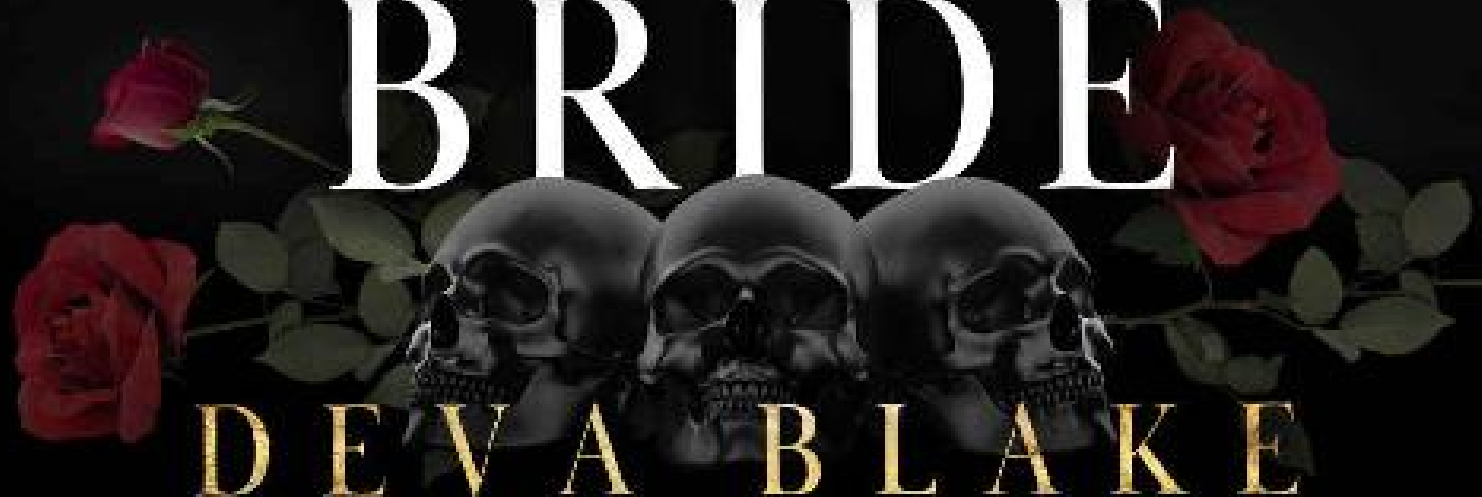


AGE GAP MAFIA ROMANCE



LEVOV BRATVA

THE BRATVA'S  
FORCED  
BRIDE



DEVA BLAKE

# The Bratva's Forced Bride

Age Gap Mafia Romance

Levov Bratva Book 5

DEVA BLAKE

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# Chapter 1 - Yaro

Molten anger pumped through my veins at the roughly written calculations in front of me, along with old inventory logs. I was so furious, I wanted to hit something. Anything.

But with my little brother there, I was forced to keep the semblance of calm on my face. I had to keep it in, even if my sanity was hanging on by a thread.

While it wasn't unusual for me to keep my cool in the warehouses, and the guys were used to the occasional outburst—since they know mine are tame compared to Dimitri's—this time was different.

Our cousin put me in charge of a handful of warehouses we had scattered around New York, along with other regions that suited our needs. Normally, when things went wrong, they weren't my doing, yet I had to make sure nothing got out of hand. However, because I oversaw the products and their storage, the problem was my fault. It would be my head, and I had no one else to blame but myself.

I sucked in a rigid breath. “What are you saying, Vik?”

My brother, more sheepish out of the two of us, glanced at me nervously. “According to my calculations and database archives, it turns out that Dominic Carter has stolen from us. It appears that he skimmed some off the top and fudged some numbers.”

A wash of shame and anger crashed over me, and it took everything in my power not to explode then and there. I put a hand over my face and tried to push through it. The paper in my hand nearly shook with my rage.

“He's been playing us as fools,” I managed to say, discreetly breathing through the heavy reality that rested on my shoulders. “Not only were we paying him a far higher rate than most to buy his silence, but he also ran off with a

significant amount of our stock. Far too much for us to ignore.”

Vik’s blue eyes were wide with concern, as he, too, was well aware of what this meant for us and the business. “Maybe my calculations were wrong, maybe—”

“No, Vik. Your numbers are right, as was your hunch. You can’t give men like Dominic Carter the benefit of the doubt,” I said sternly, hoping I might be able to snuff out that lingering innocence in him. “He took advantage of our generosity, but now he’s in for a brutal awakening.”

My brother looked torn. On one hand, he seemed grateful that the mistake wasn’t his and that his calculations were correct. On the other, I could tell he didn’t want us to bring Dominic any harm. It was his preference to avoid unnecessary violence.

In my mind, however, said violence was necessary in that circumstance. It was the only way to send a message that couldn’t be ignored. Nobody fucks with the Levovs or our money.

“Should we inform Dimitri?” He asked, looking afraid of what that would entail. It was an accurate response since that fear was entirely justified.

I folded the paper in my hands and gave it back to Vik. “No, not yet. When Dimitri hears about this, he’ll be out of his mind with anger, but for now, we must try to make this right. Maybe then this place will still be standing afterward.”

Understanding me at once, Vik nodded obediently. “What should we do now then?”

There was only one thing we could do.

Gesturing for him to follow, I began toward one of our armored SUVs. “Round up a handful of men and have them bring our trucks. That warehouse is to be cleared out before the night is up and transported back here. We’re paying Dominic a visit.”

“Which men?”

“The best we have,” I commanded, opening the front door. “Dominic will answer for what he has done.”

“Right,” Vik said in return and immediately got on the phone as he continued further into the warehouse, where some of our men were finishing up their target practice.

Getting a head start, I gritted my teeth and closed the door behind me. It was nearly impossible to hold back that raw anger coursing through me, but I started the engine and pulled out of the building through the bay doors.

Dominic screwed me over and was about to get what he deserved.

The drive to Boston was long enough to hone my fury into determination. To decide how things would go before I even got there.

Once I reached the warehouse, I pulled up to a nearby street and waited. I glued my eyes to the surrounding property to see what was happening. For that half an hour I waited, not a soul went in or out, but Dominic’s car was there. He was there.

As Vik and the others caught up with the long-bed trucks, we rolled in. The trucks backed up to the loading bay, and the group of us stormed the front door. We pushed our way in with Vik and me at the front.

With our guns raised, we did a sweep of the front, only to find that portion empty. A small light was on in the office, and that was where I went first.

There was a shuffle of movement inside as we approached, and I found Dominic scrambling to grab a handgun.

I cocked mine before he even had the chance to aim it in our direction. “Put the gun down, Dominic. I won’t hesitate.”



He froze at once, surely aware that I meant it. I wasn't full of empty threats.

When Dominic turned to face me, leaving the gun on the ground, his eyes were glassy yet wide with fear at the realization. We caught him by surprise indeed.

With a gesture of my head, two of my men moved in and snatched his arms. Dominic was panicking as they lifted him and pulled him out of the office. He was pinned in place and forced to look at me.

“Wait, please!” He blurted; voice slurred. “There's no need for violence. What is it you need, Yaro?”

“I'll be the one deciding that,” I muttered, narrowing my eyes at him. “You know exactly why we're here.”

Dominic swallowed harshly from his place, held firmly by my men. A look of recognition crossed his face, yet he didn't say anything intelligible as he rambled.

Steeling myself momentarily against the desire to lay into him then and there, I approached the office again and looked inside.

The room was a disaster of empty booze bottles littered all over the floor, along with a small cot covered messily in a single blanket and a bag of clothes not far from it. I threw him another look over my shoulder.

“You're living here?”

What little composure he had snapped, and the grown man before me crumbled. Sniveling, he nodded, and his face bloomed with color.

“The b-bank is claiming everything...along with the other warehouses,” he managed to say despite the swell of emotions. “This is all I have for the time being.”

My brows furrowed. “You burned through the cash already?”

He gave me another shameful nod.

All that money—gone. We had just recently paid him too.

I was seething on the inside as my molten anger took hold, but I couldn't let it consume me yet. There was a point to be made, and I needed him to be scared shitless.

With a forced breath, I snagged a bottle half full of vodka. I looked at it pensively and turned to face him again. I pretended to study the bottle, then dangled it in the air before him. "All for this, I assume?"

Dominic gave me an uncertain expression, surely wondering what I was getting at, and why I hadn't thrown a fit yet.

"Y-yes..."

Trying to look understanding, I nodded absently.

In one swift movement, I sent the bottle flying against the nearest wall. On impact, it exploded in tiny glass shards, and Dominic shrunk into himself with a strangled cry.

Even Vik flinched.

I was on him at a moment's notice, a black glove gripping the soiled collar of his shirt. I tightened the material against his neck as a result, and he wheezed from the force.

"I know what you've done!" I yelled at him, feeling the tension in my whole body.

"I don't know what you're talking about—"

"Cut the shit," I snapped, aware of how menacing I surely looked to him in my gear. "I brought my best men—all well-versed in ways to make anyone talk. I want to hear everything you have to say."

Releasing his collar, I took a step back and took in the alarm that further spread through his face, despite his attempts to hide it.

"Yaro—"

Pulling my gloves up, I snickered at him. “I hope you have enough booze in your system already, Dominic. What comes next will be excruciating for you.”

As my men tightened their grip on him, making the man an easy target for me, my fist collided with his jaw before he could get another word out.

He grunted from the force of it, and the beginnings of a bruise erupted across his skin. Dominic’s teeth already gleamed with blood as he sucked in a rigid breath.

“Alright,” he heaved, forcing in those drunken breaths. “The money’s all gone. From the last payment and the ones before that. I distributed some of the products to make more. I know some guys who pay good money for it.”

Wild with rage, I tilted my head and pointed at him. “And you thought we wouldn’t notice? That you would get away scot-free and not face any of the consequences.”

Dominic, breaking down, sniveled through the tears. “It was wrong, I know that! I have a problem.”

“Yes, you do. And you’re about to have an even bigger one on your hands,” I returned, unfazed by his emotions.

As far as I knew, it was all a ploy to try and soften me. Or, he really just was a weak, pathetic excuse of a man. No matter the case, it wouldn’t do him any good.

“You are going to pay back every dollar you owe us. Every dollar you have taken from us, and then some,” I told him, stepping closer to let him know I meant it. “Even if it takes getting on your knees and begging for forgiveness, you will do everything I tell you to.”

Dominic shook his head frantically, well aware that he was royally screwed. His skin was flushed and slicked with sweat. “I can’t pay with money—I have nothing left!”

“This isn’t negotiable,” I muttered, rolling up my sleeves in preparation for what was next.

“Take my daughter!”

I furrowed my brows at him. “What?”

Dominic nodded again and again as if it was the immediate solution he needed. “My daughter, Grace. She’s attending university in New York. Close to home.”

I scowled at him while I worked through what he was proposing to me. A ridiculous deal to try and save his skin. “What would I possibly need with her?”

He sucked in a ragged breath and shivered from the shock of it all. “She’s a bright young woman, and I’m sure she could be useful! If not for giving you heirs, she could help with the business. That’s what she’s in school for.”

More rage coursed through me, offended he would even think it would tempt me. That all would be forgiven just for handing his daughter over to me.

Pulling back, I was beyond words.

At once, I decided I had enough of him. The anger was so blinding, I couldn’t stand the idea of giving him another minute of my time.

Wiping my mouth with the back of my forearm, I shook my head and gestured at the men holding him.

“Have fun with him. Show our friend here why nobody crosses the Levovs.”

As I turned away and stormed out of the warehouse, Dominic’s cries were drowned out by the sound of their fists colliding with his face and body. He was berated, but my mind was entirely elsewhere.

The moment I reached fresh air, I sucked it in and found myself left with enough damning thoughts to drown in.

The situation was far from ideal.

I oversaw the operations of the warehouse, and I unknowingly let Dominic screw us over. I allowed us to be used, and that was my fault for not noticing sooner. If Vik

hadn't alerted me of some suspicious numbers, I wouldn't have known.

I needed to be sharper. Keener. It was up to me to change things.

Still flaming with my wrath for not only Dominic but for my own misstep, his words circulated my mind again.

*Take my daughter.*

Knowing how deep he was, I had doubts about ever seeing that money or product again. The likelihood of being paid back in full was painfully low.

If I couldn't recover that money from Dominic, I'd have to take the person with the potential of making it back for us.

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Gripping the steering wheel hard enough to turn my knuckles ghost-white, I was still riding that anger four hours later. Fortunately, the ride back to New York felt shorter because of it.

"Have you found it yet?"

Vik, face lit up from his laptop screen, continued to scroll. "The enrolment list is long, but I should have it soon."

"Hurry up with it; we'll be there soon," I mumbled, focusing on the road ahead.

"Why are we hacking the NYU database anyway?"

While it sounded ridiculous, it was all I had left. "Because we're going to get what belongs to me now."

When Vik went silent, I glanced over at him to find his weary expression. It was obvious he didn't like the idea of taking the girl.

Always the hero, never the villain. But he couldn't stay that way, not in our line of work.

"Where can we find her?" I snapped at him, watching as Vik continued to scroll frantically.

"She's staying in residence on campus...In Greenwich," Vik answered reluctantly. "I have her floor and apartment numbers."

"Good. It won't be long now."

## Chapter 2 - Grace

Dropping my keys onto the small kitchen counter was an unspoken moment of peace—a release of tension from the long day I had.

The door closed behind me, and I took the chance to let go of a deep breath.

The dorm was quiet and almost painfully still compared to the bustling campus grounds, but I soaked it up. I needed to slow down and appreciate how nice it was to hear my thoughts again.

While staying in a single-person apartment wasn't the best arrangement for making friends, it did lend the privacy and silence I craved.

It was proving to be a bit of a challenge since a few days had already gone by, and I was feeling lonelier with every passing day. It just meant that I needed to try harder to find friends.

Just as I contemplated getting started making dinner or flopping onto the worn-out couch for some relaxing time, my phone rang from inside my back pocket.

Slipping it out of my jeans, I spotted my dad's contact on the display. Immediately, my stomach dropped, and a sense of dread filled me

While I should've been homesick by then, and longing to see my dad again, I wasn't. A week didn't feel long enough for me to want to speak to him.

It wasn't the best outlook to have, but our connection was no better.

My stomach was in knots, but I couldn't just leave him hanging. I never knew what he'd be calling about, and I didn't want to miss something potentially important.

Pressing the accept button, the call connected.

“Hello?”

“Grace, my darling!”

From the slur of his words, along with the exaggerated happiness in his voice, I knew he was hammered. There was no missing that tone. I had to give him credit, at least it was after five.

That dread turned into a rock in my stomach.

When I caught his snuffle, I furrowed my brows. “What’s going on?”

“Can a father not call his daughter?” He asked me, sounding more nasally than normal like he was stuffed up. It was strange, and I couldn’t ignore it.

“You’re drunk, Dad.”

“I know...I...”

There was shuffling on the other side, and a moment of silence before I caught what sounded like near-silent sobbing.

“I don’t mean to do this to you, Grace, but something has happened,” he managed despite the tears. He continued to ramble, and it was almost impossible to understand him.

“What’s wrong?”

He took in a shaken breath. “Please understand where I’m coming from, my girl. Don’t judge me too harshly.”

Growing increasingly worried and annoyed, I pressed, “What is it?”

My heart pounded through the brief silence.

“The business isn’t doing well...the investment properties are being taken away,” he admitted, followed by another round of tears.

My brows furrowed, and it felt like a cold blanket draped over me. I never got to know much about what my dad did for work other than how he owned a few properties and



rented them out. Beyond that, I had no clue. As far as I knew, business had been good. It was enough to fund his lifestyle that didn't shy away from more lavish things than most people were able to enjoy.

“Taken away—by who? Why?”

He swallowed hard, and his breath was labored. “Everything's being foreclosed on. I'm bankrupt, Grace. I have nothing left.”

My next question sat heavily on my tongue. *How did it happen?*

But I already knew the answer. I could hear it in his voice.

“I'm going to fix it and do better moving forward, but I just need some cash to get by for now. If you can spare me anything, I'll be incredibly grateful.”

Anger flared within my chest. That was why he called. He didn't just wish to update me on how poorly everything in his life was going. He just wanted to come crawling to me, asking for money.

“I postponed coming here just so I could save enough money to enroll, all because you didn't have a dime to spare me. You didn't even drive me to the campus. I worked my ass off for this,” I began, already trembling with a combination of fury and deep sadness for how things had unfolded. “I don't have anything to give you. I only have enough to cover my student expenses, not your habits.”

I heard as the emotion swelled in his voice. “But Grace, I promise I won't let you down! I just need—”

“Get a grip, Dad,” I muttered, steeling myself from the guilt that trickled in. “It's your problem, and like you said, you'll fix it.”

His crying only grew louder, and I closed my eyes to try and block out the part of me that pitied him.

“I’m so sorry for what I’ve done...for what’s going to happen. I’m a coward. A failure—”

The front door crashed open, tearing me away from the phone call and the blubbering man on the other end.

Snapping my attention to the burly figure standing in the doorway, my eyes widened, and panic gripped me.

He took up nearly all the space with his corded muscle that peeked through the black tee clinging to his torso, tactical pants and boots. The black gloves on his hands made a shiver run down my spine.

Before I could say or do anything, frozen in fear, the man stepped forward and tore the phone from my hand. He ended the call and stuffed it in one of his pant pockets.

Despite the fear emanating from my body, I couldn’t help but stare at his hardened yet stoic face. His features were intensely masculine, but something in those hazel eyes captured my attention.

He looked like someone pulled straight from the military with his dark hair shaved at the back and sides, yet with some length at the top. While everything about him seemed dangerous and roguish, his overall appearance was neat.

While I could’ve studied him all day, there wasn’t time. I felt like a rabbit trapped in a snare, waiting for the end.

Just as I sucked in a deep breath, prepared to scream, his arm wrapped around my waist and pulled me into him, gloved hand against the small of my back. The opposite one clamped down against my mouth.

My throat went dry at the proximity, and I could hardly think over the pounding pulse in my ears.

“Make a noise, and you’ll regret it,” the man muttered, stare hardened on me. “Make this easier and come willingly.”

The masculine scent of him surrounded me, and my torturous body shivered at his words. He was gorgeous, even

with a scar that went from his left eyebrow down to his cheek, but I didn't know him.

He was a stranger, and he planned to take me with him.

The man gazed at me with a shocking calmness that confused me even further, and I didn't know what to do. He had my phone and me quite literally in his hold. I had the feeling I didn't want to do anything out of line in front of him.

“Come with me, and you'll be fine. You have my word.”

While the demand in his voice was still present, he spoke those words with less of an edge. Like brief sincerity.

It didn't make it any easier to accept that I was half his size and my fate was in his hands.

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The man kept his word.

Sat in the back of a massive SUV, I was still breathing. Freaking out, yes, but breathing.

I could hardly see out the tinted windows, but I focused on the two men sitting in front. The one who took me drove, while the other, slightly smaller and quieter, was in the passenger seat. They looked like one another, and I had the feeling they were brothers.

While my heart was racing, the two men weren't in any hurry. They were eerily calm, and I couldn't understand how. They had a captive woman in the back of their vehicle, and they no more than blinked over it.

Their surprising demeanors allowed me to get a good look at the driver while he focused on the road.

Those stern eyes focused on the cars ahead while his arm draped over the wheel casually. The black gloves stayed

on, leading to his impossible muscles for an ordinary man. They flexed as he drove, which made me pay close attention.

I hadn't seen anybody like him on campus. There was no way he was even remotely a student or even close to my age. He looked at least thirty like he had an entire career in the military already.

But what would someone like him want with me?

None of it made any sense. My head spun.

He was attractive—that was obvious. But I couldn't have those thoughts, not for someone who took me right from my dorm.

Shifting uncomfortably in the seat, I silently cursed how the duct tape pinched my wrists. I grumbled about it, wishing I could've at least sat normally for the ride.

"Quiet," the driver snapped, looking at me through the rear-view mirror. "I'm sick of hearing you back there."

I wanted to say something sarcastic, but I felt that it would be a bad idea.

"Why did you take me then?" I asked, tired of ignoring how insane it all was. "Who are you? What do you want?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" He returned, seemingly done putting up with me already.

"Yaro," the other mumbled in a weak warning.

*Yaro.*

That was his name.

Yaro gave him a sharp look, but then he sighed, glanced at the road ahead, and then back at me. "Your father is to blame for your current situation. He stole from us and then went bankrupt despite owing us a big sum. You were his only means of paying us back. We were promised you'd help us one day."

The air left my lungs at once. There was no way.

But it didn't make sense.

I shook my head, unable to consider the idea. "There's no way. My dad doesn't deal with men like you. He...he rents his warehouses to big companies. He might have his problems, but he's not a criminal. He wouldn't steal from anyone."

The laugh from Yaro startled me, but the bitterness lingering within it reeked of sincerity. "Don't you get it? We *are* the big company, and I came to collect. It seems your father wasn't entirely truthful with you."

"No," I mumbled to myself as I shook my head. We didn't have the best relationship, but I didn't want to believe he would do something like that. "This must be a mistake. You have the wrong person."

"Be in denial all you like, but it won't change anything," he muttered, keeping his eyes on the road.

"I don't imagine this is easy to wrap her mind around. Cut her some slack," the other one said, quiet yet trying to be outspoken at the same time. The way he hesitated told me at least someone else in the vehicle was considering my welfare.

But Yaro only scoffed.. As if I should've gone along with it and accepted my fate without questioning anything.

My stomach lurched at the thought of my dad offering me up in exchange for the supposed theft he had committed. While I wanted to doubt that he was capable of such a thing, a lingering sense of dread in my stomach hinted at otherwise.

My entire body went cold.

"Is it true?" I asked, my voice quieter than I had anticipated. "Did he really rent the warehouse out to you and steal from you?"

The other one glanced at me over his shoulder, and he sighed. Regret gleamed through his blue eyes. "Yes, it's true. We paid him to keep quiet."

That solemn tone was all I needed to hear to know they weren't lying. I couldn't imagine they would kidnap someone

they didn't know for no reason—not that it was okay in the slightest.

My stomach turned, and I fought against the bile that crept up my throat.

The nightmare I hoped was either a prank or some misunderstanding was unfolding before my eyes. It was real, and the force of that made me feel sick.

As the despair and anger collided within me, I didn't know what to do, and I didn't know what they intended to do with me, or how I would possibly get away.

But the thought of sitting by while they did what they wanted with me wasn't one I could swallow easily.

“That might be the case, but I had nothing to do with this,” I began, feeling as the anxiety coursed through me. “I won't pay for what my dad did.”

“And yet you're the one bound in the back of our vehicle,” Yaro mumbled, sending me a hard look through the rear-view mirror. “You don't have much say here.”

“I wasn't exactly given a choice!”

More anger flared from within my chest, making my hands shake. But Yaro only sighed.

“Gag her.”

The other glanced at him with a questioning gleam, and his brows furrowed. While he didn't say anything to verify what was being asked of him, he didn't need to.

When Vik didn't do as asked, it was his turn to receive Yaro's scolding look.

“I said, gag her. I'm done listening to her.”

Reluctantly, Vik gave in and grabbed a roll of duct tape from the center console. He searched for the beginning and yanked enough to surely cover my mouth, then broke it off.

My heart hammered in my chest despite how he turned to face me with a remorseful expression. He didn't seem as convicted as Yaro.

Holding the tape in front of me, Vik went to put it on my face, but I wriggled from my place and dodged it.

"Just sit still. Please," he mumbled, seemingly to avoid his brother's scorn.

"How can you expect me to do that in my current situation?" I said, completely at a loss.

Everything was ridiculous, and I couldn't understand how I found myself in that position.

"Make this easy."

"Never," I muttered, pulling away from the tape again.

He gave me a pleading look, but I didn't care. I wasn't here to make him feel better, even if he seemed nicer than the other one.

"For God sake, Vik! She's probably sixty pounds soaking wet," Yaro snapped from the driver's seat as he turned a corner, moving the steering wheel accordingly. "Get it done already."

His voice made both of us jump, but only Vik looked regretful.

Before I could do anything, his hand was on my shoulder with less care than before, and he slapped the tape across my mouth. I sucked in a harsh breath through my nose, surprised by the sudden shift in him.

While he had been more determined that time, that sadness in his eyes remained.

"Sorry," he uttered before pulling back and returning to his seat.

Aware that my voice had been taken away too, I was only left to make muffled noises, but I didn't have the energy to burn to do precisely that. Instead, giving in to the defeat, I

slumped back against the seat and tried to understand how I ended up there.

My dad. He was the reason.

I trembled with anger, beyond pissed at him for thinking I could be used as a pawn. As a means of getting out of the situation he caused himself.

His habits had been a problem ever since I was a young girl, and while I was always afraid something horrible would happen to him because of it, I never imagined that something would happen to me. That he would so willingly pass me over to some men like I was nothing more than a payment method—an object.

It made my skin crawl even to think he could reduce me down to exactly that.

I didn't know much about his business before, and I certainly had no idea he was dealing with mobsters—the type of men that abducted women from their beds and used them as ransom.

But I still didn't know what their place for me was. That was what made me anxious.

Staring out the window as my eyes burned with emotion, I could only watch as the city went by. The very place I romanticized for so long.

New York was supposed to be the place where everything changed for me. It was my opportunity to escape from my dad and start my own life.

But I had the feeling that plan died before it could even begin.



## Chapter 3 - Yaro

“Wait here,” I uttered to the back of the SUV as I popped my door open and got out. Vik did the same, closing the girl in by herself. I didn’t need to worry, though, not while her hands were bound and she was gagged.

Vik gave me a hesitant look as he tucked the laptop under his arm, holding his keys in the opposite hand. “Are you sure this is the right thing to do?”

I knew what he really meant.

*Are you sure you want to ruin her life?*

“I’m not going to question the morals of this, not when we were wronged first,” I returned, still feeling the tendrils of anger within me. At the very least, it began to ebb just before we reached my place. “Regret it as much as you want, but it won’t change anything. Dominic screwed us, and now we’re making it right for us. Remember that.”

Vik sucked in a rigid breath, and while I still saw the doubt laced in his features, he nodded.

“Look, it’s late, and we had a long day. Head home and get some rest,” I said, softening enough to remind him my frustration wasn’t for him.

“Alright. Let me know if anything happens,” he said, heading for his car.

“Will do.”

I could only hope nothing got out of hand. I knew how finicky that sort of situation could be.

The moment Vik got into his car and drove off, I was left with the crushing reality. I managed to get the girl, but now I had to deal with her. In my house, no less.

As I went to her door, I wondered if I did make a mistake. I was mad at her dad—not her.

But it was too late. The damage had been done, and I couldn't go back on the plan. I was supposed to make her my wife, even if it had been a whirlwind decision.

At the very least, I would be sending Dominic a message. As my wife, I would be in her life hanging over his like a phantom he couldn't get rid of. No matter what happened, I would be in the background, and it would be his reminder of how incredibly he fumbled it.

He never should've tried to cross a Levov.

Popping the back door open, I met Grace's scolding gaze, and that questioning I felt only increased in size. But I didn't want her to know that.

"Come on, we're going inside," I directed her, reaching for her bound wrists.

She carefully slid down from the seat, and her legs wobbled enough to let me know she was scared. I didn't blame her.

Even if she couldn't say anything with the tape over her mouth, she still managed to squirm and resist me. As if she thought I'd give up and let her go, but it was only enough to be annoying.

Huffing out a breath, I had her stand against the side of the SUV. "Give it a rest."

Her nostrils flared at that, yet she did as I directed.

"I'm taking the tape off, but if you make a sound inside, I won't hesitate to put it back on. There's no point in screaming anyway. Everyone inside works for us one way or another, and they won't run to help you. Got it?" I asked her, standing outside of the condo.

Her eyes tracked across my face momentarily, as if weighing her options, then she seemed to deflate. She nodded.

"Good."

Beginning with the tape on her mouth, I eased some stickiness away from the one side to give myself a better grip. I gave her a warning look, then yanked it off in one pull.

Grace winced and tried to hold back how much it hurt. She sucked in a deep breath and averted her eyes. Regardless of how she played it off, I knew it hurt.

Gesturing for her to turn around, I worked the tape away from her wrists, which seemed to be more tolerable. Once freed from them, I gripped her one arm and began pulling her toward the building.

To my surprise, she followed a bit easier, and I felt it was due to the exhaustion on her face. As we moved through the entrance and toward the main elevator, she looked around the nice common area.

She was probably surprised to see I didn't live in the slums.

It was one of the better condos owned by my family, and it certainly made my life easier. I had less to deal with, so I could focus more on work and what needed to be done.

When we reached the condo unit, I was so ready to hit my bed that I didn't care much for anything else. To my luck, her steam had run out, and there wasn't much fight left in her.

I let go of her arm once I locked the place down, to which she only took a few steps away from me. She wrapped her arms around herself for comfort and glanced at the furnishings around us.

Whether she was admiring it or not, I didn't care.

"This is how things are going to go," I began, catching her attention as she rubbed at her face where the tape had been. "You're staying here at my place and cannot leave. If you try to, I'll give the word for my torture team to begin with your dad. He'll pay the price for any problems you raise here."

While Grace crossed her arms and gave me a scornful glance, I watched as a flicker of fear moved through her eyes.

“What makes you think I care about what you do to him?”

Her voice was surprisingly cold, yet it made sense coming from someone who had been sold off to pay her father’s debt.

Narrowing my eyes at her, I wanted to read her better. To know what she was thinking. I could take my guesses, but knowing with absolute certainty was the best thing. “I’m sure you’re angry with him, but you’re not heartless.”

Not to mention, she wasn’t exactly the most intimidating thing. She looked far too innocent to be cold-blooded like that.

As I suspected, Grace’s hardened exterior crumbled along with her feigned toughness. As quickly as it appeared, it fell apart.

She sucked in a shaky breath and didn’t look at me. “My dad has done some terrible things, especially with this, but I don’t want him hurt...just let him suffer as he is.”

While I could tell her plea was genuine, I wasn’t ready to hear her out yet. That wound caused by her dad was too fresh for me to forget and move on.

“I’ll make that decision myself,” I muttered, pushing past her to go to the kitchen.

Pulling the door open, I snagged a bottle of beer. Effortlessly, I popped it off and took a swig.

Grace stood awkwardly in the middle of the condo as she looked around, likely wondering what was next for her.

“What do you want with me?”

Her voice was so delicate that it tugged on the vague guilt within me. But I couldn’t let it stop me. She wouldn’t sway me, not when that was exactly what she wanted.

Sighing, I leaned against the countertop. “Not only are you the payment, but the deal involves us getting married. You

will be my wife.”

Grace looked startled at once, and she recoiled at the words. An expression of raw, unfiltered horror took over.

“What?”

I had to insist that the reaction didn't sting slightly.

While I wasn't anticipating she would jump in my arms and let herself be whisked away, it irked me to know she only saw me as a no-good mobster. I wasn't ignorant enough to think she would willingly marry a stranger, but it didn't entirely help my ego.

“You heard me. It won't be long from now,” I began, swiping at my mouth with the back of my hand. “Contracts will be drawn up, and everything will be finalized.”

Her fear was palpable, but I didn't dwell on it.

I knew that look well. There were likely hundreds of thoughts racing through her mind, and her pulse was probably quickening. She was panicking and receiving an influx of adrenaline. She would have to choose between fight or flight.

From my place in the kitchen, I could sense that she wanted to bolt. I was too exhausted to deal with any of it.

Standing to my normal height, I took a few steps over to her and reached for her arm.

“I don't imagine you're too thrilled about it, but you're not running. There's no point. I have cameras everywhere in this building, and if you even try to leave, I'll have you returned right back here,” I mumbled, pulling her behind me through the condo. “You're the payment I'm owed, and if you're compromised, that punishment will fall on your dad.”

While Grace looked resistant to my words, she couldn't overpower me even if she wanted to. Instead, she let go of a forced breath and trailed behind me.

“The easier you make this, the less restrictions you'll have,” I reasoned with her. “My cousins were never shy about

locking their wives away before they found common ground, but I don't want to have to do the same. I'm not interested in keeping a prisoner."

"Then don't," she mumbled.

"If you cooperate, then I won't have to. But only then. In the meantime, you'll stay here until we figure everything out. Got it?"

Grace said nothing and instead wore a dissatisfied expression.

Not happy with that non-answer, I paused my movements and reached for her chin. She froze, pinned in place as I held her face and kept her from moving. She blinked rapidly at me, likely surprised by it.

"I said, do you understand?"

There was a short pause as many thoughts moved through her eyes, but she eventually swallowed harshly and nodded as best as she could.

"Good." Releasing her face, I resumed guiding her toward the master bedroom. "I didn't prepare for this, but you'll sleep here. I'll have someone bring you clothes in the morning."

Grace didn't say a word as I opened the door and stepped aside to let her in. Hesitantly, she stepped through the threshold and looked around the room.

Standing in the doorway, I watched as she took it all in. Everything was done up immaculately from the wall-to-wall windows on the far side to the king-sized bed, along with the pristine ensuite. It paled compared to my cousins, but it was nothing to sneer at.

