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Underworld

KINGS

VOLUME ONE

THE UNDERWORLD KINGS

VOLUME ONE

JENIKA SNOW



THE UNDERWORLD KINGS: VOLUME ONE

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Welcome to the *Underworld Kings*, where gritty mafia romance blurs the lines between right and wrong... and love and hate.

Volume One contains:

Coldhearted Bastard

Reckless Heir

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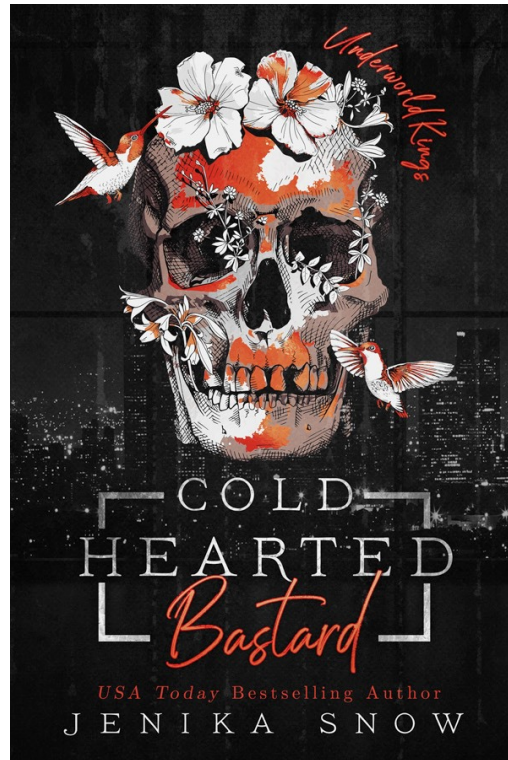
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The Underworld Kings, 1

COLDHEARTED BASTARD (Underworld Kings)

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He didn't have a heart... but he wanted hers.

All I knew about life was anger and violence. Pain and suffering. Kill or be killed.

I was a “fixer” for the Ruin—a syndicate for the Bratva, Cosa Nostra, Cartel, and any other organized crime faction that dealt in the darker, crueler aspects of humanity.

I was a free agent who was called upon to do things weaker men didn't have the stomach for.

And when you surround yourself with death for long enough, soon you don't remember what it felt like to be alive.

And then I saw her. She was a fragile little thing who tried to be strong. But I could tell she'd seen too much horror in the world, too much of the ugly within people. I should have stayed away. I'd only bring her further down into the darkness.

But for the first time in my life, I felt a stirring in my chest, this protectiveness and possessiveness toward another living person. And it was painful. It made me feel alive.

Lina tried to hide how broken she was, but I was an old friend of being ruined. She held secrets I'd find out. Because for the first time in my miserable life, I wanted something for myself. I felt something more than apathy and indifference.

I wanted to possess the innocence she clung to. I wanted to break it open and consume it for myself.

I could look into her too trusting blue eyes and knew I'd maim for her. I'd kill for her. And that became our truth when her past finally came back for her, when my present tried to destroy her.

They thought they could take the one thing—the *only* thing—I'd ever wanted for myself. They were wrong.

When I looked at her, I felt some of the monster that made me who I was retreat back to my black soul. He'd never leave... but he'd share the space.

For her.

Galina

Two months ago

I was pushed from behind so hard I lost my balance and fell forward, my hands instinctively reaching out to stop the impact. My knees and palms connected with the dirty ground, tearing at skin, pain lancing up my arms and legs.

I'd been brought to an abandoned warehouse. This could very well be where I died.

I heard snickering from the two men behind me, the ones who'd forcefully taken me out of my bed. I clenched my jaw, the familiar anger I felt whenever I thought of my father and the shit he dragged me into moving through me.

I was here because of *him*. My father. The lowlife drug addict who had a gambling problem and made a bet he couldn't talk his way out of. And he'd finally included me personally in his hellhole.

I should have left Vegas long ago, I thought. I should have never convinced myself that I was stronger than all this shit, that I didn't have to leave to make a life for myself. Damn it, I should have put him and everything he stood for behind me for good.

Would've, could've, should've, and all that bullshit.

For a second I contemplated just staying on my hands and knees. I wasn't sure if I was going to get kicked back down if I tried to rise, but I didn't want to seem weak. I refused to let these assholes think I was easy prey.

I gathered my pride and pushed myself up, the sound of the men in the room laughing causing me to grit my teeth and ignore them.

Because it was the middle of the night, I wore nothing but a white tank top and a pair of loose lounge pants. They hadn't even given me time to put on shoes or a jacket, and with it being October—even though we were in Vegas—the temperature dropped below fifty. Coupled with this dank, old warehouse and the fear that I'd probably die tonight—or worse—I started shivering.

I wrapped my arms around myself, wanting to conserve heat, and also because I could feel how hard my nipples were and didn't want the sick fucks getting a boner at the sight. I didn't look behind me at the two men who still stood there, blocking the entrance.

There were a handful of men standing in front of me, and I was surprised they needed so many bodies just for me. The warehouse I had been taken to was clearly abandoned, the floors filthy, age and rust covering every inch of this place. The scent of dirt, mold, and something rotting filled the air.

Given the fact that I was surrounded by a bunch of lowlifes, the smell of what was rotting could've very well been a body for all I knew.

I heard some shuffling to my side and turned my head to see my father stepping out from a doorway.

My father. The man I'd written off more than a year ago, pushed him out of my life because I was tired of him constantly pulling me into the vortex of his shit.

The steel door hung from rusted-out hinges and leaned half against the wall as he cleared the entryway. At first I was confused why he didn't have anyone dragging his sorry ass

forward. Was he here of his own free will? Seemed unlikely, given his track record.

But then I saw the barrel of a gun that was pointed right behind his head.

The man who stepped out from behind my father was tall and heavily muscled, his face expressionless.

When my father and the gunman cleared the doorway, I spotted another man stepping through. The master to these fucking puppets.

Henry Taedoni.

He was the only one I was familiar with in this shithole, but then again, that was only because of my father and all the trouble he constantly brought down in all our lives.

Henry was what many people in our circle would've called a gangster, although "many people in our circle" consisted of meth heads, gambling addicts, and anyone who owed him money. Henry was nothing more than a low-level loan shark, a drug dealer, and an all-around piece of shit.

He wasn't part of any official organized crime faction. I would've placed them in the white trash category, the kind of "leader" who kept addicts, criminals, and degenerates of the trashier variety on his payroll and as his clientele.

Because they were easily manipulated and wouldn't fight back.

Henry and his people weren't organized or smart. They used sloppy force and fear tactics toward an already weak population to get what they wanted.

"Galina Michone," he drawled in a way that made my skin prickle with awareness and disgust. He came closer and stopped when he was a few feet from me. A nasty grin spread across his face, a gold tooth in the side of his mouth flashing under the dirty, muted light. The way he let his gaze move up and down my body made me feel slimy and naked.

"Leo's really gotten himself into a jam this time," Henry murmured and tucked his hands into the front pockets of his

slacks, ones that looked like they were made of discount polyester.

For all the money Henry had swindled out of people, he looked as cheap as a two-dollar bill.

“I’m not sure what Leo does or doesn’t do has to do with me.” I should’ve kept my mouth shut. Pissing off Leo and his goons wasn’t going to do me any favors.

But I was surprised—and proud—I sounded as strong as I did. Inside I was terrified, of course. I knew the situation wasn’t going to go in my favor.

“Leo and I don’t speak. He denounced me as his daughter quite a while ago when I refused to give him money and told him what a lowlife he was.”

Henry grinned again, this one more sharklike.

“And even if I did have the money, which I don’t, I sure as hell wouldn’t use it to bail Leo out. He’s on his own.” I didn’t bother looking at the man who’d been nothing but a sperm donor. Fuck him for getting me into this shit.

I looked back at Henry quickly, knowing I couldn’t trust him as far as I could throw him. I noticed how he looked over my shoulder at the two men behind me, something in his eyes causing them to move closer. I heard the shuffling of their feet, smelled the dirty sweat that clung to them as it filled my nose. I tensed, my muscles tightening. Although I’d taken a few self-defense classes in the past, I wasn’t a fool thinking I was any match for them.

“It’s not money I want from you, Galina.”

My heart stopped, then started racing over time.

“Leo finally offered compensation for his debt that I am satisfied with.” Henry’s grin couldn’t be called anything but perverse. “And that’s you—or more so your body and that sweet cherry you still have between your legs.”

I felt my eyes widen a second before pure horror washed through me. I looked over at Leo, but the bastard wasn’t

looking at me, wouldn't dare face me after the heinous act he'd just done.

“And don't try saying you're not as innocent as Leo said. I've been watching you, Galina. I know you don't take company with anyone. I know your daily habits, know you sleep alone every night.” Henry raked his beady-eyed gaze up and down my body and took a step toward me. “In fact, I've stood over your bed and watched you sleep, know you keep a pistol under your pillow.” He hummed as if that aroused him. “I even leaned down and smelled your hair on more than one occasion, wondering if your pussy smells just as sweet.”

Oh God. I took a step back, fear coursing through me, but my back slammed into one of his goons. Hands clamped around my arms, and I fought wildly, self-preservation rising up. I kicked and screamed, but it was only met with a bruising grip and laughter surrounding me. Soon enough, I was winded and defeated, tears springing to my eyes... ones I refused to let fall.

I didn't confirm or deny what Henry said. I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of breaking down. I looked at Leo once more. He was staring at me with what I could have assumed was guilt, but he also looked high as a kite.

“You were supposed to protect me,” I whispered. Those words were nothing but a pipe dream of a once vulnerable little girl. I had no mother, no father despite him standing right in front of me.

And he'd sold off my virginity to clear his debt. He sold me off as if I was a commodity.

“I think I'll let some fucker buy your cherry for an exorbitant price. You don't see many women still so innocent at your age.”

Like my age of twenty-one meant I was some spinster.

“And after you've been broken in—defiled, I'm sure—then I'll take you for a ride before you really get used up.” I snapped my focus back to Henry. “But you look so sweet and delicious that I may not tire of you for some time. I may keep

you as my personal pet for a while, Galina.” He was leering again like a sick fuck.

“And then what?” I sneered. Fuck him. Let him see my anger and wrath, even if it didn’t do any good.

His grin widened. I was pretty sure he liked me fighting back, probably got off on it. “And then I’ll sell you off nightly, recoup my money and then some.”

I struggled all over again, managing to kick the leg of the bastard holding me. He grunted and dug his fingers into me so hard I knew there would be black-and-blue marks on my flesh. I hissed in pain, and he jerked me closer to him, my back to his chest, before he wrapped a steely arm around my middle, stilling me.

“If you don’t stop, I’ll knock you out with a hit to the face,” he seethed, and I froze. His breath smelled like stale cigarette smoke and cheap liquor.

“Brutus, let’s not resort to scare tactics.” Henry clucked and moved closer until he stood right in front of me. He stared at me, the leering and suggestive looks suddenly gone as he became serious.

And that terrified me the most out of this entire situation.

“It could have been worse, Galina. So much worse.”

I bit my tongue so I didn’t say something I couldn’t take back. I was still trying to think of how to get out of this, even if that seemed impossible.

“And hey,” he said and grinned once more, holding his hands out as if he was some kind of martyr. “I’m not such a bad guy. I’m even going to let you go back home and gather anything you want that’ll fit into a bag. I do want you to be comfortable... until you’re not.” He gave me a wink, and my belly clenched in dread.

I didn’t ask why he was giving me that small “gift,” because it allowed me more time to think of how to escape, of how to run. What Leo and Henry didn’t know—what no one knew—was I had always felt like something bad was going to happen. That other shoe dropping. The end of the world... *my*

world. And it was because of that that I'd already packed a bag, had escape money, no actual plan but a means to leave at the drop of a hat. If I could just get to where I'd stashed my bag and supplies, I had a chance. It was slim, but it was still a chance.

So I went slack in the asshole's arms until he loosened his hold on me enough I could breathe comfortably. Henry cocked his head, maybe thinking I was being a little too accepting of my situation, but I didn't care. I had to be smart if I wanted a chance to survive.

I gave my piece-of-shit father one last hateful look, swearing that if I ever had the chance, I'd end him, wipe out his miserable life like he'd so easily done with mine. I was then hauled away, pulled through the dirty warehouse, and tossed into the back of the car I'd been brought here in.

The next twenty minutes as we drove through Vegas and back to my crappy apartment went by in a blur. I didn't question why they hadn't just grabbed my stuff when they'd taken me from my apartment. I didn't wonder why they were even giving me this small "act of kindness". I didn't ask or care because in the end they didn't care. Hell, for all I knew this was all an act to make me more compliant, to make it seem like things weren't as bad as they were.

In the end my feelings and wants and needs, my comforts didn't matter.

I couldn't think straight, was sweaty and shaking, and I felt the glaring looks of the two men who sat on either side of me.

Before I knew it, I was hauled out of the back of the car and taken up to my apartment. Because my place was as shitty as they came, anyone we passed—even at this hour—minded their own business. They were either addicts and not coherent enough to care, or they knew who the men trailing me worked for and were too afraid to intervene.

"Grab your shit," one of the men said harshly as he pushed me into my apartment after the door was opened. It was shut behind me, and I started making my way toward my room, when I felt a tight grip on my forearm stop me.

“If you do anything stupid, I’ll fucking beat you and say to hell with grabbing your shit. Got it?”

I didn’t look at the prick who spoke the words, just nodded and tugged my arm free. “I have to use the bathroom.”

“Make it quick.” His words were clipped as he followed close behind me.

Before I could go inside, he pushed his way in front and surveyed the bathroom. It was tiny and old, with rust and calcium deposits and stains on the tub and sink, a small window above the tub. He went over to the window and tried opening it, and I held my breath, praying it held. It was old and janky, but I’d rigged it a certain way that I could open it where others would see it as sealed shut.

And when it held strong, he moved away, and I exhaled. He checked under the sink, presumably for weapons, but all he’d find was a couple of cleaning supplies, which he removed. What did he think I was going to do with them?

“Make it quick,” he said again and left me alone, and I was shocked he allowed me to close the door. I wanted to thank whoever was listening, but I didn’t have time. No one would help me but myself.

I opened the door under the sink, and as silently as I could, I popped up the loose wooden board where my bag was held. Once I had it, I grabbed the cheap sneakers inside, threw on a long-sleeved shirt, and made sure the money and gun were still tucked away. And then I went over to the toilet and flushed it, then quickly went to the window to pry it open. I hoped the flushed toilet would mask the sound of me opening the glass.

Once it was pried open, I tossed my bag out, my apartment fortunately close enough to the ground that I wouldn’t break a leg jumping out.

I was halfway out when one of the assholes pounded on the door and barked out, “Hurry it the fuck up.” And just as I swung my body out the window, I saw the bathroom door open and the prick barrel inside. His gaze latched on to me instantly, his eyes narrowing and a curse ringing out.

I landed on the ground and grabbed my bag, then ran like my life depended on it.

Because it did.

Arlo

Present day

My mother had been called a whore.
My father had been a *boyevik*—a soldier—for the Bratva.

I was an orphan at the age of eleven. A criminal at the age of twelve.

I was a murderer when I turned sixteen.

And here I was, fifteen years later, a coldhearted bastard.

You could have summed up my life in those details. The particulars didn't matter. The people I'd come in contact with were inconsequential. It was easy to pretend to have interest. It was effortless to act like I had a heart.

I'd been told a lot of things during my life, lies to make me fall in line.

“Your mother was nothing but a cheap slut. Women like that don't last long. They're used up and thrown away. They serve their purpose that way.”

That had been one of the longest, most “heartfelt”—in my father’s eyes—conversations he’d ever had with me. The truth, I’d later learn, had been far from what he told me.

I’d been taken from my mother’s arms shortly after she’d been forced to give birth to me, thrown into the home of strangers associated with the Bratva—the Russian mafia. From the moment I drew my first breath, I’d been indoctrinated to the life of a criminal. Of death and hatred and loyalty to only one entity.

My mother had been a young Russian girl who had hopes and dreams. That was the fantasy I made up. That was the fantasy she was no doubt told to stay pliant and submissive. Hope could make anyone do whatever you wanted.

I didn’t know her, didn’t know anything about her from personal experience. She’d been taken from her bed in the middle of the night, trafficked to America, and sold off like a piece of meat to those who had power and money.

Those I worked for. And sometimes those I killed.

Those who liked breaking things. Ruining them.

Those men who destroyed a person until there was nothing left but the darkness, that once hope now nothing but hopeless resignation.

The familiar anger I felt at thinking of the fate of my mother was like acid in my veins. I didn’t let emotions play a factor in my life. They never had except for the thought of a mother I’d never known, a girl far too young, who’d been raped and beaten countless times, forced to push out a baby she probably didn’t want, then used all over again.

She’d been the only thing I’d ever let my apathy go for. And a part of me hated that, hated her for making me feel anything other than the nothingness I was so very familiar with. The bleak darkness I embraced.

I didn’t have to know her love to know she’d been innocent—like so many other young girls thrown into this life.

For a second I stared at my hands, ones that had been covered in blood many times over my thirty-one years. Hands

that would soon be drenched in the life force of another.

They were fingers and palms that had killed mercilessly. Ones that had taken my father's life once I found out he'd been the one who raped my mother, fathered me, and ultimately killed her.

I didn't have to know the woman who birthed me to exact vengeance in her honor. It would never right the wrongs committed against her—or against any of the other helpless victims—but it sure as fuck made me feel better.

Patricide. Who knew it was what I'd been born to do? Who knew it was my own personal therapy?

And it was the act of killing my father that elevated me to the position I was in now with the Ruin and the Bratva. Apparently the Bratva thought I'd done them a favor by taking out my father—a traitor who'd been giving information to the Cosa Nostra.

I never corrected them, never told them that what I'd done, I'd done for myself and Sasha, that girl who'd been nothing but a child and had only been given hell on earth. Let the Bratva think I did what I did for them. It made no difference to the end result.

“I heard all the poor fucker did was look at the Pakhan's daughter, and it earned him *that* shit.”

Just hearing about the Pakhan—Leonid Petrov, leader of the East Coast Bratva—had my skin tightening. I didn't respond or acknowledge what Maksim said. I glanced at him and watched as he pointed at the SOB who was about to be dismembered and dissolved. Maksim cursed in Russian, but I ignored him and focused on the job.

There was the sound of a lighter flaring, followed by the sweet, smoky scent of the cigarillos Maksim got from a connection he had with the Cartel. I'd learned that all in the span of the first five minutes of being in his presence tonight.

I was called, and I came. I did my job, got rid of the bodies, and went about my miserable fucking life.

“A damn *look*, Arlo,” Maksim muttered under his breath, and I heard him take another drag. “Can you imagine—”

“No, because I don’t fucking care about the circumstances.” I cut him a glare. “A job is a job when the Ruin calls me.” I tipped my chin toward the black barrel off to the side. “They let you come and learn something, so shut the fuck up and listen. Stop talking.” I held his gaze with mine. “My job is to be effective and fast. Stop gossiping and get the fucking barrel.”

Normally I did my job alone. It was easier. Quiet. I didn’t want to fucking talk about the weather, let alone how one of these assholes kicked the bucket. I did what I was tasked to do, then put it behind me.

Because that’s what you had to do when you were a fixer for the Ruin.

But Maksim was still young and dumb, without much experience, and certainly not where the Ruin or the Bratva were concerned. But because he was a blood relation to one of the higher-ups with the Russian mafia, they allowed him to worm his way into situations that should have been reserved for more controlled, skilled men.

And this was one of those situations. But pissing off someone higher up in the Bratva or Ruin food chain wasn’t my style, or smart for that matter, so I kept my mouth shut and let the little shit learn a thing or two.

Because being a free agent for the syndicate known as the Ruin, one that dealt in everything illegal and underground, meant if you wanted to keep your balls, you didn’t question shit.

When the Ruin called, I took the job and did it fucking well. I didn’t care if it was for the Cosa Nostra, the Bratva, or the fucking Cartel. I didn’t give a shit who the job was for, as long as I got paid.

So as I looked at the bashed-in face of the body I was about to dispose of, all I saw was a means to an end.

“I heard they took a melon baller to his fucking eyes.”

I exhaled and felt my muscles tighten in annoyance. “For fuck’s sake, Maksim,” I said with unrestrained anger and cut a withering glare his way. He held up his hands and placed the thin brown cigarillo between his lips.

“I’m shutting up now,” he murmured swiftly and walked over to the corner of the warehouse where the fifty-five-gallon barrel drum was stashed. I crouched and opened the large duffel bag, rifling through the supplies I’d need for this particular job.

Maksim brought over the two most important implements I’d need and set them beside me.

Butcher saw.

Lye.

The latter I’d brought over in abundance earlier.

Maksim dragged the barrel over to the body currently laid out on the plastic tarp. “They really did his face dirty—”

“*Maksim*,” I growled and cut a glance his way. I didn’t need to say anything else for him to shut his trap and give a sharp nod. “Put that out.”

He took the cigarillo from between his lips and snubbed it out on the bottom of his shoe before tucking the butt in the back pocket of his black jeans.

For long minutes there was silence. I did the job quickly and efficiently, and I had to give Maksim credit—for this being his first time watching a cleanup, he didn’t lose his shit. Maybe he had balls after all.

“You want to hit up Yama? We could check out the fights down below at the Pit? I heard there are a couple of brutal ones booked tonight. Or I heard they got some new girls at Nino’s.”

I finished cleaning up and glanced at Maksim. “No,” was all I said. I had nothing against either place and had in fact fought plenty of times over the years at Yama—the Bratva underground fight ring. And Nino’s, one of the many strip clubs owned by the Ruin, wasn’t my style.

“Suit yourself,” Maksim murmured. “I’m hitting up Nino’s then. Those girls are eager to please the right people, if you know what I mean.”

The right people meant Maksim could get free ass because he was associated with the Bratva. If they didn’t recognize him by face alone, as soon as he took off his shirt, they’d see his tattoos and know who he was affiliated with.

The same as me.

A group of really fucking bad men.

But where some of them might have been redeemable... I was a monster who had a first-class ticket straight to hell.

Besides, I had plans tonight, plans that included me going somewhere I shouldn’t, because I wanted to see someone I had no business looking at.

The far-too-innocent brunette who worked at Sal’s all-night diner, a diner that was owned by the Bratva to launder their money. And the latter she’d have no fucking idea about. She probably just saw it as another run-down twenty-four-hour diner that catered to drunks, addicts, and those stumbling in after clubbing all night, looking for piss-poor food after everything else was closed.

I shouldn’t have been thinking about her, not while I was alone and lying in bed, and sure as fuck not while I was hacking up the bastard spread out on the ground.

But fuck, she’d been on my mind for months, and for a man who wasn’t afraid of anything... wanting her terrified the fuck out of me.

Galina

If you were lonely enough, it was almost like you were never alone. It was a constant, heavy presence that weighed on you almost like companionship, another person. It was a friend I'd grown very acquainted with as the years dragged on, especially after I moved to Desolation and left Vegas behind.

When I ran. Escaped.

And I'd been living with that dark companion for the last two months. How fitting was it that I'd created a new life in Desolation, NY. A new name. A new background. The lie of my life.

But I couldn't hate Desolation, especially this shitty part of town, especially Sal's diner, where I waitressed. It was the only place that hadn't asked me any questions, didn't do a background check, and paid me under the table.

I stared at the old, faded industrial-looking clock that hung on the diner wall to my right. I had no doubt if I pulled it down, it would be coated in an inch-thick layer of grime. Same with about anything in this piece-of-shit restaurant.

The time said it was late as hell, or early, depending on how you wanted to look at it. It was a little after three in the

morning, and fortunately I only had a couple of hours left on my shift.

I didn't mind the crappy hours or the depressing aesthetic of Sal's. They gave me as many hours as I wanted, the tips were decent when I worked the rush hour, first thing in the morning, and being here kept me from having to sit in my hole-in-the-wall apartment alone, wondering if they'd find me, if my past would catch up with me.

I'd heard the backstory of Sal's from Laura, one of the waitresses who worked the night shift with me. She told me Sal's had been operating for the last fifty years and had once been owned by a husband and wife, Sicilian immigrants who'd gotten their American dream of owning their own business.

But sadly, when Marianna—the wife—passed away, her husband Sal had followed not long after. And then, *surprise*, a private organization—AKA no doubt a shady business who was more than likely using this place as a front for money laundering—had swooped in pretty damn fast and taken ownership. I put the latter together myself, given my background with less-than-notable affiliations.

And here I was, two months after running from Henry and his sick plans for me to pay for my father's debt. I was living the dream, let me tell you, but pushing greasy-as-hell burgers, flat colas, and three-day-old apple pie slices to drug addicts, sex workers, drunks, and anyone else who wanted a place to get off the street since we were open twenty-four hours every day of the year was better than the alternative.

I wasn't Galina Michone anymore. I was Lina Michaels. The fake ID had been easy enough to get in Vegas, and my life here in Desolation was eerily similar to being back "home," so I'd assimilated fine.

"Can I get some fucking service over here?"

I exhaled wearily and rubbed my eyes before heading over to the clearly drunk customer who'd just come in. I'd seen him plenty of times before, and he was always obnoxious and demanding—not to mention intoxicated. It was clear he thought women were beneath him by the tone of his voice and

the look in his eyes when he addressed the opposite sex. He was like every other asshole I'd come in contact with during my life.

I could smell the booze pouring off him before I even got to his table but tried to put on a professional smile, even if I knew it no doubt looked forced and wouldn't help with this asshole's tipping. Because he never did.

He glared at me, and I pulled my pad and pen out of my apron. "What can I get for you?"

For a second he just stared at me with bloodshot, glossy eyes and a light sheen of sweat covering his forehead, causing his hair to be damp at his hairline. He also smelled like he hadn't washed in a while and had only consumed alcohol for the last twenty-four hours.

"Burger and fries. Beer. And make sure it's cold." He spit out the last word, and I didn't respond, just nodded and turned to leave.

He reached out and snatched hold of my wrist, his grip unyielding. Instantly my defenses went up even more, and my body tightened.

"Make sure my beer is fucking cold." His words were slurred and sloppy, just like his appearance.

"Let go of me," I said low, feigning strength I didn't feel like I really had. Surprisingly he did without a complaint. I wanted to rub my wrist but didn't want to let him know it bothered me as much as it did. "I'll bring over your stuff shortly. But next time, keep your hands to yourself." I left quickly, not giving him a chance to respond.

After I put in the order, I stood behind the wall, the only privacy I'd get during my shift. Assholes like him didn't bother me so much, not when I'd lived in Vegas and dealt with pricks on the daily. But they still got under my skin at times, now more than ever, and I felt more vulnerable than I had in a long time.

I rested my head on the wall, staring straight ahead at the shelving that held a few supplies. I heard the back door open,

and I glanced to the side to see Laura coming through, her tattered island satchel hanging off her shoulder. Her long, dark-blond ponytail was a little askew as if she'd been running, and when I glanced at the time, I realized she probably had been since she was a few minutes late.

Laura, like me, mainly worked the night shift, but she'd been picking up more hours to save up for classes at the community college. If I had friends, she'd probably be the closest one I'd put that label on.

She glanced up and noticed me, a genuine smile moving over her face. "Sorry I'm late."

I shrugged. What did I care? Things weren't busy right now, and aside from the drunk asshole, there hadn't been much "excitement."

She shrugged out of her jacket and hung it up beside her satchel on the hook that was nailed to the grease-stained wall. She grabbed a "clean" apron, put it on, then stopped in front of me. "The night is that bad already, huh?"

I laughed and shook my head. "Not really. Just the regular drunk asshole."

She screwed up her nose. "Which one? We get so many of them nightly."

So true.

She gave me another smile before exhaling and looked out to the front, her nose wrinkling again. "I have to work a double today. I can't complain, because the tips will probably be good, but Lina... I hate people."

I laughed, the sound shooting out of me before I could stop it. "Same."

We both turned and headed back out to the front. I followed behind, seeing if the drunk was still out there... optimistic that one of these times he'd stumble out and never come back in. But there he was, glaring at the wall, probably thinking of all the ways he could get back at someone who'd wronged him years ago. Because men like him were mean while drunk, but sober... he was probably a nasty bastard.

I was checking to see if his food was ready when I heard the diner's front door open. I glanced over my shoulder, my heart immediately skipping a beat before taking on an erratic note as I watched who walked in. The man was one I'd seen here many times over the past two months.

And he was a man who instantly had every survival instinct in me kicking into gear.

I didn't know him, not his name, age, occupation. He always paid with cash, always kept to himself. He never spoke more than what was required to order his food. And his expression never gave anything away. No frustration, no exhaustion. No pleasure or hatred. Nothing. It was as if he had no emotion, this blank slate that saw nothing but took everything in.

He was tall, with short dark hair, and he carried an air around him that couldn't be mistaken for anything but danger. The power he wielded was breathtakingly clear in just the way he walked, in the way he held himself. And the strength in his body was evident despite the dark clothing that shielded it from view.

But I didn't have to *know* him, didn't have to speak with him to recognize the type of male he was.

Dangerous.

Deadly.

Someone I had no business being curious about.

I'd been around many men like him in my life, men who killed with their hands and moved on to the next task. It was their nature.

I watched him take the same seat he always did, the one at the back of the diner that faced the entrance. He always made sure the wall was at his back. That was another sign of the type of man he was... one who'd seen enough violence that he'd never be caught off guard.

The sound of the cook hitting the little bell, indicating my customer's meal was ready, drew me out of my thoughts. After taking the plate with the burger and fries, I grabbed another

beer, noticing how the drunk had already—not surprisingly—drained the first.

I set his plate down in front of him, the beer bottle to follow. He said nothing, just started digging in with disgusting, sloppy sounds leaving him. As soon as I turned and faced the dark and dangerous man sitting in the corner, my belly tightened, that internal warning urging me to run the other way, rising up almost violently.

But I was familiar with that little voice, that sixth sense, and I pushed it down and moved closer. Because although I knew this man was someone I didn't want to get involved with, I also couldn't lie and say my sick curiosity wasn't far stronger.

“Welcome to Sal's,” I said automatically. “The usual?” He always got the same. Ham and swiss sandwich on sourdough. Side of fries. Cup of coffee. Black. No sugar.

He nodded, his dark eyes locked on mine, his face giving nothing away. I felt like an animal trapped in a snare and facing off with the hungry predator. I gave a weak nod and an even weaker smile in his direction before I turned and headed toward the cook to put the order in, but I *felt* his gaze still on me, as if he were reaching out and tearing my clothes away, baring my flesh before he took that cold, serrated knife and cut me open.

It was terrifying.

So why did I yearn for more?

Arlo

She was demure, innocent, with a soft voice that was pleasing to my ears, a smile that had my chest tightening, and a body that made me want to stab any other man who ever looked her way.

She was dangerous to me, the dark desire I felt, the way she made me want things a bastard like me had no business desiring. And yet I knew nothing about her.

But when I looked into her eyes, I saw a survivor staring back. I was good at reading people without knowing their story. She'd seen the ugliness and violence the world handed out freely... the kind *I* gave in abundance.

Lina, her name tag said, a beautiful name in an ugly city.

I'd come to Sal's plenty of times while living in Desolation, but I couldn't lie and say I didn't come in here almost every fucking night because I wanted to look at her. I wanted to be close to her.

She'd most likely experienced the brutality this world had to offer personally, one that scarred her from the inside out. I felt a tightening in my gut at the strange sensation of wanting

to protect her, to save her from further heartache. But who the hell was I to save anyone? I took life. I cleaned up death.

I was a monster wrapped up in the visage of a man. And I shouldn't want to shield her from anything or anyone but me.

I'd made sure to pay her already, wanting her to get her tip and not rely on someone else to hand off Lina's money. Sal's definitely wasn't known for its honor system. I finished my sandwich and coffee, then I waited. I watched. I wanted Lina like a starving wolf seeing a vulnerable lamb. Every part of me looked at her and demanded I take her down to the darkest parts with me, that I destroy her in the best of ways... to tear her apart until I got my fill.

I wasn't sure what it was about Lina that called to me... a more noble part of me, one that had never existed. One that would never be born. All I knew with a harsh truth was that she wouldn't leave my mind. She was a constant companion in my fucked-up head, a light in the blood and murder that took up residence there.

I watched as she handed the check to the piece of shit who'd been loud since I'd come into the diner, her only other customer. I'd seen him before and could always recognize him by the scent of liquor that seeped from his pores.

He squinted at the check, then tossed a few bills on the table despite the waitress holding her hand out for the money. I could see the frustration and almost resignation on her face as she picked up the money, murmured something, and turned to walk off.

Once again, raw anger filled me on her behalf.

My hands were in tight fists on top of the old, chipped two-seater table, the need for bloodshed moving viciously through my veins, all because of the way he glared at her... disrespected her.

And the longer I stared at him, the more I recognized what kind of man he was. I'd seen countless bastards like him before, ones who looked at the women trafficked by the crime syndicate, ones who were sick and needed their dicks cut off

because of the perverse things they thought about. And I could see the drunk fucker was hungry for Lina, but the only type of satiation a man like him would get was the kind coming from a begging woman.

I followed Lina with my gaze once more, and I could tell she was trying hard not to look at me by the tension in her shoulders and the way her hands tightly curled inward. Maybe I fascinated her in a sick way. Maybe I scared her so much that she was drawn to me, a girl who'd been damaged enough in her life that I was the only type of man who could pull her out of that darkness.

Because I was as black and cold as the night.

I felt a dangerous coil of... desire move through me. But I knew feelings such as those would do nothing but destroy me. My life, the world I lived in, had no business with something like *that*.

I watched her mannerisms, could see the armor she wore was chinked and scarred, and that made me want to burrow myself deeper under her skin and find out who she was. Where did she come from? Who was she running from?

I'd gotten the basic information on her. Address. Name. Age. The latter two were easily faked, seeing as she had only moved to Desolation in the last couple of months. It could've been easy enough to gather all the information on her that was buried deep... the real information that some people went to a lot of trouble to bury. I definitely had the connections and resources. But something stopped me from searching out information on this woman.

Another uncomfortable, unusual sensation to me. I felt like it would be an invasion of her privacy to delve deeper, not something I'd ever fucking cared about before.

I felt my scowl deepen, hating that she'd worked her way under my skin as swiftly and strongly as she had. I'd never given a shit about what anyone thought or how the outcome would play out. I didn't care how they saw me as long as they knew I was the one to fear.

Right before she rounded the corner and would have disappeared into the back room, she glanced over her shoulder at me. Our eyes locked, hers flaring slightly, because no doubt she hadn't expected me to be watching her so closely. I could practically hear the surprised—maybe frightened—inhalation she took. She was afraid, and rightly—smartly—so.

I could've said I wouldn't hurt her, but she would have known that was a lie. And so would I.

She disappeared behind the door, and I drew my attention back to the drunk. I could envision myself killing him ten different ways. At the very thought of ending his life, immense satisfaction ran through me. I fantasized about gouging out his eyes for simply looking at the little waitress. He was the type of man who deserved death ten times over for the heinous crimes he'd committed in life.

I should know, because I deserved it as well.

Lina came out a few minutes later, the jacket she wore light blue in color, faded, and older, with one hand tucked into a pocket. She had her backpack slung over her shoulders, her head tipped down, the long fall of her hair shrouding her profile from me.

She quickly made her way through the diner before opening the door and stepping outside, not once looking at me again. Movement to my left had me slowly looking at the drunk. He pulled his stumbling ass out of the booth, his focus on the door Lina had just left out of. Every muscle in my body tightened in preparation to go after him, knowing exactly what he was doing, knowing the opportunity he saw in this moment.

I left the diner, keeping to the shadows once outside, and immediately spotted Lina up ahead. She moved quickly and was scanning her surroundings. *Definitely not a stranger to being on guard.*

But she wasn't alone. I couldn't see him yet, but I felt my skin tightening, a familiar feeling that covered me when I needed to be on alert. And then I saw him, the fucker keeping close to the buildings, staying within the shadows. He stalked

her, and even from my vantage point, I could see a tenseness across Lina's shoulders.

She knew she wasn't alone. She could *feel* it. Whether she could see the bastard following her, I didn't know, but I did notice the way she kept her hand in the pocket of her coat. I knew she had a weapon tucked within.

Smart girl.

I crept closer, my muscles even tighter, my body poised to attack. I felt that familiar bloodlust move through me.

Bloodlust—he and I were old friends.

And then the asshole attacked, lunging for Lina and quickly wrapping his arms around her waist as he pulled her into a darkened corner. I picked up my pace to eat the distance and stopped when I rounded the corner of the building. I saw him only a few feet ahead, his hand around her throat, her eyes wide as she clawed with one hand at where he gripped her.

I was about to bash his skull into the side of the brick building when she pulled out a small canister, pointed it at his face, and doused the fucker in the eyes with pepper spray.

He cursed low, a string of profanities as he let her go and stumbled back, his hands frantically wiping away at his face. I was about to attack, when she reared her leg back and kicked him in the balls, making him crumble to the ground.

Fierce, dark desire shot through me at the fight in her, at how she stood up for herself. I felt the stirring of that pleasure in my cock, my breathing increasing, my heart racing. God, she was gorgeous as she stared down at the fucker with this fierceness and need for survival covering her face.

And then she darted off in the other direction, running fast and hard, her steps echoing off the tall buildings until it was just the prick and me in the alleyway.

I curled my hands into tight fists, then relaxed them. I did this over and over again as I moved closer to him. He struggled to stand up, one hand covering his balls, the other palm still wiping away at his eyes. My boot kicked away a

stray piece of glass, and he stilled, looking in the direction the sound came from, his body freezing.

“Who’s there?” He tried to sound stronger than he was. He reached into his jacket to produce a knife, moving it back and forth in front of him as if that would stop me from what I was about to do.

I kept enough distance to where his blade couldn’t touch me, but it wouldn’t matter if he did get me. It wouldn’t do much damage. My tolerance for pain was so high I wouldn’t even feel the blade sinking into my flesh, wouldn’t think twice about wrapping my hands around the edge until it dug into my skin, sliced me up, and covered the ground in blood. In fact... I anticipated whatever pain he thought he could inflict.

I looked at his hand that was wrapped tightly around the handle, remembering how he’d curled his fingers around Lina’s slender neck. I had no doubt she’d have a mark come morning. And that had my rage intensifying. I’d already decided to kill him, but now I’d make his death excruciating.

In a move so fast he wouldn’t have been able to stop me even if he could’ve seen, I had his knife in my hand and my fingers wrapped around his thick throat. He was strong, even in his intoxicated state. But I was stronger.

The stench of him was overpowering, but I leaned my full weight into his body, bringing us closer, cutting off his airflow until he started clawing at my hand, desperate to suck oxygen into his lungs.

I said nothing. There were no words that needed to be spoken. I was going to take his life as easily as if I blew out a candle, and there was nothing he could do about it. He’d signed his death warrant the moment he looked at Lina. He’d accepted this fact the moment he laid a hand on her.

And I didn’t try to sift through why I felt so strongly about this, about her. It was just this feeling that needed to consume me, or nothing was right and good in my life. It was this powerful urge to take out any threat that presented itself to her.

I would be her defender. I would be her assassin.

He started struggling less, his body relaxing farther as he got weaker, as asphyxiation claimed its icy, dark hold on him. I lifted the knife and looked at the blade, the serrated edge gleaming and sharp. This wasn't just a simple weapon. This was a hunting knife, one meant to field dress an animal in the wild.

And I was going to use it on him in the most brutal fashion imaginable.

His gasps were weak but pained, his fear tangible in the air. I let go of his throat and let him crumble to the ground. He gasped louder, already sucking in copious amounts of oxygen. I crouched in front of him, gripped his meaty forearm, and pressed it to the brick of the building.

And then as I looked into his face, his eyes swollen shut from the pepper spray, tears covering his cheeks, sweat coating his forehead, I took that blade and started sawing at his wrist. His cries were loud and would have drawn attention if we weren't in Desolation. But he'd find no hope or rescue in this city. They'd hear his pleas and screams of pain and go in the other direction.

The sound of bone crunching apart from the blade, of flesh being torn away filled my ears. The scent of coppery blood filled my nose, surrounding me in a grizzly depiction of what my life was. Of *who* I was.

His hand fell to the dirty alley ground with a *thud*, spurts of blood spraying out from the stump that topped his forearm, splattering against my hand and arm. He was weeping as if *he* were the victim.

I let go of his wrist and stood, taking a step back and appreciating my work. He cradled his arm to his chest, his tears now from pain and fear. But I wasn't done with him yet.

I reached down and curled my fingers around his neck again, lifting him easily off the ground. He didn't struggle anymore, too weak, too afraid. He kept pleading, kept whimpering.

And still I didn't fucking care.

I wished I could look into his eyes and watch the light fade.

I ran the blade down the center of his chest, causing him to still, to pant. It would be so easy—feel so good—to just sink the knife into his belly and jerk it upward, opening him up so his intestines covered the ground. But instead I placed the tip right over his crotch and watched him hold his breath and freeze.

A slow smile covered my face as adrenaline moved through me even faster. I slammed the blade into his dick and let it sink in just enough before I twisted the handle and jerked it upward, opening up the part he would have used to brutalize Lina.

He screamed and thrashed, a burst of survival energy moving through him. I pulled the knife out and let him go before stepping back, letting him sink to the ground. He'd bleed out soon enough from the arm wound and now what I'd done to his dick.

I bent down to wipe the blood off his blade on his shirt but kept the weapon. I didn't need to wait around to make sure he'd die. The wounds I'd inflicted on him were sufficient, and my knowledge on how to deliver a deathblow was accurate. The fucker would be found at some point, tomorrow no doubt, but it would just be another body found in Desolation with no leads.

When I left the alley, I should have gone home to shower the death and violence off me, but I found myself heading in the opposite direction, toward the one woman I should leave alone.

Five minutes later I stood outside of Lina's apartment building in the shadows and stared up at what I knew was her bedroom window. When I found out her address and what apartment she lived in, I'd walked by more than once. I turned into the stalker I'd never been.

The bass of music came from one of the many dilapidated homes, the scent of stale smoke and car exhaust a constraint in

the air. I moved closer to a sparse-looking tree on the verge of dying in the “backyard” of the building.

I made my way to the tree, my focus never leaving Lina’s bedroom window. The moon was bright enough that it cast light over the back of the building, allowing me to see her tiny shape moving behind the sheet.

I still held the knife in my palm, had the fucker’s blood drying on my hands and clothes. Adrenaline was humming through my veins, a high an addict would kill for.

And they did. *I* did.

I had no business being here, being close to her. I shouldn’t have followed her, but I wanted to protect her. I wanted to make sure that her almost assault hadn’t hurt her more than I knew about.

I didn’t know what was happening to me, and I should have put her behind me as easily as I did everything else. But then this vulnerable, tiny woman had inserted herself into my life unknowingly, crossing paths with the hungry wolf. And as I stood there, wanting nothing more than to go to her, to tell her she was mine, I knew how dangerous that was for her. For me.

I knew how dangerous she truly was to *me*.

And even if I should’ve left her alone, put her out of my head and my life, I knew the outcome would always be the same.

I’d go to the diner tomorrow night. I’d watch her, talk to her. I couldn’t help it, because the truth was, for the first time in my miserable fucking existence, I had a weakness... and that was Lina.

And, God help her, I didn’t want to be strong.

Galina

I was familiar with fear and the rush of adrenaline. It had been a companion in my life for as long as I could remember. So why was I shaking after my attack? Why was I having trouble breathing at the memory of his hands on my throat? Why was my vision going from clear to fuzzy, making it hard to focus?

I exhaled, shook my head to clear it, and found myself walking around my bedroom, unable to sit still, feeling as if I was missing something, as if there was an integral part of me that I'd left back there in that alley.

In Vegas.

I stopped in the center of my bedroom and looked down at my hands. They still shook slightly, and I scowled at them, curling my fingers tightly until the prick of my nails pressing into my palm had that rage inside me loosening.

Letting fear and the sensation of not having control take over my life wasn't something I'd ever allow, not if I had the power to be strong.

I swallowed, the pain and roughness in my throat a reminder that the asshole'd had his thick fingers digging into

my skin, his nails all but tearing at my flesh. I loosened my fingers from the tight cage, went into the bathroom, and turned on the light, the fluorescent bulb above me flickering before finally settling and staying on.

I could hear the electricity moving through the lightbulb, almost loud enough to drown out my warring thoughts.

I curled my fingers around the yellow-colored sink, the entire bathroom like something out of a '70s home interior catalog. I leaned forward, the mirror above me cracked in the corner, spider veins snaking down the edges.

The woman who stared back at me was familiar, yet she was also a stranger. She was used to the horrors of life. But as I looked into my blue eyes, I could see the truth. I was empty. I'd been that way for a very long time.

For some reason I thought back to the dark-haired man in the diner. His gaze made something warm and unusual grow within me, his focus so strong that I felt it as if he were reaching through the distance and pulling me in close. It was crazy, unrealistic, and so very dangerous. I couldn't entertain the idea of making any kind of connections like that. I couldn't allow myself to be *known* like that.

My gaze went down to my throat, where four finger-sized bruises were starting to form on one side, and a thumbprint mark on the other. I looked at my hands, hating that they still shook, and lifted my fingers to touch the marks.

Although my throat was raw and tender, I didn't feel much of anything else.

Am I dead inside?

Was this what it meant to only survive, not live?

I went through the motions of getting ready for bed before leaving the bathroom and heading back into my bedroom. Although I hadn't eaten anything since early this afternoon, I had no appetite, my stomach feeling like it had a stone lodged in the center.

I stood in the doorway of the bedroom and stared at the mattress with no frame pushed up against the corner wall. This

apartment was disgusting, far worse than the last hole-in-the-wall place I'd been in when I was in Vegas. But it was this type of place that would protect me from the people I ran from. It was a place to keep me hidden.

It was places like this, places that were in shit parts of cities, that didn't require background checks or credit approvals. They took cash in the palm of their hands and asked no questions when I handed them my fake ID. As long as I paid on time every month, I was left alone.

Aside from the mattress, the room was barren, not even a dresser. But I didn't need nor want furniture. I didn't want to get settled, because this place wasn't a home. I kept my clothes in my backpack, always carrying it with me in case I had to run again.

I walked over to the window and pulled the old, pale-yellow sheet aside. It had been the only other thing in the bedroom besides the mattress, and I used it as a makeshift curtain, although I was pretty sure people could still see through it at the right angle.

The scent of age and musk filled my nose, this uncomfortable tingle in my sinuses.

My apartment was only one story up, something I was very thankful for in case I had to run again, in case my only exit was this window. I stared out at the neighborhood. It was just as depressing and dirty, gloomy and dark as you'd expect in a city that was filled with addicts and crime.

The houses that were in this part of town were small two-story, bungalow-style homes, but they weren't *homes* at all. They were four walls and a roof, privacy for people to inject and snort, rape, and murder.

There were a few businesses within walking distance of me. A deli that sold questionable meat and delivered an even worse atmosphere. There was a laundromat just down the block, and a check-cashing place on the other end of the street. A pizza joint was close as well, and a small convenience store across from that. So although the neighborhood was run-down

and barely thriving, it gave me enough of the amenities I needed in order to survive.

I let my gaze travel over what might have once been a lush expanse of grass for children to play on but had long since died and was now nothing more than yellow and crispy patches trying to hang on to that last hope of staying alive.

There was one tree, but it was even sadder than the decrepit neighborhood, with barely any leaves hanging onto the skeletal branches, its thirst evident in the gnarled trunk. It was as dead as everything else in Desolation.

The shadows were dark and thick at the back of the building, and the few streetlights that lined the road had long since given up. And of course the city couldn't care less about fixing them, so they continued to let the depression cave in around people.

I felt this tingling on the back of my neck, something I was very familiar with, a feeling that told me I was being watched. I should've moved away from the window, allowed this dirty sheet to give me a semblance of privacy I desperately wanted in life, but I found myself rooted to the spot. I looked, searching for who was out there. But there was nothing to see but the sadness, ugliness, and the forever darkness.

One day I'd be able to feel safe. One day I'd be able to make a home and be happy.

But that day wasn't today.

Galina

I'd been at work for the last two hours, and there was an unusual rush this time of night that kept me busy, which I was thankful for. It helped keep my mind off the night before and what had happened.

I felt someone come up behind me before the scent of Laura's too strong, flowery perfume filtered in my nose.

"Hey," she said, and there was something off about the tone of her voice.

I turned around from restocking the Styrofoam cups to look at her. "Everything okay?" The expression on her face answered my question. She had her brows pulled down low and slowly shook her head as if clearing her thoughts.

When she looked up at me, I could see dark circles under her eyes before her gaze took in my throat. Her eyes widened, and she moved a step closer. "Oh my God. What happened?"

Instinctively I touched my neck where I knew the marks were. I'd bought some cheap concealer, but the shade wasn't a match and made the bruising look even worse. I shook my head and said, "It's nothing. Just someone too touchy-feely. I doused him with my pepper spray and kicked him in the balls

to teach him a lesson.” I gave her a smile that I felt wavering and didn’t reach my eyes. She looked like she wanted to argue, but I shook my head. “I’m fine. Promise. Now tell me what’s going on with you.”

After a moment, when it was clear I wouldn’t budge on this, she exhaled and tied her apron around her waist before leaning back and resting her hands behind her on the chipped counter.

“Well, if you don’t count the fact that I’m barely scraping by moneywise, or that my dreams of getting a college education are slowly slipping through my fingers, then yeah, I’m doing great, all things considering.” She laughed humorlessly, and although I knew I should comfort her, it was never something I’d had experience with.

I reached out and placed my hand on her shoulder, and she looked up at me, her light-brown eyes showing me how tired she really was. I wished I could’ve told her things would be okay, but the truth was nothing was ever okay in the world we lived in.

I wished I could have helped her with the money aspect, but I was barely making enough to support myself and save up to leave. I was struggling just as badly as she was, and that wasn’t even counting the shitstorm of my past that would catch up with me eventually.

Laura didn’t even know who I *really* was.

What I didn’t spend on food and necessities, I squirreled away. Desolation certainly wasn’t my endgame. I didn’t want to spend the rest of my life here. I wanted to be able to go somewhere that was full of life. Because maybe then I would actually feel like I had one.

But the cherry on the shit sundae that was my life story was that they’d found a body just down the street from where I worked. Although finding corpses in this city wasn’t exactly breaking headliner news, there was a prickling on my skin that told me this wasn’t just *any* death.

“So that body they found?”

“Yeah?” I waited to see if she’d give more information or if I’d have to press a little harder. I didn’t watch the news and didn’t want to be any more depressed than I was. And the news that tended to be throughout Desolation was always the same. Warring criminal factions, gang wars, deaths from either murder or drug addiction. And of course there was rape and sexual assault.

She leaned in close and looked around as if she was afraid someone would hear, although nobody that frequented cared. In fact, they probably had a hand in many of the news stories that had come out over the years.

“This isn’t public knowledge, not yet anyways, but I have a friend who works at the local paper who has connections with a guy who works at the police station. Apparently the body they found not only had his hand cut off, but he also had a wound on his...” She pointed down to her crotch region. “The wound was so substantial that he bled out from the groin before he could from the missing hand.”

My heart jumped in my throat at the brutality of his death.

The front door opened, and we both looked toward the entrance. My heart, that had been beating fast and erratic from Laura’s story, stilled in my chest at the sight of the man who stepped in. The same man who consumed my thoughts and made me question what was going on with my body for the last two months.

He took his usual seat, but I didn’t miss how he kept his gaze locked on mine.

“Why is he watching you so—”

“Yeah,” I said before she could finish. “It’s intense.” I glanced away, because his eyes on me were heavy, so heavy it was like a cloak over me.

But I found myself looking back at him. I didn’t miss how his gaze moved down to my throat, didn’t miss the way his jaw tightened as he no doubt saw the marks. I forced myself not to touch my neck, feeling bared even from across the restaurant.

“Yeah, he screams, ‘Stay the hell away.’”

I snapped my attention toward Laura and saw that she was staring at him, but she quickly looked away. I didn't miss how she shivered and then shook her head, her focus on her hands.

“He looks at you like he wants to eat you up until there's nothing left,” she whispered before clearing her throat and pushing away from the counter. “There's just something about him that scares the hell out of me.” Her voice was soft, and she finally looked up at me before slapping on a smile, which I could tell was forced. “But the men I've been around and this shitty city have kind of ruined it for all others.”

This would've been a good time for us to bond, for me to tell her she wasn't alone, that I, too, knew all about bad men. But she was gone before I could say anything. I didn't even know if I would have been able to say anything. Connecting with people wasn't a strong suit of mine.

I looked back at him and gathered my strength. I made my way over to him, his eyes never leaving me, as if he were the negative end of a magnet and I the positive. I was drawn to him, this invisible thread that was winding tighter the closer I got.

When I was right in front of his table, I held the pad in one hand and a pen in the other. My fingers shook, and I tightened them around the objects. His gaze flickered down, and I knew he saw my physical nervousness. I had a feeling he could read me better than I could read myself.

When he was looking back at me, I felt my tongue swell, my throat tighten, that pain from being strangled last night making itself known once more. As if he knew the latter, his focus once more lingered on my neck. Although his outward appearance seemed stoic, almost uncaring, I noticed a slight, subtle clench of his jaw, the same thing when he first looked at the bruising.

I found myself fidgeting with my hair, pulling it over my shoulders to hide the marks. There was nothing I could do about them, but I certainly didn't want anyone paying attention to the marks either. “The usual?” I hated that my

voice was so low, slightly shaky. And it didn't have anything to do with anxiety.

Why was I so on edge around him right now? All the other times, I'd been able to at least pretend like his presence didn't rattle me. Maybe it was the way he stared at me, his dark eyes so intent and prying, as if he could sift through my darkest secrets and find out exactly *who* I was without me uttering a word.

"Lina, right?" He looked down at my name tag, and I nodded, licking my lips. He was staring at my mouth now, and I felt an intense flush cover my face at the fact that he watched me so hard. There was something behind his gaze, something that wasn't apathetic. Something that was... heated.

And I felt an answering call from my body. It was uncomfortable and unusual.

It was exhilarating.

It was the first time I felt anything but the lonely despair that had always been crushing me.

"Yes," I said with a stronger voice this time. "That's what the name tag says," I teased and offered him a smile, but he didn't give me one in return. Which then had mine dying a slow, embarrassing death. "So." I cleared my throat again. "The usual?"

He was silent for so long I wondered if he'd heard me. Had I said the words out loud or thought them? I certainly didn't want to ask again and further embarrass myself. Maybe I should just turn and give him the space he clearly needed.

"I'm Arlo," he finally said, and I felt my eyes widen at the piece of information he gave me. Because for some reason he seemed like a man who didn't give anyone *any* part of himself. "Arlo Malkovich."

I nodded slowly, not sure what to say, but then common sense kicked in, and I replied, "Lina Michaels."

He leaned back in the chair and regarded me. "Lina Michaels."

The way he said it made me feel as if I'd been caught evading the truth. Of course it was a lie, but if he was calling me out, he didn't blatantly do it. I licked my lips again and nodded, not trusting my voice.

He tipped his chin in my direction. "What happened to your neck?"

There was this weird tone in his voice, as if he knew the answer to that question already. But clearly he couldn't have known the truth. I'd left while he'd still been finishing his meal, and my assailant had taken me into an alley. It had just been him and me until I left him clutching his family jewels and ran.

I found myself making sure my hair was still covering my neck before I shook my head. "Nothing. Just an unfortunate event." I cleared my throat and started shifting on my feet, not liking the way his look made me feel.

But fortunately he didn't press for more answers. I didn't know why he even asked about my neck in the first place. It was very clear by his stoic expression he didn't care one way or another.

"You come here quite frequently." I could have slapped a hand over my mouth at what just came from me.

One of his dark eyebrows crept up ever so slightly, as if he was surprised I'd been so forward with my statement.

"I do," he said slowly, evenly.

Tonight he wore a dark jacket, a white pressed shirt underneath. He looked more like a businessman than somebody who should be dining in the middle of the night at Sal's.

I could see tattoos that crept up from underneath the collar of his shirt along the base of his throat. I could even see some on his wrists that also marked the back of his hands. I wondered how much more of him was covered in ink.

"Yes, the usual, Lina."

The way he said my name sent a visible shiver through me. And it was very clear by his expression that he didn't miss it.

My pulse was rushing through my ears, so I couldn't think clearly, let alone speak. I forced myself to turn around and walk toward the back to put his order in, and once again, the entire time, I felt his gaze on me.

Who was this man? What was he to me? And how was I going to handle it?

Arlo

After I left Sal's, I knew exactly where I *needed* to go. Yama, or the Pit as it was called in English, was like a split personality. One where, on the surface, you had something pretty, something tolerable. Socially acceptable. Beautiful women, exotic drinks, an atmosphere expensive and pleasing to the eye. A man could get his wildest fantasies fulfilled in the rooms above.

But then there were the bowels of Yama. The pit of hell itself. And inside that was so deep and dark not even light penetrated.

And for a long time the Pit had been the only way for me to diminish some of the darkness that lived inside me.

The killing, the cleaning and fixing for the Ruin, for the Bratva, did help satiate all the heinous shit I felt deep down. Having somebody to go up against, someone who had the strength and agility, the same evilness lurking in them and willingness to give it back tenfold, was a whole different kind of fight.

It was the hits to my body, that pain wrapped up in brutality, that made me feel something other than the

brokenness that shaped the man I was today.

And it was in this sphere where the bloodthirsty anger of what made a person survive came to the surface. It came alive, growing until it threatened to swallow you whole. And then you unleashed it within the metal cage, letting that blood and flesh cover your chest and soak the ground, a visual that you were strong, that you were here, that no one and nothing could take you down.

It meant you were *real*.

I sat on a small, bloodstained wooden bench in the corner of the cage and focused on my taped hands, my fingers extending and contracting as I flexed them. I hadn't been to the Pit in several months, not feeling that darkness creep up on me.

But ever since that all-consuming desire for Lina arose, I'd felt myself starting to unravel, to fray around the edges as it spread outward until I'd be nothing but tatters on the ground.

The need to possess her had started to control me. And that was a very dangerous situation. I'd never given any part of myself to another person, never allowed anyone to have that kind of control over me.

So this was what I needed, to brutally destroy, to feel pain... to allow someone to give it to me.

And then my opponent stepped into the cage, a six-foot-five hulking beast who went by the Russian name Razoreniye. Or was simply known as *Ruin* in English. A killer for the Bratva, a man who was darker and deadlier than even me. He had no mercy, no empathy... nothing holding him back from being as dark as he wanted.

And he was exactly the man I wanted to fight tonight. He'd be as violent toward me as I would be toward him.

And right now I needed that more than anything.

He stepped in close, the lifelike wolf head tattoo covering the entire front part of his chest and other Bratva insignia inked on his big body.

The sounds of the bastards thirsty for the blood that would spill rang through the room. Bids for who would win this fight were shouted out in Russian, the words flowing together so they all sounded like the same string of notes through my head.

I stood, rolling my head around my neck, adrenaline making my muscles feel bigger, more powerful. If Razoreniye could have smiled in sadistic pleasure, I was sure he'd do it now. As it was, we both faced off, neither of us giving anything away.

And when the bell rang, all hell broke loose.

We were two tornadoes slamming into each other, fists a blur, the punches coordinated, the pain a welcome retreat. I absorbed it all, letting Razoreniye hit me more times than I'd ever allow another person to. And it was because that was the only way my inner war was tamed.

The only way I could gather any kind of fucking control.



I HAD A BUSTED LIP, a cut above my eye, and the dark pleasure of the relief I'd yearned for coursing through me as I left Yama and stepped out into the night, cold fall night of Desolation, New York. The feeling of my cell vibrating in my coat pocket had me reaching inside and pulling it out as I made my way toward my Mercedes.

I didn't recognize the number that flashed across the screen, but it would have only been someone close to me, or the Ruin, as no other soul would have had this number.

I hit Accept and put the phone to my ear, not saying anything. Whoever it was could either start speaking or hang up after all they heard was dead air.

"We need your assistance, Arlo." The deep voice was instantly recognizable. "We need your help with a cleanup."

Twenty minutes later I pulled to a stop in front of Butcher and Son, a decades-old abandoned slaughterhouse on the outskirts of Desolation. I parked my Mercedes and let the

headlights illuminate the large bay doors. Although I didn't see any other vehicles, I knew what waited for me inside.

After killing the engine and getting out, I scanned my surroundings, my hand tucked into the inner pocket of my jacket and my fingers wrapping around the grip of my gun.

When I was confident I was alone, I went to the trunk, grabbed my duffel that held the basic supplies I'd need to clean up the body, and made my way toward the slaughterhouse.

Once inside, the scent of age and mold slammed into my sinuses. My vision adjusted to the darkness, and I searched the large interior of Butcher and Son. I spotted the corpse in the corner, but the dark shape not far from it had my body coming even more alert.

With my hand back on the grip of the gun, I moved toward the two bodies. It was when I was a few feet away that I stopped and focused my attention on one of the men lying supine on the slaughterhouse floor.

Stone. Another associate of the Ruin. And he was alive. *Really fucking interesting turn of events.*

If I were a man who could be surprised, this would have been one of those times. As it was, I felt nothing but annoyance that this wouldn't be an easy, quick fix like I planned, and instead I'd deal with two bodies instead of one.

