need to keep him feeling comfortable. Confident. That way, when I pull the rug out from under him... It's better, see?"

Honestly, I don't actually care what happens to my dad. There's been zero attempt on his behalf to come find me, just like when I disappeared into Demyen's home. And speaking of power, resources, and intel, my *detective* father has plenty of all that at his disposal.

But he can't bother to investigate his own daughter's disappearance?

He probably knows exactly where I am. But because of everything said and done in that small room of The Meridian, he probably doesn't fucking care.

Or, even more likely?

He's too chickenshit about Master to try.

I let Master's voice drone on and on without paying any attention. I've learned during my time here that it's better to just let him have what he wants, do what he wants, and zone out whenever the opportunity strikes.

In this case, zoning out also helps ignore the fact that Demyen, *my* Demyen, is sitting right here with me, only a few feet away.

And he's doing nothing. Saying nothing.

Just glaring.

Maybe, if I drift away enough, I can go back to Fiji. Just float in memories of warm, sunny beaches and cerulean blue waves... Willow's laughter as we made sandcastles... the blanket of stars overhead unlike anything I've ever seen in my entire life...

And Demyen. There with me. Surrounding me with affection. Wrapping me up in his love, even when he couldn't put the name to it. Whispering promises he had every intention of keeping.

It's mind-boggling how one person can become two entirely different people. The Demyen in Fiji is worlds away—literally—from the Demyen sitting on the couch, listening to Master drone on about whatever.

Even Demyen in the villa compound before we left for Fiji was different. Conflicted as he seemed, he was still funny. Playful. Considerate. Compassionate. And Willow loved him for it.

No. Don't think of her. Not right now.

I force my mind to veer in another direction because if I start wondering about my sweet baby girl while looking at the man who is supposed to be taking care of her.

I steal a quick glance at Pavel. He promised, via Bambi, to protect Willow from Demyen. And even though he's pointedly looking anywhere but directly at me, I have to imagine that he's as shocked as I am to see Demyen share a friendly conversation with the man who bought me.

Who bruised me.

Who has plans to do much, much worse.

Master's hands suddenly move over my lower abdomen. The touch yanks me out of my thoughts.

"I think that will be the sweetest revenge," he drawls while splaying one large hand over what is essentially my womb. "Can you imagine the look on his face when he sees me fuck a

baby into her? And I'll make her carry it, too. Never waste good seed, especially when the woman is built for breeding."

Blood drains from my face. It's one thing to quite literally carry a secret under Master's nose, banking on his lust to cover up the truth.

It's another to hear him want it—and right in front of the *actual* father of my unborn child.

Demyen doesn't react. For a flicker of a moment, his brow twitches, but that doesn't mean anything. Nor does the quick curl of his lip that falls back into a flat line. If he did actually care about what happens to me, he'd have said something by now.

"Would you like that?" Master sounds tickled pink. "It'll be a bastard, of course. But Zakrevsky blood is still Zakrevsky blood, and I know you'll be good to your new little brother or sister."

DEMYEN

Oleg and I are having two completely different conversations. He's focused on bragging about his master plan to save Tolya and exact vengeance on the whole of LVPD, the court justice system, and his new personal sex toy.

I'm focused on not ripping his fucking fingers off his fucking hand.

I'm shocked I'm not sweating through my shirt by now, given the sheer workout every muscle in my body is receiving from the singular act of restraint.

The only thing stopping me from going completely apeshit on Oleg is the fact that Pavel used one of our secret signal codes to let me know we are too outnumbered for me to even try.

I have to focus on something else. Like the fact that Clara is here. Right here, right in front of me.

Still in Vegas. Still on home turf.

And a lot closer to my literal home turf than I originally thought.

Relief floods my veins to the point where I'm almost overwhelmed. I might actually pass out. But I can't risk that here, so I find something else yet again to balance out my shot nerves and keep me grounded in the moment.

Like the bruises shaped like fingerprints mottled all over the insides of her thighs. The bandage taped to her skin. And the way he keeps touching her like he owns her. Like he's not

completely aware of who she is to me, what she means to me...

I don't care how much he paid for her—she doesn't belong to him.

Clara Everett is *mine*.

“Would you like that?” Oleg asks me with sick glee. “It'll be a bastard, of course. But Zakrevsky blood is still Zakrevsky blood, and I know you'll be good to your new little brother or sister.”

Pavel shifts in his seat next to me. It's his way of reminding me that ripping Oleg's vocal cords through his ribcage is not, in fact, the best course of action right now.

Even if we both know he'd hold the old man down for me to do it.

Oleg is expectant, waiting for me to answer. What do I say? What *can* I say that won't immediately put Clara or myself into danger?