As she stood there, marveling at it all, I wondered how much of his money Dominic ever shared with her. I had the feeling she never knew the extent of it.

With the day's chaos diminishing with every minute that passed, I finally had the chance to look at her. The woman

I took and intended on marrying, whether it was a business move or one fueled by my pride. Likely both.

Her dirty-blonde hair ran partway down her back with its healthy sheen, and I didn't mind looking at those forest-green eyes. She was much shorter than me, with a small yet filled-out frame. If I didn't know any better, I'd say she had a past of playing sports.

My impromptu evaluation of her left me feeling satisfied, mainly thanks to those curves her yoga pants clung to.

While my resolve was cracking, along with my confidence in my decision, at least she was beautiful. I hadn't considered how poorly that could've gone in my direction—a reminder to be less hasty moving forward.

“What now?” She asked, glancing over her shoulder at me with her arms pulled close to her body.

With a final scan of her, I reached for the doorknob and pulled it shut. “Get comfortable.”

The door closed behind me, and I sighed as I wandered toward the spare room.

I was sure my cousins would've locked the door behind her if they were in my situation, but I felt she wouldn't go anywhere regardless.

## Chapter 4 - Grace

No heartbreak could measure up to how devastated I felt.

Two days had passed since Yaro took me from my dorm room. I hadn't heard anything about what I was supposed to do or how long I was meant to stay there. There was no word on what was going on with my classes or if I was even still a student there. After all the work I had put in, it seemed it had been for nothing.

Since Yaro mentioned the marriage I was going to be forced into, I could only imagine my time there would be longer than I wanted. Even a moment inside the condo was too long for my liking.

Sleep came surprisingly easy for me since there wasn't much else I could do. I stayed within those four walls for those two days, with various things being dropped on a table next to the door.

Food was freshly picked up and wrapped for me, different sanitary items, and even a bag of clothes with the tags still on. I picked at what I wanted when I got hungry enough, but for the most part, I felt nauseous.

Not that I tested it, but I knew the door was unlocked. Based on the fact that there was no click sound before or after things were delivered to me, it only made sense.

As Yaro promised, I wasn't locked in there like a prisoner, but I felt like one.

Thinking about my dad's betrayal was enough to leech the determination from my bones, and I was left to feel like a pile of heavy limbs. I didn't see a point in fighting if I was going to be overpowered by the much bigger man who took me.



I had no doubt the building was under total surveillance as he said. Given that he had somehow learned my school, campus, and dorm number, I could only imagine his connections. If he had been angry enough to follow my dad up on his offer, then he surely had more than enough money to feel like a monetary payment wouldn't suffice.

The condo alone was enough proof that he was wealthy, and if he wanted it, he likely got it.

Stuck with my thoughts in that room alone, I had never felt more trapped. Regardless of the unlocked door, my freedom had been completely stripped.

With no phone, I couldn't connect with anyone outside that place. I couldn't even call my dad and scream at him for using me as a pawn.

Even if my dad had his problems, I never imagined I'd be caught in the middle of it. I had planned on leaving him and Boston since I was a young girl, and that plan took a long time to execute.

I was well on my way to living the life I wanted for myself, and yet he had to find a way to ruin that, too. Not only did he make all that effort completely useless, but he also managed to write off the rest of my life.

Without my knowledge or consent, I would be signed off to Yaro, and the only hope I had was if he somehow changed his mind. If he decided not to follow through with it.

Stepping out of the shower after marinating in my filth for long enough, I felt a little better. I pulled the brush Yaro got me through my long hair and dried it with a towel.

I had nowhere better to be, and I figured it would help the day go by faster. Not that I had a release date to think about or anything.

With the towel still wrapped around me, I reached for the bag of clothes and grabbed a comfortable pair of soft joggers and a grey hoodie. They were some of the most

straightforward items he had grabbed, and mustering the desire to wear anything else took too much energy.

I had spent the last two days alone since Yaro never came in at night. While the space was nice—since I would've fought him against it if he had tried—it felt strange that we had hardly exchanged two words with each other since I arrived.

I hadn't exactly been open to conversing with him, but to think he planned to marry us perplexed me.

While staying in the room by myself sounded tempting, I was going stir-crazy. I needed to see something else, even if it meant running into him.

For my sanity, it was in my best interest to pretend that Yaro wasn't there at all. To try and trick myself into thinking that nothing was wrong.

But a part of me felt curious about who my apparent fiancé was. Even if he didn't seem like the most open person, I wanted to try at least and make the situation easier to stomach. Plus, I was tired of sitting in the bedroom all by myself.

Closing the bedroom door behind me, I drew a deep breath and carefully padded through the condo, taking in my surroundings. I didn't know why I needed to tiptoe around, but I didn't want to disturb the peace. It was easier to be quiet and to make myself smaller.

I was unfamiliar with the space, making me feel slightly more secure as I turned corners and checked everything out.

Moving down the stairs, I noticed how the morning light poured in through the bright windows and brought everything to life. I appreciated that sight, and it made me realize just how bored I indeed had been to find something so mundane and beautiful.

The closer I was to the kitchen, the louder a light sizzling sound became. The smell of cooking eggs hit me next, and I couldn't help but take a deep breath.

Yaro stood over the stove, moving fresh eggs around in a frying pan, alongside fresh onions and peppers. A plate of bacon was ready at the side, and bread was browning in the toaster oven.

It smelled amazing.

Even from the basic task, Yaro somehow looked incredible doing it. His black tee hugged his muscles snugly, and those light military-style pants suited his figure nicely. As he moved the eggs in the pan, his back flexed with each movement, and I couldn't help but stare.

I wasn't ashamed to admit that he was attractive, but I was ashamed that I was attracted to my captor.

Everything about him was striking. If I had the chance, I could've watched him from my place all day.

The longer dark hair fell into his eyes as he glanced over his shoulder at me, taking notice of my presence. The buzzed undercut felt especially fitting with his attire.

“Get tired of the bedroom?”

Flustered from being noticed, I hugged myself and nodded.

“I never said you had to stay in there,” he added, returning his focus to the breakfast he was busy making.

His vague kindness took me off guard. I didn't know what to make of it, especially after he lifted me from my dorm yet didn't need to lock me in anywhere. I couldn't understand why he would want to marry me in the first place. We didn't even know each other.

But with every small gesture he offered me, I couldn't help but feel like he was trying.

Clearing my throat, I approached one of the stools next to the kitchen island and took a seat. I kept a close, skeptical eye on him.

“You said your family has a business,” I began, treading as carefully as possible. “What does it entail?”

He thought for a moment. “It’s not for the faint of heart.”

“But it involves kidnapping people?”

The words left my mouth before I could stop them, but I tried to grip any form of confidence I had left. I didn’t want to seem spineless.

Yaro just snickered. “Unfortunately, that’s part of it sometimes, but it’s not a daily occurrence. We’re in the business of making ourselves as rich as possible without being scrutinized by legal bodies or anyone who wants to take a chunk out of us.”

“And how do you do that?”

“We protect our prospects and money makers with our lives, which is what I do. We have teams of men who protect our products, our associates, rendezvous points, and our families,” he explained, scraping lightly at the pan. “I oversaw the flow of the warehouse your father rented to us.”

If they worked to dodge government bodies, I could only assume they didn’t do honest work. At least, work that wasn’t entirely legal.

I had heard of the mafia before, but I assumed those stories were made for movies or to scare people into staying in line and walking the straight path. I never thought I’d know anyone related to such organizations.

Feeling brave, I lifted a brow in his direction. “How rich are you then?”

A small chuckle came from him. “Beyond your imagination.”

“That’s why you were so angry with my dad then,” I concurred, watching Yaro turn off the burner.

If he did steal from them, he would have caused a direct loss for their business. It made more sense knowing Yaro's role in it.

He nodded and began dishing the food onto two plates, moving effortlessly. "We paid your dad handsomely, yet he had the gall to steal from us. One of our most important merchandises at that."

My stomach sank at the thought.

My dad meddled in a world he had no business being a part of and kept that separate world away from me. Despite never sharing the truth with me, he still managed to rope me in it anyway.

If Yaro and his family were willing to deal in the underground business and were ready to kidnap me without remorse, then there was no telling what else he was capable of. Based on his somewhat brutal nature, I knew I didn't want to find out.

Despite the conversation going relatively well, a cold chill ran through me. The reality weighed heavily on my shoulders, and I wasn't sure how close I wanted to get to him.

That urge to flee riddled me with restlessness.

I watched Yaro as he divided the eggs between our plates. "Do I have to stay here? Or could I go back to the campus? Maybe we can figure something out so I can keep studying."

Yaro paused his work and took an audible deep breath in. "I can't let that happen. Not if you're going to be a Levov. Me and my family have enemies, and if they find out about you, they'll do whatever they can to use that against me. They'd likely try to use you as ransom."

My worries only deepened. It wasn't what I wanted to hear.

But those red flags were raised in my mind, and I silently pleaded for the chance to return to campus. To

distance ourselves, even if my name had to be signed on a marriage license.

That desperation gripped me. “Nothing will happen, and I’ll be careful. I promise,” I began, hoping for any flicker of hope. “I just...I wanted to go to NYU more than anything, and it was my one shot—”

“I said no!” Yaro snapped, dropping the pan back onto the stove with a noisy clatter. “That’s final.”

I jumped from my place, afraid of what he was capable of. Of what he would do to me.

An angry air followed him as he grabbed a plate and pushed it before me. Refusing to look me in the eyes, he clenched his jaw and headed for the door.

“Don’t go anywhere,” he muttered.

Before I could say anything, he snatched up a set of keys and a phone and stormed out of the condo. The door slammed shut and locked behind him.

As the storm went with him, only silence and eery stillness remained.

Blinking back my disbelief, my stomach turned as I glanced down at the generous helping of food on my plate. I suddenly wasn’t as hungry anymore.

## Chapter 5 - Yaro

The echo of clanking machines moved around me as I focused on my deep breaths and concentrated on the task at hand. Pushing the mechanism up, I worked against the resistance and felt the strain in my muscles.

Breathing in and out, I tried to let go of that previous anger.

“You scored yourself a wife, huh?” Elias, my best friend since childhood, asked from his place on the bench. He pressed the dumbbells as naturally as always and broke a moderate sweat.

“It wasn’t exactly on my list, but it happened,” I returned, pushing past the burning in my limbs.

Music came from Elias’ Bluetooth speaker as it filled the warehouse gym, and I tried to use it to concentrate better. Although, the reminder of Grace sparked another wave of irritation in me.

“Even if that’s the case, it fell into place pretty quickly,” he added, lifting the dumbbell back onto the stand with a heavy exhale. “I can’t believe you’ll be a married man.”

“Me neither.”

“But this should be a good thing. You’ll have someone reliable waiting for you at home. No need to prowl,” Elias teased.

“I don’t *prowl*,” I rebutted. “But the rest will be revealed with time. I don’t know much about her.”

“I’d say she’s pretty lucky marrying into the Levov family,” Elias said with a chuckle. “Hell, I was beginning to wonder if I should convince you to propose to me.”

Scoffing at him with a shake of my head, I’d leave it to nobody else but him to joke about my future. It wasn’t unusual

for him to do that, especially if things weren't going in my favor.

While I found it slightly amusing, I couldn't help but feel more solemn than expected.

Even if many marriages in my family sparked from alliances or convenient deals, they were a relatively big deal to us. The ceremonies didn't require flashy details or trimmings, but we respected them and upheld our promises.

My cousins were all happily married against all odds, but I wasn't sure how well my situation would be favored.

I never thought I'd be one to step into a rushed wedding to a woman I didn't know. Yet, I didn't think having someone in my condo with me was the worst thing in the world. Someone to add more life to the place.

A gorgeous woman at that.

That factor helped, and at the very least, I wouldn't feel entirely so alone in the relatively big space.

So far, Dimitri's wrath hadn't reached me, and I was graciously given more days to live with all my fingers and the use of my legs still. I was glad that dreaded call hadn't come through, but the anticipation still made me feel squeamish.

Even if we were cousins, and I worked alongside him, it didn't exempt me from being wrung out beyond recognition.

Being married helped soften his edges, but I didn't want to be the one to test how far.

"Listen, there's still time to drop on one knee," Elias said, reaching for his water. "I can just imagine how fat that rock would be."

"You're a jackass," I fired back, standing up from the piece of equipment to grab my towel. I scrubbed it down my face to soak up the heavy sweat I garnered.

"That might be true, but at least I'm honest."

"Whatever you say."



Elias laughed to himself and wrapped his towel around the back of his neck. “Feel like hitting up one of the clubs before you become a married man?”

While part of me wanted to take a load off and not do anything, I didn’t feel ready to go home yet. I also didn’t want to bail on Elias when we had a rare day off.

My brain was still very much on the woman I had locked up in my condo, but I allowed myself to accept a new resolve.

“Fine. The first round is on you, though.”

Elias feigned offense and grabbed his gear. “Expensive date.”

Ignoring his sarcasm, I headed out and planned to forget about my less-than-ideal situation.

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The club was as lively as usual, packed full of people with nothing better to do and too much money to spend. And yet, they were the perfect clientele.

They had their shit together enough to have their money in order, built with the innate desire to be seen and perceived as luxurious, but were just negligent enough to blow money on Levov-labeled booze.

My cousins knew exactly how to appeal to them, which worked in everyone’s favor.

Pushing through the crowd of patrons and hired dancers alike, I towered over most of them. Elias was in tow, letting his eyes scan over the beautiful women, just waiting for the right sucker to pounce on.

It didn’t take long for them to come out of the woodwork with their sensual smiles and tight clothes. Some

achieved the bare minimum with the latter.

As we went, some faced me with recognition sparking in their eyes, only to try and drape an arm over mine, or search frantically for any way to strike up a conversation. They all looked the same, no matter what color they dyed their hair, or what dress they thought would help separate them from the crowd.

They sniffed me out immediately, as they tended to as a consequence of my name. Most would think of it as a benefit instead of a punishment, but I wasn't interested in finding myself a vapid social climber.

When I was younger, I wouldn't mind wasting a night with a woman I didn't know the name of, but at that point in my life, it lost its shine. I didn't care to waste my time on people incapable of going through life without constant validation.

Some of me wondered why I was even there, but Elias was my immediate reminder.

He whistled low and tilted his sunglasses down as we walked by a group of girls. "Remind me to only come here with you next time."

Snickering at his comment, I pushed through until we reached the VIP lounge.

Elias wasted no time calling over some drinks as we took our seats.

I tried sipping mine slowly, but like clockwork, three young women strode over wearing equally tight dresses: two blondes and a brunette.

The brunette approached me with her siren eyes while the other two surrounded Elias. He welcomed them with open arms, a glass of whiskey in one hand while he marveled over them.

All three danced to the blaring music, moving their hips to the rhythm.

The drink entering my system helped ease me into it, and I allowed it. She started from a distance away before gradually coming closer, eyes young and locked on me with hunger. She trailed a hand up my arm as she approached, inches away from straddling me.

I watched her closely, feeling out if it was something I wanted to pursue.

She was easy on the eyes, but like many others, she didn't have anything particularly striking or interesting about her. She was just another young woman hoping for money, sex, or love. Maybe even all three.

She would've been a temptation to me, from the way she swayed her hips and wasn't shy to tell me what she wanted through her body alone. But just watching her made my stomach turn.

We hadn't even been there that long, but with the music pounding, lights flashing, and the presumptuous woman on my lap, I had had enough.

My mind drifted to the woman in my condo, and even if she struck a nerve with me before, being there with her sounded more appealing. I wanted peace and quiet, even if I agreed to go with Elias.

I wasn't legally married yet, but having another woman on me didn't have the same appeal. It wasn't how I wanted to start things.

The thought annoyed me. Before I took Grace, I didn't realize how the prospect of marriage would sour my perspective of the pursuit. Or how it would turn me into someone who couldn't stand clubs at the drop of a time.

"No more," I mumbled to the young lady, moving her off me as nicely as I could manage despite my irritation. "Keep him busy."

She gave me a slightly hurt look but did as I said and gravitated to Elias and the other two.

His face lit up, and he gladly welcomed the third. The trio danced around him, touching him and flirting as they wished.

He didn't have the heart to say no, although I doubt any part of him wanted to.

"You are the best friend a guy could ask for," Elias said, lifting his glass to me. He was like a kid on Christmas morning, and I didn't want to dampen his fun.

I gestured to him as I stood and peeled myself away from the VIP lounge.

Other dancers and young women tried to get my attention as I made my way toward the back of the club, but I denied them all and wondered what I planned to do with myself. The thought of catching some air out back sounded fine enough to me.

Before I could reach the door, I halted as Dimitri stepped out from one of the conference rooms. My stomach dropped at once, and my blood went cold.

We were never fully briefed after the Dominic situation. At least we didn't do one-on-one. I was sure he heard through the chain of command, at least.

"Ah, there you are," he said, eyeing me.

"Dimitri," I started, urging the effects of the whiskey to ease away. Being caught by him didn't make it any easier. "We haven't had the chance to go over everything..."

I was more than prepared for Dimitri to unload his raw anger onto me—to ream me out immediately.

But the smirk I received only made me confused. He clapped a hand on my shoulder.

"Leveraging your marriage on a stolen product? I didn't think you had it in you."

Just barely grasping for words, I didn't know what to say. I couldn't read him.

I had been around Dimitri long enough to know his cues and mannerisms, but something about that interaction had me stun locked.

When I didn't say anything, he just laughed.

"I made Vik spill about what happened. Congrats on finding yourself a fiancée," he said with a suggestive glint in his eyes. "I hope for everyone's sake that she's useful."

Deeply confused by the apparent coolness in his tone but aware of the hidden warning in his words, I knew there was more to it than a friendly congratulations.

I needed to get ahead of it before things could get out of hand. "About the warehouse—"

"Oh, I'm furious about that, trust me," Dimitri said, smile deepening with that concealed rage. He clapped my shoulder again. "But I'm trying not to rain on your parade until you're married. You fumbled it, Yaro. Badly. I'm counting on you to find a way to make up for what was lost."

There was no missing his hidden warnings, even if he did an excellent job of putting me off-kilter enough to know things wouldn't end well for me if I didn't fix what I had done. Even so, there was a small relief in knowing he would take it easy on me in the meantime.

At least I even had the chance to make it right.

Many others did less and faced more severe consequences just because Dimitri had a bad day.

He pulled another exaggerated smile and pulled away. Heading down the hallway, his voice traveled back to me.

"See you at the ceremony."

## Chapter 6 - Grace

My heart pounded against my ribcage the moment I saw it.

I barely opened my eyes all the way when I found a white dress hanging from a wardrobe in the bedroom. I could see the white silk through the garment bag, along with a veil and matching heels.

My stomach churned at the thought.

It could only mean one thing.

Standing from the bed as if a fire had been lit beneath me, I panicked all the while I approached it. Someone had snuck it in at some point while I was asleep. Most likely Yaro himself.

I had no idea.

While he had made it very clear he intended to marry me despite not knowing each other, I had silently hoped he would let it slide and change his mind. At the very least, I thought we'd have more time before the ceremony could take place.

I was foolishly mistaken.

Staring at the dress made it feel immensely more real than it initially had. Before, it just felt like something he had made up, and something he didn't mean to pursue.

And yet, there it was. There I was, trapped in a nightmare situation I couldn't fully wrap my head around.

Unable to tear my eyes away from it, I put my fingers against my temples and tried to understand how I got there and the fact that I would be married by the end of the day to the man who lifted me from my dorm room without a choice.

How could my dad ever decide to let that happen to me? How he used me as a means of fixing his mistakes.

My head ached at the heavy emotions coursing through me.

A knock at the door pulled me out of it, nearly jumping out of my skin.

With a sigh, I went over and hesitated before the door. If it was Yaro, I wondered if I could just keep him out. If I moved a chair or something tall enough to block the doorknob, then maybe I could barricade myself in. There was no way I could jump through the window, not from how tall the condo building was. But I could protest.

If I wore him down long enough, then maybe I could score my freedom back.

But when I realized the knock sounded way too soft for him, my curiosity got the best of me.

Opening the door, I found a woman with strawberry-blonde hair pulled neatly in a slicked-back pony. When she saw me, she did a full sweep from head to toe, and her eyes brightened.

“Hi, Grace. I’m Raya, Isidor Levov’s wife.”

My brows furrowed. “Who?”

She gave me a funny look. “A cousin of Yaro’s. Did he not tell you anything?”

I shook my head.

Raya sighed and seemed somewhat disappointed by the news. “Of course not. But it’s fine, I can catch you up.”

“Sorry, but what are you here for?”

She held up a big cosmetic bag with contents that moved noisily as she lifted it. “I’m here to help with your hair and makeup before the ceremony. I’m sure if Yaro had told you, it would be less jarring. But we’re going to have fun, I promise.”

While her heart seemed in the right place, and she sounded nice enough, I couldn’t help how my heart raced.

How dread trickled into my system.

I didn't know her, his family, and certainly not the man I was supposed to marry. Beyond their under-the-table businesses and how my dad stole from them, I didn't know anything. It made me feel helpless and petrified.

I didn't want to be whisked into something so serious, but I also didn't want to turn Raya away either. She seemed to be there to genuinely help me, and if I could get to know at least one person, I assumed I would be better off.

When I didn't say anything, Raya seemed to pick up on my hesitance, and her expression softened.

"I know how alarming all of this is, I was in your position once. I was terrified and angry when I was swept into marrying Isidor, yet I came to love not only him but the family too. I'm here to help. In time, everything will work out," she said, offering me her consolation.

While I wanted to believe her kindness, it was all too much to bear at once. To be expected to jump on board with everything seemed unreasonable.

"I don't even know him, or why he's determined to make this happen," I said, overwhelmed by how fast my heart raced. "I don't know what's going on."

"It's okay, hon. Neither did I. Nobody blames you for not looking forward to this," Raya said empathetically. "From what I can tell, he has some more explaining to do. But for now, I'll be with you to make sure you're just fine. I'm sure it doesn't feel like it right now, but this is a special day."

She was right, it didn't feel that way.

But even if I didn't want to partake in the wedding, I had no choice. I couldn't just run away and hope for the best. Yaro's family had money and manpower from the sound of it, and I knew I wouldn't make it very far.

Finally giving in, I sighed and opened the bedroom door.



Looking happy but considerate of my feelings, Raya walked in with her supplies, and I was swept into a whirlwind of preparations.

She started with my hair first as she put in hot rollers to let the set while she got started on my skincare and makeup. Everything she used was from brands I wasn't familiar with, each feeling lusher than the last.

At one point, she pulled out a bottle of champagne and two small flutes. "This might help ease your nerves a bit," she murmured, pouring it carefully.

While I didn't want to admit it, the attention and care were nice. And the champagne helped smooth out some of the ridges.

As Raya talked through it all, her voice was enough distraction to keep me from completely losing my mind. It made me wonder if she had exactly that in mind or was that chatty.

But the closer my hair and makeup were to being done, the more that reality ebbed back in again.

That anxiety put me on edge, and the thought of leaving behind everything I wanted to achieve to marry someone I didn't know felt like cheating myself. Forgetting about school felt like mourning the life I hoped to make for myself.

Every dream I chased since I was a young girl desperate to get away from my dad was all shot down in one sweep.

All the effort I put into working and saving for school down the drain.

All because of him.

"Alright, and you are now done," Raya said, admiring her work. She smiled brilliantly. "I have to pack up and help with some last-minute preparations, but someone will come get you when it's time. How are you doing?"

Sucking in a deep breath, I could barely look at her through the mirror. “I’ve been better. But...thanks for your help.”

“Anytime. And if you need anything at all, don’t hesitate to reach out. I’m always here if you need someone to lean on.”

While I wasn’t entirely keen on joining the family, her kindness went a long way. At the very least, I was grateful for that.

Before long, Raya gathered her things and slipped out the door, looking much more enthusiastic than I felt.

Staring into the mirror once I was left alone, there was something uncanny about it. Me, wearing a gorgeous wedding dress and the nicest makeup I could ask for, yet I felt anything but ready. Everything but happy.

I had always dreamed of finding someone I loved and marrying them in a ceremony we both put time and consideration into when the time was right. But that choice was taken from me.

While my apparent fiancée wasn’t the worst to look at, and I did find him attractive, I didn’t know him. It felt like going on a blind date to end up married right after.

None of it was how I imagined, leaving a pit in my stomach.

Waiting for whoever was meant to get me, I never expected it to be my dad.

The moment he came in through the front door, I froze up. It was like seeing a ghost.

At first, he took me in and seemed touched to see me prepared for a wedding. Tears gathered in his eyes, and I started to tear up for a moment too.

It felt like a trick. But I quickly remembered it wasn’t the warm and fuzzy meeting it seemed like. Instead of a loving father handing his daughter off to the man of her dreams, he

was there to hand me over like a prized animal. I was compensation—tradeable goods.

The purple and sickly yellow bruises around his face reminded me of that.

Immediately, I flushed with anger and sadness all over again.

“Grace—”

“No,” I snapped, cutting him off before he could start on some sappy spiel. “We aren’t doing this.”

He almost looked hurt and confused. “Doing what?”

“We are not going to pretend like you didn’t do this to me.”

When he realized how angry I really was, he hesitated and pulled in a deep, shaky breath. “I know this isn’t what either of us planned.”

“Speak for yourself. You knew this would happen—you orchestrated it! Why? Why would you choose to use me to pay them back for what you did?” I asked, finally letting the burning question come to light.

He shook his head slowly as if mauling over those decisions for himself. “I had no other choice, Grace. It wasn’t what I wanted for you.”

“Could’ve fooled me.”

“You have to believe me.”

“No, I don’t,” I returned sharply, so angry that my skin felt hot all over. “You ruined everything. Every last thing I had going for myself. My school, my future career, and everything else I wanted. You ruined it without thinking twice about it, all because of your pathetic habits.”

“Grace—”

Pointing a finger at him, I wanted him to feel my pain. To know I meant every last word of it. Even if we never had

the best father-daughter relationship, he betrayed me. I would never get that time back again.

“You let your selfishness get in the way of my life just like you did when I was younger. You will never stop taking and taking from me!”

“Grace!” He shouted at me as his face flared red. Remembering himself, he breathed in again and looked at me squarely. “I’ve heard enough of this, and you will pull yourself together. No matter what you think of me, what’s done is done. After I was informed that Yaro did follow through with it, I was offered an invitation to the wedding and to walk you down the aisle. I signed the agreement to keep things legally binding, and I did it to save myself and help you too.”

In pure disbelief, I recoiled and tried to pull back from him.

He put up a calming hand as if I were a stray animal threatening to bolt. “Whether you want to accept it or not, one day you will see that I did this for you. Let the Levov think he’s pulled a fast one on me, but this is your ideal outcome, Grace.”

There was no way for me to know if he was being sincere, or if he just wanted to make himself feel better. Either way, I couldn’t accept it.

He put his arm out for me. “I know you aren’t my biggest fan right now, but it’s only proper for me to walk you down the aisle.”

I wanted to deny him and run off, but Yaro’s voice was in my head before I could try anything, citing the whole building was not only run by his people but completely monitored.

Any attempt would likely put me in a worse situation, and I was too exhausted from the stress to expend that energy.

I didn’t want to know what the Levovs were capable of yet.

Glancing between him and his waiting arm, a final rush of conviction moved through me.

“Before I go with you, I need to know one thing. I need to hear it directly from you.”

While he looked tired of the discussion, Dad sighed. “What is it?”

“What was your business really?”

He studied me as if wondering just how much he should say, and he finally let the words follow. “I rented the warehouses to the Levovs, from New York to Boston. They stored their product there and paid me extra to not squeal on them to the authorities. Instead, I stole from them. Yaro and his goons hit me for it when I was already down, and marrying you off was the only way I could remotely pay them back. That is the truth of it.”

As I stared at him, taken aback by how easily he admitted it, I was speechless. Even if I felt it had been the truth all along, it hurt even more to hear it from his mouth.

Rage and deeply rooted despair intermingled within me, and I felt myself crumbling.

“How could you?” I asked weakly, hearing just how broken I sounded.

Dad flinched slightly from my voice, but he shook his head. He had nothing left to say.

“You did this to me,” I mumbled, at a complete loss for how to move forward. “You ruined my one chance at being happy.”

That final spark of resistance in me fizzled, and at the end of it, I had no choice but to take his arm.

Feeling only like a husk of myself, I let him lead me outside, and into a blacked-out SUV.

## Chapter 7 - Yaro

While serving my cousins and their many business ventures, I had seen and done many gruesome things. Many of which would make anyone squirm. But at that moment, nothing felt as nerve-wracking as standing at the pulpit.

The pressure of the wedding weighed heavily on my shoulders, and even if I looked the part, I felt like a kid playing dress up.

I didn't think having a quick, almost sham wedding would get to me, but the stuffy chapel was making me sweat. Seeing my friends and family in the building I didn't care about made it feel more real and daunting.

Doubt simmered beneath my skin and made me second-guess my choices.

It made me wonder how things could've been different if I never took Grace. If I had let nature run its course and decide for me. Even if I never imagined myself getting married in the first place.

Dragging someone into my life didn't seem like the fairest thing to do.

Everyone gathered in the pews as the music started, and Dominic came down the aisle with Grace on his arm.

The fitted silk dress hugged her curves perfectly, and there was no denying how incredible she looked. Everything about it made her look regal, even if she didn't look so sure.

Even if we hadn't found a common ground yet, at least she was easy on the eyes. I just hoped she had the personality to go with it and the qualities I hoped for.

Despite our circumstances and the obvious wedge between us, a small bead inside me wondered if there might be a chance for us to connect. While part of me felt guilty for forcing her into it, I wanted that redemption. The chance to

prove I didn't do it for completely no reason other than trying to best her dad.

As the ceremony began and Grace was beside me, I felt like a husk. Like a puppet trying to perform enough to convince everyone in the room it was real—including myself.

Yet, I knew better than anyone that the marriage meant nothing. We didn't know the first thing about each other, but I was legally binding us together.

I didn't know if it would turn out to be the best or worst decision I could've made.

Glancing at Dominic as he wiped beneath his swollen eye, I couldn't help but feel like I played right into his hands. I let him off too easy, even if he was visibly bruised for everyone in the chapel to see, and I willingly took the one thing he had to give.

It felt like a sick joke I played on myself, and I couldn't take it back.

The ceremony was quick with half-assed vows and the usual script from the priest, and the kiss was just as fleeting.

While it hadn't been more than a peck, the sensation sent warmth through me. It didn't seem like the worst part to endure, but I still wanted it all to be done with.

To my dismay, we were ushered to a banquet hall where there was music and congratulations given, all of which I felt like I couldn't escape. I couldn't get out of there fast enough.

While the words I received from my family were genuine enough, they still made me squirm. It all felt so superficial, no matter how hard I tried to look past it.

But I was the only one to blame for it.

Grace was just as checked out as I felt—perhaps even more so. She simply went along with it, moving from place to place.

She didn't want to be there any more than I did, but she was better at hiding it.

"You looked beautiful up there, Grace," Raya said as the girls flocked to her, surrounded by their children. "Welcome to the family."

My cousin's wives were a force to be reckoned with, but around her, they all wore their welcoming smiles. One by one, Raya introduced them to her, and while she took it well, I could tell it was overwhelming.

"We're always right around the corner if you need anything," Violet said just as kindly.

They all agreed, and Grace gave them a small smile. "Thank you."

Knowing I dragged her into this foreign world made that guilt mount even higher within me. She had no reason to be there other than to pay for her father's mistakes and because of my hastiness.

She did nothing wrong, but I threw her into something completely different from what she knew.

No matter how everything would play out for us, I had to live with that reality.

As the girls continued to talk, Andrei approached, holding his plate of cake. He gave me a small nudge. "You two staying somewhere for the honeymoon?"

While I knew that suggestive look in his eyes, I didn't play into it. I didn't want to even pretend like I had thought much farther than getting the ceremony done.

"I skipped on the suite," I murmured, hoping to drop the conversation as soon as possible. "It was an unnecessary expense. Enough had been put toward the ceremony already."

"Money is no issue here," he returned gently, giving me a strange look. "But I hope you enjoy your night anyway."



It was true that we had no shortage of it, but I didn't want to dip into my cousins' accounts just to pay for a last-minute wedding. Restricting the budget was a way for me to minimize the fuss involved.

I hadn't even considered our wedding night—technically, our honeymoon. There was no way for me to know how it would unfold, even if I envisioned the two of us locking ourselves away in our separate rooms and not coming out until morning.

The thought irritated me. That wasn't how I wanted it to happen.

But I had the feeling it would be bleak.

As the lights dimmed and the music changed, I knew immediately what was coming, and my stomach dropped.

“It's time for the first dance!” Raya shouted. The family hollered at us as I begrudgingly went to the center of the room and waited for Grace. She wasn't far behind.

I wanted to jump out of my skin, but I went along with it anyway. I didn't want to disappoint the family, not when they were happy among themselves with their partners. Elias gave me a loud ‘whoop’ as I reached for Grace.