Stone was a man I didn't know much about, but one who was just as connected with the Ruin as I was. Although he and I weren't friends and had no connection other than the same crime syndicate, we'd crossed professional paths more than once, and I did hold mild respect for him because of that.

I didn't see him as even an acquaintance, but he also wasn't my enemy, and because of the latter, I'd help get him the fuck out of here instead of killing him. Because if he were anyone else, any other poor bastard who was in the wrong place at the wrong time and allowed themselves to be vulnerable, I'd get rid of them so there wasn't even more fallback.

Stone was lying on the ground, the corpse not far from him. If I hadn't seen Stone's chest rise and fall, I might have taken his otherwise still body as being long dead.

When I was beside him, I crouched and just stared at him for a moment. I didn't know what the fuck had gone down here for Stone to even be in this situation, nor did I care. He needed out so I could get my shit done.

I said in a low, deep voice, "Wake up, dumbass." He didn't respond, and I said louder, "Open your eyes." Stone groaned, and a moment later he obeyed, his eyes opening and the fuzziness in the dark depths fading as the seconds moved by and he got his bearings. "Come on, time for you to get the fuck gone, Stone."

"Arlo?" he prompted gruffly before coughing, blood spraying from his lips and covering my shirt with red droplets.

I glanced down at the blood on my white shirt that looked black on the material from the ominous lighting. *Fucking perfect.* "Come on," I said again and helped him off the ground. "Let's get you out of here so I can do my job."

Stone didn't say anything as he looked at my face, his gaze taking in the busted lip and cut above my eye.

"What the fuck?" he grunted out.

I didn't bother responding to the clear fact that I'd gotten in a fight. If you were part of the Ruin, you knew not to ask too many questions.

He braced his weight against me. "But how? Why?"

I didn't know if he'd been hit over the head and that's why he kept running his mouth, but I helped him out of the warehouse. Maybe some fresh air would clear his mind. "See, those are questions. And I don't want fucking questions."

"I don't understand."

I wasn't sure what he was going on about, most likely private business. Either way, not my concern. Stone rested against the side of the slaughterhouse, and I grabbed my cell. After a quick call to the Ruin for a pickup, I disconnected the

call and shoved my cell back in my pocket. I knew whoever wanted Stone dead would want confirmation, but that wasn't my fucking concern.

Ten minutes later a car's headlights flashed, and the vehicle was coming to a stop beside us.

"Just get the fuck out of here, Stone. You want to survive? Leave."

He nodded. "But what about you?"

I shook my head and said nothing. I stared him in the eyes, seeing what a hardheaded bastard he was.

I ran a hand over my face, feeling a rush of pleasure when my palm scraped over my busted lip.

"Thanks." He opened the back passenger-side door.

I tipped my head in acknowledgment. Fortunately he didn't say anything else, just sat in the back and shut the door.

I stood there and watched him leave, pissed that my otherwise "normalcy" of a fix had been met with extra strings tonight.

When the car was long gone, the cloaking darkness closing in on me once more, I turned and headed back inside, about to do what I did best.

Surround myself in everything fucked up.

Galina

I curled my fingers around the edge of the newspaper, trying to stop my hands from shaking, but it was a losing battle. The black-and-white picture and headline started to run together the longer I stared at them. It was as if what I was looking at mocked me, reminding me that my life had never been easy, that I'd never get the happily ever after I'd read about in books.

Michael Boyd. Thirty-nine years old. Convicted sexual assault and rape felon. Multiple drug counts. Two probation violations. Details not being released as of now, but homicide is being looked into.

THE PICTURE I currently looked at was the same drunk who'd accosted me in the alley. It was a mug shot, one where he looked just as deranged as he had every time I'd seen him in the diner. I closed my eyes and breathed out slowly as memories of that night in the alley played back. With it only being a couple of days since the attack, it was still very fresh, but all my life, I'd learned how to bury those feelings, that fear and anxiousness, the heavy weight that could make you suffocate.

"It's crazy, right?"

I opened my eyes and blinked a few times to look at Laura, who stood beside me. She was staring at the newspaper, her brows pulled low.

“Crazy?” Was she talking about the fact that it was a murder so close, or because she recognized him? I knew she’d seen him harass me. It was hard to miss when he was loud and obnoxious and didn’t exactly hide that he was an asshole whenever he’d come in.

She tipped her chin toward the paper. “That’s the same asshole who came in here and was a prick to you. I remember what a bastard he was. I can’t say he didn’t get what he deserved.” She pointed to the charges he’d been convicted of.

“Yeah,” I said softly and folded the paper up before shoving it under the counter. I didn’t want to look at it anymore. Laura blinked a few times as if pulling herself out of her own thoughts.

“I really hate this fucking city most days.”

I snorted. “Most days?”

She gave me a tight nod. “Ninety-nine percent of the time, okay.”

I laughed softly. I’d only been here a couple of months, and I despised everything Desolation stood for. The only positive thing about this hell was that it helped keep me hidden.

“Anyway,” she said. “Good riddance.”

I couldn’t help but smile warily. I was tired, just really damn tired. I wanted to save up as much as I could so I could move to a better place, a place where I’d reinvent myself, a place where the past wasn’t always chasing me.

But that seemed like such a pipe dream and not at all realistic. The truth was I’d probably be dead before my twenty-fifth birthday, and that was being optimistic.

“So...”

The way she paused made me think she was hesitant to ask me whatever was on her mind.

“Total subject shift, but you want to make a little—easy—extra money?”

My interest was instantly piqued, as if she'd read my mind on needing money to get out of here. But my hesitance had risen instantly. Earning money was never easy.

“You wouldn't have to do anything illegal, nothing depraved or that goes against your moral compass.” She laughed a little, but it wasn't forced.

“I'm listening,” I said slowly, cautiously.

“So I waitress at this bar sometimes, and they're looking for a couple of extra hands.” When I didn't say anything, she continued, “It's that Russian bar called *Sdat'sya*.” I shrugged, never having heard of it. “They are short-staffed, and it's basically just serving drinks to a bunch of old, rich, Russian businessmen.”

Old, rich, and businessmen all in the same sentence would always have warning bells going off.

“The tips are incredible, especially the drunker they get,” she teased. “One time I made over five hundred in just a night.”

I would've said no right away, simply because a lot of red flags shot up when I thought about going to some obscure bar and serving drinks to old, rich men. But the money aspect had me not declining right away. “So what's the catch?”

She grimaced. “Sometimes, they can get a little handsy. But they have staff—bouncers, I guess—who have always made sure nothing gets out of hand. Not unless you want to make a little *extra* money.” She lifted her eyebrows.

Sex for money was what she implied. I slowly shook my head. “I'm not a prostitute, Laura.”

She shook her head. “Neither am I. I'm just saying that's some of the stuff you could see—exchanging of money and... yeah, all that.”

Now it was my turn to grimace at the thought of crusty old men trying to cop a feel or worse, thinking I'd put out.

“I don’t want to pressure you, but I know you need the money just like me.” At my no doubt surprised look, she snorted and shook her head. “Come on, you don’t have to actually *tell* me you need money for me to know. You live in Desolation. Enough said.”

True enough. Although she’d mentioned at one point the possibility of us living together, I didn’t know what my future held. And with Henry and his thugs no doubt coming after me at some point, I didn’t want Laura thrown in that mix and dragged down.

I couldn’t deny it. She was right, of course. But I had to weigh the pros and cons of putting myself in a position where things could escalate and worsen.

“I just wanted to offer it to you. We are there to serve drinks, not give handjobs... not unless you want,” she said on a laugh, and I couldn’t help the way my lips twitched in amusement.

A little sliver of reality interjected itself into my thoughts because I knew I couldn’t afford to pass up an opportunity like this. I never got chances to supplement my income. And to be honest, any extra income was better than nothing. I’d be closer to leaving Desolation. And maybe if I did a good enough job, they’d let me work other nights there.

“Okay,” I said, and she grinned wider. “I don’t have anything nice to wear though.”

She waved off my words. “No worries. They keep a wardrobe, because they prefer the waitresses to wear certain things to keep up with the aesthetics of the place.”

I was feeling a little less sure about this. What kind of place was this where they had expendable clothing all because they wanted to keep up appearances? I understood uniforms, but I doubted this place gave everyone the same drab apparel, especially if they catered to rich and powerful men.

I should’ve just assumed the night in question would probably end up coming back to bite me in the ass. That’s

usually how the events in my life went. But beggars couldn't be choosers.

And I was absolutely a beggar at this point.



I'D LEFT work twenty minutes ago, making quick time as I walked the dark, septic streets of Desolation. I'd been convinced someone would attack again, but fortunately aside from a few catcalls, I was left relatively alone.

Once I was inside my apartment building, I still didn't let go of my canister of pepper spray. The sun would be rising soon, my feet ached, and my head hurt, but I couldn't wholly complain. I'd made decent tips and even snagged some food from the diner so I wouldn't go to bed hungry and wouldn't have to stop at the convenience store for some prepackaged shit. And I had a job lined up that would—hopefully—make me some decent money.

I started taking the narrow, trash-laden stairs, the scent of stale cigarette smoke, old liquor, and the remnants of what was probably piss and vomit lingering in the air. I could hear the heavy bass of rap music playing from one of the apartments on an upper level. A couple was fighting loudly, and in another, there was the sound of glass breaking—normalcy in this building.

Once I got to the landing of the floor my apartment was on, I took a moment to catch my breath before I made my way to my front door.

I rounded the corner, and my steps faltered slightly when I saw my neighbor leaning against the interior frame of his door. A cloud of smoke filled his apartment and spilled out into the hallway, a dirty haze that made my vision slightly fuzzy. He brought his cigarette to his lips and took a long drag from it as he stared at me, the small cloud of smoke leaving his mouth as he exhaled.

He wore a stained, what was once probably white T-shirt, dark pit stains under the arms, a brown ring painting the collar, and a slight gut protruding from underneath the otherwise

stretched material. His jeans looked like they hadn't been washed since he got them, and his feet were bare, his toenails too long and too yellow. And the entire time he had his focus latched on to me like a damn leech, refusing to let go.

I averted my gaze quickly and stopped at my door, fumbling with my key for a second before I pushed it into the lock and opened the door. I shut it behind me, turned the deadbolt, and slipped the chain lock in place, then leaned against it.

The domestic shouting sounded louder and right down the hall, and I closed my eyes and thought about what it would be like to be someone else.

But fantasies weren't real. They were fine when you thought you could escape, but once reality slammed back in, that pain was even stronger than before.

Galina

The cab pulled to a stop in front of the bar where Laura had told me to meet her. She'd said to be here at ten, which might have seemed late as hell to start a shift, but when you were in the city, it was when the darkness really settled in that life started to come alive.

"We're here," the cab driver said in a thick Eastern European accent. I handed him the amount it cost for the trip, an expense I normally wouldn't have spent, given the fact that I was trying to save up, but I wasn't about to hike it across town at this hour. Going a few blocks from Sal's to my apartment was one thing. Walking to this bar would have been suicide.

I climbed out, and as soon as the cab door was shut, it drove away. *No changing my mind now.*

I tipped my head back and took in the three stories of the building in front of me. The entire structure was black brick, with twin black vinyl doors situated front and center and a small light illuminating it. Compared to all the other buildings on this block, it looked totally out of place.

The sign above the door was red neon and spelled out *Sdat'sya*.

I pulled out my cell phone and sent a quick text to Laura to let her know I was here. Aside from meeting at this place at ten, she hadn't given me any other instructions.

I wasn't brave enough to go through those front doors, which by the way were unguarded. Part of me felt a little bit of trepidation about what lay on the other side, as if I'd be walking into hell itself.

I wasn't stupid in not assuming a lot of Desolation was controlled and owned by the crime syndicate. I knew in Vegas the Italian mafia had a large hand in things. In fact, many cities around the US probably ran the same way. It was just how the world worked, how things were done. And so I tried to keep my head down and my business to myself.

Of course, sometimes that shit hits you right in the face anyway, and there was no trying to come out without being scarred.

Because the powerful controlled the powerless.

So the fact that this particular building, which screamed money and had a illicit air to it, not to mention was obviously Russian owned, told me it was probably controlled by the Russian mafia. The Bratva.

I looked down the street to my left, then to my right. A police car slowly drove toward me, and I stepped farther back, the cold stone wall of the building stopping my retreat. I knew enough about law enforcement in cities like this, ones that were corrupt and twisted, where criminals had the final say and money could buy anyone and anything.

So the men, the law—who would be the likely prospect when you needed something or when running or hiding or begging for sanctuary—they weren't the ones you'd ask for help. They were the type of men who took cash in back alleys and looked the other way. They were the type of men you ran from. Fast and without looking over your shoulder, because they'd be right behind you.

And as the police cruiser slowed to a crawl as it passed me, the driver glancing in my direction, his grin was big, with all white teeth in a shadowy interior.

A shiver worked through me despite the still air. I wrapped my jacket tighter around me and watched the cruiser disappear down the street.

A second later my phone vibrated with an incoming text, and I looked down to see Laura's message.

Give me a sec. I'll bring you in.

I tucked my phone back into my jacket pocket, and a moment later I heard footsteps coming from the side. Laura stepped out from the corner of the building and searched around before her gaze settled on me. She smiled and gestured for me to follow her.

Once I was beside her, we headed down a barely lit alley. "Are you sure about this?" I couldn't help asking as I looked around the dumpster- and trash-filled alley.

"It's safe. Don't worry. The crime around here is nonexistent." She snorted as if she knew why. I certainly knew the answer to why no one fucked with this place. *The mafia.*

Even criminals knew when they shouldn't fuck with the big boys.

We only walked a handful of seconds before she stopped in front of a rust-colored metal door. She pounded on it a couple of times before stepping back. It swung open, the metal hinges creaking loudly and echoing off the buildings.

A big, burly guy with not much of a neck and a jagged scar slashed down the side of his face held the door open. I looked at him hesitantly, his expression closed off and slightly dangerous.

I quickly glanced forward and followed Laura inside. When we entered the anteroom, the door closed behind us with a loud *bang*, loud enough that I jumped slightly. I blamed my frazzled nerves on the foreign terrain I was currently embarking in, but the truth was closer to the fact that this entire situation just didn't sit well with me.

And that was probably because I knew the person or people who owned this place weren't good men. *And those are the ones I'm trying to stay away from.*

"Don't worry about Boris," Laura said and looked over her shoulder. "The doorman." She tipped her chin to the burly, scar-faced guy. "He's harmless. At least I assume he is. He rarely speaks and just kind of hangs around in the background. Or he does whenever I've worked."

I looked over my shoulder at Boris, a big, hulking shadow behind us. I faced forward quickly, no doubt in my mind that this man was the *furthest* thing from "not dangerous" as you got.

The anteroom and hallway opened into a larger room, where a handful of girls looked through racks of clothing.

Laura stopped and turned to face me so suddenly that I stumbled back. "What?" I looked around, thinking I'd made some faux pas and hadn't realized. She didn't speak right away and started biting her lip. "Laura, just say it."

"So you have the waitressing job, but the owner of the bar wants to meet you to decide which room to put you in for the night."

I furrowed my brow. "Which room to *put* me in for the night?"

"Yeah." She kept biting her lip. "It's how it works. The way this bar is set up, there are several rooms, kind of like tiers on where the clientele lands. The higher the tier, the more important the patrons."

I nodded slowly. "Okay. So if you're not up to the owner's physical standard, you're shit out of luck and get a bottom level?"

At least she had the decency to flush as she nodded. "I know how it seems, but no matter what, the waitresses still bring home good money, even at the lowest level."

"So we might not even be working in the same room?"

She shook her head and looked apologetic. Not that it mattered if we were in the same room, but I would have preferred a familiar face. Not to mention she'd acted like we would be together because she didn't want to do it alone.

It seemed a little bit strange to me, but I wasn't going to complain about how a business was. This made me feel like, if I was given a lower-end room, clearly the owner didn't like the way I looked. I told myself it really didn't matter in the long run.

Money was money, and I desperately needed it.

Laura gave me a reassuring smile, then eyed me up and down. "Let's get you changed first and do your hair and makeup."

Hair and makeup?

Before I could complain about needing to be dolled up to sling drinks, I told myself getting prettied up would help with tips. Rich old men, especially ones who were drinking copious amounts of booze, tended to throw money at women who caught their eye. Not that I liked it, but it was a fact in the world, and I'd use it to my advantage.

I was just going through the motions as I stood there and let Laura pick out a dress for me. It was white and slinky, covering up the important parts but showing enough that it didn't leave much to the imagination.

"Seriously?" I asked as she handed it to me. "And white?"

She shrugged but smiled. "Trust me, the whole white-young-and-innocent thing will help with tips. This is old rich men we are talking about."

I was already regretting this.

Ten minutes later I was dressed, my hair styled in a soft updo, little wisps framing my face, and a light layer of makeup put on. I stared at myself in the mirror, and although I recognized the woman looking back at me, she also seemed like a stranger. This wasn't who I was. *This is for the endgame. Save money and get the hell out of here.*

I exhaled and was handed a pair of stilettos, which I grudgingly took and slipped on. I looked down at my feet, praying I could not only walk but carry drinks at the same time.

“Gorgeous,” Laura said, and I glanced at her reflection in the mirror. “Ready?”

I turned to look at her. She was beautiful as well, with a bloodred dress that ended midthigh and had a slit up the side. She was well-endowed in the chest department—unlike me—and the dress accentuated her breasts.

We left the dressing room and walked down a short hallway before she stopped in front of a closed door. I didn’t miss how Boris followed us, an uncomfortable shadow right behind me. After three heavy knocks, a deep voice called out in another language from the other side of the door.

Boris moved in front of Laura and opened the door before stepping aside and letting us in. Laura went in first, me following behind and feeling awfully bare all of a sudden, which had nothing to do with what I wore. The room wasn’t overly large, but it was exquisitely decorated. Black leather, sleek dark woods, and very obvious Russian-themed decor.

There was a massive, intimidating desk that sat across from the door, and the man perched behind and the look on his face instantly had warning bells going crazy in my head. My throat tightened at the dark power that clearly surrounded him.

To his right there was a large fireplace, the flames flickering over the faux logs. A black leather couch was situated in front of it and taken up by two men who looked about my age. They were similar in appearance and build, so I was safe to assume they were related to not only each other, but the man behind the desk as well. One of the men, the older of the two, brought a square-cut glass to his mouth, his eyes locked on me as he took a slow sip. A shiver moved up my spine, and I tried to suppress it before turning my attention to the man behind the desk.

Boris said nothing and stepped aside so the man behind the desk could get a good look at Laura and me. She seemed

relaxed enough, but I felt this uncomfortable pressure surrounding me all of a sudden. The man didn't hide how he blatantly checked us out.

His eyes seemed very dark—and not in the aspect of color. They just appeared closed off from the world, maybe even his humanity. He leaned back slowly, his leather chair making a soft sound from the shift of weight. For a long second no one spoke as he looked between Laura and me. And then he started speaking in Russian, his voice a smooth, deep timbre.

When the man behind the desk stood, I took an involuntary step back at his size. I immediately regretted showing this weakness and fear, because it didn't go unseen by him, not in the way this glint of amusement filled his eyes.

I heard a little chuckle from one of the men sitting on the couch, but I didn't look over. A survival instinct told me I needed to keep my gaze locked on the man currently advancing on Laura and me.

He stopped in front of Laura first, but I didn't miss how his focus kept flicking toward me. He didn't touch her, but then again, he didn't need to by how strong his gaze was as it moved up and down her body. Laura faced forward, her eyes locked on something straight ahead. It was very clear she had gone through this process before. Was this just something he did for every woman who worked here? It seemed so... wrong.

“Svetlana,” he said as he stopped in front of Laura. He nodded to Boris, and Laura stepped back, her face a mask of indifference. Or maybe it was fear.

She put on a completely different persona at this place compared to Sal's. Then again, Sal's was like the juices at the bottom of a dumpster in comparison to this place.

He stepped close to me, and my body tensed involuntarily. The corner of his lips tipped up as if he found it funny... or it pleased him.

“What's your name, *dorogoy*?”

I felt light-headed, my heart racing so hard and fast I worried there was a possibility I'd pass out. I licked my lips and whispered, "Lina." He didn't show any facial expressions, just watched me with cold indifference.

"Do you know who I am?" His voice was thickly accented, yet the words were smooth and clear, his English flawless. I slowly shook my head, and that had a smile spreading across his mouth, but it wasn't the type of smile that put someone at ease. If a predator in the wild could grin, I knew this was what it would look like.

"It's always so thrilling when someone doesn't know who I am." The arrogance laced in his words terrified me. "It's Leonid, darling."

He didn't circle me like he had Laura, not at first. He stood just a foot away from me and stared, not speaking anymore, as if he'd made his quota for the day. The weight of his gaze was unsettling. I didn't know what he was looking for, or if he saw the answer to his own question, but after a second he started walking around me in the same process he had for Laura.

I could feel his gaze rake over each part of my body, as if his eyes were fingers and he was touching my calves, the backs of my thighs, my ass, and moving up the length of my spine. He was in front of me again, his focus on my chest, then lower. I stopped myself from covering my breasts and the junction between my legs, because even though I was fully dressed, I felt like this man could see right through the material.

"Svetlana?" one of the men on the couch asked.

He slowly shook his head. "*Net.*"

A string of Russian was spoken, the man before me holding my focus as if he knew who I truly was, as if he could see my deepest secrets.

He was like Arlo in that regard.

Dangerous.

"*Nevinovnyy.*" Leonid's voice was low and deep. But sharp... so sharp. "*Da,*" he said as if answering his own

question. “Anastasia.”

I opened my mouth to ask what was going on, but Laura took my hand and led me out of the room and back to where the other women and racks of clothing were.

“What’s going on?” I finally asked when we stopped, and she faced me. “That was the weirdest damn interview, or whatever the hell that was, I’ve ever experienced. Who was that man?”

“Leonid Petrov,” she said, but I didn’t miss the slight tension in her voice. “He owns the bar.” Her shoulders relaxed. “And I’m sure a shitload of other places, and big connections, no doubt.” She didn’t emphasize what she meant, but I got the gist. Connections in the crime world. I glanced around, and I felt like the pressure that had surrounded us when we were in front of Leonid slowly dissipated the longer we were away from him. “Damn, I wish we had gotten the same room together, but we snagged the top two tiers, so good money regardless.”

I just shook my head. “This is the weirdest night I’ve had in a long time.”

She snorted, and we both grinned genuinely.

“It’s confusing the first time,” she finally said. “Each room is named after a woman.”

I stifled my eye roll. *Of course they are.*

“I got Svetlana. You got Anastasia... which is the highest-level tier. It’s the one where the most important clients stay. So, in all regards, you hit the motherload for the tip jackpot.”

For a moment I thought about just saying never mind and leaving. This was all so weird, and I was definitely an outsider. The women around me speaking Russian and the elite atmosphere solidified that.

I opened my mouth to thank Laura for getting me the job, but I changed my mind when the words froze in my throat as I saw a woman walk in. She held a stack of folded-up bills and proceeded to unroll them and count her very clear tip money.

Holy shit. There are hundred-dollar bills in there. I took a steadying breath and looked at Laura again. I could see by her expression she expected me to bail. Only this one time. If I make enough, this night will be a game changer.

“Okay. Let’s do this.” Even I could hear how hesitant I sounded.

Arlo

Petrov wants to meet you tonight at *Sdat'sya*. Midnight.
Sharp.

That was the text I'd gotten an hour ago, and as I pulled my car to the side parking of *Sdat'sya*, I checked the clock on the dashboard. Ten minutes until midnight.

When Leonid wanted to meet you personally, it was never a good thing. He always wanted something. Always tried to squeeze the last drop of blood from your body before he tossed your corpse aside.

And I knew what this was about. I knew Leonid was going to try to talk me into joining the Bratva instead of being a free agent—a mercenary even—with the Ruin. He'd tried before, but with men like him, they were never satisfied if they didn't get exactly what they wanted.

Leonid was one persistent bastard.

I made my way toward the front entrance, pulled the heavy black door open, and immediately heard the soft sounds of traditional Russian music playing overhead. There was a Bratva soldier situated in the corner of the room, his long

leather jacket concealing the no doubt numerous guns and knives he had attached to his body underneath.

This front entrance room was nothing but the first layer of *Sdat'sya*. It was the makeup before you got to the meat and heart of what this establishment really was.

There was a bar across from me, a few of the clientele lounging on the dark brown leather couches situated around the room. The majority of the people were in the other rooms, each one blocked off from prying eyes and ears, all of them housing a powerful, influential, and wealthy clientele. This wasn't just a bar; it was a place where a lot of the Bratva and powerful associates and allies who worked for and with them made deals, talked business, and used the amenities the Desolation Bratva had in abundance.

Drugs, booze, and women.

Behind the red and blacklight illuminated bar was a saying a lot of Leonid Petrov's men lived by.

Мы грешим, так как бы беспечны и не думаем об этом

WE SIN because we're careless, and we don't think about it. Or so it was translated loosely into English. But the truth was, that was a lie. Anyone involved in our world knew what the fuck they were doing. They were aware of their "sins," ones they didn't even see as such because the fuckers got off on giving pain to others. Like me. Like anyone associated with the Ruin.

No one bothered me. No one tried to stop me. Some even looked at me with clear fear and hesitancy in their eyes. Anyone who worked at *Sdat'sya* was part of the Ruin and therefore knew exactly who *I* was. They'd seen me at Yama, watched me destroy my opponents. They knew my reputation... the fact that I was a father killer. I wore that badge of patricide like a fucking honor.

I passed the bar and made my way down the hall. There was a Bratva soldier standing at the end by the elevator. He straightened from the wall and gave me a nod of acknowledgment. He said nothing as he hit the button for the

elevator to go upstairs, and a second later the elevator doors opened.

I stepped inside, the soldier following me in. Once we were ascending, I sorted through what would happen tonight. The one other time I had personally spoken with Leonid was right after I'd killed my father. He wanted me to join the Bratva then. I'd professionally declined. He hadn't pressed it, but I knew men like him. I knew *him* specifically. The way he worked, the things he demanded. How he expected the world to fall at his feet. And for the most part, it did.

But I wasn't like most of the world. I'd never submit to any man.

Leonid Petrov was dangerous and violent. He was a sociopath who killed simply because it was Sunday or he'd just finished a family meal. And his two sons, Dmitry and Nikolai, followed perfectly in his footsteps. Baby psychopaths in the fucking making.

"He's in his office, waiting for you," the soldier said in Russian.

I headed toward Leonid's office, passing closed doors that led to private rooms for his clientele. There was a soldier standing off to the side beside Leonid's office. He gave me a nod before turning to open the door for me.

I stepped inside and instantly took in the surroundings. You had to know the layout of any place to be prepared. I saw Dmitry and Nikolai sitting on the couch in front of the fire. Dmitry, eldest son to Leonid and heir to the Desolation Bratva underworld empire, watched me with the same sociopathic glint in his eyes I knew was reflected back from mine. I'd heard the stories of Dmitry, of his initiation, of how he'd slaughtered five men with brutal clarity and force that had even momentarily impressed me. He'd be the perfect Pakhan one day, no doubt, a leader who made Satan cower in the dark.

Nikolai, Petrov's youngest son, let a slow, sardonic grin spread across his face. He might have been the "lighter" of the two in terms of brutality, but his easygoing attitude and what others might see as "soft" was nothing but a twisted facade of

a man who I knew had once torn off the finger- and toenails of a poor bastard who'd cut him off in traffic.

Nikolai didn't bother with the glass for his alcohol and instead held up the whiskey bottle and tipped it in my direction in greeting before giving me a wink as he brought it to his lips and took a long drink.

Leonid was in the middle of a conversation on his cell phone. My shoulders tensed and my fingers twitched to go for my gun just being in the same room with the bastard.

Once he was off the phone, he leaned back and clasped his hands to rest them on top of his abdomen. He gave me a slow smile, one that was anything but pleasant. The fucker didn't know happiness, not if it didn't involve slitting someone's throat and bathing in their blood.

Dmitry and Nikolai started a conversation with each other, the Russian too low for me to hear. Leonid rose and walked around his desk before leaning against the edge and staring at me with dark, unflinching eyes.

"I wanted to personally thank you for handling the... little issue we had the other night with Maksim." Leonid's words had his sons' conversation stopping. Although I kept my gaze on the Pakhan, I sensed his sons standing and walking toward him before they flanked their father. Their expressions were the same stony composure as the leader of the Bratva.

"No thanks needed," I said, focusing on Leonid. The other two little shits not something I was afraid of. "It's what I do."

Leonid inclined his head in agreement. "You can't understand how hard it was for me not to just dispose of that trash myself." He took his hands out of his pocket and smoothed them over his tie, one that was silk and colored bloodred, the same shade that seeped out of the hundred different wounds on the man who'd offended Leonid. "But you see, it wouldn't look good for me in our business. We don't deal with that messy side of things." He grinned and held his hands out. "Bad for business, you understand. We need to keep up appearances."

I wasn't sure why he was telling me any of this. He'd taken a fucking melon baller to the poor fuck's eyes. His fingers had been cut off and part of his scalp torn from his skull. Not to mention the other twenty brutal acts I'd noticed covering his body. Or missing from it. And all because the bastard had *looked* at Leonid's eighteen-year-old daughter. His precious Tatiana.

Although Leonid and his sons could've been called psychotic, and that would've been an understatement, I was pretty sure the fucker who had his life ended pretty damn violently had probably done more than just *looked*.

The kind of death the man had gotten would have been because of an act of aggression toward her, an insult whispered in her direction, or even an obscene look. The fucker probably hit on Tatiana.

His dick had still been intact—or so I'd unfortunately noticed, since he'd been naked when I'd been dispatched to get rid of the body—so I knew he hadn't actually touched Tatiana. If the poor bastard had, they would've cut his cock off and shoved it in his mouth to make a point.

I waited for Leonid to say what else he wanted. The *real* reason he'd called me here tonight wasn't to give me personal thanks for the job I'd done.

“Come, have a drink with me.”

Before I could've said anything—not that I would've declined the invitation, which would've been in bad form—Leonid and his sons were walking past me and out the door. I followed the pack out of his office, the soldier coming up behind me as we made our way toward one of the elite rooms. On the door, a beautiful script in Russian was written in gold leaf.

Анастасия. *Anastasia.*

The double doors swung open as if on their own, and I followed Leonid inside. He headed straight toward the bar that stretched along the entire back wall, the decor in Anastasia all black-lacquered and golden accents.

I noticed a drunk and boisterous man off to the side, his Bratva tattoos visible on his arms deeming him a high ranking member. His voice was slurred as he shouted in Russian at the sex workers who'd been brought in as entertainment. His words were crude and sexual, and it was clear by his heavy-handed intoxication that he was probably a violent drunk.

I curled my lip in disgust as he started manhandling one of the women, her high-pitched giggle practiced if not forced.

There were a handful of other Russian men in the room, their overly excited and loud voices, the illegal cigars they smoked, and the constantly filled glasses of liquor creating a dangerous, sloppy atmosphere. Too much groping, damn near fucking, and a lot of money being exchanged for "extras."

The furniture was set up in several loose circles of couches and chairs, men sitting on the leather with barely dressed women perched on their laps. An elaborate crystal chandelier hung from the center of the ceiling, prisms of light cutting across the room and giving an almost hazy quality to the surroundings.

A fire roared between two large, dark couches, the flickering, low light casting shadows but unable to hide the debauchery currently taking place. Women were starting to become half-dressed as their breasts were exposed, hands disappearing into laps and through open flies and unbuttoned slacks.

The smell of Cuban cigar smoke filled the air, the low, sexually laced female laughter sounding in my ears. When we were at the bar, I kept my body sideways so I could see the entire room and have the entrance in sight. I kept my right hand free in case I needed it to pull my gun out. And then I just stared at Leonid as he ordered four glasses of whiskey. As the drinks were being filled, Leonid gave me another sharklike grin, his teeth white and straight, his incisors a little too sharp.

"I was discussing with my sons the tension rising within the Bratva and Cosa Nostra, as well as with the 'Ndrangheta, who have just claimed territory in the west. Pressure is very

high right now, many deaths as territories are being fought over.”

I didn't say anything. The bartender slid the drinks in front of us. I took mine, keeping my eyes on Leonid, and brought it to my mouth.

He grabbed his glass and tipped it in my direction before he brought it to his mouth and took a slow drink of the amber-colored liquid. I followed suit. His sons stood behind him like watchful shadows, their dark gazes locked on me as if they saw me as a threat. They were smart in that regard.

But I had no intentions of ending Leonid tonight, even if I thought he was a slimy fucker and the Bratva could do with a stronger Pakhan, one who was more rational and less psychotic.

As he'd said before... it would be bad for business.

“Because of the mounting violence,” he said and set his glass down on the bar, his fingers staying wrapped around the crystal, “I'm going to need a powerful army behind me.”

“The Bratva is stronger than ever,” I replied.

“It is, but you and I both know how easily that can splinter before breaking irrevocably.” He glanced around the room, but not once did I take my focus from him. “And you and I have a history, do we not?” He stared into my eyes once more.

I set my glass down then, the soft *clank* it made on the polished wood seeming overly loud at that moment.

“You killing your father, a traitor among the Bratva, the same man who had been going behind our backs and selling information to the Italian mob, showed me how loyal you are, Arlo. I want you on our side fully. I need the most powerful at my back, the strongest men as my weapons.” He held his hands out, palms up, his current grin slow and satisfied as if he were a cat who'd just caught the mouse. “Being a free agent doesn't and won't offer you the safety and stability the Bratva can.”

“I don't need protection. I create my own.” I noticed a slight tick under Leonid's smooth cheek because I pointed out

the truth. “I like where I’m at, Pakhan. I don’t wish to change anything.” The shit my father had put me through, the fact that he’d killed Sasha, my mother, and the blood and bodies I’d had to wade through in order to reach the surface, wasn’t anything I’d ever do again.

I got to a point in my life where I didn’t have to work for anyone anymore. I worked for myself, had the Ruin as a conglomerate of other businesses I could choose from. My reputation and skill preceded me, and because of that, I didn’t have to be tied down to one side. I could accept or turn down anything I wanted. I wouldn’t get that with Leonid. He’d expect complete obedience and submission, no questions asked. A loyal dog.

And as I said those words, I could see on Leonid’s face that the pleasant facade he’d put on was slipping. The sound of men shouting “*Na zdorovie*” before they drank filled the sudden silence. It did nothing for the tension that was now between Leonid and me.

And then his stoic expression cracked, and he smiled, but I wasn’t a fool in thinking that he would just give up on trying to bring me on to his side fully. Because a man like him, a Bratva Pakhan, was used to getting his way in all things. And if that meant he had to steal, rape, or kill to get it, he was bastard enough to do it.

Several women came out from the back, black trays in their hands, each one topped with drinks. I didn’t spare them much attention, just noticed the shift and change in the air. But then everything around me stilled as the last woman emerged, her white dress standing out among the red and black of the others, her long black hair piled high on her head, the elegant line of her neck and delicate length of her spine in full view.

Every muscle in my body tightened to the point it was uncomfortable and hard to hide. This was the last place I’d ever expect to see Lina, the last place I’d ever want her to be. And when Leonid turned his attention to see what I was looking at, I knew I’d made a big fucking mistake. An interested and curious gleam entered his eyes as he noticed Lina and then slowly looked back at me.

“Gorgeous, isn’t she?” he murmured in Russian, and the way he said those words told me he’d been undressing her with his eyes.

I curled one of my hands into a tight fist, my other hand flexing and relaxing with the need to draw my gun and place the end right between his fucking eyes, demanding he look away from her. He had no right to look at Lina, not when I knew all the depraved shit he was into, not when I also knew he dealt with human trafficking.

“Do you know her?” The tone of his voice told me he already knew the answer to that. I didn’t bother responding. “She’s got this innocence about her, one that just makes you want to do the filthiest things...” He murmured the last part, and his fucking sons chuckled.

If I’d wanted to, I could’ve drawn my weapon and shot all three of them before any of the other people in this room could have stopped me. Of course, I would’ve been shot dead right afterward, but at least Leonid and his little bastard sons would be in the ground with me.

He turned to look at me, a shit-eating grin on his face. I hated that he’d seen any kind of reaction in me, because men like him would use it to their advantage. They’d see it as a weakness. And I couldn’t lie and say he was wrong.

Lina was a weakness, an addiction, and I hadn’t even sampled. She made all rational thoughts leave my head, and she didn’t even have to be in the same room to succeed.

Everything else faded away as I watched Lina start handing out drinks. I could feel Leonid’s gaze on me, could envision the bastard smirking, as if he’d just found a chink in my carefully placed armor.

She hadn’t noticed me yet as she walked around. The men eyed her like she was a piece of meat, slipping her money, leaning forward and whispering things that made her blush but also had her eyes narrowing.

She set a drink beside an old fuck, his smile wide and lewd as he ignored the half-naked woman on his lap, her breasts

close enough to his mouth he could have licked them. He held out a fifty-dollar bill, a wink being added to the mix, and when she took it with a soft smile, I could see his other hand snaking out like he planned on palming her ass.

I curled my hand so tight into a fist that my nails dug into my flesh, opening up the skin, the pain feeling good. She stepped out of the way before he could touch her. The lucky bastard had just missed me mangling the appendage for daring to put his filthy fucking hands on her.

But I should fuck him up just for *thinking* he could touch Lina.

She fluttered around the room like a delicate hummingbird, and the entire time, all male eyes were latched on to her, as if they could smell the innocence pouring off Lina and wanted to destroy it. I understood perfectly why Leonid had picked this room for her. These men were the most powerful, the wealthiest... the ones who would pay a small fortune if a woman's virginity was up for auction.

This was also the only room Leonid came to.

I forced myself to look at him, seeing he already had a calculating expression on his face as he watched me. He saw too much, knew too much just by my reaction. And it didn't matter how much I tried—and would fail—to hide what I felt toward Lina. The fucker saw all. A man didn't become Pakhan if he didn't know how to manipulate and control... if he couldn't look at someone and see their whole story flash in front of his eyes.

And then he broke the stare and looked to the side. I followed his line of vision and watched Lina move up to the overly drunken man who stood in the corner, the one who was too handsy with the girls. The one I knew was a violent drunk just by how he carried himself. I didn't know him, but if he was in this room, he was either very powerful or was closely connected to Leonid.

I didn't miss how she eyed the drunk almost warily, her instincts telling her he wasn't a good man. He was dangerous. She handed him his glass of liquor. His eyes were hooded and

glossy as he stared down at her. He was a big asshole, broad shoulders and tall. Barely any neck. He had a light sheen of sweat covering his forehead, his red-rimmed eyes zeroing in on Lina, taking in her white dress, tracing the few strands of wispy hair that framed her face.

I could imagine the scent of alcohol that came through his pores. I felt Leonid look back at me, but I couldn't take my focus off the scene in front of me. Everything else faded even more until I had tunnel vision, until everything slowed. The bastard set his drink down, and just as Lina turned to leave, he wrapped his hands around her waist, pulling her forcibly back toward him so hard the tray she carried tipped out of her hands and fell to the floor, the glass that had sat atop it hitting the ground, the cup breaking and mixing with the spilled liquor.

I saw red as he slowly slid his hands up, his fingers right under her breasts. She pulled away forcibly enough that she stumbled a step forward. And then he groped her ass. I didn't realize I had been moving until I was right in front of him. He turned his attention to me, his dark, thick eyebrows pulling low, as if he were fucking pissed I'd dared to interrupt what he was doing.

His mouth was moving, and I could assume he was asking me what the fuck I wanted, maybe threatening to kill me. Without taking my gaze off him, I reached out and pulled Lina away from him, could feel her looking at me, could've assumed her eyes were wide and an expression of shock covered her face.

The fucker's mouth was still moving, faster now, his anger coating his face in a red hue, his eyes narrowing, a vein popping out in his forehead from his rage.

I was aware of words spilling from my mouth and directed toward Lina. Words that would have been close to "Stay close to me. Everything will be okay." But my mind was too hazy with anger and possessiveness to grasp any kind of sanity right now or to make sure I'd even said the words out loud.

And then I felt a heavy weight in my hand—one of the decorative granite balls that sat on a few of the tables, the

design reminiscent of the detailed work on Fabergé eggs.

I felt this low-level hum fill me as everything else blurred. I slammed the granite ball against the side of the fucker's head, and when he stumbled back, blood making a trail down his temple from the crack to his skull, I grabbed his wrist, slammed it against the wall, and twisted his arm so his palm was flush with the golden-threaded damask wallpaper. I brought the stone down on the center of his hand so hard I could hear the crack of bone splintering under the force and pushing through the buzz in my head. I slammed it on his hand again and again until all I saw was blood and broken bone, until all I tasted was the coppery tang coating my tongue, until I felt the warmth on my neck and covering my hands.

His mouth was wide, and I could imagine he was screaming right now, but I only heard the rush in my ears. I felt people closing in, but no one touched me, no one stopped me.

I let go of his hand, and he went to grab it with his uninjured one, maybe to cradle the gnarled appendage to his chest. I stopped him by grabbing his thick wrist and proceeded to do the same to that one, using so much force the bone became nothing but splinters and powder.

I let go of him and took a step back, letting the granite ball fall from my grasp. I felt the vibrations travel from my feet up my legs from the impact of it hitting the floor. The bastard fell to his knees and kept his arms close to his chest, his hands unrecognizable for how badly I'd destroyed them.

Now the fucker couldn't touch any female.

He can't touch what's mine.

I found myself looking at Lina, that powerful, heady buzz moving through my body, a high I always felt when the violence took over. She stood beside me with shock reflected on her face. Eyes huge, more white than blue and black. Pink lips parted. Skin so pale she looked like a porcelain doll.

I reached out and smoothed my thumb along her cheek, wiping away the splatter of blood that marred her perfect skin

after I broke the fucker's hands. For her. That blood smeared along her cheek, like a beautifully violent stroke of a brush.

I hadn't admitted it before, hadn't let it really grow inside me until this very moment, but as I stared into Lina's horrified eyes, I knew without a doubt I'd burn Desolation—the entire fucking world—if it meant having her as mine.

Because I'd never let her go, and the look in her eyes told me she realized it too.

Galina

“**D** *asvidaniya.*”

That one word replayed over and over again in my head, the word Leonid had said low and mockingly in that thick Russian accent. And he’d watched me the whole time as Arlo led me out of the bar.

I now sat in the passenger seat of a Mercedes that had been parked at the side of the building. My heart was racing so fast and hard that my pulse was a constant *thump-thump* in my ears. I stared down at my backpack, not knowing how it was sitting on my lap, not knowing who had gotten it. I’d had it with me when I entered, my clothes stuffed inside when I changed, and as I curled my fingers around the old, stained nylon, all I saw was blood and gore and violence.

“*You’ve put Dima out of commission,*” Leonid had said with controlled amusement. “*You’ll owe me, Arlo. I’ll call, and you’ll come. Remember, I now know your weakness.*” He’d said that last part while his gaze locked on me.

“What did he mean?” My voice was surprisingly strong given the fact that I felt as if I was having an out-of-body experience. I wasn’t a stranger to violence. It was all brutal.

But what I'd witnessed from Arlo, the way he used that decorative stone ball... it had been unlike anything I'd ever seen before.

He looked completely in his element, calm as he brought it down on that man's hands over and over again with bone-crushing force and precision. And his face... God, his face had been so void of *anything*.

My breath caught in my throat as I kept replaying those images over and over again. And he'd done it because that man had touched me. I knew that as well as I knew I was sitting in his car, letting him take me somewhere unknown.

I hadn't even put up a fight as he pulled me out of the bar, as he opened the door and all but set me on the leather seat of this car. I let him buckle the seat belt around me, his scent spicy and masculine with dark undertones that filled my nose, washing away the coppery scent of blood that had consumed my senses up until that point.

He didn't speak, but he didn't have to, to tell me the answers I needed. I could look at him and know exactly the type of man he was, who he was down to his very soul.

A killer.

Aside from the subtle tightening of his fingers on the steering wheel, his expression was closed off.

I stared at his hands, covered with now-dried blood. I wanted to ask him again what Leonid had meant, even though I could put two and two together. I would have had to be blind to not see that Leonid and Arlo were one and the same. Even worse than the men I'd grown up around in Vegas.

Then why am I not afraid of Arlo? Why do I feel like he'd kill a man to protect me... that he almost did?

"Where are you taking me?"

He stayed silent for so long that I assumed he wouldn't answer.

"My apartment," he finally said, and my heart jackknifed in my chest.

Something deep and dark in my body came alive. He cut me a quick glance before focusing on the street again, his fingers tightening once more on the steering wheel.

“If I wanted to hurt you, I wouldn’t have to take you to my apartment to do it.” He stated those words so matter-of-factly it was like he’d read my mind. “You’re safe.” A long moment passed before he said so low I almost didn’t hear, “Even from me.”

Twenty minutes later we were outside the city limits of Desolation and pulling into an underground garage. He parked, climbed out, and walked around the front to open the passenger door before I could do it myself. For a second I just stared up at him, my breath stalling at the cold, detached look on his face.

“Come on, Lina.” His tone was hard and sharp. It was dangerous.

I slipped my hand in his and repressed a shiver, but I didn’t know if it was one of disgust because of what I’d seen him do, or because I liked the feel of his slightly callused hand wrapping tightly around mine and helping me out of his car.

I followed him toward an elevator, and he passed a silver key card across a sensor. The doors opened immediately. And then we were enclosed together as it ascended.

I should have been freaking out. I should have been demanding he take me to my apartment. I shouldn’t have been staring down at my hands as I curled them even tighter around the straps of my backpack and watched them shake. I shouldn’t have kept my mouth shut and let my gaze trail over my dress that I now noticed was covered in pin-sized dark spots.

Blood... blood covered me.

I didn’t know anything about Arlo except for his name and what he ate at the diner every time he came in. His expression was always so stone-cold, as if he was so untouchable by everything and everyone that he couldn’t bother to care. And as I glanced at him, his profile severe and cut in masculine

lines and strong features, I couldn't find the words to say anything. I couldn't find my voice to tell him to take me back to my apartment, even though that was the last place I wanted to go. *Because I don't want to be alone.*

I was rattled and shaken, not sure what the hell just happened. He'd beat a man, pulverized his hands, all because of what? The man had groped me, yeah, but Arlo had acted out of such rage I was having a hard time breathing now just thinking about it.

Maybe all of this was some personal vendetta between the two men, because surely I would have no bearing on what Arlo did or didn't do. Before my thoughts could get even more tangled, the elevator stopped, and the doors opened. He stepped out first, and for a moment I just stood there, unsure if I should follow.

A part of me felt like I was stepping through the gates of hell itself. But I found myself moving on my own accord, the elevator closing silently behind me. I smelled lemon cleaning products right away, and with the lights completely off, the only things I could make out were what the city lights touched coming through the massive windows.

Oh. Wow.

My gaze was riveted to those windows, ones that took up one entire wall of his apartment, the city and sky stretching out for as far as you could see. It looked like it could have been cut from a postcard, how perfect it all seemed, how clean and docile... so not dangerous.

I focused on Arlo again, telling myself I probably shouldn't turn my attention from him. With the shadows and light that shone through the large windows making up one entire wall, I could make out certain parts of his home. Large couch to the left. A massive TV on the wall across from the furniture. The kitchen was to the right, all dark, smooth counters and sleek stainless-steel appliances.

I expected him to turn my way, to say something now that we were in his domain, but he still said nothing, just walked

ahead of me, the soft sound of his shoes hitting the floor seeming louder than it probably should.

“Are you okay?” I finally asked, although it felt so stupid to ask a question like that.

He braced his hands on the bar and hung his head for a second before he let out a low, short, humorless laugh. “You’re the one who was sexually assaulted tonight, and you’re asking *me* if I’m okay?” He turned just his head so he could look at me, the shadows from the dark apartment and figments of light coming through all the windows from the city right behind the glass making him seem almost sinister.

“Yeah. I guess I am.” We stared at each other for so long it started to become uncomfortable. My body shouldn’t be feeling hot, so hot that I felt a trickle of sweat trail down between my breasts.

His eyes were hard, dark. Intense. “You’re in shock.”

Maybe I was. But I had never felt as clearheaded as I did right now.

And me feeling like I was burning alive had nothing to do with the temperature and everything to do with the man standing just feet from me.

“Why did you bring me here?” I was fidgeting as I ran my hands up and down my thighs, picked at an invisible thread at the hem of the dress, and kept shifting on my feet, the *clack-clack* of my heels sounding deafening.

He didn’t respond as he turned and poured himself a drink. He held his arm out and tipped the bottle in my direction, and I found myself nodding before clearing my throat and asking him for a drink too, even though alcohol was the last thing I needed right now.

Once the glass was filled, he turned and walked back to me, holding it out, our fingers brushing as I took it with a shaky hand. I didn’t miss how his eyes tracked the movement as I tightened my fingers around the smoothness of the glass in hopes I could gather my control. He didn’t stop following my

movements with his eyes as I brought the rim to my mouth and took a long drink.

That numbness faded and the fear and anxiety coursed through me so forcefully I drowned in the liquor, inhaling it without realizing, the acidic burn of it settling in my belly like a stone in the pit of my stomach.

He didn't show any emotion as he brought his own vodka to his mouth and took a long, slow drink. He swallowed it so smoothly it could have been water for all I knew. Then he turned and headed to the bar for a refill.

The silence stretched on, the loudest thing I'd ever heard. I stood there in the center of his lavish, expensive apartment, holding a glass of vodka and wearing another man's blood on me like an accessory.

"I brought you here because it's the only place they can't touch you. It's the only place you're truly safe right now."

His words had my heart lodging in my throat. I said nothing as I finished off my alcohol, the burn already making a warm, pleasure-numbing path through my veins, my eyes watering, but I blinked it back before the tears slid down my cheeks.

He turned around to face me, drinking his second glass and watching me over the rim.

"Why would they want to hurt me?" My voice was too low, too thin. I was terrified, not just about what had happened back at that bar—with that man—but what Leonid had meant by his parting words.

Your weakness.

But most of all, the most suffocating reason why I was terrified was because as I stood across from Arlo, all I felt was the need to go to him, to press my body against his and let our darknesses coexist.

"Why would I be on a man like that's radar?" Those words were whispered, and still Arlo didn't speak even though I knew he heard me. But I didn't need him to say the words to know the answer to the question I asked. Yet again I kept

firing them at him, now more than ever wanting him to lie—to deny—what I said, what I felt.

“It’s my fault,” he finally said, but there was no guilt in his voice. There was... nothing. He tipped back his glass to finish off his vodka before setting it on the bar behind him. “I shouldn’t have let him see my reaction.” The last part was said almost as if he spoke to himself.

“I don’t know what the hell’s going on,” I admitted softly before finishing off my liquor as well. I coughed, covering my mouth with the back of my hand as the burn settled in deep. It was fire down my throat and coalescing in my belly. It was a light-headedness that made the situation a little less dreadful.

I turned from Arlo and walked toward the windows, the glass starting at the floor and going all the way to the ceiling foot after foot above me, nothing but skyscrapers and twinkling lights as far as the eye could see. Down below, there was nothing but red and white lights moving back and forth. Did the people there know the world they lived in? Did they know the evil men behind the designer suits and gentle smiles? Did they know death was right in front of them, and they opened their arms to embrace it like a warm friend?

I could see Arlo coming to stand behind me in the reflection of the glass, but I couldn’t find it in me to feel any kind of fear. And although there was this awareness inside me that this man was dangerous, I never felt that his violence or aggression would ever be directed toward me. It was illogical. It was fucking stupid.

I knew nothing about Arlo, but if I looked hard enough, I could see his entire story written right on the surface.

“You’re a bad man,” I said as I stared at his reflection. He was looking down at me, his dark brows pulled low. He lifted a hand and ran it over his mouth, the sound of his palm moving over the stubble that created a light shadow across his cheeks and jaw loud right beside my ear. It was masculine. Arousing. It shouldn’t have turned me on, but it did.

“I am.” That word was final. So final that I felt a chill race up my spine as he said it in that low voice.

“Are there worse men out there than you?” I didn’t know why I asked the question. Because truthfully I knew the answer.

“No.”

I wanted to say I didn’t believe him, but I’d be lying to both of us.

“But there are men out there who would hurt you, Lina... simply because you’re associated with someone.” I knew he meant associated with *him*. “They’d hurt you to make a point, to take a perceived weakness and snuff it out.” His gaze was so fierce.

My heart hiccupped. Was he saying *I* was his weakness? I didn’t even know him. How could I control someone *that* much? But my words were thrown back at me because the feelings I had when I was in Arlo’s presence were soul-searing.

What Arlo unknowingly made me feel was hot enough to burn the wings off an angel.

My breath caught at the cold calculation, what he implied. *What he’s saying.*

“And it’s taking every single ounce of self-control I don’t even possess not to go back there and kill any bastard who would take your life as if it meant nothing.”

I didn’t know why I turned around, didn’t know why I faced the predator head-on. But as he took my now-empty glass from my hand and set it aside, his eyes never leaving me, there was nothing on this earth that could have forced me to look away.

I moved my arms behind me and pressed my palms flat against the window. The glass was cold and smooth beneath them. Hard. I curled my fingers against it, even though I knew it wouldn’t give me any purchase.

I stared into his eyes that looked so dark with the shadows gently caressing him like a lover. And I knew the absolute truth the longer he stared at me, peeling away bit by bit, exposing me inch by inch.

“Did you kill that man in the alley?” I knew I wouldn’t have to specify what and who I meant.

One.

Two.

Three seconds passed before he moved in an inch closer. “Yes.”

He said that word as if it was the easiest thing to admit. As if killing was the simplest form of pleasure. I held my breath, his truth like a sledgehammer to my chest.

“Ask me why I did it.” Low voice. Deep words. Tearing me from the inside out.

“Why did you kill him?” There was a hitch in my voice that I knew couldn’t go unnoticed.

He leaned in until his lips were close enough to my ear that his answer would brush along the shell. “For you.”

My heart was running a race in my chest. *Bu-bump. Bu-bump.* “What are you?”

His smile was slow. Evil. He moved a step back, and I sucked in a breath.

“I told you.” One. Two. Three seconds. “The bad guy.”

Arlo

I didn't want to frighten her. I wanted to pull her against my body and hold her head to my chest, tangle my fingers in the long fall of her hair, and whisper all the words that would let her know how safe she was.

I wanted to know everything about her. I wanted her to *trust* me.

She hid things about her life, her past, present, and future. I wanted to tear those secrets away until she was just as vulnerable to me as she'd made me to her. I didn't even know how or why or fucking *when* it happened, but this woman had changed something monumental in my life. I hated it.

I couldn't live without it.

Months. It had only taken a moment to look into her innocent eyes to know there was something light and different the world could offer... something that could *shape* me. Only a handful of months to turn my world upside down without her even having to utter a word.

A. Fucking. Look. That's all it took to go down this rabbit hole where, for the first time in my miserable life, I questioned

my very sanity. *For the first time in my life, I want something just for me.*

And as I stared into her blue eyes that looked so dark right now, not because of the shadows or lack of light but because she was vulnerable in my presence, I told myself there was no going back.

I'd lost it in front of Leonid, showed him a weakness in his own fucking house. He wouldn't forget it. He'd use it against me. He'd twist it and use it to his advantage. It's what men like him did. It's what I did.

I'd seen it in the way he looked at me when I took Lina out of there. When he stared at *her*.

I turned away and stalked back to the bar, pouring myself more vodka. Too much. I tossed it back and went for glass number four. The burn wasn't there any longer, and alcohol was the last thing I needed. My head was already fucked up without the temptation of Lina in my apartment and the cloudiness of booze in my veins.

I shouldn't have told her I killed that fucker in the alley. But I'd taunted her, needed her to ask me so I could *show* her how far a man like me was willing to go for *her*.

"Who are you? Who are those men? What is actually going on?"

I didn't turn around to face her. I stared at the wall straight ahead, my glass in hand, my fingers tight enough around the glass I hoped it cracked and tore my hand to shreds. It would give me something else to feel.

"I'm a ba—"

"I know. You're a bad man. I didn't ask what people see when they look at you, not what you see in the mirror. I want to know what's going on, because if what you say is true—"

"It is," I said, cutting her off.

"Then with my life in danger, you owe me the truth."

How could this woman utter a few words and have something tight and uncomfortable inside my chest and

squeezing my vital organs? I was now regretting not looking into her past, not getting any and all information on Lina that I could. I didn't have a moral compass, yet when it came to her and finding out who exactly Lina Michaels was—who she *really* was—I found myself holding back, wanting her to be the one to confide in me.

It was fucking stupid. A mistake. I ran a hand over my face.

I turned around and looked at her. She was still against the window, but her gaze was steady as she watched me. It would be so easy to go up to her and press our bodies flush together, to curl my fingers around her throat and make her look into my eyes as I tell her she's mine.

Fuck, I envisioned myself burying my face in her hair and inhaling deeply before running my nose down the length of her throat, dragging my tongue up and down her soft skin. I could practically taste her in my mouth. Sweet. So sweet. I wanted to feel how fast her pulse would beat against my tongue, proving that she was just as affected by me as I was by her.

“Don't ask questions you don't really want to know the answers to.” Did she want me to admit I was involved in the crime syndicate? Did she want to know everything that touched me, everything I owned, was because of blood money?

She pushed away from the window and took a step toward me, but I didn't miss the tremor that moved through her body. She was trying to be stronger than she felt. It was an admirable quality, but it was also a weak one. A human one that would do her no good.

Lina kept moving closer, watching me cautiously. How close would she come? Would she get so close I could reach out and curl my fingers around her waist? Close enough to where I could press her body to mine and let her *feel* the physical reaction she brought out of me?

“Are you part of that...?” She didn't finish that question, but she didn't need to. She knew what I'd say if I could have.

She just wanted me to verify it. I couldn't. I wouldn't. It wasn't even about some moral compass, wasn't because of the Bratva or the Cosa Nostra. At this point I didn't care about any of that. I'd never tell her, because it would put her in even more danger.

I said nothing. There were no words I could say. She looked away when it was very clear she understood, when she knew she wouldn't get the answers she sought from me. I finished off my vodka and set the glass down. I tried to shut off my emotions, what I felt. They were messy and didn't do anything but cause issues. They made a conscience rise up in somebody like me.

"So what?" She looked back at me. "You can't take me home because I'm in some kind of danger now?" She scoffed and looked away. *So brave. Trying to be so strong.* It was a turn-on. "You know nothing about me." She looked back at me then, trying to hide the fear in her eyes.

But it wasn't for me. She was afraid of something else. Her past. I wanted to find who'd hurt her, who'd betrayed her, and make them beg me for death.

"I've known bad men my whole life. I know how to survive. I don't need anyone protecting me."

Something dark and possessive unfurled in my chest, tightening my heart, causing it to grow, the organ pulsing so hard I was sure it would rip through and crack my ribs.

I wanted to be the one to protect her. I wanted to be the one who killed anything that threatened her.

"Why are you doing this?" she whispered, and I hated that she had a tremor in her voice.

You know why. Or maybe you don't. But you will, and you'll be even more afraid of me, because you'll see I won't let you go.

But I didn't say any of that. I took a step closer and watched her body tense, her eyes flare. "I caused issues for you with people you don't want issues with." I held her gaze with mine. "And until I fix it, until I can make sure you're

safe, you'll stay here." She opened her mouth, most likely to protest, but a slow shake of my head and a thinning of my lips stopped her. "You'll stay here." I took a step closer. I wasn't lying about Leonid or the danger he presented, but I also wasn't being honest about the situation. I wanted her here for totally selfish reasons.

"You know nothing about me," she whispered again. I didn't answer. "My work. My apartment." She looked away.

"The apartment is a shithole."

She snapped her head in my direction and narrowed her eyes. Her annoyance was an accelerant to my lust. "That may be, but it's where I live," she said in a low voice, all but sneering the words at me. "And I need to work. I need the money." The way she clamped her jaw told me needing the money wasn't just about needing to keep that shithole of an apartment. She needed money for other reasons.

I said nothing as I stared into her eyes. I took a step closer until our chests almost brushed. I had to admit I fucking got off on the fact that she didn't retreat, that she held her ground and met my stare with a thinly veiled pissed-off one.

"Whatever you need, I'll provide."

She shook her head. "I don't like being indebted to anyone."

"Non-fucking-negotiable." I crossed my arms over my chest, knowing she had a hell of a lot more to say. "Besides, as stubborn as you are, you don't seem like the self-sacrificing type of human. Pretty sure you want to live, isn't that right?"

She pursed her lips even more. "And if I left when you're not here? Ran... from you?" There was this challenge in her voice that had my blood turning to fire. I let a dangerous smile cover my lips.

"I'd find you. No matter where you went." I closed off any emotion then, turned, and started walking toward the hallway. "I'll show you where you can sleep." I knew she'd follow. She was strong, but she wasn't stupid. Lina had felt the danger where Leonid was concerned, and although she knew I wasn't

any better than the bastard, the unhinged aura Leonid didn't even try to conceal was too strong for her to ignore. And for whatever fucking reason, little Lina trusted me more than she trusted herself to stay safe.

She should fear me just as much as Leonid from principle alone. But she didn't, and that had that possessive glint in me where she was concerned growing tenfold. One day it would consume both of us.

One day soon.

Galina

I stood in the center of what was clearly a guest room. I was pretty sure no one had ever even been in this room aside from a housekeeper. It was empty of life. It could have been a hotel room for how “warm and welcoming” it was.