I force myself to shrug and lean back in the couch. “Shit, man, I don't fucking care what you do.”

Oleg peers at me. I'm giving him no reason to not trust me, but nothing can or will stop him from being an overly suspicious man. Maybe I'm playing it *too* casual, especially since he's hinted at knowing that Clara and I have something special.

Or rather, that we did.

Oleg suddenly shoves Clara off his lap, so hard that she lands hard on the floor on her knees and lets out a soft cry of pain.

That sound nearly yanks me from the couch to her side. But I can't.

Not if all three of us are gonna make it out of here alive.

He roughly fists a hand in her hair and yanks her head back. “I just realized, *umnitsa*, that you haven't properly welcomed our guest. And he's an old friend of yours!” He chuckles darkly and thumbs her bottom lip. “I'm sure he'd love to get reacquainted with your pretty mouth.”

I don't like it, but I'll take it. Whatever needs to happen to bring her closer to me and farther the fuck away from him.

But then Oleg yanks her head back hard, again, and uses his free hand to fumble with his pants zipper. "On second thought, why don't we show him everything you've learned while you've been here?"

Two things.

One: I do *not* want to see any part of my father that involves zippers.

Two: if he's saying what I think he's saying, I might have to bite the bullet anyways. Because I am going to fucking castrate him.

Clara suddenly looks at me, pure terror in her eyes. Her lips tremble. It's so slight, I don't actually know if I saw her mouth the word "please."

It's okay, though. She doesn't need to.

I'm about three seconds away from ending this with his head impaled on a set of antlers.

I try to convey to her that I'm here, I'm with her, I've got her. It's going to be okay. I'm not going to leave her with this monster.

But before I can, she looks away. Her face falls, and a chilling sense of resignation settles into her body. Which, much to my horror and fury, is a lot thinner than it was before the auction.

Fucking hell, Clara...

What the hell is he doing to you?

I glance up at Oleg. He seems less than amused. Almost bored, actually. "Oh, bah, you're no fun. Fuck off," he grumbles with a swift, hard shove of his foot against her shoulder.

Clara breaks her initial fall with her hands, but Oleg's kick forces her to sprawl completely on the floor.

I start to lean forward to help her up, but Pavel stops me with a subtle clearing of his throat.

My fingers clench into fists. It's killing me inside that I can't do anything to help her. That I can't just whisk her away somewhere safe, then come back and beat the ever-living shit out of the man who dared lay a finger on her.

I will. Soon enough.

But for now, I have to sit and wait.

Clara slowly pulls herself up. I don't miss the way her arms tremble when she braces against the coffee table for balance, or how she winces with pain when she stretches one side of her ribs.

She avoids looking at me. Won't even look at my feet as she rises, instead just staring off into the middle distance with that same empty resignation in her features.

That hurts worse than anything Oleg or his men could do to me.

"I said, fuck off!" Oleg snaps.

Clara winces. Then she scurries away, shrinking in on herself with every step. She doesn't even try to sneak a peek back over her shoulder.

There's an ache growing inside my heart right next to the fury.

Oleg rolls his eyes once she's left. "Sometimes, I do question whether she was worth the expense."

That's right. Oleg bid for her. He's the fifty-million-dollar asshole I've been trying to track down this whole time.

Which means, on top of everything else, that his business dealings in Russia really are that successful. Which also means that he's probably got even more resources, connections, and allies on his side than I can afford to take on, should I slip up in taking him out.

Because I *am* going to kill him. That's a certainty.

I just have to make sure I do it right the first time. One shot, one kill. If I miss, I'll risk starting a war I can't win.

I force myself to smile. It feels more conspiratorial than anything. "I have to admit, it's pretty impressive what you've

got going on here. Not saying your other girls aren't as good, but... Fifty million dollars? For a single woman? Where the hell did you get that kind of money?"

Oleg simply shrugs. "She's a special case. Worth every penny. And there is nothing I wouldn't do, nowhere I wouldn't go, to ensure Tolya's freedom. Fucking her into submission so she recants her testimony is just a side bonus. Knocking her up would be icing on the cake."

"So that's your plan? Fuck the truth out of her? Sorry, Otets, but there's no such thing as a magical dick."

"You forget," he counters, "I've been working with an elite clientele back in Russia. I supply the goods, and they've taught me a few tricks of the trade." He sighs and flicks at a piece of invisible lint on the arm of his chair. "Even so, she's getting quite boring. I was hoping for a lot more fight, a lot more fire."

Maybe that's another reason why he hasn't slept with her yet. Which—thank God—is probably the best news I can be given at the moment. "Yeah, well, you win some, you lose some."