My hands fell to her waist as hers rested on my shoulders, and we began. I felt like a middle schooler experiencing his first dance. It was unnatural for me and more awkward than I cared to admit.

We were silent as we danced, and while I hoped for something to soothe our rigidness, it was hard to miss how good it felt to hold her. The warmth she emanated was something I hadn't experienced for a while.

Even if I didn't know her that well yet, being close gave me a small sense of comfort. Something to help move more naturally.

It seemed like a redeemable part of the day.

As we swayed, I found myself relaxing more, thanks to her. Grace did the same as if unconsciously following suit.

Regardless of how I felt about the dance, I didn't mind the opportunity to take her in completely. She was more beautiful than I initially wanted to admit. While her light green eyes still held lingering discomfort within them, they seemed to soften the longer we danced. Her features were so soft looking and perfectly accentuated by the makeup Raya had done for her.

As Grace relaxed even more, looking exhausted from it all, she leaned against me with her arms wrapped around my neck.

A tender sensation rushed through me at once, and I could only breathe through it as I held her closer.

The subtle shift didn't seem so bad, and I even found myself appreciating how she felt safe enough to lean into me. Whether she was just doing it out of duty or to convince herself everything was fine, she didn't utter a complaint about it.

With her pressed against me, it stirred new thoughts I didn't previously have, and I regretted not getting that suite.

Grace was so warm and enticing before me, and something about her piqued my interest. When I initially took her from her campus, I didn't expect to be drawn to her truly. I thought I would lift her to get back at her father, make things legal, then continue with the business.

But having her so close, the thought of getting her out of that dress certainly crossed my mind.

By the time it was all over, nothing was stopping me from taking my new wife back home. We both looked like we had been through hell and back as we rode in the back of the SUV, and we didn't say a word.

It was impossible to look at her without feeling that guilt and slight regret creeping in. I felt responsible for

dragging her into my mess. For making her a part of a world she had no business being in.

I felt no better than her dad.

## Chapter 8 - Grace

There was no way to describe how I felt after it was all said and done.

The ceremony, while rushed, wasn't as bad as I expected, but it wasn't anything like I pictured as a little girl. I was officially married and a Levov, but I didn't feel excited. I didn't feel swept off my feet.

I just felt numb, like I had officially signed away everything I hoped for.

Since being stuck with my dad, I always wanted to do what most average women did. I wanted to graduate from university and get a good job. To settle down and start a family in a nice neighborhood somewhere. The abysmal childhood I experienced sprouted that idea in my head, but it all felt like It was for nothing.

Towing behind Yaro as we entered the condo, I felt like a doll playing dress up.

Even if the kiss and dance were nice, I didn't know how to feel about the rest of it.

I couldn't help but assume Yaro felt the same way as the gloomy atmosphere followed us both inside. It was my first time entering the condo as a bride despite not feeling like one and the place not feeling like home either.

As the lights turned on, we reached the living room, and a small display on the glass coffee table caught our attention.

Silver balloons tied to a container of ice and fancy-looking champagne glinted under the light, matched with some glasses, white candles, and a handful of other nice touches.

To my surprise, a small grin claimed Yaro's face.

He reached for the card and read it quickly. He snickered to himself. “Leave it to Isidor and Raya. It’s all about the details.”

Feeling like I was missing something, I wasn’t sure what to say.

But standing in the living room wearing one of the nicest wedding dresses I had ever seen, I felt ridiculously overdressed and uncomfortable, even if Yaro was still in his suit that flattered him more than I wanted to admit.

Letting go of a breath, I turned away from him. “I’m getting changed.”

He mumbled a response while he inspected the champagne bottle.

Taking that as my cue, I went straight for the master bedroom with a hundred thoughts moving through my head at once.

Reaching for the zipper took some effort, but once the dress hit the floor, I felt a semblance of normalcy again. I rifled through some of the clothes that had been left for me and found a two-piece pajama set with shorts and a tank top that looked comfortable enough.

Slipping them on, I let go of a deep breath and looked at myself in the mirror.

I started the day as Grace Carter and ended it as Grace Levov. There was no easy way for me to digest that fact, regardless of what my dad said.

It was impossible to see it as a good thing. Sure, the money would be appealing to some, but it didn’t matter to me. I wanted a genuine connection and to know my husband before we exchanged any vows.

And yet, something about Yaro made me want to know him better. To put in the effort and find out exactly who I married.

I was torn about it all.

As far as I saw it, I had two options. I could flop onto the bed and hide there for as long as I wanted, or I could confront my new reality. While the former was tempting, my curiosity got the better of me.

With a sigh, I headed for the door and approached the living room.

Sat on the couch, Yaro had helped himself to some of the champagne as he sipped on it and scrolled through his phone. When he heard me coming, surprise ran across his features as he looked at me.

He obviously assumed I'd hide myself away for the night, but I proved him wrong.

Wordlessly, I reached for the bottle as his eyes tracked my every move. I poured some into a spare flute, then sat across from him.

Exchanging only glances while we drank our wine, there was something tantalizing about that quiet air between us.

Like a silent challenge of who would start first.

Since we hardly knew each other, the beginning was always the hard part. I didn't know his interests outside of work, and that left too many options in the air.

When it went on for too long, Yaro eventually sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "Things have not gone how I anticipated they would either, and I get it if you hate me. I wouldn't blame you."

It was an interesting statement to hear from him, given that he had put us both in that position.

But I chose to ignore it, not willing to decide if I hated him just yet. It was a strong word.

After a drawn-out sip, I asked, "What was your childhood like?"

Yaro furrowed his brows in confusion. “My childhood?”

I nodded simply. “Yes, your life. What made you who you are.”

He studied me for a moment, then rubbed absently at his chin. “I was born in Russia, as my cousins were, but I remember very little. Vik was born here after we moved, and it was just the two of us with our parents until our mother died unexpectedly. After that, our father was harder on us. He couldn’t take the thought of losing his wife, but I took the brunt of it to make sure Vik would grow up to be mostly normal. We spent most of our time with our cousins since our fathers were in business together. Those moments were good. Happy. But I developed a thick skin as I got older and clashed more with our dad.

“I was aimless when I finished school after nearly failing. I didn’t see much of a point in it at first, until I figured out which subjects I actually enjoyed learning about. Vik was always better with numbers than I was. But my size and lack of direction made me perfect for our family’s empire, so I joined the ranks. I wanted Vik to choose differently than me, but he wouldn’t. He was determined to follow in my footsteps no matter how I begged him not to.”

“Would you say you’d do anything for your brother?” I asked, curious about his determination to see him live differently.

Without needing to think about it, Yaro nodded. “Anything at all. If anyone picked on him in school, I was there to make sure they never laid another finger on him. I always tried to help Vik stand up for himself, but he was always more reserved about using violence. I like to say he’s the better one of us.”

“I always wanted a sibling for that reason,” I began, contemplating my childhood. “To have someone to protect. But in hindsight, I think it was for the best.”

“You were an only child.”

“On most days, I would think it was the worst thing in the world to not have someone to share my pain with, to help make it easier for me. But now I know I would’ve felt immense guilt if I had to watch a sibling experience what I did,” I murmured, chest hurting at the idea of it.

Yaro forced out a breath. “You’re correct. Watching a younger sibling face those same experiences makes it feel like your fault. You’d burn down the world if it meant keeping your sibling safe.”

I softened at the genuine emotions that passed through his eyes. I knew he meant it completely.

Yaro took a generous gulp from his glass, then glanced at me again. “What was yours like then?”

Those old feelings rose to the surface, and I swallowed against the lump in my throat. “My mom walked out when I was just a toddler, so I don’t remember anything about her. I guess she got sick of his habits, and he didn’t take it well. He drank more, and I had to face everything he dished out on my own. I didn’t have anyone to shield me from it. The older I got, the more emotionally abusive he was, which made his betrayal feel even worse. Any sense of independence I made for myself; he always found a way to break it again.”

Sympathy stitched into his features as Yaro nodded with understanding. “But you managed to get away from him somehow?”

“I wanted to sooner for school once I hit eighteen, but I didn’t have enough money saved up. I spent the next few years working and saving as much as I could since my dad didn’t offer me a dime. Once I had enough, alongside some bursaries, I headed straight for New York,” I said, feeling a spark of pride for managing to get myself that far.

Vague anger veiled his eyes then. “He didn’t pay for any of it?”



When I shook my head, Yaro scoffed. “Yet with everything we paid him, he couldn’t give you that kindness?”

My chest ached at the memory. “Of course not. He had his priorities, and none of them included me.”

That frustration ebbed into what I could only assume was sadness. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“I would say it built some character, but I’m not sure how much is left now.”

Yaro sighed and reached for the bottle to pour himself another glass. “No young woman in your shoes should be swept into this life. You deserve more than that.”

Hearing him admit blame to some capacity softened me somewhat. He wasn’t just a cold man willing to do questionable things for no reason. He had a reason for being determined and willing to do whatever it took to keep his brother safe and ensure they were both okay.

He had a past similar to my own, and I understood him better from knowing that.

Growing up a certain way shapes you, and beneath his hard exterior, I could see someone who used to hurt. Someone who wanted different for himself.

As I sat across from him, I could feel my perception changing little by little.

“It’s no different from what I was raised in, apparently.”

Taken aback by the statement, Yaro furrowed his brows. I couldn’t fully read the expression on his face.

Then, he dropped it. Whatever was going through his head, he moved on.

With a shallow breath, he swallowed the last of his champagne and put the glass down on the coffee table, then stood.

“I don’t want to bother you for the night,” he mumbled, already heading toward the hallway. “I’ll stay in the spare.”

“Wait,” I blurted, catching him off-guard before he could leave.

Yaro turned around to face me and looked confused.

Whether it was the champagne or the conversation, I felt braver than I had before. I couldn’t help but find him appealing, and I didn’t want the night to be over yet.

“It’s our honeymoon night,” I said, pulling in a steadying breath. “It’s only right we spend it together.”

He seemed to contemplate the idea as he hung back and took me in. I watched those thoughts move within his features, giving away doubt, self-sabotage, and uncertainty.

But I didn’t want to lock myself in my room for the night, and I didn’t want him to either.

Before he could say anything, I braced myself and cut the space between us.

Lifting myself on my tiptoes, I pressed my lips against his with a hand on his chest.

Yaro froze initially before realizing what I had done, and he melded his lips with mine. His hands gripped my waist as he pulled me even closer, welcoming that embrace.

He tasted like champagne, and his lips were softer than I expected.

Like the first kiss, it made me woozy yet longing for more.

To my relief, his grip on me tightened, and I lost myself in the kiss.

## Chapter 9 - Grace

My skin felt like it was on fire as Yaro pulled me into him, palms moving to the small of my back with desperation. That warmth from his body against mine had my head spinning, and I couldn't be bothered to think logically.

Yaro was undeniably beautiful, and I only wanted to explore the man I now called my husband. He had no qualms about it as his tongue flicked against my lower lip, asking for entrance.

Obliging him, I parted my lips and felt his caress. Sparks of pleasure elicited a breathless moan from me, to which he groaned into the kiss.

Without warning, Yaro reached down, prompting me to jump. I did as he wanted and was in his arms in the blink of an eye. Seamlessly, he carried me into the wall and into the master bedroom.

That fire lit between us only burned brighter as he continued the kiss, only breaking it to place me on the bed.

The moment I reached the mattress, my stomach fluttered with anticipation, and my head filled with a pleasant fog that made me think of only Yaro. Every reservation and reluctance I previously had for him melted away the moment his lips captured mine again.

That excitement blossomed through me, unable to resist him or the way his mouth helped bring renewed life to me.

There was no need for words to describe how badly we wanted the other, not while that mutual eagerness coursed between us.

Yaro tipped my chin up as he broke the kiss, only to paint my skin with more of them. He moved down my neck,

pausing to whisper, “If it’s our honeymoon night, then we might as well make the most of it.”

That proposition sent a chill down my spine, and I didn’t have the mind to deny how much I wanted exactly that.

I sighed as his lips brushed against my neck, reaching just above my collarbone, and his words made me wet with anticipation.

Before I could reach out to him, Yaro pulled away and pushed my shoulders back, making me lean against my elbows.

Surprised by the action, I peered up at him and watched as he kneeled in front of me. He did so wordlessly, spreading my legs apart from the edge of the mattress.

I was glad I had changed out of the dress and into something more moveable the moment Yaro took the material of the bed shorts in his hands and pulled them down to reveal my black panties underneath.

His eyes darkened as he took me in, reaching to remove them simultaneously. Seemingly pleased by what he saw, Yaro hummed to himself and tossed both articles to the side.

Leaving me bare, that cool breeze on my lower half made a chill run through me, but my relief was immediate as his palms ghosted up and down my thighs.

He hooked his big hands around my legs and pulled me closer until he was nearly level with my heat, desperate to feel him.

There was no time to say anything as Yaro leaned in and swiped his tongue against my eager clit.

That single stroke made my toes curl and pulled a sharp exhale from me. Pleasure burst within me, leaving me desperate for more.

To my luck, Yaro didn’t stop there. He lapped at my heat, focusing on my sensitive bud first. Wave after wave of

excitement coursed through me, making me tip my head back into the pillows.

Needy for more of him, I reached down and threaded my fingers through his hair, immediately met with a moan from him. The vibration magnified that pleasure, making it my turn to let him know how much I liked it.

Yaro's ministrations continued as they traveled lower down, exploring every inch of me. His hands gripped my thighs to keep me in place despite my wriggling.

Between those quick swipes of his tongue and the way he sucked on my clit, there was no shortage of arousal. I was warm and perfectly pliable, ready to be moved in whatever way he wanted.

The moment his fingers made an appearance, my back arched off the mattress. Those moans fell from my lips without resistance, and while I tried to hold some back, it was useless.

I was a mess the moment he inserted one and gently pumped in and out of me while I grew accustomed to the feeling of him. My throat was already dry from moaning for him. But as another went inside me, I was a goner.

My fingers tightened in his hair, letting him know just how incredible it felt. Whether it was the champagne in my system or the raw attraction I felt to him, I didn't care. I just wanted more of him. I needed that satisfaction.

"Yaro, please," I murmured breathlessly, peering up at him.

With a final swipe to my clit, he lifted his head to meet my gaze. His pupils were blown wide with arousal, which somehow made him look even sexier than usual. "What do you want?"

His honey-tone made me shiver with delight, still soaking in the leisurely stroke of his fingers. I couldn't speak, not when he was feeding me that delicious sensation.

“Use your words,” he muttered, looking at me through his dark lashes. “What do you want?”

Swallowing thickly, I had to work up the courage to find my voice again. “I want to feel you. Please.”

“Where?”

My breath hitched as his thumb brushed against my clit again. “Inside me.”

With a satisfied sound from his chest, Yaro removed his fingers and moved across my body until he completely caged me.

My eyes closed as his lips collided with mine again, and I lost myself to the feeling of his hands sliding beneath my top.

He brushed his fingers against my nipples as he reached for my breasts and kneaded them in tandem. That immediate rush of pleasure had me moaning into his mouth, practically begging for more of it.

Those skilled hands did wonders just before he nudged the fabric of my top up. Catching on, I reached for the shirt and yanked it off, not wanting to waste a moment. Our lips broke apart for only a moment before we went right back again.

Realizing I was the only one sans clothes, I reached between us and worked the buttons of his shirt undone. Yaro maintained the kiss as I worked until the last one came undone and he shouldered it off, leaving his bare torso for me to marvel over.

But the moment was fleeting from his impatience.

Unable to wait any longer like a fire had been lit beneath him, Yaro undid his belt and stripped himself down completely.

The moment he returned to his previous position, dipping down to kiss me again, his cock glided against the outside of my heat, catching that arousal as he went.

That sensation sparked bliss through me, triggering my sensitivity at once. I nearly choked on my moans as he did it again, moving himself between us.

He swallowed his groan as he placed a hand against my thigh and made sure to kiss my lips until they were surely swollen.

My head was a mess of desperation and longing, silently pleading to be one with him. I had never felt so strongly about anything before that moment, and I knew I had to have him.

The moment he pulled back enough to line up with me, I braced myself. He was far bigger than what I ever had before, and while it was daunting, it only made me more eager.

We both inhaled sharply the moment he slid inside, only to groan as he sank further and further.

There was no way to describe just how incredible it felt. I parted for him effortlessly, surrounding him with my warmth, and he pushed me to my limits with his girth.

Yaro gripped the sheets beneath me as he bottomed out, stopping to give me the chance to grow accustomed to him. He cursed under his breath, letting it fan against my neck.

Goosebumps rose from my skin the moment he drew his hips back, then sank back in, illuminating that incredible feeling within me. I reached for his back, needing to ground myself as he started thrusting.

His pace was sinfully slow at first, yet it grew faster as he went. Each draw of his hips sent waves of bliss through me, and I was breathless underneath him.

“My god,” Yaro muttered, using one hand to support himself while the other held my hip in place. He tried his hardest to conceal just how overwhelmed by the feeling he was, but I saw as those subtle cracks started to form.

The moans fell from my lips, unable to hold them back like I tried to before. I didn't care to pretend like I wasn't

completely absorbed in how sinfully he thrust into me. Like I wasn't savoring every moment he was inside me.

When his thrusts grew faster and sharper, I tipped my head back against the mattress, jaw slack and unable to fully register just how ground-breaking those movements were.

Letting his sounds of appeasement leave him, Yaro grabbed one of my legs and bent it toward me as he drove his hips into me relentlessly. I gasped at that new angle, bewildered by how intense it felt.

With one arm wrapped around my hoisted leg and the other resting next to my head, Yaro leaned in and thrust into me with everything he had.

I was already seeing stars between each thrust, feeling that overwhelming tightening in my lower belly. Every deep caress against my inner walls had me closer to that precipice, begging for release.

Yaro's mouth captured mine in a searing kiss before he dropped his head in the crook of my neck and focused all his intention in the quick snapping of his hips.

With my eyes squeezed shut, I clenched around him as he pushed me closer to the edge until I couldn't take it any longer. That intense pleasure mixed with his previous ministrations was enough to make that coil snap.

I cried out as I hit that high, trembling as my orgasm tore through me.

"Fuck," Yaro muttered against my skin, tensing as I clamped around him. He continued thrusting even as his movements turned sloppier, and I knew he was close.

His grip on me tightened as he groaned, only to pull out and release against my belly. That warmth spread through me as Yaro panted and slowly came down from cloud nine, holding himself up above me.

Still vibrating from my overwhelming orgasm, I couldn't bring myself to open my eyes yet. I wanted to soak it



in and appreciate how incredible it felt.

Yaro eventually pulled away and wandered into the ensuite before he returned with a damp towel. I shivered as he ran it across my skin, helping to clean me up.

Once he was satisfied, he tossed it aside and offered me a hand.

Looking up at him, I still felt lighter than air and delirious from how blissed out I was. Feeling in need of assistance, I took his offer, and he pulled me into place with him.

He lifted the blankets over top of us and settled in behind me, draping an arm over me.

I was caged in by him, comforted by his warmth. I didn't complain as that exhaustion fell over me, and my eyes shut.

As that body heat was exchanged between us, that temptation of sleep called to me, and I couldn't deny it.

Giving in, I forgot all about our tumultuous start and felt too satisfied to fight it.

## Chapter 10 - Yaro

I didn't know I could go through so many emotions simultaneously, only to reach relief by the morning.

I was never one to let my feelings get the best of me since I knew to keep them in from a young age. I couldn't get in trouble if I didn't show them.

But the whirlwind that had been the wedding was enough to upset that balance within me.

When I woke up, Grace was still fast asleep and curled up in the blankets. She looked completely at peace, and no part of me wanted to wake her up.

While I knew we had a long way to go, the night before gave me a glimpse of hope for our future. There was undeniable chemistry and attraction between us, and that was something to be grateful for.

I was afraid we wouldn't connect at all and that we would both be left unfilled and unhappy. But after hearing her story, I just wanted to know more about her.

Hearing just how removed Dominic was as a father figure in her life riled up that anger within me. I knew she didn't deserve any of it. Not the way she was raised or her dad using her as a pawn.

Rummaging through my wardrobe, I pulled out the usual and got dressed. I glanced at Grace from time to time and appreciated her beauty from afar. She looked almost ethereal in the bed as the sun started to come in.

It was also nice to return to my usual bed for the night. Crossing that unspoken boundary with Grace brought me back into the master bedroom, and it almost felt normal again. I didn't think I'd miss the bed as much as I had.

Once I was all ready to go, I poked my head into the room to find her stirring quietly. While I initially thought she

was about to wake up, she nestled back into the pillow with her blonde hair fanned out behind her.

I couldn't count my lucky stars enough for managing to secure a woman with a face and body like hers. It made accepting the new situation a bit easier.

I just hoped there was room for us to get closer, rather than being dragged further apart because of being married.

A part of me wanted to step into the room and reach out for her. To run my hands through her hair and caress her skin. But I didn't want to disturb her.

I could only imagine how hard the last few days had been on her, and I knew she needed her sleep. I didn't want her to feel deprived.

With a reassuring breath, I reminded myself there would be another chance. With passion like what we experienced the night before, I had no doubt it would reappear again.

Grace was the only subject in my mind as I went to work. I hoped for an easy day that didn't involve any craziness so I could at least attempt to digest everything that had happened.

But, of course, that peace never lasted long enough.

Vik and Elias were at my desk immediately. I didn't even have the chance to grab myself a coffee.

"Congratulations on the bride and honeymoon," Elias commented with a sly expression. "Thankfully for you, she's easy on the eyes."

Sighing, I leaned back in my chair. "Is there a reason you two are standing in front of my desk at eight in the morning?"

Vik's features looked strained. "We've caught wind of some rumors spreading around already. Some you probably won't like."

I narrowed my gaze at them. “What rumors?”

When Vik hesitated, Elias stepped in with his arms crossed. “Apparently someone’s going around saying you stole Grace away from her doting father, and neither of them consented to the arrangement, nor did he sign the marriage license. Not only that, but you and your cousins collapsed his warehouse business to boot as if he wasn’t the one to cause that himself.”

Immediately, anger flooded my system. Not even a day had passed since the wedding, and I was already dealing with the politics of it all.

I clenched my jaw. “Dominic was invited to the wedding. Even if I didn’t want him there, we had to keep it clean. We certainly had nothing to do with his booze problem that tanked his business.”

“We know that,” Elias confirmed with a sigh. “But apparently, that fact is being withheld from everyone else.”

Even if we were the usual target of lower families, it was worth our while to stomp out those threats before they could manifest into anything damaging. While we sat at the top, it was worth showing them we meant business and we wouldn’t stand for anything that might attempt to dirty our name.

Trying my best to pull myself back from the anger, I pinched the bridge of my nose. “Is Dominic the one responsible for this, or does it have anything to do with the Riccis?”

“Nera and Bianca have been minding their business as far as we can tell. They aren’t stepping on any toes. There’s nothing on their front,” Elias answered. “We’re speculating it was Dominic’s doing.”

I was at a loss for words. I didn’t even know where to begin.

With a deep, exhausted breath, I ran a hand down my face. “Whether it’s Dominic or someone else, there’s always

someone trying to tarnish the Levov name, and our cousins won't like that very much. If enough families feel scorned or moved by this rumor, they might try and form new alliances to take us down. We can't let that happen."

"We'll show them exactly why they won't ever win," Elias added with a determined glint in his eyes.

"Got any ideas how?" I asked.

"Why don't we send someone to Boston to give Dominic another shakedown? He was already dealt a pretty good beating before; I'm surprised he didn't learn his lesson," he murmured, reminded of just how bad that night had been.

Nodding slowly, I considered the idea. "If one wasn't enough, then maybe two will warn him what else will come his way if he doesn't shut his mouth."

"I hope this guy has insurance. He's going to need it."

"Alright, then. I'm trusting you with this, Elias. Let him know we mean business, and take Vik with you," I said finally, feeling good about the idea. "I don't want this weasel thinking he can screw us over again and again. No more chances. I may have married his daughter, but that doesn't absolve him."

"What will Grace think?" Elias asked, lifting his brows suggestively.

"She doesn't need to know," I returned, realizing how the new familial ties made things a bit more complicated than they had been. "Just don't kill the man, and I won't have to. Got it?"

He chuckled. "You got it. Let's roll, Vik."

Understanding what was expected of them, Vik followed behind him, and they both left my office.

The moment I was alone, I tried to decompress from the immediate anger I started my workday with. I didn't feel like carrying that into the rest of the day, even if that was how it normally happened.

Sat with piles of reports and files in front of me, I sighed. Not only did I have to make sure our warehouse operations moved smoothly and that our men were doing as they should be, but I also had to go over recent documentation. Verifying numbers, stock, and signing off that everything looked alright. I usually had Vik work out the inventory numbers, but I was the final check to make sure nothing had been tampered with.

Ever since Dominic's scheming, we had to be more vigilant about what was coming in and going out and making sure our partners weren't screwing us.

Starting with the first pile, I tried my hardest to focus on the words before me, but I kept thinking back to the news Vik and Elias broke to me.

Those false allegations seemed to fluster me more than usual, and I couldn't get it out of my head.

It wasn't unusual for someone to spread rumors about us through New York, whether to try and muddy our reputation or with the hope of bringing us down one way or another. Most of it was unfounded or ridiculous enough for us to ignore, but something about that one bothered me.

It usually didn't hit so close to home.

While I did take Grace from her dorm, Dominic practically offered her on a silver platter and told me she was mine even if I chose to speed that process along by going there myself that very night.

I started to wonder if he used her as a pawn for a reason beyond his selfishness. If he hoped to pin this blame on me while absolving himself.

It made me wonder who else he might've been working with.

But I didn't need to worry about it then. Elias and Vik would be there in a few hours, and they'd remind him why it was in his best interest to keep quiet.

The day stretched on, and while I had made some progress with the paperwork, my eyes were aching, and I wanted it to be over. Luckily, the day was just about done, and I was waiting to be filled in about the Dominic situation.

Rubbing at my eyes, my attention was snagged from my phone vibrating on the desk.

It was Vik's number.

Reaching for it right away, I accepted the call and put it to my ear. "What's going on over there?"

I heard Vik sigh from the other end. "It's not good."

My brows furrowed, and I sat forward instinctually. "What do you mean, Vik?"

"We scoured the whole place, but we can't find Dominic."

"What?"

"The warehouse is empty, and it looks like nobody has been here for some time now. Dominic and what was left of his things are gone," he said, voice carrying how serious the situation seemed to be.

My stomach dropped at that, and I leaned back against the chair. Running a hand down my face, I let go of a deep breath to compose myself.

That wasn't good.

We didn't know where Dominic went or what his plan was. He could've been anywhere from New York to Boston, conspiring with God only knew.

He was a loose cannon, and something had to be done about him eventually.

"Alright, you two come back home then. Keep me updated if anything changes."

## Chapter 11 - Grace

The condo felt even more abysmal as time went on, and the few things I could do were growing increasingly more boring.

I had streamed more than my fair share of movies and TV, I put together every puzzle, and I read as many books as I could get my hands on. Everything had been brand new, and I had the feeling Yaro hadn't used any of it before. He didn't strike me as the kind of person to sit down and pour hours into a puzzle by himself.

Without much left to do, I was bummed, and I didn't know what to do.

Apparently, I was a wife instead of a student, and I didn't know what that entailed. I didn't exactly have that role model growing up. I had no idea what was expected of me, and each time Yaro came home at the end of the day, I just felt like a centerpiece in the condo.

Two weeks had passed since the wedding, and I felt down. I felt restricted, not because of how Yaro treated me, but because my choice had been taken away from me.

I was aimless, and not having anything to do left me with too much time to dwell on everything I lost.

I didn't want to seem ungrateful for the nice roof over my head or the meals I was given, but it was hard to be completely thankful when I felt locked in a cage.

Going to university had been my only mental and physical escape. It was the one thing I wanted more than anything, and it helped motivate me when I doubted myself.

But without that crutch anymore, I didn't have anything else to rely on.

Forgetting about my schooling and my program felt like mourning a loss. One I would never get back again.



Yaro himself was another story entirely.

While he was gentle with me and never pushed me into anything I didn't want, he was quick to anger. In a way, he felt like another version of my dad. Like I had gone from one questionable man to another, but I was legally married to him.

I couldn't run away from Yaro. It was physically impossible.

Fitting in another puzzle piece, I nearly jumped out of my skin when the doorbell rang.

Confused, I got up and hesitantly went to the door. Not expecting anyone, I looked through the peephole and let go of a breath when I spotted the girls on the other side.

“Grace?” One of them asked.

Reeling myself back in, I unlocked the door and opened it for them.

I was met with their smiling faces, all looking more than excited about something I was unaware of. They greeted me in almost complete unison.

They were all there. Adrienne, Raya, Violet, and Maria.

Wearing different variations of luxurious-looking clothes, I knew Yaro hadn't been lying about the money part. They certainly had more than enough.

“Hi,” I managed, feeling a small lump in my throat.

They had been nice enough at the wedding, but I still wasn't familiar enough with them. It was intimidating to feel like I needed to join the fold and become one of them.

“We got our nannies rounded up to look after the kids today, and we wanted to know if you'd like to spend the day with us,” Adrienne began, wearing a pantsuit that looked extremely fitting for her.

The most familiar face, Raya, stepped forward. “We were thinking of going to the mall first, then possibly getting

some cocktails. How does that sound?"

The first word that formed on my lips was a dismissal. I wanted to say no out of habit, but it didn't take long for me to remember just how long I had been stuck in the condo for. I needed to stretch my legs beyond moving from the living room to the kitchen and then back to the bedroom again.

I pulled a small smile for them. "That sounds really nice."

"Perfect," Raya said, looking pleased with herself. "We'll help you get ready!"

Smiling to themselves, the girls poured inside, and as Raya promised, they put together every piece of my outfit and helped get me ready. She focused on the clothes while Maria did my makeup, and both Adrienne and Violet did my hair.

By the end of it, I was in a pair of white, flared trousers that went to my waist, matched with a solid black top that accentuated me nicely. They accessorized me with bangles, small golden earrings, and a simple necklace to pull it all together. My hair had been slicked back in a sleek pony, and I almost didn't recognize myself.

I actually felt...good.

Walking through the mall with them, I couldn't help but feel like somewhat of an outsider still. They were more than welcoming as they chatted with me as if we were old friends, but I knew that kind of thing took time.

At the very least, being surrounded by them and their brightness was nice. I was surprised they all seemed so happy since our husbands were involved in organized crime. It was hard to wrap my head around.

It made me wonder if there was something else to their business. If things weren't as doom and gloom as I assumed they were.

We grabbed a drink right away to sip on as we went from store to store and browsed. Being with them started to

make me feel better about everything, and I relaxed enough to let myself enjoy the companionship.

At school, I had hoped for a whole group of friends to keep me company, but that proved to be harder than I anticipated. Regardless of how well I knew them, they gave me that feeling I craved.

It was nice to not feel alone.

We reached a store I had never even considered stepping foot in before, and I was immediately dazzled by everything on display. From sleek outerwear to strappy shoes and chic sleep sets, they had everything.

“This would look amazing on you,” Raya said, passing me a tiny black dress. “With your legs, you’ll look like a runway model.”

“Oh, and this one!” Maria said, passing me a lacy lingerie set. “I’m sure Yaro would love this.”

The girls giggled at the idea, but all seemed to agree. I tried to force away my slight blush.

Before long, my arms were full, and the employee had the items whisked away to a changing room. Ushered in, the girls sat on luxurious couches and waited for me to come out with each piece. I modeled them all, and each article made them hype me up.

By the end of it, I had a pile of clothes they all approved of, but the second I checked one of the price tags, I nearly choked.

“These are great and all, but I don’t have money for all this,” I said, feeling embarrassed to admit it. At that point, I didn’t even know where my wallet was.

While I was silently panicking on the inside, the girls were relaxed.

“What about the black card?” Adrienne asked, sipping from her drink.

When they noticed my confusion, she furrowed her brows at me.

“Did Yaro not give you one yet?”

“No,” I answered simply. “I haven’t really left the condo enough to need money.”

“Well, to get you up to speed, we all have these credit cards,” Raya said, pulling hers out. The glossy black card almost seemed to twinkle under the lights. “They’re all linked to the same account the boys set up for us. It’s extra spending money allotted for the whole family that won’t be missed, be it for supplies, new clothes, or anything else we might need. We call it the ‘family bank’. I can’t believe he didn’t give you one yet.”

I was at a complete loss for words. I could only guess how shocked my expression was. “So, you just...buy things whenever you want?”

Maria laughed quietly to herself at that. “Basically. They even get upset if we don’t spend enough.”

“They claim we don’t spoil ourselves enough, if you can believe it,” Violet agreed.

I didn’t even know what to say.

“How is everything here?” the employee asked with a plain, very retail smile.

“She’ll take it all,” Raya replied with a coy smile and handed her card to the employee. “This should cover it.”

The woman nodded at once and scurried off to the registers to finalize the sale.

“And I don’t need to ask Yaro to pay you back?” I asked, so overwhelmed by the idea of essentially having free reign to money that wasn’t technically mine.