I scanned the room and took in how sparse everything was. The queen-size bed pressed against the wall in the center of the room. One dresser across from that. A TV sitting on top of it. There was a padded chair beside the lone window, the sheer curtains in place allowing muted light to filter through. There was a small bathroom attached to the room, and one small landscape painting that hung on the wall beside the bed.

I walked up to the picture and stood in front of it. I hadn't bothered turning on the lights. I was already sucked into the darkness, so I might as well get used to it. I stared at that picture, a serene beach scene with tall grass frozen in a swaying motion from the wind, waves hitting against the shore and causing white peaks, a long stretch of sandy land leading to paradise. There was even a little bridge leading down to the water.

It was generic, probably had come with the apartment.

I turned and looked at my backpack that sat on the dark comforter in the center of the mattress. I walked over to it at the same time I got out of the dress, feeling like the material was permanently stuck to me because of the blood. I let it drop to the floor unceremoniously as I reached into my backpack and pulled out a T-shirt and a pair of shorts.

Once I was in the bathroom, I wasn't surprised to see a toothbrush and toothpaste, soap, shampoo, even face wash sitting on the counter. All unused. I could've imagined this was a swanky hotel stay if I wasn't being kept here against my will. But I wasn't stupid. I knew that man—Leonid—was bad. Very bad. And for whatever reason, Arlo wanted to protect me. I wasn't anybody special, had nothing to offer, but I wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth in my situation.

I couldn't pay him for keeping me safe. I could barely even afford to keep myself alive and safe from the men I was running from. I set my outfit on the granite bathroom counter and braced my hands on the edge, closing my eyes and just breathing. I didn't want to look at my reflection. I didn't want to see blood on my skin, a reminder of tonight.

So instead I ignored the mirror and grabbed the shampoo and body wash, went into the shower, and cranked it on as hot as I could stand it.

I scrubbed myself for twenty minutes until my skin was raw and red, until it was numb, and washed away any remnants of death. With my shirt and shorts on, I climbed into the bed, pulled the blanket over my head, and then let the darkness take me away.



SOMETHING LOUD WOKE me with a startle, my eyes surging open, my heart racing. I hadn't dreamed last night. I didn't see scary faces surrounding me in the darkness, didn't feel someone chasing me as I looked over my shoulder. I didn't dream of being held down and blood covering me. I couldn't remember the last time I'd slept so soundly, where the nightmares didn't drag me down and try to keep me there.

I pushed the blanket off my body and sat up, wincing from the kink in my neck from sleeping in the same position all night. Morning sunlight streamed through the window. Even though I knew the hectic-day life was in full gear just outside the glass and steel, I didn't hear honking cars or the thick life of traffic. I inhaled and smelled the faintest hint of lavender and lemon.

I heard another sound come from outside the room, and I stared at the closed bedroom door for a moment before forcing myself out of bed and into the bathroom. After I used the restroom, I brushed my teeth and washed my face. I looked at myself in the mirror. My long dark hair was in unruly waves and cascading down my shoulders and back, tangles touching my cheeks. My hair was even more crazy because I'd slept with it wet, and trying to tame it was a losing battle. I gave up, grabbed a hair tie from my backpack, and was back in front of the mirror, pulling the long fall off my shoulders and into a ponytail.

The bags under my eyes were horrendous, and they stood out like a neon sign against my too-pale face. But it didn't matter. I wasn't about to enter a beauty contest. I was quite literally trying to stay alive. So fuck it if I looked like the living dead.

I left the bathroom and shut off the light, headed toward the bedroom door, and gripped the handle, my nerves taking control. I opened the door and stepped out into the hallway but didn't move right away, just stood there trying to control my breathing. I didn't hear anything, just the stillness of the apartment, which was a little unnerving. But then I shook my head to clear it, feeling stupid. A quiet house should be the least unnerving thing going on in my life right now.

I stopped at the end of the hall and saw part of the kitchen and living room. My heart was thundering in my chest so loudly I wondered if it could be heard outside my body.

There was a light sound of something being set down, and I leaned to the side and looked into the kitchen. There, sitting at the small dining room table, was Arlo. My breath caught in

my throat at the sight of him sitting there shirtless, tattoos covering his body, some that were very clearly Russian.

Bratva.

It all fell into place as I took in the stars on his shoulders, the Russian-style cathedral tattooed in vivid, gorgeous detail in the center of his chest, and a Russian nesting doll inked on his entire right side. He had a myriad of other dark and colorful ink along his broad shoulders, biceps, forearms, and very defined chest.

I felt a flush move through me so powerfully it was hard to catch my breath for a moment.

My gaze landed on the gun sitting right beside his hand on the dining room table.

Without looking up from the paper in front of him, he said in a deep, low voice, "If you're a coffee drinker, there's some in the pot. If not, all I have is water." He flipped a page on the paper. "The pastries were just delivered and are in a box on the counter."

I didn't move for a second, and he looked up at me, dark gaze slowly moving up and down my body. My shorts were high up on my thighs, my T-shirt long enough to cover them. It probably looked like I wore nothing underneath.

Although I was fully dressed, I couldn't help but feel like I was totally nude in front of him. I tugged on the hem of my shirt before diverting my gaze and making my way toward the kitchen. I could smell the coffee, and although I wasn't much of a fan, I figured now was as good a time as ever to get a little caffeine fix.

After I poured a cup, not bothering with sugar or milk because I didn't want to go rummaging through his things, I opened up the box and grabbed the first danish I could see. I could still feel Arlo looking at me, but I refused to meet his gaze.

Although I had so many more questions, I didn't know if he'd be forthcoming with the answers. But then again, I wouldn't know unless I asked.

After I swallowed a bite of danish and washed it down with some coffee, I set the cup on the granite counter and looked up at him. He was back to reading the paper, and from the distance I could see it was in another language—Eastern European if I had to guess by the letters.

Although he didn't have a noticeable accent, a few times I had heard a difference in the way he pronounced certain words. "I didn't realize you could get international papers in Desolation." Truth was, I didn't know if you could or couldn't get anything in this godforsaken city. I hadn't been here long enough, and it wasn't as if I'd checked out the lay of the land.

He leaned back in the chair, and I forced myself not to look at the way the muscles under his tattooed, golden skin flexed with that small movement.

Arlo was a big man, broad shoulders, a wide chest, and a ridiculously defined abdomen. I could see the gray sweatpants he wore from this vantage point, a very outlined V of cut muscle starting on either side of his waist and disappearing underneath the material. I picked up my glass and took a drink. As soon as I swallowed too much liquid, I regretted it.

I sputtered and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, my eyes watering, my tongue burning because the coffee was so damn hot. I turned my back to Arlo and coughed a couple more times, patting my chest and only turned around once I could breathe again. He still had his focus on me, but the corner of his mouth was tipped up ever so slightly, as if he thought it was amusing. I found a spark of anger and annoyance moving through me, but I didn't say anything.

"Desolation can get anything you want, Lina." He lifted his coffee mug to his mouth and took a long, slow drink as he watched me. *Don't look at that bulging bicep. Don't watch the way it clenches and relaxes just from him picking up a damn ceramic mug.*

"Italian, Russian, Spanish. Any language you want... anything you want, you can get for a price." He set his mug down but kept his fingers curled around the handle. His other arm still rested over the back of the chair beside him. His

position was easygoing and relaxed, and God, he made it look sexy.

Maybe I was suffering from some instantaneous Stockholm syndrome? But I knew that wasn't true. I'd felt this dark desire for him the moment I saw him months ago. Now that I was in his home... forced to stay here for my "own good," I felt like I was losing my mind slowly.

"Do you know how to fight?"

His question took me off guard, and I eyed him as I swallowed another bite of danish. "I think?" I felt my face heat at the stupid words that just spilled from my mouth. "Well, I've taken a couple self-defense classes and always carry pepper spray on me. I can defend myself if needed." I wondered if he'd seen me in the alley after I doused the asshole in the face with my pepper spray before kneeing him in the nuts and taking off.

Although the truth was, I'd gotten very lucky in that instance, in being able to leave. The bastard had been stronger, bigger. All it would've taken was my hands to be restrained and my bag tossed away, and I would've been at his mercy. I wasn't strong in the physical sense, and the few self-defense moves I knew wouldn't help me if somebody really wanted to hurt me.

"I'll teach you how to fight."

I felt my eyebrows rise to my hairline at his words. *Teach me how to fight?* It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him no, that fighting and violence were the last things I wanted. But was it really? I needed to learn to protect myself, not just from the Vegas shit, but all this other stuff now too.

"Nonnegotiable, Lina."

I didn't know if me defying him pissed him off or amused him. It was hard to read Arlo's expressions the majority of the time, because he kept himself so closed off.

"Okay," I said without any heat. I would've taken more of the self-defense classes in Vegas before fleeing, but funds and time hadn't really allowed it. And as I stared at him, I knew

without a doubt Arlo could kill somebody with his bare hands if need be. “But can you tell me *why* you’re doing this? Like, I understand the safety aspect, but why do you care? I’m a nobody.”

He just looked at me, not speaking, but there was this hard tension around him. I knew I’d still get no answers from him.

Fine, if he wanted to give me a hard time, then I’d just show him how stubborn I was. “I need to work on my next shift.” The hard set of his jaw told me he was about to argue, but I shook my head. “Listen,” I said before he could go into whatever spiel he was about to say to me. “I don’t know what mess I’m caught up in, because you won’t tell me, but I know if you wanted to hurt me, I wouldn’t be in your apartment right now, eating a strawberry danish and drinking bitter-ass coffee.” His lips quirked slightly as if he was amused. “But I *have* to go to work. I can’t just *not*. It’s clear you’re not hard up for money,” I said and pointedly looked around his lavish penthouse apartment, “but I don’t have that luxury or privilege. I...” I stopped before I could say I was running and needed all the funds I could get.

His eyes narrowed marginally when I wouldn’t press on. It was very clear this man got what he wanted without anyone giving him shit about it, but I was already in a deep enough hole with my own problems, and then there was all this other stuff that was now laid in my lap. I just wanted to figure out how things were going to go and if they could even get better at this point.

But I wasn’t ready to give up on this. If he wanted to “keep me safe” and force me to stay, then there was one thing he’d learn about me, and that was I didn’t give up easily when I put my mind to something.

We were in this silent stare-off for a couple of seconds, and when he didn’t speak, I exhaled and just pressed on. “I have to work,” I said, softer this time, hating myself that I heard the defeat in my voice. “I know you said it’s not safe, and I’m not stupid, but you don’t understand, I *have* to make money.”

“If you’re in trouble, all you have to do is tell me and I can help.” His voice was low and deep, but I didn’t miss the edge, didn’t miss the danger lying underneath.

“Maybe I don’t want anyone’s help.” The words were so soft I didn’t even know if he heard, but when he spoke, I knew he had.

“Maybe sometimes we have to ask for help, even if we don’t want it.”

I was shaking my head before he finished but couldn’t find the words to say anything. I looked around his incredible apartment, took in the natural light filling the space, noticed all the expensive, sleek appliances, and didn’t miss how everything screamed of wealth.

“You can’t possibly know how it feels to struggle.” I was assuming, and I shouldn’t. I knew nothing about Arlo, where he came from or how he’d grown up. When I looked back at him, I could see the hardness back in his eyes.

“I had some clothing delivered for you.”

He changed the subject so fast my head spun. He looked pointedly at my shirt and shorts. I didn’t bother asking how he knew my size to order me anything. “You can’t work out in those.” He lifted his gaze back to my face. “We’ll leave in an hour to teach you how to defend yourself, *moy svet*.”

I didn’t know what he’d just said in Russian, but I could assume it was along the lines of “ungrateful bitch.”

I exhaled and finished my danish and coffee, rinsed out my cup, and set it in the sink. I wanted to ask him over and over again why he was doing any of this, letting me stay in this posh apartment, feeding me, clothing me... protecting me. I just wanted to take his face in my hands and... kiss him.

Instead I picked up the bag he’d gestured toward on the ground by the breakfast bar and walked away, mentally adding up how much I’d owe Arlo after this was all said and done.

And as I walked back to the guest room to change, I felt him watching me the whole time.

Galina

This felt like it was a *really* bad idea as I stood across from Arlo in a questionably stained—possibly once white—boxing ring.

We'd left almost two hours ago from his apartment. I'd taken in the wealthy part of the city, remembering the glittering skyscrapers that seemed to touch the heavens, where people walked up and down the streets without the fear of getting pulled into a dark alley.

I'd stared out the window of his car and saw the affluence slowly turned into that ugliness Desolation was so known for.

I didn't need to ask if this gym was Russian. That had been clear when we stepped inside and I saw the massive Russian flag hanging behind the boxing ring, coupled with the fact that all I heard was men shouting and talking in another language.

At first, I'd had in this weird moment of awe as I followed Arlo inside, the gym bag hanging loosely from his strong, broad shoulders. Although all the noise sounded like there were a hundred men crammed inside, there was probably only a handful, all of them so big and loud it made my ears ring.

But as soon as they noticed Arlo, the conversation stopped, all eyes on us.

He said something low but loud enough that it carried through the small interior. And then I watched in confusion and a little bit mesmerized as the men left. As in they *left* the gym.

I glanced around. The place appeared run-down, decades old. The boxing ring itself was battered, with dark tape holding some of the roping together that surrounded us, the white beneath my feet stained in brown, rusty shades.

I looked at Arlo again, the white T-shirt he wore hiding almost all the tattoos on his chest, yet I could make out the dark ink and shapes beneath the thin, light-colored material. “Is this place owned by the Russian mafia?” I had no idea why those words came from my mouth. I felt my eyes flare in surprise and a little bit of fear.

I didn’t want to get on his bad side, although I didn’t know if Arlo had a good side.

I also had no idea if blatantly talking about the Bratva would piss him off. Not that I knew anything about the former, but if I were to guess, I assumed this place was hard-core mafia territory.

“It’s owned by Ivan.” He smirked.

I licked my lips and started moving my hands up and down my thighs. “Ivan, huh?”

He nodded once. Slowly.

I said nothing else, just kept running my sweaty palms up and down my thighs. The workout clothes Arlo had gotten for me were nothing but a pair of black leggings, some ankle socks, tennis shoes, and a form-fitted short-sleeve shirt. I was completely covered, modest even, yet whenever Arlo looked at me, I always felt so naked.

“What did you say to everyone to get them all to leave the gym?” I figured that was a safe enough conversation switch, but when he slowly shook his head, I had a feeling this might have been another “nonnegotiable” situation.

“I told them,” he finally said, “you weren’t a sideshow, so I politely informed them the gym was closed for a private lesson.”

This dark tendril moved through me at his words, because I knew what they were. A lie.

I watched the way his gaze tracked up and down my body, how his eyes moved along my form, lingering on the long lines of my legs, moving back up to skate over the most intimate part of me that was totally covered, so it wasn’t like he could see anything, yet I felt a whole lot of heat in that moment.

Then he moved his gaze up my flat belly, over the small mounds of my breasts, and finally looked into my face. My nipples hardened under the sports bra and thin Lycra of my shirt. I tried to control my breathing, but I knew I failed. How could a look make me *feel* like this?

“I have a feeling that’s not what you said to them,” I said with a hint of teasing in my voice.

“It’s too bad you don’t speak Russian,” he said, deep and low. “Then you’d know if I was telling the truth.”

He was infuriatingly stubborn, and it turned me on like nothing else.

“*Interesno, kak by vy otreagirovali, yesli by uznali, chto ya skazal im, chto pererezhu im glotku, yesli oni khotya by posmotryat na vas.*” He spoke deep and low, his words flowing through and around me.

I had no clue what he had said, but for some reason it caused a shiver to consume my entire body. The smallest tilt of his lips showed me he *knew* what effect he had on me. “What did you say?”

He took a step closer, and one more until he was now circling me. “You should learn Russian, *moy svet.*”

That was the second time he’d called me that, but I was too flustered to ask what it meant. “Maybe you could teach me?” I had no idea why or how the words came out of my mouth, but I didn’t take them back. It was presumptuous to think this man

would help me any more than he already was. But as he stopped in front of me and I tipped my head back to look into his too-dark eyes, I idly wondered how much he would give me.

Arlo was so tall. At five-foot seven, I wasn't exactly short, but standing in front of him, my head only reached his pectoral muscles. He was so tall, so big that he was easily twice my weight. He made me feel safer than I ever had before.

I refrained from shivering at the thought and wondering if he was this big... everywhere.

He reached out, and my body tightened, but his finger just barely brushed my neck. "*Gorlo*," he said as he curled his fingers around my throat.

I blinked up at him, and a second later he twisted me around until my back was to his hard chest. His hand on my throat was firm, but he made sure not to cut off airflow.

"*Plecho*," he murmured, his voice right by my ear as he placed his other hand on my shoulder. He slid his fingers down my arm and curled them around my wrist. "*Zapyast'ye*." Arlo moved his fingers down to curl around my hand. "*Ruka*."

God, I was burning alive as I felt his entire body stay flush with mine, as I felt his hot touch skitter along what shouldn't be erogenous zones but very clearly were as I grew wet and needy. I could feel a moan burning up my throat, but in the next second he tightened his hold on me and jerked my arm behind my back. With the fingers of one hand wrapped around my throat and his other hand keeping my wrist to the small of my back, I felt trapped.

And then he was gone, my body tilting forward before I righted myself.

"It's a good thing I'm going to teach you to defend yourself, because in that moment I could have done whatever I wanted, Lina."

I turned around to stare at him, my face hot, which I hoped he took as embarrassment and not arousal. Because it totally was the latter. My breathing was so shallow and fast, yet he

was completely composed. Any kind of idea that this man might be attracted to me and that's why he was helping went out the window as I remembered when he had his body pressed against mine. I hadn't felt any clear signs he'd been turned on. *Not like me.*

And that thought had even more heat rushing to my face with embarrassment.

"Come on, Lina. Show me what you learned."

A part of me—one I should burn to the ground if I was smart—wanted him to call me by my real name. *Just say Galina. Call me Galina as you touch me.*

My heart was racing a mile a minute as I stared at him. Arlo was massive, but wasn't that the point of self-defense, to take down somebody who was bigger than you, who was a threat? But my couple of measly classes wouldn't help me in this instance. I'd gotten lucky with the drunk in the alley. He'd been inebriated. I'd caught him off guard, and then I'd run like hell. There was no running from Arlo. We were caged within these boxing ropes, but I knew even if I got out, he'd still get me. He'd find me, catch me... do whatever he wanted.

"I don't want to hurt you." My words were low and almost laughable even to my own ears. And then he smiled slowly, the first full-blown one I'd seen him give me in my presence. I wondered if this was the first one he'd ever worn.

It was terrifying... and so attractive.

He curled his finger toward me in that universal sign for *come here*. My legs were like jelly, my hands shaking. I felt a drop of sweat slowly trail down my temple. I went back to those classes I'd taken, forcing myself to look at Arlo like he was the threat he was portraying to me right now... the threat he was to everyone else.

I charged after him, aiming for his legs to take him down, but I only got a few steps before he wrapped a thickly muscled arm around my waist and lifted me off the ground. I gasped with the sudden rush of air and shift of the ground beneath me,

and then once again he had my back to his chest, his arms keeping mine pinned to my sides.

“Show me again,” he said darkly against my ear and let go of me.

I stumbled forward and tried to catch my breath. I turned around again, not sure what the hell I was doing, yet trying to look for a weak spot. I went after him again, but this time I ducked when I saw the subtle tensing of his arm. I knew he was about to grab me again. I managed to kick my leg out and get him in the calf, but his leg was like cement, hard and unyielding.

He had me off the ground and spun around so fast I grew dizzy. And then my chest was pressed against the boxing ring rope, Arlo’s massive body against mine, every inch of him burning me where he touched.

“You should get your money back if this is what they taught you.” I could hear the teasing, annoyed note in his voice, and my own irritation rose.

“You’re bigger than me, stronger.” I turned my head to the side so I could look at him, but that was a foolish move, as it brought our mouths dangerously close together. “I don’t have my pepper spray, and I don’t have the added benefit of fearing for my life and getting that kick of adrenaline.”

My breath caught, my lungs tightening, when this dark, strange look covered his face.

“You *should* be afraid right now, *moy svet*.” His words were low... deadly. “You should be more afraid of me than anything else in the dark.” He leaned in an inch. “If you knew who I truly was, you wouldn’t be so close to me.”

I looked down at where his hand gripped the rope on either side of me, the tattoos on his fingers sneaking up the back of his hand disappearing and going up his wrist and forearm. I’d never been one to think tattoos were attractive, but on Arlo, it made him brutally beautiful to me.

“You’re so tiny, *moy svet*.” He made a low, gruff sound and pushed away from me. I closed my eyes and breathed out just

as he said, “Again.”

And so for the next several hours, I sparred and grappled with Arlo until I was sweaty and sore, more tired than I’d ever been, but had never felt more liberated in all my life.

Galina

The following day, the routine was the same. But I'd called off from my shift, knowing it was the smart thing to do even if it felt wrong with my end goal.

We ate breakfast before Arlo took me to the gym, where he barked out in Russian at the men there, which had them scattering out of sight, and then he proceeded to help me train for a few hours.

After a light lunch, we came back to his apartment, where I showered, then proceeded to pass out until dinner. My body ached, even my skin hurting from the almost brutal way Arlo had pushed me with self-defense.

And although I'd never been so tired before, I'd also never felt stronger or more sure of protecting myself. I'd never felt so... safe.

The sun had set an hour ago, and Arlo ordered Italian, which had just been delivered. The bags were fancy and black, gold lettering stamped across the front. I'd never eaten from anywhere that had delivery bags as swanky as these or, hell, delivery bags at all.

I was doing everything in my power not to look at him. I felt his eyes on me, so magnetic that I was hyperaware of every little move he made.

He hadn't gone to work—or whatever he did to make a living—since he'd brought me to his apartment, and my curiosity was starting to get the better of me, but I refrained from asking. I did have tonight off but was scheduled for Sal's tomorrow, and I wasn't going to miss it. No matter what he said.

I brought my fork to the chicken parm on my plate and cut off a piece, focusing way too damn hard on it. It was either that or look at Arlo.

The flavors burst in my mouth, the sauce rich and everything combining together as if the cook had been creating a masterpiece. But instead of his tools being a canvas and paints, he used tomatoes, basil, and other seasoning.

And it was the fact that I was trying so hard *not* to focus on Arlo, who sat across from me yet felt so close, that I was comparing food with painting.

For fuck's sake.

The tension in my body got too tight, but I finally looked up at him. He was leaning back and his body shifted to the side slightly, a glass in his hand with clear liquid filling it, liquid I knew wasn't water. He had one arm bent at the elbow and resting over the back of his chair, his focus trained on me. I actually shivered. I had no idea why this man had this kind of effect on me, but there was no pushing it aside.

There was no ignoring it or trying to act like I had a handle on anything. I didn't. My life was so messed up at the moment that any kind of relationship, including the sexual kind, shouldn't have even been a blip in my mind.

“I have to leave after dinner to do some work.” He let those words hang in the air, and I didn't respond because I knew he wasn't finished. He slowly took a long drink of his vodka and then set the glass on the table, keeping his hand

wrapped around it, his index finger slowly tapping against the side in an almost hypnotic way.

“Okay,” I said a little too breathily and then felt my cheeks heat. I reached across the table for my glass of red wine, the exact opposite of what I should’ve been drinking. After I took a drink and set the glass back on the table, a heavy weight of silence moved between us.

“I don’t have to ask that you stay in the apartment while I’m gone, right?” His voice was low and firm, as if he was trying to be as nonthreatening as possible. And although this man was dangerous on every level, I knew he wouldn’t hurt me.

Stupid, stupid girl.

“I’ll stay in the house, because I know it’s dangerous, but we do need to discuss me going to work tomorrow.”

He didn’t move, said nothing, but I saw the subtle tightening of his jaw after I spoke.

“We’ll talk about it,” he said, and now it was my turn to clench my teeth together, because his tone felt strangely like he’d only said the words to placate me.

I wanted to instantly lash out. I didn’t need another father. And although mine was worthless and the world wouldn’t miss him if he was gone, I also didn’t need anybody to look after me. I could do that myself. No one could take care of me better than *me*.

So although I wanted to stay on the subject, because that’s what I did—fight—how I survived, I had to pick and choose my battles. I didn’t have anywhere to be tonight, and I felt safe here. With Arlo. He was helping me by training with me, showing me how to protect myself. But I did repeat in my head a mantra I’d said over and over again, that I would get answers from him one way or another. Eventually.

It was another twenty minutes before I finally finished my dinner. I’d never eaten so well than when I was with Arlo, that was for sure. I’d never been full, always feeling that sliver of hunger biting at the edge.

And the entire time I'd been eating, Arlo had watched me. As if he couldn't take his eyes off me. I didn't know whether to be flattered or if he thought there was something wrong with me, but I chose the former, because the things I felt toward him with just a glance, things that made my belly tighten and my heart flutter, couldn't handle rejection, not with the way my life had been going.

I finished off my wine, the alcohol giving me a warm sensation, my limbs feeling a little heavier than normal.

“Come here, I want to show you something.” He stood and walked past me, and I had no choice but to follow.

We made our way through the living room to the other side, where the shadows seemed thicker, where the lighting didn't penetrate. He stopped at a sliding glass door I hadn't even noticed, it was so seamless with the rest of the windows.

When he pulled it open, the night air washed in, teasing the strands of my hair around my shoulders. It was chilly, but it felt good, my body temperature seeming stifling whenever I was near him. We stepped out onto the balcony, and I felt the breath leave me at the scenic view in front.

Although the city had been gorgeous on the other side of the windows, as I walked toward the balcony and curled my hands around the cold, hard edge, it now seemed so surreal.

The banister was made up of thick glass with steel framing, giving the illusion that you were closer to falling over the edge than you really were. It had my legs tingling and my knees buckling. It made me feel alive.

This high up, the wind was vicious, lashing out at you as if it were angry you'd dared to come out and experience it. I felt Arlo's presence as he came to stand next to me, but I couldn't drag my gaze away from the cityscape.

Even so high up, I could hear the faint trickling sounds of life down below. I could visualize people yelling at each other, honking their horns and waving their fists in their anger. I imagined lovers were whispering soft things in each other's

ears and children crying for their mothers to buy them more sweets.

I could practically smell the hot dogs from the street vendors, the yeasty scent of the fresh bread that filtered out from the open doorways of cafés and bakeries. If I closed my eyes, I could imagine I was somebody else, somewhere else where nothing could touch me. And being stories upon stories above it all, it was an almost tangible feeling that it was true.

“I know you want answers,” he finally said after a long moment of silence.

I turned my head to look at him, my upper body leaning against the banister, the wind now more of an intimate caress.

“But you being dragged deeper into this—into a darkness that is unforgiving—comes with a price.” His eyes looked so dark under the moonlight and backlit by the cityscape. “I don’t think you understand how—”

“Dangerous it is?” All the *whys* bounced in my head, but they didn’t make it past my lips. I found my gaze drifting lower. His mouth had tipped up at the corners slightly as I’d cut him off, but he still finished his sentence.

“Something like that.” His voice wrapped around me, pulling that invisible thread between us tighter until I feared it would either snap before we made contact or irrevocably keep me ensnared.

I forced myself to look back into his eyes, trying to wade through the fog that had suddenly filled my head. “I can handle precautions. I can even handle violence.” *I’ve seen enough of it.* “I just don’t want lies.” I didn’t know what I meant by saying those words, but his expression told me maybe *he* understood. But still he said nothing, and I felt like the flickering in his eyes told me he couldn’t promise me the truth regardless.

I cleared my throat and faced the city again, a shiver taking hold of me tightly. “Would it be possible to go to my apartment and grab the rest of my things?” I didn’t know if I expected him to tell me I’d go back there soon so there was no

need to get my stuff, but he kept quiet for so long I glanced back at him. He was still watching me, but the look on his face was conflicted.

“Tell me what you want, and I’ll stop by and grab what you need.”

Now it was my turn to stay silent for long moments. “No offense, but I usually wait until the third date before having the guy riffle through my underwear drawer,” I teased, but the way his pupils dilated after I spoke had any humor leaving me. His expression was so intense that I felt goose bumps move along my arms and legs. I shivered again.

When he reached up and smoothed his thumb along my cheek, I closed my eyes and leaned into his touch. He felt so good, his skin warm, his hand big.

“Ya by ubil lyubogo, kto pytalsya zabrat’ tebya u menya.”

I felt my heart race faster at his words. I didn’t know what he said, but he whispered it so deeply, with so much possessiveness laced within, that I knew whatever he’d just spoken was the absolute truth.

“Did you just say I wasn’t worth all this trouble?” My voice was light, or at least I was trying to make light of the sudden heaviness I felt.

He didn’t smirk, didn’t do anything but stare at my lips, ones I suddenly felt like licking. “Let me know what you need, and I’ll make sure you get it. Whatever you need,” he said deeply, his gaze still on my mouth.

And then he turned and left me standing there, and a part of me knew he’d forced himself to leave, because if he hadn’t, I was pretty sure this night would have been ending a hell of a lot differently.

Like with me in his bed.

Arlo

I'd gotten the text from Dmitry this morning.

Butcher and Son. Midnight.

A part of me wasn't going to go. I didn't owe the bastard anything. I didn't work for him or his father, yet a dark curiosity filled me on why Leonid's oldest would want to speak with me. And if we were doing this at the old slaughterhouse, it was clear he didn't want a witness. He didn't want the Pakhan to know.

I pulled my car around the back of the old building and cut the engine. I grabbed two guns, a GLOCK and a Beretta, and tucked one in the waistband of my pants and the other in the front. I adjusted my jacket and climbed out, already having three knives strapped to my body, hidden yet easily accessible.

I didn't trust any of these fuckers.

As soon as I stepped in the warehouse, I felt eyes on me and found Dmitry leaning against one of the rusted walls to the sides. The shadows hugged him like an old friend, welcoming him back to the fray.

Tendrils of smoke curled around him, the end of his cigarette lighting up in the darkness, a flare of brilliant orange as he inhaled. He exhaled, those tendrils turning into a thick cloud in front of his face before dissipating.

Although I only saw Dmitry, I knew his brother was close. They were never far from each other. At only a year apart in age, they acted more like twins than siblings, knowing what the other thought, what the other felt, how they'd react. It was fucking eerie.

“Your brother can crawl out of whatever dark hole he’s occupying anytime now.” I kept my voice low, but I knew it was loud enough Nikolai would hear. I made my way toward Dmitry, watching for any subtle changes in his posture, listening to the sounds around me to gauge where his brother was.

The Petrov brothers were young, in their early twenties, yet I knew they'd experienced much of the same depravity of the underworld as I had. It had hardened them, made them lack any normal empathetic, human feelings toward others. It had pulled that light that could've grown in them completely away until there was no chance they'd ever grasp it.

That's how I'd been, how I'd felt. I had always assumed I'd die in a dark hole where I'd forever be alone, the dirt covering me up so I'd never have the chance to crawl myself out of it.

I thought of Lina back in my apartment. *Moy svet. My light.* She made that light attainable, reachable. *Real.* And that's why I'd do anything—everything—I could to ensure my world didn't touch her.

I could hear Nikolai's low laugh somewhere close by, echoing off the rusty, debilitated walls, but I kept my focus on Dmitry. When I was a few steps from him, I watched him inhale again, that smoke circling him, clouding his visage. Yet his eyes positively glowed as he stared at me.

He leaned against the wall with one leg crossed over the other, one hand tucked into his pants pocket. He flipped the ash from his cigarette, took one more hit, then flicked it away

before pushing off the wall and coming to stand before me. His lips peeled off his teeth, all straight, white, and flashing in the darkness.

“My father has been talking nonstop about the scene you caused the other day.” He let those words hang in the air between us. And so did I. “I swear he’s got a constant fucking hard-on because of it. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen him so excited about something.”

I had no doubt Leonid was obsessing about the fact that I’d expressed so much emotion, especially over a woman. That’s why she was at my penthouse, because I knew the fucker wouldn’t give up until he figured out a way to take her, to use her so I would do what he wanted. And that was joining his army in the Bratva and just becoming another soldier, another one of his pawns.

He was twisted enough to hurt her to force my hand. And I wanted her too much that I’d do anything to keep her safe.

I heard one set of footsteps behind me. I knew it was Nikolai. He was even less of a threat to me than his brother and his father, although only because I was more skilled, more deadly and dangerous. I saw him in my peripheral as he made his way around me and stood beside Dmitry.

“I don’t know whether to be offended or to up my game over the fact that you didn’t even flinch in my presence,” Nikolai said, and I looked in his direction.

“Probably safe to assume both.”

Nikolai sneered in my direction but kept his mouth shut.

Both the Petrov boys were large assholes, as tall and as muscular as me. With matching dark hair and eyes, they looked more likely to grace a fashion magazine or be on the big screen than slithering around in the dark, killing and maiming in the name of the Russian mafia.

If their father was the gun, they were the bullets.

“Your father needs to find a hobby if my life is so consuming to him.” I addressed Dmitry in reference to what he’d said about Leonid. I looked back at Dmitry and saw

something flicker in his eyes, a hard calculation. But it was gone as soon as I'd seen it, washed away with a sharklike grin.

Long moments of silence stretched out, and my patience wore thin, my annoyance growing. I wanted to go back to Lina. I wanted to feel the softness of her cheeks again. I wanted to feel her lean into my touch. And these little fuckers were taking my time away from her.

“You need to get the fuck on with it and quit wasting my time.” My voice hardened, my jaw tightening. My fingers twitched to grab my gun and aim it at Dmitry's head, to pull the trigger and put a bullet through his skull just to send a message to Leonid. I always was a trigger-happy bastard.

“I'd like to offer you a job.”

I didn't hesitate to respond right away. “I already have a job with the Ruin.” I could see the snarl on Dmitry's lips, but I didn't care if the fucker didn't like my response. “And even if I didn't, I wouldn't take a job from someone who barely has hair on his balls.” It was a low blow, but I was agitated over the Lina situation and these assholes keeping me from her.

Dmitry laughed, deep and low. “Man, Arlo, if you were anyone else, I would have already put a bullet between your eyes for your insults.”

I curled my lip. “You could *try*.” Dmitry may have only been a decade or so younger than I was, and far from a child, but I'd seen more in my years in this fucking underworld than he'd probably ever experienced in his life, even being the son of the Pakhan.

“I'm going to give you a pass on the disrespect.” He held up one finger. “But just this once, Arlo.”

I curled my fingers tightly into my palm and bared my teeth. “Is that so?” I took a step forward and saw Nikolai tense. But Dmitry held his hand up, stalling whatever his brother was about to do.

“I think we're getting off on the wrong foot here.” Dmitry tipped his head to the side as if trying to examine me, trying to figure me out. *Good fucking luck*. “I think this is something

you'll like, Arlo, something that will satiate that evil, tar-stained, fucked-up soul of yours."

Nikolai gave a little chuckle in response.

And then the air shifted, changed as it charged with something sickly and vicious. The atmosphere wasn't lighthearted anymore, wasn't the soft laughter of a demented man with fake smiles and a twisted mind. It was a sudden seriousness that was cloaking, a sturdy presence like a fourth body in the room.

"We want you to kill our father." Dmitry said it so matter-of-factly that I was actually taken aback, his words so final there was no doubt in my mind he meant every single one. "I know, before you say it or even think about it, that you're wondering if this is a setup." He held his hands out, palms up. "This is my brother and me offering you an olive branch. We're giving you a chance to take out the threat that is directed at your woman, no strings attached, no repercussions with the Bratva. No retaliation."

I eyed them both, gauging their body language, sifting through it all to see if they gave away any signs. Sweating, shifting of eyes, twitching of bodies. But they were both cool and collected, their breathing easy, their focus on me.

Well, fuck me. They were dead serious.

I knew they had no real love for the man who'd fathered them, had heard plenty of stories of their upbringing and all the vicious shit Leonid did to "toughen" up his sons. Where he treated his daughter like a princess, a little bird in a gilded cage, his sons got the blunt force of his brutality.

I chuckled, but it held no humor. "You little shits think you can take down Leonid on your own?" I lifted an eyebrow as I eyed them both. "I'll give you both credit; you have some balls of steel, conspiring to take down one of the strongest Pakhans in the Bratva."

"He's become unorganized, his vengeance with the Cosa Nostra becoming volatile. He's making too many mistakes and fucking things up. He's going to end up bringing a lot of fire

and death down on this organization and ruin a lot of connections we have in place.” Nikolai was the one to speak, and I was surprised by the thought-out response. He actually sounded clearheaded and not like a raving lunatic.

I’d always heard Nikolai was more of the partygoer in Petrov’s trio, the one less likely to give a shit about following in his father’s footsteps. The responsibilities fell more on Dmitry for obvious “oldest son” reasons.

“I’m not sure how this is my problem,” I responded, feeling the need to go to Lina even stronger than before.

Dmitry gave me a hard smile. “This is *your* problem, because my father has plans for your woman.”

My entire body tightened, even though I already knew Leonid wouldn’t leave this alone. I’d seen the excited glint in his eye as I took Lina out of his bar.

“I don’t need you or your brother interfering.”

Nikolai snorted and leaned back on the wall, crossing his arms over his chest and glaring.

“He’s like a dog with a fucking bone over having you join the ranks.” He shook his head. “I don’t get his obsession with you, but he holds you in high regard and will use whatever means necessary to bring you in.”

“And he plans on trying to use her as collateral to force my hand.” I didn’t phrase it like a question, because I knew that was the outcome Leonid saw. I knew the way the fucker’s mind worked. Dmitry was quiet for so long it started to feel like this itch under my skin.

“I don’t think you understand the obsession my father has with that woman. Because he knows you want her, because you couldn’t control yourself, he won’t stop until he makes you see his way of thinking.” I saw a muscle in Dmitry’s jaw tick, as if just speaking about how fucked up his father was almost sent him into a rage. “He wants to make her *his*, Arlo. That’s the fucking truth of the matter.” Dmitry took another step forward, and my entire body tightened. With readiness. I was already walking on a razor’s edge and trying to control

myself after hearing the news—the fucking threat—of what Leonid wanted with Lina.

I moved my hand suddenly to my back to get better access to my gun.

“Do you understand what I mean, Arlo? Do you understand what my father does to women?”

I gritted my teeth. I knew.

“He’s a savage toward the fairer sex. Fucking deplorable.”

I was surprised to hear the venom in Nikolai’s voice as he spoke about his father. Although they may not have cared for the man in a father/son sense, I always assumed they had some kind of respect for him. It was very clear they didn’t.

“He’ll destroy her, Arlo, and I don’t mean end her life in the most humane, painless way possible. He’ll beat her down mentally and emotionally until she’s nothing more than dough that he can form into whatever vision he sees fit. And when he’s the only thing that she can grasp on to, when he has you right where he wants you, he’ll destroy you too.”

I was seething with rage, and there was no way I could hide my body’s reaction. I wasn’t even trying as a deep growl of aggression and warning left me.

Dmitry smirked, but it didn’t hold the amusement or satisfaction I assumed it would from seeing me lose control. The very thought of anyone so much as laying a hand on Lina made me want to desecrate the entire city of Desolation. To think that somebody would touch or hurt her, to snuff out that light, made me want to go on a killing rampage.

“Our father needs to be taken out, Arlo. And because you now have a direct link to him through your woman, because she’s a threat and you know my father won’t stop until he gets what he wants, which is now both of you, she won’t be safe.”

I curled my lip at him. “Don’t fucking act like you’re giving me some kind of fucking gift, like you’re doing me a favor. You’re doing this because you want power, Dmitry. You’re doing this because your father is psychotic and destructive, becoming too volatile apparently. Don’t fucking

act like you're giving a handout simply because you have a good heart. It's just as fucking black and soulless as mine."

Dmitry laughed and looked over his shoulder, which had Nikolai chuckling as well. "As much as we'd like to take out the old fucker ourselves, show him the kind of family love he's shown us as we grew up, you know how our world works." He looked back at me. "It would be bad form for us to have a personal hand in it. But you're the best of the best. A real coldhearted bastard, aren't you? You could take him out and make it look like he just disappeared. Poof," he said as he curled his hand into a fist in front of his face.

I turned from them and paced, knowing what I had to do but not wanting to fucking work with Dmitry or Nikolai. I didn't want to make back-alley deals with them. This wasn't even about the Bratva or their Pakhan. I couldn't give a shit about Leonid and his fucked-up morals. My only concern and priority was Lina.

I turned to face them and growled out, "She's mine."

Dmitry started laughing. "Yeah, I think you made that pretty fucking obvious when Dima touched your girl and you pulverized his fucking hands." Nikolai started laughing even harder this time after his brother spoke. "Although it served the fucker right. He was a touchy bastard and doesn't know what the word 'no' means."

I clenched my jaw so tightly I wouldn't have been surprised if I cracked some teeth. As I stared at the dirt and trash strewn on the ground, the stench of decay and age surrounding me, I knew what I had to do.

"You and I both know you're going to take him out." The confidence in Dmitry's voice made me instantly want to break his neck, but I said nothing, just glared at the prick. "My brother and I don't need more war. We want an alliance between the Cosa Nostra and Bratva. We need to grow stronger and create not only domestic deals but international ones. And we found a way to do that. But if our father stays in power, he'll destroy the progress we're making." Dmitry

looked at Nikolai and smirked, as if they shared a silent conversation on what was really going down.

“Didn’t you know?” Nikolai prompted and pushed off the wall, stalking toward me. “I’m getting hitched. Got an arranged marriage to a sexy little just-turned-eighteen Italian hottie.” He wagged his eyebrows and grinned lasciviously.

“That’s your plan? An arranged marriage between the Petrov Bratva and Cosa Nostra?” I ran a hand over my face and shook my head. “You guys are even crazier than I thought.”

Dmitry grinned and didn’t say anything else. Good. I wasn’t into all the politics that came with the crime underworld. And I didn’t want details and logistics on what was all going to go down.

“So we came to a father killer to handle this.”

I kept my expression composed as I stared at Dmitry. They wanted their father out of the picture, wanted to fucking tie themselves with the Italian mafia, so that was *their* fight to deal with. But now Lina was in the mix because of me and my fuckup. I had to finish this. I had to go into the fold whether I wanted to or not, but when it came to her, I realized I’d do anything to protect her.

She had secrets, ones she’d tell me eventually, ones I’d take care of for her, so she never had to worry about anything again but being with me.

I’d do anything to make her mine. And tonight I was going to make her see—and feel—just that.

Galina

I woke to the groggy feeling that I hadn't been asleep for very long, the weight of that tiredness trying to pull me back under, but something had woken me up, so I forced myself to blink my eyes open.

I stared at the ceiling, a sliver of the ambient city light coming through the curtain of the bedroom window. As my mind cleared and I woke up further, I realized what had roused me.

I wasn't alone.

I felt someone watching me, and my gaze was pulled to my side of the bed, where I saw a large masculine body sitting, his forearms braced on his thighs, his head cocked to the side, and his eyes latched on me.

I gasped and sat up, knowing it was Arlo as the fog in my mind cleared. With a hand on my racing heart, I licked my lips and let the silence stretch out between us.

“Moye serdtse bolit, kogda ya smotryu na tebya.” His voice was deep and low but still had the intense effect of moving over every inch of my body and lighting it up.

“Arlo?” I whispered his name in the darkness. “What’s wrong?” It wasn’t by the way he watched me, but the tension in his shoulders, the way he clenched his jaw so tightly I could all but hear his teeth grinding. “Is everything okay?” Every little shift I made on the bed was followed by his eyes, as if he was tracking me and refused to let his prey go.

“It will be,” came his reply.

My heart thundered at those three words that sounded almost threatening. But not to me. *Never to me*, I thought with certainty.

I’d put my hair in a loosely knotted bun after my shower, and a strand tickled the side of my face. I pushed the lock away from my cheek, seeing Arlo watch the act with a clarity that was startling.

After he’d left for the night, I stayed on the patio for so long my fingers had felt like ice before going numb. I’d taken a too long and too hot shower, then slipped into bed, where I was sure I wouldn’t have been able to fall asleep because I felt too wound up, my thoughts too consumed with Arlo. He’d been on my mind a lot before all this drama happened, but now being in his home, surrounded by the constant sight of him, the masculine way he smelled, and coupled with our almost intimate self-defense classes, I couldn’t *stop* thinking about him.

I glanced at the small clock on the bedside table and realized I’d only been sleeping for an hour, and although I’d been groggy upon first waking and still very much tired, my body had woken up like a firework exploding in the sky with each passing moment in his presence.

I was confused why Arlo was here... so close and watching me so intently.

“I’d like to take you out to dinner tomorrow night,” he finally said after a long moment of passing silence.

My heart raced faster than it should at such an innocent statement, and I found myself licking my lips. He was so close that I could reach out and touch the stubble along his chiseled,

square jaw. “Dinner? Like a date?” I felt stupid right after the words left my mouth, and the way his lips twitched told me he thought it was funny, or maybe cute in a childish way. “Of course I didn’t mean a—”

“Yes, Lina. I’d like to take you to dinner for a date.”

My entire body hummed with pleasure. Going on a dinner date with Arlo shouldn’t have made my body tingle the way it did, but here I was, feeling a blush steal over my face. “Okay,” I whispered and ducked my head, this sudden shyness claiming me. A second later I felt the bed shift as he moved closer to me; then his finger was under my chin, bringing my face up so I was looking at him once more.

I glanced into his eyes that looked far too dark in the shadowy room. And the longer we stared at each other, the more I felt my breathing grow shallow.

“Dlya tebya ya sdelayu eto bezopasnym.”

I almost moaned at the way his deep voice moved over me as he said the Russian words.

And as if he just realized he’d spoken in a language I couldn’t understand, he murmured, “I’ll make it safe for you, Lina.”

“Galina.” My real name fell from my lips almost instantly, and I should have been afraid about giving that part of myself to him. It wasn’t safe, not with the running and hiding, but as I looked into Arlo’s eyes, this inherent part of me knew this man would live up to his promise to protect me. *Even from myself.* “Please, call me Galina. It’s my full name.” Not a lie, but also not totally the truth. Yes, it was my full name, but I’d made it sound like Lina was a nickname instead of what it really was. *An alias.*

Things started to feel weird then, more electrified, a charge in the air that had my breathing becoming even more frantic to the point I felt light-headed. When Arlo’s gaze dipped down to my mouth, he moved his thumb along my bottom lip, a slow and steady stroking that had pressure and heat settling between my legs.

“Galina,” he murmured in the sexiest way imaginable. My eyelids started to droop, to close on their own, as my nipples beaded under my thin T-shirt, as my pussy became wet. I ached in the best possible way *down there*.

“Look at me, *moy svet*.”

I couldn't help but obey his command as I opened my eyes, my eyelids fluttering. I held my breath as our gazes locked. I knew what was coming. *A kiss*. I didn't want to stop it, even though I probably should have. It would only complicate things in the long run. But I'd been thinking about his lips on mine for the last couple of months, and even obsessively since staying at his home. I wondered if his kiss would be soft or firm, gentle or aggressive.

I didn't care how it was. I wanted whatever he'd give me, virginity be damned.

“You should stop me,” he said, but he was leaning in slowly, maybe to give me a chance to change my mind. I wouldn't.

“But I won't.”

The deep, primal sound that rose up from the center of his chest had more wetness spilling between my thighs and had my breasts feeling sensitive and heavy. I wanted his touch, his hands stroking over every single naked inch of me. I wanted his mouth on my body, drawing out all the dark pleasure I'd only fantasized about.

He slipped his hand along my jaw to curl his fingers around the back of my neck, pulling me forward until our lips were now touching. The kiss was soft, barely any pressure, but God, it felt so good. And when a little moan spilled from me, I felt the tension escalate in Arlo's body.

He groaned, and his fingers tightened on my nape a second before he deepened the kiss, tilting his head to one side as he used the hold he had on my neck to move mine in the other direction. I parted my lips on a gasp, and he used that opportunity to slip his tongue along the seam before delving into my mouth.

His kiss was passionate and deep, his flavor heady and spicy. I could taste a hint of vodka coming from him, and I found myself sucking on his tongue, drawing not only the essence of that liquor from him, but also everything that was Arlo. A rough sound vibrated out of him, and then he was hauling me toward him until I straddled his waist, my thighs split as I braced my knees on either side of his muscular thighs.

I wrapped my arms around his shoulders, bringing my breasts flush with his hard chest. Could he feel my nipples? The twin, hard points hurt so bad, but in the best of ways. The sounds we made as we kissed were wet and dirty, needy and desperate. I certainly felt like I was drowning.

But what a way to die.

His hands were on my waist, his fingers digging into my flesh in a bruising manner that turned me on even more. I sat down fully on him, and a gasp left me as I felt how hard he was right against the most intimate part of me. His harsh groan sounded more animalistic than human, and the kiss deepened farther.

He slid a hand up my spine, tangled his fingers in my hair, and a moment later he yanked on the strands, pulling my head back and breaking the kiss. I moaned at the pleasure and pain that dominant act caused.

Arlo had his mouth on my throat instantly, his lips at my pulse point, sucking and licking, his teeth scraping over my sensitive flesh as he gently bit down. I shuddered on top of him, felt the rhythmic pull of his lips on my neck, and knew there would be marks there come morning.

His mouth was everywhere, along my jawline, skirting over my lips, his tongue licking slowly at my cheek before sliding down the side of my neck. It was such a primal act, as if he was this feral creature trying to stake his claim on my body.

“Tell me what you want,” he grumbled low, his voice sounding thicker, as if it hadn’t been used in far too long.

I didn't think I could find my voice right now, so another moan rose up. His fingers tightened in the bun of tangled strands on the back of my head, and he grunted when I started rocking back and forth atop his lap.

“Tell me what you want, *who* you want to give it to you.”

I gasped at the forcefulness of his words, but it was such a turn-on I felt even more wetness slide out of me, the cotton barrier I wore sticking to my cleft.

His erection was hard and thick between us, moving over my panty-covered pussy. I only wore a thin shirt and no bra, my underwear and his slacks the only thing stopping him from pushing into me and giving me what I really wanted—Arlo deep inside me.

“I want *you*.” The words came out before I could censor them, but now that he'd heard them, I was glad I hadn't tried to keep them in. “I just want you, Arlo.”

His fingers tightened in my hair again as he groaned, and then he let go of the strands, and I pressed my mouth back to his. The kiss turned deep and passionate, as if we were trying to breathe each other in. And the entire time I ground myself on him, rocking back and forth, writhing on top of Arlo as he slid his hands behind me to cover the small of my back. He pushed up my shirt and cupped my ass cheeks in his big palms, giving them a light squeeze that soon turned more forceful.

“So fucking perfect.” He squeezed even harder this time until I felt my eyes close on their own as dark pleasure spiked within me. “You're so fucking hot.” He kissed me with more force, grunting against my mouth until I swallowed the sounds, giving him a moan in return.

Arlo curled his fingers harder into my ass, and I started really rocking back and forth, sliding my slit along his massive erection. I felt like he had a steel rod tucked behind his slacks. I could imagine how good it would feel... how much it would hurt for him to push all those stiff inches into me.

He pulled at my bottom lip with his teeth, licking away the sting he caused, and that's when I exploded. I let my head fall back on my neck, his fingers now pulling out the hair tie, letting my locks tickle the base of my spine, my skin feeling overly sensitive.

"Fuck yeah." He had my now loose hair wrapped around his fist, tugging it hard enough I cried out as the pleasure went impossibly harder. The sting of him pulling my hair coupled with the orgasm rushing through me had me crying out loudly. Embarrassingly. "*Christ*, give me more of those sounds."

I never wanted the pleasure to end. And when it started to fade and I sagged against his chest, I expected Arlo to tense, maybe close off from me again. What I didn't expect was for him to wrap his arms around me and just... hold me. It made me feel like he didn't want this moment to end either.

"So beautiful," he murmured as he slipped his hand under my shirt and started rubbing my back gently, soothingly. I rested my head in the crook of his neck, Arlo's scent so dark and spicy. I inhaled deeply, wanting to take another piece of him inside me. The deep sounds of his soft Russian endearments made me sink against him even more.

His words ran softly along my body before licking them away as soon as they landed on my skin. He gently moved his lips along the other side of my neck, sucking at the flesh, pulling it between his teeth before letting it go. I felt those tendrils of pleasure rise again despite having just gotten off.

"Arlo." His name was a strangled mewl from my parted lips. I never knew I could sound so wanton and needy before.

"I know what you need, baby."

The world tilted as I was suddenly flipped around and now on my back, Arlo hovering over me. His hands were braced on either side of my body, the shadows concealing the majority of his face. I found that darkly attractive. All I saw was the thunderous, stormy look of pure lust reflected back at me.

He leaned down and started kissing me deeply. "So sweet." Arlo was breathing so hard. "*S toboy ya teryayu kontrol.*"

I ran my tongue along his bottom lip, pushing against the seam before delving inside and dueling with his tongue.

“You make me lose control, Galina.”

I made a small cry of pleasure at hearing him saying my full name.

“You’re dangerous to me. My only weakness.” The last part was so low I almost didn’t hear.

We kissed harder, my hands smoothing over his big biceps, my pussy wet, my clit throbbing in time with my pulse. The sounds we made were incomprehensible, rough, and guttural. Never once had I felt so out of control. Never once did I need something so instantaneous and consuming as I did right now with Arlo.

“Arlo, *please*.” I didn’t care that I was begging, pleading for anything... for all he could give me.

I felt his hands slide down my side, past the edge of my shirt, his fingertips skating over the bare flesh of my thighs. I felt goose bumps form along my skin as he gripped the T-shirt and pulled it up. I rose enough to help him take the shirt off, the cool air puckering my nipples instantly.

He groaned deeply, flattening his tongue along one peak and dragging it up and around. Over and over again. I let my body fall back on the mattress, my hair no doubt a tangled knot on the light sheets.

I gripped the comforter on either side of me, pulling at it as he worked on one nipple and then went to the other, back and forth, over and over again. He tugged and tweaked at the flesh with his teeth, the sting of pain heightening my desire even more.

“I can’t think when I’m around you.”

I felt the vibrations of his words grow inside me. I thrust my breasts out farther, whimpering when I felt him slide down my body. I missed his mouth on my nipples, but he cupped the mounds as if he knew where my thoughts had gone, massaging them, tweaking the tips with his fingers and thumbs.

“Open for me.” It was a thinly veiled demand I complied with promptly.

I parted my thighs, the cool air washing over me, my pussy so hot, so wet that my panties were stuck to my folds. I should’ve been embarrassed Arlo was the first man to see *that* part of me, that he’d see how worked up I was.

I closed my eyes as I kept pulling on my bottom lip, the pain from that small cut and my constant tugging on the flesh heightening my pleasure further. He ran his hands up my calves, over my knees, and moved his fingers up my inner thighs until he framed my pussy. “Look at me.”

I blinked my eyes open and stared at the ceiling for a second before I pushed my upper body up on my elbows and looked down at Arlo. My breath caught at the sight of him between my legs, the darkness in his eyes, and carnal need reflected back at me, making my heart skip a beat.

He smoothed a finger along the edge of the material, so soft, so gently that it was maddeningly erotic. And when he pulled the material aside, exposing me, I bit my lip hard enough I tasted the copper flavor of my blood coating my tongue.

“Oh fuck, Galina.” I could feel the soft puffs of his breath moving over my now bared flesh. He slowly lifted his gaze back to my face. “Are you going to let me touch you *here*, lick this sweet spot?” He slid a digit up and down the edge of my underwear. It was an almost innocent graze, but it seemed so dirty, so erotic.

“Yes,” I breathed out instantly.

He groaned and leaned in, the sound of him pressing his nose to the material making my lips part even more. And when he inhaled deeply, a gruff sound leaving him, a stab of desire tore through me so hard I actually lifted my hips and pressed myself against him.

“You smell so good. The most addicting thing I’ve ever been around.” His fingers were tight on the skin of my inner

thighs. “I wonder if this pussy is as fucking sweet as you smell.”

I was all but hyperventilating at his dirty words. And while he kept his gaze latched onto my face, he leaned in that last inch, my panties still shoved aside, and flattened his tongue on my cleft, licking me in a drugging way.

I made a sharp sound in my throat at the feel of all that hot, wet heat, at the way he kept licking me from entrance to clit. Over and over again until I felt something tingle at the surface of my body and consciousness, readying to explode outward.

My belly was hollowing from the force of my breathing, and my arms shook from holding myself up. But I couldn't stop. I had to watch.

“Mmm,” he hummed and sucked my clit into his mouth, causing my back to really arch, nearly forcing my eyes to close as the pleasure slammed into me. “I was right. Your pussy is so much sweeter than I could have ever imagined.” He moved back down and circled my hole, pressing the thick muscle in slightly before retreating and going back to my clit. “Addicting. I'll never get enough.” He sucked at my opening, and I moaned. “I'll need to have my face buried between these pretty pale thighs every fucking night just to get my fix.”

Oh God. I was going to explode just from his words.

“Who's licking this little pussy?”

My mind was in a haze as I let his words filter in.

“Who's the only one who will *ever* kiss you here?” He emphasized that single word by doing just that, a soft, almost sweet kiss against my clit. “Who's the only man who will ever know how sweet your cunt is?”

My hands ached at how tightly I tugged at the bedspread. I couldn't form words as I watched him tongue me, over and over again until I was lost in the sight of him doing these carnal things to my body. This was the best kind of torment.

“Tell me, *moy svet.*” Those four words were a demand right before he sucked my clit into his mouth and gave a hard pull that sent me over the edge.

“You, Arlo. Only you,” I cried out as I came.

“Fuck yes.” His words were muffled against my flesh as he sucked and licked, nipped and stroked. I moaned when I felt him tease a finger along my pussy hole, my body tightening when he gently slid it inside me. “So fucking tight.” He sounded like he gritted those words out through clenched teeth.

He sucked my clit again as he did a slow thrust of his finger in and out of me. And when he added a second, the stretch and burn, the discomfort of having something inside me for the first time heightened my lust.

I bowed my back, my breasts thrusting out, my nipples tight and aching. I buried my hands in his short dark hair and tugged at the strands as hard as he’d pulled at mine. It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him this was my first time... for anything, but I was so lost in the moment that all conscious thought was gone. Pulled out of my head as if it never had a place in there.

I came again, my arms giving out as I fell back on the bed, my hands slipping from his hair, my breath stuttering out of me. I let the pleasure wash through me until I was too exhausted to move, let alone ask Arlo to hold me.

“Look at me,” he said low, deeply.

I forced my eyes open and lifted my head to watch as he pulled his fingers out of me, my arousal glistening off his digits. He spread them along my inner thighs, the warmth of my pussy juices cooling almost instantly along my flesh. He leaned in and dragged his tongue along all that cream, lapping it up like he was starved for it.

He pulled back, made sure my panties were in place, adjusted my shirt down so I was covered, and then he was pulling me into his arms. My chest was right on his, and the sound of his frantically beating heart had me smiling. He might act outwardly like he was fine, controlled, but he couldn’t hide this.

I shifted closer, and I felt how hard he was. I pulled back and tipped my head in his direction. “What about you?” He cupped the side of my face, his thumb stroking over my cheek. Arlo didn’t say anything for long seconds, and when he leaned down and kissed me slowly and gently, I melted into him, tasting myself on his lips and tongue.

“This isn’t about me. I didn’t do this for you to reciprocate.” He kissed my forehead and whispered, “Besides, eating that sweet pussy brings me more pleasure than you’ll ever know.”

I shivered, and he tightened his grip and pulled me closer to him.

“You’re mine, Galina.” His words sounded final. “*Ya ub’yu lyubogo, kto popytayetsya zabrat’ tebya u menya.*”

“You’ve said that before. What does it mean?”

He was silent for long moments, and I could imagine he was trying to think of a lie, but what he uttered told me it was the absolute truth.

“It means... I’ll kill anyone who tries to take you from me.”

Galina

The next morning I found myself alone in bed, the covers over me, the other side of the bed cold, telling me Arlo probably left as soon as I'd fallen asleep. I didn't want to let that bother me as much as it did, but what we'd shared last night, what he'd done to me and what he'd said, made me feel even more connected to Arlo than ever before.

I got ready for the day. Our morning routine was the same with a danish and cup of coffee, but I noticed Arlo's gaze on me was even more intense than before. I couldn't stop thinking about his hands and lips on me... what he'd done between my legs, his mouth sucking and licking at me like he was so hungry for me he'd never get enough. I wondered if he'd thought the same thing.

And as I stood a few feet from him in the boxing ring, my heart thundering and sweat lining my temple, my physical reaction had nothing to do with what we were about to do and everything to do with where my mind had gone.

I was so aroused, and he hadn't even touched me today.

"You're not focused this morning," he rumbled low, his expression that same stoic mask that made it impossible to see

what he could be thinking about.

“I’m fine.” *Lie. Such a lie.*

He smirked and took a step closer, and my heart jackknifed in my throat. “That so?” I nodded but didn’t trust my voice. His smile faded. “I don’t like lies, Galina. And grown men know to only give me the truth.”

I took a step back as he advanced. “Yeah?” That lone word was a squeak out of me. “And if they do lie?” Why was I playing with fire? I was going to get so damn burned. The ropes stopped my retreat, and I reached behind me to grip them, curling my fingers over their thickness, praying it kept me from crumpling to the ground.