Oleg runs a hand over his beard. "I'm thinking we can liven things up with her a bit more. I've been too easy on her. Giving her too much space to move around me, around in this house."

I freeze. I don't like what he's getting at.

"Thinking of just going for it?" I ask as casually as possible.

A sick, twisted grin suddenly spreads across his face. "I should, shouldn't I? Break her in for good. And I'm fairly certain that she'll get her fight back once she sees the line of men forming at her door. I'll even let you go in right after me." He winks at me like I'm supposed to appreciate the consideration. "That should be fun! Let's make a whole dinner party out of it. We'll have her for dessert."

The fakest laugh I've ever made sounds weird coming from my throat, but it's the best I can do in these circumstances. "Send me the invite, and I'll be there."

Pavel silently joins me in rising from the couch and casually strolling toward the front door of the house. We can't do anything sudden or unusual, not if we want Oleg to still think we're on his side.

But the second we pull out of the driveway...

"We're taking her back, aren't we?" Pavel says it more like a statement than a question.

I don't even have to think about it. Zero hesitation. One hundred percent murderous fury against the man I unfortunately share genes with.

"We're taking her back. Tonight."

CLARA

I can't breathe.

I can't breathe.

I can't breathe.

I'm breathing too fast and not at all at the same time. My chest feels tight and I can't seem to gulp enough air to fill my lungs but then I'm overfilled and near to bursting.

Master is Demyen's father?!

I'm fucked.

Done for.

Master is going to break me. But then he's gonna kill me, and Demyen's going to watch him do it with that same dark glare on his face.

Demyen. He was here. He was sitting right in front of me.

Talking to his *father*.

I grab one of the larger pillows off the bed and hold it over my face. Then I just scream. And scream. And scream.

Only when I break down into sobs do I allow myself to fall onto the bed and give in to the shattering heartbreak and despair. I'm all out of time, and I'm realizing now that I didn't have much to begin with.

Master knows who I am and what I did.

To Tolya. To his *son*.

I thought this new life as his slave was going to be hard just by the nature of it alone—but he's got a score to settle with me. Vengeance to play out. Whatever he's done to women before, he's going to do far worse to me.

How long has he known? Did he always know? Is that why he went to such lengths with Raizo to buy me?

How did I not recognize him as Demyen's father?!

A thought suddenly occurs to me. A theory, really. I've never actually seen the symbol Master branded me with—not in its entirety or on purpose, since I've usually done my best to avoid acknowledging it.

Now, I need to see it. I need to see what's been permanently seared into my skin by the Zakrevsky patriarch who wholeheartedly, with every fiber of his being, believes I'm personally responsible for Tolya's incarceration.

I roll off the bed and yank the closet door open so I can use the dressing mirror to get a good look. Or at least, a good enough glance. I rip the bandages off and peer hard at the rippled flesh beneath my buttock.

I can't make out the specific details of the brand itself—a crest, maybe?—but there's one feature I do, without question, see very clearly.

The letter Z.

Z for Zakrevsky.

I don't know how I manage to make it to the bathroom before I puke up what little contents I have in my stomach. Even after there's nothing left to hurl, my stomach muscles clench and spasm and still try to expel *something*.

My fingers fumble for the handle. Flushing away my bile shouldn't feel so poetic, so *final*, but it does. I sit there on the tiled floor, hair falling in front of my face, and watch the water swirl and dive and drag my dripping tears down with it.

If only I were small enough to just escape this way, too. Hell, even a sewage line would be better than staying here.

The bedroom door opens, then quickly shuts. If I'm lucky, it will just be a housekeeper or one of the other slave girls.

But this is me, and my life, so of course I'm not lucky. Of course it's Master, who quickly comes into the bathroom, grabs me by the hair, and yanks me to my feet.

"What's the matter, *umnitsa*?" he coos scornfully in my face. "Are the pieces finally falling into place?"

For the first time since I've been here, I let him see me cry. I don't hold back, either—my whole body shakes with sobs, and I don't care that he sees me break down in front of him.

To my surprise, he doesn't get angry or throw me against the sink. Instead, he lets go of my hair and cups my face in both hands. "Shhh, shhh, shhh," he whispers as he wipes away my tears with his thumbs. "Look at me, darling. Look at me."

I do. I know it's a trap, but dammit, I look up at him, meeting his gaze.

"I mean what I said." His voice is gentle, like he's actually treating me like a lover. It's weird. Unsettling. "I am—" He kisses one cheek softly. "—going—" Another kiss on the other cheek. "—to break you."

I stiffen. He smiles and smooths away the hair still sticking to my face.

"And I am going to enjoy the way you kick and scream beneath me as I do." He grabs the hair at the back of my head with one hand and uses it as leverage to drag me over to the bed. "I want your fight, *umnitsa*. I want your fire."