“Of course not. As we said, it all comes from the same place. Besides, you are his wife,” Raya hummed, getting up and linking her arm through mine.

As I was swept away to the next store, the poor guards escorting us had their arms lined with bags of things that caught our eyes—most of which were handed to me without question.

It was impossible to digest just how rich and powerful the Levovs truly were, but there was no denying how nice it was, even if it was far from the situation I came from.

By the end of it, we went through the main corridors of the mall and headed toward one of the exits. Maria slipped in beside me and smiled.

“So,” she began, dragging out the word. “How are things with Yaro? I was the newest addition, so I know what that change is like.”

“Everything’s been good,” I said, aware that I wasn’t being entirely truthful with her.

As if she could sense it in me, her smile softened. “It’s okay to not feel settled yet. It takes time, especially since things tend to be crazy for this family. And just know you aren’t a prisoner to Yaro. If you want to. Be happy despite the circumstances, then you need to try and work with him. Voice your concerns and needs when they arise. You’ll be better off in the long run if you do.”

While it felt like sound advice, voicing any concern felt impossible. It didn’t feel like I had a voice at all some days.

“Thank you, I appreciate it,” I said, trying to be as positive as I could be. “There are a lot of new things I’m being exposed to recently.”

“Of course,” she said, looping her arm through mine. “Remember that we’ll always be there for you. If you need a friend, all you have to do is ask.”

It was reassuring to feel like I had people in my corner, even if I was still trying to navigate such dramatic changes. To know that I was welcomed, and even started to feel like one of them.

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Shopping with the girls was nice, and I felt way better when I returned to the condo. My many bags were brought upstairs by the guards, and I spent the rest of the day putting them away.

I got dressed in some more comfortable loungewear and made my way back to the puzzle I had been working on before. But as I sat down and felt their absence, that previous sadness came creeping back in.

Even if I threw money at the problem, it didn't solve how unfulfilled I felt.

When the door finally cracked by the evening, and Yaro came in, his features were stitched with irritation. Something must've happened at work.

He said nothing as he walked in and kicked his shoes off. Then, he glanced in my direction. "What do you want for dinner?"

No greeting, no wondering how I was, nothing. It made that sinking feeling in my stomach worse.

Bothered by the idea, I didn't say anything. It took my hunger away immediately.

A huff came from Yaro as I stared at my puzzle, trying to grasp anything that made sense. His steps were so quiet I didn't hear him approaching until he was right there, gloved hand beneath my chin. The material felt strange against my skin.

He forced me to look up at him with a fixed expression.

Shocked by the sudden proximity and the gesture, I could only blink back at him.

A rush of simultaneous fear and surprising attraction hit me immediately, and I was immediately conflicted.

But the irritation set in, and I shook him off. Standing to my feet, I pulled back and crossed my arms.

What looked like hurt scurried through his features, but he quickly hardened his face again. “Why are you moping around when everything is being taken care of for you? Don’t think I wasn’t alerted when the family account was accessed—I know the girls took you out today. You have no reason to be upset.”

“No reason?” I asked with a scoff, offended by the implication. “I have reasons that are significant enough to me. I was looking forward to university, but since you pulled me away, I lost that too. My dad sold me like livestock, and now I have no autonomy.”

“I already told you I’m not your prison guard,” Yaro snapped, eyes sharp with annoyance. “I don’t have time to sit around and dote on your whims. I have work to do, and if I fuck that up, you suffer too.”

Heat rushed through me at that, but it didn’t change how I felt about it. “But I never asked for this! I have nothing to do and nothing to put energy into.”

Yaro shook his head and ran a hand over his mouth. “You have nothing, huh? That’s a joke.”

There was more I wanted to say, but his reaction was enough to silence me. I didn’t see a point in arguing when he wouldn’t hear me out, to begin with.

“I’m not interested in this right now,” he muttered, turning his back to me. “I’ve had a long day.”

Yaro went to the kitchen and sat on one of the stools by the island. With his phone out, he scrolled until he found something that interested him.

Awkwardly, I sat back down on the couch and looked aimlessly at the puzzle in front of me.

“I’m ordering Chinese food,” he mumbled eventually.  
“You can eat it or go hungry.”

That pit in my stomach told me I didn’t need food at all as I fought back tears. Instead, I didn’t even want to be in the room with him.

Standing from the couch, I left the living room without another glance and made my way to the guest bedroom. I hoped it was enough of a sign that I didn’t want him in the same bed as me.

My cheeks burned as I went, embarrassed for ever hoping we had a chance to become something more than the marriage license binding us together.

I wasn’t so sure it was possible.



## Chapter 12 - Yaro

The other side of the bed was empty when I woke up, and I knew I shouldn't have been surprised to see it. Even if a small part of me hoped Grace would find her way into the master bedroom after having the chance to get over what happened.

But I was in the big bed all alone, and I felt her absence.

Regardless of where we stood, that loss of body heat and comfort, even at a distance, was easy to miss.

Grace likely stayed in the spare bedroom all night, and that was a shame. But if it stopped us from bickering, then I didn't mind.

Even if I wanted to pretend like I had been right to speak to her the way I did, I couldn't. That regret pulsed within me, and it weighed on my conscience more than I wanted it to.

Completely uprooting her life and beginning something new wasn't an easy adjustment for her, and I knew that well enough. I didn't need to add to that stress. No matter how she wanted to perceive me, I wasn't prepared to be the worst part of her life.

That sounded miserable, and I had too much pride to let her believe I was a monster.

As Grace said before, her choice had been taken away from her, and it was all my doing. First, it was her father, and then it was me. I didn't want to find myself grouped in with men like Dominic.

With a sigh, I reached for my phone and pulled up my contacts. Before long, I had a few messages sent out.

It was my duty as her husband, regardless of our arrangement, to keep her happy. I didn't want her moping

around the place forever.

After getting dressed in relaxed slacks and a lightweight button-up, undone partway down, I reached for a pair of sunglasses and rested them on the last button mid-chest.

Making my way to the spare bedroom, I rapped my knuckles against the door. “Grace?”

I heard a mumble of protest from her inside, and I cracked the door open enough for her to hear me clearly.

“Get up and get ready. We’re going out for the day,” I instructed her, peering in just enough to see the lump she formed beneath the blankets in the mostly dark room.

“What?” She asked, voice still laced with sleep. She shuffled into a sitting position and rubbed at her eyes. “What are we doing?”

While I didn’t feel like standing there all day answering her questions, I reminded myself to be patient. The day wasn’t about me. “You need to get out of the condo, so we’re going to the beach.”

“The beach? Swimming season is over already. It’s too cold.”

I pulled in a deep breath. “Who said we had to swim?”

As she turned over, letting me see her face, the look of protest moved through her features. But she sighed. “Fine.”

Taking that as a good sign, I closed the door again and went downstairs.

Sitting on the couch waiting for her, I got a text back from one of our men to let me know everything was in place. I could only hope it would be enough to make her hate me less, or at the very least, begin that process.

Eventually, Grace emerged from the hallway wearing a pair of high-waisted jeans and a white sweater tucked in the waistband that made her slight tan pop. Her hair was pulled

into a neat bun on her head, and there was something about the look that seemed so comfortable.

As she approached, still looking hesitant as her eyes drifted over to me, the outfit complimented her so precisely that I knew getting through the day would be a challenge. It was like watching her walk down my own catwalk, perfectly contoured and appealing.

It took everything in my power to resist her.

“Ready to go?” I asked, using it as a distraction as I stood.

“I guess, but I haven’t eaten anything yet,” she said, looking almost pained to have to admit it.

Aware she hadn’t eaten anything before bed, I knew she’d be half starving, which was why I had extra food ordered.

“Don’t worry about that; I’ll have it taken care of,” I said, reaching for my keys on the counter. “Let’s head out.”

Without another word, she followed behind me, bundled up for the chill that lingered in the air.

The drive to Coney Island was as quiet as I expected it to be, which prompted me to play the radio quietly. Even if Grace didn’t say much, I still caught her gaze lingering on the passing scenery. When she saw something that caught her attention, her lips would pull slightly in a smile.

Something in me hoped she would have the chance to smile more throughout the day. Even if things between us were rocky, I still wanted her to have a semblance of fun.

The beach was mostly empty when we arrived, save the odd person walking through the sand. But since the summer season was over, the rides were shut down, and none of the food stands were open.

It was only the sand, water, and fresh air left for us to appreciate. At the very least, the sun was out and offered enough warmth to take the bitterness out of the air.

The sound of waves crashing against the wet sand welcomed us as we approached the sea. It was a refreshing change since I didn't often have enough time away from work to go to the beach.

"This way," I said to Grace, pointing in the direction of the cabana that had been opened for us. The doors were open and overlooking the water.

Grace's face lit up as we approached it. "Is this for us?"

I nodded. "I rented it for the day. It's yours to enjoy."

She stepped inside, finding a break from the chilly breeze, and marveled at everything that had been arranged in our absence. Two lounge chairs pointed toward the sea, where the ocean was perfectly visible. A short table at the back was full of food and drinks, and more cushions and blankets were tucked off to the side.

It was everything we could need to enjoy a few hours taking in the scenery.

"Oh, wow," Grace said, smiling at the spread. She reached for an apple slice on one of the food trays and bit into it. She looked pleasantly surprised by it all, and her expression softened when she turned to look at me. "This is very nice, but I wouldn't mind beachcombing first."

"You're free to do what you want," I said, stepping inside. "I'll be here."

She brightened at that, then headed out toward the water.

Letting go of a breath as I sat down on one of the lounge chairs, I was relieved she didn't hate the idea.

Instead, Grace busied herself by walking along the water and grazing the sand for anything that caught her eye. If she found something, she'd bend down and inspect it before picking up whatever she wanted to hold on to.

I watched her from the cabana, amused by how immersed she was in searching for those small treasures. She picked up what looked like a shard of sea glass, and she smiled to herself while she examined it closely.

As she ventured around the beach, careful not to get wet from the crashing waves, she looked beautiful and at peace. It made me wonder how many times she could do that exactly. How many days were spent not thinking about life's stress or sinking every moment at a dead-end part-time job to save enough money to leave home?

If it was something she enjoyed, then I was prepared to bring her to the beach as many times as it took. I didn't want her to feel like she was wasting away in the condo, even if I needed to keep her safe.

Before we were married, she expressed wanting to be on campus again so she could attend her program and get the education she wanted. I declined that request since my concern came from a genuine place.

There were many people out there who would jump at the chance to kidnap the wife of a Levov. We had too many enemies to risk that. If I couldn't protect her, then I couldn't let it happen. It was too great of a risk, and even if she didn't recognize that yet, it didn't change that fact.

Still, I found a compromise I hoped she would come to appreciate.

After a while of scanning the beach, Grace returned to the cabana with a handful of shells, small rocks, and green and white sea glass. Gleeefully, she placed them on one of the serviettes, then took a seat on the other chair.

Scanning the pages of one of the books our men had left for us, I glanced up at her long enough to murmur, "Make sure you eat something. You must be starving."

While Grace went to object to the latter statement, her stomach betrayed her with a growl. She dropped her shoulders and reached for a sandwich wrapped in parchment paper. She

ate while I continued to read, aware that she still didn't know the actual surprise I had planned for her.

I waited until she was half done to clear my throat. "I spoke with an admin from your university earlier."

Grace froze as she listened, only able to swallow what was in her mouth. I knew I had her undivided attention.

Flipping a page like it wasn't that big of a deal, I continued, "I pulled some strings, and if you're still interested, you can do it remotely."

As I looked over at her, I was met with her stunned face immediately. She didn't say anything at first, surely disbelieving it.

When she finally regained her bearings, she murmured, "How will that work?"

"Online schooling is a thing, you know."

Ignoring my sarcasm, Grace let herself get excited about it. I got to watch as that pure enthusiasm she had about returning to school flooded her features. "Are you serious? You're not playing a trick on me?"

Taking a risk, I reached for her empty hand. Even if I couldn't find it within myself to say it out loud, I wanted her to feel how sorry I was for the night before.

While she glanced down at our connected hands, Grace didn't pull away or seem offended by it. Instead, she let it happen.

Her gaze returned to mine, and I urged myself to keep it together despite how beautiful she looked.

"There's no trick," I began, relieved by the steadiness in my voice. "I think you should have something of your own to work at."

She held our eye contact bravely, letting go of that hesitation from before. She gave my hand the slightest squeeze. "How'd you convince them to let me back in?"

My heart felt lighter at the sight of her unwavering happiness. Keeping up my unbothered façade, I shrugged. “I have connections. Plus, I may or may not have brought up a sick relative who needed you to care for them in another state.”

Her face softened, and she looked genuinely moved by the gesture. “Thank you, Yaro. Really. I always wanted to get my degree.”

Looking at her in that moment, so full of joy and renewed hope, she was almost ethereal. There was something so simple yet natural about her beauty, and it was impossible to ignore how greatly she affected me.

While my first instinct was to find that fact bothersome, I knew the alternative could be much worse.

Her lips looked so perfect, and I wanted to taste her again. Enough time had passed since we last had sex, and I was growing more pent-up with every day that went by. I wondered if she felt the same way.

But I didn’t want to push her, not when I was just starting to make progress with her. I wanted her to come to me and realize her own desires.

Instead, I reached my other hand toward her and let it brush against her cheek. She blinked back at me innocently, looking between my eyes and my lips. It made me want to chuckle, yet I refrained.

It was almost like trying to gain a scared deer’s trust. I caressed her skin slowly, afraid of spooking her again.

To my luck, Grace leaned slightly into that touch, breathless as she studied my features. Those green eyes said so much without her having to utter a word.

She was interested but guarded still. Not completely, but just enough to make her question if it was the best thing for her to entertain.

I hoped that touch would entice her to make the first move. To take that leap of faith and lean in. My finger slowly moved down her cheek, and I could've sworn I watched her shiver.

Grace swallowed hard, barely breathing under my gaze. Whether it was my pent-up frustration talking or a sincere thought of mine, I contemplated leaning in myself. I tossed that idea aside to feel her lips on mine again.

She was so close it wouldn't take much effort. A few inches, and I'd get to be reacquainted with that addictive mouth.

A trilling noise from within my pocket startled me, shaking me out of that stupor. Sighing, I pulled away from Grace and fished my phone out of my trousers. Vik's name popped up on the screen, and I already knew it couldn't be good news he had to offer me.

I answered the call and put the phone up to my ear while Grace continued to eat, looking happier than she had before. "Yes, what is it?"

"We've been hit, Yaro," my brother said from the other end, sounding strained.

My brows furrowed immediately.

I had been enjoying my peaceful time with my wife, but it seemed that moment was short-lived.

The rush of anger immediately squashed what shred of joy I got from it.

"How bad is it?" I asked, trying to keep my voice down.

"Bad. We need you here before Dimitri hears about it."

"Damn it!" I exclaimed, pinching the bridge of my nose. "Vik, get to Coney Island as soon as you can. I need you to take Grace home while I check it out. And hurry your ass here."



“Coney Island?”

“Just get here!” I snapped before ending the call.

Standing, I managed to catch a glimpse of Grace’s visible disappointment. “What’s wrong?”

While I wanted to answer her, I didn’t have time. If it was as bad as Vik said, I needed to do damage control as soon as possible.

“It’s business,” I mumbled, dropping the book on the lounge chair as I reached for my keys and slipped them along with my cell in my pocket. “I’ll be back home as soon as I can be. Just sit here and wait until Vik picks you up. I have to go.”

I missed the eagerness and gratitude that had been on her face not long ago, but I didn’t have time to dwell on it. I had to take care of business, regardless of what that entailed.

The day shifted in a way I didn’t want it to, and what effort I put in suddenly felt like it had been for nothing. It wasn’t what I planned.

But either way, I walked out of the cabana and made my way to the hit site, only thinking about Grace and how excited she had been for even a shred of kindness from me. The smallest favor I could give her that seemed to mean the entire world in her eyes.

## Chapter 13 - Yaro

Vik had been right. It was bad. That influx of anger that came over me at the beach hit me tenfold when I arrived.

The dock was located on the outskirts of the city, tucked away in an old industrial complex, and it was the place where we handled a lot of deals. The warehouses were usually heavily guarded, and the product was constantly in and out of there to make it nearly impossible for anyone else to track our whereabouts.

Being located by the water helped us bring products in and make those under-the-table exchanges. But that evidently exposed us to some vulnerabilities.

The moment I stepped foot on the property, I found countless bodies on the concrete, either dead or dying. There was a mixture of our men and some I'd never seen before.

It had been a sizeable bloodbath from what I could tell, with a near-even exchange of downed men.

I clenched a gloved hand at the sight of one of our guards downed by the edge of the water. Blood was smeared on his cheek.

“What the hell happened?” I asked, glancing up at Elias.

He ran a hand over his head in disbelief, somewhat shaken up by the aftermath, even if he hadn't been there himself when it happened. “A trade was scheduled tonight, but right as the cargo docked, another boat came in. Something quick and almost silent. The trade was intercepted, and they managed to lift some of the product when our guys were distracted. We took down most of their decoys, but they got away with some of it. As you can see, they got a few of our own.”

My blood felt like fire running through my veins.  
“Who did this?”

Elias shook his head, face void of any clue. “We still don’t know. We’re working on it. The bodies are still warm.”

Looking down at the body in front of me, my stomach turned. It was a dangerous game we were playing, and any one of us could end up with that same fate one day. It was a hard pill to swallow.

“Make sure someone looks into the men we lost and compensate their families. Find out if they have any kids or wives and make sure they’re taken care of,” I directed, aware of how many men we tended to lose. It was a game of numbers, turf, and influence, and most of our men were honest people. “Everything needs to be done right.”

Elias nodded. “I already have someone on it.”

“Good,” I mumbled, eyeing up the boat that once had all of our cargo on it. It was docked but visibly missing some of our goods as our men did a check of everything onboard. “This can’t be a coincidence. How in the hell did these people know about trade?”

He sighed. “A rat, maybe? A handful tend to slip under the radar from time to time.”

“We can’t have that anymore. We need better background checks and follow-ups with new hires. No more favors for friends of friends anymore. We might need men, but we need ones that won’t spill every detail they come in contact with,” I muttered, irritated by the thought of anyone thinking they could pull a fast one on us. “If there’s a rat in our ranks, they must be found.”

“If it’s any consolation, we managed to secure a hostage.”

I perked up immediately at the news. “Where?”

Elias hiked a thumb over his shoulder. “Inside the north warehouse. He’s stable enough to be questioned.”

“Why didn’t you say so before?” I questioned, pushing past him to make my way over to the building. Several of our men were in and out, surveying the area and picking up on any clues that might have been missed.

Elias followed wordlessly, just as disappointed and angry about the attack as I felt. We made our way inside, and the guys made way for us.

That section of the warehouse was mostly dark and empty, save the single light that hung above the captive’s head. Slumped against the steel wall with his hands and feet bound and gagged by a rag, he wasn’t going anywhere. He heaved in his deep breaths surely away the next while would be less than comfortable for him.

Looking between the two men who flanked him with their guns in hand, I vaguely gestured at the captive. “Get him up.”

Without needing to be told twice, they reached for either arm and yanked him up. He was a bit unsteady on his feet, and his skin was already drenched in sweat.

Before I could even begin, my phone rang again. Forcing out an annoyed breath, I fished it out of my pocket and found Dimitri’s name on the caller ID. My skin went cold, and my stomach dropped, but I did my best to hide it. I didn’t need anyone to know just how anxious my cousin’s phone calls made me.

“Hang tight,” I muttered, turning from them. I glanced at Elias briefly. “Get him warmed up for me.”

He nodded and rolled up his sleeves. At the very least, he could put his anger to good use while I faced Dimitri.

Making my way toward the door, I stepped out from beneath the steel service blocker and answered the call.

I didn’t even have the chance to greet him. To soften him up before breaking the news.

“What the fuck happened?”

I winced at his tone but urged myself to pull it together. It wasn't the first time I was yelled at by him, and it certainly wouldn't be the last.

"We've been hit again. This time, they somehow got a hold of our trade time and location. They hijacked some of the cargo and ran off with it. It caught our guys by surprise, and we lost some tonight," I answered, trying to keep my voice as level as possible.

There was a small break before he spoke. "How many?"

"I'd guess between five or ten. The ones they managed to take out were only cannon fodder—a distraction. Their main objective was to take the cargo, but backup arrived before they could take it all, and we snagged a hostage. I'd say they took at least ten thousand worth."

Dimitri cursed from the other end. "You and I both know that's far more than we can allow. How did this happen?"

"We're still working out the details, but I'm inclined to believe we might have another rat," I admitted, angry that there was a chance one of ours might've been leaking information. "At this point, these hits can't be random. They seem premeditated. They might be half-assed, but you can't deny there's intent. That paired with the rumors going around, I'm willing to bet Dominic is working with someone."

"Whoever it is, they're toying with you," Dimitri returned sharply, tone warning me not to trip up. "Exterminate the rat, figure out who these people are, and take care of it. I gave you a break before, but I'm serious, Yaro. I don't want this spiraling out of control."

I knew he was right, and there was nothing I could argue. We had more than enough trouble since Dominic decided to screw us over.

"I'm on it," I said, speaking as confidently as I could muster despite feeling the opposite. The sound of Elias's fist

colliding with the captive's face traveled through the door. "We won't stop working this hostage until he talks. I'll have a name before the end of the night."

"You better. I'm counting on you, Yaro."

That warning never left his words, and that added pressure seemed to stack on my shoulders. I could only push my luck so far before my cousins would inevitably come down on me. I didn't need them questioning my authority or dropping me in the ranks.

I worked too hard to get to where I was, and I didn't need that threat all because of a bitter alcoholic with nothing better to do.

"I won't let you down."

Dimitri let go of a deep breath and then ended the call. Looking out at the property as our downed men were recovered and taken away wrapped in sheets and the rest of the scene was cleaned up, I reeled myself in.

I had to. I needed to tap into the side of me that my cousins needed.

The one that didn't mind spilling some blood for the sake of the family. No matter where they fell in the order of our men if they worked for us, then they were family by extension. If they were loyal to us and did as we required, then they deserved just as much respect as my intimate family members.

If beating answers out of a man could scratch the surface of finding justice for the men we lost that day, then so be it.

Sliding my phone back in my pocket, I turned and zeroed in on the captive.

Elias pulled back with a wild look in his eyes, knuckles already beginning to bruise. The hostage's right cheek was puffy and split, and he was heaving out those shallow breaths.

“He’s ready for you,” he mumbled, wiping his mouth with a forearm.

Nodding once, I motioned toward the man. “Remove the gag.”

One of ours reached over and yanked on the soiled rag until the captive was able to suck in a deep breath. Even if Elias had only roughed him up a bit, he was already worn down considerably, regardless of how hardened he tried to seem.

“Make this easy for me, and I won’t prolong your suffering,” I advised him, examining him from a step back.

His mouth fixed into a scowl. “I don’t have anything to say to you.”

“That’s a shame,” I mumbled, flexing as I pulled my gloves tighter. “I was looking forward to this chat.”

In the blink of an eye, I swung at him. Clipping his right side, he recoiled from the impact, slumping against our men who held him. They forced him back on his feet. I clenched my hand against the slight sting in my knuckles.

“But if this is the sort of conversation you’ll have with me, then I don’t mind.”

I hit him again and again until he was spitting out blood. It trickled down his chin as he struggled to swallow against it. Pausing to catch my breath, I stepped back and admired my handiwork.

Puffy and bruised like an apple, the man looked like he had been jumped in a parking lot somewhere. His chest heaved as his body went into shock, but he still hadn’t uttered a word.

“Come on, now,” I began, letting those torture techniques I studied move to the front of my mind. “I just want a few simple answers. If you don’t want to be put down here and now, you’ll tell me who you work for and how they learned about the trade. Got it?”

But the man looked at me with disgust and spat at a mouthful of blood against the concrete floor. “Fuck you.”

Bristling at that arrogance, I sucker-punched him square in the face with a sickening crunch of his nose. His head swung back with a grunt, caught off-guard by the impact.

“Who do you work for?” I yelled at him, my voice returning to me in a sharp echo.

“I won’t...I won’t tell you,” He managed just above a whisper.

Realizing I’d have to step it up, I shrugged and said over my shoulder to Elias, “We have a crowbar sitting around somewhere, right?”

Glancing back at the hostage, I noticed that fear sparked within his eyes. The first crack in his resolve.

“As far as I’m aware, a dead man doesn’t need his kneecaps,” I mumbled.

Before Elias could retrieve something for me to use on him, the man faltered.

“Wait! No, please,” he said, giving in at least. He dropped his head in shame. “No more.”

That was what I wanted to hear. I needed as much information as I could get from him.

His head was yanked back by one of the men, forced to look at me.

“That’s better. Now, tell me what I want to know.”

With a shaky breath, the man uttered, “Bruno...that’s the name.”

My brows furrowed together at the shred of information as I crossed my arms over my chest. “I need more than that. Who’s the boss?”

The hostage’s legs shook as he stood, likely ripe with unused adrenaline. “The young boss, Pietro, he’s planning



your downfall. So far, the plans are unraveling exactly as he planned. His father is Sergio Bruno.”

“I’ve never heard of them. They must not be that important,” I mumbled, both glad and aggravated by the thought of a lesser family thinking they could take advantage of us.

“No, perhaps not. But his plans surpass anything this city has seen before.”

I scoffed at that. “Somehow, I don’t believe that. Why do they have these plans, exactly?”

The man looked weaker than he had, as if there wasn’t enough adrenaline in his system to compensate for the pain. “There’s history, but I don’t know the details.”

“And these plans, where did Pietro get his information to know where and how to hit us?” I asked, feeling like I was on the cusp of figuring it all out.

A hoarse cough moved through his chest, and the man spat up more blood. “The rat is closer to home than you know.”

While the statement made me pause, that realization clicked in my mind soon after. The very man I had my eyes on ever since I married his daughter. Somehow, he found out too much. Maybe he managed to get his own source to infiltrate our ranks.

I needed to launch an interrogation of our own men before things could get out of hand.

But with Dominic’s whereabouts being unknown, we couldn’t just show up at his warehouse and shake him down. He’d have to be tracked down, and by the sounds of it, the Brunos were the real threat.

If they thought we’d roll over and let them take what was ours, then they had another thing coming. I wouldn’t say I liked the implication that I didn’t know how to manage my

position. That there was enough of a crack for the Brunos to infiltrate.

What made it all worse was how I allowed even those beginning steps to be taken.

Irritated by it all, I reached for my pistol.

Exhausted by the thought of what was ahead of me, I sighed. "For what it's worth, thank you for your cooperation."

A false relief flooded his features before he realized what was coming. I leveled the barrel of my handgun on his forehead and clicked the safety off.

His eyes widened, and before he could plead for mercy, I pulled the trigger.

The shot echoed within those steel walls, splattered with his blood. He slumped back and hit the floor as my men released him. Dusting themselves off, they got a head start at cleaning up.

No loose ends.

## Chapter 14 - Grace

Sitting in the car silently while Vik drove gave me too much time to think. Too much time to maul over how triggered I felt by Yaro's anger before he left the beach. It deepened my worry of finding myself in a similar situation I was in before.

Work-related things seemed to set him off easily, and I didn't know how much of it I could handle. After dealing with my dad growing up, I didn't want to walk on eggshells forever.

Vik spent more time changing the radio station and asking what I wanted to listen to than I cared for, but in all honesty, I didn't want anything playing. I just wanted silence, even if that opportunity to overthink was terrifying.

The drive was somewhat awkward, but I felt surprisingly relieved to see the condo once we arrived. I followed closely behind Vik as we entered the building, aware of the eyes on us while we walked in. He carried a silver laptop beneath his arm and held the doors open for me when we approached them, offering me small smiles.

There was something about Vik that made me wonder how he worked alongside Yaro in the first place. It made me think back to when Yaro told me about their upbringing, and how he tried his hardest to shield his younger brother from their father.

His kind nature made sense the more I thought about it.

As we stood side-by-side in the empty elevator on the way up, I glanced over at him. He was a bit shorter and thinner than Yaro, but he had enough muscle definition to let me know he worked out, too.

He looked similar to his older brother, but his dark brown, almost black hair and blue eyes made him more like a carbon copy of his cousins. Still, he had the same freckles and facial structure as Yaro.

“How bad was the issue?” I asked, testing the waters.

Vik hesitated, then narrowed his eyes slightly at me. “That depends on your definition of ‘bad’.”

I stared back at him, unsure of what that was even supposed to mean. “Yaro seemed very angry about it.”

“That isn’t entirely out of the ordinary for him,” He murmured, only to follow it up with a sigh as if realizing he couldn’t hide it all from me. “We lost a few men and some products. His anger was warranted.”

The reminder of how dangerous their work was made a shiver scurry up my spine. I should’ve been aware enough that they would lose men from time to time due to the nature of things, but the idea that any of the Levovs could be injured at any given moment seemed to put it all into perspective.

I couldn’t imagine how devastated the girls would be if their husbands had that same fate. It was hard enough considering that for Yaro, even if things weren’t always entirely great between us.

The elevator dinged when we arrived on the right floor, and Vik led me to the suite.

“But enough about that,” he began, unlocking the door. He pushed it open and let me go in first. “My brother mentioned wanting to get you set up for online school. I’m glad he came around to it.”

Forgetting about the more depressing topic, I smiled at the prospect of continuing to earn my degree regardless of where I did it. “I am, too.”

As we made our way to the living room, Vik pulled the laptop out from beneath his arm. “This is actually for you. I can help put everything together while we wait for Yaro to get back.”

Not sure of what other choice I had, I nodded. “That would be great, thanks.”

“No problem,” Vik chirped, sitting on one end of the couch while I took the other, lanky legs stretched out in front of him. “I’ll get you connected to the internet first, then we can navigate the learning portal, so you know where to go.”

It wasn’t exactly how I saw the rest of my day panning out, but we needed to pass the time anyway.

Even if the whole process didn’t take very long, Vik spent some time showing me everything and letting me know my credentials to access my learning account. After a bit, I realized he was stretching it out as long as he could, likely to distract me from what was going on with Yaro.

I didn’t see the point in it, but I appreciated the gesture anyway.

Once virtually every page had been combed over, I grabbed the two of us something to drink which Vik thanked me for.

As he sipped from his iced tea, I leaned against the couch and considered the words that weighed heavily on my tongue. I debated if it was worth saying or if I was better off keeping everything to myself.

Regardless of Vik being his brother, I felt like I could trust him. He seemed softer-natured compared to Yaro, and that made me less resistant to share my feelings with him.

I tapped against my glass while I tried to find the right words.

“You said being angry was normal for Yaro, but how much did you mean that?” I asked.

Vik seemed to realize his mistake as he paused, then pulled his eyes away from the laptop. “Well, he can be quick to anger, but that isn’t necessarily his norm. Things have been worse for him lately because of work.”

“What’s been going on?” I asked, furrowing my brows. “I mean, I know things haven’t been that great, but he never tells me.”

Vik sighed, then closed the laptop and put it aside. “Yaro’s been under more pressure, and he’s trying to patch things up after what happened with your father. There have been a few targeted hits against our men recently, and he’s straining to try and figure out who’s responsible. If he seems angrier than usual, that’ll be why.”

As I digested those words, it helped me make sense of his random bursts of anger. How he could be tender and gentle one moment, then off the wall mad the next. It was stress weighing him down.

“I’m somewhat afraid of him...Not all the time, but just when he gets mad like that. I don’t know what to expect from him,” I admitted, looking down at my hands as I spoke. “It reminds me of my dad.”

When I looked over at him, Vik’s expression softened. “I don’t know the extent of it, but I know he won’t ever hurt you. He might be stubborn and blunt about things at times, but it’s his duty to protect you now. Even if he doesn’t express it, or if it doesn’t seem that way given the circumstances, Yaro would do anything to keep you safe.”

Warmth moved through me then, along with a spark of surprise. “Really? Some days it seems like he couldn’t care less if I wasn’t here.”

Vik snickered. “Him not letting you go back to campus was the first sign that he cares about your well-being. He can’t let anyone get their hands on you. He doesn’t make a big deal about it, but Yaro is always putting himself before anyone else. He’s not usually the one being taken care of, even if someone attempts to.”

The reality of his words was difficult for me to digest, but I had the feeling he was telling the truth. Even if he could be cold about it, Yaro always made sure I was taken care of. Whether it was meals, clothes, or getting me out of the condo, he was trying.

“I could see that,” I murmured, losing myself in the thought.

Guilt gripped my heart, and I felt bad for comparing my husband to my dad. One of those men made sure I had what I needed while the other could barely give me the bare minimum. One was working hard to keep everyone safe, while the other bummed off the Levovs’ money and stole from them, losing everything in the process.

Even if that anger seemed reminiscent of my dad’s, I couldn’t keep blurring the two in my mind. It felt like an injustice.

Regardless of how things started between us, Yaro did try to be kind to me, and that sense of loyalty was there. I just had the feeling it would take more work to fortify that bond between us.