He stopped a foot from me, his eyes raking up and down my body. My breath caught because I for sure could read his expression now. Arlo stepped even closer until I felt his body heat seep into me. I thrust my breasts out, and his gaze dropped to look at my chest. He lifted a hand and ran it over his mouth, the sound of his palm scraping over his stubble turning me on.

“You want the truth?” There was a challenge in his words, and I nodded. “If you want the truth from me, I expect the same from you.” He moved closer like a predator, and the ropes dug into my back even harder. That pain heightened my pleasure and reminded me of last night and how good the orgasm had felt when that agony and ecstasy slammed into me.

He reached out and curled his big fingers around the ropes right next to mine, our skin brushing dangerously close. I clenched my thighs together as a pulsing ache settled deep within. “What I say might scare you.” His focus was on my mouth, and I wanted to kiss him so desperately.

“I’ve been scared enough times in my life, and none of them were when I was with you.”

I swore I saw a flicker of surprise on his face before it was gone. He leaned in and rested his forehead against mine, and for just a second we both breathed the same air.

“I kill, Galina.” His words were low. “I kill men who lie to me.” He took a step back, maybe assuming after he spoke the words, I’d shut him out. I’d erect a wall between us from fear and hatred.

“Are they bad men?” I whispered.

“Yes. They are the same as me.”

I swallowed, again having a feeling Arlo said these things to make himself out to be a villain, and although I’d never see him as a hero, the knight who rides in on a white steed and saves the day, I also knew the man standing in front of me saved me simply because he didn’t want me to be hurt. And he was still protecting me.

I took a step toward him and placed my hands on his chest. I stared at where I touched him, wanting to be honest for the first time in my life, wanting to confide in someone I trusted. And although I hadn’t known Arlo for long at all, a fleeting passage of time if I was being realistic, I could honestly say I’d never felt so safe with anyone else.

“I used to live in Vegas,” I finally said, not meeting his gaze, just staring at my hands, because I knew if I looked at his face, I’d lose the courage to tell him any of this. “I never had a stable household. My father had a drug and gambling problem, one so bad he got in trouble with some pretty dangerous men.” I internally snorted at that thought. Henry seemed so harmless compared to Arlo. “A couple of months ago,” I said, softer this time, and I felt Arlo tense beneath my hands, “I was dragged out of bed in the middle of the night and taken to this man who my father owed.” I licked my lips, hating that any kind of weakness or fear came through my voice, but it pulled me back to that night.

Arlo lifted his hands and placed them over mine, not pulling them away from his chest, just holding me. He was giving me silent support to continue, I realized.

“My father, the piece of shit that he was, offered me to this man in exchange to clear his debt.” The dark sound that came from Arlo had me squeezing my eyes shut tight. I didn’t want his pity or anger. I just wanted to start over. I wanted to escape

that. “My father offered up my virginity to wipe his slate clean.”

The air shifted around us, tensed as Arlo let those words really sink in. I did look up at him then, and the stormy, violent expression on his face almost had me taking a step back. But I knew he’d never hurt me. I knew that by the way he still kept my hands pressed to his chest, his thumbs stroking over them in a gentle, reassuring manner. I wasn’t about to go into all the disgusting things Leo would have done to me before selling me off to other sick fucks.

“But I was able to escape when we got back to my apartment. And so I ran... I ran to Desolation and became someone new.” I exhaled. “I don’t know if I’ll ever be safe, not when I can’t see my father or his debtor letting me go.” I looked into Arlo’s eyes. “And that’s one of the reasons I’m telling you, because I want you to understand that my life comes with a lot of baggage, and the last thing I want is for you to deal with even more shit than what’s already happening.”

Arlo cupped my cheek and just stared at me for long seconds. He leaned in and kissed my forehead. I closed my eyes and sank into his embrace. “I’m sorry.”

I felt my brows pull low. “Why are you sorry? You didn’t do anything wrong.”

He kissed me again before pulling me into the hardness of his chest. I rested my cheek against his heart and listened to the steady beat as he ran his hand up and down my back. “I’m sorry you had to experience the darkness of what this world offers. I wish you never had to be part of that.” There was so much sincerity in his words that I felt the prickling of unshed tears in my eyes. “No one will ever hurt you. I’d never allow it, *moy svet*.”

I believed him. God help me but I believed him. That’s why I’d said anything about my past at all.

“What does that mean? I’ve heard you call me that a few times. Please don’t tell me it means I’m too much trouble.” I tried a teasing approach after such a heavy topic because I

didn't want to speak about the shitty past anymore. I wished I could rip all of it from my world and never have to worry about anything but enjoying this one life I had.

Arlo was silent for so long I wondered if he'd ever answer. But then he cupped my face and leaned in to kiss me almost sweetly against my lips. "It means 'my light.' That's what you are to me, Galina. You're my light in all the darkness that surrounds me."

Galina

After confiding in Arlo this morning, the rest of the day had been filled with this weird energy. We worked out with more self-defense training, but the energy had just been off. Arlo seemed tense, a little distant, and it was clear he had something big on his mind. I didn't want to think it was about what I'd told him. I didn't want to obsess and worry that I'd pushed him away with what was following me, no matter what he said or what endearments he called me.

He'd taken me back to his apartment after we finished training, where he told me to relax until dinner but that he had business to take care of and would be back later. He left with another kiss to my forehead before leaving me standing in the foyer, staring at a closed door and having the horrible feeling that I'd pushed away the first man I'd fallen for.

And I had... fallen for him.

I now stared out the window of his Mercedes, the night having fallen an hour ago, my worry still at the forefront of my mind. I glanced over at him, but he was once again hard to read. He'd closed off from me, put that wall up so it was too solid for me to get through. A part of me just wanted to cancel

tonight, because whatever bond I felt we'd started to share, the intimacy that I craved, was slipping through my fingers.

The restaurant Arlo was taking me to was a short drive from his apartment and still within the heart of the wealthy district of the city. I was glad he hadn't taken me back into my side of Desolation. He pulled to the curb, where a young man dressed in valet attire helped me out of the passenger side, and another man in the same uniform took the driver seat before pulling from the curb to park the car. Arlo placed a firm, warm hand on the small of my back and led me inside. I felt that touch through my entire body and glanced down to make sure my arousal wasn't betraying me through my clothing in the form of hard nipples.

Fortunately I was safe for the time being.

Arlo had told me to wear something more formal for tonight, so I'd picked one of the dresses he'd gotten for me. It was a black, thick, ribbed-knit, long-sleeve dress that fell to my knees. The gray wool jacket that had been among the clothing he'd splurged on for me, and the dark tights covering my legs protected me from the chilly, nearly winter air of New York.

Vasyli's looked like one of the many skyscrapers in this part of the city, but the brickwork and artistic flair were very much Russian. The cathedral depiction etched into the massive red double doors was so detailed you could tell whoever created it had put their heart and soul into it.

Rectangular windows were in even intervals along the front face of the building, ornate golden wrought iron covering most of the glass so you couldn't see inside. But the metalwork was so delicate and beautiful that it was almost prettier to look at than the open sky itself.

Arlo opened the door for me, and I stepped inside, the warmth of the restaurant and the sights and smells bombarding me in the best ways. Traditional Russian music played softly overhead, and the scent of savory and sweet food filled my nose every time I inhaled.

An older gentleman came forward, his smile big and adding even more wrinkles to his face. He looked more like a grandfather than anything else, especially with his thick cable-knit cardigan over his white button-down shirt. He had a full head of white hair, his eyes so blue and light they almost seemed transparent.

The older man and Arlo started speaking Russian, but I never felt left out even though I couldn't understand them, not with Arlo's hand still resting on the small of my back, his body pressed close to mine. After a long moment the older man turned to me and introduced himself as Akim, welcoming me to his restaurant. He kept a respectful distance, and I wondered if it was the way his gaze lowered to where Arlo's hand rested possessively around my waist.

We were led through the restaurant, and I took in the vibrant red booths on either side of us. A row of four-seater square tables was lined in the center of the room and between the booths. There were only a few people dining, and I assumed the lateness and that it was well past a normal dinnertime was the reason. But I liked that it was more intimate. I didn't think I'd feel as comfortable if the restaurant had been packed.

I was transfixed by the decor, at the very traditional and culturally aesthetic Russian theme. A gold Russian imperial eagle was front and center on the wall, vibrant colors splashed along the wings and spread out through the wall. A red and gold chandelier hung from the ceiling and cast an ambient, soft glow through the interior.

We were led to a booth in the back, and once at the table, the older gentleman asked me in a heavily accented voice if I cared for him to take my coat. Once it was off and hanging on the wall beside us, I slid into the booth across from Arlo. I felt nervous over this dinner date, or maybe it wasn't the date at all but everything I'd admitted to him this morning and the fact that he'd been acting off all day.

I hadn't realized I'd been so tense, but the fact that this was a *date* made me feel anxious even when it shouldn't, especially given all the things Arlo and I had done just the

night before and the personal things I'd shared with him. But for some reason tonight felt more intimate than when he'd had his face buried between my thighs.

It was that thought, and the memory that followed, that caused a rush of all the feelings he evoked inside of me, which in turn had my body heating. I glanced up at Arlo and saw the way his eyes became hooded, as if he knew exactly where my mind had gone. Then again, my body betrayed me and how he made me feel at every turn.

And then the time flowed so seamlessly, so easily, that I let myself fall into just enjoying myself. The hours passed as we ate all the Russian foods and talked about all the wonderful things.

We didn't order from menus in the traditional sense, but instead the chef created dishes for us, and everything I tried was delicious and totally new to me. I sampled *pelmeni*—flavorful Russian dumplings. Then there was *borscht*—beet soup. I had a special fondness for the *pirozhki*, which was baked bread stuffed with meat, mushrooms, rice, and onions. This was all eaten between sips of vodka and incredible conversation with the only person who had ever made me feel comfortable. I forgot all about the weirdness that had come from Arlo all day. I forgot about all my problems and the shit that followed closely at my heels... the things I was running from.

It all felt so... normal.

By the time we had desserts—yes, plural—I was satiated and full and didn't think I'd ever smiled as much. My cheeks hurt, and my face felt hot from the vodka and smiling. I glanced around and realized we'd been here for so long, lost in just enjoying each other's company, that the restaurant had pretty much emptied. Meaning it was literally Arlo and me.

I leaned back in the booth and just stared at him, feeling my heart flutter strangely in my chest. I could have blamed the alcohol for the heat in me, or the way I couldn't stop blushing and grinning. But that wasn't the truth.

I was falling for my Russian, and I didn't want to stop, not even if the ground rushed up to greet me painfully. Not even if it killed me in the end.

"Tonight was wonderful. Thank you." His smile was slow and very satisfied. "I have never had such a great time." It was the sad truth, but one I owned.

"I'll have to make sure you experience so many wonderful times that it'll take away all the bad ones."

My throat tightened with emotions I didn't—shouldn't—think too hard on.

I didn't know what to say, but even if I found words to convey how he made me feel, the sound of the front door opening and the gust of chilled air rushing into the restaurant that made its way to our table would've cut me off.

I lazily glanced toward it, wondering who was coming to eat so late. It had to be going on midnight by now. My heart lodged in my throat, and I straightened, sensing Arlo taking full attention of my sudden shift in demeanor.

I glanced over at him to see this hardness come into his eyes as he glanced at who'd just entered. Leonid.

He had two barely legal women on either side of him, and when he noticed us, my breathing became shallow. It was the familiar dread I felt when I knew I was in the company of someone truly evil. His cold, dead eyes slid over to me, and he grinned slowly. I'd barely had any interaction with this man, only the small "interview" we'd done before I waitressed at his bar. But as I looked into the visage of evil itself, I knew without a doubt Arlo had been right.

This man was bad and dark to his very soul, and he'd do *anything* to get his way.

The next few minutes happened in slow motion. I could see the way Arlo's entire body grew taut when Leonid walked past our table, but his expression was surprisingly stoic, as if he was masking his true feelings even if his body reacted on its own. Leonid only gave Arlo a moment's glance before his focus was right back on me. I didn't miss how he curled his

hands around the women's waists even harder, so hard I didn't miss the slight winces that covered their perfectly made-up faces.

The way he raked his gaze up and down my body made me feel dirty, like a barrel of oil had been spilled on me and I'd never get it off. My skin felt itchy, prickly, the urge to scratch, to tear it off almost too strong to ignore. And just before he walked out of our sight, he winked at me as if it was a promise of what was to come.

"I think I want to go now," I said softly as soon as we were alone again.

Arlo said nothing as he paid our bill and helped me into my coat before leading me outside. His big palm was warm and steady against the small of my back. Once I was seated in the passenger seat, he crouched on his haunches, surprising me. His hand on my thigh was hot and heavy, and it gave me the sense of being safe. Because I knew these hands had killed so many.

"Do you kill people for a living?" I whispered the words, not sure why I was asking him that right here and now. But they spilled from me like a wound opening up and bleeding out.

Arlo didn't speak for so long I was afraid I'd ruined the night, that he'd never answer. Things had been so off today after confiding in him; then they felt right again during dinner, as if whatever he'd been thinking had drifted away and he was able to relax.

"I think you already know the answer to that," came his reply.

I nodded slowly. Yes, I did know the answer, and it didn't send fear through me, didn't have me looking at him in a different light. "And you'll kill someone who means to hurt me." I didn't phrase it as a question because I knew he'd killed the drunk for me, to keep me safe, to make sure it never happened again. So I knew the answer already, yet I wanted him to verify, to tell me again... to show me I was as twisted as he was, because I *wanted* that confirmation.

He stroked my cheek so softly, so gently that it went against the very makeup of who he was, of who I saw him to be on the outside. A part of me knew this man was good—not inherently, not down to his soul, yet he was gentle to me, kind even. He treated me better than anyone else ever had.

“I’ll never let anyone hurt you again.” Back and forth, his thumb on my cheek was lulling.

Long moments we just stayed there, this strange, comfortable sensation filling me. It was as if this was where I had always been meant to be.

“I forgot something inside. I’ll be right back.” His voice sounded off, too low and calm... too restrained. He handed me the keys to the car. “Start it and stay warm. Keep the doors locked, although no one will bother you.” He said it with such certainty and conviction I couldn’t help but believe him.

He looked at me for a long second and then reached out to cup my face. I instinctively leaned into his touch and let my eyes close.

“Everything will be okay.” I opened my eyes, not sure what he was talking about, because so much was *not* okay. “I’ll make sure of it.” His stare was hard. “You believe me?”

I was nodding before I even realized I’d done the act. My body already knew without a doubt this man’s word was true. He leaned in and kissed me passionately, fully. He ruined me in the best of ways. And when he broke the kiss and stood, shutting the door and looking through the tinted glass as if he saw right into my soul, I knew it all so clearly my breath shuddered out of me.

I’d always be safe with him, and that should have terrified me, because it just meant Arlo was even more dangerous than the monsters that were after me.

Arlo

Not taking out Leonid just moments before, as he'd been far too close to Galina—as he'd looked at her as if he was undressing her with his eyes—had taken every single ounce of my fucking willpower.

I didn't want to leave her in the car, even though I knew she was safe. No one would fuck with her in this part of town. No one would dare even look in her direction, knowing she was with me. This part of Desolation was heavy Bratva territory. Which meant crime that didn't have to do with the Russians was damn near zero.

I stepped back into Vasyli's, seeing Akim speaking in a low voice with the bartender.

Akim glanced over his shoulder to see who'd entered, and at the look on my face, the silent command I gave him, he nodded slowly and walked over to the front doors, sliding the lock in place and tipping his chin toward the back, indicating to the bartender it was time to leave. Although he didn't know *why* I was here, I made my expression pretty fucking clear.

Shit was going down, and if he didn't want to be in the crosshairs, it was time to make himself scarce.

After meeting Dmitry and Nikolai at Butcher and Son and fully hearing their plan where their father was concerned, I hadn't needed to think about what had to be done. There was no choice in the matter. I'd planned on taking Leonid out even before speaking with his sons. The *how* just hadn't been planned yet.

Leonid had to be taken out in order to keep Galina safe. I didn't give a shit about the Petrov family's internal power struggle or what they had going on behind the scenes with the Italians. My only concern was making sure the woman who was mine, who I'd protect with my life, was never put in harm's way. Especially because of me.

Dmitry had told me his father came to Vasyli's every week at the same time and always took the private back room for his meal. After his meal—and a couple of forced sexual acts from the women he brought with him—he'd go back to his apartment, which was heavily guarded and had too many witnesses, and do unspeakable things to the females until they limped home the next morning, bruised and sore and destitute in ways they'd never imagined.

But here, at Vasyli's, he was unguarded, too arrogant in feeling he was safe in this part of the city. And that was true for the most part. But not tonight.

I hadn't wanted Galina to go anywhere near Leonid, because it would rack up my rage even higher. I hated having her near him, but this was the quickest, most convenient route to get this shit done with Leonid. I didn't want to wait, and neither did Dmitry or Nikolai. Waiting would just make the risk of Leonid finding out even greater... if he didn't already know. Not much got past the sadistic bastard.

At the thought of taking down Leonid, I felt a satisfaction fill me. I'd make sure it was the most bloody, brutal killing possible. He didn't deserve any less.

My anger rose so fast and high I was choking on it. The memory of Leonid looking at her, the fire in his eyes as he no doubt thought of all the ways he'd break Galina, had me curling my hands tightly into fists. I remembered the way

she'd trusted me with the truth of her past—one I'd handle for her whether she wanted me to or not, one I'd take out once this was all said and done.

I'd hunt down the motherfuckers who thought to degrade and hurt her. I'd make them cry and beg for death before I gave them the final blow. I'd make sure Galina never had to live in fear again.

The bartender made himself fucking scarce like a fire had been lit under his ass. Akim disappeared as well. The heavy weight of silence was now the only thing that I let filter through my conscience. I had several guns strapped to my body, all concealed yet easily accessible. But that's not what I'd be using tonight.

Tonight, and just for Leonid, reserved for fuckers who personally wronged me, or in this case, the only important thing in my life that they wronged and threatened—Galina—I'd use my fucking hands. I'd make this intimate.

I wanted to see—*feel*—the blood flow out of Leonid's body as he looked into my eyes. I wanted my face to be the last thing he saw before he took his final breath. Just thinking about it got me off.

I could hear a few raised whispers coming from the kitchen, the clang and bang of pots and pans before total silence once again surrounded me. I made my way toward the back where the private room was, my heart a steady, calm beat in my chest, the thirst for blood surrounding me like a lover's caress.

The door Leonid was behind was shut, and I stopped in front of it, hearing the sound of a soft female cry on the other side, followed by the unmistakable clank of silverware hitting a plate. I knew the sick shit Leonid liked, how he got off on a woman's tears.

I unsheathed one of my knives and curled my fingers tightly around the hilt, the weight substantial, the blade sharp enough it would go through flesh seamlessly. With my other hand, I reached for the door handle and silently opened it, the

hinges greased, everything still so silent aside from the unobstructed noises now coming from the room.

The interior had the same setup as the main restaurant with the Russian aesthetics, but there was only one white-linen-covered table set in the center topped with plates filled with different items. No one had heard the door open, not with the sound of one woman weeping and the other making the unmistakable sounds of giving head.

Leonid sat facing the door—never presenting his back and being vulnerable. His head was tipped toward the ceiling, his eyes closed, and one hand tangled in the hair of the woman giving him the blowjob. His hold was so tight in the strands that his knuckles were white, and there was no doubt the female had to feel that pain all the way down her spine.

I turned my attention to the other woman, who sat at the other end of the table, her wide eyes trained on me, her face tear-streaked, a bruise already marring her cheek. Blood had trickled out of her nose, and she hadn't bothered wiping it away, a crimson trail, a visual of the kind of pleasure Leonid got off on.

"Sosi eto, gryaznaya shlyukha." Suck it, dirty whore. To emphasize what he wanted, he lifted his hips with enough force the girl gagged, clawing at his thighs. She pulled back enough to suck in a lungful of air before she was right back to sucking his dick.

Leonid opened his eyes and righted his head, and our gazes locked. He wasn't surprised to see me here; that much was clear by the lack of emotion on his face, but then again, that's what I wanted. I wouldn't kill him unknowingly. I wanted him to know his life was ending tonight. It would give me even more pleasure.

He grinned slowly and pushed the woman away, her small body becoming unsteady before she righted herself and hurried to the other side of the room. He tucked his cock back into his pants and zipped it up, all the while staring at me.

In Russian, he said, "She's a poor substitute to the mouth I really want sucking my dick." He reached out and picked up

an olive, popping it into his mouth before chewing it and washing it down with a swig of vodka straight from the bottle. He made a show of looking behind me. “I don’t see that sweet piece of virgin ass to give me that visual, but”—he lifted his hand and tapped his finger on his temple—“I have her image seared right here. Makes fucking these sluts more fun.”

I kept myself calm, didn’t show any reaction. I didn’t need to let my rage—which was paramount and tangible right now—control me. That’s what he wanted. Leonid wanted me to let unused emotions make me sloppy.

“*Ubiraysya.*” The girls scurried fast as fuck out of the room, and once we were alone, I reached behind me and closed the door with a soft *click*, never taking my focus off him.

“Care to join me for a drink?” He picked up the vodka bottle and tipped it in my direction. “Seeing as one of us is going to die tonight...”

“I didn’t come here for a drink.”

He took a long swig and watched me before swallowing and setting the bottle back down. “No, you didn’t.” A long, terse moment of silence passed, one where I felt things start to escalate. “My sons think I don’t know betrayal when I can smell it like a hound chasing a rabbit.”

I kept my face emotionless.

“The little bastards were always a disappointment. I blame their weak whore of a mother.” His smile was like the flash of a shark’s teeth. “You came here because of the girl.” He didn’t phrase it like a question. He leaned back in his chair, the wood creaking from the shift of his weight. “Yeah, you came here because of the girl.” He chuckled low and deep, and I knew I’d let my mask slip by the way he laughed harder and tipped the vodka bottle in my direction. “Not the sharing type, huh?” He shrugged. “I was never one to get attached. I like to keep my options open, and with so much willing pussy available, it’s a buyer’s market.”

“Trafficking, forcing women to fuck you, or the fact that they are too afraid of your wrath to say no isn’t willing pussy.” I took a step closer, thoughts of Leonid forcing Galina to do anything rushing through my head in disgusting, vile clarity.

Leonid didn’t speak, just kept that stupid fucking grin on his face. He held his arms out, his three-piece suit stretching wide over his chest. “Do you think you can take me down?” He slowly pushed himself up to his full height. His gaze flickered down to the knife in my grasp. “Hand to hand, eh?”

I kept completely still and at ease. I was ready for this. I pushed Galina out of my mind, the very thought of her having no place for what was about to happen. Without taking his gaze off me, Leonid started to unbutton his jacket before removing it and hanging it over the back of his chair. He moved around the table and took several steps toward me, stopping when he was an arm’s length away.

For long moments we didn’t speak, just held each other’s gazes, the aggression and testosterone, the suffocating thickness filling the air. And then he struck like a cobra, his hand reaching for my neck. I had no doubt he planned to crush my windpipe, tear my trachea right from my throat.

I ducked and dodged right before he could wrap his thick fingers around my neck. I thrust my arm his way, trying to lodge the blade into one of his kidneys, but he moved out of the way quickly, the knife grazing his shirt. I heard him hiss and knew I’d at least nicked the motherfucker.

We both stumbled back before I charged forward, my body crashing into his. I used momentum to push him backward and against the table. Plates and cups fell to the ground, glasses breaking, my boots crunching on the debris. We grappled for supremacy, with me trying to stab him, but the fucker was stronger than he looked, his arms corded with muscle, so he was able to block any hits.

“I’m going to have fun fucking the innocence out of Galina.”

I felt this beast awaken further inside me when I heard Leonid say her full name. I shouldn’t have been enraged that

he'd dug up information on her, should have known the bastard would have wanted to cover all angles where she was concerned. His obsession wouldn't have let it be any other way.

I rammed my elbow into the side of his face hard enough his head cocked back and blood sprayed out. I used that moment to stab him in the side, his grunt of pain driving my bloodlust higher. Just as I was about to jerk the knife upward all the way to the motherfucker's heart, he slammed his fist into my gut with so much force the air left me and gave him the opportunity to push me back a step.

"You could have been my best soldier, could have been my right hand," he roared as he charged forward, but I tensed, waiting to absorb the hit, my fingers twitching on the handle that was covered with his blood. "What a fucking waste." His face twisted in rage, and I slowly grinned, letting him see the pleasure and darkness that consumed me.

This was why he wanted me as his weapon for the Bratva... because he knew I'd kill anything that stood in my way, and now, that was *him*.

Right before he rammed his shoulder into me, I turned and lifted my knee, connecting with his side and spinning around to wrap my arm around his throat. I shoved him forward so hard that when he crashed into the wall, a picture shook and then fell to the ground.

"You'll never hurt another woman again," I seethed, my mouth right by his ear. He jerked his head back, his skull connecting with my cheek. Fire raced along the side of my face, but I paid it no mind. The pain felt fucking good.

He bucked backward and was able to spin around, but I delivered a knee kick, causing him to howl in pain before he fell to the ground. I was on him in the next second, one hand wrapped around his throat, the other still holding my knife. I grinned wider as I delivered an elbow to his head. I watched the haze cover his eyes from the pain and disorientation, and I took that moment to lean in so our faces were close enough I could have given him a kiss of death before I ended this.

“Galina is *mine*, and I’ll bring down anyone and anything who tries to take her from me.” I bared my teeth in what I knew was a frightening display of the demon in me. “That even means you, you sick fucking bastard. I’m going to get off on slicing your throat open ear to ear.” He struggled, but the hit to the head still settled, the glossy look in his eyes present. Blood trickled out of one of his ears, but the bastard had the balls to still grin, red covering his teeth.

“I would have fucked her until she was a broken—”

I brought my knife to the soft spot right below his ear and dragged it slow and deep all the way around until I reached his other ear, his skin opening up like a ribbon being pulled away from a gift. Blood sprayed across my chest and covered my hands, droplets splashing on my neck.

I straddled his waist and stared down at him, right into his eyes, watching as life faded from him as he struggled. His hands were at his throat like he could seal the wound up, as if it’d staunch the blood flow and save him. I kept my grin in place, because even though Leonid knew he was dying, even if he tried to use the last of his strength to push me off, everything he’d worked for was now nothing.

“Your legacy ends here and now, Leonid. Your sons will move in the opposite direction of what you wanted.” I leaned in close so his blood was the only thing I smelled, that metallic scent that filled my nose and had adrenaline rushing through me. “Did you know they’re forming an alliance with the Cosa Nostra?” Leonid’s eyes widened, and he feebly struggled against the news. “Yeah, it seems like Nikolai is marrying a little Italian to bring the two families together.” I laughed low at the look on Leonid’s ashen face. “I bet that just skins you alive, doesn’t it?”

His eyes narrowed in one last rush of aggression, and he grated out in a barely audible hiss, “Fuck. You.”

I laughed darkly and cupped the side of his face before saying, “No. Looks like you’re the one being fucked.”

He started gasping, his mouth opening and closing, the blood flow from his neck slowing. And then he looked at

something over my shoulder just as anything and everything that used to be Leonid Petrov faded away.

I stayed where I was as I stared down at him, this heaviness in my chest lifting marginally knowing Galina was safe from this fucker. I stood and walked a few steps back, and while keeping my eyes on the dead bastard, I grabbed my phone from my pocket and dialed the number that would handle the rest of this.

As soon as I heard the deep voice on the other end, I said, “I need to book a travel ticket for one. Yes, I need assistance with extra baggage.” I stared at Leonid’s now lifeless form as I put the cleanup in motion.

Once it was all set and my phone was back in my coat pocket, I reached over and grabbed a white linen napkin, rubbing it over my hands while I stared down at the fabric as it changed to red and pink. The blood of my enemy smeared across that strip of cloth, the stickiness of it covering my fingers and palms.

I let the napkin drop as I left the room, shutting the door behind me. If the women were smart, they were long gone by now. I walked down the hall and saw Akim standing in the kitchen entrance. His gaze took in the blood covering my clothing and hands. I gave him a nod, and he gave me one in return.

I left the restaurant and headed back to Galina. *Moy svet.*

My light.

Galina

I'd seen the blood on Arlo's hands and clothes, smelled it filling the car interior as he said nothing and drove us back to his apartment. I didn't need to ask what had happened... what he'd done. I knew.

He'd killed Leonid. He'd made it safe for me.

Arlo hadn't said one word the entire drive back, and not a single syllable once we were inside his penthouse. He headed straight to his room, and a moment later I heard the shower kick on. I'd wanted to go to him, to touch him, hold him—even if he probably didn't want that—and show Arlo I was here for him.

But instead I went to my room and showered. I had been able to still feel Leonid's oily gaze on my body, and wanted to scrub my skin clean until there was no memory of tonight left.

Now here I was, sitting on my bed with my hands clasped in my lap, my legs bare, and the only article of clothing I wore was a shirt that fell to midthigh.

I stared at the partially opened door, having heard the shower in Arlo's room turn off so long ago I'd been frozen in this spot, afraid to leave and talk to him, confront him...

comfort him. But then I found myself pushing off the bed and standing, making my way out into the hall and to his room. The door was open, but he wasn't there, the bed made, the room void of life.

I heard a soft sound come from down the hall and walked on bare feet toward the kitchen. I stopped when I saw Arlo's huge form standing against the granite breakfast counter, wearing only a pair of dark sweatpants, his chest bare and so wide and big, so muscular and powerful.

He'd killed a man tonight with that body, with those hands.

I felt my heart flutter in my chest and was walking toward him before I realized I was doing it. He didn't look at me, although I knew he was fully aware I was moving forward. He brought a bottle of liquor to his mouth and took a long pull from it before setting it on the counter, the glass hitting the granite making a hard *clank*.

I was a few feet from him and held my breath as he turned his head, and our gazes crashed together, held so strongly I felt it in the pit of my stomach.

"Come closer," he said so low it felt like an intimate caress against my body. There was no doubt in his tone I was not to disobey. But I didn't move. I couldn't. Something held me back, maybe fear of these feelings inside me, maybe the unknown of what happened next. "Come here."

I was obeying him instantly after those two words spilled from his mouth, an anchor wrapping around me and tethering me to Arlo in a way that ensured I wouldn't drift again.

His hand shot out so fast that I had no time to react, to gasp... to run.

He curled his hand around my waist and jerked me toward him, then spun me around and pressed me against the counter, my chest flush with the unforgiving, cold granite. The feeling of his body moving close to mine, his heat searing me from the inside out, was euphoric.

The sound of his palms slapping the counter on either side of me was loud, causing my ears to ring, my body to tremble.

His warm breath tickled my ear, and I shivered and closed my eyes.

“You should have run,” he growled. “You should have run so far and fast from me that you thought there would be no chance for me to find you.” He used his foot to kick my legs apart, and I teetered against the counter to steady myself. I did make a sound then, one of shock and arousal at his forcefulness, at the fact that he was so clearly unhinged.

“You would have found me.” The words were so thin, like a blade of grass in the wind, one you’re barely able to grasp as it slips through your fingers.

He pressed his body flush with mine, and I snapped my eyes open at the feel of how hard he was, the thick rod nestled right between my ass cheeks, my shirt molded to my body and a barrier to what I really wanted.

“That’s fucking right, Galina. I would have found you.” He pressed against my ass slowly, steadily, showing me what he was working with. “There isn’t any place on this fucking planet you could hide from me.” He slammed so hard against my ass that I was pushed forward slightly on the granite, my palms sweaty, slipping against the smooth top.

I couldn’t catch my breath. My pussy was soaked. This forcefulness coming from Arlo, the dominance and the way he spoke like he owned me and no one would ever have me but him was a fire between my legs that spread outward and threatened to burn the entire apartment down.

“I wonder how wet you are right now. I wonder if I slipped my hands between your legs, if you’d soak my fingers.”

I didn’t speak, couldn’t, so instead I lifted my ass and ground the cheeks against his erection. The material of his sweatpants and my cotton shirt, and the fact that I wore no panties, left little to my imagination on what he was sporting between his legs, not when I could feel every hard inch, every defined ridge.

He hissed against my ear, pushing the long fall of my hair over one shoulder and wrapping the strands around his fist,

jerking my head farther to the side, keeping me stationed. He leaned down to lick my neck like some kind of creature tasting his meal. “You must like playing with wild animals, baby. You must like the risk of getting bitten.”

I closed my eyes and moaned, a nonverbal affirmation that I wanted anything he had to give me.

“So tell me... tell me how fucking wet your cunt is for my cock. Tell me how much your body weeps for me to fuck it.”

“Why don’t you find out?” God, I really did want to get bitten as I taunted Arlo, as I lifted my ass and moved it back down, over and over again, grinding myself against him as if I had any clue what the hell I was doing. I had no idea how to seduce a man, but the lack of control and restraint I could feel coming from Arlo told me my lack of experience didn’t matter. He wanted me fiercely.

He was still and tense behind me, as if my words had shocked him, maybe even pissed him off because I was going against him. I had no doubt not many people did, not if they valued their life. But when a deep sound of pure lust came from him, I knew I’d won. I knew he wouldn’t deny me, because whatever thoughts he’d been lost in before I’d come into the kitchen, before my presence dragged him out of the blood that covered his vision and mind, I was more powerful in this moment to have that wrought-iron will vanishing.

He pushed that turmoil down so the man who was behind me was one who would fuck me to let me know we were both here and alive and nothing could change that. Because even if we both had some part of evil in our lives that festered, right here and now, Arlo was mine just as much as I’d always be his.

And as he slid his hands over my arms and down my waist to grip my hips in a bruising hold, I knew without fault I’d never wanted to be broken more than I did right now.

For a long moment he did nothing but hold me, his hands like vises around me. I wondered if he was trying to talk himself out of it, tell himself this was a bad idea, that crossing this line would end up changing everything. I wanted to yell

and scream, look him in the eye and tell him things were already changed. *I* was already changed. And it was because of *him*.

He growled. “I’ve always prided myself on being a man with control, that nothing could bring me to my knees—figuratively and literally. But where you’re concerned...” He ran the tip of his nose over the side of my neck, and I tilted my head to give him better access. “Where you’re concerned, I’ve never been more irrational or fucking crazed in my fucking life.”

I felt him push my shirt up and didn’t stop him. I *wouldn’t* stop him for the life of me. The cool air moved over my bare ass, and when he leaned back and moaned at the fact that I wore no panties, I felt a gush of wetness slip between my thighs. Could he see how soaked my pussy was?

“*Jesus Christ, Galina.*” More long seconds passed where he didn’t move, but I could feel his gaze on me, could feel him tracing the lines and curves of my ass with his eyes as if he was memorizing them.

I glanced over my shoulder and saw his gaze slide to the small hummingbird tattoo I had on my hip, a tiny thing with its wings spread out and its back arched. Arlo reached out to smooth a thick, calloused finger along the ink.

“Hummingbirds can flash their colors but hide them as well,” I said softly, this hitch in my throat. I didn’t know why I felt the need to tell Arlo that, but the words spilled from me before I’d had time to stop them.

I connected with the small bird that had a pulse of twelve hundred beats a minute, a tiny thing that was still mighty, that could hide but be seen... fast and smart. I liked to compare myself to such a creature, one complex even if on the outside it appeared fragile.

My body shook as Arlo slid his finger along my skin before dropping his hand back to his side. His gaze, so dark and penetrating, had all thoughts leaving me aside from the wicked things I wanted him to do to me.

“More,” he said in a voice so low it was almost menacingly.

I took in a shuddering breath and did what he said, spreading my legs an inch more, wanting him to look at my inner thighs, to see how they were glossy because I was drenched.

He let out a low hum of approval that sounded almost evil. It made me hotter. “Do you like taunting me, teasing me?”

I knew it wasn’t a real question, not the way he phrased it. He curled a hand against one bare ass cheek, his blunt nails scraping over the flesh until I gasped from the sensation.

I reached out farther to the edge of the counter, curling my fingers around the hard stone, bracing, giving myself leverage and purchase. I rose up on my toes to offer myself more to him, my entire chest flush with the counter, my toes barely on the floor now. I gave him a silent invitation.

“Do you want me to lose control, *moy svet*? Do you want a gentleman or a monster fucking you for the first time?” His words were gasoline on the inferno inside me. I wanted it, however he gave it to me.

“I want the real you.” I glanced over my shoulder so I could look into his eyes. I knew what I wanted. I knew how he wanted to give it to me. I didn’t care about the pain. I *wanted* it. “I want the monster.”

His eyes became hooded, his lips peeling back from his teeth in a feral display of alpha aggression and pure lust. Without taking his gaze off me, he smoothed a big palm over my ass, his hand so large I felt tiny beneath him, a little doll for this Russian beast.

“Spread wider. Let me see this little cunt so wet and ready to take my cock.” He gripped the other side of my ass, spreading my cheeks at the same time I widened my stance. I could feel the cold air along my heated pussy and had no doubt he could see my slit.

“So fucking juicy, pink, and swollen.” His words were low, and I could tell they were spoken to himself. “Tell me who this

belongs to.” He emphasized what he meant by slapping my ass, not hard enough to hurt but firm enough there was a dark promise of what was to come. “Fucking tell me.”

“You,” I said breathlessly, far too softly for him to hear clearly, I knew.

“Fucking say it louder.” He gave my ass a harder swat this time, and I moaned through the sting.

“You, Arlo.”

He hummed in approval and soothed the sting away by running his palm in slow circles over my ass. “That’s right. I fucking own this ass.” He moved his hand closer and closer to the part of my body that ached the most. My clit throbbed in time with my pulse, my inner muscles clenched for something substantial only Arlo could give me, and my legs were shaking from the adrenaline moving through my veins.

The need to feel his big, callused fingers sliding between my lips, teasing the bundle of nerves at the apex of my thighs, to cup my cunt in his masculine hand, was so strong, so fierce I nearly begged him with tears streaming down my cheeks.

“And this?” he taunted as he finally slipped his fingers down my cleft, purring like a content feline. “So *fucking* wet. You’re drenching my hand, baby, your pussy juices sliding down my fingers all the way to my wrist. Isn’t that fucking *filthy*?” I moaned and shivered. He leaned in so his mouth was by my ear again and said harshly, “What a dirty little girl you are, hiding this sweet pussy from me.”

Oh God, I thought as I bit my lip, my teeth digging into my bottom one so hard that I felt the skin break and tasted the tangy, coppery flavor of blood along my tongue.

“Who does this sweet cunt belong to, Galina?” His fingers skated over my lips, massaging the tender flesh, sending shock waves through my core. He moved those big digits to my clit, rubbing slow, steady motions around it until I shuddered, so close to orgasming I could taste it. “Tell me who owns this, who you belong to, Galina, and I’ll give you what you want.” He added more pressure to my clit, and a low, threadbare

sound left me. “I’ll give you the world, every single fucking thing I am, baby.”

“Arlo, oh God. You, Arlo. Everything I am belongs to you.” I’d never been so free with my words and body, never meant anything as much as I did saying the words that spilled from my lips. But with Arlo, it was as if this dam had broken inside me, this rush of free falling emotions and feelings, sensations and desires. There was no stopping the torrent of carnal lust that exploded from me.

“So you’re saying this virgin pussy is all mine? Mine to lick, to suck... to fuck as hard as I want?”

I tossed my head back and moaned loudly again, nodding before I moved my tongue along the wound on my bottom lip, continuously tasting that metallic flavor.

“Because this *is* my little virgin pussy, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” I cried out as he rubbed my clit harder. “It’s *your* virgin pussy.” On any other occasion, I would’ve felt humiliated for saying such things, but I felt liberated as the words spilled from my mouth and as Arlo gave me an answering growl of approval.

“*Khristos.*” His voice was low, that one word harsh. “I’ll never be the same because of you.”

I didn’t have time to think of what he meant by that, because a second later his body was off mine, and the feeling of his warm breath moving along my exposed pussy had my eyes snapping open.

I looked over my shoulder to see him kneeling behind me, his big hands covering each of my ass cheeks, spreading them wide, his gaze latched onto the private place he’d revealed.

“No other fucker will look at you *here* but me.” It was a warning, as if he thought I’d tell him otherwise, as if I wanted anyone else.

I shook my head because I couldn’t find my voice all of a sudden.

“Ask me for it.” His voice was gruff, and I swore I felt the vibrations straight to my clit. I also didn’t need to ask what he meant. I knew the dirty thoughts going through his mind. *They’re the same ones running through mine.*

“I—” God, could I actually say the words? A resounding *smack* followed by searing pain in my ass cheek as he spanked me had me arching my back involuntarily. “Lick my pussy.” The words whimpered out, pulled from me as if I knew what to give Arlo to have him give me more. But that didn’t stop my face from heating hotter than the sun as the dirty words spilled from me.

His fingers were tight on my bottom, relaxing and flexing, as if he was just taking his time looking at what was nestled between them.

“I’m going to drown in you,” he said a second before his mouth was between my legs and his tongue pushed through my swollen folds.

I gasped and moaned, my fingers painfully tight around the counter as I gave myself up to Arlo, as he drove me closer to the edge.

“Never enough.” His words were muffled against my slick pussy. “So hot and sweet. You’ll be so fucking tight gripping my cock as I fuck you, as I put my claim on this untouched cunt.” He slapped my ass, and I curled my toes, my eyes rolling back, my body not my own right now.

He wasn’t human. He couldn’t be by the sounds he made as he ate me out, the gruff snarls, the way he pulled my pussy lips between his lips, sucking them, gently biting the flesh before letting it snap back into place as he went to the other side and repeated the action.

And when he flattened his tongue and moved from my clit all the way through my cleft, licking me slowly, savoring me all the way to my asshole, I felt the familiar tendril of my orgasm rush forward.

“I want to see you so unhinged that you fly so high I’m the only fucking thing that can keep you grounded.” He moved a

finger around my pussy hole before gently pushing it in. My body gave way, accepting the thick digit, weeping for more. I heard the sloppy sounds as my body latched on to that finger, feeling my inner muscles tighten around it.

He pumped inside me once, twice, then slipped another finger in on the third thrust, scissoring until the stretch and burn gave way to more pleasure. And while he started pumping in and out of my pussy, he rubbed my clit with his thumb, sending me high into the stars until I was consumed by light and heat and knew I'd never be sane again.

"I need..." I didn't know how to say what I wanted, yet it should have been so simple. I thrust back on him, sliding my pussy on his fingers, fucking myself in a wanton, uninhibited way. I'd always been so in control of myself and my surroundings, but just letting go was freeing, and doing it with Arlo was liberating. "I need to come, Arlo." My voice was a husky purr, thick and drugged sounding.

"Does my girl want to come?"

"Yes," I cry-moaned. "God, yes." At the moment I'd never needed anything more. I'd die without it, I told myself.

Lazy thrusting in and out of me. Slow circles against my clit. He was torturing me, prolonging this, when all I wanted was to explode and give Arlo—the only man ever—my pleasure.

"Then come for me," he growled at the same time he sank his teeth into the flesh of my ass cheek and started finger-fucking me faster, rubbing my clit harder.

The pain and pleasure cracked through me like lightning hitting a tree, an explosion of light and heat encompassing all of me. I came, my back bowing, my tits shaking as my entire body shuddered with an orgasm that had my knees buckling. My nipples hurt because they were so tight, the blood rushing below my skin, no doubt pinkening it up, making it ultrasensitive.

I came so long that I could only pant through it all. And when I sagged against the counter, when the sensitivity was

too much, I mewled my protest. Arlo slid his fingers from me, and I heard him sucking. Looking over my shoulder with what I knew was a sleepy, satiated look, I watched as he licked my wetness from his hand while he stared into my eyes.

“I could live off your fucking orgasms.”

My eyes flared as he kept licking my juices off. God, his hand was soaked from fingertips to wrist. That should have embarrassed me, but... it didn't. I rested my forehead on the counter, my eyes closed, breathing through the aftereffects of my climax. But in the next instant, Arlo had me pulled up, my back to his chest, one of his thickly corded arms tight around my waist.

“We've just started.” He spun me around and all but ripped the shirt from my body until I stood before him totally naked, breasts heavy, nipples tight, and pussy still so wet. He didn't try to hide how he raked his gaze up and down my body, his focus lingering on the junction between my legs for so long I grew self-conscious.

“Even though it's dark in here,” he said in a growly voice and looked up at me, “I can see that sweet little slit, can see your glossy arousal coating your thighs.” He leaned in an inch and braced his hands on the counter on either side of me, caging me in once more. “And it's because of *me*.” He hummed. “That does something wicked to a man, Galina, something primal and possessive.” When he leaned in so our lips were a hairbreadth away, I wanted his kiss, needed it. “You know what I'd do to any man who touched you or so much as looked at you?”

I nodded slowly, feeling my pulse kick into overdrive.

“Say it. Say the words out loud so you can hear the truth.”

My chest heaved up and down from the force of my breathing. “You'll kill them.”

His smile was slow, self-satisfied. “I'd tear them limb from limb until there was nothing left.” He stepped back so suddenly I exhaled fast enough that I grew dizzy.

And then I couldn't help but look down at the heavy length of his erection tenting his sweats.

“You want more?”

I snapped my gaze up and licked my lips. I didn't need to respond because he saw my answer in my eyes. He hooked his thumbs in the waist of his pants and pushed them down, his cock springing out from the confines of his pants, his dick bobbing twice before settling and pointing right at me. His length and girth had my eyes widening, because although I'd felt how large he was, seeing it brought it into a whole new level of reality.

His cock had to be the length of my forearm and just as thick, too wide for my fingers to wrap fully around. I clenched my thighs as wetness spilled from me, and despite my earlier—very powerful—orgasm, I wanted so much more.

He reached out and touched my hip. At first it was gentle, but then he added pressure, his fingers digging into my flesh, pushing me down until I sank to my knees. With my head tipped back and my gaze on his face, I couldn't breathe because of his startling beauty, not the kind that was classic and soft, but more of Lucifer... a fallen angel.

“Look at it.”

I lowered my gaze to his cock, so thick and long as he held it in his palm right in front of my face. The head was bigger than the shaft, wider and flared, the slit teasing me. My throat tightened, and my mouth watered at the sheer size of him.

He gripped the base of his cock hard and started to slowly bring his palm toward me, his fist tight around the girth. His hand was huge, and his cock matched that of the man who held it.

Once at the tip, he lazily stroked himself back down to the base. He did this twice more, my breathing becoming even harsher with every passing moment he erotically teased me. And then he slid his palm back up to the tip, pushing free a pearlescent drop of pre-cum from the slit.

“Go on,” he coaxed. “Lick it off like a good girl.”

I braced my hands on my thighs and leaned forward, my eyes locked on Arlo the entire time as I dragged my tongue over the slit. His salty, very male flavor exploded on my tongue, and I couldn't help but moan. And aside from the tightening of his jaw and the way his pectoral muscles twitched, he stayed still, his expression like stone.

"I've never done this," I whispered, worried I couldn't pleasure him. And God, I wanted to so badly, just as much as he pleased me.

"You know how fucking hot it is knowing I'll be your first?" He ran the crown of his cock over my lips, using it like a tube of lipstick, coating my flesh with his pre-cum. Painting me. "You know how possessive it makes me, knowing I'll be the only fucking man to ever see you like this?"

I might not have known what I was doing, but that didn't stop me from staring into his eyes and parting my lips to take his thick crown into my mouth. The muscles in his neck stood out, he gritted his teeth, and then he slid in slowly, inch by inch, until I was forced to brace my hands on his thighs to keep him from thrusting in too fast.

"Hollow out your cheeks," he gritted. "Move your tongue around." I was grateful for his direction. "Yeah... fuck yes. That's it... oh *Christ*, yes, Galina, that's it."

His encouragement fueled me on, and I moved my mouth over his cock, running my tongue along the flared tip, dipping it into the slit and lapping up the silky pre-cum that formed. I was starved for Arlo, it seemed, because I couldn't get enough. I was so lost on how good it made *me* feel to blow him that I didn't hear his low growl or how he told me to stop.

One second, I was sucking him off and enjoying the salty flavor of him, and the next, I was sitting bare-assed on the counter, my legs spread wide enough that Arlo could fit between them. He was still making those deep, growly noises, and I felt it all the way to my clit.

"When I come, it's going to be with my cock inside you and you taking every single last drop."

I looked down to watch him stroke himself, his dick wet-looking from my mouth, the tip having so much pre-cum that it started to drip onto the floor, a string of clear fluid hanging on to the crown before landing on the tile at his feet.

“If you aren’t ready for this, you should tell me now.”

I shook my head and braced my hands behind me on the counter, leaning back and thrusting my breasts out. I gave him that silent approval.

He hummed in pleasure and stepped closer to me, his body heat mixing with mine, the spicy, dark scent of him invading my senses. “I don’t think I could have stopped anyway, *moy svet*.” His tip was notched at my hole, his eyes locked on mine. I held my breath as he started pushing in, breaking through my virginity, tearing at my innocence, sliding deep inside me and stretching me until the pain and pleasure were so intense I felt a single tear slide down my cheek.

He leaned forward, one hand on the counter beside my ass, his other resting on my inner thigh to keep me spread. And when he flattened his tongue and licked up my cheek, taking that tear into him, I closed my eyes and moaned.

“Even your tears are the sweetest thing I’ve ever fucking tasted.” He pushed in another inch. “Give me more. Let me lick them up, take a piece of you in me.”

My head was thrown back, my hair hanging over the edge of the counter, and my eyes closed as I gave him what he asked for. The pain was front and center, the stretch so monumental I felt like I was splitting in two. But he was relentless as he pushed his way into me, burrowing himself into my body and into my heart inch by inch.

“Fuck yeah.” He licked along my cheek again, getting every tear that slid from my eyes. And when he was fully inside me, we both exhaled harshly. “So tight. So fucking hot and tight for me. You’re strangling my cock, baby.”

I lifted my head and forced my eyes open. He rested his forehead against mine and started to pull out. I gasped right up against his mouth, and he kissed me, swallowing the sound,

letting his cockhead stay notched right at my entrance before he pushed back in. We both shook from the force, groaning from the sensations.

“You deserve slow and easy for your first time—”

“I want *you* and how you want to be with me, Arlo.” There was conviction in my voice as he pulled back, and we stared into each other’s eyes. “I don’t want some idea of how my first time is supposed to be.” He was still for a second, only a twitch of his fingers on my hip before he growled and slammed back into me so hard my eyes widened and I cried out. He pulled out and looked down at his cock. I followed his gaze and saw his length covered in my arousal and streaked with my blood.

“Fuck,” he seethed. “Look at how I broke you, took your innocence... made it fucking mine.” He gripped my other hip and slammed home, my ass sliding up the counter, my skin squeaking along the surface. I could only hold on and watch as he fucked me with abandon, so fierce and untamed... exactly how I wanted it to be with him. The sounds of his cock tunneling into my pussy were so loud, my wetness making it dirty and obscene, but it had even more cream dripping from me, a slippery mess under my ass and making his thrusting so seamless all that discomfort morphed into a deliciously dark tendril.

“Look how good you take me, your little pussy sucking at my cock, tightening around me, milking me for my cum.” His words were almost indiscernible, and with each one, I was soaring higher. “Touch yourself; play with your clit.”

I slipped a shaky hand down my belly and ran my fingers along my bundle of nerves. I was wet, so drenched that when I lifted my fingers slightly, a string of wetness clung to the tip of my finger and connected with my pussy.

“Shit, that’s hot.”

I snapped my eyes up to his face and saw he watched where my hand was. I moved my fingers back to my clit and started rubbing it back and forth, a broken sound leaving me at the pleasure that coursed through me.

“Baby, I’m so fucking close already.” His body was covered in sweat, glistening under the backdrop of city lights, his muscles flexing and relaxing as he pounded into me. “I’m going to come so fucking hard, and you’re going to take every single drop I have to give you and ask for fucking more.” He pulled my lower body closer to the edge of the counter and really started fucking me then.

“Yes.” I worked my fingers over my clit while I let my head drop back on my neck and closed my eyes as I gave in to everything.

“Come for me.”

And I did. I cried out long and loud, not caring who heard in the other apartments, not caring if I sounded like a wounded animal. I felt how hard my contractions were, how my pussy sucked and latched on to his cock. He was grunting and moving harder, his thrusting getting more erratic. I knew he was close, and when he slammed in deep and stilled, roaring out when he came, I felt his cock kick inside of me as he bathed every inch of me with his seed.

His cum was hot and thick and set off another orgasm that stole my breath and had my arms giving out under me. But before my back slammed onto the counter, Arlo’s hand was pressed in the center of my back, his strong arm keeping me up.

Finally he stilled, resting his forehead on my chest, his warm breath washing along my breasts as we both panted and gasped for air. I lifted a hand and tunneled my fingers in his short hair, the strands damp at the temple. He kissed one of my breasts, then moved over and gave the other a gentle press of his lips. It seemed so intimate, maybe even more so than what we’d just shared.

I didn’t know how long we stayed like that, with Arlo still semihard inside me, but my ass had since gone numb and I didn’t care one bit. I’d never felt so alive and content before.

He lifted for me and pulled out, and instantly I felt our combined fluids start to come out of me on a warm trickle. Arlo was looking between my thighs, and I went to close them

with embarrassment, knowing he could see his cum slipping from me, but he stilled me with his hands on my knees.

“No,” he whispered gruffly and leaned in to press a kiss to my clit, pulling a sharp gasp from me. I felt his finger move along my entrance as he said, “How sore are you?”

I swallowed and took a few breaths before I answered. “Just a little.”

“I bet.” He kept gently rubbing along my entrance, gave my clit another kiss, and then I felt him push his cum back into my body. “I fucked you hard.” I tried to stifle my moan, but it came out regardless. “I belong right in here.” He lifted just his eyes to my face as he stayed between my thighs. “Always.”

I found myself nodding before I could take in his words fully.

He stood, and I didn't fight him or complain when he lifted me into his embrace, my legs over his arm, my side to his chest, and my head on his shoulder. He held me gently, as if he cherished me. I closed my eyes and settled my weight against him, aching and sore between my thighs, the chill in the air and the experience we'd just shared causing goose bumps to skate along my arms and legs.

Arlo laid me on the bed and adjusted me so he could pull the blanket over my nude body. And then he was slipping in beside me and pulling me close, the warmth of his bare skin on mine pushing away all the coldness I'd felt and any worry or uncertainty that would have made itself known until there was only euphoria.

For long minutes we didn't speak, but I didn't know what we could have said. We spoke with our bodies and said so much during that time that I felt like I knew all I needed to about Arlo without him having to ever say a single syllable. I reached out for his hand that rested on his abdomen. I twined my fingers through his, staring at the contrast, how his hand was so much bigger than mine, his fingers so much longer.

His skin was a dark, golden hue compared to my pale complexion. He was strong where I'd always been weak. He

was fearless where I'd always been afraid of what was lurking over my shoulder.

"I'm going after them, Galina," he said, his voice deep and wrapping around me like another blanket of protection.

I closed my eyes because I knew who he was talking about. He'd already killed Leonid, even if he hadn't said the words. I knew he was trying to protect me further. I'd never told him Henry's full name, never told him where he could be found, but I also knew if Arlo wanted to find someone, he didn't need me to accomplish that. He had resources I could never comprehend at his fingertips.

I thought about this man who held me so closely, who ran his fingers along my spine, always touching me, as if it centered him like it did me.

Arlo promised he'd make it safe for me, and that meant he was going to Vegas and after Henry. I knew without a doubt Arlo would kill him.

"I don't want any vengeance, Arlo." I rested my head on his chest and trailed my fingers over one of his many tattoos. I could see scars littering his flesh under that dark ink.

He stayed silent for long seconds before finally saying, "I'm going to make it safe for you, even if I have to kill everyone to make that reality." His arm around me tightened as if he needed to know I was still here.

"You don't have to ask for or need or want my vengeance, Galina. You have that from me without fail. You had it from the very beginning."

I should've been afraid of him, but I wasn't, and I knew I would never have cause to be. Talking him out of anything, especially something like this that caused the man who was clearly born out of blood and violence to latch on to like a starving beast, would have been like trying to break up two fighting dogs.

I'd only get hurt in the end, even if inadvertently.

Arlo

Sleep would never come tonight, not after killing Leonid, and not after claiming Galina. I'd held her for hours, her soft body molded to mine, the sweet scent that clung to her hair filling my nose every time I inhaled. Her arousal and virgin blood drying on my cock was a reminder that I didn't deserve her but that I wouldn't let her go.

I'd kept a constant touch on her, my fingers moving against her arm, down her back, brushing strands of silky dark hair away from her face just so I could look at her and watch her sleep.

I'd never considered myself a lucky man. That wasn't something life gave you. I'd scraped the bottom of the barrel to be able to survive, clawed my way out of a buried grave with dirt under my nails and blood covering my body just so I could make it the next day. But as I stared at Galina's sleeping face, counted each long, thick lash that formed dark crescents along her alabaster skin, I knew for the first time in my life, I *was* lucky. Because she was mine.

I'd been afraid of my turbulent emotions and the tightness in my body waking her, so for the last hour I'd been sitting at the table, cleaning my gun, the meticulous work good for my

thoughts, helping calm the raging emotions inside me. They were foreign, not something I'd ever experienced or wanted, and they were all because of Galina. Now that I tasted them, I never wanted them to go away.

I could hear her stirring, imagined the sheets sliding against her smooth, bare skin. I was hard already, had been since she fell asleep in my arms, her head on my chest, her silky hair fanned across my chest.

My cock throbbed; my balls ached. I wanted her again. And again and again.

I felt my muscles tighten more as the need to fuck Galina again slammed into me. I wanted to tangle my hand in her hair and jerk her head back as I buried my face in the graceful line of her throat.

And as if my thoughts called her to me, she stepped out from the hallway, the white sheet wrapped around the lithe curves of her body. She had the material bunched together right above her breasts, one hand holding it in what I imagined was a white-knuckled grip.

The sight of her did something to my chest, something powerful and dangerous. Irreversible.

I set the piece I'd been cleaning down and pushed the chair back. Just enough. "Come here."

I saw the tightening of her nipples under that too-thin sheet as my words affected her. She didn't speak as she came forward, the material dragging softly against the hardwood, the *swoosh-swoosh* noise filling the thick silence.

She stopped a couple of feet from me, the pulse at the base of her ear telling me how her body responded to me. Fast. Erratic.

"Come closer, *malen'koye solnyshko*." *Little sunshine.* That's what she was. Light to my darkness. Warmth to my cold.

Her eyes lowered to my cock, and she saw how hard I was for her already. *Come closer, Galina. Come closer to the wolf who's so hungry he'll devour you without a thought.*

And then she let the sheet fall away, her body naked and soft, the lights from the city right outside the window whispering across her skin, the shadows playing along the perfect lines and curves of her form.

Come here and let me consume you like you've already done to me. Let me ruin you as much as you've caused every part of me to crumble to the gritty floor.

She took another step toward me, and another. I couldn't stop myself, didn't even try to act like I had any control where she was concerned. I reached out and curled my hand around her waist, my finger sticking into her soft flesh. Too hard, too forcefully. There would be marks tomorrow. But I couldn't find any reason to care. I wanted those bruises littering her soft, pale body. I wanted to be able to look at them and know she got them because of me... because she was mine.

I yanked her forward until she stumbled onto me, her legs on either side of my thighs. She straddled me, her pussy pressed right against my cock. She gasped, and I slid my hand up her waist, whispering along the curve of her breast before wrapping my fingers loosely around her throat. I added a little bit of pressure, a reminder that she was mine. A physical, visceral reminder to her. "Say it. Say the words."

She gasped, and I pulled her toward me even more, our lips barely brushing, her breath mixing with mine. I inhaled deeply, taking her into my lungs, needing to survive off her.

"Fuck me, Arlo."

I groaned and slammed my mouth down on hers, the beast coming alive once more and washing through me. I let go of her throat and gripped her waist, urging her to rise slightly. I grabbed the base of my cock, aligned the tip with her entrance, and then I was pulling her down, both hands on her hips, bruising fingers in her skin.

I tipped my head back and groaned loudly, the noise mixing with her gasp of pleasure and pain. I knew she was sore and told myself to be gentle. *Be easy.* But as she started riding me, I saw a haze of pleasure and need. I lifted my hips

and pulled her down on me, fucked her like she was the air and I was suffocating.

I wanted to come in her again. I wanted to leave a little part of myself inside her like she'd done to me. Galina had worked her way into my body, torn away layer after layer, skinned me alive until I was the most vulnerable I'd ever been. And she didn't even know it. Would never grasp how naked I was.

"Mine," I growled right before I took her mouth in a bruising kiss. She clutched at me as if she was afraid I'd ever let her go.

Never.

With Leonid gone, there was only one threat left to get rid of, and that was going to Vegas and finding the men Galina had run from, who'd threatened her, thought they could hurt and use her. I wouldn't wait. I'd do it right away, take Galina with me, because I couldn't stand to not have her by my side, my worry for her and the need to protect her too strong to ignore. She'd never be safer than when she was with me.

I was a strong man. An evil man. But for her, I wished I was good and gentle.

I wished I could be someone else entirely.

Galina

A handful of days had passed since Arlo claimed me, since I gave myself to a man for the first time.

Since he ruined me for all others and had put an invisible brand on me that deemed me as only his.