No. No, no, no. Not now.

He can't do this to me now. I'm not... I can't...

Demyen's face keeps flashing in my mind. He hates me. Demyen hates me. He wants nothing to do with me, and has no issue with everything Master told him he wanted to do to me.

So why does this feel like such a betrayal against him?

“No!” I cry out suddenly. I brace my feet on the edge of the bed, shoving back and making Master stumble. And even though his hand in my hair twists and pulls painfully, it’s still a small victory for me. “You can’t!”

Master growls and throws me hard onto the bed. He flips me onto my stomach and with one smooth yank of my skirt, lands a searing blow from his palm onto my ass.

Stars burst in my eyes.

I can’t even properly scream. My mouth just hangs open as the heat and the sting spreads across my skin. And before I can suck in another deep breath, he does it again to the other side.

This time, a sob chokes out. I try to curl up into myself, but Master simply uses that angle to yank me off the bed by my legs and drops me to the floor. The wind tears out of me, and I have to lie there for a moment just to remember how to breathe. Or see.

“Yes, the fuck I can.” He says it so calmly, like he’s scolding a small child. He uses his foot to roll me onto my back. “You owe me, Clara Everett. You fucking owe me, you owe my son, and I’m going to take every drop of your repayment from your body, soul, and mind.”

I shudder with fear and disgust, but I don’t give in to his taunts. I refuse. Because if I give up on myself now, then I’m giving up on my baby. There’s still a faint chance I’m reunited with Willow again in this life... and I won’t let that glimmer of hope disappear.

So *that’s* when I fight back.

That’s when I launch myself off the mattress and slam into his back with a furious shriek.

The impact actually makes him stumble forward. I use that to my advantage and just lose my absolute shit all over him. I claw him, bite him, pull his hair, rip at his beard. When I sink my nails into his face and yank, *hard*, he roars with pain and I feel the warm, satisfying trickle of blood on my fingertips.

He manages to throw me off his back, but not as hard as he probably wants to. I’m able to rebound pretty quickly, and I

dodge to one side when he lunges at me.

I see one of the end table lamps sitting nearby. I yank it, cord and all, and swing it as hard as I fucking can at his head.

I chose well, apparently, because instead of shattering like a normal ceramic lamp, it clangs sickeningly against his skull.

Master drops to the floor, already unconscious. Blood trickles from his ear as well as his face.

Maybe he's dead. I'm not sure. I'm not exactly ready or willing to check.

What I do know is he's out cold, even if temporarily, and I need to make the most of this unexpected break.

I can't rip this stupid maid's uniform off me fast enough. I definitely don't care if I tear it into shreds in the process; it's a shame I don't have the time or supplies to burn the fucking monstrosity.

Rummaging through the dresser drawers and the closet only manages to give me options that all belong to Mr. Zakrevsky—I refuse to call him “Master” now—but I'm going to make do with what I have. A button-down shirt, jeans that are way too big for me, and a belt to make sure they don't fall down every other step will be enough to get the hell out of here.

I take one more peek through the closet and sigh with relief. They're too big, but this pair of slippers will work until I can get something better.

This is a ground floor room, which probably wasn't the best choice for someone trying to overlord his control over rebellious slaves like me. *Tough shit*, is all I think with one last glance at the unconscious-or-possibly-dead body of my captor as I flip the latches of the small window.

There's a small garden bed below the windowsill, but at least it's not cacti. I whisper a quick apology to the delicate blossoms when they crumple under my feet.

Guards pace back and forth in the main driveway, which means I have to go through the courtyard and over the back

fence. It's chain-link and will definitely alert the guards to my escape, but at this point, I don't fucking care.

I'll take my chances on the fact that I'm too expensive for Zakrevsky to allow his men to shoot me.

Voices carry across the courtyard and make me freeze against the adobe wall. From what I can pick up through the muffled voices, it sounds like the guards posted back here are escorting the other slaves to the basement.

I wish I had the time, and the resources, to break them free.

But right now, I have to focus on getting back to my little girl.

I wait for the voices to fade before I risk darting across the courtyard. Thankfully, the solar lamps don't give enough light to announce my presence—and what guards are left nearby are too busy pouring drinks in the kitchen. I don't risk stopping long enough to glance around; best to just aim for the fence.

Almost there.

Just have to climb and—

Strong arms wrap around me and pull me away from the fence. A hand clamps down over my mouth.

No. No, no, no—

I was so, so close to salvation.

TO BE CONTINUED

Demyen and Clara's story concludes in the third and final book of the Zakrevsky Bratva trilogy, *RHAPSODY OF PAIN*.