“You know,” Vik started, letting a mischievous smile settle on his lips. “Yaro might seem all tough—which, granted, he is—he’s also incredibly sensitive. He cares more than he lets on, and I know how you perceive him is something he considers very closely. Don’t let his hard exterior fool you.”

I smiled gently at the idea. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Vik’s easy-going nature was a relief, and I felt grateful for him then. He was like a middleman to help me navigate my new life, and he meant the world to Yaro. That much was obvious.

Even if there were still unknowns between us, I found myself looking forward to seeing where my future with Yaro would take me.

“Yaro mentioned I’d be useful to the family business before,” I began, redirecting the conversation. “What did he mean by that?”

He shrugged. “Since you’re studying business, you’ll be able to use that to help us with our profits and front-end things what the customers will see. But since you’re still

studying and don't know much about the lifestyle, there's no pressure for you to start yet."

While the business had dangerous aspects, something about it made me curious. Despite not being brought up in their world, something about it was intriguing.

I liked how their values seemed to be the center of everything. How they were a family looking out for family. It wasn't something I ever had.

"Do you think Yaro would be open to letting me learn more about it if I asked?"

Vik drew in a sip from his drink. "I don't see why not."

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When the front door cracked open, it was dark out, and Vik was long gone. He had been apprehensive about leaving me there, but after I reassured him enough times that I'd be fine, he eventually went home for some rest.

After our talk, I had a change of heart for Yaro. I realized I had been looking at him the wrong way, and like Maria said, if I wanted things to go well, I had to speak up.

Taking a deep breath as Yaro walked in, I internally told myself that my situation was what I made of it, and I wanted things to be better between us.

A greeting was on my tongue, but the moment I saw the blood splattered on his button-down, it all fizzled away.

Immediate concern flooded my system as I jumped to my feet, surprising even myself.

"Oh my god," I uttered, approaching him with a twist of my stomach. "Are you hurt?"

I wanted to reach out to help, but I didn't know where to start. The blood was everywhere, along with his bruised



knuckles, exposed as he held his gloves in one hand.

But Yaro sighed and shook his head. His shoulders looked heavy from the weight of everything, along with the bags under his eyes. “The blood isn’t mine. I’m fine.”

I recoiled somewhat at his words, realizing what that meant. The damage was dealt to someone else.

Even if that was true and he felt fine, the lingering anger and defeat in his eyes were still a cause for concern.

Vik told me everything I needed to know about his brother earlier, and I better understood his nature. He was the provider, yet he often wasn’t provided for.

Immediately, I wanted to do something for him. Even if I didn’t have anything planned, I wanted to ease some of that sting and take on some of the stress he shouldered on his behalf.

With a small reassuring smile, I reached for his hand despite the blood.

Yaro glanced between my hand and my eyes, surprised by the gesture. Yet, he let it happen, and I pulled him toward the bathroom.

He followed somewhat reluctantly with all his limbering height. He probably felt ridiculous but was too exhausted to say otherwise.

It made me wonder if he secretly wanted to be looked after.

Once I flicked the lights on, I pointed at the vanity sink. “Wash up there while I run a bath.”

“A bath?” He questioned, tone lingering with the slightest hint of an objection.

“Yes, a bath. Now clean yourself up.”

His brows lifted at that, and I could’ve sworn I saw a look of amusement cross his face before he did as I said without another word.

Bravery instilled within me at that, and I redirected myself to the corner tub. I ran the water, surprised by how quickly it seemed to fill up. Looking at the various soaps and oils stored nearby, all virtually untouched aside from a regular bar soap he used, I picked ones that sounded nice and added them in.

All the while, Yaro yanked his bloodied shirt off and started scrubbing the blood from his hands and arms. There was a shuffle of clothes behind me, presumably from him removing the rest of his clothes.

Soon enough, the room smelled amazing, and the tub was nearly full. Turning the taps off, I waited for him to be done.

Once his skin was clean enough not completely to soil the water, I looked over at him while I reached for him again. He put his hand back in my palm, and I helped him in the tub.

Even if he tried to seem perfectly fine and able to get in on his own, I could tell he was hurting. He looked sore and worn out, slightly unsteady on his feet.

But as Yaro stepped in and eased into the water, I watched as that tension ebbed away. He sighed and leaned against the tub, soaking in that relief.

I couldn't help but smile at how simple it was, yet it seemed to be exactly what he needed. Getting up, I reached for a towel and placed it next to the tub.

All the while, I felt his eyes on me. Studying me.

When our eyes met, I couldn't read what he was feeling, but that hint of surprise let me know he had never been shown that type of care before.

It was a nice feeling, and I hoped he could feel my affection through it.

As that tension felt too thick between us, Yaro dissolved it by cupping water in his hands and splashing it

over his face. He closed his eyes as steam moved all around him.

Getting an idea, I moved myself over until I sat behind him on the tiles surrounding the built-in tub. I carefully reached for his shoulders and massaged gently, afraid of catching him by surprise.

While he certainly was caught off-guard by it, Yaro allowed it and relaxed into the touch.

His shoulders were so wide they took up much of the room, but as I worked some magic into them, that tension started easing away.

Yaro let go of the occasional breathless moan, content from the sensations.

After a few minutes of gentle silence, he murmured, “Why are you doing this for me?”

I hadn’t expected him to ask me outright, but I chose to do the same in return. “You’ve been so tense and on edge lately, and I just want to help you feel better. Besides, it’s also a thank you for earlier today.”

Yaro looked touched by the gesture as he cracked open an eye to look at me before he opened them both and reached for my hand.

Confused, I looked down at his palm before placing it in his, and he guided me toward him.

Before I could process what was happening, I hit the warm water with a quiet shriek, making it slosh within the tub.

## Chapter 15 - Grace

My pajama set was soaked as I straddled his lap in the deep tub, still shocked he had even done it.

“Yaro!” I cried out, bewildered by it. “I’m drenched.”

A satisfied smile settled on his face as he chuckled, letting his big hands fall on my hips. “Good. That’s how I like it.”

A blush immediately blossomed in my cheeks, aware of what he meant. Without a bra beneath the satin material of my top, the fabric clung to my chest, showing every contour of my body.

But Yaro didn’t seem to mind.

Instead, he took full advantage of the situation and gripped the top between his fingers. Carefully, he lifted it up and over my head, leaving my chest completely bare in front of him.

While my skin burned from his undivided attention, I couldn’t deny how nice it was to see the hunger in his eyes. A reminder that he found me appealing, as I did about him.

Those hazel eyes seemed to darken as he studied me closer before bringing a hand up to my ribcage. His thumb reached around and brushed against my nipple, peeking from the temperature difference outside the tub.

That pleasure flickered through me immediately, making me sigh from the sensation. I leaned into that touch, hoping for more of it.

Yaro looked satisfied by my reaction, to which he continued rolling circles against it. As I tipped my head back, soaking in that stimulus, I felt his cock twitch beneath me. It made my insides pool, and I immediately saw the appeal of sharing the tub.

He grunted his satisfaction, using both hands to toy with my nipples. He knew exactly how to pull those breathy moans from me, stirring that excitement within me.

It had been how long since we last had sex, and we were both pent up because of it. His eagerness was plain enough.

Finished with his initial ministrations, Yaro let his hands slide down my thighs until he reached for the matching black bottoms, completely soaked.

Aware of how our position wasn't the most ideal for removing them, Yaro gripped the waistband and pulled.

Immediately, the material tore, shredding in half.

"I liked those," I mumbled half-heartedly.

Yaro chuckled as he put a hand against my jaw and pulled me closer. "I'll get you another pair later. As many as you want."

Since I knew it was an easy enough favor for him to follow through with, the thought was forgotten the moment our lips crashed together and the water shifted around us.

I melted into him then, allowing myself to let go of any previous inhibitions. Drifting closer to him, my arms draped around his shoulders as I kissed him back. There was something so addicting about his lips that had me feeling like I was finally getting another hit of what I wanted.

As much as I wanted to resist Yaro before, I didn't feel that same wall between us anymore—the block that kept us from getting closer. Something felt different about it that time.

Whether he was appreciative of the gesture or if it was my change of heart toward him, there was so much feeling within that caress of our mouths.

His palms glided down my back as he held me against him, deepening the kiss like he couldn't get enough of it. Our cores were aligned, offering us that mutual friction that made us breathless.

My head spun at the feeling of him brushing against me, wishing I could be so full of him already.

But Yaro wasn't in the biggest hurry yet. Instead, he brought a hand down between us and carefully traced circles against my clit. That pleasure stitched within me, forcing me to moan into the kiss.

He hummed his appeasement as he slowly added more pressure until he built up a rhythm I liked.

A shiver ran down my back as my entire body seemed to come to life thanks to his fingers, wriggling against him for more of that sensation.

The incredible feeling seemed to consume me as I tried to keep up with his lips, yet my mouth parted as a strained moan came from me. He took advantage of the opportunity and took my lower lip between his teeth.

My skin felt like it was on fire from how perfectly he held me and made me want more of him. I whimpered at how weak that gesture made me, finished with the teasing.

Like he was granting my wish, Yaro put his hands beneath me and stood from within the tub, not caring how the water splashed. I clung to him with a squeal, watching as he pulled us both out.

When he reached the lush bathmat, Yaro carefully lowered me until I stood in front of him.

His arms wrapped around me and kept me pressed against him as he sealed my lips in another heated kiss. He poured so much emotion into it that I could hardly breathe, overwhelmed by how intense it all felt.

"Let me thank you for your help," Yaro murmured against my lips as he turned me around.

Before I knew it, I was facing the vanity, and his hands adjusted me into place. Bent slightly over the countertop, my palms rested against the cool surface, and my heart stammered from the anticipation.

Yaro pushed my legs apart as he slid his hands up and down my backside. He let one continue until he reached my front, dropping his fingers to brush against my clit. He grazed it, making a shiver run through me.

I gasped as he traced slow circles there while he pumped himself a few times with his opposite hand. The moment he prodded my heat, my eyes squeezed shut.

In time with his patterns against my sensitive bud, Yaro spread me open and slid inside.

Choking around my moans, I was immediately shocked by how intense the new position felt. Burning heat coursed through me as he pushed further inside me and let me take in that incredible sensation.

Yaro groaned as he entered me, placing both hands on my hips. As I gripped the countertop and braced myself for his thrusts, he was met with little to no resistance.

When he drew his hips back and carefully created a faster pace, I moaned for him. That influx of pleasure made my eyes shut, and I couldn't even attempt to keep my noises to myself.

As our mutual eagerness mounted, he quickened his thrusts, eliciting a sinful combination of our skin slapping together, along with our moans.

My legs alternated between being tense and feeling lighter than air. It was a struggle to keep myself standing as I received each one of his unrelenting thrusts that grew more powerful with each one.

I moved with the force of his hips, clenching around him.

Yaro grunted as he thundered into me, fingers tight from their place on my hips. He towered over me, making me feel completely surrounded by him.

There was no denying how it drove me crazy and made me want him even more.

He cursed to himself as he shuffled me back, creating a bigger arch as I gripped the counter to keep myself steady.

As the air in the room seemed to thin, Yaro reached for my hair and gripped it as he thrust into me.

While he hit an even deeper angle, I cried out for him like a siren, so incredibly full of him. I didn't want to try and hide how much I was enjoying it, not when it clearly served as his motivation to give me as much as he could offer.

To my relief, that finish line was approaching at an alarming speed.

When I tightened around him again, building up that tension within me, Yaro groaned. His hips moved sinfully fast, pushing me further and further into that bliss.

As I hit my climax, I let go of a strangled moan and squeezed the countertop. My whole body tensed while I rode out that high, assisted by his continued thrusting.

When he couldn't take it anymore, Yaro pulled me up until I was pressed almost flush against him, and he pumped into me. His thrusts were sloppy as he grunted and pulled out to spill his seed on my back.

I barely registered as he came down from his orgasm, still holding me up to keep me from falling over.

Yaro caught his breath, dropping his head down to pepper kisses across my naked shoulder and over to my neck. He gave my hip a small squeeze before helping clean me up.

Noticing how weak my legs were after it all, he scooped me up in his arms and took me to bed, both completely blissed out.



## Chapter 16 - Yaro

My phone vibrating on the nightstand woke me up first thing, and while I wished I could ignore it and turn around, I was in no position to do that.

And it was lucky I didn't roll back over and pull Grace into my arms, even if I wanted to. The thought of surrounding myself in warmth and staying under the blankets for a few more hours had the greatest appeal, but the moment I saw Elias' contact flash on my screen, I knew that was wishful thinking.

There had been another hit. Another attempt to bring me and my family down.

Cursing under my breath at not being able to enjoy even twenty-four hours of bliss from my wife's tenderness, I peeled myself out of bed and went straight into getting dressed.

I tried to do so quietly so as not to disturb her sleep, but once I was just about ready to go, Grace stirred.

"What's going on?" She asked, rubbing the sleep from her eyes as she sat up in bed.

Sighing, I slipped my phone in my pocket and leaned over to her side of the bed. "One of our locations has been hit. They need me out there."

I expected her to roll over and fall back asleep, but she blinked back at me through the low light of the bedroom, wide awake.

"Can I come with you?"

That question startled me. Never in my life did I think she would want to see what I got up to during the day. It was a foreign world to her, not a thing we typically exposed our wives to.

When I still didn't say anything, Grace continued, "I don't know anything about the business, but I feel I should. I'd like to understand it better."

Searching her face for any joke or trick being played on me, I was surprised to find only uninterrupted sincerity.

I wasn't sure how to feel about it.

"It's dangerous, you know. I can't guarantee nothing will happen."

While I expected that to shake her determination somewhat, her resolve didn't waver.

"I don't care, I want to see what you risk your life for," She murmured, reaching for my hand. "I won't take long to get ready."

The warmth of her hand seemed to travel through my entire body, and for whatever reason, I didn't want to deny her curiosity.

"Fine. Get dressed. We leave in ten."

A small smile settled on her lips, and she squeezed my hand before she slid out of bed and did exactly that.

As she got ready, I found myself bewildered by the idea of Grace taking an interest in the business. But I shouldn't have been surprised, not after I told her she would eventually become an asset to us.

It was easy to forget she was majoring in business, which surely made her more curious to see just how we managed things.

To my surprise, it almost felt like an honor to know she didn't completely hate my line of work and that she was willing to get out of her comfort zone to understand it better.

As instructed, Grace got herself ready in under ten minutes and met me by the front door wearing black leggings and a matching sweatshirt, almost like she was ready for a

heist. The thought made me laugh, but I told myself to concentrate.

Something serious had happened, and I needed to evaluate the damage. I needed to be there for our men.

Pulling up to the warehouse that wasn't far from the last hit site, my stomach dropped. It didn't take long to see just how much damage had been dealt.

But before I could address it, I brought Grace around to the trunk and pulled out a black Kevlar vest. She lifted her brows in question, and I handed it to her.

“You're essentially about to walk into a crime scene, and I need you protected, even if it is minimal,” I said, watching as the realization moved through her eyes.

Of course, she didn't understand the full extent of what that meant yet. While something had already happened, that didn't mean another strike couldn't happen while we were there.

Once she had the vest strapped on, I motioned for her to follow me.

Immediately, there was no missing the garage-style door that had been cut into and seared at the edges. The scorched piece had been cast aside, big enough to let a person walk through. Tire tracks suggested they had peeled out of there as fast as they could manage, likely when they were caught.

Two of our men stepped out of the warehouse, one holding a clipboard as he approached.

Immediately, tension pinched their shoulders together, more aware of the full damage than I was.

“What happened here?” I asked, unable to hold back the wave of immediate frustration.

The first one pulled in a discreet breath. “The warehouse was broken into and ransacked in the night. They took a considerable amount of product, but when they were

found out, our guys tried to take them down. Unfortunately, they got away with a substantial amount.”

I narrowed my eyes at them. “How did they have the chance to get away with it? Why weren’t they taken care of sooner?”

The two men glanced at each other, likely searching for the appropriate excuses to ease the sting of my anger.

The second one looked young and inexperienced as he swallowed hard. “Apparently there was a shift change—”

“I don’t care if there was a shift change or not. There was no reason for this place to be unguarded long enough for them to slip in without being seen!” I snapped at them, bewildered by how it ever even happened.

The two men flinched at my raised voice but took it on the chin and nodded.

“There have been far too many hits already, and now they’ll think they can walk all over us. Tighten things up around here, and let the others know there is to be around-the-clock surveillance of every warehouse. I don’t ever want to hear there wasn’t at least one person at every post or monitor,” I directed, doing my best to reign in that anger. I didn’t want Grace to see me in only a bad light. “Do I make myself clear?”

They both nodded again, not wasting a moment. “Yes, sir.”

“Good. Because it’ll be your heads, then mine when Dimitri catches wind of anything else.”

They both looked anxious but reserved as they continued without another word.

I glanced back at Grace to find her brows raised curiously. While she certainly looked intimidated by the prospect of anyone being punished for the hit or future ones, there was still a sort of curiosity stitched in her features.

“Still with me?” I asked, hoping to break that tension I felt building in my chest.,

I couldn't understand the strange frame of mind I found myself in. I was stuck between two worlds—the one where I had to run a tight ship and the other where I was trying my hardest to prove I wasn't a monster to my wife.

At the very least, she didn't seem too repulsed by how I shouted at our employees, and that was a good sign.

Grace just nodded and followed me inside.

That tension was impossible to shake no matter how hard I tried. Inside the warehouse, it was a jumbled mess of men not only cleaning up what had been the hit site but also moving product and rearranging it to be moved in the meantime until the building could be fixed.

While I needed to be engaged with what was going on, I couldn't shake that worry in the back of my mind. Grace was in the middle of that chaos, and I was afraid something else might happen while she was there.

I couldn't stand the thought of it, even if it had been her idea. It was my responsibility to keep her shielded from the dark aspects of this business, and I'd be damned if anything happened to her on my watch.

Regardless of whether it was the reluctant vows I made to her or how we were slowly forming some sort of trust between us, I felt obligated to protect her.

As one of the higher-ranked men came into view, I called out to him, and he pivoted on his heel to approach me.

“Sir,” he said simply, chin raised obediently.

“Give me the run-down on what's going on here,” I said, looking between him and the movement going on in the open space.

He nodded once. “We've taken inventory of what was taken, and now we're moving the more valuable product out to a different warehouse to ensure they don't try to come back for more. We plan to swap with lesser value stock...”

As he spoke, I caught myself glancing over to where Grace stood as she took it all in. She watched as equipment was moved, along with the inventory, looking somewhat amazed by the extent of everything. The sheer numbers and vastness of the business. That warehouse wasn't even half of it.

“And where are you sending it?”

He showed me a map on his clipboard and pointed at a region on the upper west side of the city. “We found a reasonable rate here. It's secluded, and there's potential for future real estate, should we need it.”

“Very good. Send the details to my office, and I'll make sure to sign off on any changes.”

“There is another matter we need to settle,” he began, flipping between his stack of papers.

I did my best to listen as I was briefed, but Vik and Elias moving in to speak with Grace caught my attention.

Elias, with his shit-eating grin, stuck his hand out to Grace while he mentioned some vague introduction. A look of recognition crossed her face, and they seemed to talk easily enough.

I could already hear what he would say to me, surely prepared to tease me about bringing her to the warehouse.

While I couldn't pay full attention to what they were saying, given how he pointed to various things, he seemed to be explaining some of our operations to her. He was being smug as he flashed me the occasional smile, but I knew it was harmless.

Even if I knew I would never hear the end of it, especially given the fact that I was married and he wasn't, a swell of pride moved into my chest. At the very least, it was nice to see them getting along, and that Grace was taking an interest in my work.

Initially, I only saw that as a burden, since I didn't want her to become entangled in everything. There was no telling when things might go south, and I didn't want that extra layer of stress. I didn't want anyone to have something they could hold over me.

But I didn't anticipate how nice it would be to have her accept that part of me. The more rugged, brutal side.

"Thanks for showing up here," I heard Vik say. "We would've all been wrung out by now if it wasn't for you."

I had words for him in my mind, but he was lucky I was preoccupied.

Trusting them to keep an eye on her, I was whisked away to oversee more changes that needed to be made. All the while, I silently prayed for everything to go well. For nothing to get out of hand.

When I came back alone, I overheard them talking to her still, relieved to see them getting along with her. She spoke to them like they were already familiar, and I was glad to see it. It made those two worlds seem like they were coming together seamlessly, and it helped me relax somewhat.

All three of them broke out in laughter at something Elias said, and I clapped a hand against his shoulder once I approached.

"I hate to interrupt your fun here, but there's still work to be done."

Elias sighed and hung his head. "Always the stickler for fun."

"What happened to being my subordinate first, best friend second here?" I asked, cocking a brow at him.

He chuckled. "You've got it, boss."

"That's more like it."

Grace's small smile made something stir inside my chest, and as much as I wanted to act on it then and there, it

wasn't the place or time.

I turned my attention to Vik. "I need you to pass it down the line that things are going to get stricter around here. Apparently, what we implemented before wasn't good enough. These people somehow know more than they should, and they're getting cocky. I'm putting out the order now—if any of these Bruno men are seen again, shoot on sight."

Grace's reaction at that was the first sign of true uneasiness. She shivered, and her expression turned more serious. She was surely reminded of how cutthroat our life truly was.

We didn't just make deals and alliances to pass money around. People involved in our world were killed every day, and while there were pretty finances involved, it always came at a cost.

Vik nodded. "I'll send it down the pipeline."

We continued to do what was necessary to sort out the aftermath of the break-in, and by the end of it, I turned to Grace with a deep breath. "Alright, we're done here."

"Wait," she said to my surprise as we were close to the main door. She looked almost sad at the thought of going home already. "I know I'm not technically helping yet, but I want to see more of the businesses. Vik was telling me about the whiskey line and Isidor's casino. It sounds so interesting."

I looked at her in disbelief, caught off-guard all over again.

Before, I didn't think she wanted anything to do with our lifestyle. I assumed she would rather study than look into what was happening behind the scenes.

While it was my first instinct to say no and take her home, there was something so genuine about her interest. I felt like I couldn't deny her, not when she made me feel so seen and validated.



“Alright, then,” I began, holding the door open for her.  
“We’ll go check out the clubs.”

Grace flashed me a smile and went outside, making me realize just how lucky I was to have scored a woman like her.

## Chapter 17 - Grace

The club was even more impressive than I ever could've imagined.

I had never been in a place even remotely similar, and just stepping inside made me feel like one of the most important people in New York. Albeit, underdressed, too.

From chandeliers and ornate decor to the pristine bar that seemed to glow under the lights, everything looked so perfectly deliberate. Not even the finest detail had gone unnoticed.

“Who owns this one?” I asked Yaro over the music, following him away from the main floor and over to where it seemed quiet. Some doors were for employee access only, and I imagined some of their business went down back there, away from the noise.

Yaro walked with his gloved hands in his pockets. He towered me as we walked side-by-side. “This is a joint one between the family. While my cousins have their own respective clubs or other ventures, some are under the family name, and we're all shareholders. This is one of the most popular spots.”

“I can see why,” I said, marveling at it all. Between the lavish décor and the energy of the place, it was amazing. “It's incredible.”

It almost reminded me of the parties I thought I would've attended while at school, but perhaps a little on the dingier side.

“Grace!”

I whirled around at that familiar voice and found myself face-to-face with Raya. Behind her, the rest of the girls were gathered, all smiling at me.

She pulled me in for a hug without a second thought. “It’s so nice to see you here!”

“If I had known we were coming here, I would’ve put on something nicer,” I admitted sheepishly.

But the girls waved it off.

“You just look...mysterious, that’s all,” Violet said, giggling as she sipped from her drink.

Yaro dipped his head down to be level with my ear from behind. His voice sent a shiver down my spine. “I have business to attend to, but I’ll be back soon.” He directed his gaze to the girls. “I’m trusting her with you.”

“She’s perfectly safe with us,” Maria said, reaching an arm out for me. “Come dance with us.”

I took her arm and was immediately swept away. As we went, I glanced behind myself to find Yaro going into one of the back rooms and giving me a mutual second look. My heart skipped a beat at that.

We were meshed in with the rest of the dancing patrons, and soon enough, I didn’t seem any different from them, aside from the slight awkwardness I felt.

The girls were all smiles as they gathered around, swaying to the music and doing their best to integrate me into it. Still holding my hand, Maria danced with me, guiding me into the groove of it.

I mirrored her movements, quickly reminded that I hadn’t danced in a long time. It felt like forever since the last time I moved to fast music and let myself get lost in it.

“There you go, that’s more like it!” Maria said, beaming as we moved.

I couldn’t help but laugh, warmed by how welcomed I felt by them. We danced with one another smoothly, making the occasional face at each other and laughing whenever we had the chance to.

As I let go of the calculated side of my brain, the movements started to feel more natural, and those inhibitions started to slip away. Swaying my hips with the girls, I felt almost sexy despite being underdressed.

It felt so natural, and I started to regret not indulging myself in that kind of thing sooner. While I was at home saving for school, I never let myself go out and act like other people my age. I just went to work and stressed about not having enough money to achieve my dream. But in that moment, it felt like I was gaining that freedom back again. Like I was making up for lost time in a way.

We continued through a few songs before I felt eyes on me, and I turned to find Yaro standing there. His eyes raked up and down my body, meeting my gaze by the end of it. They were blown with lust, and something about it made chills scurry up my arms.

“I’ll take it from here,” Yaro said to the girls as he reached for me. He never even pulled his stare away from me.

As if the girls understood exactly, they wore their suggestive smiles and dispersed in the crowd.

Immediately, we were left alone, but there was no time to think about his proximity or to let those nerves flourish within me.

Yaro hooked a hand around my waist and pulled me closer, letting himself join in with my subtle dancing. With both hands wandering to my hips, I felt perfectly surrounded by him. His cologne smelled more reserved than most, but there was no doubting its luxury, and I had grown to appreciate it. It felt familiar then, and taking it in at that moment made me soften.

My mind went hazy between Yaro’s muscled form swaying with me and how his black tee hugged his body.

I focused on how his warmth felt from where he touched me, making me feel more alive than ever. It was rejuvenating, and I never wanted it to end.

Yaro tucked a stray piece of hair behind my ear, making me shiver again. “I don’t know if you’re aware, but your hips are hypnotizing. You should be careful with them.”

Immediately, my cheeks warmed, and I couldn’t find anything suitable to say in response. I felt like a blushing schoolgirl despite how he was legally my husband. It felt like we were in the dating stage we never got to experience.

The thought of being able to capture his attention so wholeheartedly was invigorating. It almost felt like I had a different kind of power in my hands.

Feeling braver then, I moved even closer until I was pressed against him, all while maintaining that unwavering eye contact.

While his gaze was hungry, I didn’t feel like a piece of meat to him. There was something reminiscent of worship in his eyes, and that gave me the boost I needed to dance on him.

Yaro seemed to eat it up as his eyes grew even darker, completely ringed with desire. Something about it made me feel hot all over.

With another surge of confidence, I turned myself around and backed up into him. His hands settled on my hips as he squeezed me. Grazing him, I felt as he stirred within his pants. The silent compliment I needed to keep going.

That tension pulled even tighter as we moved with the music, blending in with the crowd around us. Air felt hard to come by from our proximity and from just how suggestive it felt. I wanted him, and there was no denying it.

As his hands explored my body, roaming across my midsection and just brushing against my chest, mental images of our time the night before flashed in my head. I wanted to feel his bare skin against mine again and to soak in just how incredible he made me feel.

Being aware of just how badly he wanted the same thing made it even harder to keep myself off him. It was

tempting to give in then and there, but I couldn't—not in the very club owned by his family.

Turning back around to face him again, I caught his strained expression. I felt the very reason through my leggings.

I gave him a wanton smile, never stopping my movements. “How many businesses in total are listed under the Levov name?”

Yaro leaned in closer to my ear just as he chuckled; his hands glided up and down my waist. “Surely you don't care about all that. Especially not right now.”

I couldn't help but smile at that. He was so worked up that he couldn't bring himself to think about the details.

Swaying my hips under his touch, I put a hand against his chest. “I assure you, I do care. If I'm a Levov and will be expected to help with things, then I should know the ins and outs, don't you think?”

Something moved through Yaro's eyes at that, as if they were overflowing with lust. That appeasement told me that was exactly what he wanted to hear.

He hooked a hand against my jaw and lifted my face closer to his. A smug smile crawled across his lips. “You're taking on the role of my wife exceptionally well.”

Warmth cascaded through my body, making me melt.

It was what I wanted to hear, too.

Energized by how magnetized our bodies felt then, I wasn't interested in stopping my movements. Instead, I continued to rub against him, wondering when he would inevitably falter.

## Chapter 18 - Yaro

It was impossible to conceptualize just how hard I was at that moment. With her perfect body moving against mine, letting me feel every inch of her, I was straining against my pants.

There was something about Grace accepting her role in the family that made everything feel more real between us. She was interested in being involved, and that was all I could ask for.

Even if it felt like a great risk bringing her into the fold, I couldn't deny how sexy it was. Her eagerness to learn felt like a blessing, and if the business could be a sort of foundation for us to grow closer, then so be it.

There were ways for her to be involved without being in the line of fire, and if that was what she wanted, then I would make it happen.

As Grace swayed those luscious hips, grazing my front, I felt minutes away from giving in. I was overcome by how effortlessly she drew me in, and I had half a mind to have her then and there.

The building had several back rooms, and the thought was beyond tempting.

Pulling her in and having a quickie without anyone seeing wouldn't take much. The music would be loud enough to cover our sounds; my cousins had already cleared out.

Looking at me through her lashes, it hit me at once that Grace indeed had power over me. She was enchanting, and I knew she would be the death of me. One way or another, she would have me in the palm of her hands, and I had the feeling we were already toeing that line.

I went to reach for her hand, to whisk her away and let those primal urges take over, but a loud bang, followed by a

crash, rang out.

The impact sent a wave of smoke into the room, and screams broke out from the crowd. At once, everyone scattered as they ran to get away from the smoke and from whatever had caused it.

My ears rang, but I pushed through it and grabbed Grace's arm. With my other hand, I pulled out my pistol and tried to discern what was going on.

Between the screaming and overall chaos, several shouts were muffled by the noise, and I couldn't tell who it came from.

But men were moving through the smoke. From the way they hurried in, I knew they weren't ours. They couldn't be. Not with those attack-like stances.

Clicking the safety off, I raised my gun and fired at the nearest one. The bullet hit its target, and the first one went down. There was a whole wave of men flooding in the club, and I realized immediately it was an ambush.

Targeting our club full of civilians was a low move, but that seemed consistent with the very people we had been up against for the last few weeks.

I had no doubt they were Bruno men.

More shouts came from within the club, but I recognized those voices. Glancing to my left, I found my cousins navigating through the smoke with their own pistols drawn, firing at the influx of men. Our guards joined in, creating almost a wall of bodies against the attackers.

The patrons were flooding out in the opposite direction, leaving us to fend the place from them.

The more bodies that entered the building through the rubble, the more dire I realized the situation was. It was a full-blown shoot-out, and Grace was still in tow behind me. She didn't have the Kevlar on anymore, and there was only so much I could do to protect her then.



But alongside the people rushing out of the club, I found Raya in the corner of my eye. Rushing over to her, I brought Grace to her.

“Take her and go! Get somewhere safe!” I shouted over the chaos.

Understanding, Raya nodded and immediately reached for her.

The fear gripping Grace was enough to make me regret even bringing her there in the first place. If we had just gone home like I originally wanted, we wouldn't have been in that mess.

But I couldn't dwell on it, not while I had seconds to watch the two of them hurry away from the fight.

It felt like a major sacrifice to let her go, but I had to. It was for the best.

Returning my attention to the fight, I found our men formed a united front, aiming at any men they spotted. Those shots rang out, and my own joined in as they seemed to drop like flies.

Standing alongside my cousins and our men, our mortality seemed more apparent than ever, but it didn't shake us. We were trained to handle situations of that exact nature.

It was heated at first with constant rounds of shots. Many of their bullets were swallowed up by the rubble since they were at a disadvantage. They had the club lights working against them, and they weren't as familiar with the layout. Better yet, they didn't know we had backup or just how many men we really had.

With reinforcements rolling in, we were able to pull back and get a better look at the situation.

“They're retreating!” Dimitri shouted, getting in some last few shots as the men pulled back.

Once the last few survivors ran out the way they stormed in, an eerie silence settled over the club. No more

guns were fired. No more bodies hit the ground. What men we did hit littered the floor, and their bodies began appearing one by one as the dust quite literally settled.

Not far from my place, one of them was down but attempting to crawl away. His leg was shot and bleeding, but otherwise, he seemed fine.

With fresh anger coursing through me, I stormed to where he was, kicked his gun away, and slammed my boot against his injured leg.

He screamed, writhing in pain on the floor. Pinned there beneath me, he wasn't going anywhere.

Our men evaluated the space, working to neutralize the property. As everything went still again, the damages were assessed. Luckily, it didn't seem like any patrons had been caught in the crossfire.

Isidor shook his head as he stood by the opening—the wall that had been blown in and left a gaping hole behind. He was both pissed and devastated. “I can't believe this happened. In broad daylight, too.”