Even now I was still thinking about that first time... and the days that followed, how he'd taken me every night in his bed, in the shower, from behind, as I rode him. Being with Arlo was untamed, like we were two animals rutting together, sweaty and desperate, both needing to get off because it would be the final completion of bringing us together.

It had been wild and dirty. It had been aggressive and violent.

It was perfect.

And although all I wanted to do was stay wrapped in that fairy tale where the villain had made me his and I never had to worry about the what-ifs, reality was crashing back into me.

I stared out at the sight of Vegas. It had the same feel for me as it always did. Desperation, longing... hunger. It was a thick, sticky feeling that coated a person from head to toe,

trying to suck them in with the flashing lights, the promise of euphoria and pleasure, the lie that if you just stayed a little bit longer, you'd fall in love.

A beautiful lie. For me at least.

But I knew there were the stupid in the world who embraced it all, if only for a moment in time. They'd get lost in how pretty things were on the outside, not knowing that if they dug a little deeper, they'd come to the rotten center. But I'd never been fooled, not when I spent my whole life nestled away in the slums where the beauty of what could be never touched you.

We'd taken a private jet from Desolation to Vegas almost two nights after Arlo killed Leonid. I wanted to tell him it was too soon, to let me think about this, for us to try to figure something else out. It wasn't that I was averse to him taking out Henry. In fact, when I thought about it, this sense of all things right filled me. And that scared me, terrified me that I was comfortable with the grit and destruction that came with the man I loved.

Because the truth was, I was sick in the head because I wanted Henry gone. I wanted my father to see the repercussions of what would happen if he tried to hurt me. I wanted Arlo to show everyone what he was capable of.

I didn't want to seem weak, never had been in my entire life, but for the first time ever, I felt as if I was cocooned in this bubble, as if I lived this whole other life. Feminists around the world would probably skin me alive at how much I loved the lengths Arlo would go to, to ensure my safety.

"It's time," Arlo said in his signature deep and gravelly voice from behind me.

I turned around but didn't move closer, feet upon feet separating us as he stood shrouded in shadows on the other end of the hotel room. He was magnificent and beautiful as I took in the suit he wore, a dark and expensive visage of what he really was.

A professional killer. A violent murderer with no remorse.
A sociopath perhaps.

The man I love.

I made my way toward him until mere inches were the only thing keeping us apart.

“I’ll say it again... I think it’s best if you don’t come so that you don’t see what’s going to happen.”

I licked my lips and shook my head. He’d tried to tell me I wasn’t going with him tonight—demanded I stay safely in the hotel room, more accurately. But if this was really going down, I *had* to be there. For my peace of mind and to close this chapter in my life.

“I’m coming,” I said firmly—finally—and kicked up my chin in defiance, which had the corner of his mouth lifting in amusement despite the seriousness of the situation. He lifted his hand and cupped the side of my face. His expression softened.

“Grown men don’t even have the balls to defy me.” He leaned in and kissed me slowly and thoroughly, and I melted into him like I always did. “Your strength is one of the reasons I love you so fiercely.” His words were low and deep and murmured against my mouth, and my pulse did a flip in my chest.

My heart pounded in my chest at his words. “I love you,” I said, the words sounding like they’d been torn from me and rend me in half.

He pulled back, and I immediately rested my forehead on the center of his chest, breathing in his scent. I loved this man so much it physically hurt, and although I knew nothing would happen to him because he was so strong and stubborn, so dangerous that even death feared him, my breath still hitched at the thought of losing him.

“There’s no need for fear,” he said softly and kissed the crown of my head. “Don’t you know I’m the monster all other monsters fear?”

I smiled although I felt no humor in the way he teased, even if I knew he did it for my benefit.

“Come on. Let’s get this over with.”

I pulled back and looked up at him. I wanted the demons to stay firmly in the shadows. Yet I didn’t want to ever look over my shoulder and worry someone would take me away from Arlo. And the only way to ensure our future was secure and our relationship stronger than ever was to have more bloodshed and bury the bodies of the past.

God, who was the woman I’d become, one who was okay with killing to ensure *my* life was safe?

A survivor. I’m a survivor, and I’ll do anything to make sure I stay by Arlo’s side.

After one more kiss, he led me out of the hotel room and down to the BMW that had been waiting for us at the airstrip once we landed. I didn’t have to give Arlo any information about Henry or my father, and he’d never asked. Whatever connections he had, Arlo had obviously gotten the details he needed, and that was clear as we left the Strip and headed to Fremont Street.

The older part of Vegas came into view, a relic of the past yet still popular to tourists in the way they held on to a memento from a different time. But soon that facade started to wane the deeper we drove, the farther we went into the gritty part of what the city offered, where buildings were dilapidated, businesses run-down, broken windows and broken-down lives, with half-naked women standing on the corner of streets, smoking cigarettes and suggestively asking for “company tonight.”

I felt myself get pulled back down to the only place I’d ever called “home,” and I hated it. I felt nauseous in the way it was heavy inside me, like this other presence trying to take root in my soul.

I was staring out the passenger window when I felt Arlo’s hand cover mine that rested on my thigh. I looked over at him, but he was firmly focused on the street ahead. I wasn’t

surprised he'd been able to sense my turbulent emotions. We were connected in a way I'd never understand but was forever grateful for.

He tightened his fingers on my hand, and I lifted my other to place my palm over his, the warmth and strength that poured from Arlo enough to have a semblance of calm washing over me. But even that soothing sensation couldn't fully extinguish my bone-deep fear of what was happening next.

The broken part of Vegas was like another world on its own with how things worked. It was like Desolation in that sense, with life lost in the deepest parts, swallowed whole and decaying in the underbelly of what used to be a thriving society.

I didn't know how long we drove, but it was done in silence. I looked over at Arlo again, seeing and sensing the change in him the closer we got to wherever our destination was. His body was tighter, his concentration sharper. He had retreated to some hidden part of himself where emotions couldn't touch, where he was a machine without feeling and only had cold, dead calculation as his compass. I focused out the windshield again, because if I thought about this too hard, I'd have to retreat into myself to get through this.

It was another five minutes before Arlo finally slowed and pulled the BMW into the cracked and uneven parking lot where an old casino sat. It didn't even look like it was still operating for business, but there was a flickering light above the scarred and faded front door, like a welcome mat for anyone brave—or stupid—enough to enter.

He maneuvered the car toward the back of the building where no light touched before turning around so he faced the street. He cut the engine, and we sat in silence for long seconds as he stared at the back of the casino, both of us plunged into darkness so shapes were distorted and reality didn't quite look how it should.

“Arlo?” I whispered his name but didn't know what I was asking him.

“You’ll stay in the car, Galina.” He looked at me then, the first time since we’d left the hotel. He reached over and opened the glove box, a dim light from the small interior breaking up the density of the blackness. He pulled out a gun and held it to me, the barrel facing the windshield. I glanced from the weapon back to him. His silence was loud, his message clear.

Use this if anyone fucks with you.

I reached out and took the gun, our fingers brushing together for a split second before the contact was broken. The weight of the weapon was substantial as I stared down at it, the metal cold but warming the longer I held it. I knew how to shoot, had to learn at a young age. But this weapon was heavy in my palm, bigger than the one I owned, and I felt a light sheen of perspiration cover my forehead.

“Arlo, let’s just go,” I suddenly said and snapped my focus to his face. “I just want you to be safe. Let’s go and forget this.” I was rambling, my fear so strong right now I couldn’t control myself. And I felt ashamed over that. *Right now I need to be strong.* I’d never let fear control me, but at the thought of Arlo getting hurt—or worse—this cold terror encompassed me.

“*Moy svet,*” he murmured. “You have nothing to be afraid of. I won’t let anyone hurt you.” His jaw tightened. “I won’t let anyone take you from me.”

I shook my head because he’d misunderstood me. “I don’t care about me. I can’t lose *you,*” I said and was immediately embarrassed. I didn’t want to cling to what we had, to let it be a weakness, but here I was, begging him to leave with me so there wasn’t a threat that he’d be taken from me.

“My sweet Galina,” he whispered and cupped my face as he leaned in and kissed my lips softly, then the tip of my nose, and finally settled on my forehead. I closed my eyes and let the feeling and smell of him surround me until that hard panic started to lessen.

“Not even death can take me from your side.” He pulled back and looked me in the eyes. “Not even death,” he said

again, and I nodded, although I wanted to tell him he couldn't guarantee that. No one was immortal or invincible. No one could predict when or how they died, or stop it. But when Arlo said it with such stony determination and finality in his voice, it was hard *not* to believe that if anyone could defy death itself, it was him.

“Tell me you understand.” His voice was hard, as if he expected me to comply no matter what, to believe my words even if they were a lie.

It was hard to breathe, let alone speak, but I managed to say, “Okay. I understand that you're crazy.” I was the one to lean in and kiss him this time and felt his lips tilt into a smile against mine.

“*U nas yest' vsya nasha zhizn', chtoby byt' pravymi.*” He pulled back and smoothed a finger over my bottom lip. “We have our entire lives to be together.” And then he was out of the car, the locks engaging, sealing me in, the gun in my hand a reminder that I had to use it. Because although I told him I'd stay in the car, there was no way I was letting him go into that situation alone. There was no way I'd let him get hurt because he was making things safe for me.

With steely reserve, I'd do what I had to, like I'd always done.

I'd fight for my life, and Arlo was now firmly embedded in it.

I'd fight to the death for both of us if need be.

Galina

The night seemed colder than it should for this time of year, or maybe it was the worst fear I'd ever felt in my life taking hold.

I'd been standing outside the back door of this broken casino for a long moment, my back against the brick, my breathing so fast and erratic I feared someone passing by would hear.

The sound of music blaring in the distance, the screeching laughter of a woman far too close for comfort, the crash of glass breaking, and an array of other obnoxious noises filtered through the night and tried to pull my concentration in twenty different directions.

The man you love is in there fighting for you. Go in there and stand by his side.

He'd hate it, be pissed at me. But I didn't care. Not right now, not when doing nothing wasn't an option.

With one more steadying breath, I pushed away from the wall, drawing up all the calm concentration I could muster, and reached for the back door I'd seen Arlo step through.

I curled my hand around the handle and pulled it open, the metal giving a loud creak, which had me freezing and my breath stalling in my lungs, my heart in my throat as I prayed to whoever was willing to listen that no one heard. After a second where no one came rushing toward me with their gun raised, I stepped inside.

I shut the door as quietly as I could behind me, the scent of mold and age tickling my nose in an uncomfortable way. The back room I stepped into had boxes pushed against the walls on either side of me. Trash littered the floor, grime and dirt everywhere. The ceiling looked like it was ready to cave in, bowing in one corner, the rest of the once-white paneling showing water damage that created large brown and yellow circles above my head.

I could hear muffled voices coming through the closed door in front of me, and I quietly made my way toward it, gripped the handle, and pulled it open. I immediately scented cigar smoke, but it couldn't mask the stench of heavy mold and decay thick in the air.

When I stepped out into the small hallway, I followed the muted light that came from my left, which was also where the voices filtered from. I was surprised I wasn't shaking, my hands steady, my finger running slowly over the gun as if a reminder of what I'd have to do. Because there was no doubt in my mind I'd have to use it on somebody to protect myself and Arlo.

I stopped before I got to the edge of the hallway that opened into the main part of the building, and looked around the side, taking in the large room that had clearly once been the main casino. Broken-down and half-taken-apart slot machines were pushed up against walls.

I could see a blackjack table with torn and stained felt laying on its side on the ground and to the left. There was one window beside the front doors, the glass painted black, a piece of cardboard taped in the corner, presumably to cover up a hole.

And then my heart jumped into my throat when I spotted where the men were, where the voices came from, and how Arlo stood behind Henry with a gun pointed at the back of his head. There were only two other men seated at the card table, one on each side of Henry, both looking ready to shit themselves.

Arlo had his other hand up, another gun pointed at one of the men.

“Go ahead,” Arlo said calmly as he looked at the man who sat to his right, the only one who didn’t have a gun pointed to a skull. “Reach for it, grab your weapon, and we’ll see how fast you are.” Arlo slowly grinned, and it was a smile I’d never seen before. It was absolutely terrifying. “You’re all gambling men here. Want to place a wager that I can put a bullet in all three of your skulls before you even draw?”

A thick moment of silence passed where no one spoke. I don’t even think they breathed.

The man sat stiffly in his chair as he stared at Arlo. There was no doubt in my mind, given his expression, that he wouldn’t be taking on that bet.

“You’re making a big mistake,” Henry had the balls to say.

Arlo chuckled softly, but there was nothing humorous about it. It was dark and insidious, as if it was a precursor to all the “mistakes” that would come. “Is that so? You’re some big shot, huh?”

Henry narrowed his eyes despite Arlo not looking at him.

“It’s usually men who are about to die who say it’s a mistake,” Arlo said in a deceptively calm voice. I could hear the sound of trickling, something wet hitting the ground. My vantage point allowed me to see one of the men had pissed his pants, urine trailing down his leg and creating a puddle on the floor.

“You fucking weak asshole,” Henry sneered as he clearly realized one of his spiders had lost his bladder. Arlo pressed the gun harder against Henry’s skull, and he straightened in his

seat, gritting his teeth. “You have no idea who you’re messing with.”

No, Henry had no idea who *he* was messing with.

“You stupid girl.” The low voice that came from behind me and the feel of a gun pressing into the center of my back had my entire body freezing. But it wasn’t the gun pressed between my shoulder blades that had me tightening. It was the voice... the voice of my father. “You should have stayed away. Not like Henry wasn’t gonna find you.” His breath was warm and thick with the scent of booze. “He did find you, was gonna bring you back. You’ve made my life hell by skipping out.”

I looked over my shoulder at my father. His face was beat to hell, black-and-blue and swollen. It was clear me leaving had caused Henry to use the man who’d been my sperm donor as his personal punching bag. Yet I felt nothing. No sympathy. No empathy.

He nudged my back with the gun until I stumbled forward. Arlo lifted his eyes in my direction, but other than a subtle tic in his jaw, he showed no emotion. He might keep that steely composure, but I knew he was pissed I was here, that I hadn’t listened. Surely he knew I couldn’t allow him to do this on his own. He had to know I’d stand beside him to make this right.

This was my fight, and I wouldn’t do it in the safety of a car with a gun in my lap as someone else put their life on the line for me.

Henry started laughing, and not even the gun pressed to his head could stop him. “So this is your doing, Galina?”

A low rumble filled the room, and I realized it came from Arlo. He leaned in so his lips were close to Henry’s ear and said something in a voice too low to carry to me. I could see Henry’s skin become pale, his eyes flashing with fear, but then they shifted to something evil as he stared at me.

When Arlo stood, his eyes were trained on my father, who stood behind me. He now had a firm grip on my arm as if he thought I’d try to run. But I was done running. I was sick of

hiding. I was here to face this head-on no matter the consequences.

When we stood a foot from the card table and off to the side, the two other men sitting glanced my way with terror clear on their faces. They were lackeys, pawns in whatever sick game Henry played.

“Henry, just give them what they want. He’s not playing.”

Henry looked to the side and bared his teeth at the man who’d spoken. “Fucking coward.” He wasn’t smart, not even with a gun pressed to his head. He kept his fear covered in knock-off designer suits and too much cheap cologne.

The gun was ripped out of my hand by my father, but he still had his gun pressed to my back. But as I stared into Arlo’s face, I wasn’t afraid of dying. At that moment I wasn’t afraid of anything. My entire life and all the situations I’d experienced so far had come full circle. I knew from this moment on that I would never allow anything to control me. I wouldn’t allow someone to scare me enough to have me running away. It always caught up with you anyway.

Henry looked me up and down, his gaze lewd and just as slimy as I remembered. He grinned and spat out, “Lookin’ just as perfect as the last time I saw you, Galina. I wonder if that tight little virgin cunt is still untouched, or if you became the whore I envisioned shaping you into myself.”

Pop.

I blinked once, my ears ringing, that *bang* of a gun being discharged echoing throughout the entire room, seeming to shake the lone window and crack it even more. I stared at where Henry sat, the bullet hole in his head leaving a trail of red right between his eyes and down the bridge of his nose.

He slumped forward, his skull cracking against the card table hard enough the flimsy piece of furniture shook from the force.

“Holy shit.”

“Fuck!” the two men on either side of him screamed out, eyes wide, their fear saturating the room.

“Man, we had nothing to do with whatever Henry was into,” one guy rambled, hands in front of him.

“We just help him occasionally,” the other man cried.

“Oh holy fuck. Please don’t kill us.”

Arlo looked right at me, and without taking his gaze off mine, he pointed one gun at the guy to the right and kept the other one trained on the man to the left. Then he pulled the triggers and shot them both perfectly in the head. It all happened in a matter of seconds, yet also seemed to go so slow it was like wading through water.

Three bodies now slumped over the card table, blood seeping into the green felt, my father behind me cursing, the gun at my back shaking from his nerves.

The scent of blood filling the room became so strong my stomach twisted, bringing me back to the present, time speeding up until I could remember to breathe again.

“Let her go,” Arlo said and aimed the gun right over my shoulder. He was a good shot, but how good of one when I was being used as a shield?

“Put the gun down and let me go. I ain’t got no fight in this,” my coward father mumbled from behind me. It was because of *him* that all of this was even happening.

My father had his arm raised and pointed the gun at Arlo as he started slowly backing up, one arm around my chest as he kept me firmly in place so if anyone got shot, it was me. “I mean it. Let me go or she dies.”

“You’d shoot your daughter to save your own ass?” Arlo asked calmly as he moved away from the table and came forward, staying far enough back that my father wasn’t spooked any more than he already was.

“She’s nothing to me.”

And wasn’t that the truth. Nothing but a bargaining tool. Nothing but someone to sell to be raped and tortured just so his debts could be paid. I’d never meant anything to him, and that’s why when he rounded the corner with me, I pulled up

the self-defense moves Arlo had taught me and leaned into him. It took him off guard at first, his hold loosening marginally, and it gave me enough leverage to twist in his hold, turn sharply, and bring my knee up to connect with his groin.

He grunted and brought his arm up. I knew he was about to shoot and saw it happening in slow motion. I ducked and put all my weight into his body, careening us to the wall. His back slammed into it, the air leaving him, my head ringing as his skull cracked into mine from the impact. I knew the only reason I'd caught him off guard was because he was drunk and he'd underestimated me.

We wrestled with the gun for only a second, the weapon between us, our eyes locked on each other's. I saw his desperation, knew he'd kill me if it meant saving his own hide. If I had any sentimental value toward this man, it would have been crushed a long time ago. As it was, all I saw was my survival or him bringing me down to hell with him.

The gun exploded between us, going off, heat, smoke, and searing pain encompassing me in a physical and emotional way. We both froze, staring wide-eyed at the other, both hands on the weapon. I stumbled back and looked down, the barrel pointed at my father's chest. Blood seeped through his shirt and spread outward so fast I took another step back. I slammed into a hard wall—Arlo's chest. He gently took the gun from me, wrapped a protective arm around my waist, and then lifted his arm.

My father was shaking his head and holding his hands out, pleading, begging as he bled out, but it all fell on deaf ears and apathy. Arlo fired his gun and delivered a bullet right through one of his eyes. My father's head cracked back on the wall before he slid down to the ground, blood smearing as he made his descent.

I didn't know how long I stood there, but when Arlo wrapped me in his arms, my head over his heart, the tears came fast and strong. They weren't ones of sadness or fear. They were ones of pure, utter relief.

I was finally free, even if I was covered in blood.

Galina

They were both dead, that chapter in my life done. No more running. No more hiding.

It was enough to have a tear unexpectedly slide down my cheek.

I wrapped my arms around my waist and stared out at the bright lights of Vegas. The sights and sounds, the bustle of life that had always been a constant in my world seemed miles away. A distant memory.

It was no longer my past or present. Because my future was so very different now.

“No more tears.”

I closed my eyes at the sound of Arlo and felt another tear move down my cheek as if my body was trying to defy his very words.

“It’s over,” I whispered and opened my eyes at the same time I turned around to face him. He immediately enveloped me in his arms and held me, resting his chin on the crown of my head, my strong protector who asked for nothing in return but gave me so much of himself.

“I love you.” I uttered the words, not realizing they’d come out until I felt his body tense against mine. “I love you so much,” I sobbed, meaning them with every single part of me.

He tangled his hand in my hair, the locks damp from the shower we’d taken together as soon as we’d gotten back to the hotel hours ago. He’d washed me so gently, wiping away the violence of the night, as if he needed to do it so desperately it was his only mission in life.

He tipped my head back so I was forced to look into his face, the light from the city coupled with the darkness of the room casting an ominous presence over him. I stared into his eyes and got lost in the depths. “I love you,” I whispered, wanting to say the words over and over again until they were seared on our flesh, forever tattooed on our souls.

I lifted my hands and cupped his cheeks, a light scruff starting to grow in, scratching along the sensitive skin of my palms.

He was brutally beautiful, my dark, avenging angel. He made me feel things that I’d never thought possible, that I’d never envisioned for myself. I never thought I could give my heart to somebody, that I’d ever truly feel safe or be happy.

But looking into the dark, turbulent emotions that covered Arlo’s face, I knew without a doubt all the things that had led up to this point in my life, all the ugly things had brought me to this one beautiful moment in time.

They led me to him.

“*Moy svet.* I love you as much as my dead, dark, and twisted heart can love anything so light and beautiful. I’ll love you until I can’t love anymore, and only then it’ll be because I’m dead and rotting in the ground.”

I rose up on my toes and pressed my lips to his, stopping him from saying anything. I dragged my tongue across the seam of his mouth, loving the spicy, masculine flavor that covered him—that *was him*—before delving inside. He was still so tense, but he tightened his fingers in my hair, holding

me in place as he tilted my head to the side and deepened things.

This harsh groan left his throat, and I couldn't help but soften against him, wanting that danger and darkness that seeped from his soul and surrounded me. "I need you," I begged against his mouth, not realizing until this moment that I'd never needed anything more than I needed to feel Arlo's body pressed against mine, his cock deep in my pussy, his power holding me down so I was forced to take it all.

The feeling of his arms tightening around me had a thrill moving through my entire core. I found myself tearing at his clothes, ripping at mine, needing to be bare, to feel skin on skin, to know Arlo wanted me as much as I wanted him. I needed to know I was alive at this moment.

And when the remains of our clothing were nothing but tatters on the ground, he lifted me up, his biceps clenching with power. I wrapped my legs around his waist, my arms around his neck, deepening the kiss, desperate and hungry, starved like an animal unleashed inside us.

"I need to fuck you," he growled against my mouth and didn't wait for me to comply, to agree... to beg to be filled and stretched by him.

He strode us toward the bedroom, and I repeated, "I need you." Arlo kissed me and growled between licks and sucks, his hands gripping my ass cheeks, his palms so big and firm, so masculine. The air left me when my back hit the mattress, when Arlo's massive frame covered mine.

He used his knees to spread my legs wide, pushing them out forcefully so I had no choice but to stretch for him, to bare my pussy and wait for him to give it to me the way I wanted. And when he settled fully on top of me, the thick, heavy length of his cock sliding right between my pussy lips, I tunneled my hands in his hair and tugged on the strands as a moan was ripped from me.

"So fucking wet for me." He thrust against me, his length slipping up and down my slit before moving back. Over and

over, he slid through my cunt, my lips framed around his girth, the root of his shaft rubbing my clit with every upstroke.

“Arlo. God, yes.” I could have gotten off on this alone, the rocking motion, the feel of his weight on me, pushing me down on the bed, making me take what he had to give me.

I was so wet, soaked, my inner thighs smeared with my arousal for him.

“So ready for me,” he growled against the side of my neck, biting down on the flesh hard enough I cried out from pleasure and pain, knowing there would be bruises come morning, fingertip-sized ones on my waist, hickeys on my neck.

I speared my hands in his hair, keeping him right where he was, begging for more, harder... all of it. I lifted my hips, silently demanding. I needed him inside me so deep I didn't know where I ended and he began.

And then the tip nudged at my pussy hole a second before he lifted his head slightly and looked me in the eyes. “*Moya.*” *Mine.* He thrust all those inches into me so hard my back arched, my breasts shook, and a painfully aroused sound left my mouth. “You're mine,” he grunted as he thrust into me hard once more, sliding out until the tip was lodged in my entrance, then pushed back in.

“Yes,” I cried out.

He fucked me with fast strokes, ones that made me feel like he was staking his claim irrevocably, that he was showing me with his body that I'd never get away, that I was his. His hips slammed against me, the sloppy, wet sound of our fucking so dirty, so raunchy, that I was almost on the verge of coming from that alone.

He was brutal, the motions pushing me up the bed from the force. Arlo slipped his hand under me and up my back, curling his fingers over one shoulder, keeping me in place as he worked his cock in and out of me.

This wasn't making love. This was raw, hard-core fucking. He was a feral beast, his body corded with strength and deadly precision. It was like he was losing just as much control as I

felt like I was inside. And all I could do was hold on to him, my legs wrapped around his waist, my hands still tangled in his hair. He was biting and licking at my neck, making inhuman sounds that drove me perilously close to orgasm. His grunts, my moans, and the noise of our wet sex slapping together surrounded my head and filled the room.

“You’re mine, and I will never let you go.” He slammed so hard into me, hitting a secret spot that had my eyes rolling back in my head and the air being forced from my lungs. “Now come for me.”

I came, my body obeying Arlo instantaneously.

“Fuck yeah. That’s it. Even your body knows you’re mine.”

The vibrations from his voice went right to my clit, engorging the tiny bundle even more until I was nothing but a mindless fiend, thrashing my head back and forth, trying to stay conscious. I knew Arlo was the only thing that could give me the fix I needed. He was the only thing that had brought life into every single part of me.

He grabbed both of my wrists in one of his hands and thrust my arms above my head, adding pressure and pinning me down so I was spread out like an offering. And then Arlo leaned back, his other hand gripping my waist, his fingers clenching and relaxing as he stared down at where our bodies were connected.

“I’ve never seen anything hotter than the sight of my cock in your cunt.” He slid in and pulled back out, slow and easy, as if he savored the sight. “My cock is so wet, glossy because you’re fucking dripping for me.” His gaze refused to move from where he watched, and I lifted my head to look down the length of my body to watch too. My lips parted as I saw the thick, girthy length of his shaft pull out of my body, wet and shiny under the glow of the outside lights coming through the window.

“Look how wet you are, baby. Look at how fucking soaked you’ve made my cock.”

“Yes, Arlo. Oh God, yes. Fuck me.”

And he did just that.

He slid his hands along my inner thighs, then hooked his fingers under my knees, pushing my legs out so far and wide that my muscles protested in the best way. The new position was obscene, my legs damn near in the splits position, my pussy lewdly displayed, but God, I’d never found anything hotter.

He slammed into me so hard and fast that I was losing my mind.

Arlo was ruthless, my body aching wonderfully. My breasts shook back and forth, my nipples hard peaks, painful, silently begging for his mouth again. As if he knew my thoughts, knew what I *needed*, he bent down and took one taut tip into his mouth, drawing the bud up, running his teeth gently over it again and again until my pussy clenched tightly around his cock on its own with my impending orgasm.

“So sweet. My favorite flavor in the world is *you*.” He dragged his tongue over my chest, up my neck, and circled my ear before growling out, “Now come for me.”

And I did. I exploded in a show of lights and fireworks, pain and pleasure. All I could do was take what he gave me. Every single touch, sight, smell, and sound drove me higher.

The gruff sounds he made against my throat as he thrust in and out of me. The way his balls slapped the crease of my ass. How the root of his shaft rubbed against my clit every time he slammed home.

I was flying high, licking the sky, feeling that ecstasy from the tips of my toes to the ends of my hair. And I never wanted it to end.

I felt his cock kick inside me, growing thicker before he roared out, the heavy, hot jets of his cum filling me, taking root so I’d always be marked from the inside out by the man who held my heart, body, and soul.

When we were both spent and depleted, he brought one of my hands to his mouth, kissed the center of my palm, and then

braced his forearms on the bed on either side of my head. Our breathing was harsh and identical, our skin sweaty. I felt the droplets of his perspiration land on my chest, hot and sticky... so damn sexy.

He pulled out, and I felt the loss right away. I felt the combination of my arousal and his cum slip from my pussy and slide down the crease of my ass to make a wet spot on the mattress.

Arlo pulled me close to him, and I curled against his body, my head dizzy, my vision blurry from the aftereffects of my orgasm, of my sheer happiness and love for this man. He lifted my hand and placed it on his chest, right over his heart. I tipped my head back to look into his face, noticing he already watched me, *knowing* there was something on his mind. There was a strange expression on his face, one I couldn't place. I reached up and smoothed my finger between the crease of his eyes.

"I never had a heart to give away, Galina," he said softly in the darkness, his gaze holding mine. "I never knew love, never gave it or received it. I didn't even know what it was until you came along."

My heart stalled in my chest at hearing him say those words, my breath holding in my lungs as I waited for him to continue.

"I'm not a good man. You know this. And you accept me regardless." He took my hand and placed it on his chest, right over his heart. "But whatever can grow in this dark, dead heart of mine, whatever love I am capable of, I want you to own it. I want you to be the only person to have that part of me, *moy svet*."

"Arlo—"

"I want to give you everything that I am, Galina. I want to give you the bad, the good... even the parts that are terrifying, because that's what's real; that's who I am." He slid his hand along the side of my neck to cup my face, his thumb smoothing over my temple. "I didn't know what being in love

felt like, and until you came along, I never knew how much I wanted to live. For you.”

“I love you.” I said those three words again, tears building in my eyes, ones that came from the very best part of me.

“Without you, there is no me, Galina. And if that’s love, then I love you so fucking much I’d tear my heart out and give it to you in offering just so you could see my loyalty, my determination... that within this monster, I am just a man needing the most important person in his life. *You.*”

I closed my eyes and felt a smile move across my face.

“I love you. So much you make life hurt in the very best way, *moy svet.*”

And that’s how I fell asleep, knowing I’d never have to be afraid of what lived in the dark any longer, because I had the most dangerous monster holding me tight.

EPILOGUE

Arlo

Five years later

You can never fully leave behind darkness. It follows you like a shadow, always there, looking and imposing. But as long as you have light, it will always stay one step behind, never able to touch you.

And as long as I had Galina in my life, I'd never truly be the villain in my own story. She'd given me that humanity I'd always been missing.

I stood on the porch and stared at her, her profile shadowed by the sun setting over the horizon, the waves crashing against the shore. Next to staring into Galina's face, the sight of her like this, the beach and ocean her backdrop, was one of the most beautiful things I'd ever seen.

For three years we'd lived on the shores of a small French village, the beach butting right up against our home, the salt and seawater in the air. I knew leaving the Ruin behind had been the best decision I could have ever made. Because it made Galina happy.

I'd waited to get my affairs and finances in order and had been putting all the money I earned working for the Ruin into offshore accounts so that no one—legitimate or otherwise—could ever get their hands on it. I had to ensure we'd never be followed, her life never again put in the crosshairs. I'd hated waiting so long to get her out of that godforsaken city and life, but it had been worth it. To see her smile up at me every night when I made love to her told me that without any words being uttered.

To know I'd done everything in my power to ensure Galina would never have to want for anything again in her life gave me peace. And I'd been ensuring that since I started working with the Ruin. But my priorities had shifted over the last five years—ever since Galina came into my life. Now, the end goal and all the saving had been to make her happy and keep her safe.

Until I took my last breath, I'd always make sure she was provided for, looked after, taken care of. I loved her. So fucking much.

I walked toward my wife, who stood in the same spot where we'd taken our vows nearly three years before. Galina had her arms hanging loosely at her sides, the wind moving her long Bohemian-style skirt back and forth.

I stepped up behind her and wrapped my arms around her slightly swollen belly, my palms flat on the swell as I leaned down and nuzzled her neck. She tilted her head to the side to give me better access, and I closed my eyes and inhaled her sweet scent.

“What are you thinking about, *moy svet?*”

She wrapped her arms around mine, and I could practically *feel* her smile. “You and how happy you make me.”

I kissed the side of her neck again. I wasn't a good man. I never had been, and I never would be. Galina was the only saving grace in my life, my soft spot, my weakness. She knew all of this, listened to me tell her my darkest parts, my past, the violent things I'd done. And she loved me regardless, irrevocably. Undeniably.

“Ya nikogda ne znal, chto znachit byt’ zhivym, prezhde chem ty byl moim.”

She turned and wrapped her arms around my neck, rising on her toes to bring her lips flush with mine. “I understood you pretty well that time,” she murmured against my lips.

“Yeah?” I nibbled her bottom lip. She’d started learning Russian and French a few years back, the latter something practical since we now called France home, the former because she said she had a passion for learning how she could curse me out when I pissed her off. I’d grinned, not caring if she wanted to swear at me in Russian every day. Her voice was so lovely anything she said was music to my ears.

“That’s right,” she kept teasing. She pulled back, and her expression turned somber. “I never knew what it meant to be alive before you were mine.”

She said the exact phrase I’d just told her in Russian, and although I told her she was mine, I knew she’d never understand when I told her she was the only thing that had ever made me feel alive.

“I love you,” I whispered and kissed her slowly. I slipped my fingers over her belly again just as my little girl, growing safely inside her mother, kicked my hand strongly.

“I hope you’re ready for her, because I’m afraid how active she is while inside is a precursor to how wild she’ll be once she’s here.”

I kissed her again and again, unable to stop my grin. “I can’t fucking wait. Let her be a wild child. Let her experience life and the world as she wants. No one will hold her back, or I’ll put a bullet in their head.”

Galina snorted and rolled her eyes, but I was fucking serious. My baby girl wouldn’t be told she couldn’t ever accomplish anything in this world. I’d never be like my father. I’d teach her about the world, the good and bad and how she could overcome any obstacle. And I’d do that with the one person I trusted more than anything else: my wife, soul mate, mother of my children—because I wanted a houseful of

daughters who looked just like Galina and sons who would protect the women in their lives above all else.

She was my heart. My light.

I was lucky to have Galina in my life, luckier still that I was going to be a father. I'd never complain about anything again, not when I'd been given the best gift imaginable.

Happiness, love, and—most of all—knowing what it meant to actually live.

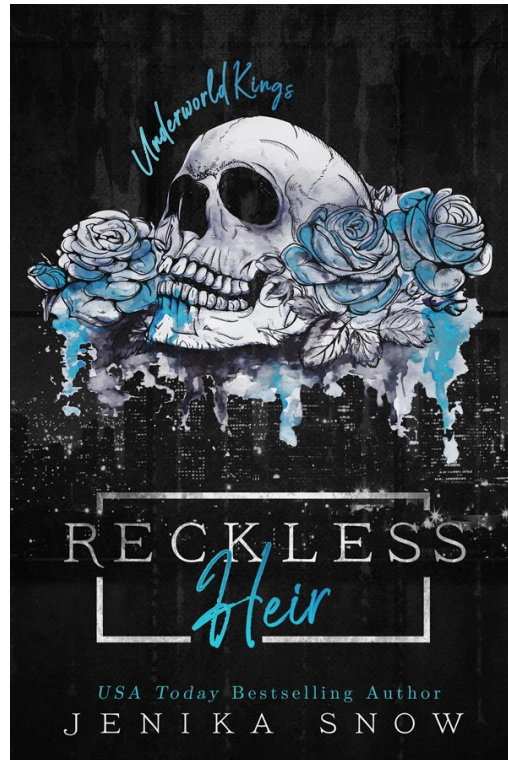
The End.

Want to read a bonus—spicy—short story for Galina and Arlo? Read *It Came Upon A Midnight Clear* absolutely free [HERE](#)



Want to read more in the Underworld Kings series? Check out [RECKLESS HEIR](#), Nikolai's story!





The Underworld Kings, 2

RECKLESS HEIR (Underworld Kings)

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RECKLESS *Heir*

My father sold me off to a ruthless killer in the Russian mafia, an alliance between the Bratva and the Cosa Nostra.

An arranged marriage where I'd be at the mercy of the man who'd no doubt see me as his property, where I was sure he'd be just as cruel and violent as every other Made Man I'd known in my life.

Nikolai Petrov, known to be a sociopath and for killing anyone for the smallest infraction. And I'd be forever tied to him, an accessory he could use or dispose of any way he saw fit.

And then I found myself painted red, my wedding dress stained in blood. A man dead by my husband's hands for simply touching my hair.

I was terrified of the lengths Nikolai would go to get what he wanted... to keep me as his, but despite all of that I felt something far stronger, far more dangerous.

Need. Want. Dark and depraved desire. And it was all for the man who said I was his.

For better or worse.

PROLOGUE

Nikolai

We'd arrived at Butcher and Son, a decades-old abandoned slaughterhouse in the outskirts of Desolation, New York ten minutes ago. I looked down at my watch, expecting Arlo Malkovich any minute.

Arlo, a free agent in the crime syndicate known as the Ruin, did the dirty shit other men couldn't or wouldn't. Body clean-up, mercenary work, torture, and hits ordered down from the higher-ups from all factions of the underworld.

The Cartel, Bratva, Cosa Nostra, and any other illegal entity that needed a hub to get their guns, drugs, trafficking, or kills done easily and without legal interference.

And that's exactly what we were going to use Arlo for.

Our dirty work.

Not that I personally gave a fuck if anyone knew we were about to put a hit out on Leonid Petrov, our father and the Pakhan of the Desolation branch of the Bratva. The asshole had this long coming, and had dodged more attempted hits on his life over the decades than I could count.

The sound of a car pulling in, gravel being kicked up, and then followed by an engine being cut, a door being opened and closed sounded. I straightened and glanced at the partially opened metal doors just as footsteps echoed off the walls and Arlo stepped inside.

I glanced at my brother as he leaned against the rusted walls of the warehouse, Dmitry's body relaxed although I saw the lines around his tightened lips. He brought a cigarette to his lips and lit it, the end flaring a second before he inhaled, held it in, and then exhaled, tendrils of smoke curling around him. He brought it to his mouth again and inhaled, and I could see the tension growing in him. The end of his cigarette lit up once more in the darkness, a flare of brilliant orange as he inhaled.

I kept to the shadows as Arlo came closer, his focus on my brother. I knew he couldn't see me shrouded in the corner and I grinned.

Arlo stopped a few feet from where Dmitry still leaned against the wall. "Your brother can crawl out of whatever dark hole he's occupying anytime now." His voice was low and I grinned wider and laughed, the sound echoing off the rusty, debilitated walls. *The fucker.*

Dmitry inhaled from his cigarette again, that smoke circling him, clouding his visage, his focus trained on Arlo. My brother didn't say shit, just flipped the ash from his cigarette, took one more hit, then flicked it away before pushing off the wall and coming to stand before Arlo.

I tensed, taking a step closer but staying in the shadows, my hand on the butt of my gun as I prepared to fight dirty.

Dmitry grinned, a frightening visage with his lips peeled off his teeth, all straight, white, and flashing in the darkness. Dmitry started talking about the bullshit that happened at one of my father's establishments, an encounter where Arlo had taken it upon himself to obliterate the hands of one of Leonid's soldiers simply for touching a female Arlo had taken some hardcore interest in.

“I swear he’s got a constant fucking hard-on because of it,” Dmitry said. “It’s been a long time since I’ve seen him so excited about something.”

I moved forward then, coming up to Arlo from behind, the shadows slipping away from me.

I knew Arlo was well aware of my presence, but the fucker didn’t even tense as I approached and I felt my grin widen even more. “I don’t know whether to be offended or to up my game over the fact that you didn’t even flinch in my presence,” I said.

“Probably safe to assume both.”

Arlo’s words irritated me and I sneered at him as I came to stand beside my brother.

“Your father needs to find a hobby if my life is so consuming to him.” Arlo addressed Dmitry in reference to what had been said about our father.

Dmitry gave Arlo a sharklike grin.

Long moments of silence stretched out before Arlo broke it up by saying, “you need to get the fuck on with it and quit wasting my time.”

I noticed Arlo’s fingers twitching, and knew the sociopath wanted to go for his gun.

I didn’t want to have to kill Arlo, not when we needed him.

“I’d like to offer you a job.” Dmitry was the one to break up the silence.

“I already have a job with the Ruin,” Arlo said right away. “And even if I didn’t, I wouldn’t take a job from someone who barely has hair on his balls.”

My pulse jack-knifed at the low blow comment Arlo directed toward my brother.

But my brother didn’t take the bait. He laughed, deep and low. “Man, Arlo, if you were anyone else, I would have already put a bullet between your eyes for your insults.”

Arlo curled his lip. “You could *try*.” We may have only been a decade or so younger than Arlo, and far from children as Arlo so crudely implied, but we’d seen some heinous shit... done terrible things that we were right up there in the sociopathic killer tier as Arlo.

“I’m going to give you a pass on the disrespect.” Dmitry held up a finger. “But just this once, Arlo.”

“Is that so?” Arlo took a step forward and I tensed even more, about to move closer. But Dmitry held his hand up, stopping me from coming closer.

“I think we’re getting off on the wrong foot here.” Dmitry tipped his head to the side as if trying to examine Arlo, trying to figure him out. “I think this is something you’ll like, Arlo, something that will satiate that evil, tar-stained, fucked-up soul of yours.”

I chuckled in response.

And then the air shifted, changed as it charged with something sickly and vicious. The atmosphere changed, wasn’t filled with the laughter of demented men with fake smiles and twisted minds. It was a sudden seriousness that was cloaking, a sturdy presence like a fourth body in the room.

“We want you to kill our father.” Dmitry said it so matter-of-factly that I was pleased to see Arlo was actually taken aback. “I know, before you say it or even think about it, that you’re wondering if this is a setup.” He held his hands out, palms up. “This is my brother and me offering you an olive branch. We’re giving you a chance to take out the threat that is directed at your woman, no strings attached, no repercussions with the Bratva. No retaliation.”

Arlo eyed us both. He wouldn’t see shit. We knew how to keep our cool, how to act like shit was dark and deadly. He chuckled, but it held no humor. “You little shits think you can take down Leonid on your own?” He lifted an eyebrow as he eyed them both. “I’ll give you both credit; you have some balls of steel, conspiring to take down one of the strongest Pakhan in the Bratva.”

I stepped forward and spoke. “He’s become unorganized, his vengeance with the Cosa Nostra becoming volatile. He’s making too many mistakes and fucking things up. He’s going to end up bringing a lot of fire and death down on this organization and ruin a lot of connections we have in place.”

“I’m not sure how this is my problem,” Arlo said, his jaw tightening further.

Dmitry gave me a hard smile. “This is *your* problem, because my father has plans for your woman.”

I instantly saw Arlo’s entire body tighten. The woman Arlo had become obsessed with was clearly someone special. A weakness. And it’s what we’d use against him to get him to do exactly what we wanted.

Kill our father.

“I don’t need you or your brother interfering,” Arlo gritted out.

I made a deep sound in my throat and leaned back against the wall, crossing my arms over my chest and glaring at the bastard. “He’s like a dog with a fucking bone over having you join the ranks,” I said in reference to Leonid. I cocked my head to the side. “I don’t get his obsession with you, but he holds you in high regard and will use whatever means necessary to bring you in.” It was no secret our father wanted Arlo as a full-time Bratva soldier, but the coldhearted asshole in front of us preferred to stay a free agent.

But if Leonid wanted something he wouldn’t stop until he got it... by any means necessary.

“And he plans on trying to use her as collateral to force my hand.” Arlo didn’t phrase it like a question. He was smart enough to know how twisted our father’s mind was.

Neither me nor Dmitry said anything for a long while, letting that reality sink in with Arlo.

“I don’t think you understand the obsession my father has with that woman of yours.” Dmitry finally spoke. “But because he knows you want her, because you couldn’t control yourself at *Sdat’sya* and destroyed Dima’s hands, he won’t

stop until he makes you see his way of thinking.” A muscle under Dmitry’s jaw ticked, as if just speaking about how fucked up our father was almost sent him into a rage. “He wants to make her *his*, Arlo. That’s the fucking truth of the matter.” Dmitry took another step forward, and once more Arlo’s body became tense.

With readiness.

And in turn I felt my own darkness rise up like toxic tendrils. My muscles tightened, blood rushed through my veins, and I had an itch under my skin to destroy someone or something.

And when I saw Arlo’s hand move to his back to no doubt get better access to his gun, I rolled my head around on my neck, cracked my knuckles, and felt adrenaline coursing through me.

“Do you understand what I mean, Arlo? Do you understand what my father does to women?”

I kept my focus on Arlo and what he was doing with that fucking hand by his gun. My fingers tightened around mine in preparation.

I bared my teeth and when Arlo looked at me I gritted out, “He’s a savage toward the fairer sex. Fucking deplorable. He’ll destroy her, Arlo, and I don’t mean end her life in the most humane, painless way possible.” I pushed off the wall, not bothering to hide the gun in my hand, my finger on the trigger. “He’ll beat her down mentally and emotionally until she’s nothing more than dough that he can form into whatever vision he sees fit. And when he’s the only thing that she can grasp on to, when he has you right where he wants you, he’ll destroy you too.”

A deep growl of aggression and warning left Arlo.

I glanced at my brother and saw him smirk. We had Arlo right where we wanted him.

The feelings Arlo had for this woman clearly went deeper than sexual or obsession. Dare I say the sociopath in front of us actually *cared* for her?

“Our father needs to be taken out, Arlo. And because you now have a direct link to him through your woman, because she’s a threat and you know my father won’t stop until he gets what he wants, which is now both of you, she won’t be safe.”

Arlo curled his lip at Dmitry. “Don’t fucking act like you’re giving me some kind of fucking gift, like you’re doing me a favor. You’re doing this because you want power, Dmitry. You’re doing this because your father is psychotic and destructive, becoming too volatile apparently. Don’t fucking act like you’re giving a handout simply because you have a good heart. It’s just as fucking black and soulless as mine.”

Dmitry laughed and looked over at me, which had me chuckling as well. “As much as we’d like to take out the old fucker ourselves, show him the kind of family love he’s shown us as we grew up, you know how our world works.” Dmitry looked back at Arlo. “It would be bad form for us to have a personal hand in it. But you’re the best of the best. A real coldhearted bastard, aren’t you? You could take him out and make it look like he just disappeared. *Poof*,” Dmitry said as he curled his hand into a fist in front of his face.

Arlo started pacing, the clear intellect on his expression telling me he was thinking about all possible outcomes and disadvantages and advantages to killing the Pakhan of the Desolation Bratva.

Arlo stopped and growled out, “She’s mine.”

Dmitry started laughing. “Yeah, I think you made that pretty fucking obvious when Dima touched your girl and you pulverized his fucking hands.”

I started laughing even harder this time after my brother spoke.

“Although it served the fucker right. He was a touchy bastard and doesn’t know what the word ‘no’ means.”

And that’s when I saw everything settle within Arlo. He’d made up his mind.

“You and I both know you’re going to take him out.” There was clear confidence in Dmitry’s voice.

“My brother and I don’t need more war. We want an alliance between the Cosa Nostra and Bratva. We need to grow stronger and create not only domestic deals but international ones. And we found a way to do that. But if our father stays in power, he’ll destroy the progress we’re making.” Dmitry looked at me and smirked, a silent affirmation of all of this passing between us.

“Didn’t you know?” I prompted and stalked toward Arlo. “I’m getting hitched. Got an arranged marriage to a sexy little just-turned-eighteen Italian hottie.” Although I didn’t fucking know if she was sexy, it didn’t fucking matter, not when this was strictly a power move. But Arlo didn’t need to know all the details.

I wagged my eyebrows and grinned lasciviously.

Arlo stared at me in the eyes. “That’s your plan? An arranged marriage between the Petrov Bratva and Cosa Nostra?” He ran a hand over his face and shook his head. “You guys are even crazier than I thought.”

Dmitry grinned but didn’t say anything else.

“So we came to a father killer to handle this.” I knew that would drive the nail into the proverbial coffin for Arlo. He knew all about killing fathers seeing as he did his own in when he was only sixteen.

And as I watched Arlo’s eyes narrow, I grinned. Yeah, he’d do this for us.

He’d help us bury our psychopathic father.

Amara

“**B**ut I don’t love him, papa,” I whispered as I stared at my father, knowing my words fell on deaf ears but I said them anyway. And to be honest, I wasn’t sure why I was so shocked that this was happening. “I don’t know him.”

In our world—the dark and gritty, ugly and brutal one that was ruled by the mafia—arranged marriages were common. The women didn’t have to know the men they were to marry. They didn’t have to love them or even like them.

They just had to obey because this was all done to strengthen ties between families.

But this wasn’t a marriage to a fellow Italian mafia house, which had always been the norm.

This was me being given to Nikolai Petrov, second born son to Leonid Petrov, Pakhan to the Petrov Russian bratva.

Nikolai Petrov.

It was a name I’d heard my father speak before as I eavesdropped on his meetings, on the phone calls he made in his office in the weeks leading up to this conversation. He’d beat me with his belt if he’d known I’d been listening to his

private meetings, but when I'd heard my name mentioned, tying my life to a man I didn't know, a man who was more than likely the exact same breed and cut from the same cloth as all the other monsters surrounding me, I'd taken notice and didn't care about repercussions if caught.

My father, Marco Bianchi, had his hard eyes set right on me, his jaw looking even more severely cut as he ground his teeth. Me questioning anything he did was an affront to him, an offense. Because I was nothing but a lowly daughter good for nothing but pawning off to secure my father's power even more.

His expression told me plenty even though he said nothing.

"He's crazy, papa," I said low, my tone desperate, not knowing anything about Nikolai, but I didn't have to know him to understand the type of male he was and where he came from. "He's a Russian." Those three words seemed like the most logical explanation for him being a lunatic.

I knew enough of our world that it wasn't as if the Cosa Nostra was friendly with the Bratva, certainly not close that they'd pawn daughters off to sons. Yet here we were. Here I was.

"You'll do what I say, girl, and thank me afterward," he clipped out in Italian. His tone said that was the end of it and there would be no other questions asked.

My father wasn't an affectionate man, in fact, he'd never told me he loved me, hadn't hugged me, shown me any kind of caring or nurturing touch in my eighteen years. I'd come to accept that although I was his flesh and blood, he saw me as nothing more than a commodity. Something he owned. Something he could use to up his status as underboss.

He was the king and I was a pawn in his game of chess.

My father flicked his hand toward the door, a silent, "get out".

I felt my shoulders sag forward, and hated myself for showing any kind of weakness in front of him.

I left and shut his office door behind me and leaned against it, feeling my mother's gaze on me. I lifted my head and stared at her. She stood down the hall wringing her hands together, a horrified look on her face.

Fernanda Bianchi was as much a prisoner and board game piece as I was. She, too, had been given to my father when she was barely eighteen, their marriage arranged, my mother forced to be with an older man who treated her like nothing but a vessel for his heirs.

We were all just tools, bargaining chips to them. *The weaker sex*, as they called us.

My fifteen-year-old sister, Claudia, had a spirit that I wish I'd possessed, a fire in her veins that I wanted for my own, and a freethinking mind that I envied. She didn't care about rules or traditions no matter how many times Father scolded her, or Mother talked to her. She lived by her own rules, and as much as I loved her for it, I also worried for her and the world we lived in. If a woman couldn't be submissive to the men in our lives on their own... it was beaten into them.

Then there was my twenty-one-year-old brother Gio, who was just as ruthless and coldhearted as our father—as every man in the underworld kingdom—was a prisoner, too. He'd been warped and twisted up, indoctrinated into all things mafia that it's just who he was now. But even the life he led, the rules and expectations for his life hadn't made him evil. Not truly. Not yet.

“Passerotta.” Sparrow.

It was the nickname my mother and brother had given me when I was a child because they said I fluttered around constantly, little wings taking me from one place to another.

My mother's voice was soft, submissive, and I heard a hint of sympathy laced in that lone word. Although I knew she probably didn't want this life for me, she didn't say otherwise. My father had shaped my mother into the woman who stood before me; softly spoken, eyes always diverted to the ground when he was in the room, her appearance always perfect.

I wondered how she could find any happiness.

I knew he hit her when he was mad, when she didn't do what he said, when he wasn't happy enough with... anything.

"Mamma," I choked out and covered my mouth with a hand, refusing to cry even though my eyes watered. I was an adult, an eighteen-year-old woman who was crying and rushing to her mother for comfort. And I felt no shame in that.

"Come, darling" she said softly and held her hand out to me.

I slipped my palm in hers and let her lead me down the hallway, around the corner, and followed her as we descended the stairs. She took me to the gardens, a place I knew was where she found her solitude, where she felt safe and free.

I felt the tears start to fall as we sat on the wrought iron bench and stared at the blooming roses. The gardens were meticulously landscaped, mainly by the workers coming in daily to tend to it as if it were a religion, but my mother could also be found here during her free time.

"Mamma," I whispered her name again and felt her hand cover mine, which rested on my lap. As I sat beside my mother I felt like a little girl again. I felt as vulnerable as one. "He's the bratva." My mother knew this, yet I said it again, as if it would make a difference, change my fate.

She didn't speak, but her silence was comforting in itself.

"Does Gio know? Claudia?" They'd know eventually, sooner rather than later.

"Gio was told." She shifted beside me. "He wasn't pleased with your father's decision, but there wasn't anything to be done. The deal had already been made."

The deal had already been made.

I looked at my very traditional Italian mother and waited until she glanced at me. I stared up into her crystalline blue eyes, ones the exact same shade as mine. It was the only thing all three of us had inherited from her. Where she was fair skin

and blonde hair, me and my siblings took after my father's darker Sicilian side with our olive skin tone and black hair.

"In life we have to make sacrifices." She swallowed. "We have to do things we don't want for things to stay positive." She lifted her hand and cupped the side of my face.

I'd grown up knowing the Russian mafia was the enemy, a dangerous and brutal organization, one my father said was filled with savages.

She smoothed her thumb over my cheek and dropped her hand back to her lap, glancing at the gardens once more. I did the same.

"Amara," she said my name softly and my throat tightened.

I knew that tone. It was the one she used when things were lost, when there was nothing to do but obey.

I closed my eyes and felt more tears move down my cheeks. I knew the man I was to marry would be cruel. He'd be like my father... he'd be like all the men in our world. And there was nothing I could do. Running wasn't an option. I had security with me constantly, a precaution my father took because there were men, bad men like him, who would use me to get to him. I had no money, no real friends to turn to for help. I had nothing to my name aside from what was in the home behind me.

So here I was, knowing my life was in the hands of others, knowing I had no choice but to go along and hope for the best.

Because as soon as I said "*I do*" to Nikolai Petrov, I'd be nothing but a vessel for his sexual depravity, and the babies he'd make me have for him.

Nikolai

The lights were obnoxious, the music too loud. And the people grinding and bumping against each other reminded me of cattle. They stunk, were sweaty, and I found myself curling my upper lip in disgust.

I followed my older brother Dmitry through the dance floor, the bodies parting ahead of us, my fingers twitching because all I thought about was pulling out my gun and shooting the next drunken asshole who elbowed me.

We finally made it to the backroom, and once the door was shut behind me, I leaned against it, crossing my arms over my chest, my leather jacket stretching across my chest, my hand close to my gun tucked in the holster at my side.

Dmitry had been silent for the last twenty minutes since we found out we had a motherfucking traitor right under our noses. I could feel the tension and aggression seething from him because of it.

My brother walked over to the scarred wooden desk across from the door, a stack of papers on one side, the rest scattered across the top. The grey, old as fuck chair behind it was pressed to the wall, the large black stain and three holes on the

backrest a lasting memory that had me smirking on how it got there.

Because of me. Because I'd shot the bastard who'd been sitting in it just last year. Fucker had been cooking our books and skimming off the top.

I made sure to put that problem to rest real damn fast. And I got a thrill of pleasure every time I stared at that damn near black stain from where I'd put three bullets in his chest.

"Where is he?" Dmitry finally spoke, his voice deep, rough, and filled with a hell of a lot of emotions.

"They're bringing him in, Pakhan." Vladislav said, staying to the side, his hands clasped behind his back and taking on the stance of a good and loyal soldier.

And the prick they were bringing to us? Stupid asshole had also been stealing from us. But that wasn't even the biggest issue. If that had been the only issue that had come up I would have made an example of him by cutting off his hands.

But nah, the bastard was also giving intel to our enemies, making back alley fucking deals to line his pockets and gain connections. Fucker actually thought we wouldn't find out.

So now there wouldn't just be sawed off hands, but also a hell of a lot of other painful things I'd do to remedy the situation.

That's where we differed. Dmitry let his emotions control him. Although I wasn't a fucking sociopath by the technical term, but I sure as hell knew how to keep my emotions in check and keep that mask in place.

Showing emotions was dangerous, and in our world that was nothing but a weakness.

Dmitry had his back to us, his hands shoved in the front pockets of his dark jeans. He stared at the wall, an out of date calendar tacked to it.

We all stood there in silence as we waited for the soon-to-be-dead piece of shit to make an appearance.

I stared at my brother, who remained like stone, his body tense, the dangerous fucking energy radiating from him.

I was glad he'd taken over as Pakhan for the Bratva in our city of Desolation. Because even despite his lack of keeping his emotions in check and staying cool under pressure, his fucking mind was like a work of art. All critical thinking and twisted plot reasoning.

The bastard was a damn mastermind.

“We expected this,” Dmitry said and turned to face me.

I didn't respond, knowing he was talking about the traitor and what led up to this. Our father had been so consumed in his own greed and power struggle that he didn't notice what was right in front of him. But we saw everything, so after he was taken out we saw a shift in ranks.

There were bastards who were trying to go against us in our own organization, and because they were trying to expedite shit, they were getting sloppy. When you didn't take your time that's when mistakes started to happen... that's when you got caught.

Like what was going to happen to the bastard who would die by our hands tonight.

“With father out of the picture there's bound to be those in the Bratva that push back with the change in leadership.”

I grunted my agreement.

Although we hadn't confirmed that we'd been the ones to hire Arlo Milkovich to take out our father, we also hadn't denied it. There'd been no secret that there was no love lost for our father.

We'd been nothing to him but pawns to use, pieces to move on the chessboard of his twisted version of life.

And he sure as fuck used us.

I knew he'd been working on selling off our youngest sister, an arranged marriage to a high-ranking Russian who would have ruined her in the most depraved of ways. And then there was Dmitry and I, who had been beaten and torn apart,

“toughened” up for the world we lived in by our father’s own hands.

I couldn’t count the number of men I killed at my father’s orders, brutal and torturous ways to send a message. This was how it had been since we were old enough to walk and talk, shaped and molded into the warped men that stood in this room today.

And although taking him out would’ve been necessary given the fact he was moving the organization in a direction that would have collapsed alliances and already laid plans for growth, I wasn’t going to deny, and I knew Dmitry wouldn’t either, that killing our father had also been a personal satisfaction as well.

The bastard had needed to be killed.

I relaxed my arms and looked down at my hands, picturing all the heinous shit I’d done with them over the years... all the fucked up acts I’d have to do with them tonight. By the time I left the club the sun would be rising and my palms and fingers would be stained red from taking a life slowly, painfully.

Therapeutically for my fucked up soul.

“We need to expedite your situation.” Dmitry’s hard voice pulled me out of my macabre thoughts and I looked at him. He ran a hand over his jaw, his expression lost in thought. “We need to push up the wedding.” My brother looked at me then but I made sure to keep my expression void.

“Move up?” We hadn’t even spoken about a firm date on when I’d wed the Bianchi girl, but it didn’t matter when it happened, just that it did.

Dmitry nodded. “Yeah. move it up to set things firmly in place.”

Before we hired Arlo to end our father, we set up safeguards in place for growing a Bratva. And that included an arranged marriage between myself and the daughter of Marco Bianchi of the Cosa Nostra.

Although alliances such as this, a bond between families was commonplace, in this regard, where the Bratva and Cosa

Nostra were coming together for the “greater good” it wasn’t the norm. Not when we’d been battling for decades.

“We need to let all of those who think to rise up against us know what kind of power we have at our backs.”

And that’s exactly what this move was going to ensure. Anyone in the Bratva who thought to go against Dmitry or myself would see that not only were we vicious in going after what we wanted or taking out a threat, but we also had the west coast Cosa Nostra as a strong ally. And that kind of power would yield a union that was unstoppable.

I didn’t even know what my future wife looked like, didn’t know anything about her aside from her age and name. She could be a homely mouse for all I knew.

And I hadn’t cared enough to research her.

Because It didn’t matter what Amara Bianchi looked like, sounded like, or how she acted. She was a means to an end.

She was mine for better or worse.

Amara

I worried at my bottom lip as I stared at the laptop, watching as it seemed to take an eternity for the screen to load.

I felt like I was doing something wrong... searching the Internet for any piece of dirt I could find on my soon-to-be-husband.

Nikolai Petrov, a man notorious in the Russian Mafia as being insane, demented and dangerous.

I closed my eyes and exhaled. And God help me, I was to wed him.

I opened my eyes just as the page reloaded and as I clicked on one of the news articles, it was basically all the same information I found so far. Which is a whole lot of nothing that wasn't just for face value.

I knew enough about how organized crime worked, the Bratva in the Cosa Nostra not much different in that they did things only on the surface it looked good, while deep on the underground is where the real business happened

I clicked on an article for Nikolai Petrov and started reading.

Multi-millionaire heirs to the Petrov empire at only twenty nine and twenty eight, Dmitry and Nikolai Petrov, who have suspected ties to organized crime, have ventured into a new enterprise and renovated the Clandestine building on Fortworth Street in Desolation. It's predicted to be a top tier nightclub, and set to transform Desolation from the ground up.