“They're getting bolder each time,” Dimitri said, face fixed in a scowl. “This was too close to home.”

Andrei, enraged as he looked upon the damage that was dealt to the club, clenched his jaw. “This needs to end.”

“I have one of them here,” I called out, reaching for the captive's collar as I hoisted him up.

The blood was drained from his face as he was forced to his feet, made to put pressure on his bad leg. He could hardly stand, and I knew there wasn't much fight left in him.

“Yaro, take that one and find out what the hell is going on here. We need answers, and we need it figured out before anything else happens,” Andrei instructed, running a hand through his hair in frustration.

Nodding, I motioned for a few of my men to come over, and I passed the hostage to them. “Take him to the docks

and put him in the interrogation room. Patch him up enough to keep him alive, but no more than that.”

They nodded, taking the man away with little care. If we didn't need him for answers, I was sure we all would've found at least a flicker of satisfaction in ending him.

As the situation was taken care of, that remaining question remained in my mind, banging against the walls. *Where did Grace end up?*

Feeling that rush of concern and panic, I peeled away from the scene when I knew it was alright to, and I hurried outside.

Fortunately, I didn't have to go far. The girls had been tucked away in one of our armored SUVs, all looking just as worried when I opened the door.

But that relief I felt lifted the burden from my chest. Sighing, I stepped back as Grace got out.

Reaching for her, I pulled her aside and put a gentle hand against her face. She had dust in her hair and on her clothes, but other than her shaken expression, she seemed fine.

“Thank god you're alright,” I mumbled, letting my thumb stroke her cheek.

“That was terrifying.”

“I know, but you're going home now. You'll have to wait for me there,” I said, hoping to have her protected at the condo with the doors locked and several guards posted outside.

I expected her to deflate with relief, but her brows furrowed. “Where are you going?”

“We got a hostage, and I have to interrogate him to find out how all of this is being orchestrated and what their next moves are.”

“Let me go with you, then.”

“What?” I asked in complete disbelief. I couldn’t understand why she wanted to be so involved. “I could’ve lost you back there. You’ll be safer at home.”

“But I can’t go back. I survived that explosion and the gunshots, and I need to see what happens. I need to know,” Grace said, silently pleading. “I never felt like I had a real family before—not until we married and I started learning more about the business. I want to help in whatever way I can one day, but until then, I need to understand what goes on. Please, Yaro.”

Sighing, her reasoning hit me hard after knowing her upbringing and just how neglectful her father had been. I didn’t want to take that away, even if she would be safer at home.

I sighed. “Interrogations aren’t pretty. I need you to understand that you won’t be the same walking out of there. You won’t look at me the same either.”

The latter had my heart in stitches.

“I don’t care,” she said, lifting her chin with confidence. “I need to see it all, even the gruesome parts.”

Taking in her innocent face, that apprehension wouldn’t leave my system. By letting her tag along, what had been otherwise unknown to her would be clear as day and more brutal than she had ever known.

To his credit, Dominic had shielded her from that underbelly, and it was hard to know if she was truly ready for that.

Yet, on the other hand, it was what she wanted. Grace was willingly asking to be taken to an interrogation—an integral part of what we did when times were tough. When we had no other choice but to pull information out of our enemies.

I had told her I wasn’t her jailor numerous times, and I meant it. I couldn’t take that choice away from her, not after I already had when it came to our marriage.

Giving her waist a small squeeze, I let go of a decisive breath. “Fine. Follow me.”

## Chapter 19 - Grace

I didn't think Yaro would actually let me tag along, but I was grateful he did. I took it as a sign of trust, and it meant a lot to me.

Things felt different between us, and I wanted to lean into it. I didn't want that chance of becoming closer to get away from us.

I moved through that hall with a newfound purpose, following Yaro through a different warehouse from the one we had been at before. We walked beneath fluorescent lights as we moved, passing huge rooms full of stock. All the inventory was wrapped up, concealing their contents. It made me wonder how the assailants at the other warehouse knew what they were looking for or what they were taking.

It struck me immediately how serious the issue was becoming. There had been two hits within twenty-four hours, and their men seemed to be on high alert and spread thin. Between guarding and cleaning up after the attacks, the overall operation had many moving parts. Some I hadn't even seen yet.

It helped me see the bigger picture, even if there were aspects of the business I was still unfamiliar with.

As we went through another hall and moved down a set of stairs that led to a basement, equally as lit up as the upper floor, there were men all around us. Some flanked us, while others nodded their heads in acknowledgment as Yaro walked by.

He seemed to lead them with ease—a quick reminder that he wasn't just some grunt. He had his place in the family ranks, and he had a considerable number of people beneath him. They all respected him, and I couldn't deny how impressive that was.

By proxy, I felt regarded in the same way. I was his wife, following in his footsteps to some degree.

It instilled in me a sense of pride that felt entirely new to me.

While my hands had trembled all the way there after the explosion at the club, it almost felt like my duty to see what came next. To understand the ins and outs.

My curiosity had gotten the best of me, and I wanted to see how Yaro ran his end of the business. He was in charge of the warehouses and the men posted between those locations, and that was a considerable achievement.

With a husband like him, risking his life like he often did, I didn't want to shy away from the grittier parts. That almost felt like a disservice.

Yaro slowed to fall into step with me as I followed, leaning down to murmur, "The girls don't normally see this kind of thing. If you want to leave at any point, just go. I understand."

Nodding, I wanted him to think I would do exactly that. But I couldn't. I didn't grow up in his world, and I needed to desensitize myself to it. It was all new to me, and being squeamish about that kind of thing wouldn't do me any good.

Not only was it his lifestyle, but now mine, too.

We were bound to one another, and that reality belonged to both of us then.

I had felt brave the entire way there, but as that adrenaline began to ebb from my system, I started to feel the slight tendrils of regret creeping in. The closer we were to that interrogation room, the more I started to consider the true weight of what I was about to witness.

But as we rounded the corner and entered the room made of four steel walls, concrete flooring, and a single light, there was no backing out.

The captive was seated in a hard-looking metal chair in the center of the room with a bandage secured around his one leg. A patch of blood seeped through the gauze, but he was nursed enough to keep him from bleeding out, it seemed.

That bright red stain was enough to make my stomach turn.

Elias was already there with a handful of other men, seemingly leading the interrogation. When he noticed us coming in, he glanced at me, and a slight look of surprise crossed his face before he turned his attention to Yaro.

“He hasn’t talked yet, but we’re getting there.”

Yaro nodded, then waved the remaining men away. “Elias, you stay. I want three men posted outside the door, but everyone else out.”

Everyone did as they were told at once until it was only the two of us, Elias, and the captive. Elias moved back to stand near me with his arms crossed as he observed the scene ahead. Once the shuffle of feet quieted down, my attention went completely to the man.

Taking a deep breath in, I tried my best to prepare myself from the back half of the room. To urge myself to not look away no matter what.

Adjusting his gloves, Yaro fixed his gaze on the man whose face was already puffy and discolored from being hit.

“If you tell us what we need to know, then I will make this quick,” he began, looking squarely at him as if they were the only two people in the room. “Understand?”

The man only breathed heavily, sounding strained as if his airflow had been obstructed in some way.

“Who are you?”

The captive didn’t say anything. He only looked back at Yaro with a harsh glare.



He back-handed him without another thought. The sound of his gloved hand colliding with the man's cheek made me jump slightly from how fast it happened. I hardly had the chance to blink without missing it.

His head recoiled, and the man heaved in those shallow breaths.

“Let's try that again. Who are you? Who do you work for?” Yaro asked, raising his voice.

Something in me wanted the hostage to just get out with it. To let Yaro hear what needed to be said, then move on to spare him more damage.

But as the man refused to speak, it became clear why Yaro couldn't be easy on him. If he wouldn't budge, then he would have to resort to more extreme measures.

Something about the interrogation had me split down the middle. I didn't enjoy violence, especially not as the skin was broken and blood began to flow, but at the same time, I knew why he had to do it. I understood what he was fighting for.

Yaro wanted to keep his family safe, and there were men out to get them and their business. It was unfortunate that some man had to take the brunt of it in his leader's stead, but that was apparently how things were done.

The more the captive resisted, the more he was hit. Again and again, Yaro struck him until his face was beaten almost beyond recognition.

It went on for some time, and with each collision of leather against the skin, I flinched less. I told myself not to react, even if the man began to sob from the pain.

Even if the sound of Yaro's fist meeting his face again and again was sickening to hear, I didn't let it shake me.

When the relentless beating didn't work, Yaro glanced over his shoulder at Elias. “Get him up.”

With a single nod, Elias did as he said and left my side to move behind the man. He grabbed his bound hands and hoisted him up, simultaneously kicking the chair out from beneath him.

The captive was forced on his bad leg, and the moment the pressure sank in, he cried out. Face bloody and bruised; tears streaked down his broken skin, not given any relief from the pain.

More blood began to seep into the bandage.

“I’ll talk, I’ll talk!” He screamed as his face drained of color. “Please, I’ll talk!”

The desperation in his voice echoed off the walls, making a shiver run down my spine. Seeing the man so horribly beaten and in pain was hard to stomach, even if he was my husband’s opposition by association.

Yaro nodded once, and Elias returned the chair, dropping the man onto it.

There was immediate relief as the hostage sat down with his head hung. He wheezed out those shallow breaths as he tried to calm himself after that shock.

He swallowed thickly. “I’m...I’m a sort of scab worker.”

Yaro and Elias exchanged a look before focusing on the man again.

At last, some progress was being made.

“Who hired you for this job?”

The captive dropped his shoulders, likely aware of how much trouble he would be in if anyone found out he was talking. “Me and the guys were contracted to help Sergio and Pietro Bruno. They wanted to stay under the radar and avoid having any of the blame come back to them.”

Yaro tensed at the mention of these Bruno men. With his arms crossed, making his biceps look even bigger than

usual, he scowled at the captive.

“Why? What was the purpose of hitting the club?”

“They wanted us to try and eliminate as many members of your family as possible, hoping it would seem like a random attack from a different group. They hoped the grief and less manpower would help make future hits easier to accomplish. The goal was to crumble the empire as close to home as possible.”

Raw fury crossed Yaro’s face at the explanation. While he seemed to get the answers he needed, I could tell none of them were simple fixes.

“And Pietro is leading these attacks?” He asked, keeping his voice as level as possible.

The man nodded, looking paler and worse than he had initially. His wound seemed to be catching up with him.

I didn’t know who the Brunos were or why they wanted the Levovs to be eliminated, but it seemed to be in our best interest to have them taken care of. How exactly that would happen, I didn’t know. But I could only imagine the kind of decisions Yaro would have to make when it came to them.

With a sigh, Yaro shook his head absently.

“It was always the Brunos. They’re trying to wear us down by spreading us thin with these attacks,” he mumbled, reaching for his holstered gun. Seeing it made my skin grow cold. “But no more. It’s time to send Pietro a message.”

Looking exhausted from it all, Yaro raised his gun at the man, who immediately began to shake and fight against it. He pleaded with him not to shoot.

My heart raced at the expectation of watching the hostage get shot through the head, but everything came to a halt as Yaro looked over his shoulder at me. He seemed to remember himself, and the fact that I was in the small room too.

I watched as that resolve broke, and he lowered his arm with a deep breath. He handed the pistol to Elias.

“Take care of this, and make sure he’s delivered somewhere the Brunos will find,” he mumbled to his best friend, who took the gun and seemed to understand.

“Will do.”

Like a shield from the brutality of what would soon unravel in the interrogation room, Yaro approached me with an arm resting against my lower back.

“We’re done here,” he said softly, guiding me through the door and down the hall.

Wordlessly, I followed, silently grateful for the decision. Watching Yaro beat the man for answers desensitized me to the point where I would have watched him be killed if it meant toughening my skin. But that was a slippery slope. And one I didn’t know how to navigate without destroying myself.

Sucking in a deep breath, we moved down the hall, and I tried to shake the residual feelings off my shoulders.

Before we could hit the staircase, a loud pop rang out through the warehouse, signaling the captive was dead.

Continuing through the massive building, I didn’t even flinch.

## Chapter 20 - Yaro

Just as we didn't want, everything had been in shambles since the explosion at the club. The incident drew unwanted attention from the public since it had the potential to wipe out a significant amount of life. With whatever luck we had left, nobody died, and that was the one thing we clung to.

The media attention made me wonder if that had been part of the plan. To get more eyes on us with the hope of uncovering some of our hidden dealings and leading to some sort of charges.

While the Brunos seemed to work quickly, we worked even faster.

I had been working around the clock as a means of damage control alongside Dimitri and Alexei. With the cops in and out of the establishment, along with the persistent news coverage, everything fell into pure, chaotic hell.

Anything in the club had to be transported behind the scenes before anyone could find it or link that product to any of our other warehouses. Swaps also had to be made within the warehouses to protect our most valuable stock. Everything had to be neat and tidy, and impossible to be tracked by any government body.

Damage control was the last thing I wanted to be doing, but after everything, my cousins were beyond furious.

Something that started as bold hits and potential retaliation from Dominic snowballed into a major issue with the potential of landing us in trouble. From affecting just the warehouses to nearly all aspects of the company as a whole, it wasn't just my problem anymore.

It was exactly what Dimitri didn't want to happen, but at the very least, the problem was now on the whole family's radar, which meant the concern was split evenly. It wasn't only my issue to shoulder or fix anymore.

Since the interrogation, Grace had been quiet around the condo. I found her lost in thought or looking out the window each time a police cruiser went by with their lights on. She had a fitful sleep afterward, but when I prompted her about it, she didn't say much.

When a meeting was called at the casino, I expected her to want to sit it out. I thought she was starting to second-guess her desire to be involved. But to my surprise, she demanded to sit in on the meeting.

That previous moping and pensiveness fell away, and she wouldn't take no for an answer.

Thus, she followed in tow as we moved through the main floor of Isidor's casino, both exhausted from everything going on yet alert out of necessity.

We hardly spoke any words to each other after I gave in and let her come with me. Not because anything was wrong between us but because the pressure of it all was palpable. Even while I was at home, I could only think about work and what needed to be done next. Between coordinating shipments, making sure deals went down without interruption, and trying to find any deserters in our ranks, it was impossible to think about anything else.

Despite it all, Grace was incredibly patient, and her presence was enough to keep my head straight. Her acceptance of my work and what needed to be done to keep us all safe and prosperous helped.

Before long, we were all sat around the big table in the conference room. All of my cousins were there, along with Vik to take notes and Grace by my side. Unlike the usual meeting etiquette, nobody poured any whiskey. There was too much at stake to get buzzed at that hour.

"The media frenzy has been haywire since the explosion, and as we know, the coverage hasn't exactly worked in our favor," Andrei said, sifting through the papers in front of him. "The public has been hesitant to visit any of

our locations, which has been devastating for revenue. Even the casino regulars have slowed to some degree.”

“What about after your media tour?” Alexei asked, zeroed in on the topic since he often handled the public image side of things.

Andrei sighed. “I played the part of devastated CEO to as many stations as I could, and while some members of the public have been swayed, others haven’t been. Our numbers went up slightly after, but not by enough. We can’t have this permanent stain, not if we hope to get things back to normal again.”

“Surprisingly, whiskey sales have been up,” Isidor commented, sounding somewhat hopeful about that part.

Dimitri snickered. “Probably from the sympathy drinkers.”

“Regardless,” Andrei continued, keeping the meeting on track. “The cops have been sniffing around wherever they can, hoping to link the hit with organized crime. There have been some public inquiries into it, but with the help of some associates, things are moving as they should be. This is good for now, but we can’t risk drawing more attention to us.”

Alexei nodded. “We dished out a considerable amount of hush money to some of our crooked cop friends to keep their knowledge of us under wraps. It was a big financial hit, but fortunately, none of them have squealed. They’re working to direct that attention elsewhere.”

Andrei nodded. “Yes, but handing the cops hush money isn’t enough. We need something to help change how the public sees us as a business entity. After the attack, they’ve already begun to question how safe our establishments are, wondering if something of the same nature might happen in those places, too. We need to find something that will change that opinion in our favor, which is why I called this meeting.”

That was a good thing, but paying off the cops was only ever a bandage for the situation. If we didn’t get to the

bottom of the Bruno catastrophe, then the same issue would continue to arise, and that meant more negative attention on us.

Everyone sat in silence as we thought about ways to change that public opinion, and with every minute that went by, Andrei looked more strained.

“You could try and point out that it was a targeted attack to garner sympathy. Maybe then people will empathize with us,” Isidor suggested, grasping at straws.

But Andrei shook his head after considering it. “That will cause public hysteria over underground dealings rising to the surface and could link us straight to our concealed business ventures. If we rat on the Brunos, who’s to say they won’t turn around and do the same?”

Isidor sighed and sank into his chair as he thought about it more.

“We could extend the media train and try to make the public see you as a humble business owner affected by an awful crime, but you’re optimistic about the future. Maybe even claim all connected business venues will receive a boost in security after the attack?” Alexei suggested, potentially onto something.

“If I stand in front of another camera and continue to milk sympathy from these people, they’ll start to hate me,” Andrei said. “Padding security isn’t a bad thing, but I’m not sure waving that around will make us look any better in their eyes.”

While I had a hand in some of the damage control, the family image wasn’t my area of expertise. I tried to think of anything that hadn’t been done already, but I came up short.

“You could be charitable,” Grace mumbled, speaking up after being silent the entire meeting.

Andrei looked in her direction with his brows raised. “What was that?”



She cleared her throat and sat taller, reining in her confidence. “If you want the public to think highly of the family and to make them feel more inclined to support the company, you can do that by making a generous donation in the Levov name to first responders as a thank you.”

Andrei thought silently about it, but Alexei was the first to bring his question to the table. “How will spending more money help us recuperate the revenue we’ve already lost?”

Grace leaned forward, already prepared with her answer. “By supporting the people who reached the scene first to make sure nothing happened to the patrons, it will come off as a show of good faith and appreciation. The company will seem generous and appreciative of the help, and we’ll be back in the public’s good graces. While it’s an initial hit financially, that gesture might pay off in the long run through more whiskey sales and increased foot traffic at the casino and other clubs.”

Andrei rubbed his chin absently as silence filled the room. Then, he chuckled, breaking through the slight tension that made Grace look apprehensive of speaking up.

“I’m impressed,” he said, glancing over at Grace with a hint of a smile on his lips. “It’s not a bad idea. Giving back to the community builds trust and encourages mutual support.”

My cousins nodded, coming around to the idea, and a spark of pride hummed in my chest.

“We’ll have to settle on an amount for each sector, then send out some sort of announcement to make it public,” Andrei said, already diving into the details. “Alexei, I’ll have you draft the cheques and work out who to send them to.”

As they ran through the fine details, I looked over at Grace to find a small but pleasant smile on her face, surely proud of herself for coming up with a solution. Even if it didn’t solve everything, it seemed like a positive first step.

I was proud of her, too, and I wanted her to know she had my support.

From beneath the table, I reached for her hand. Her eyes softened when she glanced at me, letting me see just how appreciative she was of the opportunity.

I gave her hand a small squeeze, soaking in that touch that grew to give me comfort.

As I tried to focus on the rest of the meeting, I couldn't help but feel like I made the right choice in marrying her.

Even before she was fully ready to help with the business, Grace had already begun to make her mark. She saw a future in the company, which meant she saw the same as me. Like there was hope for us to be more than just a marriage license.

The thought made my chest feel light and surprisingly optimistic.

“Alright, that’s exactly the progress we need,” Andrei said, looking energized by the prospect of salvaging what we made for ourselves. “After the donation, we’ll have to follow up with a grand re-opening of the club...”

The meeting continued, and Grace’s input was taken into consideration more than once. She was almost like the star of the meeting and the savior we needed, thanks to her background in business.

She helped us navigate the troubling time, and I couldn't help but look at her in awe. She was doing better than I ever could've anticipated, and she deserved nothing short of my unwavering respect.

## Chapter 21 - Grace

Despite everything that had happened in the last few weeks, it seemed to be turning around in some respects.

Thanks to the suggestions I made during the meeting with Yaro's family, media pressure had lessened to some degree, and the public response had been mostly positive. I could tell having less of that attention on them helped the business move smoother since Yaro came home, seeming less stressed than he had been before.

It took the pressure off both of us and gave us a sense of normalcy again.

Yaro telling me to get up relatively early on a Saturday to go for a drive came as a surprise to me, but I didn't ask any questions until we were in the car, headed down the highway.

The sun brought the city to life as it reflected off the high-rise buildings and followed us into the outskirts of New York. When the familiar-looking warehouses came into view, I glanced at him curiously.

"Where are we going?"

A small smile pulled on Yaro's lips. "Since it's the weekend and I finally have a moment off, I'm going to teach you how to shoot."

"Shoot?" I echoed, surprised to hear it. Even if it made my stomach flip-flop at the idea, my interest was captured.

He nodded once. "Since the explosion at the club happened, I've been thinking you should at least be trained on how to defend yourself. I'm not exactly planning on arming you indefinitely, but you should know how to shoot if it ever comes down to it."

"That sounds reasonable," I said, going along with it. "I've never even held a gun before."

“Exactly why I think this is a good step.”

While the idea of being responsible for a firearm made me nervous, I was prepared to do whatever it took to show Yaro I wasn't a weak link. I may have been new to his world and how it all worked, but I was willing to try.

Despite not thinking so initially, I wanted to be of value to him and his cousins. The way they established themselves and worked so hard to protect what they cared about was inspiring. If I was going to live alongside Yaro and be taken care of, then it was the least I could do to become an asset in some shape or form.

Pulling up to one of the warehouses, Yaro killed the engine and popped the door open. I followed suit, trailing him inside wordlessly.

Upon walking into the building, it became incredibly apparent that the warehouse was a sort of training ground. One section was full of workout equipment and various training obstacles, while another section housed all the gear they needed.

“This is essentially our arsenal,” Yaro said, gesturing to the many lockers full of intense-looking weapons. “While we have firearms spread out around the city, this is the main hub. When the other locations need top-ups, they come from here. And to go along with it, this is our shooting range.”

Yaro pointed toward a heavy steel door that led to the indoor range. I could hear as others practiced inside.

I swallowed hard as my attention strayed on the seemingly endless supply of high-powered weapons. I had never seen so many guns before, and the thought of being surrounded by them made me squeamish.

At the same time, it was fascinating.

“What will I be practicing with?” I asked, growing more curious as I looked at the guns, especially the heavier-duty ones. The rifles that seemed like they would be heavy in my arms. I couldn't imagine trying to shoot with one.

But, to my luck, Yaro reached for a small pistol from one of the storage lockers. He showed me that it was unloaded before clicking it back into place.

“You will be starting small. Here, hold it and get a feel for it,” Yaro said, handing the weapon to me.

I took it in my hands like it was still loaded, still exercising caution regardless of the fact. I moved the cool metal back and forth, registering its weight in my palm. It was a strangely surreal feeling, even if it was just a gun.

“Every weapon feels different, regardless of what kind it is. Understanding that weight distribution is important, especially if you ever need to use one outside of this place. When you get used to how it feels to hold and shoot it, you’ll gain more confidence with it,” he explained, watching as I handled the pistol.

Yaro grabbed another and ran through the parts of the gun, explaining everything I needed to know. He showed me how to aim, switch the safety on and off, and how to reload it. When he was done and felt like I was ready, he took me over to the firing lanes.

Equipped with my earmuffs and safety glasses, I was ready to get started.

While it still felt strange to hold, I reassured myself that I would grow accustomed to it eventually, as Yaro said.

Facing that paper target at the end of the lane, I drew in a deep breath, and Yaro stood at a safe distance.

“Now, do as I instructed before and give it a try.”

Taking in a deep breath, I loaded the pistol, then clicked the safety off and aimed. My stomach was in knots of anticipation then, but as I let go of that breath, I told myself it was just the first step.

It was my first time shooting a gun, and I was just practicing. I didn’t need to be perfect at it.

Pulling the trigger, the bullet fired down the lane and nicked the paper target. It wasn't anything impressive, but at least I even hit it. That recoil felt foreign to me, but after blinking through my astonishment, the wave of invigoration hit me next.

"That was great for a first attempt," Yaro shouted his encouragement. "Keep going until the clip is empty."

Nodding, I returned my full attention to the target and took my time aiming. With each round I fired, it made me want to get better, and that confidence slowly set in at last.

Once the magazine was empty, Yaro clapped from behind me; then the target came zooming forward until it was within reach.

He pointed at the target and smiled, even if I never fully hit the center ring. "Look at this—you've done better than a lot of our rookies during their initial training. Well done."

"Thanks," I said, mirroring his joy. "I have a great teacher."

"It's a great start, but there are a few adjustments you could make," Yaro began, taking the gun to show me examples.

After getting some pointers from him, I kept practicing my aim until my arms got sore. Before long, I was better than I had been to start, and I had Yaro to thank for the confidence boost.

When we decided to call it a day, we left the warehouse and headed for the car.

"Thanks for taking the time to teach me," I said, walking next to him as he slung an arm around my shoulder. The contact nearly made me melt in place. "And for letting me better understand your world. I never expected to be a part of something like this, but I want to do whatever I can to help."

Yaro chuckled. “Soon enough, I might even bring you along for trades and hits.”

Even if his tone was teasing, that pride swelled in my chest. “I’ll do whatever it takes to be a true Levov.”

Seemingly caught off-guard by the statement, Yaro paused just outside the car and glanced down at me. “What do you mean by that?”

I let go of a deep breath. “I just want to be an asset to the family. To prove myself.”

His brows furrowed as he dropped his arm to snake it around my waist and placed a gentle hand against my jaw. His thumb caressed my cheek, impossibly tender for a man in his profession.

“Grace, you’re exactly that by simply being my wife and by supporting me. The moment we signed that marriage license, you became a Levov,” he reassured me, tone kinder than I had expected.

I swallowed hard, somewhat embarrassed by the sense of duty I felt. “I just...I’ve never felt like I had a true family. Certainly, nothing like you have with Vik and your cousins. My mother walked out on me when I was little, and my dad was hardly even that. For the first time ever, I feel like I’ve been accepted into a cohesive family. Even if there are ups and downs, I’ve seen how you all support each other, and I guess I just don’t want to feel like a burden. I want to do my part and help where I can.”

Yaro listened intently to me as if I had better understood where I was coming from. After a moment, that smile returned to his face, and his thumb continued to stroke my cheek. “I admire your tenacity, and that you haven’t shied away from this life. But there’s still time for you to decide where you want yourself to fit in all of this. I don’t want you to feel obligated to jump into the throes of it, especially not the more dangerous parts. You’ve already done more than enough

to help us. Regardless of what you are currently doing or not doing, you are a Levov.”

His words of encouragement helped ease the pressure I had on myself somewhat, and I let myself relax knowing he didn't just see me as the woman he married because of a trade. He cared about us and about me, and it was more than I could ask for.

“While I appreciate you tagging along and learning the job, it would give me peace of mind to know you were at home focusing on your studies for a bit,” Yaro said, looking more tired than he had before. “Slowing down would be...nice for once.”

“Do you ever get to slow down?” I asked, finding his more laid-back demeanor endearing.

He snickered, then swooped down to press a quick kiss to my lips. “Never.”

Startled by the affection, I watched as Yaro popped the door open for me.

“Speaking of home, going there sounds nice right about now.”

Something in me didn't want that bonding time to end, and seeing how stressed he had been lately, I couldn't help but feel bad for him. I wanted to help ease more of that tension for him.

“We should do something fun after all that practice,” I suggested, climbing inside as he took up the other side, closing the door behind him.

“What do you have in mind?”

I gave him a small smile. “It's a surprise. But we'll need to visit a craft store.”

Confusion stitched into Yaro's features at that, but he started the car regardless. “A visit to the craft store it is.”



More than happy he had no objections to it, I let myself get completely immersed in the trip to one of the bigger craft stores in the city, more than happy to be there with Yaro.

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I never thought I'd ever see someone like Yaro in a hobby store, but it ended up being more fun than I anticipated. We returned home with bags full of paint tubes and supplies and spread them out on the island counter.

"Are you sure about this?" Yaro asked, looking at the paints like they were foreign objects to him.

"Come on, it'll be fun," I reassured him, pulling out one of the canvases.

"Did you paint often before?" He questioned, sitting down on one of the stools while we unpacked everything.

I shrugged, thinking back to that time in my life. "I just dabbled. I usually painted when I wanted to feel better about things in the past. It helped me unwind and let go of what bothered me."

Yaro nodded thoughtfully, grabbing a paintbrush. "I can't say I have since I was a kid."

"It's time to change that," I murmured, offering him a smile as I prepared the paint for us.

"What are we painting?"

"Whatever you feel like. It doesn't even need to be anything. Just turn your mind off and let the paintbrush do the work," I instructed, standing in front of my tabletop easel, ready to get started.

While he seemed unsure, Yaro did the same, dabbing his brush in the paint on his pallet.

We both worked quietly for a while, and I took the chance to focus on my breathing to help me relax. The last few weeks had been packed with non-stop action and concern, and I did my best to try and let it all go.

Things had been going well with Yaro, and I felt more optimistic about our future together. He accepted me as his partner, and by letting me tag along during some work matters, I felt like we managed to establish more trust between us.

When I had been treated as a tradable object, I wouldn't say I liked Yaro all that much. His anger had been too much for me, and I didn't know anything about him. But with time, as he put in that effort to establish something more genuine between us, along with the passion that burned between us, I felt different about him. I had the chance to learn more about him and to see him in a different light.

What had started as a nightmare situation seemed to unravel into something completely different, with the potential of being great after all.

It made me smile to think about knowing we could make the best out of an otherwise unfortunate situation.

After some time had gone by, and I finished painting a landscape of snow-covered trees, I pulled back to admire it. I wasn't the best painter, but I could tell what it was, and that mattered the most to me.

"How did you do?" I asked, glancing over at his canvas.

"Just a minute," Yaro murmured, adding some finishing touches to his apparent masterpiece.

I couldn't help but stop myself from laughing at how he stood over his tiny tabletop easel with a look of determination on his face. I found the way he made his paintbrush and pallet look small in his grasp endearing.

Seeing such a big, muscled man like himself partake in something that contrasted his usual daily activities was a sight to behold.

“There,” he said, taking a step back.

I peered over at his canvas, squinting to figure out what he painted. There were interesting swirls of color and different shapes, but nothing I could discern. “It’s...an abstract piece?”

Yaro scowled at me. “You really can’t tell what it is?”

Sheepishly, I shook my head ‘no’.

He pointed at the canvas as if that would help make it clearer. “It’s the city. The high-rise buildings with a sunset behind it all.”

While his explanation helped clear it up for me, I still couldn’t quite see it. But I did my best to be supportive. “You put in a lot of effort.”

Yaro narrowed his eyes at me, not fooled by my words. “You’re patronizing me.”

“I’m not, I swear,” I said with a laugh, trying to hold it in.

“Admit it, it’s terrible.”

“It’s not terrible, it’s...” Looking at the uneven splotches of paint, I couldn’t contain my amusement anymore. It looked like something you’d see in a daycare. “Okay, it’s pretty bad.”

“Maybe you just lack the vision,” Yaro said, reaching over with his paintbrush.

In a quick swipe, the bristles swept across my cheek, leaving a cool sensation in its wake.

Startled by the sudden gesture, I looked at him wide-eyed. “You did not just do that!”

He snorted at my reaction, throwing his head back with a devious laugh. “That’s for calling my painting bad!”

Energized by his joy, I swept up a glob of yellow paint and did the same in return, smearing it across his chin.

“Hey!” He said, tone bubblier than usual. In retaliation, he scooped up more of his paint and dragged it across my forehead.

“Yaro!” I squealed, trying to shield myself from his attacks.

Soon enough, we were engaged in a full-fledged paint brawl as we mixed paint across one another’s skin.

When it was becoming too much, Yaro yanked his shirt up to avoid getting any on it, and he tossed it aside.

Seeing his bare torso so perfectly crafted with every cord of muscle, I felt stunned by the sight of it, as if it was my first time seeing his body.

He took the opportunity to smear paint down my neck, just narrowly missing my own top. Not wasting a moment, I leaned in and painted across his chest, watching as the colors melded together on his skin.

Seeing how the brush glided against his body stirred something in me, and I couldn’t look away. It was mesmerizing.

Without putting his brush down, Yaro reached for my baggy sweatshirt and pulled it over my head. I didn’t object and simply let it happen, along with my bra being undone and dropped to the floor, too.

Both wearing only our bottoms, we laughed at how ridiculous it was as we painted one another.

That cool sensation moved all around me until I was covered in streaks of paint, but I didn’t care. Not while the condo filled with our mutual laughter that almost turned delirious after a while.

When we gave up, both exhausted from letting that amusement out, our brushes were cast to the side, and Yaro turned to face me once more.

A small, content smile settled on his lips as he took me in.

“I might be awful at painting, but I wouldn’t mind seeing this more often,” he murmured, bringing a thumb up to my chest. He rubbed it against my nipple, watching as the red and blue paint blended into a faint purple.

I swallowed back a moan at the sensation, but I couldn’t hide the goosebumps that sprang up from my arms.

Even if his face was obscured by different colored paints, I found it just as handsome as ever. The product of our spontaneous fun made him look even more charming.

Unable to help myself, I took a step closer and went on my tip-toes to kiss him.

Our lips melded together like they were made to do exactly that, and I melted into that tender caress.

Yaro’s hand fell to my hip, and he pulled me closer, soaking in that warm exchange.

I did not doubt in my mind that we had the potential to be something great, and the kiss was a perfect example of just how drawn to him I was.

“Jump,” he murmured, dropping his hands to my backside.

Doing as he said, I jumped up, and he caught me easily. I giggled at the way he rushed us out of the kitchen and toward the nearest bathroom, forgetting all about the paint.

As we made it inside, shutting the door behind him, Yaro immediately turned the shower on and let me get to my feet again. He tested the temperature with his hand, and once he was satisfied, we both stripped until we were bare.

Pulling me in with him, I soaked in how perfectly warm the water was.

Facing me as he stood beneath the showerhead and let it rain all over him, he held me by my hips and let his hands run up and down my back. I leaned into his touch, comforted by him and the pleasant water.

I placed my palms against his painted chest and smeared it around, watching as the colors mixed and muddled in the water. It pooled all around us and moved down the drain with ease.

Yaro did the same to me, letting his hands ghost over my breasts, making me arch slightly into the touch. He did it more teasingly than anything, making me lust more for it.

When he was seemingly satisfied by how much paint was gone, Yaro leaned down and locked his lips with mine. That wonderful feeling consumed me, and I softened for him, reaching out to hold him.

He put a gentle hand against my cheek and deepened the kiss until I felt light-headed, drawing out a soft moan from me. Yaro hummed his approval against my lips, moving his body with mine to create more friction between us.

His cock stirred against me, and my mind went haywire.

But before I could take matters into my own hands, Yaro kissed down my neck, then traveled down my body until he was forced to kneel.

He looked up at me through his dark lashes as he made himself level with my head and gripped my thighs.

Anticipating what was to come, I shivered just from the sight of him.

Spreading my legs enough to make room for him, Yaro leaned in and licked a long strip through my folds. My eyes fluttered shut immediately, and I tipped my head back to rest against the cool tiles behind me.

Bliss pulsed through me with every pass he made from the bottom to the top, letting his tongue rest on my begging clit. Breathlessly, I moaned for him, taking in every shocking sensation.

He squeezed my thighs and quickened his pace against my sensitive bundle of nerves. Those short flicks made me

writhe against the wall, using it to hold myself up. At the very least, Yaro's hands pinned me in place, helping to keep me on my feet.

I would've been a pile of limbs on the shower floor if it weren't for him. My legs were weak from the constant onslaught of pleasure he offered me.

As Yaro added a finger into the mix, carefully sliding it in and out to supplement the attention he gave my clit, I was a complete mess.

Moaning for him, it felt almost impossible to stand straight. I ran my fingers through his hair, eliciting a hum from him that traveled up my body. It sparked even more pleasure for me, and I couldn't care about anything else. I just wanted and needed that approaching release.

Eager for more friction as that tension mounted within me, I carefully wriggled my hips back and forth.

When Yaro realized what I was up to, he groaned against me and stuck his tongue out to let me ride it.

My throat went dry from moaning for him as I moved my hips back and forth, addicted to the incredible feeling of it. I gripped his hair tighter and let my jaw go slack, greedily pulling myself closer to the edge.

The water could hardly conceal my enthusiastic sounds, practically begging to orgasm.

Feeding into what I wanted, Yaro continued wriggling his tongue in time with my thrusts to make it even more intense for me.

When I couldn't take it anymore, I moaned and stilled my hips, then crashed head-first into that release. The bliss rained over me just like the water did, and I assisted through it with Yaro's help.

He continued to eat me out as I came, gripping him for dear life.

Once my body relaxed, completely at ease again, thanks to my orgasm, I could barely stand. Thankfully, Yaro held me there as he stood, meeting me at his full height again.

He pulled me into him and melded our lips together. My head was full of that content fog, and I was ready to lie down in bed.

But from the feeling of his hard cock rubbing against my core, I knew the night was only just beginning.

Yaro nipped at my lower lip and chuckled. “Don’t think I’m done with you yet.”



## Chapter 22 - Yaro

Just as I got comfortable in bed with my arm wrapped around Grace's naked waist, my phone buzzed from the nightstand.

I debated leaving it until morning, but I ignored the temptation and turned over. Given everything happening lately, I couldn't ignore any text or call.

The moment I read the message with tired eyes, my stomach dropped. A trade had gone wrong at one of the warehouses. Again.

I wanted to yell then and there. To voice my frustration at everything going on and how I just wanted to enjoy that quality time with my wife. That seemed to be an impossible feat.

"What's wrong?" Grace asked, sounding exhausted.

Irritated, I gave her thigh a gentle squeeze and pulled away. "They need me at one of the warehouses. Something happened."

"Should I go?" She murmured, already moments from falling asleep.

"No, go to sleep, sweetheart. I'll figure everything out and be back soon," I returned gently, hoping she knew just how much I enjoyed our day together. "You need the rest."

A small, sleepy smile settled on her lips. "I like it when you call me that."

As much as I wanted to dwell on that thought, I had business to attend to. "I'll keep that in mind."

In a hurry, I grabbed the nearest clothes I could find and pulled myself together. But before I left the room, I went to her side of the bed and bent down to give Grace a quick kiss on her forehead.

“Be safe,” she hummed before tucking the blankets beneath her arm.

“I will.”

Before I could delay any longer, I slipped out of the room and left the condo altogether. Alone in the car, I drove as quickly as I could to the warehouse.

I expected there to be a swarm of men outside, working to assess damages and take care of business before I arrived, but the property was surprisingly quiet.

Confused by the lack of movement, I pulled through the gates and scanned the cluster of buildings, only to find a few of our men posted out front of the nearest one.

Something didn't seem right. There should've been action and chaos, along with bodies on the ground, but it was as still as ever.

Pulling up to the men out front, I rolled down my window and shut the engine off.

The guards looked at me strangely.

“Is there anything we can help you with, sir?” The one asked, moving away from the wall he leaned against.

Furrowing my brows at him, I couldn't understand why everything seemed so out of place.

“Yeah, I received a text saying a trade here went south. So what happened?” I asked, looking between them both.

But they only looked more confused than I felt, glancing at each other as if I was going crazy.

“Nothing of that nature happened here, sir. There weren't any trades scheduled here for the night.”

I just blinked back at them in complete disbelief. “What are you talking about?”

They both seemed to scramble, looking for any answer, but there wasn't much else they could say.

“We haven’t heard anything about any hits here tonight. There must be a mistake.”

He seemed to have a point, but I didn’t yet know where that mistake came from.

Pulling out my phone, I found that message and read it again. I couldn’t see anything wrong with it, until that realization hit me, and the dots seemed to connect.

I never looked at the number who sent it. I had been too tired to pay proper attention to what was going on. There was no contact associated with it and no name to help me discern who had sent it. It was just an unknown phone number.

Usually when something went wrong, Vik or Elias would let me know, or some other higher-rank employee that had my number. But I didn’t recognize that one.

Based on the mystery number and the lack of action around the warehouse, it became incredibly clear that something else was going on. Upon thinking about it further, I realized which location I was at and how there truly hadn’t been any deliveries scheduled for that night.

Those revelations came too late, it seemed.

Before I could say anything to the men, my screen lit up with an incoming call. My ringer shattered my deep thoughts, and I noticed that same number again.

My brows furrowed, and I accepted the call at once.

Lifting it to my ear, I murmured, “Who is this?”

A small chuckle came from the other end. “I bet you’re just now realizing there wasn’t a hit at the warehouse at all, and now you feel like a colossal idiot.”

Anger flared within me, pushing me closer to the edge of rampaging. “Who are you?” I snapped, sick of the games. Of the back-and-forth bullshit.

“I’m Pietro Bruno, the very man you’ve been looking for. Honestly, I want to thank you for being that colossal idiot

who fell for my trick. You made it way too easy.”

“Why?” I managed to say through grit teeth. “What the hell is the point of this?”

“You’ll find out soon enough,” Pietro said as if it was no big deal to him. “But I received your little gift, and I wanted to call you personally to inform you I couldn’t care less about that scab or any other one you might feel like killing. That’s the name of the game, right?”

Hearing the smugness in his tone was enough to set me off. That pure rage moved through my blood, begging to be let out.

“I’m not interested in your games, Bruno,” I shot back, voice shrouded with anger. “All of this needs to come to an end. If you don’t stop targeting our dealings, our men will take you out before you even have the chance to wave a white flag. Am I clear?”

But Pietro only snickered. “It can’t end just yet, not before the grand finale.”

“What are you talking about?” I growled as my last shred of patience was long gone.

He chuckled again, letting that sound come from somewhere within his chest. “Your precious wife is gone, Yaro. Thanks to the false alarm you chased after, you let your guard slip.”

Everything hit me at once as if the world suddenly stopped spinning. My stomach dropped, and that flush of anger cooled into a sheet of ice.

He had her. The one thing I dreaded the most—the very thing I tried to prevent since the beginning. Pietro had Grace.

My hand holding the phone up trembled faintly despite my training to hide all emotion at the drop of a hat.

I was ready to kill him. Then and there.

“Whatever you do next will dictate the last few hours of your life,” I warned him, steeling myself against the unprecedented rage that toiled within me. “Harm her in any way, and we will both be burning in hell a whole lot sooner.”

Pietro *tsked* through the phone. “I don’t know, Yaro. I’d be talking a whole lot nicer to the man currently holding your wife hostage. She’s a pretty one too.”

When that fury became out of control as that veil covered my eyes to make me see only red, I ended the call and dropped my phone in the center console. Without saying a word to the men outside the warehouse, I turned the car back on and peeled out of the lot as fast as I could.

There were no words to describe how blindingly furious I was. As I gripped the steering wheel like a vice and held the gas pedal down, I tried to hold on to hope that maybe it was just another trick. That it was a false alarm to throw me off again.

While that would mean he had some ulterior motive, and I was likely also falling into another trap, I didn’t care. I just needed to know that Grace was safe.

Pulling up to the condo, I raced inside, not taking the time to address anyone in the lobby. I mashed the buttons in the elevator as my ears rang, ready to go completely off the handle at any given moment.

In all my years of working for my cousins, I had never felt that close to completely losing my mind.

The second I hit the right floor, I shoved my way in, only to find the living room and kitchen empty. I hauled ass upstairs, but each bedroom was the same. When I reached the master bedroom frantically, I found the bed empty, with the sheets rumpled.

The window was open and blowing in cold air. That was how they got in. They took her from the bed just as I had lifted her from her dorm at NYU.

It was no false alarm.

Grace was gone and in the hands of my enemy.

Cursing myself for being bested by some unknown head out for what we had, I turned back and hurried out of the condo.

Before me, Grace was an innocent woman following an honest life. I was the one who brought her into my dangerous world, well aware of what could happen to her.

I had the choice to ignore Dominic and let his daughter go, to let her continue as she had before I turned it all to shit. Before I landed her in that exact position.

As far as I was concerned, I was no better than her father.

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Racing through the streets of New York, blanketed by night and the city lights that accompanied it, I couldn't get Grace out of my head. Along with all the ways I'd torture Pietro once I got my hands on him.

I was beyond angry with the Brunos. After everything they had done to mess with and terrorize my family, they somehow managed to sink impossibly lower. Bringing my wife into it was grounds for retaliating in the most inhumane ways possible, and I'd do whatever it took to get her back.

Grace didn't deserve any of it, and the thought of her being terrified for her life had me ready to end every last Bruno in the country.

I never thought I'd ever find myself in my position, and I certainly never thought I'd ever be so desperate to get my wife back. What started as a sham developed into something genuine, and I'd be damned if something ever happened to her.

She became something precious to me, and I was always prepared to fight for what I treasured most.

Gritting my teeth, I muttered to Vik in the passenger seat, “Find anything yet?”

His laptop screen lit up his face as he scanned through as many articles and websites as he could. “As far as I can tell, they’ve been successful at keeping their name under wraps. There’s hardly anything about the Brunos. A few references about Sergio and the fronts he’s running, but nothing else.”

“I need something to work with—anything,” I mumbled, tightening my grip on the steering wheel. “How have we managed to find nearly nothing on these people?”

Before he could answer, Vik’s phone pinged, and he reached for it immediately. His face lit up. “Ah, there we go. Elias managed to do some digging.”

That piqued my interest with urgency. “What did he find?”

“Apparently Sergio Bruno has been making a name for himself in New York’s underbelly with the help of his son, Pietro. His wife died some years ago from cancer, but they also had a daughter together named Alessia—”

“There,” I interrupted him as the thought hit me. “That’s what we need. Alessia.”

Vik furrowed his brows. “What will that accomplish?”

Still seething, I wasn’t interested in debating. “We track Alessia down and grab her for ourselves. Pietro won’t want to risk his sister’s life, right? If we’re lucky, she won’t know much about her family’s dealings, and they’ll want to safeguard her innocence. We let them know we have the girl and propose a trade for Grace. While we’re there, we ambush them and put an end to this.”

While Vik seemed apprehensive still, he forced out a breath and continued typing. “I’ll check the databases and CCTV cameras for her movements.”

“Good. The sooner we find her, the better.”

Apparently, I was doing what I did best. Preparing to take someone else’s daughter.

Even if I didn’t want to bring any other innocent people into the mess between our families, I didn’t see any other choice. I needed to get Grace back, and as far as I was concerned, Pietro had taken the first move from the very beginning. It was my turn to exact our revenge.

After a moment of tense silence, Vik murmured, “Are you sure about this? You don’t want to just hit one of their warehouses and take care of it that way?”

I shook my head without even needing to consider it. “We don’t know enough about them to confidently locate their main warehouse. They might have more than one at this point, and we can’t risk hitting the wrong one. It would ruin any chance at using stealth to our advantage.”

While Vik still seemed apprehensive of nabbing the girl, he continued to scan the databases. With a final click, he inhaled sharply at the recognition. “I found her. Alessia’s not far from here, and she’s on foot. Three blocks ahead.”

“What luck,” I returned, glad for the stroke of convenience. I picked up the pace and cleared the distance between us until those three blocks were behind us.

“That’s her, on our right,” he said, pointing at the only girl walking down the sidewalk. Even better, there was next to no one nearby.

“You’re certain that’s her? I don’t want another Violet situation on our hands.”

He nodded. “I cross-checked with her file. It’s her.”

“Alright. I’ll pull up, and you grab her as fast as you can. Don’t hesitate, Vik. I’m counting on you,” I said, already moving into the other lane, approaching the sidewalk.

Surely aware of our limited time, Vik nodded once and moved the laptop out of the way. “Let’s get this over with.”



As I pulled up to the curb just ahead of her, Vik shoved the door open and rushed out. The girl looked up right as he put a hand against her mouth and told her not to say anything.

Fear immediately flooded her eyes, but Alessia didn't fight. Instead, she fawned, questioning what was happening. Unable to resist his power over her, she was ushered into the back without the opportunity to be seen.

The moment they were inside, I wheeled away and heard Vik close the door.

She panicked from the back seat, unable to hide just how petrified she really was.

“What’s happening? Who are you?” She exclaimed, visibly trembling.

“I’m sorry,” Vik said, seemingly just as unprepared as I looked at him through the rear-view mirror. He seemed far too apologetic for someone trying to convince the girl she was being abducted and needed to cooperate with us.

“Vik,” I warned, focusing on the road ahead.

“You need to be quiet,” he corrected himself, sounding flustered. “We won’t hurt you, but we need you for ransom. Your family has someone very important to us, and we need to get her back.”

It wasn’t exactly how I would’ve handled it, but it was blunt enough to get the point across at least.

I caught as confusion moved through Alessia’s features. “What...what are you talking about? My family?”

She was innocent, after all.

While it made it harder to follow through with, I had no choice. We weren’t planning on hurting her if that was any consolation.

“It’s a lot to take in, but they aren’t who you think they are,” Vik said, oddly soft with her. There was no missing the color in his cheeks, even if he was easily flustered.

Shaking it off, I sighed. “Bind her.”

She was terrified still, but it didn't matter. As far as I was concerned, she was only a means of getting Grace back. If she had to be uncomfortable for a few hours, then so be it.

Reluctantly, Vik sighed and reached for the cuffs tucked away in the back. I heard as they clicked around her wrists, and they both settled into that silence as Alessia was too afraid to question us further.

She was my ticket to getting my wife back, and I was prepared to do anything to make that happen.

## Chapter 23 - Grace

Everything was dark when I came to, but I couldn't muster the energy to open my eyes fully. As more feeling returned to my body, I managed to peer through my lashes until that strength returned.

My head pounded immediately, and I suddenly wished I couldn't register that pain to save myself from it.

My entire body felt like it was full of lead, and stringing a single thought together felt like a task from the grogginess that cloaked me.

Blinking through the fog, I tried my hardest to take in my surroundings. As more fragments pieced together, I realized the room wasn't familiar at all. I didn't know where I was.

Despite the pain, I pushed myself into an upright position and took in the space around me.

The room was mostly dark, but the moonlight coming in through the white curtains helped illuminate the space. There was a double bed beneath me, a nightstand to my left, two double windows on the same wall, and a single door.

As I realized I didn't know where I was and that I didn't remember how I got there, my heart started to race, and my hands trembled.

Swallowing hard, I edged my way off the bed and noticed my wrists weren't bound. That seemed like a good sign, at least. Creeping to the door, I tried turning the knob, but it didn't budge. Locked.

I tried the windows next, seeing if I could push them open. But again, nothing.

Peering outside, I could just make out what looked like the side of a fairly big house and a backyard, but it was hard to

make out fine details through the darkness that shrouded everything.

As the panic started to worsen, I tried to regulate my breathing. Even if I didn't know where I was or what happened, I needed to stay calm.

Retreating to the bed, I nearly jumped out of my skin the moment the door creaked open. It captured my attention immediately, putting me on the highest alert possible.

I squinted to make out who had stepped into the room.

What looked like a young man entered silently, then closed the door behind himself. He was tall and lanky, and even being in the presence of someone I didn't know in a place I didn't recognize was enough to make a shiver move through me.

He took a few steps in, wearing a white button-down and dark slacks with his arms crossed over his chest. From what I could tell, his hair was cropped short and buzzed along the sides. A small smile settled on his lips.

"I thought I heard you moving around," he murmured, peering over at me like I was something to be fond of.

When I flinched and stepped back even further, his hands went up in defense. "There's no need to panic, Grace. I'm here to help."

My brows furrowed, and the pit in my stomach told me otherwise. Based on the fact that I wasn't in the condo and Yaro wasn't there, I had the feeling that wasn't the case.

"What are you talking about?" I managed to say, aware of how my voice wavered.

He dropped his hands and shrugged. "Your father just wanted you to be safe and to be free of the Levovs. They kidnapped you, but you didn't deserve that. So I decided to help."

Even with the clarification, it didn't make any sense. I hadn't seen my dad in months, and he certainly did not attempt

to do any sort of ‘saving.’

Feeling exposed under his eyes, wearing only a thin pajama set, I crossed my arms and looked at him oddly, confused.

“I don’t even know who you are.”

“I’m Pietro. My father is an old friend of your dad’s, who we can’t find at the moment no matter how hard we try. But it was his wish for you to be free again,” he said simply as if he had accomplished the greatest favor for me.

Staring back at him, I tried to place that name. It was familiar.

My mind raced back to the interrogation, and it clicked at once.

Pietro Bruno, the one who orchestrated the hits. The one behind Yaro’s stress for the last few months.

I froze immediately, far too aware that I was in the same room as someone willing to reach the lowest of lows to ruin the Levov name.

I couldn’t believe it.

Yaro had warned me someone might try to use me like a betting chip one day, and while it seemed like a valid concern given his work, I never thought I would find myself in that position.

I assumed I was safe enough in the condo, but it seemed Pietro and his men had found a way to make it happen, even if I couldn’t remember it.

But if he really wanted to free me as he said, then that could be my chance to escape. I just had to play my cards right.

Taking in a discreet breath, I did my best to find my voice again. “I want to leave. If you intend to do what my father wanted, then you’ll let me go.”

Pietro didn't budge. Instead, he tilted his head and studied me through the dark room. "I can't let you go yet. Not until everything is over."

While it sounded like he intended to eventually, the thought of being confined at his will made me want to get out even more. I felt squeamish, caught between fight or flight.

Shaking my head, panic rose in my chest. "You can't keep me here like this. I need to go home."

He kissed his teeth and stuffed his hands in his pockets. "Your dad said you were always blind to what was good for you, and I see that already. But soon enough, you'll understand."

Hearing his condescending tone felt like cold hands wrapping around my neck. That need to fight only grew the more I listened to him talk, but I was at a disadvantage. I was in an unfamiliar place—likely his home—with no clue of how far I was from home. I was unarmed, but Pietro had a gun holstered against his upper thigh.

The thought of tricking him and somehow securing the weapon for myself crossed my mind, but he was much bigger than me. Even if he wasn't quite as muscular as Yaro, he was tall and likely strong enough to fend me off.

Despite the adrenaline in my system, I didn't have the energy to put up the fight I needed to.

I didn't know what to do.

That helplessness made me angry and upset all at the same time. My hands continued to shake as I looked at him.

"I want to see my husband," I said, rigid with every word.

A sigh came from Pietro, and he shook his head. "I can't do that, Grace. You know that."

While it was a long shot, that denial made the emotions course through me. My whole body shook, and I felt prepared to explode. I needed out. I wanted Yaro.

“Let me see him!” I shouted at him, leaving my patience behind.

But Pietro only continued to shake his head absently as he backed himself closer to the door. “Yaro isn’t good for you. I’m sure he has brainwashed you by now, but you need to detox yourself of him.”

I couldn’t wrap my head around how ridiculous it sounded, and I felt like I was going insane.

Before I could say anything else, tears gathered in my eyes, Pietro left the room, closing the door behind him. It clicked with a lock.

Left alone in the room, I couldn’t help but choke on a sob.

I didn’t understand why I was there or what he wanted with me, and the thought of being torn away from Yaro and the others made my heart ache.

Even if I wanted to be a part of the family and help in any way I could, I didn’t want to be in the middle of the chaos. I didn’t want to feel like something that could be taken and traded all over again.

I just wanted Yaro.

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The sun came up as the hours passed, and I still couldn’t leave the bedroom.

I tried to at least sleep during that time to try and wake up with a clear mind, but I didn’t have any luck. That constant panic wouldn’t let me go, and I was left to question what was going to happen to me.

Pietro offered me nothing in terms of an explanation, and that not knowing was burrowing under my skin.

I just hoped Yaro was at least on his way and that he knew where to find me. The family had ample resources, and I had my fingers crossed that something would help them figure out where to go.

I couldn't stand the thought of being away from him for another night, left to try and sleep in a place I wasn't familiar with.

By mid-morning, I was startled from my place on the side of the bed when Pietro waltzed into the room with a brown takeout bag, locking the door behind himself.

He only murmured a greeting and set the bag down on the side table, then made his way over to the closet within my view.

Pietro hummed to himself quietly as he rifled through the clothes, silently analyzing them.

With the sunlight pouring in, it helped me get a better look at him. His short hair was light-brown, and his skin lacked that healthy glow that Yaro had. It made me miss him even more.

Wearing another variation of a button-down and trouser ensemble, Pietro certainly looked like he had money. But the big watch around his wrist suggested he wasn't very subtle about it.

"This one's perfect," he said, pulling out a matching set of satin pajamas he seemed to like. They were similar to the ones I already had on, yet the top was shorter, and the neckline was much deeper.

"Here," Pietro murmured, handing them to me. "Put them on. You don't need to wear anything from *that* place again. I want to see you in this one."

While I took the white material in my hands, discomfort scurried through me at the thought. I half expected him to turn away or busy himself with something else, but he didn't move.



Instead, Pietro stared at me, then lifted his brows expectantly when I didn't move. "Go on."

While something in me wanted to snap and throw them in his face, I knew I was walking a fine line. I couldn't set him off, not when he was the one handling my fate. He was the one who determined when or how I might get to leave.

As much as I didn't want to, I had to go along with it for the time being.

Sucking in a deep breath, I stood from my place and began with my bottoms since I at least had panties on.

As dread flooded my chest, I eased them down, then reached for the white ones once they hit the floor. I tried to make it go by faster, but Pietro made a sound of disappointment.

"Not so fast."

Tears pricked at my eyes, but I urged myself to keep it together. I couldn't let him see any sign of weakness that he might try to play into.

Instead, I stepped into the bottoms, leg by leg, at a pace I hated. When that material finally slipped over my thighs and reached my low belly, I felt only the slightest relief.

I managed to sneak a glance at him then, dreading the next part the most. I didn't have a bra on.

Hesitating, Pietro caught on to it as he leaned against the wall, and his expectant look lingered. He gestured toward me vaguely. "Go on."

Averting my eyes, I couldn't bring myself to look at him as I slowly eased the material of my top up until it came off completely. Even if he wasn't the worst-looking man, the context of everything made me want to be sick.

I didn't know him, and I didn't want to undress in front of him. I just wanted my husband.

Wondering if it was good enough, I glanced at him, and Pietro looked satisfied by what he saw. He hummed his appeasement, then turned his attention to the bag of food.

Relieved but feeling like I needed to scrub my entire body after, I hurriedly put the top back on. Even if I was covered, I felt just as exposed from the thin fabric that seemed to show everything.

“I hope you enjoy what I brought you,” Pietro said, pulling out a few cartons of food. “I got Pad Thai. If you don’t like it, I won’t get it again.”

It was an oddly kind gesture from someone who just made me undress in front of them like a doll. I didn’t know what was going on or what he was playing at.

He was being too nice, and I needed to know what the deal was.

“I bet you’re hungry,” he said, handing me a carton while he took his own and sat down next to me on the bed.

It was so casual, as if we had known each other for years. Like we were eating lunch together on a playground somewhere.

It didn’t make any sense.

Even if my stomach was screaming for sustenance, I felt too nauseous to eat. Instead, I picked at the warm food and endured those hunger pains.

“You know,” he began, swallowing his food. “This is the perfect chance for you to start over, Grace. Yaro was never the right man for you. He’s too hostile and quick to anger. He’s in the Levov ranks for a reason, I suppose, but he had no right to take you from your dorm. He should’ve cut your father some slack.”

Without thinking, I murmured, “Is it any different from what you did to me?”

He cracked a small, surprising smile at that. “It is different, of course. I wanted to liberate you from that

tyrannical family, and I did.”

I had every reason to doubt his motives, yet I kept it to myself. It was hard enough to muster up the energy to respond to him and to stay alert.

“Things will be different. With me, you’ll be free to choose. You’ll live the life you truly deserve.”

He spoke with such confidence that I couldn’t tell whether he truly believed it or if he just wanted to try and fool me. But it still didn’t make any sense to me.

After some time of being incredibly uncomfortable, I had the slightest relief once he stood and put his food on the bedside table.

But my stomach turned the moment he got down to be eye level with me, far too close for my liking. He reached a hand out to caress my cheek, and I flinched at the feeling of his cold hands.

They were nothing like Yaro’s, and it made me retreat within myself.

“Don’t resist,” Pietro said, cooing at my reaction. He was putting on a soft façade for me, but I had the feeling that wasn’t his usual demeanor. “I’m a good guy, Grace, and I want what’s best for you.”

The very thought made my skin crawl all over again, and I wanted to lash out. I wanted to scream at him and thrash my limbs until I discouraged him from trying to get that close again.

But I needed to save my skin. I had to consider how things might unfold if I gave in to those reflexes.

Pietro moved his thumb across my cheek and leaned in. His lips were far too close. “Kiss me, Grace.”

That panic and disgust had me on the brink of losing it. I was moments away from having a complete breakdown, yet I had the feeling something much worse would happen if I didn’t comply.

I tried to muster up the courage to follow through with it. To seal off my emotions and become a husk of myself just to get through it. It would only be a small kiss, surely. Just enough to keep him satisfied.

But my mind went to Yaro and how electrifying every kiss with him felt. I wanted him more than anything.

“No,” I said, pulling back. “I won’t.”

Even if it felt like the wrong choice to better my survival, I couldn’t bring myself to do it. I couldn’t.

Pietro’s previously kind and almost dream-like expression faltered, and his eyes hardened. He scowled, inches away from me.

The moment he pulled away and stood up again, I sucked in a deep breath.

“You’ll regret that,” he muttered, shaking his head. “Soon enough, you’ll realize you wanted me all along.”

My stomach twisted at that since I already knew that was impossible. No part of me would ever want someone like him.

But with whatever luck I had left, Pietro went toward the door and left. The lock clicked again behind him.

That relief I felt to be left alone in the bedroom came with the crushing realization that I wasn’t any closer to getting back home.

I was still trapped and away from the man I needed the most.

Unable to hold back the emotions from the stress of it all, I broke down. Tears streamed down my face as I pulled my legs in and hugged them tightly. Sobs shook my body, and it was all I could do to silently plead for Yaro to get me out.

I needed to go home.

## Chapter 24 - Grace

Every time I heard footsteps out in the hall, my stomach sank, regardless of whether they came in or not. I dreaded seeing Pietro again more than anything, even if he was trying his hardest to come off as a nice guy.

There was something sinister beneath that mask, and I didn't want to ever see that true part of him.

Even if I had full faith that Yaro would find me eventually, some agonizing part of my brain wanted to convince me he wasn't looking. That he had given up on me and didn't think I was worth the hassle.

It made me wonder if I was even that important to him since I hadn't been found yet.

The thought was selfish, but I couldn't help it. Being trapped in that room for hours made my mind run wild.

I jumped the moment the door unlocked and cracked open again. My skin went cold at the expectation of finding Pietro there.

However, an older man stepped in. He gave me a look of recognition when he spotted me on the bed, then the door closed behind him.

"I'm sorry we had to meet like this," the man said as he shuffled over to the windows. "I'm Sergio, Pietro's father."

I stiffened at that and didn't say anything.

He glanced over his shoulder and sighed. "I told my son to let you keep your self-respect, at least. Please, go cover yourself."

While part of me didn't want to take any kind of order from him, my desire to be properly clothed outweighed that thought.

I got up from the bed and hurried to the closet, snatching the first hoodie I found. I pulled the black material over my arms and zipped it up. Finally, I didn't feel quite so exposed.

Standing there somewhat awkwardly, I watched as he pulled out a cell phone and tapped on the screen a few times. With a quiet beep and the sound of something releasing, the window in front of him was unlocked. He pushed it open slightly to let the breeze sweep the curtains into the room.

"Some air should help," he murmured, turning back around to face me.

My brows pinched together. "Aren't you afraid I'd try to escape?"

Sergio snickered. "You'd be dead before you could even try to get away from that drop. Besides, I don't think you'd be that foolish to try."

Biting my tongue, I crossed my arms over my chest.

The older man moved over to the bed and sat on the end, the mattress sinking beneath him. He sighed.

"I knew your father, Grace. We used to be business partners until his drinking got in the way of progress, and we went our separate ways," Sergio began, running a hand over his graying hair. "I was aware of his predicament. How he was paid generously by the Levovs for the warehouse rentals, yet he drank it away and lost it all. He even lost you."

Not taking my eyes off him, I couldn't bring myself to move closer. But the mention of my dad did pique my curiosity.

"Dominic informed me you were wrongfully taken by Yaro Levov. His last wish was for you to be rescued from them, no matter the cost. He wanted you to be with my Pietro instead, to seal our families together."

My stomach turned not only at the thought of being married to his son but also at how my dad wasn't entirely

truthful about the situation. It seemed all too convenient.

“He lied,” I muttered. “My dad offered me up as payment for the debt he owed them. He stole from them, and they wanted their money back, but he couldn’t pay it.”

But it wasn’t what Sergio wanted to hear. He shook his head with a huff. “No, no. That’s what the Levovs want you to believe. Your father came to me begging for help. He said that his daughter was taken, and he needed to get you back.”

Every objection I had rose to the surface, and while I didn’t agree with how the situation with Yaro unfolded in the beginning, I didn’t want anyone to misconstrue who really set me up.

“He offered me up like a prized cow. Dad told me himself—”

But Sergio only waved me off, shaking his head in denial. “I regret to inform you that I’m going to carry out your father’s wishes as I promised. He carried that desire to his grave.”

Everything stopped at once, halted by that simple sentence. My skin went cold.

“What are you talking about?”

Sergio looked at me with a distant grief in his eyes. He let go of another pensive breath before he spoke. “Dominic came to speak with me before he went AWOL, and it was the last thing he did before taking his own life. My men found him in one of the warehouses the bank took from him not long ago. I thought I should let you know the moment I got the message.”

I nearly stumbled, feeling like I was about to lose my balance. That reality hit me like a truck, and I didn’t know what to do with that information.

My stomach sank immediately with that shock.