I CONTINUED READING, clicking on another link that showed Nikolai and who I recognized as his older brother Dmitry. They were standing in front of a lavish door, *Sdat'sya* written above the wrought iron and wooden massive structure and giving it an almost ominous appearance.

I briefly looked at Dmitry, his light blue eyes bright yet they were also calculating. He'd seen a lot in his twenty-nine years.

I looked back at Nikolai then, feeling this strange tightness in my gut at the fact I'd be marrying him in the near future. Very near future if my father had his way.

His short dark hair was haphazardly strewn across his head, as if he ran his hands through it and didn't care how it looked. I felt like he probably didn't care about a lot of things. *Like humanity.* He had the same shade of blue eyes as Dmitry, a smirk on his face as he stared at the camera, as if he dared whoever was standing in front of them to take the picture.

My heart started racing, my throat tight and my mouth dry the longer I stared at him. I'd never spoken to him, never seen him in person, yet I felt this intense apprehension just from a picture alone. In fact, this was the first time I'd seen him in any capacity. I shouldn't find a man like him attractive, but I couldn't help the fact I did.

How would I feel once I was in the same room with him... alone with him?

It was enough to have fear striking me hard and fast.

I opened another article, getting pulled deeper and deeper into any and all things I could find on one of the Petrov Bratva heirs.

He had a younger sister—my age—named Tatiana. And strangely enough I couldn't find any clear images of her, as if she were hidden away from the public eye.

The last article I clicked on had my heart picking up an irregular beat as I read about Nikolai having a traffic incident where it's rumored he tore the finger and toenails off a man for cutting him off in traffic.

A knock on my bedroom door startled me and I slammed the laptop closed and pushed it under my pillow just as the door opened and my mother stepped inside.

I could see by the exasperated expression on her face and the way she was moving a little too quickly that she was nervous about whatever had brought her into my room.

"Is everything okay, mamma?" She immediately walked toward my closet without responding, and started rifling through the dresses that were hung up. I heard her mutter under her breath, "*this won't do*".

I stood and started twisting my hands together, but with each passing second I was growing more anxious about what was going on.

"Mamma?" She stopped as if my voice had pierced through the muddled fog of her thoughts. She turned to face me and I felt my brows lower as I looked into her eyes. "What's going on? Is Claudia okay? Gio—"

She waved her hand again, cutting me off, as if brushing my concern away. "No, your brother and sister are fine. Everything's fine. It's just the plans have... changed a little."

I felt confusion fill me coupled with a good dose of apprehension. "Changed how?" As if my life wasn't already a mess.

"Your father just got off the phone with the Petrov's."

My heart sank into my belly and I felt a rolling tide of nausea settle into me. The only thing worse than being tied to a man I didn't love and had never met a single day in my life, was if he called off the engagement. It would bring shame upon my father, on our whole entire family. I'd be seen as

tainted, worthless... not good enough to even be sold off by my family.

And *I* would be the sole reason for it all, even if I'd had nothing to do with it, even if I couldn't have offended anyone aside from just simply breathing.

“Okay,” I said slowly. “What does that mean?”

I could see the tension around her eyes. “Your father got you a personal guard until the wedding, and then...” she glanced around and looked at my closet once more. “And plans have moved up.”

My pulse raced and I shifted on my feet. I wasn't surprised about the guard. We'd always had soldiers following us, men watching out for the Bianchi family whenever we left the house given who my father was. Marco Bianchi had many enemies, people who'd kill us to get to him.

But I'd never had a personal one myself. So that meant either there were threats that I'd never been privy to knowing that were too close to us, or maybe my father—or my future husband—was afraid something would happen to me... or that I'd run.

Not that the latter wasn't something that would ever happen. I was too “watched”, and truthfully, too afraid to even try leaving. I had no money, nothing of value. What was I supposed to do, live under a bridge, beg for change just so I could eat? I'd never survive, not with men out there who'd use and abuse me as much as the men in the mafia world would.

“What do you mean things have moved up?” I normally didn't press, but the words spilled out of me before I could stop them.

She turned back around without answering me and started pushing hangers aside, inspecting each dress. “This won't do. Not at all.” She faced me once more. “We need to go dress shopping tomorrow.” She nodded. “And we'll have lunch with Maria and her daughter. Keep up appearances.” She sounded like she was speaking to herself.

With each passing second I was getting increasingly antsy, a lump forming in my throat as I thought about all the possible things that could go wrong... even more than they were.

“Have things been *canceled*?” I whispered that last word, holding onto hope, but also feeling a spike of fear. I didn’t want this arranged marriage, but at the same time if Nikolai Petrov called off the wedding for whatever reason, I would be the one who suffered for it. The brunt of my father’s wrath landing on my shoulder because I wasn’t “good enough.”

“Dmitry Petrov called your father this afternoon, said he wants the engagement and wedding pushed up.”

I swallowed roughly, not sure how to take that. I hadn’t known when the wedding actually was, the only details I’d been told was that it was happening. For some reason I thought I’d have a long while before things went through, before everything was finalized. Weddings took a long time, right? Right?

Seemed like I’d been wrong.

“Nikolai and Dmitry Petrov are flying in this weekend. We’re having dinner here.” My mother smoothed her hands down her perfectly pressed dress. “They want to discuss a firm date for the wedding in person, and I’m sure Mr. Petrov wants to meet you officially.”

I wasn’t fool enough to think Nikolai cared anything about me, not about anything of importance. I’m sure he wanted to make sure I wasn’t a homely spinster, or had a disfigurement. Not that any of that would stop him from this marriage, not when it meant more power all around.

The most pressing issue for him was probably that he wanted to get a feel of my father in his own atmosphere, to witness with his own eyes how much power and connections Marco Bianchi actually had... how much Nikolai would gain by marrying into the Bianchi family.

I wanted to curse, wanted to deny it all and tell my mother I would not do this. But I was a good Italian girl. I had learned my place in this world, where I stood with my family. And so I

pressed my lips together and kept all thoughts to myself. It was safer that way. Even if I trusted my mother, and knew she empathized with me, my disobedience—as my father would see it—would no doubt get back to him.

“Okay,” I finally said.

My mother gave a firm nod and faced my closet once more. “You need to make yourself presentable,” she said without looking at me. “You need to look your best so Mr. Petrov sees your worth.”

Yeah, like superficial beauty was all any female in this world had to offer.

“Amara, you need to meet the new guard your father will have with you until the wedding.” She started murmuring under her breath again.

“New guard? What about the ones I’ve used before?”

She started murmuring in Italian again as she looked at my closet. “No, no. They’ve been reassigned. More pressing issues, your father tells me. Your father wants you downstairs to introduce you to Edoardo. He’s been highly recommended by Lorenzo.”

I turned that information over in my head. “Lorenzo? Maria’s husband? Francesca’s father?”

My mother hummed her answer but otherwise didn’t say anything else.

“But why would Lorenzo just give up one of his men? Surely father has others?” Not that it mattered one way or another who watched over me, but I was curious on why my father would take another guard from one of his soldiers when I knew he had men at his disposal.

My mother glanced at me and scowled. “We don’t question what your father decides, especially when he wants you protected.”

I pursed my lips but otherwise said nothing else. I turned from my mother and walked over to the window, pulling the heavy curtain out of the way and looking outside. My bedroom

faced the front of the house, the long, elaborate and winding driveway leading down to the wrought iron gate.

I felt like a caged bird in a beautiful prison.

No doubt right now my father would be working overtime to make sure everything was proper and perfect and in its rightful place before that dinner that would change everything.

My life wasn't my own. It never had been and it never would be, and that wouldn't change because of who I married.

And Nikolai was no different than my father. In fact, I had a feeling he was even worse. The very devil himself.

Amara

Shopping with my mother is basically me following her around as she tosses items into my arms as well as the guard who'd come with us. Today we had two of my father's men with us, Tomasso, my mother's guard, and Edoardo, the new guy my father had assigned to me until the wedding.

The man detailed to me was a kid, if I were being honest. He barely looked older than me.

Edoardo was an annoying shadow that I should have been grateful for because I knew he would protect me with his life. Not because he cared about me, but because he worked for my father, was paid by him, and feared for his own safety if he didn't uphold his duties.

My mother shoved a few more dresses into my arms and gently pushed me toward one of the changing rooms.

"Don't take too long, Amara. We have lunch with Maria and Francesca."

I stifled an eye roll at the sound of Maria's daughter's name. Francesca was spoiled by her father, and had a holier than thou attitude to match. But I was forced to be polite and

grin and bear it because we ran in the same circle and drama was the last thing I needed.

Women using any kind of intellect or independent thought process in the mafia world didn't do any good. We were meant to be seen, not heard.

I tried on the dresses, doing the obligatory "showoff" for my mother. Once everything was paid for and our bags were in hand, we left the boutique. Tomasso walked beside my mother, and Edoardo kept right behind me.

The sun was bright and I lifted my hand to shield my eyes. We made our way down the sidewalk, but it was only a few seconds before I felt this prickling on the back of my neck, and skating down the length of my spine. I found myself stopping and looking around, the very real feeling of being watched so pronounced it was impossible to ignore.

My mother and Tomasso continued forward, not realizing that I'd stopped, but Edoardo was a solid presence behind me as I glanced up and down the street.

There were a handful of cars driving by, and a dozen or so people walking up and down the sidewalks, shopping bags in hand, the unseasonably warm spring weather bringing them out.

But nobody seemed to be paying attention to me. Yet I couldn't shake the feeling that I was definitely being watched and not just in passing, but full-on staring at me enough I felt like it was a physical presence skating over me.

"What's the problem?" Edoardo's hard voice pierced through my thoughts and I blinked back to clear my mind, looking over my shoulder at him, my hand still shielding the sun from my eyes.

I noticed his hand started to go toward the inside of his jacket, and knew he was reaching for his gun. I felt my pulse race a little, because despite being surrounded by men like Edoardo and Tomasso, men who were like every other male in my life—brutal and savage and easily able to kill without remorse—I still found it shocking, appalling that somebody

could be so coldhearted that they'd have no problem putting a bullet in someone in plain sight.

I shook my head. "Nothing," I murmured and started walking again to catch up to my mother.

But no matter how much or how far I walked, I still felt someone watching me and I knew what it was.

A predator.



"I'M sure it'll be a beautiful wedding. I bet you're so excited, Amara."

My name being said, dragged me from my thoughts and I looked across the table to see Maria smiling at me warmly. Her daughter might be stuck-up and cold, but Maria was as sweet as they came and I found myself giving her a genuine smile in return.

"Of course," I lied easily.

I picked up my cup of tea and brought it to my mouth, not really tasting the flavor, and everything in me feeling numb. I listened idly to my mother and Maria talking, glancing over at Francesca to see her on her phone.

She had this sardonic little smirk on her face and then she looked at me, her expression telling me how much she *didn't* want to be here.

I felt a pinch of annoyance, but she looked back at her phone, dismissing me.

I didn't know how long we sat there, me tuning out everything except feeling the hot tea fill my mouth and go down my throat every time I took a sip from the cup.

But it was when I felt that tightening on the back of my neck once more, prickles along my arms, that I snapped back to reality and straight up my spine, glancing around the small cafe but not seeing anyone focused on us.

Tomasso stood in one corner of the room, his hands behind his back, his expression stern. Although he looked easy-going

for the most part, I'd known Tomasso my entire life. I'd seen him beat a man on our front lawn simply for making an innocent comment about my mother's beauty.

I glanced over at Edoardo, who stood by the front entrance, taking the same stance as Tomasso. He was staring right at me and I felt this cold chill race down my spine. And although I should've looked away I couldn't, our gazes locked, his face so unforgiving and hard that it was as if I were staring at a lifeless husk.

I was the one to break eye contact and focused on the inside of my teacup, the tan colored liquid inside now only filling a fourth of the ceramic, dark sediment scattered along the bottom.

I still felt that heavy presence but ignored it. I could chalk up all of this, every nuance and feeling, every intrusive, fearful thought I had, all the anxiety, tension, anger and sadness that was consuming me since I found out about the arranged marriage, was slowly starting to crash in on me.

"So when's the date set?" Maria asked and I glanced up to see her pick up her espresso, taking a sip from it as she stared at my mother. "Spring of next year? That's when all the girls seem to be setting their wedding dates."

When my mother didn't answer right away I looked at her then. Seeing how my mother was picking at her linen napkins and shifting slightly on her chair told me everything I needed to know. She was nervous.

"We're looking at something earlier."

The way she was acting after Maria asked when the wedding date was, and her physical response, told me it seemed like everyone in my family knew when I was getting married except me.

And her evasive answer had dread settling in. *How early are we talking?*

But I knew better than to ask in front of anyone. Not that my mother would tell me even if we were alone. She may love me and want to protect and shield me from the horrors of our

world as best she could, but she'd been beaten into submission for so long by my father that her loyalties—her fears—would lean toward him. Always.

And telling me anything he hadn't approved would be going against Marco Bianchi.

Even to the woman who birthed me I came second.

Nikolai

I'd followed Amara after they left the Bianchi house half an hour ago. I parked across the street and watched them go into the boutique twenty minutes ago.

And I was still sitting here in my rental, a cigarette to my lips, and my cock harder than granite.

And all because of Amara Bianchi, my soon-to-be, barely legal wife who was fucking gorgeous.

To be honest, I'd been fucking surprised at how beautiful she was. Because Marco Bianchi wasn't exactly a looker, not with his squat stature, overweight girth, and the arrogance that made him even uglier.

But once I'd seen Amara step out of her house, an older version of her following behind, I'd instantly felt the stab of lust at the sight of my eighteen year old fiancé. She had one lithe, tight little body, long black hair that brushed along her waist with every step she took, and then there was her flawless olive skin tone.

My dick had been hard since then, stabbing against the zipper of my jeans, and the fucker hadn't gone down this entire time. I hadn't seen her since she walked into the

storefront, my fingers itching to reach down and pull my dick out and jerk off just to ease the pressure in my balls.

Her being gorgeous as fuck would sure as hell make this marriage far more bearable.

I brought the cigarette back to my lips and inhaled, pulled it away to exhale, then flicked the ash out the crack in the window. I finished off the cigarette and made sure it was stubbed out before throwing it away. I focused on the store as I reached in my pocket for a pack of gum just as my cell phone went off.

After popping in a couple pieces of spearmint gum, I answered the call without looking at who it was. I knew it was Dmitry. He was the only asshole who had this number, and the only one who had the balls to call me.

“Yeah?” I barked out into the receiver and felt my body tense just as Amara came toward the glass, her focus on the street, her long dark hair draped over one shoulder.

All I could think about was the depraved, nasty things I wanted to do to her, how I’d tangle all that silky hair in my fist and yank her head back to bare her throat. I’d bite at that creamy neck, leaving marks so everyone saw she was mine. We didn’t need love or comfort. We only needed hardcore lust, and I sure as fuck had that in spades.

Visions of her on her knees with me forcing my cock in her mouth, down her throat, hearing her gag, feeling her muscles work against my shaft as I skull fucked her and told her how she was my dirty little whore. Only *mine* though. I’d never let anyone else have her, touch her, or even fucking look at her. I was a territorial fucker, proprietary, and Amara would be mine in every single fucking way that mattered.

If I pulled fingernails off some asshole for cutting me off in traffic, the psychotic shit I’d do to someone who even *thought* lewd things about Amara, I’d skin them alive.

As if she heard my thoughts, her head turned in my direction.

I knew she couldn't actually see me, not with the deeply tinted windows, but she was smart, had intuition and instinct to know she was being watched.

Even from a distance I could see how blue her eyes were, and I let my gaze linger down the slender swatch of her throat, down to the V-cut of her dress, and took in the feminine definition of her collarbones. Her breasts were on the smaller side, but fit her petite form to perfection. I reached down and adjusted my cock, gritting my teeth at how badly I wanted to jerk off right now.

“Are you even listening to me?”

I focused on my brother and rested my head back on the seat. “What?”

“Where are you?” Dmitry growled.

“Out.” I found myself looking back at the storefront, furrowing my brow when I didn't see Amara standing there any longer.

“Yeah, asshole, obviously. Where? You left early and you know we have shit to do, reasons why we are even out here.”

“Yeah, I fucking know.” My voice was just as clipped as Dmitry's. But my focus wasn't on the whys or reasons we were here. I was solely focused on wanting another glimpse of my little Italian again.

I was now anxiously awaiting the weekend to get the wedding date set in place and to be in the same room as her. My cock twitched again as I thought about what would happen after that.

On the wedding night.

I'm going to fucking ruin her in the dirtiest way. I'm going to make her addicted to my touches, the smell of me, the very sight of me. She'll be like Pavlov's fucking dog, her pussy getting wet and primed at just the thought of me walking up to her.

I shouldn't have been thinking about soiling such a beautiful, vulnerable girl. I knew she was innocent in all ways,

the Cosa Nostra notorious for keeping their women under lock and key, their chastity intact to be used and sold off.

Although some factions of the Bratva held this barbaric tradition—my father being one of them—now that Dmitry and I had taken over the Desolation syndicate, we didn't give a shit about that.

I never understood those outdated traditions, how a girl was only valuable if her hymen was still intact. I was under the mind frame of enjoying your youth and living however the fuck you wanted.

If someone wanted to gangbang their night away, more power to them. If someone wanted to pull out teeth and cut out a tongue for finding a rat in the ranks, hell, I'd be right there at the front of the line listening to them scream and beg for mercy.

Live and let live. Unless you fucked with us then we'd end you in the most torturous, twisted ways.

"I'd ask if you're watching Marco, but I know that's not the case since I have a few guys doing that," Dmitry drawled and my focus was snagged once more at the front of the store, as if getting a glimpse of my breakable looking future wife got me off. "I hope like hell you're not being a fucking creep and stalking Bianchi's daughter."

I smirked even though he couldn't see me

"And if I am being a stalker? What do you care what I do? Not like you haven't done some questionable things, big brother." I kept my voice void of emotion.

I felt my muscles tighten as the door to the store opened and one of the guards stepped out. Marco's wife Fernanda followed, her cell phone pressed to her ear, her mouth moving as she looked over her shoulder.

"I don't care. Just reminding you I don't want your crazy ass ruining this."

I growled low and narrowed my eyes. "Fuck off. I know how important this union is. Hell, who's idea was it, Dmitry?"

My brother snorted. “Just making sure you know what’s at stake and the end goal, and that’s not getting your dick wet.”

Oh, that was for sure fucking part of it, and as if my cock agreed, the big length jerked once more behind my zipper.

I watched as Amara was the next to leave the boutique, the wind picking up and blowing the long fall of her dark hair around her face, the fabric of her modest dress molding to her body so I could make out the curves of her waist, the mounds of her breasts... and that feminine indentation between her legs.

At this rate I’d come right in my jeans without even having to touch the fucker.

“I’ll be where I need to be. Don’t worry.” I ended the call before Dmitry could hammer me with any more questions, and shoved the phone back in my pocket. Not that he cared what I did normally, but this situation was different. It meant a huge power surge in our direction, would get any stragglers in line after our father’s death.

When Amara and her guard were out of the store, the door closing behind them, they all started walking down the street. I noticed how Edoardo, her weak as fuck little guard didn’t even stop himself from checking out my fiancé’s ass. I’d have to remember to give him two black eyes for that shit.

When Amara suddenly stopped I trained my focus back on her. Her shoulders pulled back as she looked up and down the street.

A slow, predatory grin spread across my face.

I got off on her very evident apprehension.

Her gaze skated over the rental I was in, staring at it for just a second before she looked away. *She felt me.*

I wasn’t done following her, watching her... thinking about all the filthy, degrading things I’d do to her. She’d cry for me and I’d lick her tears, drag my tongue along her face and taste all that fucking fear and sadness.

Maybe all of that shouldn't have brought me as much pleasure as it did, knowing she was uneasy right now because she could sense my gaze on her, probably *felt* that sliver of fear, that tingle of warning.

Oh... I was going to have fun with her.

Amara

The day of the dinner had the staff bustling around and my father barking out orders. I could feel the tension radiating off of him whenever I was within a five foot radius of him. He was nervous, that was painfully obvious. And it was strange seeing my father so worked up, so on edge over something like this.

Dinner.

I'd seen him upset, rigged and on the verge of seeming like he would murder the next person who crossed him. But tonight was supposed to be just a formal dinner between my family and my future husband. So the fact my father was so tense over this? Told me he feared the Petrov brothers. No doubt didn't trust them either

My father wasn't one to feel fear easily, so seeing him show it, actually let it manifest so it was visible to all who had eyes... that in itself worried me. Because if a man like my father was anxious around Nikolai and his brother, what hope was there for me to make it out alive?

If I stayed in the house one more second, feeling that pressure grow all around me, I was going to snap.

I left my room and walked down the stairs, my feet barely making any sound over the plush floor runner. I passed many servants, but they ignored me otherwise, and when I got to the landing and headed for the front door, I wasn't surprised to see Edoardo move out from the hallway.

I wanted to snap that I didn't need him to watch me. I was home, with so much security around that I was drowning in it. But I kept my mouth shut and ignored him. I didn't like the way he looked at me, staring at me with this slimy gaze.

Once outside I felt his heavy presence behind me, the sound of the door clicking shut seeming overly loud. For just a second I closed my eyes and inhaled, the promise of spring in the air enough to drive away the chill when the wind picked up.

Adjusting my cardigan so it was a little tighter around my chest, I walked forward, wanting to look at the fruit trees at the front of the property by the main gate and see if there were any new blossoms.

I could hear the steady footfalls from Edoardo behind me, and looked over my shoulder, confirming he was right there, yet he did give me some personal space.

There were several gardeners working on the property, making sure the bushes were trimmed, the landscaping just perfect. The soft soles of my flats kicked up some of the decorative pebbles as I made my way toward the line of fruit trees.

Once I got to the line of trees I weaved my way in and out of them. They were pretty sparse, bare for this time of year, but I didn't care. I just wanted out of the house, wanted to get away from all the chaos and hectic atmosphere that was all because my life was irrevocably, dramatically changing.

I stopped and ran my fingers over the bark of an apple tree, the texture slightly rough, chilled from the cold air. I trailed my fingers along the branches, imagining the leaves filling it out this summer. Sound to my left had me looking at the massive gate that lined our entire property. From the ground to about waist high was decorative stone, then that's when the

intricately twisted wrought iron bars started and climbed up about fifteen feet.

I could hear Edoardo start a low conversation with the guard at the gate, and glanced over my shoulder to see their heads angled forward as they spoke in hushed voices. I focused on the trees again, looking at the branches, and reached up, rising on my toes, to touch the small buds that were starting to sprout along the spindle lengths.

It was only a moment before the sun caught something, causing a glint to draw my attention back to the gate. I saw a sleek black luxury car with darkly tinted windows drive-by. It wouldn't have had me take notice otherwise, but because it was moving at a slow-creepily speed-had the hair on the back of my neck standing on end.

Although we didn't live in an exclusively private area, with houses having about an acre between each, and our home in particular was situated across from a thick line of woods. That meant car traffic down this road wasn't frequent.

I found myself glancing at Edoardo again, but he was still immersed in a quiet conversation with the gate guard. My focus went back to the car, which was now completely stopped just ahead of me, the vehicle idling, the low hum of the engine speaking of wealth, it was almost silent.

I felt my heart jerk in my chest the longer I stared at the car. I couldn't see who was inside with how dark the windows were tinted, but I felt whoever was in there watching me. It took me back to earlier, that same feeling I'd had as I stepped out of the boutique, the same sensation I'd experienced at the cafe.

It seemed like time stood still, but I knew only moments had passed, seconds of this almost stare-off with this strange vehicle. And then it was gone, disappearing down the road and around the corner. Only then did I exhale, letting out the tensions that had been slowly growing in those short seconds. I knew I should tell someone, Edoardo at the least, but a little voice whispered no, to keep it to myself.

I had turned and made my way back to the house before I realized I was moving, wanting to go in my room, shut the door and lock myself away from everyone and everything.

Yet I couldn't shake the feeling of almost... anticipation settling deep inside of me.

Amara

I was being tugged at, plucked, shaped into what my mother and father saw as the perfect Italian girl for my future husband.

And all I could do was stand there, staring at myself in the full length mirror as servants bustled around me, smoothing out nonexistent wrinkles in my dress, making sure every curl, every hair was in its place. My makeup had been done twenty minutes ago, a subtle, natural look that accentuated my beauty, or so my mother said.

They were murmuring and under their breath, a string of words on how they wanted everything to be perfect “*per Master Bianchi’s orders*”. And I just stood there like a doll that they could prep and primp, not feeling anything, not seeing anything.

There was a soft knock at my bedroom door and then my mother was coming in, speaking in Italian to the servants, ushering them out and coming to stand behind me, her delicate sized hands resting on my shoulders. She was only about an inch taller than my five-foot-five frame, but even still I couldn’t meet her gaze. There was a lump in my throat, an ache in my chest, and full pressure in my belly.

“Dmitry and Nikolai Petrov have arrived and are downstairs in your father’s cigar room,” she said softly and I nodded once, licking my lips and continuing to stare at my reflection.

My mother had picked out the dress I was currently in, an emerald green full length one that she said complimented my olive complexion and dark hair beautifully. It was long sleeved, with a scalloped collar that dipped right underneath my collarbone bones, an attribute my father always said hinted at femininity.

Although it was form fitting and showed the slight swells of my breasts, the dips of my hips, and the flare of my waist, it was still modest, the skirting fell to my ankles, keeping the majority of my skin covered so I seemed innocent. Virginal. Because that was, after all, the biggest selling point. My inexperience. My lack of anything and everything sexual.

I’d never been alone with the opposite sex who wasn’t hired by my father to guard me, who wasn’t a family member. I’d been sheltered and sequestered away until all I could do was gather my worldly experience from the many books in the library, from the hushed whispering and gossiping of the staff.

“Mr. Petrov will be stunned when he sees your beauty, Amara.” She moved her hands down my shoulders and gripped my upper arms gently. “He’ll treat you well.” I could hear the hopeful tone in her voice. Was she trying to convince me or herself?

I said nothing, just nodding like a good Italian daughter who knew her place even if all she wanted to do was scream and curse and break everything. I had so much bottled-up emotion, so much anger and rage that I wanted to hurt someone, something.

I wanted everyone else to feel my frustration.

“Come *passerotta*,” my mother said and gently placed her hand on the small of my back to lead me out of my room.

Once we made it to the top of the stairs I could hear deep voices filtering up from my father’s cigar room. I reached out

and gripped the banister, curling my fingers tightly around it, digging my nails into the wood. My heart was thundering, my throat tightened and my mouth went dry.

There was a deep rumble of laughter and I felt this tightening in my chest, something that didn't have anything to do with fear but of anticipation. Was that Nikolai's voice? Would he be as intimidating in person as he was in the images I was just looking at?

My mother led the way, clicking her tongue for me to get going like I was a show horse. I guess I was to them, in a way.

I realized we were standing in the opened doorway of my father's cigar room before I realized I'd even moved. My mother's hand rested on the center of my back, and my focus was on my father first, who held a square-cut glass of amber colored liquid in his hand. He leaned against his oak desk, a cigar between the fingers of his other hand. He laughed deeply and I let my gaze slide to the two men who stood a few feet across from him and beside the fireplace mantle.

And as if our silent presence was a heavy weight in the room, all conversation between the men ceased and their attention latched right onto me. And *my* gaze was locked on one man specifically, as if we were two magnets and I was helpless to fight the pull.

His short dark hair was in a disarray around his head, brushing his forehead as if he'd been running his fingers through it. Or maybe how he looked when he woke up in the morning, or how he looked after he...

I pushed those obscene thoughts away as I felt my face heat, no doubt painting my flesh crimson.

His masculine square jaw was covered in a dark shadow of scruff, and no man should have lips that full. I wasn't even ashamed at how deeply I was looking at him, how I took in his straight, angular nose, or how his eyes were so blue they were a stark contrast to his darker tones.

Even if I hadn't known what he looked like before meeting him in person, his visible reaction to my presence tipped me

off that he was my future husband.

His jaw clenched slightly, his nostrils flared suddenly. I saw a tightening of his fingers around the bourbon glass he held, and there was no mistaking the way he checked me out, his gaze roaming up and down my body.

Despite wearing a demure, modest dress, I felt completely naked at that moment as his gaze moved up and down my body.

“Amara,” my father said in a tone that he’d never used with me before. Gentle.

He held his hand out and beckoned me.

I felt a nudge from behind, my mother gently pushing me further into the room. I took a couple steps forward and looked over my shoulder at her. She stood in the doorway, hands clasped in front of her, her head down. The perfect submissive Italian wife for my father. It made me nauseous.

“Amara,” my father’s voice turned a little harder, a little sterner.

I knew my lack of obeying him right away angered him, and if the Petrov’s weren’t here right now I’d have a red mark on my cheek in the shape and size of my father’s palm.

I faced forward once more and made my way over to him quickly, finding it hard to breathe the longer I was in the room with these three men. He gripped my upper arm harder than necessary and I couldn’t stop the wince. I noticed the subtle tightening of Nikolai’s shoulders, the slight narrowing of his eyes as his gaze landed on where my father held onto me.

My father turned me so I was facing the two Petrov’s and let go of me. Dmitry leaned against the edge of the mantle, a smirk on his face as he brought his glass to his mouth and took a long drink. But then my focus was locked on Nikolai once more, as if I had no control.

I was lost in his blue eyes, and in his imposing, intimidating demeanor. God, he was big, tall and muscular, broad shoulders and a hard body that couldn’t be hidden behind his leather jacket, dark shirt, and black jeans.

I felt dizzy, woozy even, as if I were staring directly into the sun but unable to look away. Of course I felt fear. But it was more akin to being afraid of the unknown and not so much that he'd destroy me. Although I wasn't confident the latter wouldn't happen.

“Amara, I'd like to officially introduce you to your fiancé, Nikolai Petrov.” My father's voice was even, slightly saccharine. And Marco Bianchi could have never been called sweet or amicable.

I had no doubts these two Russians knew the type of man Marco was, the things he'd done, the lengths he'd gone to get what he wanted. I knew they were well aware of this because they were all one in the same.

My father was brutal and savage in all aspects of his life. That's how he'd gotten into the position of Capo of the West Coast Cosa Nostra.

I glanced at my father once more, watching as he tipped back the rest of his bourbon. I had a feeling that wasn't his first and certainly wouldn't be his last. From the little I knew about the Cosa Nostra and Bratva, I was aware of the tension that had always been between them, the decades long war and strife, vengeance and revenge always seeming to go back and forth.

All the blood that had been spilled by both sides.

And as I saw the glossy look in my father's eyes, the slightly tint of pink to his cheeks, I wondered if this was what my father looked like when he was happy as he sold-off his daughter in a power-play.

It was just one of the many questions I'd never get an answer to.

I nodded even though no one asked anything of me. I wanted to ask when the wedding date was, and how soon we were talking, but I knew better than to open my mouth and voice that.

The sound of liquid being poured into a glass told me my father was getting a refill he didn't need.

And during all of this Nikolai and I held eye contact. Just a look from him made me feel unbalanced and nervous... bared so that I couldn't hide anything from his knowing gaze.

"Don't you want to know when our wedding is?" Nikolai's voice was a deep rumble. Although he had an American accent, I did pick up on a slight Russian one, almost inaudible aside from when he pronounced certain words.

"She'll go along with whatever date is set," my father answered and I looked at him, seeing him staring down into his bourbon, a scowl on his face.

"I didn't ask you," Nikolai said in a deep, dark tone.

I snapped my head in his direction, feeling my eyes widen. People didn't speak to Marco that way, least of all in his own home.

The room became deathly quiet with the only sound being that of the crackling fire. I let my gaze slip to Dmitry and saw him smirk just as he brought his glass back to his mouth and finished off his liquor.

"I was talking to my future wife. My fiancé, Marco."

I bit the inside of my cheek as Nikolai used my father's first name, something that would be deemed as disrespectful in his eyes. But my father said nothing, and although I could feel the coldness blasting out of him, his anger tangible, his silence meant one thing.

He was afraid of Nikolai, of what this man, his organization could do. The power they wielded.

"Well, go on girl. Answer him." My father's voice was clipped and I could feel his gaze on me although I didn't look at him.

I twisted my fingers together in front of me, knowing I should probably take a submissive stance and lower my head in respect, break eye contact with Nikolai, yet it was as if he were silently willing me to meet him head on, to not back down. And that had a surge of sureness and my own power moving through me.

Show him I was stronger than people gave me credit for. And so I straightened my spine and tipped my chin, holding Nikolai's gaze and seeing his expression clearly showing approval coupled with a little tilt at the corner of his mouth as he smirked.

"Don't you want to know when we're getting married, Amara?" He asked again and I suppressed a shiver at the sound of my name falling from his lips, his Russian accent seeming thicker now as he rolled those syllables around.

I felt slightly ashamed and uncomfortable for feeling a flash of desire at that, especially standing in a room with two strangers and my father. And I quickly realized just being in Nikolai's presence made everything else fade away so I didn't really care about anything else or what anyone thought.

It was liberating.

I licked my lips and found myself glancing at my father as if instinctively being pulled to garner his approval.

"Don't look at him, *krasavitsa*." Although Nikolai's voice was stern and demanding like my father could be, it also held a different note in it.

I couldn't place it, but I knew it made me feel a certain kind of way that had my thighs clenching together and my face heating even more. And I did find myself obeying, staring once more at Nikolai, feeling everything else fade away.

"Answer the question for me." He took a step forward and although he was only a few feet away, I could smell the spicy, dark scent of whatever cologne he wore.

I inhaled deeply, not realizing I'd done the act, took in his scent, until I was barely able to stop the soft sound of... what? Neediness? Desperation? Arousal?

"When?" That one word was breathless from me, barely audible, but he gave me another one of those far too sexy corner mouth smiles.

"When, what, *krasavitsa*?" He took another step forward and I felt how tight my muscles were, as if I were anticipating... something.

I licked my lips and noticed his gaze dropped down to watch the act before he slowly, lewdly dragged his focus back up to my eyes. “When is the wedding?” For a prolonged second after I asked the question Nikolai didn’t speak, just continued to watch me. And then he smirked.

“A month from today,” Nikolai finally said matter-of-factly.

The air left me so violently I stumbled back, my father’s desk stopping my fall. “Next month?” My voice was strained.

“Get yourself under control, girl.” My father hissed. “Stop being dramatic.”

I felt like we were all silent for so long, only the sound of my racing heart filling my ears. But then I blinked myself back into focus and heard my father speaking to Nikolai, his tone sterner now. I knew it was because Nikolai had offended him with the way he spoke to my father, a disrespect Marco probably would never get over.

I tuned out everything else as I focused on the fire. The room, scene, conversation... all of it drowned out as my pulse pounded in my ears once more.

“Because the date of the wedding has been pushed up, we’ll have to forgo an engagement party.” My father’s voice brought me back to focus and I looked at him.

I chanced a look at him to see his jaw clenched as he looked at the other men. Clearly this change of date and plans made my father upset. I knew how he felt.

And I knew it was all because people would talk, gossip. The rumors would spread on why the wedding had been pushed up, why there wasn’t an engagement party to announce the celebrations officially.

They’d think I was tarnished, tainted. Pregnant out of wedlock, perhaps.

More talking, more tuning out.

“That’s all, Amara,” my father snapped and I straightened, not sure what he had said before that, but knowing a

dismissive tone when I heard it.

I turned and started walking toward the door but didn't realize how close Nikolai was until I felt my shoulder brush against his hard chest. I felt a jolt of electricity move through me but was pretty proud of myself for not letting it visibly affect me as much as I wanted it to. I looked at him then, his gaze locked on me, his expression showing so much... *promise*.

I left my father's office and closed the door softly. I took a few steps away from the room and found myself leaning against the wall, my eyes closed, my palms flat behind me on the damask wallpaper, the texture cold and almost grounding me.

I felt dizzy, nauseous. I was getting married one month from today. How had I gone from my father telling me I was part of an arranged marriage to the wedding being thrown together this quickly?

Of course I wasn't a fool. I knew there were other things in place which had accelerated the date, things I'd never be privy to. Things I probably never wanted to even know about.

I opened my eyes and stared at the arched ceiling, the light from the chandelier in the foyer casting a glow down the hallway. If I went right I'd go back toward the front doors, then take the stairs and lock myself in my room.

Instead I found myself taking a left, wanting to go outside, to get fresh air, to look at the sky and clear my head. I knew Edoardo would find me sooner or later, but when I was at home he gave me a little bit of breathing room, wasn't right on my heels because of all the cameras and security that my father had in place.

I'd only made it about ten feet before I heard a door behind me open and close, and then heard the heavy sound of footsteps coming up behind me. I was just about to stop and look over my shoulder, assuming it was my father about to berate me for being too "dramatic" in front of Nikolai and Dmitry, but just as I was about to turn I felt a heavy body press

against me and use their strength to move me until my back hit the wall.

I was now situated in a corner alcove, the light not penetrating the space so it was filled with shadows blocking the view of anyone who happened to pass by.

I gasped and craned my neck to look into a pair of bright blue eyes, Nikolai's expression hard, unreadable. Although he used his body to corral me where he wanted, he wasn't touching me any longer, now about a foot between us, his body heat slamming into me and making it hard to breathe.

"W—what are you doing?" My voice was barely audible, nothing but a breathless sound leaving my parted lips. My heart was thundering in my chest, threatening to burst free of my ribs, and I felt jittery, adrenaline pulsing through my veins, the flight or fight instinct running hard in me.

He tipped his head to the side as he looked down at me, the shadows wrapping around the sharp planes of his square-cut jaw. And still he didn't speak, didn't answer me.

My entire body jolted when I saw him lift his arm, and then my gaze was latched onto his hand, which rose higher and higher until his hand was close to my face. But he didn't touch me, not for long seconds. I stared into his eyes, not able to breathe or think.

It was when I felt his fingers gently stroking along my upper arm that I snapped my head down, not even realizing he'd moved his hand back down.

"Not breaking his hand for touching you was really hard, *kukolka*." His voice was low and deep, sinister in the way he said the words. "Yes, that's what you are, isn't it?" It sounded like he spoke to himself, murmuring the words low and deep and so very heady. "My little doll." He looked at my mouth again. "*Krasavitsa*," he murmured. "Beauty."

I looked up but saw he was watching his hand on my arm, still felt his thumb brushing back and forth. He lifted his focus back to my face then and I held my breath.

“I showed more self-control in front of your father than I ever have in my life.” Still the brushing of his thumb back and forth. “But my brother said I needed to be on my best behavior and all that.” Back and forth. Back and forth. He slowly grinned. “First impressions and all that.” His accent seemed deeper, richer now, his thumb still sweeping over my fabric covered arm. “But he shouldn’t have put his hands on you, father or not,” he ground out, his jaw clenching as I *felt* his anger. “I’m the only one who will ever touch you.” He leaned in close so our mouths were almost touching. “But only to make you come.”

I gasped in shock at his words just as he took a step back, his hand falling from my arm. I found myself lifting my hand and rubbing where he’s just been touching me. Even through the fabric of my dress it felt like my skin was scorched in the best way.

In a way his touch, his words and his body heat made me feel dirty and wrong and... feelings I wanted more of.

“Until dinner, *kukolka*.” And with an arrogant grin he turned and left me leaning against the wall still shrouded in shadows and wondering what in the hell had just happened.

Nikolai

I brought the glass tumbler to my mouth and drained the rest of it as I stared at Amara Bianchi. She was a sight, a fucking gorgeous, innocent female that I couldn't wait to dirty up.

Although I knew she was a virgin—something her disgusting piece of shit father had boasted about, as if that were the cherry on the top of this arranged fucking marriage. It didn't matter if she'd been with anyone before. This was a marriage of convenience only.

Or it had been until I saw her for the first time, until I realized how much fun I was going to have taking my innocent, virginal wife in every obscene, lewd way imaginable. I'd never been possessive of anything in my life, yet the very thought of anyone touching Amara, desiring her, *thinking* that they could ever have her, had a dark rage filling me.

It made the murderous side rise up greedily. The thoughts alone were enough to make me go out and slaughter someone for potentially thinking about her.

The only time my hard-on had gone down was when I stepped into the room with Marco. Fucker could make anybody's blood pressure drop just from having to deal with his arrogant ass. But then as soon as Amara had come in my deflated cock had become semi-hard instantly.

And I hadn't cared to try and hide it, didn't even bother adjusting myself. I didn't know if anybody had seen how hard my cock was getting, how the fucker tented my pants.

I continued to stare at Amara, smirking at the fact she'd refused to look at me since we'd sat down for dinner. I knew I probably shouldn't have approached her after she left her father's office, really shouldn't have called her those little pet names.

And when her bastard of a father point-blank asked me if Amara was "sufficient" for me, as if she were a piece of fucking steak I was buying from the butcher. I hadn't given a shit about formalities.

I was protective of her instantly, and hearing her father speak to her as if she meant nothing pissed me the fuck off. I'd left without saying shit to my brother or Marco, just turned and left right in the middle of Bianchi's ramblings and went after his barely legal daughter.

Clenching my teeth as I got enraged all over again, I forced myself to look away from my pretty fiancé and narrowed my eyes at her father. Amara's mother looked depressing as she sat beside Marco, the woman as dainty as her daughter, but I could tell she'd been trained to be quiet and obedient. Meek.

That wasn't something I wanted in my life. I wanted a wife that had a passion and fire to match my own chaos.

And I saw that burning in Amara's eyes the short time we'd been in each other's presence. She knew her place in our world, but she also had a spark, a fire of life behind her eyes that turned me on. Excited me, like a predator who just spotted a gazelle anticipated the hunt.

Her brother Gio sat on the other side of Marco, and Amara's younger sister Claudia sat beside her mother. When I looked at my pretty fiancé I felt a stab of lust that she was looking at me out of the corner of her eye. I held back a grin, not sure why I was so pleased she showed interest in me.

It would make all of this easier, make our time together when we were alone and I had her naked and spread for me all that more pleasurable.

I thought back to when I'd cornered her in that alcove, both of us hidden by shadows so it was just the two of us. I swore I'd smelled the sweet scent of her wet pussy as I inhaled deeply, as I held her arm and stroked her gently, as I watched her pupils become blown from her desire when I told her *I'd be the only one* to touch her as I brought her pleasure.

That had been a bastard thing to say to her, so sweet and innocent that she'd never heard such filth in her life. And fuck, that wasn't even dirty by my standards. I had a shitload of nasty stuff I wanted to tell her... make her do. Do to her.

Fuck, my cock jerked in approval at all of that.

My skin tightened, a sensation I had when I was being watched, and I let my gaze move away from Amara to look at Gio. The bastard's focus was trained on me and he didn't bother concealing his disapproval. I lifted my glass up and tipped it in salute to him before downing the rest of it.

Staring at Amara's brother, I lifted the now empty glass, signaling the wait staff to refill it. A second later I was topped-off and taking another pull of liquor. If the bastard thought he could be intimidating by glaring at me, he didn't know nearly enough about who and what I was.

If he thought the fucking Cosa Nostra was dangerous, he hadn't seen anything yet. As if he read my thoughts he narrowed his eyes and clenched his jaw. I suppressed my laugh when I heard Dmitry growl low in his throat, a warning for me to behave.

I looked at my brother and lifted an eyebrow, silently telling him I thought I was doing pretty fucking well at being a

gentleman. I'd never given a shit about what anyone thought or said, and certainly didn't abide by rules and "behave". But because an alliance with the West Coast Cosa Nostra was important to our organization, I was going against the grain here and listening to "reason".

I looked back at Amara, a stab of lust slamming into me when I saw her blue eyes trained right on me. She looked away quickly and I could see her shoulders tense. But I continued to stare at her, knowing she felt me watching her.

I liked making her feel on edge, a little uncomfortable. It turned me on to know she thought how I acted, how I blatantly watched her was no doubt inappropriate.

I leaned back in my chair and kept sipping on my liquor, filtering out the conversation around as I blatantly eye-fucked her in front of her entire family. But I didn't give a shit who saw me or what they thought. She'd be mine soon enough by law and tradition, hell, she pretty much already was mine since the engagement was official between her father and me.

She picked up a piece of fruit from her salad, and I watched as she brought it to her mouth, her lips closing delicately over the fork as she pulled the bit of strawberry off.

My cock jerked hard at the sight of that, at the thought that I'd have her on her knees, the plump pink lips suctioned around my cock, her gaze trained on my face as I forced her to take it all.

I'd throat fuck the hell out of her, watch as tears streamed down her throat because I wouldn't be gentle, wouldn't give her time to get accustomed to my huge dick. I could all but hear the sound of her gagging as I envisioned shoving into her mouth so deep she'd swallow around the crown obscenely.

I was going to have fun with her. Fuck, I was going to ruin her for anyone else but me.

Amara

I stared at myself in the mirror, not recognizing the woman looking back at me. The wedding dress was gorgeous, the white lace and Swarovski crystals weaved into the silk, the fabric molding around my curves and hinting at my womanhood.

Although most of my skin was covered so it was still modest and showed my innocence, it also would let everyone know I was a woman now, with a womanly body that only my husband would ever get to enjoy.

Those thoughts had my belly clenching.

It was a gorgeous dress even if I didn't pick it out, even if I didn't have a choice. In any of this. But what difference did it make? It's not like I'd be wearing it for more than a day anyway, the material probably ripped off my body by Nikolai as soon as we made it into the hotel because he was a beast.

I closed my eyes and breathed as that thought conjured up a hundred different images of what would happen on my wedding night. I wasn't stupid enough to think Nikolai would take his time with me, that he'd be gentle, that he'd make love to me. I was sure he wasn't a virgin and experienced. He'd

probably pleased more women than I'd be able to comprehend.

For the past three weeks I hadn't been able to stop thinking about Nikolai, about our inappropriate, impromptu alcove meeting where he touched me, where we'd shared that forbidden act. I could still smell his cologne, had even shamelessly thought about touching myself when I was alone in bed at night to the memory of how dark and spicy it had been, how it wrapped around me.

I'd pictured his big body hovering over mine, and imagined how it would feel to have his body heat pouring off his naked, muscular form and seeping into me, surrounding me.

When I blinked back to the present and stared at my reflection, I noted my pinked cheeks, my dilated pupils. I was aroused. And all from a thought of that Russian beast.

I lifted my hands and smoothed them down my flat belly, along my curved waist, and stopped right under my small breasts. My focus was trained on my left hand, at my bare ring finger that soon would be bound with gold and a diamond. I didn't even know what my ring was going to look like, didn't know anything about my future husband aside from the basics that I had found myself.

My father certainly hadn't given me any kind of background. But because Nikolai was in the Bratva I knew he was probably even worse than the men I'd known my entire life. I'd seen the cold calculation in his bright blue eyes, as if his mind had been working out every possible scenario and outcome of a situation.

A knock on the dressing room door drew me from my thoughts. Before I could tell them to enter the door was being pushed open. I felt surprise fill me when it was Francesca who entered, her gaze raking up and down me. Surprisingly enough there was appreciation in her expression.

"Not bad," she said almost dismissively and I bit my tongue in a retort.

It wasn't that I was weak or couldn't stand up for myself. I just knew I had to pick my battles, and the only thing I'd accomplish going head-to-head with Francesca was severe annoyance.

I just didn't have the energy to deal with her and everything else going on in my life. If she wanted to think she was better than me or everyone else, that was the energy she would have to put out.

She stood there looking me up and down for a second before she took a seat on the padded chair in the corner of the room. For long moments neither of us said anything and I was hoping someone would interrupt the awkward silence that descended in the dressing room.

"Are you nervous?" she asked and I looked back at my reflection.

Francesca sounded pleasant enough, and dare I even say, genuinely curious. But I knew where her thoughts were going right now.

She was my age and her father would be marrying her off in the same way in the very near future.

I watched as she lowered her gaze to the ground and saw how she picked at the hem of her dress almost nervously. She was scared because as she looked at me I knew what she saw.

Her future.

Francesca was a bitch, a mega one, and a small part of me wanted to feel sympathy for her. Because if we were in opposite places right now all I'd be able to think about was when it would be *my time* to stand in front of this mirror as I looked at myself wearing my wedding dress.

Of course I didn't even have to think about her question or the answer. I'd been thinking about all the things regarding this wedding for almost a month now.

I licked my lips and continued to stare at myself in the mirror, smoothing my hands down the dress, letting my fingers trail over the lace detailing. "I'm terrified," I whispered so softly I wasn't sure she heard me.

“I can’t think of anything worse than marrying someone you don’t love.”

I furrowed my brow at her tone. She sounded like she was speaking from experience. But surely that wasn’t the case since she wasn’t married off yet. She’d be locked away, keeping that precious virginity intact until her father could use her as a pawn.

Francesca’s expression morphed into irritation the longer I watched her. *There is the girl I knew so well.* So cold and hateful. She would probably be a better match for Nikolai.

And when she smirked I forced myself to break eye contact with her, knowing she was about to go to her default and be cruel.

“Are you ready for your wedding night?”

I didn’t bother answering, just kept smoothing my hands down my dress.

“I don’t think anyone is ready for their wedding night, especially not when you’re getting married to a killer.”

I swallowed roughly and her blunt, coarse words. Of course I knew this to be fact, but I felt irritation fill me. I looked at her then and she must have seen something in my expression because her body visibly tensed.

“No, I doubt it,” I said and let those words hang in the air between us. “I’m sure your mother felt the same way when she was forced to marry your father.” I felt this fire burn inside of me, knew I should have shut my mouth, but the words just kept spilling out. “And I’m sure you’ll feel the same thing when your father pawns you off, just like mine is doing to me.” Neither one of us spoke for so long I didn’t think she’d ever respond. But when her nostrils flared slightly I knew I’d hit a nerve.

Her lips pursed so tightly there was a thin line of white around her lips. “It hurts the first few times.”

I knew she was looking for a reaction, saying these things for shock value, pissed that I’d called her out that my fate was hers. Although I was a virgin it wasn’t as if I didn’t know the

fundamental basics of sex or what happened on a wedding night. My mother had hinted to it over the past couple weeks, but she'd been too timid to go into the hard details of it all.

So I'd made it a mission to eavesdrop when my brother would talk with some of the guards and what he did with the girls he'd been with. I overheard staff talking about what they did with their partners in hushed detail that my face had heated unbearably.

If she was looking for a reaction she wouldn't get one. Not about this.

"Yeah, the first couple times hurt like hell, and of course blood. A lot of blood in my case." I felt my eyes widen at her admission, but she kept talking. "Let's hope your future Russian beast of a husband takes pity on you and doesn't just push you on the bed, spread you open, and rut between your thighs like the animal I'm sure he is."

She shrugged and looked down at her nails, examining them as if she found a chip in her new manicure.

"But that's how these men are, aren't they when they don't care about you." Her voice was soft, almost as if she spoke to herself. "Some of us are just a vessel for them to shove deep inside and fill with their babies."

When she looked at me there was a nasty smile on her face. "Have you heard some of the things your future husband has done?"

Maybe I hadn't kept my mask in place well enough because when her smile widened I clenched my jaw.

"He's ruthless, and finds sport in killing his enemies. And you know what they say about the Russians, how barbaric they are, how they use and abuse their women." She shrugged again and smoothed her hands down her dress. "I'm sure it won't be any different with Nikolai Petrov. He probably likes it when the women he fucks bleeds and cries."

I turned and faced her then. "How do you know all this?" Of course I wasn't stupid and had heard her words, how it sounded like she was telling me all of this from experience.

But surely that wasn't her truth? Surely she hadn't experienced it firsthand?

She didn't answer for long moments and it was her expression that told me the truth. She knew these things because she'd done them. She wasn't just saying it to shock me, wasn't fabricating any of it to be a bitch.

"When I get married it'll be to someone I love and who loves me back." Her tone of voice told me she honestly believed that.

I didn't bother correcting her, reminding her that in our world there was no "marriage for love". *Let her believe what she wants.*

"Francesca," I said softly. "You know the rules of our world. You know we have to follow them." I forced the words past my lips. They tasted sour, toxic. I felt like a robot just regurgitating what had been beaten into me since I was old enough to understand words.

She didn't say anything but her expression hardened, her red painted lips pinching. "I know what the rules are. I know what's expected of me." The words were hard, growing louder with every syllable.

I'd never seen or heard Francesca speak so passionately about something.

"But I also know what I want. And I'm not going to settle. I have plans, plans that don't involve being shoved onto someone I don't want." With that she pulled her shoulders back, tipped her chin up and snubbed nose at me. She raked her gaze up and down me, her lip curling as if I were weak and beneath her for "following the rules".

I said nothing else as I watched her leave the dressing room, shutting the door behind her harder than necessary.

For a second I just stood there, the only thing running through my mind was my own thoughts and everything she said being repeated like a broken record. I faced the mirror once more and thought about what she said, about finding love, knowing what you wanted and not settling.

But I also knew reality. I faced it. And I knew fairytales and a happily ever after with my prince charming had never been in the books for me.

All I could do was accept my fate and hope that the outcome at least had me somewhat happy.

Nikolai

I knew what the fuck they had planned as they led me through one of the clubs we'd just opened in Desolation.

I should have told all of them to fuck off. A bachelor party was the last fucking thing I wanted. If I wanted to get plastered I could do that in the comfort of my own place without all the half-naked strippers they no doubt hired for tonight.

But I knew if I'd tried to back out of it would come off as disrespectful. I personally didn't give two fucks who I disrespected, but Dmitry and I were trying to strengthen the Desolation Bratva, not piss more soldiers off.

The very thought of all the naked female flesh awaiting me tonight had my cock shriveling the hell up. And that in itself pissed me off too.

Konstantin and Arseny glanced back at me as we made our way past the main part of the nightclub and into the back hallways that lead to the offices and staff rooms. I refrained from rolling my eyes at how eager and excited they looked. Hell, this is probably going to be the most action they'd gotten in quite a while.

Because if one thing the Desolation Russians did well, it was party. Unlimited amounts of booze, drugs, tits and ass were always in abundance.

Konstantin stopped at a closed door and looked at Arseny, then glanced over his shoulder at me. He faced forward wearing a stupid fucking grin and gave three hard wraps on the door. A second later it was being pulled open.

I wasn't surprised to see the room filled with Bratva soldiers, high-ranking underworld officials, and females in every shade and shape.

The noise level was growing louder with every passing second, a deafening roar once I stepped inside. Shouts of congratulations filled the room, coupled with slaps on my back.

"Ah, my friend Nikolai," Kirill said, his voice slurred from too much vodka, his Russian barely legitimate for how much he'd had to drink.

I glowered at him at the "friend" reference.

"You'll tell us how rough and hard you fuck that Italian bitch, yeah?" he slurred out and tipped his head back to laugh. *"Come back and tell us how much she bleeds and cries."*

I snapped. I turned on him and gripped his throat, tightening my hand so hard his face went from red to purple. I pulled him close and inhaled deeply, my nostrils flaring as I took in his wide eyes, his startled expression, and the stench of fear pouring off him.

Good, the bastard had reason to be terrified right now.

"Say it again," I gritted out loud enough only he heard me. Although I realized the commotion in the room had lessened, felt all the gazes locked on me, I didn't care who heard or saw what was about to go down.

"Go on Kirill. Fucking say those words about my soon-to-be wife once more." His eyes widened and he shook his head, his mouth opening and closing as he tried to get out the words.

I squeezed his throat tighter, letting him know that I was the one to control the situation. I was the stronger one. I leaned in another inch until our noses were nearly touching and snarled out in Russian, *“if you ever fucking say anything about her again, I’ll cut out your tongue, grill it up, and feed it to Dmitry’s dog. Do you understand?”* He struggled even more to breathe. “Tell me you understand. Nod your fucking head,” I finished off in English.

He nodded instantly, his face getting a deeper shade of purple, his struggles becoming less. I held his stare for another second before finally loosening my hold enough that he could suck in a deep breath.

“Yes. Yes I understand. My apologies. I meant no disrespect.”

I let him go fully, feeling satisfaction when he sank to the ground and started rubbing his neck, gasping and struggling to breathe. Bodies moved away from him, but no one said shit.

A red indentation of my hand already marred his throat, a thick collar that would be a bruise and a reminder tomorrow. I smoothed my hands down my jacket and looked around the room, noticing all the assholes glance away quickly.

“Well, “I said in a bored tone. “If this is a fucking party, then let’s fucking party. “

A few men cleared their throats and shifted on their feet as their clear hesitation poured out of them. I got off on the reputation of being “trigger happy” or having a short fuse, and of breaking fucking bones if anyone offended me. It made others remember to tread careful. To fear me.

But after a few seconds of me not losing my shit again the music was turned up and the voices started to rise again. The strippers, or hell, prostitutes more than likely, started grinding on the men and taking their clothes off. I could hear hands slapping ass cheeks, and saw hands reaching for any and all available female fresh flesh.

I knew before the night was over there would be condoms littering the ground, clothes scattered across couches, and the

stench of booze, sweat, and dirty sex filling the air to a nauseating level.

One of the girls sauntered up to me but I gave her a firm shake of my head and she made a U-turn, getting snagged around the waist by one of the other men right away. I scowled as I pushed a few guys out of my way and walked over to where Dmitry sat on a leather chair. He had a glass of whiskey in one hand, and a thick cigar in the other.

When I was in front of him I glowered down at the way he smirked. The bastard thought this shit was funny?

“How are you liking the soiree?”

Fucker.

He knew I wasn't into this kind of shit, and had no doubt, especially by the cocky look on his face, that he found it hilarious that I was annoyed by this bachelor party.

When I didn't respond, Dmitry exhaled a cloud of cigar smoke and chuckled. I lowered myself down and sat on the other chair beside him.

Long seconds passed before he said, “never took you for the protective type.” His voice was low, his focus on the crowd.

“She's an extension of me,” I said flatly.

“Hmm,” he responded and I made a gruff noise in my throat of irritation.

“Insulting her is no different than a motherfucker doing it right to my face, and you know how I deal with a ballsy bastard who does that.”

Dmitry glanced at me, his expression void of emotion aside from a lone eyebrow cocking up. “Okay,” he said but I could hear the amusement in his voice.

I gritted my teeth and narrowed my eyes.

“You think I didn't notice the way you were staring at her when we were at Bianchi's house? Or how you wanted to break her father's hand when he grabbed her?” Dmitry lifted

his brow again and brought his cigar to his mouth, taking a few puffs, a thick cloud of smoke trailing out of the corners of his mouth.

I clenched my jaw and looked away, watching as Kirill stood against the bar, a partially naked woman sitting on his lap. He palmed one of her tits, his other hand curled around a bottle of vodka. His neck sported one hell of a handprint, and I felt sadistic pleasure fill me.

“Don’t act like you wouldn’t have been looking at her the same way,” I murmured. Lucky for Dmitry, I hadn’t seen him eye-fucking Amara. If I had, I probably would have beat his ass until he was black and blue. *“She’s beautiful.”*

I hadn’t been able to get her off my mind since we left the West Coast, and the very thought of any other female had my dick acting like a turtle afraid and tucking into itself. A pathetic example, but one that was pretty fucking accurate.

Not that I had the time, energy, or hell, even the fucking desire to test out the theory that my cock now thoroughly belonged to Amara, apparently. I just had no appetite for anyone but my pretty young fiancé.

But we’d been neck deep in Bratva shit, cleaning up our father’s hectic and chaotic dealings, the kind of shit that would have had the Desolation branch imploding if it stayed on that path. Although we’d known how crazed our father had been, we hadn’t realized the extent of his lunacy until we’d started going through everything.

“You know I would’ve been all in and followed through with the plan whether Bianchi’s daughter was a hag or gorgeous.”

Dmitry made a deep sound in his throat and I looked over to watch him take a puff off his cigar, one of his fingers from his other hand tapping on the side of his glass as he looked around the room.

“You know I never doubted you or your commitment.” He looked at me then. *“I knew you would’ve followed through no matter what. It’s just a plus she’s a hot piece of ass, huh?”*

I felt the hand that was curled around the armrest tighten against the leather, my nails digging into the material as annoyance filled me. “Watch it,” I growled. Dmitry glanced at me and smirked.

Fuck, what was going on with me?

Even hearing my brother talking about Amara that way, pointing out how gorgeous she was, had jealous rage filling me. The bastard liked getting under my skin.

I let my gaze go over to Kirill once more. He was nursing that vodka, every once in while lifting his hand to rub his neck. But he was smart not to look in my direction. I was still fuming from what he said, liable to go off the rails again at the slightest provocation.

“I have to get out of here.” I stood and looked over at Dmitry, seeing him already watching me.

“It’s your party and you’re just gonna up and leave?” Although my brother questioned me, his tone told me he really didn’t give a shit one way or the other if I was here.

I made a noncommittal sound, and he reached his hand out. I clapped my palm against his, told him I’d talk to him later, and then headed out. I felt my blood boiling, aggression still pumping through my veins after not only hearing Dmitry talk about how hot my fiancé was, but also the shit with Kirill, all the Bratva stress, and the fucking bullshit still eating at me with Amara’s father.

I knew Amara was afraid of Marco. I could see the way she looked at him, the timid demeanor that her mother and sister also held. It was one that had been trained into them out of fear.

And I didn’t want my future wife to be afraid. I needed someone who was as strong as I was, who would stand beside me and watch as I burned the city to the ground and tallied up the bodies that littered our feet.

And I felt—*sensed*—she had that inside of her. I just needed to bring it forth, let her see that even in the darkness you didn’t have to be afraid, not if you ruled it.