Even if I didn’t have a healthy relationship with my dad, it still felt devastating. Not only because of our

tumultuous past but also because he never took the opportunity to make it right. We would never have that chance again.

He was gone.

Regardless of how many times I let my anger wish I could get away from him in the past, I never thought it would happen quite like that.

Between hearing about my father's passing and being trapped somewhere I didn't want to be, it was impossible to keep those mounting pressures in. The emotions made my nose tingle, and I couldn't hold it back.

A tear tracked down my cheek, leaving me feeling completely helpless.

A look of feigned sympathy settled on Sergio's face. "I know it must be hard to stomach, and if it counts for anything, I'm sorry for your loss."

I didn't want to hear it. Any of it. I didn't need his sympathy, not while he was clearly using my loss as a means for trying to ruin my husband and the family.

He didn't even know the half of it. From my dad's constant poor judgment to the way he treated me throughout my childhood. It was more complicated than my dad simply taking his life.

I just wanted to go home. It was all too much. I needed the chance to mourn not only the loss of my dad but also the idea of what could've been. I needed peace, but I wouldn't find it there.

"Please," I managed, voice fragmented by the tears caught in my throat. I sniffled. "Just let me go—"

But the door opened again, stopping my words at once. Pietro stepped into the room, not even bothering to close the door as he approached.

A wild look filled his eyes.



“We need to go now,” he said, carrying rope in his hand as he crossed the floor with several long strides. A triumphant smile moved across his lips. “You’re going to watch your husband’s downfall.”

My heart clenched at the words, forced to completely forget about what I had just been told. While I knew that the Levovs were the kings of New York for a reason, I was still worried about Yaro and the others. I didn’t want anything to happen to them.

Pietro grabbed both my arms and roughly tied the rope around my wrists in front of me. He did it with speed and purpose, surely riding the wave of knowing everything was coming to a head.

While the hope of seeing Yaro soon kept my heart beating, I was numb to the rest. To being Pietro’s hostage and not knowing if or when I’d get to go home. To the news I had just received about my dad.

I didn’t have the chance to truly accept it, not while I was whisked out of the bedroom and put in a blacked-out vehicle with no explanation of where we were going.”

## Chapter 25 - Yaro

We had been driving through the night while we waited for any word from either our men or from Pietro himself. I had sent him a message after we obtained Alessia, telling him we took her and were looking for a trade.

Those hours passed, and I didn't hear anything from him. It made my blood boil all the while.

Just as the sun started coming up, we drove around the west side of the city when I noticed a black car pull in behind us. It moved recklessly, squealing tires as the barrel of a gun appeared out the window.

My eyes widened at the realization.

I jammed my foot against the gas pedal, urging the SUV to go faster. I swerved away from those bullets, hearing as they either ricocheted off the vehicle or hit the asphalt. More cars followed suit, trailing behind us.

A scream came from Alessia, which only frayed my nerves more.

They had to be Bruno men. There was no question about it.

It was likely another last-ditch attempt at trying to pick me off so that he didn't have to face me after all that time.

"Vik, call for backup and fire at them!" I shouted into the back, focusing on the road ahead as best as I could despite the onslaught of bullets coming at us.

As Alessia cried out, petrified by the situation, Vik was quick to grab his phone and send a message.

"Get down," he instructed her, using himself as a makeshift shield while he pulled a rifle from beneath the seat.

From the rear-view mirror, I watched as he stuck the barrel out the window and fired back at them.

I tried my best to keep the car straight and to prevent any crashes. While there were cars on the road, we were lucky it wasn't during rush-hour traffic. Instead, the nearby cars swerved out of the way and tried not to get caught in the crossfire.

But no matter how fast I went, the men were gaining on us. Taunting us with their speed and copious guns firing in our direction, they certainly had the upper hand at that moment.

Regardless of how bad it looked for us, I couldn't let anything go wrong. Grace needed me, and I'd be damned if I didn't fight as hard as I could for her.

Gritting my teeth, I drove on, gripping the wheel as tightly as I could.

The ring of gunfire made me anxious, and I could only hope that Vik's shots counted for something.

But to my relief, those familiar SUVs took up the rear and returned those bullets with precision. One struck a tire, causing them to burn out before they could get away. The others seemed to try and push forward, but when the rounds became too much, they pulled away, taking different alleyways.

Our men stayed hot on their trail to eliminate that threat.

Cutting off my path to separate us from the action, I made sure to hit more obscure roads to not be tracked again.

The moment we hit the open road and had the chance to catch our breath, I swallowed hard and looked through the mirror.

"Everything alright back there?"

"We're fine," Vik said, and while the bewildered look in his eye suggested he was at least somewhat shaken up, he didn't look hit. That was what mattered.

Relieved that they were both alright, I kept pushing, hoping we could find someplace to hunker down in the meantime. I couldn't let anything happen to Alessia, not when I needed her for the ransom trade. She was the clearest path to getting Grace back.

After some time of driving, I pulled into a deserted parking lot and tucked the SUV in behind an old building.

I took the opportunity to get out and stretch my legs while Vik watched over Alessia to make sure she didn't slip away.

While it had been a close call, my mind moved swiftly to Grace all over again. I spent all night without her, and the thought of not knowing how she was or where she had been taken was eating me alive.

I didn't want her to be afraid, but I could only imagine how awful it likely was for her. She had toughened herself up over the last few weeks, yet I didn't know how she would handle being abducted all over again.

It was my worst nightmare come true, and I was desperate to have her back.

My phone rang in the pocket of my trousers, and I wasted no time reaching for it. I had hoped to see Elias' number, letting us know where we could recover her from, but my stomach dropped at that newly-familiar number.

Pietro.

I accepted the call and lifted it to my ear.

“Where is she?”

“Now, now, don't act like the hero, not while you have my sister,” he said, sounding smug. “Let's stop with this pointless cat-and-mouse chase, shall we?”

His tone was enough to make my blood boil.

Too busy trying to hold my anger in, I didn't say anything.

Pietro sighed as if bored. “If you want your precious Grace so badly, then come to Boston. Meet me at—”

“I will go to Boston, but we’re meeting at Dominic’s old warehouse. The last one he had before it was repossessed. That’s the only place the trade will happen. If not, I’ll bring New York and Boston down just to get Grace back.”

I wasn’t prepared to walk myself into some place that gave Pietro the upper hand. It had to be neutral or nothing.

He simply laughed through the phone. “Fine, you have yourself a deal. Bring Alessia safe and in one piece, and I’ll have Grace over.”

Not offering him any more of my time than he needed, I ended the call, grumbling to myself. Immediately hitting as many contacts as I could on my cell, I alerted our men about what was about to go down. We needed as many men in Boston as we could afford.

Nobody was going home until Grace was safe.

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Back in the SUV, driving down the highway, the drive was agonizing. For every second that passed, Grace occupied my mind.

I couldn’t help but think back to our rocky start and how we slowly began to see eye to eye. How despite my reluctance, she put in the effort to get to know me. While I didn’t want her to break my walls down initially, she did it anyway, and it proved to be the best thing for me.

We built a connection I had never experienced before, and it was a relief to know I was capable of loving someone against all odds. She accepted me when I didn’t think I was worth anything more than what I offered the family business. I didn’t believe anyone could catch my eye and make me miss

them more than anything, but Grace had accomplished exactly that.

Even if I was exhausted from driving all night, tense and strained from not knowing where she was, I wouldn't rest until I had her back.

I needed her to know just how much I cared about her, even if I wasn't always the best at expressing it.

After several more hours of being on the road, it was the afternoon by the time we reached the warehouse. Parking some distance away, we held back and waited for our backup to arrive.

An assessment was done around the perimeter, and our men went into place, waiting for the call. It was confirmed that the Brunos were already there with their men in behind, poised.

From what we could tell already, our men significantly outnumbered theirs, thanks to the groups we managed to pull from Boston. It didn't hurt to have a favor to call in from time to time.

Before we could move in, my phone rang again, but that time it was Dimitri.

“Hello?”

“We heard what happened and left as soon as we could. I'm with the others, and we're prepared to surround the place if anything goes amiss,” he said, straight to the point. There was no hint of anger in his voice. Just support. “Go get her.”

“I appreciate it,” I said just before ending the call and rounding over to Vik, who had strapped a vest on Alessia.

I pulled my own on and made sure everything I needed was in place.

The girl looked shaken up and wide-eyed, but she didn't seem to have much fight left in her.

“You ready?” I asked Vik, who oversaw everything pertaining to our hostage.

He nodded despite still looking apprehensive about the whole thing. “I’m ready for it to be over and for Grace to be safe. I hope she’s alright.”

Pulling in a steadying breath, I had to convince myself she was. “Grace is tough. She’ll be fine.”

While he kept his eye on me for a moment longer, likely trying to gauge my faith in the situation, he eventually nodded. “Alright. Let’s get it done then.”

Keeping our men at a safe distance, the two of us walked around the building with Alessia in tow. She was unsteady on her feet, surely from the fear and constant adrenaline since the moment we grabbed her off the street.

Normally, we didn’t have those kinds of dealings during the day, but given that the warehouse was tucked away in a remote location in Boston, we were far enough away to keep any public attention away from us.

At the very least, doing the trade with the sun on us wouldn’t let anything go unseen.

Standing by the building, shaded from the heat, was presumably Pietro. He had Grace in his grasp, pulling her out into the open.

Her eyes lit up at the recognition, and her shoulders dropped with some relief. I could just imagine she didn’t want to get ahead of herself.

I told myself to keep that same level of reservation despite how desperately I wanted to run over and hold her. To safeguard her from the terror of a man that stood next to her.

Above all else, Grace appeared to be unharmed yet understandably rattled. I took it as a good sign.

But it was hard to picture Pietro being the one to cause us so much grief over the last few months. He looked young

and inexperienced, not like the sadistic orchestrator I had in my head.

Just from looking at him, I knew I could snap him in half if I needed to. While a part of me wanted that satisfaction, I hoped it wouldn't come down to it. I didn't want things to be messier than necessary.

“Welcome,” Pietro said, wearing a smug smile. “I’ve been waiting to meet the infamous Levovs for myself.”

“I hate to disappoint you, but this is all you’re getting,” I returned, already feeling as that anger coursed through me.

“You’re not Andrei, but I don’t mind starting from the bottom.”

He may have been young, but he knew exactly how to get under my skin. He was irritating and apparently used that to his advantage.

“I’m not here to talk,” I stated firmly, clenching my fist at my side. “I want my wife in exchange for your sister. That’s the deal.”

Pietro wore a feigned frown, seeming disappointed by my choice to speed things along. “But you’re in my position to be making demands, Yaro.” A devious grin moved across his face. “You’re in Bruno territory now.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, aware of what that meant. We had fallen for another trap.

“We managed to buy the warehouse from the bank, just the way we wanted it,” Pietro said, looking far too impressed with himself. “I was surprised you requested this place, but it worked in our favor.”

More wrath threatened to push me off the handle, but I remembered our numbers. Pietro had no idea about the groups we called from the area. He likely assumed I only had a handful of men waiting to be signaled.

“Hand Grace over,” I shouted more sternly, keeping my expression hard. “If not, your sister will pay for it in her



blood.”

I half expected him to show any sort of regret or tension at the sound of his sister being taken out, but Pietro’s smile lingered.

“My new fiancée isn’t going anywhere, Levov.”

Furrowing my brows, I didn’t know what he meant. Confused, I didn’t take my eyes away from him. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Pietro slipped an arm around Grace’s shoulders like he owned her, and that realization dawned on me. There was no mistaking his intentions.

Grace squirmed from beneath his hold, yet she couldn’t get away. His discomfort was not only the validation I needed, but it also fueled that fire growing within me.

“I liberated Grace as her father wanted, and I won’t just let her return to you,” he announced, grinning ear-to-ear. “I’m becoming a bit infamous myself, and I need a good woman to bring me heirs. Plus, it’s more salt to your wounds. Not only did we intercept many of your deals, but I also took your girl too.”

Lifting my gun on him, I cocked it as a warning. “I’m not interested in talking.” Glancing at Vik, I mumbled his name.

Knowing what I wanted, he reluctantly reached for his gun and pointed it at Alessia’s head, almost like someone had a barrel against his head, too. He didn’t want to involve her, and while I didn’t either, we had no choice.

Pietro watched as we made our moves, nodding absently. With his arm around her neck, he pulled his own on her.

His brows lifted as I tensed, and he laughed. “Oh, did you think that just because I wanted her, I wouldn’t do what needed to be done? She’s a trophy, Levov, but nothing more than that.”

We were locked then, and his words had me ready to pounce at any given moment. He had no right to talk about my wife in that way, especially not being the pathetic man that he was.

As much as I wanted to shoot and get straight to it, we were in a delicate situation. I couldn't compromise us or Grace, not while she was still in his grasp.

I had to be careful.

To my relief, that crossroad we found ourselves in was the signal.

As his men rolled in, flanking him from behind, ours did the same. Covering all sides, our manpower outnumbered theirs, and Pietro was completely surrounded.

From those on foot with their pistols raised and the snipers we had hidden nearby, there was no way for him to get out of it.

The moment he realized those extra men weren't his, fear flashed through Pietro's eyes. He hadn't anticipated just how prepared I would be.

For someone who seemed to know a lot about my family, he didn't know enough.

With a hard swallow, Pietro lined the pistol against her temple.

"I'm warning you!" He shouted, aimed at every man we had on him. "If you shoot me, she goes down with me."

Securing my grip on the pistol, I wanted to call his bluff, but I couldn't. It was a risk I wasn't willing to take.

"Stand down!" I yelled, putting a hand out to reassure them. When I turned my attention back to him, I wore a hardened mask. "Give her up now, or your sister will be splattered on the concrete. This is your final warning, Pietro."

Finally letting cracks show through his confident and aloof resolve, Pietro glanced nervously between myself and

Alessia. He seemed to realize then that I meant it.

“Please, Pietro,” Alessia cried out as tears ran down her cheeks. “Please don’t do this. Do what he says.”

Her plea revealed more of that uncertainty in him as he moved anxiously on his feet, unsure of his next move.

It seemed he had only planned so far ahead before letting his impatience get the better of him. Letting a show of his apparent foresight outweigh any genuine goals he had.

Even if he wanted to pretend like he didn’t care about his sister, it was evident that he did. His hesitance spoke for that.

Suddenly looking like a madman, going between the idea of ending Grace or giving her up, I didn’t know what to expect from him. All I could do was remain steadfast in the situation and prove to him that I wasn’t leaving without her.

Caving under the pressure, Pietro pulled his gun away from her and dropped to his knees, letting Grace go.

I didn’t believe it at first. That he was prepared to wave that white flag.

“Drop your weapon!” I demanded of him, looking between him and my wife, making sure he wasn’t going to pull a fast one on her.

Even more surprisingly, Pietro clicked the safety on and set the gun to the side, then put his hands in the air.

Relieved, I gestured for Grace to run to me.

At once, she did, trying to cut the space between us.

Just when I went to breathe, thinking it was all over, a click on my left side shattered that false reality. A cold barrel pressed against my temple.

Grace stopped in her tracks, completely freezing in her place as fear glazed her eyes. Absolute shock filtered into her features, gaze locked on me.

I was cornered.

## Chapter 26 - Grace

Panic stitched into my heart immediately, and my skin went cold all over.

It was so close to being over. I was so close to being reunited with Yaro and having the chance to go home. But that hopeful moment was clouded by my fear for him.

Sergio stood next to him with a gun pressed against his head, stare fixed on him. Despite the crowd of armed men around us, there was a complete standstill. He had the upper hand.

While I came to learn that their word was dangerous, I never thought my husband would be caught at the end of a pistol in the direct line of fire.

I wanted to scream. To let out my anger, frustration, and deep remorse for everything that had happened within the last twenty-four hours.

But that wouldn't accomplish anything.

I reminded myself to keep my head straight, even if I was ready to break down completely.

"Sergio, stop," I began, at a complete loss for anything else I could do to help. "I need Yaro alive. I'll never forgive you if you do this."

"I believe you have misread me, Grace," Sergio said, not pulling his stare away from Yaro. "I don't care what you want. I never gave two shits about your father. I needed that ammunition to finally take matters into my own hands. I never cared about what happened to him, and I sure as hell don't care about what happens to you."

While I knew his supposed condolences didn't feel significant at all before, I at least assumed his previous partnership with my dad would have meant something to him.

I was wrong, it seemed.

With his full attention on Yaro, Sergio continued. “I was burned by the Levovs before, and I’ve been waiting for this day.”

“When?” Yaro muttered, only looking at me like I was his lifeline. “When did we supposedly cross paths with you?”

“Yonkers. ’03. Ring any bells?”

While it sounded like gibberish to me, I watched as that recognition moved through Yaro’s face. He knew immediately.

“The drug trade gone wrong,” he mumbled. “I knew Bruno sounded familiar.”

Sergio’s lips formed a flat line as that anger glazed his eyes. “You weren’t satisfied with the product and wanted to back out, but when we tried to make you honor the deal, you used force instead. You broke my brother’s leg, and he couldn’t get away. He was found with all that product on him, and he was thrown in prison for possession, among other things. Just before they went to let him out, he was hit on the inside. He never made it to his release.”

The anger turned into a deadly combination of fury and devastation in his eyes. “Your family left a bitter taste in my mouth after that day, and I always wanted revenge somehow but never got around to it. Your family has such incredible influence, after all, it was hard to find enough cracks. With time, that desire to get even faded, and I was perfectly fine with letting it rest until Dominic came crawling to me. He went on about how he had to sacrifice his daughter at the mercy of the Levovs. Hearing your name was enough to bring back that fire in me. I decided enough was enough.”

Yaro’s jaw clenched. “You had your inexperienced son take the reins for you then?”

Sergio’s anger turned into bitter amusement. “Pietro already thought the Brunos were going to be the next Levovs,

and he was going to make it happen himself. It didn't take much convincing on my end."

With his head hung and his hands in the air still, he looked defeated by his father's words.

"And what, you plan on killing me for something you were willing to let slide? Did you think you were doing Dominic a service by trudging up the past?"

Sergio smirked, feeling far too confident from his position. "It was on my list."

I couldn't stand the certainty in his eyes, assuming he could pull a fast one on Yaro and get away with it.

The very thought of him even attempting to take him from me was enough to make my entire body ring with urgency. I wouldn't let him get the chance.

Trembling with fear and anger, I reached for the gun Pietro dropped and pulled the safety as I aimed it at him. I pressed it against his brown hair and threw Sergio a look made of all my fury.

He seemed surprised by the change.

"Let Yaro go, or I'll shoot Pietro!" I yelled at him, finger already on the trigger.

I had never shot anyone before, and I certainly never thought I'd be in that position. But the situation was dire enough, and I wasn't prepared to let any of the Brunos walk away with my husband's blood on their hands.

Grateful for my practice with Yaro, I was confident enough to handle that weapon. To know I could be of use.

While Sergio did seem caught off-guard, what little fear he had simmered away. He didn't pull his gun away from Yaro's head. He simply sighed. "The kid is cannon fodder. Do what you want to him, the spineless bastard already failed me. I'm cleaning up his mess anyway."

His words shook me down to my core, in complete disbelief that he thought so little of his son. The one he influenced to take up the lead position in trying to bring down the family.

It was difficult to stomach.

Pietro trembled as he broke down crying, shoulders shaking as those sobs moved through him. His sister did the same from afar, looking devastated by it all.

“Please, stop this!” She cried, helpless from her position. “Please make it stop.”

Regardless of what Sergio decided to do, they were all surrounded. If he made the wrong move, they would suffer as a result. None of them would get away alive, not while every gun was poised and ready to shoot.

“You two were always the biggest regrets of my life,” Sergio uttered, seemingly disgusted by the very sight of them. “You sheltered idiotic brats. You wouldn’t have survived a day in my shoes back in the day. Certainly not you, Pietro.”

“That’s enough,” Yaro snapped, angered from his position, with the gun still against his temple. “You’ve made your point.”

“But I don’t think I have,” Sergio growled, eyes searing into him. “Because you’re still breathing.”

Choked up and feeling hopeless all over again, I didn’t know what to do. Sergio didn’t care whether I shot his son or not, and doing so seemed entirely pointless.

But I caught the quick movement of Yaro’s eyes in Vik’s direction. It was subtle enough for Sergio to miss but enough to suggest something was going on.

While Vik looked shaken up that his brother was compromised, he gave the quickest nod he could.

Before I could react, Yaro yanked himself back as Vik pushed Alessia behind him and pulled the trigger. That pop



seemed to shatter reality for a split second and was almost impossible to keep up with.

Vik stood with his gun still pointed at Sergio, panting and wide-eyed. Yaro stood at his full height, overlooking the scene with that same bewilderment. He was fine, and so was Vik.

But Sergio gurgled from his place as blood trickled down his chest, almost illuminated in the sunlight. Some ran past his lips as he swayed, somehow still on his feet despite the impact.

As his skin drained of color, he swayed, then went down.

At once, Alessia and Pietro cried as the men moved in, not only surrounding them but their hired men as well. They were cuffed and moved out while their father was taken care of.

Before I could do anything, Yaro was on me, pulling me into his arms. He took the pistol from me and turned the safety on before tucking it away.

Once that recognition hit me, I broke.

I wrapped my arms around him tightly and soaked up that familiar scent and feel of him. He had become someone who could ground me and offered me that comfort I needed without another thought.

All that fear I felt while trapped with the Brunos ebbed away as he held me and rested his chin against the top of my head.

“I’ve got you,” he murmured as everything around us was sorted out.

His voice was the very thing that made me feel sane again, and his body pressed against mine was the reminder that we were both still alive.

We made it.

There was no need to worry or be afraid for each other.

We were alright.

Shellshocked by it all, I didn't know what to say. I could only hold him and silently thank my lucky stars.

"Come on," he said softly, pulling away enough to put an arm around me comfortingly and lead me away from the busy space. "I'm taking you home."

Nodding wordlessly, I followed him to where the vehicles had been concealed, so overwhelmed by it all.

I could only imagine that Yaro felt the same way since he didn't say anything either. Instead, we walked in silence until we reached an SUV.

Once he let go of me, he reached for the door on my side but stopped. He let go of a deep breath and turned to meet my eyes.

"That was the worst night of my life," Yaro admitted, reaching for one of my hands. He took it in his much bigger one and kept his eyes there as he thought. "I could only think about how much I needed you back and how angry I was at myself for ever leaving the condo last night. Being your husband has changed me, and while I used to think marriage wasn't for me, I want it more than anything now."

My eyes brimmed with tears as Yaro spoke, feeling as my heart softened.

He sucked in a deep breath and continued, "I love you, Grace. If you let me, I will protect you for as long as I physically can. No matter what happens, I want you to be safe and happy. I want you to know that I'm always doing everything I can to ensure you are taken care of. I was willing to search every place from here to New York for you, and now that you're here with me, I won't let anything else happen to you."

Sniffing through the sheer tenderness I felt consumed by at that moment, I stepped closer and put a gentle hand

against his jaw.

I took in his pure beauty, beyond appreciative for the chance to be with him again. To start over and spend my life with him.

“I love you too, Yaro,” I managed, feeling a shiver run through me at the feeling of his arm snaking around my waist to pull me in. “I’m not going anywhere without you.”

His kind smile warmed me all over as Yaro pulled me into him and pressed his lips to mine.

Everything that had been wrong was corrected, and at last, I felt at ease. With the chance to breathe again, I soaked in how perfectly his lips melded with mine.

We both sighed into that touch, full of undeniable relief.

When he pulled away and caressed my cheek as he looked down at me lovingly, that resolve filled his features.

“Let’s go home.”

## Chapter 27 - Grace

My skin was practically glowing from being under the warm sun all day, soaking in the crystal-clear water and reading on the beach as I pleased.

Showering by the end of the day in the luxurious suite and getting ready for dinner was the bow on top of it all as I looked at myself in the mirror, noticing how relaxed I looked. With my hair down and curled loosely, paired with subtle makeup and a black dress that Yaro loved, I left the bathroom feeling confident.

Dressed eloquently in his silk shirt, loosely tucked into his trousers, he perked up the moment I stepped out. He did a once-over of me, letting an appeased smile settle on his lips.

“Ready?”

Smiling at his positive reaction, I nodded and took his arm.

We left the private suite and took the boardwalk hand-in-hand over to the extravagant restaurant bordering the ocean, beautifully lit up by candles and soft lights that danced across the water’s surface.

We had been there for a few days already after finally deciding to go on a real honeymoon once everything was said and done. Since New York was cold with winter approaching, we opted for a warm, sunny location with the most beautiful water I had ever seen.

It was the most luxurious trip I had ever been on, and I was beyond grateful for the opportunity to spend it with Yaro.

We were seated in the perfect spot that overlooked the ocean and immediately served local delicacies and whatever beverage we desired. While it wasn’t the most exciting, I went for water after being outside all day.

“How does it feel to have your first online term done with?” Yaro asked, throwing back the last of his whiskey.

“Relieving,” I answered, feeling that pure tranquility blanketing me from the vacation. “I can’t wait to start the next one, but the break is appreciated.”

“Of course, you’ve been working hard the last few months. You deserve it.”

Smiling at him, I couldn’t help but think he was the most handsome man. I didn’t know how I got so lucky.

“After everything that happened this year, I think we both deserve it.”

“I won’t deny that,” he murmured with a chuckle.

The dinner was exactly what we needed, and when it came time for dessert, Yaro asked if I wanted anything to drink before we left. I felt myself nearly slip there.

“No, that’s okay. I’m feeling pretty tired,” I managed to say, keeping my expression neutral with the hope of not giving my secret away.

While he looked at me a moment longer, seemingly surprised, he didn’t push. Instead, he nodded and folded the menu back up. “We can go back soon if you’d rather watch a movie before bed.”

“I’d love that.”

Once we wrapped everything up and went back to our suite, I was brimming with excitement and anxiety, hoping for only the best outcome. Looking down at the small box I had stashed away in the wardrobe, I let go of a deep breath.

It was time.

I found Yaro in the living room, tucked on the couch while he scrolled through potential movies for us to watch together. His concentration pulled away from the screen the moment I stepped into the room with my arms behind my back.

There was no holding back my excitement. “I got something for you.”

His brows went up at that, and he dropped the remote on the couch as he sat up. “I didn’t know there’d be gift giving, or I would’ve got you something.”

Handing him the small box, I waved him off. “This trip has been the best gift I could ever ask for. You’re off the hook.”

Yaro gave me a small yet hesitant smile in return as he took the box in his hands. He turned it over as if that would give him an idea of what it was. He seemed completely at a loss for what was to come.

“Open it,” I said, laughing quietly at his reluctance.

Tentatively, Yaro undid one of the bows and slowly pulled it away. With one hand, he pushed the lid back and froze.

In the center of the box was a pregnancy test. The positive one I took before even going on the trip.

Yaro didn’t say anything at first as he just stared down at it, seemingly in disbelief. It took him a moment to even let it sink in.

But the moment he looked over at me for confirmation, his eyes softened.

“Really?” He asked, voice so heart-wrenchingly gentle.

As tears welled up in my own eyes, I nodded, unable to hold back my smile. “You’re going to be a dad.”

Placing the box down carefully, Yaro stood at once and broke the space between us. He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me against him tightly.

“That’s incredible news,” he managed with a slight waver in his voice as he murmured it into my hair. “I’m going to be a dad,” he repeated.

Soaking in that warmth, I was relieved by his reaction. We hadn't talked much about having children, and I wasn't entirely sure where he stood in the matter.

"So that's why you haven't had a drop of alcohol since we've been here," he murmured, pulling back enough to let me see his tender smile.

I laughed quietly at his noticing and wiped beneath my eyes. "And here I thought I did a great job covering my tracks."

Yaro chuckled as he held me, letting his hand rest against my jaw. "I think I can let it slide just this once."

His lips were inches from mine, just waiting to close that small gap. Glancing down at them, I couldn't help how it stirred that want within me. He just had a way of pulling me in without needing to try.

"I'll admit," Yaro murmured, using his hand to tip my chin up so our mouths were even closer. His breath fanned against my lips. "The mental image of you pregnant with my child does something for me."

Immediately, I melted at the prospect, noting how my insides squirmed. It was enough to make that excitement and joy simmer into desire.

"I like the sound of that," I said, craving more of his touch.

With a suggestive smirk, Yaro leaned in and brushed our lips together. That tingling sensation rushed through my system, and I was reminded of how easily he could make me weak for him.

Leaning into him, I didn't want that kiss to end.

Without needing to say anything, Yaro moved backward, pulling me along with him until he reached the couch.

Dropping onto it, he dragged me onto his lap as I giggled at the gesture. Not breaking that caress, I deepened it,

melding our lips and spreading that sensitive pleasure between us.

When his hand lowered to my ass and squeezed it, I knew that his mind was in exactly the same place as my own.

It didn't take long for us to urgently reach for one another's clothes, undoing buttons and pulling at the fabric until we were both completely naked on the couch.

As I straddled him, Yaro cupped one of my breasts in his big hand while he flicked his tongue over my opposite nipple. I moaned at the sensation, arching into it.

In the perfect position already, his hard cock twitched against me, and the fleeting friction made me needy for more. Drawn into that feeling, I carefully rocked my hips above him, letting it slide through my soaking heat.

Yaro muffled his groan into my skin as he continued to give my chest some much-needed attention. When he popped his mouth off, he pulled me impossibly close and captured my mouth with his again.

We both moaned into the heated exchange, so unbelievably worked up already.

His palms rested against my hips as he helped me grind against him, building up more of that arousal that made us both go wild.

I was the first to cave, unable to handle how badly I wanted him. Watching him on the beach all day and how incredible he looked at dinner made me unbelievably desperate for him.

He never failed to be the most attractive man I had ever met, and it left me feeling luckier every time I thought about it.

I stilled my hips and lined us up, already gasping at how he opened me up. Completely supported by his hands on me, I lowered myself onto him, and it felt like coming home.



We both tensed at the initial insertion, and I wrapped my arms around his neck to stabilize myself.

Little by little, he filled me, and it didn't take long for me to take all of him. Taking a moment to savor how mind-blowing it felt to even have him inside me, I hummed my appeasement.

“You feel amazing, sweetheart,” Yaro whispered against my lips, strained from how I surrounded him. His next words made me shiver. “Ride me.”

Encouraged by it, I lifted my hips and moved up and down his shaft. From my position, he hit every place at once, and I was already questioning how long I'd be able to hold it in.

Sucking in a deep breath, I urged myself to continue despite how raw and intense that pleasure was.

As I maintained a consistent pace, using his strong shoulders as leverage, Yaro dropped his head back against the couch. A hoarse groan left him as he let me take charge, hands merely on my hips for support.

His brows pinched together as he took in that mutual bliss, Adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed harshly. His fingers dug into my skin, letting me know just how much he was enjoying it.

When his groans turned into breathless moans, my legs were weakening from how intense it was to take all of him in such an intimate way. He seemed to catch on to it as he held my hips and guided me back and forth.

Being on top made me feel so much more at once, and it was enough to make my head spin.

That greediness applied to both of us as Yaro moved his hips slightly, bucking up into me in time with my grinding against him. We gripped one another tightly, mixing our moans and the delicious slap of our skin.

My fingers held the nape of his neck as I concentrated on moving faster, eager to hit that precipice. I brushed my lips against his, but that blinding pleasure wouldn't let me commit to it—not when I was too busy moaning for him.

Yaro grew louder as he stilled my movements altogether, allowing me to fall into him as he took over. His hips hammered into me, filling me again and again at that perfect position.

He kissed my cervix, making me whine at the intensity of it all.

I clenched around him as that coil burst and grabbed the back of the couch for support. Crying out with my intense release, I tensed and felt as every tiny spark of pleasure mounted inside me turned into a wave of sheer bliss.

Yaro chased that same high, panting into my skin as he thrust a few more times before spilling inside me. He bucked his hips lazily a few more times to prolong that state for us both.

We panted and tried to catch our breath, skin hot as we remained there in place, holding each other.

As he slid out of me, I felt that absence and mourned it despite knowing there would be more to come. I clenched around nothing then as my body slowly began to relax again, completely unraveling after such an intense orgasm.

Yaro absently trailed his fingers up and down my back, allowing me to curl into him. He placed a gentle kiss against my forehead while I rested there.

“You are everything I never knew I needed,” he whispered, touch gentle and mesmerizing.

Exhaustion cloaked me, but it didn't stop me from giving him a lazy smile as I traced small shapes against his chest.

“It's you and me,” I hummed, full of love and admiration for him.

“And our little one,” he added, sounding so proud about his ability to say it.

Mustering the energy to brush my lips against his, I murmured after, “Always.”

His warm, encouraging smile made my heart feel fuller than ever, and I couldn't help but feel hopeful about our future together.

I couldn't ask for anything more.

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THE END

## **About the Author**

Deva Blake writes from her study room with garden view in her Californian home. She loves having a cup of mint tea as well as a rose candle burning next to her while working. Deva writes dark mafia romance about the type of guys that your parents warned you about but that you end up falling for anyway, because they're just too irresistible. When not buried in her dark imagination, she enjoys baking cakes for her son and husband.

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