I ignored everyone as I headed out of the backroom, took a left after I shut the door behind me, and made my way toward the backdoor that would lead to the alleyway behind the club.

I pushed open the bar on the door, stepped outside, an echoing *bang* echoing off the brick building behind me. The back alley of the club held the dumpsters, along with two damn near burnt out street lights, one in each corner, and a chain-link fence lining the entire length of the building ahead of me.

The trash had gotten picked up earlier this week, but there was still the decaying sweetness of garbage in the air, coupled with motor oil, car exhaust, and a tangy scent that was reminiscent of blood.

I leaned against the building and fished out a cigarette from inside my jacket pocket. I stared down at the white stick, scowling. I really needed to quit these dirty fuckers. But with my stress of an all-time high, my cock only coming to attention for one particular female that I couldn't even touch yet, the only kind of relief I could find was in this little bastard.

I put the cigarette between my lips, fished out my zippo, and flicked the top to light the end. After a long inhale, the tip glowing bright orange, I pocketed the lighter and rested my head against the building, staring up at the city light polluted sky.

I closed my eyes and took another deep drag, and lifted my free hand to scrub it over my jaw, the scruff along my cheek scraping my palm. When I exhaled and opened my eyes, everything around me came rushing back.

I was about to take one last hit before I headed back inside when I heard the sound of something loud hitting one of the dumpsters. My entire body tensed, my muscles clenching. I slowly straightened from the brick wall, letting the cigarette fall from my fingers and snubbing it out with the heel of my boot.

I trained my vision toward where the sound came from, and for several seconds I controlled my breathing and tried to

keep myself calm and even. And then I just listened.

I could've brushed it off as the same shit that happened day in and day out in this fucked up city. Murders, assaults, illegal dealings, and all sorts of other degrading, nasty shit. But something kept me rooted to the spot, and when I heard a soft female whimper come from the other side of the dumpster diagonal to where I stood, I felt my hands tighten into fists at my sides.

I already had a plethora of anger rushing through me, built-up energy, increased pent-up aggression from all the shit that I'd been dealing with the last month. And that aggression had only risen in me the longer I let it fester and boil. I needed an outlet. And when I heard the distinct sound of someone getting hit, I knew I'd found it.

I started making my way toward where the sound came from, and made out more clearly the soft pleas from a woman and gruff demands from a male.

His voice slurred, the sound of his hand hitting no doubt her face growing louder and louder, making my anger rise to the forefront.

All I could picture was Marco treating Amara that way, putting his hands on her brutally, making her obey his rules, his law.

The blood was rushing through my veins, my nails digging into my palms hard enough I knew I broke the skin. My chest was pumping up and down, the need to draw blood, to make someone hurt filling me like a violent beast ready to tear out of me, skin me alive just to escape.

For the little sanity I had left, I needed to get this rage out of me. Because if I didn't, it would continue to grow and mutate inside of me. I'd be too dangerous to be around Amara, too volatile. I already wanted her desperately, craved her, hungered and was so fucking thirsty for her.

I was a ticking time bomb and I needed to push the detonation.

She didn't need to see that side of me, the one that got excited and anticipated giving pain and delivering death, violence and blood. But as much as I wanted to give her gentle and sweet like she deserved, I knew that was also false hope. Who did I think I was to be able to offer that to anyone?

I rounded the edge of the dumpster and saw two forms, the shadows concealing most of their features, but I could make out his body, much larger than hers.

I had a gun strapped to me, but that's not how tonight would go. That's not how this fight would end. I'd use my hands, and make it really painful.

I curled my hand in his hair before he knew I was standing behind him, and then with all the force I had, slammed his face into the side of the dumpster.

His skull cracked against the metal and made an echoing sound. The woman cried out and stumbled back. All I could picture was Amara, someone hurting her, someone thinking they could take from her what she wasn't offering.

I started breathing harder, couldn't see straight, couldn't hear anything but the rush of blood in my veins.

He let out a deafening roar when I let go of his hair. I took a step back and watched the woman run off, her clothes haphazard, her hair wild around her head.

I focused back on the piece of shit, his upper body curled forward, his hands covering his face. I was pretty sure I'd broken his nose, could smell the blood that was no doubt pouring from his nostrils

"What the fuck," he slurred and went to stand, bracing a blood covered hand on the metal as he looked at me. I kept to the shadows, and as he blinked at me, not recognizing who I was, I knew he was about to come at me.

Good.

The fucker smelled like a brewery, probably had all sorts of toxic shit shot up in his veins too. His movements would be slow and sloppy.

I let the smile spread across my mouth, slow, thorough. I could see when his vision adjusted to the darkness, when he could see me a little more clearly. He swallowed roughly and took a small step back, but the dumpster was in his way, stopping him from retreating.

There was no escape for him, not with what I planned to do. He'd be a broken, ruined mess at my feet, bloody and destroyed just like he was going to do to that woman. I'd never been a man who cared about other people's business. If it didn't concern me and I kept moving.

But this was different and I couldn't explain it, couldn't stop myself as I took a step forward, grinning bigger as he took a step back. He held up his hands, blood dripping down his palms and along the underside of his forearms.

"Please, please I didn't know it was you. I wasn't going to do anything."

I didn't say anything. Words didn't need to be spoken. That time had passed. In fact, that time had never come. He wanted pain and distraction right now. And so I'd give it to him tenfold

I slammed my fist into the side of his head, his skull slamming against the dumpster once more. He groaned but didn't fight back. I wanted him to. I needed him to. And it pissed me off that he was being submissive because he knew who I was.

I growled low and held his thick, sweaty neck in my grip, squeezing tightly, doing to him what I wanted to do to Kirill back at the club. I used force to walk him backwards so his body slammed against the chain-link, felt his hands claw at the back of mine, his nails digging at flesh, and all I did was stare into his eyes.

I crushed his trachea in my grasp, listening to the garbled sounds of him trying to breathe. I watched as the blood vessels burst in the whites of his eyes, the muted glow from the streetlight giving me a front row seat to his death.

And how I fucking reveled in it, like flames with accelerant, an addict with his next hit, a lungful of oxygen after not being able to breathe.

I'd never claimed to be a good guy. I was the villain in every story, the boogeyman under beds. I was the grim reaper greedily coming to take that next life.

And I'd never apologize for it. Because I'd never stop. This was me. A monster who wore that title like a fucking crown.

Amara

The wedding

I didn't know how long we stood there, seconds, minutes... God it felt like an eternity, but then the double doors were being pulled open, a man on each side holding them, their tuxedos pressed and sharp. Their expressions were stoic as they glanced our way.

My father had his hand curled around mine, which rested on his forearm. But I wasn't foolish enough to think it was because he was trying to reassure me. No, he was doing it so I didn't run. Not that I would get very far in these stilettos or with all the security.

I closed my eyes and breathed slowly.

The day had finally come. I was about to wed Nikolai, heir to the Desolation Russian mafia. A man who was by all accounts... bad.

And he was to be my husband, for better or worse.

My father's body was tense beside me, almost forbidding. I chanced a glance at him out of the corner of my eye, my veil making his visage cloudy, hazy in appearance.

He looked over at me for just a second. I could see the softening on his face, or maybe it was wishful thinking, a little girl looking up at her father, hoping and praying that he would tell her everything would be okay.

But that wasn't who Marco Bianchi was. He was cold and hard like a block of ice, and when I saw his jaw tense, a muscle under the freshly shaved olive toned skin flex, I felt... nothing. No disappointment, no sorrow, only let the absolute hopelessness that nothing would get better fill me until it's all that consumed me. I accepted it, dare I even say embraced that this was who and what I was and nothing could change that.

I faced forward again, stared at the large oak double doors. Bodies lined the pews, each one standing up as the traditional wedding song started playing.

My heart was racing overtime when I saw Nikolai's dark and imposing form at the end of the aisle. He waited for me, waited to take ownership of me.

For better or worse. For better or worse. For better or worse.

It was my father tugging me forward that had me blinking back into the present, breathing out slowly, thankful for the veil, in fact, because it hid how nervous I no doubt looked.

If I hadn't been holding onto my bouquet with one hand, and gripping my father's forearm with the other, I knew my fingers would be shaking.

The walk down the aisle seemed to take an eternity. I felt everyone's gazes on me, their stares like a heavy presence, a weight that kept pushing me further down, down, down. And then it was as if someone pressed fast forward.

Everything was a blur as I was handed off by my father to my soon-to-be new husband, as Nikolai led me up the two steps to the altar, as words spoken by the priest. I was aware of the heavyweight of my hand in Nikolai's, and the only thing I could hear was the heavy rush of my breathing moving through my ears.

In and out. In and out.

And then I felt Nikolai give my hand a squeeze before he positioned me so I was fully facing him now. He stared down at me for long seconds before he lifted my veil. Everything felt surreal, as if I were wading underwater, everything so thick around me I couldn't find purchase, couldn't get to the surface. But the longer I stared at Nikolai, the more everything seemed to fall into place. To settle.

Reality crashed into me, noises bombarded me. I smelled the spicy scent of his cologne, and felt his body heat surrounding me.

"I do," he said low and deep, his Russian accent seeming so thick in those two words.

And when it was my turn I was on autopilot, murmuring those two words as I stared into his blue eyes.

More words were said by the priest, phrases in Latin, followed by traditional religious proceedings that had us going through the motions.

And then it was done. Finalized, sealed by six little words spoken in English.

"You may now kiss your bride."

The corner of Nikolai's mouth slowly curled up into a smirk, his hands rested on either side of my face, his thumbs brushing along my cheekbones. "For better or worse, *printsessa*." A gentle sweep of his thumb against my bottom lip. "You're mine now, *kukolka*."

And then he was leaning down, his mouth pressing to mine, his lips surprisingly soft against mine. A little shocked sound left me when I felt his tongue stroking over the seam of my mouth. I gasped then, my first kiss sending electricity traveling to the tips of my fingers and toes.

My eyes fluttered closed when he stroked his tongue along my lips once more, when I heard the low and deep groan rumble out of his throat.

My mouth parted on its own. And when he delved inside, taking that as my surrender, touching his tongue to mine, all I

tasted was an addictive male. All I smelled was Nikolai. All I felt was my husband.

And now I was irrevocably his.

Amara

“**Y**ou’re going to get drunk, *passerotta*.” My mother’s voice was hushed, but her tone was tight, as if she were angry that I was drinking my third glass of champagne.

At my own wedding.

And because I was already feeling a buzz, I didn’t care to placate her and stop.

The entire day was a blur and the only thing that was helping my nerves was the alcohol. All I could keep thinking about was what was going to happen tonight when the reception was over and Nikolai took me upstairs to our honeymoon suite.

Just the thought had me reaching for the stem of my champagne glass and bringing the flute to my mouth, finishing it off before snagging another one by a passing waiter.

I could feel my mother’s scowl, heard her click her tongue disapprovingly at me, but I ignored her. I didn’t look at her. My face felt hot, the alcohol rushing through me but I felt good. I felt like all the stress of the last month was fading. Thankfully.

I let my gaze travel over the expansive ballroom, the massive crystal chandelier that hung in the center of the room casting golden shards of crystalline light across everything and making it seem like it was a fairytale instead of my nightmare.

There were circular tables in perfect intervals around the large square swatch of the polished, wooden dance floor. The bar lined one entire wall, white up lights illuminating the mirrored wall behind it. And the waitstaff made sure no one ever had an empty glass.

My gaze went to Tommaso and Edoardo, watching as they stood by one of the entrances to the balcony, their posture stiff, their expressions firm. And although they wore tuxedos, blended in with the guests, I knew they probably had a handful of weapons on them.

I kept scanning the bar and as if I were being pulled one way, my gaze landed on my husband. My. Husband.

Nikolai stood with his brother Dmitry, a handful of men that had been their “guests” standing close to them as well. But I knew those men weren’t here in a formal way. They were soldiers, just like half the men that had been at the wedding.

As if he heard my thoughts, or felt my gaze, Nikolai looked at me and our gazes locked. My body’s reaction to him was instantaneous. Pulse racing, belly feeling like butterflies moved within it, hands starting to shake.

And when his grin was slow to move across his face, when he winked at me and silently promised all the dark and devilish things he’d do to me tonight, my body reacted then too.

I felt my inner muscles clench, tingle. I grew warm between my thighs... wet.

Oh God.

I reached for my nearly filled champagne flute and took a hard pull from it.

Part of me wanted to keep looking at him, especially as I watched his smile grow, as if he knew how off-balance he

made me, how nervous I was. How he affects me. But I forced myself to look away and scan the room again, trying in vain to focus on something else.

I couldn't help but think about what Francesca had told me at the dress fitting. I couldn't help but feel my worry that what she said was the truth, that Nikolai was a beast and would do all kinds of debasing, degrading things to me all for his pleasure.

My gaze went back to Nikolai. He still watched me, this hungry look in his eyes.

"It's time." A deep voice said behind me and I looked over my shoulder to see my father standing there, his posture stiff as he all but glared down at me, his hand held out.

I breathed out slowly and stood, gathering the skirting of my dress and slipping my palms in his.

Tradition was important in my family, in any good Italian one where custom and authenticity was held to the highest standard.

And so my father led me to the dance floor, just as an old Sicilian wedding song started playing. My father pulled me in close to dance, a pasted-on smile across his face solely for appearances.

He was silent for several long seconds before he broke the ice with his hard pitch-ax of a demeanor. "You'll be good for your new husband, won't you." It wasn't phrased like a question. It was a demand.

I nodded.

"Good," my father said with a final tone. "You're representing our family. You are the glue to bridge the gap between the Bratva and the Cosa Nostra." His stare was so cold I felt it to my bones. "Your brother barely meets my expectations. And your sister's spirit is too high. She'll be in trouble the older she gets. I'll be lucky if I can pawn her off to one of my soldiers."

My worry for Claudia rose but I didn't let it show, didn't want to give my father anything to use against her, to lock her

up even more, suffocate her as he made our home her prison. “She’s sweet and soft and timid,” I found myself saying the words before I could stop them.

He scoffed. “Your sister is trouble. She’ll have to learn her lesson. She’ll need to know her place. And she has three years to come to heel before that happens.”

I felt panic rise in me but tried to beat it back. My focus went to where Claudia sat with Gio and our mother. She was picking at a piece of bread, a scowl on her face as our mother said something to her that clearly made her unhappy.

My father pushed me back slightly so I was forced to tip my head to look into his face. And he never stopped dancing, putting on that facade.

“You will obey him.” His voice was hard and firm. “Your husband is the law. You will make this family proud, and you’ll do all that is expected of you. No questions. No complaints. Complete obedience.” His expression was familiar, frigid and cold and more lifeless than I’d ever seen.

He didn’t wait for a response because he didn’t want one. He wasn’t asking a question, wasn’t asking my permission. He was telling me what I would do and that was the end of it.

He rested his palm on my waist, his other hand holding mine as we moved fluidly around the polished dance floor. My heart was thundering and my throat was tight and dry, but still my gaze sought out the man in question.

Nikolai and his brother had since moved away from the bar and stood by the balcony doors. The corner that they stood in held the hazy glow from the chandelier lights, but his focus was trained on me, as if he hadn’t taken it off this entire time.

I shivered.

“You do what he says, Amara.”

My father’s tone brought my attention back to him once more. I knew what he meant.

I licked my lips but didn’t respond. I forced myself not to look at Nikolai but that only lasted a few minutes. No matter

what position I was in as we danced, Nikolai always had his focus on me.

I could do this, be the devoted wife that my father wanted. But it wasn't because Marco Bianchi ordered me. It would be because of pure survival. I wanted to be happy. I wanted to be loved. I didn't think I'd ever find that with Nikolai, but I wanted to try. Because what other options were there?

The song ended and we were handed off to waiting guests. My father did a slow dance with my mother, and I was swept away by my father's brother, Ignacio. My uncle was nothing like my father. He was jovial, humorous. He was kinder, if you could be kind in the mafia. But that was probably why my father always looked down at Ignacio. He saw him as lesser than because he wasn't an unmoving, coldhearted bastard.

This changing of dance partners happened for the next twenty minutes, with the guests lining up to have their turns.

I was passed off from one family member to the next, one associate to the other. The conversations were polite if not tense, as if no one knew exactly what to say to me.

I danced with Franco, one of my father's associates, and listened to him talk about how his daughter was getting married next spring. When I glanced at my father, I saw him dancing with Francesca.

He looked as pleased with having to dance with everyone as I was. Francesca's mouth kept moving, her smile wide as she kept talking and talking and talking.

I could see my father's jaw clench tightly, no doubt his irritation rising. He wasn't one for conversation. When the song ended he seemed all too grateful to get rid of Francesca as he turned and walked away, leaving her standing there staring at him with a stunned expression on her face.

I envied her then, because that was the look of a daughter who got all the attention she wanted and couldn't understand someone not wanting to hang onto her every word.

After I'd done the obligatory dance with the last guest, I excused myself, wanting to go to the restroom to take a

breather, to get away from everyone. I was drowning. But I was waylaid by two of my cousins, both of them chatting happily as if me getting married was the most exciting thing to ever happen.

“Oh my God, look at him,” Auna said and her almost dreamy sigh grated on my nerves. She turned her head and made it painfully obvious she was staring at Nikolai. “He’s just so big, with all that dark hair and those blue eyes.”

She sighed and I felt this twisting sensation in my belly. I didn’t want to think too deeply on it. I didn’t want to allow myself to think that it was jealousy I felt.

“He looks so... *dangerous*,” Selena whispered that last word almost secretly. “Way more than any of the guys we see around here.” She leaned closer to me, her eyes wide. “When I found out you were marrying him I did a little research.”

She lifted her hands and wiggled her fingers in front of me as if she were a spy and found out the most interesting evidence. I didn’t bother telling her I’d done my own research, as well.

I also wasn’t about to admit that yes, Nikolai was so big, so attractive that my body felt like it was short circuiting whenever I thought about him, that I felt arousal I’d never experienced before.

That I feared and anticipated in equal parts what would happen tonight.

I noticed my father dancing with my mother, both of their postures stiff and clearly uncomfortable. I couldn’t find Nikolai, but Dmitry and the other Russians stood around a table drinking and laughing, and I could see the way their gazes scanned the room, as if they were waiting for something to happen, hoping they could cause mayhem if it did.

Tommaso was across from where my mother and father danced. I couldn’t find Edoardo, but I was thankful for that. I was tired of him being my second shadow.

I blinked back to the present and looked at Auna and Selena, who were still thoroughly involved in their

conversation about my husband.

“If you’ll excuse me,” I murmured and started heading toward the main ballroom doors without waiting for their reply.

I suddenly had crushing pressure on my chest and picked up my pace.

I smiled and nodded as people tried to stop me, congratulated me and wished me well. I expected Nikolai or my father to try and stop me, to usher me back to the oppressing suffocation of being surrounded by all these people.

But no one stopped me. No one tried. And the closer I got to the double doors that led to the hotel hallway, the more that pressure kept growing. I felt hot, beads of perspiration dotting my temples.

When I finally made it through the open double doors and away from the sound and lights, the noise, I took a deep breath in and felt that dizziness that was circulating around me fade

I was walking down the hall and rounding the corner before I realized I made the trek, but I didn’t stop. My feet went over the plush carpet silently, my fingers tight around the lace of my dress. And when I rounded another corner that’s when I stopped and leaned back against the wall. I rested my head back and closed my eyes.

Just breathing.

The sounds of the wedding had faded so I barely heard anything, just the steady beat of my heart, the rush of blood through my veins as it filled my ears. And it stayed like that for several long minutes until a feminine sigh, a little moan broke my contentment.

I blinked my eyes open and lifted my head to look down the hallway where the noise had come from. Then I heard it again, that female sound that was clearly from pleasure. It was followed by a gruff male grunt. Then matching harsh breathing.

I was moving toward it before I knew what was happening. The door I stopped in front of was partially open, just a sliver of a crack allowing me to see into the darkened room. The window off to the side allowed blue-hued moonlight to filter in and show me two bodies pressed against a large couch.

“Are you going to give it all to me?”

I felt my heart race. I knew that voice.

“Come on. Just pull that dress up and let me.”

Edoardo.

This felt wrong, and not just because I was watching something very private.

“Oh Edoardo. I love you.”

I slapped a hand over my mouth to still the sound of my shocked gasp when I heard Francesca.

“I want you,” she whispered. There was the sound of clothes ruffling, a zipper being pulled down, and then Edoardo grunted, Faces gasped, and I took a step back.

“That’s it. Yeah, that’s it.”

And then the very distinct sound of them having sex filled my ears.

“I love you Edoardo. God I love you.”

I stumbled back, my heel getting caught on the end of my dress. My arms flung out as I tried to right myself, my back hitting the wall loud enough all sounds ceased. I should have hurried away but I was frozen in place when I heard hushed, frantic whispers.

And then the door was opening and Edoardo was coming out, gun in hand, eyes frantic and crazed. His gaze locked on me and his eyes seemed to darken before his eyebrows pulled down in a scowl.

“Go back to the party.”

I knew he wasn’t speaking to me even though his focus was trained on my face. A moment later Francesca was

slipping past him, her body freezing as she caught sight of me, her eyes widening.

“Amara,” she said softly, this frantic look on her face as she looked between myself and Edoardo. She took a step toward me. “It’s not what you think. You can’t tell—”

“I said go back to the fucking party,” Edoardo snapped out and looked at Francesca with a deep scowl on his face.

I could see the way her throat moved as she swallowed, could practically feel her fear pouring off of her. This wasn’t just her hesitation and being afraid that I would tell anyone that her and Edoardo were having sex, something totally forbidden, a treasure you only gave your husband.

If this came out it would ruin her, destroy her family and their reputation. They’d be shunned, looked down upon, and all because of this one act. And it didn’t matter if she told me she’d been with anyone like she had all but implied at the dress fitting—like she’d all but bragged about it. Words were just that... words. Easily hidden. But this. This couldn’t be hidden or brushed away if someone other than me found out. There were those who would love nothing more than to disgrace a family, to hurt someone above them.

But despite all of that she didn’t fear that, not right now. What she was afraid of right now had everything to do with the absolute brutal expression on Edoardo’s face that was trained right on her. It was one I’d never seen him wear before. He’d always been so stoic, almost seemed so unaffected.

But this... this was the same dangerous man that I saw when I looked into my father’s face. They were cut from the same cloth. They all were.

When she didn’t move fast enough, Edoardo faced her and took a step forward. That had her gripping the skirting of her dress and turning, hustling down the hallway with only one last glance over her shoulder at me before she rounded the corner and then it was just Edoardo and myself alone.

He slowly turned back and faced me and I couldn’t breathe, the air being sucked out from all around me, the

suffocating feeling of his anger aimed full force on me.

“I—I didn’t see anything.” I didn’t know why I’d said those words . He and I knew the truth, knew what I’d witnessed. It was clearly written across my face.

“Let’s not make a liar out of you, Amara.” He took a step forward but I had nowhere to go.

With a wall at my right, and Edoardo blocking my left and in front of me I was trapped.

I licked my lips. I could scream, call for help. But the tightening of his jaw, and the thinning of his lips told me he knew where my thoughts were going. He lifted his finger and placed it on his mouth.

“Shhh. We don’t want anyone to hear a commotion.”

Telling anyone what I saw wouldn’t have hurt anyone but Francesca and her family. I may not have thought very highly of Francesca, but her mother and father had always been kind to me. But he wouldn’t believe me even if I told him so I kept my mouth shut.

Another step forward and I held my breath, not sure what he planned. Threats were obviously on the horizon, but I didn’t like the way he looked at me, like he planned on doing things to me to ensure I stayed quiet.

Like he wanted me to break my word and tell everyone what I’d seen so he could make it a reality.

It was this darkness that spread out from him. It was the way he raked his gaze up and down my body with degrading intent.

“I’m not going to say anything,” I said again and tipped my chin up in almost defiance. “I’d never want to hurt Maria’s family that way.” He smirked, as if what he thought I said was funny. “Let’s just go back to the reception. I’m sure Nikolai is waiting for me.” I wasn’t ashamed to throw my husband’s name out there, hoping it would put fear into Edoardo. But all he did was take a step closer. His gaze roamed across my face and I curled my fingers into my palms, my nails biting into the flesh, the pain sparking into pleasure.

“Here’s what’s going to happen, Amara,” he said in a low voice as he reached up and rubbed a strand of my hair between his thumb and forefinger, his focus trained on the act. “You’re going to stay quiet because I’m not going to lose my station. I’m not going to be punished by your fucking father because I broke the rules. And you’re going to keep that pretty mouth shut or I’m going to do all kinds of things that you’re not going to like.” He slowly lifted his gaze from that lock of hair to meet my gaze. “But it’s definitely going to be things I like,” he whispered.

A long pause of silence stretched between us, as if he wanted to let those words sink in, let that meaning really solidify.

“Do you understand what I mean, Amara?” I wanted to slap him, to scream in his face, to tell him he couldn’t speak to me like that. I was above him, not just in morals and dignity, not just in respect or status, but because he was the lowest of the low. He was a killer, willing to force me to do what he wanted simply to keep my mouth shut.

Oh I understood. But clearly he *didn’t*. “What do you think will happen when I tell them the truth? What do you think they’ll do to you when I tell my husband that you threatened me?”

Edoardo’s eyes darkened even further and he tightened his fingers on that strand of hair until it was being pulled, a sting to my scalp that had me gritting my teeth.

“Fuck the Bratva,” he spit out. “Your father is a weak man for making deals with those lowlifes.” Edoardo lifted that lock of hair up to his nose and inhaled deeply, this disgusting sound of pleasure leaving his throat.

Motion in my peripheral had me glancing to the side.

Time seemed to stand still as I watched Nikolai round the corner and slowly walk down the hallway, his focus on me, so intent, so deadly. He lifted a hand and I watched with what felt like huge eyes as he slipped his hand inside his tuxedo jacket. I could hear Edoardo talking, his voice a distorted rumble that I couldn’t process anything else.

I heard this buzzing in my ear, drowning out everything else, making it impossible to know what he said. But I could feel him tugging on the strand of my hair, and I took my focus off of my husband for a second to see Edoardo grin at me lasciviously as he leaned in, his gaze now on my mouth.

“You’re going to listen to me and keep your mouth shut or I’m going to fuck you so hard you bleed for days afterward. Do you understand me?”

My skin prickled, tingled as I looked back at Nikolai, my eyes widening even more, my mouth slightly parted. He pulled out a gun, the silver metal catching the light.

“Or maybe you want me to do that. If you’re married to Russian scum, you probably like it rough and raw, don’t you?”

Edoardo was too absorbed in his disgusting plans for me that he didn’t even sense the monster who stood right beside him.

It was only when Nikolai lifted the gun and trained it at Edoardo’s temple that I felt the air around me change. And it took a millisecond for Edoardo to realize we weren’t alone. But it was too late.

Because when Nikolai gave me a slow grin and an arrogant wink, I knew this was the end.

And then my husband pulled the trigger.

I didn’t hear the gunshot but I felt the blood, the hot spray of it along my neck and throat, no doubt covering my pristine white dress. I felt the vibration of Edoardo’s body hitting the floor between Nikolai and I, but still I couldn’t take my eyes off my husband’s bright blue eyes.

He’d brought death with him, and now he was bringing me down to hell to rule beside him.

Amara

I felt my hearing slowly return, my body jerked back to reality. I felt pin pricks move along my arms and legs as the rush of blood increased under my skin. It was painful. I welcomed it. I inhaled, the oxygen feeling cold, icy in my lungs as the world crashed back into me.

I remembered bits and pieces of the reception, tears in my memory of the gun, of the bullet cracking through Edoardo's skull. I saw flashes of images and sounds, the very real sensation of that warm spray of blood covering my neck and chest, my arms and all over my dress.

And as I stood here in the hotel room where I'd spend my wedding night, where Nikolai would pluck my virginity and lock it away as his and his alone, I knew with the cold hard truth of reality that I would forever be changed.

I closed my eyes as I thought back to the last few minutes after Edoardo was killed. I remembered staring at Nikolai looking into my eyes, the dead body of Edoardo between us, blood sprayed lightly across Nikolai's neck. He'd said nothing, didn't move, just breathed slowly, deeply, as if he hadn't just put a bullet in my guard's head for touching my hair. And that's all he would have seen. He wouldn't have known the

disgusting things Edoardo said, what he planned. He didn't know what I'd seen happen with Francesca.

Nikolai had killed someone for me for simply being too close, for touching a lock of my hair.

I vaguely remembered Francesca screaming at the end of the hall. Her mouth had been wide, her face red, and tears streamed down her face as she stared down at Edoardo's body.

I remembered Nikolai wrapping his hand around my waist and pulling me close to his side, leading me down the hall and out of the reception hall. And when my father blocked our way, his face red as he stared at his now dead soldier, I vaguely recalled Nikolai telling my father we were leaving because he wanted to be alone with "his pretty new wife", and that Marco "needed to clean up the mess".

My father cursed under his breath in Italian, and then snapped his fingers for his men to do damage control and make sure the hotel staff didn't come around until they got Edoardo out of there and the blood cleaned up.

But by then I was already half-way down the hallway, the heavy weight of his palm on the small of my back giving me a strange sort of comfort and stability. And what I recalled with clarity was that Nikolai hadn't been in a rush. He hadn't cared that he left a corpse in the hallway of a very busy and prestigious hotel.

I blinked back into focus and took in my surroundings. How long had we been in the hotel room? I didn't remember anything after leaving my father and his men, and didn't remember the elevator ride up or stepping inside the room.

Yet here I was.

"Come, Amara," Nikolai said in a deep voice and I blinked several times, seeing him standing in the darkened hallway, the shadows concealing his visage so all I could make out was his huge body.

And then I was moving toward him, following him, my feet padding over the plush runner making my steps silent. I

was swallowed by the shadows, my need and desires and all the emotions I felt waging war in me.

He was already waiting for me in the grand bedroom, standing a few feet from me, the hue of the city lights making his massive body almost glow, yet concealing the entire front of him so I couldn't see his expression.

Nikolai walked up to me, and I felt my heart jerk in my chest when he stopped a foot from where I stood. The scent of him had the air slowly leaving my lungs as if he alone had the power to make me breathless.

And when he lifted a hand all I could think about was that first time he'd touched me at my father's home, the forbidden stroke of his fingers on my body that lit me up from the inside out. But he didn't touch me, and instead reached over my shoulder and slowly closed the door, the soft *click* deafening in the grand hotel master suite because it meant finality.

And then he was gone, moving several feet back as if he knew being so close to me made it hard to function, to think... to even breathe.

I couldn't breathe, couldn't even move as I watched Nikolai stare at me.

It seemed like an eternity passed where we just stood there, the pressure in the room growing until almost felt unbearable, like all he wanted to do was make me as uncomfortable and unsteady as possible.

He reached down and unclasped the heavy-metal of his watch before walking silently over to the polished dresser and setting it on top. He turned and faced me once more and shrugged out of his tuxedo jacket, tossing it to the bed without looking to see if it landed where it was meant for. His vest was to follow. His fingers found his bowtie, undoing it in steady, unhurried motions. When he was just in his crisp white shirt he held still for long seconds.

Then he went for the top of his shirt, undoing the buttons one by one, going all the way down until he let the material move off those broad, wide shoulders and fall to the ground.

Nikolai still said nothing, and I let my focus trail over his broad shoulders, along his muscular arms, and over his defined, powerfully masculine chest. He was so big, so strong that I couldn't breathe, felt a lighted fire start in me that scared the hell out of me.

He had tattoos covering a lot of his skin, dark and angry designs, skulls and detailed knives and guns, Russian symbols and words that made him seem even more dangerous.

Nikolai hummed in what was obvious approval and I snapped my gaze back to his face. His eyes were hooded as he smirked.

“Does my pretty young wife like the way her husband looks?”

When I felt my eyes widen and didn't respond, he chuckled deeply... darkly.

My wedding night was here, upon me, and I was covered in blood, my white dress splattered in red pinpoints, my face and neck feeling tight, sticky for the silence my husband exacted on Edoardo.

He went for his belt and undid the buckle, pulling it loose so the two halves of leather hung open, and then went for the button of his black slacks. When he chuckled again, I looked back at his face, realizing I'd lost focus as I watched him undress.

“Yeah, my gorgeous little wife likes what she sees.” He hummed but didn't undo his pants, just kept his fingers on the button. “I can't wait to show you all the other things you'll enjoy.” He took a step closer but I was frozen in place, my eyes still wide, my throat tight. He moved another step closer.

I held my breath as I tipped my head back so I could look into his face. The lights were off in the hotel room, the moonlight and glow from the city lights and skyscrapers right outside the large window across from us bathed him in this ominous glow.

My body tensed when he lifted his hand and I felt him drag the pad of his thumb over my jawline and down my neck. He

pulled his hand away and stared at the digit for a second before shifting his hand in my direction so I could see the dark, rust-colored smear on his skin.

“Amara,” he murmured my name deeply, his gaze going down to my mouth, then to my neck... and lower still until he got his gaze lingering on my chest. He hummed again. “I’ve never seen anything more beautiful than the sight of you covered in gore and not sure what’s going to happen next.” He made a lewd show of dragging his gaze from my breasts to my face.

His expression was stone-cold as he held my focus and brought his thumb to his mouth, sucking it off. I gasped, shocked at what he’d just done. And before I could react he had his hand wrapped around my throat, walked me backward so the wall stopped our movements.

He added slight pressure and lifted up slightly, causing me to rise on my toes to keep the pressure off my neck so I could breathe. Nikolai leaned in so our noses barely touched, so our lips were almost brushing. We shared the same breath for long seconds.

“Mmm.” The vibrations from his deep voice speared right between my thighs. “I’m going to have so much fun with you, wife.”

And then he was dragging his tongue along my lips. It wasn’t a kiss, it wasn’t soft or sweet or gentle. It was obscene, like a lion licking at his prey, marking his territory.

His body heat caused beads of sweat to form along the length of my spine and between my breasts

And then he was gone a second later, taking several steps back so I was forced to brace my palms flat on the wall behind me to steady myself.

“As much as I get hard seeing you covered in the blood of someone I killed...” He tipped his chin toward the open doorway to the bathroom. “I’m sure you’d feel more comfortable getting cleaned for your wedding night.”

And then he turned and left the bedroom, walking out of the room. I was frozen for long moments until I heard the sound of ice being dropped into a glass in the sitting room. I closed my eyes and sucked in a ragged breath.

When I opened them I was staring at the arch ceiling, the chandelier in the room elaborate and obnoxiously luxurious. I lifted my hand, realizing it slightly shook, and touched my bottom lip, still feeling it wet from his saliva, warm from his tongue. And then I shocked myself by running my tongue along my bottom lip, tasting the flavor of Nikolai mixed with the coppery flavor of blood from the man he killed.

I pushed away from the wall and walked on unsteady feet to the bathroom, shutting the door and locking it. Not that a lock would keep a man like Nikolai Petrov away. If he wanted in I knew he'd find a way.

He'd always find a way.

Amara

I'd been in the bathroom too long, so long the water had run cold and still I stayed in the stall. So long the ends of my hair had dried and curled against my back, the strands making my flesh feel even more sensitive.

I'd expected Nikolai to pound on the door, to demand I come out and give him what was now rightfully his.

But he never came, never rushed me.

And I could breathe, gather myself, and clear my head. Or at least I could until I faced him. Which I had to do sooner or later so I might as well get it over with.

I closed my eyes and breathed out once. Twice. Three times. I opened my eyes and stared at my reflection before straightening and making sure my towel was on securely in place. I'd been too flustered to grab a change of clothes from the overnight bag that had been packed before leaving my home. *My home*. Not any longer.

My hands shook and I hated it, hated that I didn't have control. Whatever had been shoved into that bag was all I'd take with me. Nothing from my "old life" would come with me. I'd have nothing physical to hold memories of whatever

happiness I'd managed to scrape up living under my father's rule.

I shook my head to push myself back to the present. Here I was, about to step out into the master suite with nothing but a thigh-length terry cloth covering my nudity. My virginity.

With one more look at my reflection, I turned towards the door, reached out with a shaky hand, and gripped the handle. I opened it just as I reached up and turned off the light, plunging the small room in darkness, feeling like it would protect me somehow.

It was a ludicrous thought. I had a feeling Nikolai thrived in the shadows.

I stood there for a moment, half in the bathroom and half out, looking into the suite, not seeing or hearing anything. It was wishful thinking that possibly Nikolai wasn't going to accost me tonight.

But he hadn't hurt me, hadn't so much as touched me inappropriately. Not really. He could've pushed me up against the wall and taken me as soon as we got into the hotel room. He could've had me twenty different ways already. But he told me to clean up, giving me time and space.

He'd killed for me. To protect me.

My vision adjusted to the darkness and I looked at the bed, the massive, king size mattress and frame although large, barely filled the huge room. I continued to look around the room, at the seating area across from the bed, the plush couch, the loveseat, and the chaise across from that, the small glass and chrome coffee table between them.

I looked out the window and could see the skyscrapers, the twinkling lights and could imagine how noisy it was. But being this high up, surrounded by metal and glass, concrete and steel, I heard nothing but the steady beat of my heart and my uneven respirations.

But I wasn't alone. I knew that. I *felt* it. And then my gaze found him.

He sat in the corner in the modern style tufted black leather library chair, a swatch of light from the window spilling through.

My heart was racing as I stared at him and watched as he brought his hand up and to his mouth, putting a cigarette to his lips in the sexiest way I could have ever imagined. Although his chest was still bare of any coverings, he still wore his black tuxedo slacks. His feet were bare, and god, how could a man's feet be considered attractive?

He inhaled and the end lit up a bright orange for a second.

I didn't bother telling him it was probably forbidden to smoke in here. He wouldn't care. Nikolai wasn't the type of man to follow the rules. He did what he wanted when he wanted. He didn't care about repercussions. He didn't care about getting in trouble. In fact, I was pretty sure he got a rush going against the grain.

And then a second later a warm glow filled the room and I realized he turned on the small lamp that sat on the table beside the chair he was in. It was just a tiny reading lamp, the light barely spreading out five feet from where he sat, low enough that it gave it an intimate atmosphere.

It gave Nikolai a devilish glow.

But God, it was bright enough that he would be able to see everything, my nudity on full display like a painting in a museum.

He leaned back on the leather chair, one hand resting on the armrest, his back fully against the cushion now. He had an elbow on the opposite armrest, his thighs slightly parted, his body so big that he dwarfed the seat. With his elbow still resting on the edge of the chair, he brought his hand to his mouth. That's when I noticed a cigarette—no, not a cigarette but something else—between his fingers.

He brought it to his lips and inhaled deeply, his eyes narrowing slightly as he stared at me. Nikolai took a long drag from the end, held the smoke in for several seconds, and then

exhaled slowly, a cloud of whiteness slightly obscuring his visage.

I knew what he smoked, remembered smelling the same cloying scent years ago when I'd caught Gio sneaking out the back with one of his friends to smoke a joint.

Nikolai was getting high.

I realized this was the first time I really had taken note of his tattoos, of how much of his flesh he had covered in them. On the back of one hand he had a detailed rose inked, and on the other he wore a vicious looking skull. The dark ink crept up as forearms, weaving around his biceps, over his shoulders, and stopped right below his thickly corded neck.

And then there was his chest, that despite all the tattoos and designs, couldn't hide the raw power of his abdomen, couldn't conceal the rippling muscles, the rolling hills of power.

I felt like we were at a standstill, a crossroads as I stood on the opposite end of the room, both of us just staring at each other, my hand having a death grip on the edge of the towel to keep it in place.

And then I saw his gaze travel from my face to my neck, along my collarbones, and over the slight swells of my breasts that I knew he could see underneath the fabric of the towel. He went lower still, a slow and easy appraisal of my form as if he could see right through the material to my naked body. I shivered, goosebumps popping out along my arms and legs, my breath stalling as I continued to watch him.

He brought the joint to his lips again and took another long inhale from it, his gaze now back on my face.

There was a small decorated tray on the table beside him, which he used to snub the end of the joint.

"Come here *kukolka*." His voice was deep and dark and barely audible. I found myself unable to move even though this wicked part of me wanted to. Wanted to obey.

When I stood in the same spot one of his dark eyebrows cocked up slightly and the corner of his mouth lifted. He

smoothed his left hand over his thigh once. Twice. And on the third time he patted his leg.

Amara

“**B**e a good girl and come here and sit on my lap.”

Oh God. Why did that sound so... dirty?

The air left my lungs so violently I felt dizzy from it. That demand, that softly spoken order made me feel things I'd never experienced before.

I was embarrassingly wet between my thighs and clenched my legs together, the pressure making it worse, making my arousal grow.

But I did find myself moving closer, doing what he said.

I was only a foot from him when I found myself holding my breath, unable to move closer. He was like a flame and I was liable to get burned.

He laughed low and deep, a chuckle that speared right to my pussy. I licked my lips, not sure what to say, but before a word could escape, he snapped his hand out and curled it roughly around my waist.

I gasped at the force in which he curled his fingers into my waist, a startled sound leaving me when he pulled me forward so quickly I lost my balance. But his firm hold steadied me,

and when Nikolai positioned me in the way he wanted, I was left sitting on his lap with my legs thrown over the arm of the chair and the towel riding up my thighs almost indecently.

He started playing with a strand of my hair and I watched with wide eyes as he brought the lock to his nose and inhaled deeply, his eyes becoming hooded.

“Mmm,” he hummed and I felt that sound between my thighs. “Normally I’d have to show you how much it disappoints me that you didn’t listen to me right away.” He ran the tip of that lock of hair over his mouth, slow and easy, lazily almost. “But you’re so innocent, so breakable.”

He let that strand of hair fall to my shoulder as he leaned back in the chair, the leather making a soft sound as his weight settled into it. “So untouched,” he murmured and made another deep rumbling sound from his throat. My chest was rising and falling as fast as I was breathing, but I couldn’t take my gaze away from his face.

It was only when I felt the heavy weight of his palm landing on one of my thighs that I snapped my head in that direction, looking at my lap.

His hand slowly started stroking up and down the top of my thigh, his fingers skating slowly along the bare skin until goosebumps covered my limbs. I couldn’t breathe. Or maybe I was breathing too hard. Too fast. Maybe I was tethered to the world because of him. Or maybe I was floating away.

I couldn’t tell reality from fantasy. Or maybe this was a nightmare.

“Tell me,” he said softly, conversationally. “I know you’re a virgin.” That last word was spoken tightly.

It should have disgusted me that he was saying these things, forcing me to reveal anything private about myself. Yet why did it arouse me that he was pushing, that he wanted to pluck any secret I had buried deep in my soul?

“Tell me, little doll, tell me if anyone has ever touched you.” As he stared into my eyes, he slowly pulled one edge of the towel aside until I felt the chilled air in the room brush

along my exposed flesh. I automatically tensed, my hands moving down to put the material back in its place. He slapped my inner thigh again.

“Now, now, sweet girl. Don’t try hiding from me. Let me see all that perfection. Let me see what is mine.”

Oh God I was flailing and flailing and flailing down a dark hole and there was no light. No, that wasn’t right. There was a light and it was Nikolai. He was the glow as bright as the sun and I was looking right into him.

“Any secret meetings with those teenage bastards?” I made a panicked sound in my throat as he kept touching me. “Hmm, is that a yes? A no?” He innocently stroked me as he forced me to stare into his eyes. “Any little fuckers touching all this perfect skin?” He trailed the tips of his fingers down to my knee, then curled them inward and started trailing them up my inner thigh. “Who do I need to kill for touching what’s mine?”

I licked my lips, my mouth suddenly so dry, my tongue too thick for me to form any words. He made another deep sound a second later and slapped my inner thigh. Not hard enough to really hurt, but enough that I felt a brief sting from the contact.

“You’ve been such a good girl so far. Don’t start disappointing me now by not obeying.”

I’d never been around a man like him before, his needs very specific. I couldn’t deny that the very thought of obeying him turned me on almost violently.

I felt his hand leave my thigh and I knew he’d slap my tender skin again. I knew I’d get wetter. “N—no,” I finally answered his questions.

“Mmm. So no one has touched this little cunt? No one has ran a finger right down your center?” My face was on fire. “What about yourself, *krasavitsa*? Have you played with this little clit?”

He emphasized his question by doing the act, by circling that bundle until I whimpered.

“When you’re alone in your room and have the darkness as protection to keep your secrets, do you slip your hand between

your legs and play with this pretty little cunt?”

I felt my embarrassment rise so strongly I was sweating. Why was he doing this? Why was he being so crude?

Yet I was... wetter.

“I—I’ve never touched myself.” I didn’t admit that I’d thought about it, envisioned doing it as I thought of *him*.

I felt his body tense. “So innocent,” he murmured. His finger moved along my cheek. “Look at this blush. Look at how wet you’ve gotten for me? I think my pretty girl likes it when she’s humiliated, don’t you?”

I couldn’t speak. Did he actually expect me to?

“Yeah, I think my *krasavitsa*—my beauty—likes it when I make it hurt because it feels so fucking good, *doesn’t it?*” He growled those last two words. “Hmm,” he kept stroking between my legs, so close to my opening that I anticipated and feared what he’d do. “I own this.” His words were lazy, as lazy as his touch when he covered my pussy. Nikolai leaned in closer so his mouth was right by my ear. “I’ll do what I want with it.” He added more pressure and I made a mewling noise. “I’ll do whatever I fucking want whenever I want with it, and you’ll ask for more.”

Why did it feel so wrong to hear him say such obscene things to me, to see me as an object, something he owned? Why did it make my body tense and my mind send out a warning signal?

Why do I want him to do it again and again and again?

I shifted on his lap, just the smallest of movements, but I felt how hard he was, the huge length of his erection digging into my bottom. He leaned in closer so his lips were brushing the shell of my ear, his fingers stroking me slowly, slipping through my folds.

He said something under his breath, no doubt feeling how wet I was, the slickness of my arousal coating his fingers.

“Do you feel how hard I am?” His words were nothing but a growl and I felt that vibration all the way down my body, to

the very core and soul that made up... me.

My eyes closed on their own and I started breathing harder, not able to answer him. But I knew he didn't want a response. This was just another way for him to put me on edge, to embarrass me with my inexperience. Because it turned us both on.

"I've never been so hard in my life, knowing that no other man has touched you, that my fingers are the first and only ones to ever feel all this honey." He took a thick finger and circled my opening, not penetrating me, just teasing the edge and drawing out more slickness from me. "*Jesus Christ,*" he snarled and then said a string of words in Russian, ones that sounded coarse and hardened. "To know that my cock is going to be the first... the *only one* to ever feel how tight you are, to ever feel how wet you get..."

He didn't finish the sentence, just gently pushed the tip of his finger into my pussy. Although it didn't hurt, his finger was large, wide and thick and filled me. The pressure was intense, the fullness enough to have my inner muscles clamping down.

He made a gruff sound and pulled his finger out, circling my entrance once more. "Fuck, you're so tight, I can envision how it's going to feel pushing past all that resistance, popping that little cherry of yours."

His words were so crude, unlike anything I'd ever heard before. Yet they pulled a moan from me, had my nipples tight, aching. Painful. It was then I realized the towel had come undone, the loose knot that I had secured around my chest now open so the material was pooled at my waist. I made a surprised sound and was about to reach for it to cover my chest once more when he made a disapproving sound so that I stilled.

He pulled back and I knew he was looking at my chest, could feel his gaze on my breasts so profoundly I felt my nipples tighten even further.

"No, no. You're going to leave that right where it's at. You're going to let me look at these perfect little tits shake as I

a finger fuck you and make you cum on my lap. And you're going to blush like hell for me, your cunt getting all juicy because it embarrasses you knowing the position you're in for my enjoyment. Isn't that right?"

A strangled noise left me, one of embarrassment and pleasure.

"I bet you've never heard such filth." That thick, tattooed finger stroked down my cleft. "I bet I'm scandalizing my pretty new virgin wife."

I bit my bottom lip, my teeth pulling at the flesh hard enough I felt a flash of pain and the flavor of copper coat my tongue.

Nikolai had the fingers from his hand that wasn't buried between my thighs gripping my chin a second later, turning my head in his direction.

"Look at all this perfection, all this unblemished, perfect fucking flesh," he murmured. "My girl is so pure. But I'll change that real fucking quick." And before I knew what he was doing he was dragging his tongue over my bottom lip and groaning. "So sweet, *kukolka*. That's what you are, my little doll to do with as I please."

I was scandalized, humiliated, so turned on I couldn't breathe. Nikolai had done things to me in a matter of one day that I'd never experienced firsthand, that I never could have envisioned.

"How much do I frighten you, Amara?"

The way he said my name, the way his accent was thicker on that lone word, had my inner muscles clenching painfully. Another drag of his tongue over my bottom lip and then he was pushing it into my mouth.

"You don't," I said and I couldn't believe the words spilled from my mouth. Of course there was a part of me that knew I should fear him, but I also knew he wouldn't hurt me. I didn't know how, didn't know why those thoughts reassured me, but I knew that to be the truth.

He pulled back just an inch, our faces so close that I didn't even think a sheet of paper could pass between us. Nikolai stared into my eyes, his free hand sliding up to wrap around my throat, his fingers tightening ever so slowly so that I felt the breath start to leave me as my heart beat a static rhythm.

“And now? Do you fear me now, little doll?” He didn't add any more pressure. He wasn't going to hurt me. He was testing me, testing the waters of whatever this was between us.

That's what I told myself anyway.

But I said nothing, and instead leaned into his hold, bringing our noses close enough they touched. His eyes became hooded, his nostrils flaring. All I smelled was that addicting, spicy scent of him. It filled my head, made me drunk, as high as Nikolai surely was after smoking that joint, that sweet scent saturating the room.

And still he kept stroking my pussy slowly, almost sweetly, as if he were trying to be gentle for me.

But I needed more. I didn't know what that *more* was, but I felt it claim me, wrapping its tight fist around my body and holding me where I needed to be. And I knew Nikolai could give it to me. He was the only one who could.

A keening cry left me when he pushed one finger into my unused body. He tightened his fingers on my throat marginally, making me stay right where I was, making me take what he gave me.

“You'll take it, won't you?” He didn't phrase it like a question. “You'll take every single fucking thing I have to give you and you'll only take it from me.”

My body jerked when he pushed another finger into me. Two digits stretching me, filling my pussy, making it hurt to the point I felt this spark of fire and life and all things clear and right explode inside of me.

My back arched on its own, my breasts thrusting out. He growled and used the hand on my throat, that collar of power and flesh and security, to push me backward so my upper body

was bowed even more, my chest in the air, my nipples hard peaks.

He lowered his head and took one of those tips into his mouth, growling again so I felt the vibrations fill me. He shoved those two fingers even deeper inside of me, taking a part of me I didn't know I had to give. But Nikolai now owned it.

A sound akin to a wounded animal spilled from my parted lips when he bit down on my nipple at the same time he pulled his fingers almost all the way out and then thrust them back into me and curled them inward.

It hurt. It was agony. It was the greatest thing I'd ever felt.

He rubbed his thumb along my clit in slow circles and I reached out to grip his forearm, not to push him away, but to keep him in place. I dug my nails into his flesh and he hissed then groaned.

I couldn't comprehend anything around me as the pleasure and pain and agony and ecstasy filled me and exploded outward.

And the entire time Nikolai sucked at my breast, the ache of his teeth pulling on that tight flesh, the uncomfortable fullness of his fingers lodged in my pussy, drawing out a hurtful pain that sucked the air from my lungs.

He said hushed words against my breasts, words I couldn't hear, but knew I wouldn't understand even if he'd said them loud enough.

And when the pleasure receded my body tingled, every single inch of exposed flesh feeling like I'd touched a live wire.

It was long seconds of riding this wave before I felt myself come back down. I felt him pull his fingers out. I was blinking rapidly, trying to stay conscious when all I wanted to do was float away.

"Look at me, *printsessa*." There was clear command in his voice, a dominant demand that had my attention being pulled

to him. He held his hand between us, his middle and index finger covered in my orgasm, streaked in my blood.

My mouth slightly parted as I watched him move those digits to his mouth, drag his tongue over them, licking every drop of *me* off, never once taking his gaze from my eyes. And only when he was done getting his fill did he reach out and grip my chin with that same hand, his fingers wet, a combination of me and him, warm but now cooling against my jaw.

He jerked me forward and our lips slammed together viciously, violently. He plunged his tongue into my mouth and forced me to taste myself, forced me to taste him. He was showing me, making me feel and see and hear and experience that I was now his. And he said all of that with that one kiss.

A new life bloomed in me, light and heat and electricity and so much intensity that I couldn't see anything right in front of me, didn't know where I was. Up or down. Kept on earth or lost so high I'd never touch the ground again.

He broke the kiss and instantly I was boneless, exhausted, so satiated I let myself sink against his hard body, not caring that I clung to him, that I had my arms wrapped around his neck, my head resting on his shoulder. In that moment I trusted him wholly, completely.

He rose from the chair, the towel falling fully away from me. Nikolai lifted me easily into his arms as if I were that little doll he kept calling me. The whisper of air touched my temple, the slightest brush. I probably imagined it, but I wanted to think it was a soft side of Nikolai kissing me, telling me in his own, silent way that he had me, that everything was okay. Even if I knew it wasn't.

The sound of blankets ruffling, the feeling of softness greeting my boneless body.

“What about tonight? What about our wedding night...” I murmured sleepily, unable to finish the sentence as I started feeling heavier and heavier, my body sinking deeper and deeper into the mattress.

But Nikolai didn't say anything in response, didn't comment that he hadn't taken me, hadn't gotten his own pleasure.

Blankets covered my naked body. My eyes were already closed, sleep pulling me under.

But what I was aware of was that I drifted off to sleep alone in that massive bed with my virginity still intact on my wedding night.

Amara

I didn't know where we were going, and for some reason I was too afraid to ask Nikolai, who sat silently beside me in the back of the Mercedes that had picked us up from the hotel just minutes before.

I glanced over at my husband. His focus was his cell phone as he typed out a message, his body so big that he seemed to take up the entire backseat. Or maybe it was just the vision of him that was firmly implanted in my mind. A beast, larger than life.

He was all-powerful, dangerous, someone who'd kill for me as easy as it was to take a breath in and exhale it out.

And he took my breath away.

"My little doll stares an awful lot," he said without looking up at me.

I shivered at the way he said "little doll", at the tone and inflection of his voice. It covered me like a hot balm, like heated honey.

"There's a lot of you." I felt my eyes widen as those words spilled from me before I could stop them. *Oh God, the*

humiliation. My face heated unbearably but I couldn't look away even though I desperately wanted to. I saw the corner of his mouth twitch as if he found it amusing.

He tucked his cell back in the inner pocket of his jacket and rested fully against the leather seat, turning his head to look at me. Nikolai still had that hooded cast to his eyes, his black lashes too thick and his eyes too blue to be on a man as masculine as him.

A man should not be that attractive, shouldn't look that good when he wasn't even trying. He instantly made my body warm and soft and so very wet.

And all it took was a pointed look at me.

His gaze held mine for long moments and then I saw him start to lean forward. He was coming closer, crowding me in the best possible way. When his gaze dipped down to my mouth my breath caught and my lips parted on their own. He was going to kiss me. I wanted him to kiss me. Right here in the back of this Mercedes. Right here where the driver could see it all.

And I wouldn't stop him.

But before he could give me what I wanted the car was slowing, his smile was growing, and he was leaning further away from me.

I blinked back rapidly and watched as he smoothed his hands down his leather jacket. He didn't wear the normal attire I'd seen the men in my life wear, the men who worked for my father. My father.

They all wore tailor made suits, expensive cuts of cloth that hid the monster beneath the material. But not Nikolai. Aside from the tuxedo on our wedding day, I'd only seen Nikolai in dark jeans, an equally dark shirt, and that black leather jacket molded over his hard, very male body.

The car coming to a stop jarred me out of my clear sexual appraisal of Nikolai and I looked out the passenger side window, feeling confusion fill me as I stared at what was right outside. My mother and father's home.

“You took me to my parents’ house?” My heart was thundering as the reality of that settled in, as the fear of the why filled me until it spilled over. Was he bringing me back here because he didn’t want me? Oh God, had I done something wrong?

“Nikolai?” His name was a soft croak from me. I looked at him and heard the panic in my voice, knew it covered my face. All I could think about was what did I do wrong? *What did I do wrong? Oh God... what did I do wrong?*

At first his expression was stoic but then the dark slashes of his eyebrows came down slightly in a frown.

“I did something wrong? You’re giving me back to my father?” I hated—*hated*—that I sounded so weak right now, but God it was terrifying to think of what my father would do if Nikolai told him he didn’t want the marriage to last. That he didn’t want me.

I didn’t realize my hands were shaking until Nikolai placed his much larger, heavier one on top of mine. Instantly I calmed, stilled, but I could still hear the racing of my heart in my ears, feel it almost bursting from my chest.

Nikolai’s jaw was clenched tight as he looked out the window behind me. I could see the pulse beating beneath his ear frantically, felt his fingers tighten around my hands that were still on my lap.

“I thought you’d want to say goodbye to your brother and sister, your mother even.” He turned those bright blue eyes back on me. “It’s your father you’re so afraid of.” It wasn’t said like a question because he knew. He knew. He had to. The Bratva couldn’t be that different from the Cosa Nostra. Their traditions, the rigidity, the severity of how the men were had to be similar. The same.

The question took me off guard for a moment and I jerked, as if electrocuted, or maybe slapped. I didn’t have time to respond because Nikolai’s door was opening, the driver holding onto the edge.

“Sir,” the driver said but when Nikolai didn’t move or speak, the driver cleared his throat. “Would you like some extra time? Privacy?”

Nikolai didn’t respond, just kept staring at me, kept his hand on mine, his fingers tightening ever-so-slightly with each passing second.

And then the weight of his palm was gone, his big body uncoiling from the car as he stood and stepped out. His door slammed shut and I closed my eyes and exhaled, feeling the heavy silence all around me.

It only lasted a moment before my door was being opened and my husband held his hand out for me. It was automatic as I slipped my palm against his, allowing him to help me out. I smoothed my free hand down my tunic then my leggings, before gripping the soft material of my shirt and letting Nikolai lead me up the steps to the front door.

It swung open as if automatically sensing us and Beatrice, one of the servants, stood on the other side with her hands clasped behind her back and her head bowed.

“Mr. and Mrs. Petrov,” she said respectfully as we neared. “Master Bianchi wasn’t expecting you.”

“I know,” Nikolai growled and tightened his hand on mine. “I assumed his own daughter wouldn’t need to call ahead to visit her family.” He strode inside without waiting for a response, never letting go of my hand.

We entered my childhood home and the front door shut behind us softly. We only stood there for a few seconds before I heard a rhythmic pounding sound coming closer and closer. And then I saw Claudia come barreling down the stairs, her grin wide, her dark hair fluttering behind her as she raced forward.

I couldn’t help but laugh as she cleared the stairs and slammed into me, giving me a full body hug, one that felt far too good for the short time I’d been gone. She tightened her arms around me and I did the same, feeling my eyes prickling

with tears of what, sadness? Happiness? The loss of the only thing I'd never known?

"I missed you." Claudia's voice was muffled against my shirt and jacket.

I squeezed her back. "I've only been gone for a day," I said with a little laugh in my voice, trying to make things light. She tightened her arms around me once more and I laughed genuinely this time, but there was an ache in my heart.

"Hey, now. It's okay." I pulled her back to look into her blue eyes. "Are you okay?" Her face was a mask that started to break slightly before she gave me a bright smile. A fake smile that didn't reach her eyes.

I wanted to dig a little deeper, ask her what was truly wrong, but I knew. I knew why she looked at me with those wide blue eyes that were identical to mine and Gio's. No, I knew what the issue was. Our father.

She tried to brush it off as if it were nothing as she murmured under her breath, "it's father."

She exhaled and stepped back fully. "Father has been a beast since something happened at the wedding, something he refuses to tell anyone."

I shifted on my feet as nervousness slammed into me, and glanced over at Nikolai. He stood a few feet to the side, a still and imposing form that watched me as if I were the only important thing in the room.

My breath caught.

Although I knew Nikolai could hear what we were talking about, he didn't act like he did, didn't show any emotion over what Claudia had just said. I looked back at my sister, glad she didn't know about Eduardo. My father had clearly cleaned it up efficiently fast so no one but a small team of his men knew what had gone down.

"I'm sure it's just work stuff." I finally found my voice to say to my sister.

She exhaled but nodded and I was thankful that she accepted what I said, even if I didn't know if she believed me. I was glad she didn't make me lie even more. I didn't want to tell her about any of the horrors or darkness that happened in our world even if she was surrounded by it. Even if I knew she was fully aware of it all. I wanted to keep her safe and innocent and protected from it all.

Gio and my mother stepping into the foyer drew me out of my thoughts and I embraced both of them, answering their conversational questions automatically. I could hear Gio talk about "safe" topics with Nikolai. Sports. Stocks. The fucking weather. It was awkward, and it was evident my brother didn't like my husband.

But all I could think about was my father, how he'd make Claudia's life even worse because of the situation with Edoardo. How my father no doubt blamed *me* for Edoardo's death, and because I was now a married woman and out of his house, she'd take my place for his wrath.

It was those thoughts that had me moving away from my family and walking toward a place I had no business going.

My father's office.

All conversation behind me dimmed and I glanced over my shoulder to see all three of them watching me. Nikolai's eyes were hard set, his jaw clenched, his hands tight fists at his side. But he didn't move closer. He didn't stop me. Maybe he knew I needed to do this, to talk to my father, to try and smooth out the wrinkles and calm the rough waters. I was the only one who could protect Claudia. Not even Gio would go against my father. He was too busy, always on errands by our father, learning the "family business".

I knew it was all strategically orchestrated by Marco, that he was being molded and brainwashed and shaped into what our father wanted. The perfect heir. The perfect soldier.

I walked down the hallway and stopped in front of my father's office doors, reaching out automatically and digging my fingers into my palm before relaxing it and lifting it up to bring my knuckles down on the wood.

He made me wait a solid minute, standing behind that closed door, before he barked out that I could enter. I pushed the heavy door inward and stepped inside, leaving the door open behind me. A survival instinct.

I smelled faint hints of cigar smoke and a fire that had burned long ago in the mantle, charred wood tinged the air and clinging to the books that lined one wall. He sat behind his imposing, massive oak desk, his reading glasses pushed up the bridge of his nose as he brought his pen down across a sheet of paper.

“What?” he said in a bored tone without looking up at me.

I didn’t say anything for a second as I picked at the edge of my shirt, a lone thread barely hanging on. Just like me. Just like Claudia would be if I didn’t fix things.

“I—I...” I couldn’t manage to say anything else, couldn’t find my words.

My father set his pen down, removed his glasses, and leaned back in his chair. And only then did he look up at me. No expression on his face. No happiness to see me. No love that his daughter was here, that she was a married woman and starting her own life now.

Nothing.

He lifted an eyebrow and steepled his hands in front of his face. Waiting. Waiting. The silence stretching out between us, making me on edge, making me even more scared. But he did that on purpose. It was a tactic, *his tactic* to make me even weaker than he already saw me.

“I was wondering if we could possibly discuss Claudia visiting me once I’m back in Desolation?” The thought of leaving my sister here and traveling so far, all the way across the country, had my belly tightening. “Maybe she could help me get settled? I’ll be alone over there, and I’m sure Nikolai will be busy with work.” I swallowed.

He stayed silent. Still kept those fingers steepled in front of his face.

“Just a thought,” I whispered.

“Hmm,” he finally said. “Just a thought?” He placed his hands on the table and drummed his fingers. “You made quite the mess last night with Edoardo.”

I opened my mouth and snapped it shut, smoothed my hands down my thighs over and over again. “It’s unfortunate about Edoardo, but—”

My father slammed his hand down on his desk so hard his lamp shook from the force. He slowly rose, his palms braced on the smoothed wood. “There are no excuses.” His eyes narrowed. “What exactly were you doing with your guard, hmmm? Being a little whore?”

My throat was so tight. Too tight. I couldn’t admit that I’d seen him and Francesca, couldn’t put her family through any of that. “I just needed a breather. Edoardo followed me, must have thought he was still there to watch over me.” I was surprised I sounded as sure and strong as I did.

“Is that right?” He straightened but I held my ground, tipped my chin up, and kept my focus on his eyes. “I see you’ve gotten a bit of a backbone since getting married to the Russian.” He moved around his desk. “He must have fucked all the weakness from you.”

I slapped a hand over my mouth in shock and disgust that my father would say such crude things to me. But the man advancing on me and looking at me with such malice and hatred was even worse than the person I’d grown up to fear and hate.

He stopped a few feet from me and curled his lip in disgust. “You remember what the hell I said. You remember to obey that Russian bastard no matter what.” He took a step forward. “I won’t have you fucking up anything else.” Another step closer, but I still stayed where I was.

I craned my neck to look into his face. “Father,” I said in a sweet voice, hoping it would placate him to see I was just a woman. Just the daughter he pawned off. “I’ll be good. I’ll make you proud.” *Fuck you.*

He stayed silent.

“But if you’d allow, I’d love to have Claudia visit. If you’d allow it.”

He smirked. “If I allow it.” The humor faded. “I had quite the mess to clean up.”

Back on that. Back to it being my fault.

Faster than I anticipated, my father grabbed my wrist in a bruising hold, so tight that I felt it wrap around my bone. Tighter and tighter he squeezed before jerking me forward and baring his teeth.

I wasn’t aware of the sound of pain leaving me until it spilled loudly from my mouth and filled the office. And then I heard it. Footsteps coming forward. Hard. Heavy. Nikolai’s. My father is in front of me gripping my wrist one second, and the next he was being tossed across the room and stumbling back against his desk.

I stared at Nikolai’s huge, imposing back as he stood between me and my father. His shoulders were rising and falling, and I heard the heavy rush of his breathing. His anger was a tangible presence in the room, bigger than life itself.

“You...” Nikolai said and took a step toward my father. “You made a fucking mistake.” His accent was so thick right now that his English was barely distinguishable. I knew if I didn’t stop this something horrible would happen.

And it wasn’t that my father would be killed by my husband’s hands, but that Nikolai would face repercussions over this.

I found myself at Nikolai’s side, my hand curled around his larger one. I stroked my thumb over his inner wrist and slowly he turned his head from where my father still stood by his desk.

“Let’s go. Let’s just go.” I said that over and over again like a mantra. I didn’t know when I’d gotten to the point where I’d embraced this new life so thoroughly. But here I was, fearful of Nikolai being hurt even though he seemed indestructible. “Please,” I whispered and I watched as that rage that covered his face lessened marginally and he exhaled.

He looked at my father again and gritted out, “that was the last time you ever touch her.” And then Nikolai was weaving his fingers through mine and leading me out of the house.

Amara

My tears had long since dried, but all I could think about was Claudia, how she'd looked at me with a detached expression, her big blue eyes showing me what her future held.

It was the same one as mine. I glanced down at my wrist, a bruise in the form of my father's hand covering my pale skin.

I closed my eyes and thought about those last few moments when Nikolai ushered me out of the house. My mother and sister had followed us out to the car, and the look of worry on my mother's face had been tangible.

I thought about how I'd stared into Claudia's wide blue eyes, felt her apprehension and fear, and pulled her close to me in a hard hug and whispered in her ear.

"I'll come back for you. I'm not leaving you here. I promise."

And then there was Gio, who'd stood by the front door with his hands clenched tight at his sides, his focus on my wrist. His jaw had been locked tight, his eyes narrowed. I had to hope and pray he'd protect Claudia from our father's wrath

until I got her away. I had to believe he loved us more than he cared about our father's approval.

I had to believe that or I'd die.

"*Please,*" I'd mouthed to him, and when he'd given a firm nod I'd felt air fill my lungs.

"I'll come back for you."

And I would. I felt that fill every part of me so solidly there was no other option.

I was vaguely aware of the private jet's engine starting and pulling me out of my thoughts. I heard the sound of the pilot and the copilot rattling off airplane jargon. I sensed rather than saw the flight attendant walking up and down the small aisle.

But what I was very aware of above all of that was Nikolai's intense stare on me.

I looked at him, not surprised he had those blue eyes trained on me. I couldn't call any part of Nikolai soft. He was seated but looked tense, jagged, like a sharp blade that would cut through you as easily as a hot knife through butter.

"I have to get her out of there." I knew he was aware of what I said, what I meant.

But he didn't respond, just reached across the short space between our seats and gently took my hand in his. He pushed up my shirt, showing the ugly coloring of my wrist, and I heard a low, deep sound of disapproval leave him. He gently—God, so gently—stroked his finger down my inner forearm, stopping right before he got to the bruise.

And then his touch was gone and he was leaning back in his seat, his focus trained out the window. A muscle under his scruff-covered cheek flexed and I swallowed, knowing that sensation I felt coming from him, knowing that hard, almost unreadable look on his face.

He wouldn't let this end.

We sat there for long moments, so long I didn't think we'd speak the rest of the flight to Desolation. I lifted my legs onto

the seat and curled them close to my chest, adjusting myself so I could look out the window.

We'd been in the air for half an hour now, the time surprisingly passing by in a blur, but the tangible energy that kept coming from Nikolai couldn't be ignored.

I'd stopped glancing over at him, knowing I'd see the same thing each time. Hard resolve that he would deal with my father in the way men like him did

Violently. With finality.

But I didn't have the energy or the emotions to care, to try and talk him out of it. It wouldn't have mattered anyway.

All I cared about right now was getting Claudia safe and out of that house, away from my father. Because surely now, after all of this, after the spectacle that happened in his office with Nikolai, my father was especially volatile. And Gio and my mother could only protect my sister so much.

"Your mother is under your father's thumb so deeply she's embedded there," Nikolai finally said and I was so startled by the deep timbre of his voice that I actually jerked slightly in my seat and turned to look at him.

I licked my lips and nodded, not trusting my voice for fear it would tremble from the force of my thoughts and emotions. And I didn't want to appear even weaker than I felt I was already coming across. I was ashamed that I wasn't stronger, that I hadn't fought harder, that I hadn't just taken my sister and ran.

My mother was already too far gone in my father's clutches to listen to reason. She hadn't protected us all these years, and instead had been complacent in his wrath and hatred toward us. She'd let his anger wrap around us with the reasoning, the explanation that it was "just how things were".

Just how things were.

I was done with that.

"You act surprised." I uncurled my legs and stretched them out, not realizing I'd been in the same position for so long that

my legs were cramped and aching.

He lifted his hand and ran it over his jaw before smoothing it up and down his thigh. I watched the act, remembering how he'd done that last night in the hotel room before he patted his lap and told me to come sit down.

I felt a flush move over me, unexpected arousal washing away all my worry, which just made me feel even guiltier.

“Women in the Bratva, or at least in Desolation, aren't like that.” He leaned back in the seat further and spread his legs a little wider, the position shouldn't have been as attractive as it was.

And he was so big, his legs so long, his torso so muscular and wide, that he dwarfed that leather seat.

“They stand by their man, powerful in their own right. They don't cower. You can't when it concerns the world we live in.” There were shadows behind his blue eyes, things he wasn't telling me.

I didn't ask him about his mother. Maybe that's where that darkness came from.

“Of course this isn't how it always is, or was.” His jaw clenched at that last word. “Even though it should be. But there's a lot of evil that lurks right under your nose.” He lifted his hands, palms up, as if that explained it all.

“You're worried about your sister.” He said it point blank and I didn't hesitate to nod.

“My father is going to take it out on her.” I looked out the window again, seeing nothing but white and blue, so far up I could almost pretend that we'd never land again, that we could stay high above the world where nothing could touch us.

“Your father will take what *out* against your sister?”

I dragged my tongue over my bottom lip, feeling that soreness from when he'd bit the flesh last night, once again another reminder of what we'd shared and done.

I didn't answer for long seconds, but when I finally did look at him I could see no judgment, no anger directed toward

me. There was this calculation in his eyes, this steady resolve. How was he so different from the men I grew up around? How was he so different from my father?

“Because of the situation that happened with Edoardo.” My voice cracked on that last word as memories of all that blood, the brain splattering across the wall beside me, slammed into my mind like a broken record.

Over and over again. On repeat.

“He blames me, thinks I was having some clandestine rendezvous with him, a scandalous affair that would have ruined his reputation.” I looked down at my lap and twisted my fingers together. “And I don’t care that he thinks I’m a whore. I don’t care that he blames me for anything or everything. I just want to protect my sister. I know that because if he can’t punish me for all that has happened, he’ll take it out on Claudia.”

He stayed silent, too silent that I thought I overstepped bounds, taking liberties that would put me in a bad position with my husband.

Although I didn’t think there was any love lost between Nikolai and my father, saying anything negative in regards to Marco wasn’t something a daughter should do, especially to her husband who had professional ties with him.

I started to feel beads of sweat line my temples, fear skating down my spine. I was shifting on the seat, twisting my shirt in my hands. I couldn’t sit still, all the horrible, awful things that could and would happen bombarding my brain so that’s all I could see and think and feel and hear.

“Amara.”

It was the hard, rough sound of Nikolai’s voice pulling me out of my thoughts that had me blinking to clear my vision and looking over at him.

He was leaning forward in his seat, his elbows resting on his thighs as he stared at me severely.

“I...” I was rubbing my palms up and down my legs and noticed the way his gaze dipped down to watch the act for just

a second before he brought his focus back to my face.

“Just forget I said anything. Everything’s fine. Everything’s fine.” I looked back out the window and bit my bottom lip, feeling like a fool for running my mouth the way I did.

It didn’t matter how Nikolai acted toward me, how he protected me... killed for me. How he’d assaulted my father to keep me safe. None of that mattered at all because he was still the bad guy. He was still part of the same world I was, and in that world, no matter what he said, I had to learn my place. I had to learn to think before I spoke.

I’d only make things worse, not only for me, but my sister as well.

“Come here.”

I looked at Nikolai after that hard command and watched as he slowly straightened before leaning back in the chair, taking on that relaxed position once again. He had his forearms resting on each side of the seat, one hand crawled around the edge of the armrest, his fingers stroking the leather slowly.

He didn’t have to ask again. I braced my hands on the seat and pushed myself up, taking the three steps that required me to stand in front of him.

Despite the fact I was now taller than him and he was looking up at me, I still felt so tiny, so incomparable to his presence.

He was like the sun and I was the earth orbiting around him. He was bright and big and without him I felt cold and dead. It was the most unexplainable emotion I’d ever felt, this feeling that one person held so much power over me.

It was a weakness, another one I certainly didn’t need, but also one I couldn’t get rid of no matter how much I desperately wanted to.

“Come here.” His voice was deep and dark and delicious and I felt it all the way down until it curled my toes.

I knew what he wanted. And so I breathed out slowly and looked down at his slightly splayed thighs, the way he still rubbed his thumb across the leather of the armrest, and then looked back to his face, where I saw his hooded expression.

I positioned myself on his lap, both of my legs resting between his, his hand automatically sliding down the center of my back to settle right above my ass, at the small of my back. His palm seemed so big that it encompassed the entire area.

His finger and thumb were on my chin, slight pressure added as he turned my head toward him. My breath caught in my throat. It wasn't because of the look on his face, or the way he stared at my lips as if he were a hungry, starving, ravenous wolf.

No, it was none of those things, it was the way his thumb stroked the length of my spine, a gentle touch that went against everything that he seemed to stand for, that I saw when I looked into his blue eyes.

“Come here,” he murmured and I felt the slightest pressure on my chin where his thumb and forefinger still gripped me gently. He could've easily moved forward and pressed his lips to mine, used force to bring my mouth to his. But no, he wanted *me* to take the initiative. He wanted *me* to kiss *him*. And I did.

I leaned in and sealed my mouth to his, his lips firm but smooth that I started to get lost in that small sensation.

Our lips moved together, slow at first, inexperienced from me. But he ate my passion, swallowed my breath, and didn't let up until I was writhing on top of him like a desolate fiend for anything he'd give me.

When he slid his palm up my back and gripped my nape, keeping my mouth to his, stroking his tongue along the seam of my lips until I opened for him, I knew the sliver of control he'd given me was over.

He was now back in control and I softened and grew wetter over the fact.

He held the power. It was his. *It's always been his*, I realized in that moment.

“Look at you giving into me so easily. So fucking perfectly.”

God I loved how thick his accent became when he got aroused, loved how I felt how hard he got because of me. And I was amazed he had the power to wash all my worries away with his touch and the words that spilled from that wicked mouth.

“I could fuck you right now and you'd let me, you'd part those pretty pale thighs and let me, wouldn't you?”

I couldn't respond, I was so breathless.

“I could fuck that fear and concern out of you. I could shove my cock so far in you, little doll, take you for our very first time thirty thousand feet in the air, and make it so all those hard thoughts can't consume you anymore because *I'll* be the one doing it.”

His mouth was so close to mine, no longer kissing me, but every time he spoke his lips brushed against mine.

I quickly realized Nikolai was an expert at diverting, and changing the situation around so it was in his favor, so he had the power.

He'd done it.

He slipped that hand down the length of my spine, slowly. So slowly it ached. And then he was gripping my ass, curling his fingers around one cheek and giving the flesh a hard squeeze.

I moaned against his mouth, that discomfort so good it made everything feel so much better.

He broke the kiss and trailed his mouth along my jawline and to my ear. “It's going to be fine,” he whispered against the shell and I shivered on his lap. “I'm going to make sure it's fine, *malishka*.”

“You can't know that.” My voice was a hiccup of sound. “My father is a monster.” I should have felt... something akin

to shame or guilt for putting this on Nikolai's plate. We hadn't even been married for twenty-four hours. But when it came to my sister, I knew I'd crawl naked and broken on the floor if it meant she was safe.

Nikolai pulled back and stared at me so hard and for so long I felt stripped bare. "Little doll." He murmured, his hand now on my waist in a nursing grip. "I'm no stranger to getting rid of the monsters that lurk in the dark."

There was something right in his voice. I remembered bits of what I'd read, rumors whispered of him and his brother killing their father. Patricide.

He leaned in and dragged his tongue along my bottom lip so slowly I felt every inch of him. "And when it comes to you... I've never been more dangerous."

Amara

I'd been in a haze the rest of the flight, and it hadn't helped clear my head being on Nikolai's lap, which of course is where he made me sit the entire time, his hand resting on my hip, his thumb pushing up my shirt enough that he could stroke the strip of skin exposed.

And I was still thinking about that—*feeling it even*. It had been a twenty-five minute drive from the airstrip to our destination, which appeared to be an underground garage located at a red brick building. The sleek, black luxury car descended and I leaned back in the seat to stare at the long strips of lighting that illuminated the gray cement that covered everything.

All I'd had to go off of on Desolation, New York before coming here was the frightening rumors, and the harrowing bits and pieces I'd found off the Internet. But even then I knew those online stories and pictures showed the *best* parts, which wasn't saying much since the city lived up to its name to a fault.

The drive from the airstrip to Nikolai's place had been done in relative silence, with Nikolai sitting beside me on his phone working, a scowl on his face as he typed out emails and

sent out texts. But I'd been fine with the quiet, in fact I'd embraced it so I could further allow myself to let all of this sink in.

My new reality.

And as I stared out the tinted window and got a good look at the city that was my new home, it was everything I'd envisioned.

Cold. Unforgiving. Broken.

We passed through two gates, both stationed with a man dressed all in black. They waved the car through, and I was about to ask Nikolai about all the security when the car stopped in front of a single silver elevator. I only had a moment to exhale before the driver was out and opening the door for Nikolai.

Nikolai held his hand out for me and I automatically slipped my palm against his, allowing him to draw me out of the vehicle. The door shut with an audible *click* and I could hear the echo bounce off the low ceiling. I glanced around and noticed several luxury cars lined up on either side. All dark, all sleek.

"Who needs this many cars," I murmured before I realized I said the words out loud, and once again successfully put my foot in my mouth.

And then the car was pulling away from the curb and we were left alone. I could hear the sound of my heart beating as Nikolai slipped his hand up the length of my spine, pushed the long fall of my hair over one shoulder, and curled his hand around the back of my neck in a clearly proprietary way.

Once in the elevator and the doors closed, Nikolai entered a code in the keypad, as well as a sleek silver card into a small slot. But he kept his other hand curled around my nape, and the heavy, warm feeling of that presence had my belly flipping and heat pooling between my thighs.

All I could hear and smell and sense was Nikolai. He was dark consuming and so dangerous that it gave me this thrill.

I felt like Pavlov's dog, becoming wet and needy just by being in the same room with him, just from the sight and smell of him.

All too soon the elevator came to a stop and the door opened.

He led me forward into what was an anteroom, the large space having a minimalistic touch to it. A few abstract black-and-white paintings covered the walls, and a plush rug met my feet the deeper we went into the room. Nikolai slid his fingers off my nape so slowly I knew he'd done it on purpose, to really let me feel him.

He stepped up to a large dark wooden door with a silver curved handle. When he reached out the side I noticed another small keypad on the wall similar to the one in the elevator.

After a series of beeps, he pushed open the front door and stepped aside to allow me to enter first. The interior was dark at first, but once I stepped fully inside a soft glow illuminated the foyer as if activated by a motion sensor.

The lights were still off in the rest of the apartment, and my eyes adjusted to the darkness in front of me. I could make out a living room, set lower than where I stood, the design showing the very same minimalistic style as the anteroom.

I heard rustling behind me and looked over my shoulder to see Nikolai taking off his jacket and hanging it on the silver hook by the door, then reaching into his pocket to take out his cellphone and a set of keys. He tossed those in a small bowl that sat on a long, narrow table against the wall beside the door.

"I thought you'd keep your pretty new wife in that hotel room for at least a week. Break her in the good old fashioned Russian way."

A startled squeak left me and I snapped my focus in the direction of where the male voice had come from. I felt Nikolai move up behind me instantly, a heavy, warm presence like a protective wall.

It was then I noticed a large body sitting in the corner of the room, the shadows concealing him almost fully.

“Thought you’d have to carry her over the threshold because you’d made it impossible for her to walk.”

I backed up a step, slamming right into Nikolai’s hard body. His hands came up to rest on my shoulders, his fingers squeezing me slightly.

Nikolai growled, “watch it, Dmitry.” A beat of heavy silence passed before Nikolai spoke again. “I won’t remind you again to show respect where Amara is concerned.”

Hard, tense silence followed, thick enough it was hard to breathe as Dmitry just stared at us, still covered by darkness, the lights from Desolation barely reaching him. But then there was a subtle movement of him inclining his head and I exhaled all that tension away.

“Making yourself at home here is going to have to stop.” Nikolai said through gritted teeth.

“Is that so?” There was almost... humor in Dimitry’s voice.

Nikolai’s body grew harder behind me. “Yes.” That lone word was hard and tight and pushed through clenched teeth.

More silence. More thickness coating the air.

“Fine. I guess being married now affords you some privacy.”

Nikolai made a deep sound behind me that was reminiscent of a growl.

“How was the flight?” Dmitry said in way of changing the subject.

I felt Nikolai’s body shift a little, then felt his warm breath tease the side of my neck. “The flight was fine.” More warm breath along the side of my throat... more clenching of my inner muscles. “Oh but how we wanted to do more. Isn’t that right?” His voice was low, too low for anyone but me to hear. “*Mmm*, how I wanted to do so much to you, little doll.”

My breath hitched and my face felt hot that he was saying these things where Dmitry could easily hear.

Dmitry laughed low and a second later he was rising from the chair.

“I told you to wait in the anteroom.” Nikolai’s voice lost all that sexy Russian deepness as he moved out from behind me so he was now blocking my view of the rest of the apartment.

“Sasha was thirsty.”

I looked around Nikolai’s arm, expecting to see a woman come out of the shadows, Persephone to Hades perhaps, but there was just the sound of a clock ticking down the seconds.

“Should have kept her at your place then.”

And then I saw slight movement beside Dmitry’s leg. A sleek, toned body coming to stand beside her owner. Sasha was a dog.

“You know Sasha doesn’t like to be alone.” Dmitry reached down and ran a hand over her head. Now that my eyes had adjusted I could see him more clearly... could see he was watching me.

Dmitry took another step forward and the motion activated lights flared to life. I stared at Nikolai’s brother, saw him smirk at me, then glanced down at his canine companion. A sleek black and brown Doberman sat on her haunches beside him, her ears pointed straight up, her black eyes trained on me. If I didn’t know she was alive, hadn’t seen her move just moments ago, I could have mistaken her for a statue for how still she was.

He kept stroking her head, his sleeve pushed up his forearm so I could make out the tattoos that lined his wrist and snaked up to disappear under his shirtsleeves. But even those dark designs couldn’t hide the very clear—and numerous—scars that were raised underneath the ink.

“Why don’t you just get to the point of why you’re here?” Nikolai had shifted once more so he was standing at my side, and I felt instantly warm when his hand settled on my lower

back. But he only kept it there for a moment before he slowly slid it up, between my shoulder blades, and curled his fingers around my nape again.

God, why did I find that possessive, dominating hold so damn arousing?

I couldn't help but feel as if Nikolai did this as some kind of brand of ownership. And I couldn't find the energy to care. Because I liked it. I liked the heavy weight of his palm on my nape. I liked the feel of his thumb stroking up-and-down the side of my neck, over my pulse point right below my ear.

"I have business outside of the city that's going to require my attention for a few days." Another long pause. "I need you to watch Sasha," Dmitry said in an even tone.

I looked at the Doberman again.

"I'm not a kennel, Dmitry."

"Don't act like you don't like her company." Dmitry slid his gaze over to me. "It'll only be a few days. Besides, you know I don't trust anyone else with her." Dmitry slowly grinned as he kept staring at me. "Not allergic to dogs are you?"

I found myself slowly shaking my head.

"Great," Dmitry said with as much enthusiasm as a cold man like him probably could muster. "It's settled then. A couple of days tops. I think you and her will get along well, Amara."

I was aware of a rough sound leaving Nikolai, felt the air in the room grow hotter, the tension increasing.

"You and I have some business to discuss, don't we brother?"

I looked at Nikolai, saw the hard set of his jaw, the clench of muscle underneath. His nostrils flared once before he gave a hard nod toward his brother.

And when he looked at me I saw that truth in his eyes. Whatever business they had to discuss most likely had to do

with me... with my father and the massive mess that had been left back on the West Coast.

“You’ll be okay for a couple of minutes?” Nikolai asked and I was sucked into his orbit, as if he were the sun pulling me closer and closer.

Although I didn’t feel like I would be fine. I felt like I was coming apart at the seams and didn’t know if that was a frightening realization, or one that I ultimately would welcome.

I had to be stronger. *I have to be stronger.* Not just for me, but because of the situation at hand, the most important reason. Which was getting Claudia out of that house and away from Marco, away from being further molded and brainwashed into thinking that’s how her life should be.

Nikolai looked like he wanted to say something else, and God did I want him to touch me again, even if it was just a stroke along the side of my neck, a reassurance that he was coming back.

When did I get so attached? When did I find myself wanting far more than I should with this man in such a short amount of time?

It seemed so insane yet I couldn’t convince myself it was wrong.

“Give me a moment and then we can settle in for the night.”

I found myself nodding, and when he did lift his hand, when he tightened his fingers around my chin, I felt myself soften. He leaned in and kissed me softly, so softly it was like he hadn’t even kissed me.

And then he was gone, both of them stepping out into the anteroom, leaving me with Sasha, who sat still, watching me, those dark eyes far more intelligent than any canine should have been.

I wasn’t necessarily a dog person, had never grown up with any kind of pets in my life, to be honest. Father never allowed it. So I sat in the garden and threw seed out in front of

me, watching as the sparrows and chickadees, even the paired doves, pecked at the ground.

But Sasha didn't seem like a "pet". She was very much Dmitry's companion.

I kept utterly still, not sure if making sudden movements would startle her, cause her to be defensive. So I stood there, picking at my shirt, feeling sweat start to bead my temples.

This was ridiculous. She was just an animal, not giving me any indication that she meant me any harm. And surely Nikolai wouldn't have left me alone if he thought I was in danger.

I didn't know if I was going to move toward her or step back, but before I could make up my mind, she was slowly rising and coming toward me, her movements steady and slow, as if she weren't sure about *me*. It was almost humorous.

She was sleek and muscular, reminding me of a predator stalking closer.

It was reminiscent of when I'd seen a feral cat once at the back of my father's home. Its black and white body had been crouched low to the grass, slowly creeping toward a little bird that was eating the seed I'd thrown on the ground. I wouldn't have let the cat get the little bird, but I'd watched in rapt awe nonetheless. So stealthy. So quiet that the tiny bird didn't even realize, wouldn't have a chance.

The closer Sasha got, the more tense I became. She was just a foot from me now, her ears twitching slightly, the little nub of her tail not moving. Weren't dogs supposed to wag their tails if they were in a good mood?

Oh God. She was going to pounce, just rip my throat out and maul me.

And then she sat on her haunches, lifted her paw, and pawed at my leggings. I was so stunned that a small sound left me involuntarily. She did it again, and again, and I found myself reaching out with a shaky hand and tentatively running my fingers over the top of her head, keeping my movements slow and steady so as not to startle her.

And when she let me run my fingers across that bump on the top of her skull and behind her ear, I gave a little laugh.

She huffed out and gave a low groan, and if I didn't relate so much in that moment, I might have laughed.

"I know, girl."

The front door opened a second later and Nikolai was stepping inside and shutting the door behind him. I heard the faint click of a lock engaging, and then we just stood there and stared at each other.

Nikolai lowered his gaze and I knew he watched as I pet Sasha.

"I knew she'd take to you right away," he said almost to himself. "Go on, Sasha, lay down."

Sasha didn't move. In fact she growled low, which had Nikolai's eyebrows rising slightly.

"Seriously?" He growled in return and said something low in Russian, which had Sasha huffing out once more, but she did move over to the couch and laid her lithe body down on the rug, her focus never wavering from Nikolai.

"What did you say to her?"

"I told her if she didn't cut the protective bullshit, I'd feed her the kibble from the corner store instead of the steaks Dmitry left for her in the fridge." His lips twitched and I realized he was teasing. Nikolai Petrov... teasing. "I told her if anyone was going to protect you it was me."

My heart skipped a beat at that, but Nikolai didn't give me a chance to let his words flutter in me and spread outward, didn't allow me to let his meaning soak in. Because he started coming toward me, stalking just like Sasha had done... just like a lion did to the gazelle before he pounced and took it down.

He stood in front of me smelling like dark spices and remnants of the icy air outside. The plane ride had been long, the time change something I'd have to get used to. And with evening settling over the city, sleep sounded heavenly.

That was, it had until Nikolai stood right in front of me, both of us alone, the sound of my heartbeat increasing, and the feel of his body heat surrounding me, having any feeling of tiredness leaving instantly.

He reached out and toyed with the end of a lock of my hair, rubbing it between his fingers before lifting his gaze to my face. For long moments he just watched me, and with each passing second I grew hotter, as if I were standing under a heat lamp.

Wet and soft and ready for something I'd never experienced before.

"I bet you're so damn pretty when you cry," he murmured and smoothed a thumb under my eye as if he pictured a fat tear rolling down.

And even though I could assume the worst by his comment, that he wanted to hurt me and draw those tears from me, I felt the *truth* of what he meant.

Because thinking of him making me cry has me wet.

"Come, let me show you the rest of your new home."

...rest of your new home.

That should have scared me more than it sent a thrill of excitement through me.

I hadn't been able to understand how I'd become so comfortable with Nikolai in such a short amount of time. We knew virtually nothing about each other, yet the more I thought of it, the more I opened my mind and tried to sift through all the little pieces of its truth, that's when I understood.

No longer did I feel like that bird living in a gilded cage, singing a beautiful song not because I was content, but because I had a broken heart.

I was finally free for the first time in my life. I could breath and stretch my wings.

Amara

Nikolai held out the Thai takeout box but I placed a hand on my belly, then lifted my palm toward him and shook my head. “I don’t think I can take another bite,” I said with a grin, then followed it with a soft moan of discomfort. “I don’t think I’ve ever eaten so much in one sitting.”

I had my father to thank for that, a man who would watch our portions and scold us if he thought we had too much to eat. In his eyes all he saw us as was a pawn to use, and his pawns had to be thin and pretty and only there for appearances.

After Dimitri left, Nikolai gave me a tour of his apartment. Although the term *apartment* seemed grossly understating given his place. The penthouse was two levels, with the lower one housing the living room, kitchen, two bedrooms, and a full bath. There was a modern staircase that led up to the upper level, which was taken up completely by the master suite and bath.

The entire time he told me about the history of the building, how he purchased it years ago, gutted it and had it completely renovated. His apartment was the only one in the building, but he also had some storage space on an upper level, and an office that he used one below. It was strange seeing

Nikolai in that latter light... a legitimate businessman and not only as a criminal.

But I supposed those two lives were interchangeable in the underworld.

He told me about all the little details, the mundane pieces of information that seemed so very “normal”, for what a couple shared. He let me know the schedule of the staff who came in and cleaned, and how he had a secretary who came in several days a week and did office work on the lower level.

He talked about how the building was secure, that I was always safe when he wasn't at home, that he had men who patrolled the perimeter, and security cameras that monitored everyone who came and went.

He assured me no one would touch me while I was here, not even my father.

He explained his schedule could have him gone for long hours each day, but that he'd make sure he was home so we could eat dinner together every night.

Home.

Hearing him say that one word, expressing in that way how we shared the same space, probably shouldn't have made me feel as good as it did.

After that he suggested I take a bath and relax, and I'd been so stunned to see this gentle side of him that I'd stood there long after he'd left the master suite, just staring after him. Of course I didn't have much to go off of in being surprised by anything he did, but because he was a man in the same kind of criminal organization my father was, I assumed they were one and the same.

And although I wasn't a fool in thinking he wasn't just as deadly—maybe even more so—than my father, in only a few days' time I was finding out he wasn't like the evil monster I'd painted him out to be. Not to me at least.

So I'd taken a bubble bath, soaking in that massive tub until the water had become chilled and my fingers had pruned up. Then I'd wrapped myself in a plush robe, until my skin

had dried, and slipped on some leggings and an oversized sweater.

And here I was, sitting beside him on his couch, stuffed with good food, my head warm and loopy from the two glasses of wine I had, and feeling a different kind of heat fill me.

I stared at the television and let the words roll around in my head until they finally decided to spill forth. I reached for my glass of wine and finished it off, the sweet notes of berries hitting my tongue before sliding down my throat.

“This is all so...” I set my glass down and glanced over at him. He watched me stoically, then cocked an eyebrow as he waited for me to finish. “...domesticated.” I felt my cheeks heat at that admission and focused back on the TV.

“What did you think it would be like?” I shrugged and looked over at him again. “Thought I’d have you chained up in my bed so I could have my way with you any time I wanted?” He grabbed his beer bottle off the table and settled back on the couch as he brought the rim to his mouth and took a long pull from it.

I shouldn’t have felt the burst of humor at his words, but I found myself laughing softly.

“You should laugh more.” He brought his beer back to his mouth and drank deeply. “It’s pretty.”

My laughter died as something deliciously heated took its place.

“It’s just...” embarrassment had my words stalling.

“Don’t go all shy on me now, little doll.” The way he said that, and the look on his face told me he was thinking the same thing I was.

What we shared on our wedding night and on the plane.

“Unless you *prefer* to be chained up to my bed and at my mercy?” His voice dropped to a rougher octave then, and I physically shivered.

I knew he saw my physical reaction by the way his pupils expanded, his lips barely parting as he sucked in a breath. I was embarrassed by his words, not because he spoke them, but because of how much I wanted them to be true.

I was seamlessly turned on by the idea of Nikolai having his way with me.

His chuckle had me looking over at him, my face getting redder as embarrassment filtered through me. I was so transparent, his words having a physical effect on me that I couldn't control. I gritted my teeth and stared back at the TV, but a second later I felt his thumb and forefinger gently pinch my chin as he turned my head in his direction.

Gone was any kind of amusement, and in its place was a seriousness that had my breath catching in the center of my throat. For long moments Nikolai didn't speak, just stared into my eyes, his gaze slowly working along my chin and along the line of my jaw, before he made the trek back to my lips.

Back-and-forth, so slowly, as if he memorized every part of me.

With gentle pressure, he pulled me forward. I held my breath, but then started panting, my chest rising and falling far too fast to be considered normal. But Nikolai didn't comment on my physical, visceral reaction to him. Instead he pushed his thumb between my mouth, making me suck on the digit.

Our mouths were so close, my eyes barely open, this lethargic sensation moving through me. I could've blamed it on the wine, on the full stomach, but it was all because of Nikolai.

I felt so dainty sitting beside him, tiny and small against his massive body. All I could do was breathe him in. All I could see was him. All I could feel was *him*.

He hummed low and I felt myself get slick, my body preparing itself for *him*. And then I felt the brush of his lips against mine. It couldn't even be considered a kiss for as light as it was, yet I felt it in every single part of my body.

He slid the fingers that were holding my chin to the back of my neck. I let him take the lead, and liked that he was in control. I had a feeling even if I was experienced, I still would've wanted a man like Nikolai to show me how it was done.

With his hand on my nape, and more pressure being applied so he could tilt my head to the side, he opened the kiss. I moaned at the flavor of him, felt euphoric when he curled his fingers around my hair and tugged at the strands.

With each passing second his hold on me became more forceful, his kiss more demanding until he held a chunk of my hair in his fist, that sting causing my pussy to be soaked.

And that's when he pushed his tongue inside, stroking me from the inside out, pressing the muscle against mine before retreating and repeating the action all over again. We did this for so long, slow and thorough kissing, that I was liquid between my thighs.

I was drenched, the soft material of my leggings rubbing against the most sensitive part of me. I was braless, something I now wished I hadn't done because my nipples were rock hard and rubbed tortuously against the material of my sweater.

"I've never tasted anything sweeter" "His words were rumbled against my mouth and I felt the vibrations all the way down my body to settle right between my thighs.

He pressed his tongue in and pulled it out. In and out. In and out. The act couldn't be called anything but a mimic of fucking. God how I wanted it—him—right now, so much so that my pussy clenched hard. And when my inner muscles relaxed I felt more wetness spill from me, no doubt creating a wet spot in the center of my leggings.

I tried to clamp my thighs together but my position made it impossible, what with one leg bent on the cushion and the other one on the ground.

He broke the kiss but he wasn't nearly done with me yet. *Thank God.* He dragged his tongue over my top lip, then my bottom, lapping at me over and over again, slowly licking as if

he were a lion grooming me. And then he dragged that tongue along my jawline, moved it lower and lower until he was sucking at my pulse point right below my ear, scraping it with his teeth harder and harder with each passing second. I feared he'd break the skin.

But I desperately wanted him to.

Mark me. Mark me so everyone knows what you did to me.

"I know what you need," the vibrations of his voice went through my neck and I tilted my head to the side even more, giving him better access. His low chuckle was pleasure filled, and before I knew what was happening, his hands were on my hips and he was lifting me off the couch so suddenly that I had to steady myself with my palms on his broad shoulders.

I blinked open my eyes and looked down at him, watching as he stared up at me with eyes so dark they no longer appeared blue.

He said nothing for a long seconds and all I could hear was my frantic breathing. Whereas I felt disheveled, crazed almost in my need, my arousal, Nikolai looked ever composed. To always have to be in control must have taken so much energy.

And when he leaned back on the cushion and draped his arms over the back of the couch, slightly spreading his legs wider so I could fit between them, I knew I wouldn't stop this.

I knew I would let it go as far as it could. All the way. Until I was crying for more, tears sliding down my cheeks as I begged and pleaded for something... anything that would make me feel even more alive.

It was as if he was waiting for me to make the first move, yet I could see the tightness in his body, the tension around his eyes. He might be giving me the illusion that I had control right now, but I knew that wasn't the case.

But I knew Nikolai never gave up the reins, was always dominating in every aspect of his life, and I felt a shiver working its way through my body as I slowly licked my lips, loving that the small act had the muscles in his neck clenching as he watched me.

My hands were at the bottom of my sweatshirt and I was pulling it up and tossing it aside before I could lose my nerve. He didn't move, showed no reaction as I exposed my breasts to him. Of course this wasn't the first time he saw them, wasn't the first time he touched them... had his mouth on them. But for some reason this moment felt different.

I felt a surge of power fill me. I tucked my fingers underneath the edge of my leggings and pushed them down, my breathing so fast and frantic I felt lightheaded as I stepped out of them.

And then I stood there naked, totally bared to him, watching as he raked his gaze from my eyes, over my breasts, down my flat belly, and stopped at my pussy.

He stared at *that* part of me for so long I started to squirm in place, felt beads of nervous sweat line my temples... felt my inner muscles clench and my pussy grow wetter.

Nikolai stared and stared and... stared. God, he looked at my bare pussy as if he were memorizing it.

"Spread your legs," came his dark command and I shamelessly did as he ordered.

Cool air wafted over my heated flesh and I felt my eyes widen when my arousal started to slide down my inner thighs. Face hot as fire and probably redder than ever before, I was about to close my legs out of sheer embarrassment when he *tsked*.

"You'll keep your legs open so I can stare at that pretty cunt and see how wet you are for me." And then there was silence as he did just that, his gaze tracking that bead of pussy juice making its way down my inner thigh.

I was humiliated. I was turned on. But I stayed still with my legs spread, *feeling* his gaze on me.

"Look at how you're such a good girl." He still didn't move but trailed his focus up my body to look in my eyes again. "You're doing so well. There isn't anyone who pleases me like you do."

That praise shouldn't have hit me right between the legs, shouldn't have made me feel drunk, but here I was, swaying with the force of it.

I allowed myself to look my fill of my big Russian husband, at how broad his shoulders were underneath the button-down shirt that encased all that masculinity. I could see the subtle definition of his muscles under the expensive fabric, and felt my breathing increase. And then I was staring at the massive erection digging against his pant leg.

"You want to see it?" He taunted, erotically teased. He didn't give me a chance to respond, not that I could have found the words anyway. "Of course you want to see it," he crooned, his accent much thicker. "The fact you've never seen a cock before makes me so hard, sweetheart, harder than I've ever been."

My heart was pounding so hard and fast behind my ribs, and when I licked my lips his chuckle was instant, his focus never leaving my face. He lowered his hands to his pants, undid the button, and pulled down the zipper so it sounded obscene in the living room.

I didn't take my focus off of his face, too shy, too nervous even though I could see the movement of what he was doing, of how he pulled his dick out and started stroking himself.

His eyes became even more hooded, his mouth parting. *Oh God.* I wanted to clench my thighs harder, feeling more wetness spill from me. But I didn't want to disobey him.

"Go on. Look at it." The corner of his mouth kicked up in a semblance of a smile.

I found my hands curling into tight fists on their own accord as I lowered my gaze down to stare at what he did. I took in a sharp intake of breath as, the first time in my life, I watched a vulgar, sexual act. Calling it vulgar sounded almost wrong, as if what he was doing was immoral or wrong.

He was my husband. I was his wife. This was what married couples did.

And God he was big, long and thick. Too big. Too thick to fit inside of me.

I was transfixed as I watched his tattooed hand stroke up and down his cock. Root to tip. Root to tip. And on every upstroke he squeezed and pushed a bead of clear fluid out the slit at the crown.

He did this over and over again until that pre-cum slid down his dick, following the line of that thick, pulsing vein that ran on the underside of his cock.

“Get on your knees.”

I snapped my gaze back to his face, feeling my eyes widen in shock. “W-what?”

He made a disapproving sound. “Be a good girl and don’t make me tell you again.” He kept stroking himself in unhurried motions. “You know you want to, so sink down on those knees and come closer, sweetheart.”

It only took me a second before I found myself doing just that, like he had a chain around my body and one firm yank and I was obeying him. But this wasn’t about compliance or force.

This was about the pleasure I got acting on his commands.

“Closer, baby girl.”

I crawled on my knees until I was between his spread thighs, the scent of him invading my senses and nearly having a moan spill from my lips. Nikolai smelled like clean sweat, dark spices, and unrestrained power.

“I know you’ve never sucked a cock before. But I want to hear you say it.” I was transfixed at the sight of another bead of pre-cum forming on the tip before following suit down the underside of his shaft.

My mouth watered shamelessly, and I knew he’d asked me a question but I was so hazy with this reality that I couldn’t comprehend anything but counting my heartbeats.

It seemed to be the only thing that kept me firmly rooted to this moment.

“Go on, *printsessa*. You know you want to please me.”

What’s wrong with me that I crave to do as he says?

I forced myself to look away from him jerking off, but the sight of his pleasure written across his face could’ve had me orgasm right then.

My inner muscles clenched, my clit throbbed, and I was so wet I was a mess between my legs.

I didn’t know why I was so shy saying the words he wanted. I thought them loud and clear. We’d done far more explicit things, too. “I’ve never... I’ve never done that.” My voice was breathless.

He made a deep sound from deep within his chest. “No, baby girl. I want you to use your words.” A moment of silence passed before he continued. “Because we both know how wet that cunt gets when you’re embarrassed.”

I squeezed my legs together so hard a moan spilled from me, my clit getting pinched between my lips.

“I’ve never sucked cock before.” I felt my cheeks heat and was about to look away when he made another rough sound, forcing me to look at him without uttering the words

“And how much do you want to suck my cock? How much do you want to move that tongue over the head and lick up all the cum that’s coming out?”

I didn’t know when I lifted my hands, or when I placed them on his knees, but I found my palms moving over his thighs, and found my body moving closer to his.

“That’s it. That’s a good girl. Come closer and lick my cock, swallow the pre-cum I’m giving you.”

I curled my fingers against his thighs, digging my nails into the expensive material of his slacks. My focus rested on his shaft, at the flushed, bulbous head, at all that clear fluid leaking from the tip.

I was leaning forward before realizing I did the act. I dragged my tongue around the crown, saltiness exploding in

my mouth. It was such a startling sensation, an unusual flavor, that I snapped my gaze up to look at Nikolai.

He watched me, his lips slightly parted, his eyes nearly closed, nothing but pleasure reflected back to me.

“Open wider and take me as far as you can, let me feel the back of your throat. Let me hear you gag.”

I felt like I was in some kind of alternate reality, doing things I’d only fantasized about, hearing dark words I’d only ever envisioned as I lay alone in my room.

And wished for... more.

I sucked the head into my mouth, not knowing what to do, but envisioning Nikolai’s dick was gelato I ate in July, wet and cold and melting all over the place. I closed my eyes and sucked and licked, dragging my tongue over every inch, the harsh sounds leaving me turning my body inside out in the best way.

My jaw ached, my mouth watered continuously, but I didn’t stop.

“Look at you,” he purred. “Making a mess all over my cock. I bet your pussy is so drenched you’ve made a wet spot on the carpet.” He tightened his hold on my hair when I ran my tongue along the underside of his dick, picturing a fat drop of sweet gelato melting down it. “You’re a dirty fucking girl, aren’t you?”

I could only moan.

“Letting me make you do these filthy things without putting up any kind of fight.” He lifted his hips slightly and made me take more. “I like that I can make you my whore.”

My pussy clenched.

“But only mine. Only mine,” he whispered those last two words.

“You’re doing so good, baby girl. Don’t stop now. Take a little bit more.” Nikolai added pressure to the back of my head until I was forced to take another inch of his cock.

My saliva glands worked overtime, spit coming out the corners of my mouth and covering the sides of his dick.

“That’s it. So good.”

A little bit more pressure on the back of my head had me sinking down another inch. My shoulders tensed, my hands clenching at his thighs. It was too much. He was too big.

“Look at how well you’re taking me, sweetheart. You’re making me feel so good.”

And then I took another inch, feeling the tip of his cock at the back of my throat.

“Your mouth is so warm. So wet.” He grunted and lifted his hips, forcing a little more dick in my mouth. “That’s it. Swallow around the tip.” I gagged on how thick and big he was. “Yeah... that’s it. So good. Perfect.”

He pushed his cock deeper inside me again and again, forcing the crown of his erection to the back of my throat. “Swallow it, sweetheart. That’s a good girl. Just like that.”

The sloppy, wet sounds that came from me as I sucked at his dick was obscene, embarrassing. His fingers dug into my scalp, massaging, tugging at the hair. I was a slobbering mess on his dick, spit everywhere, dripping down my chin and onto my breasts.

Tears cascaded down my cheeks, and the entire time I stared into his eyes, unable to look away as he stuffed my mouth full of his cock, forcing me to do the most depraved act I could have ever envisioned doing. He humiliated me. He turned me on even more.

I clenched my thighs together again and relaxed. Doing this repeatedly, pinching my clit between the folds of my pussy, giving myself pleasure even though it wasn’t enough to send me over the edge.

Heavy tears on my cheeks, spit coming out of my mouth. He bared his teeth as he pushed my head back down on his dick, grunting when I tried to shake my head. It was too much. He was too thick and long. I was suffocating, drowning.

“Breathe through your nose, sweetheart.” He pulled me back and gave me a few seconds to suck in some much needed breath, before he pushed me forward once more.

Over and over he did this, using me, using my mouth for his pleasure, to fuck himself. And I let him. I wanted it. I was so wet I wouldn't be surprised if there was a mess on the floor between my thighs.

I felt him tense and knew he was close to orgasming. I never wanted anything more than I wanted him to cum in my mouth, to swallow it all, to know that *I* was the reason he lost control.

And so I renewed my efforts, taking as much as I could, feeling my throat contract, constrict around him. He growled low and tightened his fingers in my hair so hard a strangled sound of pain left me.

But he was too big, it was too much. My throat felt raw, and I still couldn't breathe. As if he read my thoughts once more, he jerked my head back with a harsh tug of his hand in my hair, the action so sudden his shaft sprang free of my mouth with a resounding *pop*.

Spit trailed down my chin and dripped down my bare breasts, causing my nipples to become even more taut, more aching. I was panting, my lips swollen, numb, the tears still rolling down my cheeks.

“Look at how gorgeous you are with your mouth all red and swollen from sucking my dick.” He roughly ran the pad of his thumb over my bottom lip, pulling the flesh down and letting it go with a snap. “Look at how dirty you are with spit covering your chin and tits because you choked on my cock.”

He leaned forward and ran the thumb he'd just used on my lip to smooth over my cheek, collecting a tear and bringing the digit to his mouth and dragging his tongue over the pad.

“I was right. You are fucking pretty when you cry.” He leaned in then, circling my throat with his palm, his hold loose, but I felt a calmness somehow settle in me. “And your tears are the sweetest thing I've ever tasted... so far.” And

when he dragged his tongue from my jawline over my cheek, licking up my tears, growling deep and harsh, I didn't stop the moan that left me. "Because I bet your cunt is even sweeter," he whispered.

And then I was lifted off the floor so suddenly the world spun. Nikolai put me on his lap so easily it was as if I had no control over my body, as if I weighed nothing... was insubstantial.

His hands on my waist were painful and brutal, and I knew marks would mar my flesh, but I'd never wanted anything more.

Nikolai used the hold he had on me to rock my body over his, his cock nestled between my pussy, my slickness causing this delicious, smooth fiction.

My pussy lips framed that massive cock, his thickness so substantial all I could think about was how could-would-he fit? How could he possibly stuff all of that into my unused body?

"It'll fit. I'll make sure you take every fucking last inch when the time comes," he growled and I made this strangled noise in the back of my throat.

Had I said my worry out loud? Did I care? The answer was a resounding no.

He moved me easily over him. Back and forth. Back and forth. I felt myself reaching that pinnacle, that precipice, the edge of where I'd fall over and wouldn't care if I hit the ground hard, crushing me, wiping away any thought or feeling or emotion that I'd ever had.

I curled my hands around Nikolai's shoulders, dug my nails into his flesh until he hissed, until he growled and held me harder. And then his mouth latched onto the side of my throat, his teeth grazing at my flesh hard enough the pain sparked something deep and dark and delicious inside of me.

"You're going to come for me, and you're going to do it right now, baby girl." His mouth was still on my neck, that soft, tender spot of flesh where my throat and shoulder met.

He bit down hard enough I cried out, then moved his lips to my collarbone, digging his teeth into the flesh and bone.

I swore I heard him snarl, felt his fingertips bruise into my waist.

He kept biting me, leaving marks, sucking at my skin. And it hurt so good. It was the sweetest agony.

I pressed my pussy down on his cock hard, rotating my hips, shamelessly fucking myself on him until I came so forcefully my head fell back on my neck, too heavy to hold up myself, my eyes closed on their own, and I gave into the pleasure.

It was only when I was aware of the sounds fading that I came back to consciousness. Nikolai was murmuring in Russian, soft things that I wanted to think were endearments, but a part of me thought that they were filthy, nasty words.

And God that made me wetter, a fresh gush leaving me as if I hadn't just orgasmed harder than I ever had before.

"I'm not done with you yet," I heard him say right before he bit the side of my neck once more hard enough I gasped, hard enough I thought he might have broken the skin.

And then I was flat on my back, my thighs spread so wide the muscles protested. He was between them a second later, his mouth covering my sensitive, drenched pussy.

"Mmm, yeah, that's what I fucking thought."

My hands instinctively went to his hair and I held on as he dragged his tongue through my folds, teased my hole, then flattened that muscle and moved it up to my clit.

"I knew your cunt would be sweeter. The sweetest thing... my fucking obsession." He sucked that bundle into his mouth and hummed, growled, and sounded like a crazed beast. "I want you to tell me you're a whore for me, but only for me." His words were muffled and wet sounding against my pussy and I cried out at how sensitive I was, how good it is.

"It's too much. It's too much." I didn't know if I was pleading that his words were crossing lines, or that his mouth

was too forceful as he tried to pull another climax from me.

“It’s not too much and you’ll give me this. You’ll give me everything because you’re mine, Amara.” He stared at me in the eyes for a second before he spit between my legs, soaking my pussy with his saliva.

I gasped, watched his eyes became lit with fire from the inside out, and then he was eating me out.

He sucked my clit into his mouth and drew on it hard. “You’ll only ever be mine.” Another hard, painful... so, so good pull on my clit. “Now tell me, *malishka*, tell me what I want to hear and what you want to say.”

I gasped and gasped and gasped and then cried out through my orgasm, “I’m your whore. Only yours, Nikolai.”

I was vaguely aware of the animalistic sounds he made while he was relentless between my thighs, while he lapped and sucked at me.... while he spit on my pussy then licked it back up. It was dirty and wrong. *It’s so right and feels too good.*

He kept me spread open, refusing to let me get away.

I slowly—painfully—came down from my high, crying, begging, praying to a God that wouldn’t listen. My fingers tugged at his hair hard enough I knew it had to hurt, but he stayed right there between my legs and ate me out, his licks slow and gentle now.

And then he was away from me, the chilled air brushing over my pussy, which forced my eyes open. But he didn’t move far. He shifted on the couch so his legs kept mine open, his focus trained on my pussy. His hand was wrapped around that massive, girthy cock, and he stroked himself fast and hard from root to tip.

“Look at that,” he groaned and used his free hand to slide up my inner thigh. I moaned at how good that felt, that soft touch when he did something so dirty. But that was short-lived when a second later he brought his palm down and slapped my pussy.

“Ahhh.” I arched my back, my breasts shaking, the sting and burn instant.

“Again,” he demanded as he still furiously moved his palm up and down his cock. He slapped my pussy again and I cried, begged, curled my hands against the couch cushions so I didn’t move away.

Nikolai smoothed his hand over my erotically abused flesh, soothing, me, driving me up higher and higher and higher.

And when he brought his palm up to the crown of his cock and squeezed, his forearm flexing, the veins standing hard viciously, I held my breath.

His neck muscles clenched as he groaned then barked out a hoarse sound. He angled his erection toward me and hot, thick jets of milky white cum shot out of the tip and splattered my pussy, my thighs, even my lower belly. It was everywhere. He was everywhere.

And his orgasm seemed to go on and on, never-ending, and all I could do was lay there and take it all, let him bathe me in his seed, paint me with his mark.

When he was done the only indication he gave was a subtle relaxation across his shoulders and the rapid rise and fall of his chest. His eyes were barely open as he stared down at me, as he looked at all the cum on my body.

“God, you’re a fucking mess, *malishka*. Hottest fucking thing I’ve ever seen,” he murmured. He reached out and smoothed his fingers along the streaks of seed, smearing it, rubbing it into my thighs and belly, my pussy lips and then teasing my opening and pushing some in there, too.

I gasped at the feeling.

He held his hand up, showing me how glossy they were, coated with his orgasm, and he made me taste it, pushing those digits into my mouth and against my tongue. He was salty and sweet and darkly addicting. And I found myself sucking on those fingers, lapping up all his seed like I was starved for it.

I'd never known addiction, never felt the undeniable pull of needing something so badly it hurt. But as I stared up at Nikolai, I realized this must be what it felt like.

This must be what it was like to know you could never go back to what was before.

Amara

“**P** riv’yet *malishka*.” The way he said that was all sexually laced and filled with innuendos.

I might not speak Russian, but I recognized a few words since being with him, and knew *malishka* meant “baby”. Just knowing he called me that endearment had me softening in the most liquid way.

“I want to take you to dinner tonight.”

Nikolai’s rough voice drew me out of my book and I glanced up at him. He stood at the top of the stairs, leaning against the wall and looking far too sexy right after a shower.

His dark hair was wet and not yet styled, his upper body naked and all those tattoos in clear display. He wore a pair of dark tailored slacks, but the button was undone and I could make out that hard, defined V cut of muscle lining his six-pack.

My face heated as I remembered what we’d done last night just on the couch not ten feet from me. My pulse ratcheted higher as I shifted on the tufted stool I sat on and my thighs protested because Nikolai had kept them open so long and with so much force.

And I felt every part of me tingle when I swallowed and the soreness lingered from when he stuffed his cock down my throat.

“Okay,” I said softly, surprised I had it in me to even answer right now.

I felt my heart thump in my chest when he gave me a slow smile and a long once over, as if he, too, remembered the filthy things we’d done.

When he turned and headed back into the master suite, I exhaled. I heard a phone ringing, then the distinct, muffled sound of him speaking in Russian. That distraction helped bring my thoughts and body back to the present.

It was still early in the morning when I’d woken up and seen Nikolai sleeping soundly beside me. I’d felt his body heat in all the right places.

I’d never slept beside anyone other than my sister when she’d been younger and I let her crawl into my bed after she had a nightmare, so I’d been thankful he’d still been sleeping as I’d snuck out.

And what I’d done couldn’t be called anything but that.

After getting ready as quietly as I could in a pair of leggings and a soft cashmere sweater, I made my way downstairs and into the kitchen. It had taken me ten minutes to figure out the coffee machine, a fact that made me feel ashamed. We’d had servants to handle these things, when this task, as well as other daily, household things, should have been common knowledge to me.

After I’d made myself a cup of coffee that had been so strong, I’d shuddered and coughed, and then had added damn near half the milk and sugar we had in the kitchen, I’d explored the apartment. With the sunlight streaming in the large windows, the penthouse had seemed far more inviting. Nikolai had built-in bookshelves across the room, many of the titles in Russian, some even Latin. I’d spent another ten minutes just pulling books out, cracking spines, smelling the pages, and feeling the leather under my fingertips.

I had picked a random one in English and found a little nook, grabbed a blanket off the couch, and sat on a little plush stool by the window. I stared out the glass and watched the cars and people below. It didn't matter the luxuriousness of Nikolai's apartment, once I looked outside all I could see was the broken sorrow that was Desolation.

And although the view wasn't horrible, with the main street that ran parallel to this building pretty quiet and as clean and taken care of as any place in this rundown city could appear, I couldn't help but picture all the emptiness I'd seen as we drove through the city to get here.

I heard him coming closer and tried to focus on the book, but the words blurred together. I couldn't concentrate and found myself reading the same line over and over again before looking up at him through the long fall of my dark hair.

He was on his cell phone, his words deep and low and in that sexy Russian. And God did he sound delicious when he was speaking that other language. He wore a suit, finely tailored, molded to fit his strong physique.

Nikolai could pull off business attire as well as a bad boy in a leather jacket. I'd take him anyway I could get him. And that realization shocked me even though it probably shouldn't have. I was thankful that I was attracted to him, grateful that so far he hadn't treated me badly.

I knew things could change at the drop of a hat. I'd only been in his presence for a couple of days. This could all be a farce, a mask he put in place. But I wanted to think it wasn't. I wanted to hope it was more than anything I could have dreamed of.

But the longer I stared at him, the harder I thought about all the things we'd done. How he touched me, the things he said to me. They all sounded so genuine. They sounded real.

His voice rose, his clear anger picking up with whoever he was speaking with on the other end. And when he got to the bottom of the stairs, he barked out one last word, disconnected the phone, and shoved it in the inner pocket of his suit jacket.

And then he was staring at me and I couldn't find the strength to look away, didn't care that he saw me watching him.

“Come here, *malishka*.”

“Come here, *baby*.”

I set the book aside and stood, padded over to him on bare feet, the cold wood underneath my soles doing nothing to cool me off. When I stood right in front of him, he stared down at me with an intense expression covering his face, one that I could have construed as angry but I knew better.

I didn't know how I was aware of something so sure, but I knew with certainty the look on his face was one of dark passion and intense need.

“I have some work to do that will keep me away for several hours, but I'll be back and we can have lunch together.” His voice dropped lower and he took a step closer. “And by lunch I mean spreading those pale thighs and feasting on your pussy.”

Oh. God.

I took a step back on instinct, the fight or flight instinct at war. On one hand I could feel the beast within Nikolai, having the survival mode running high. But I desired him more than I had the urge to flee.

I couldn't think, couldn't do anything but stand there and stare at him with wide eyes and lips parted, chest rising and falling, nipples hard because I was insanely aroused.

Faster than I could anticipate, he reached out and curled his hand around my throat, used the act and his strength to move me backward until the wall stopped our retreat. Nikolai added pressure on my neck to lift up until I was on my toes.

Although I could breathe it was hard, but I didn't fight, didn't try to get his hand off. I was wet, already soaked so that my arousal dripped between my thighs, my inner muscles clenching for something substantial, something thick, hard, and long.

Something only Nikolai could give me.

He pressed his entire body against me, had his mouth on mine, devoured me with that kiss, plundering my mouth with his tongue and teeth, biting nipping, drawing blood until I found my hand wound around his neck, my nails digging into his nape.

He licked my lips and kissed me harder, grinding his erection against my belly. I wanted him, those words on the verge of spilling from my mouth. I wasn't too good to beg my husband to fuck me, to finally consummate our marriage, to take my virginity and make me his. But he stepped away so suddenly that I faltered, the words drying on the tip of my tongue.

I had to brace my palms on the wall behind me to steady myself, his form wavering in front of me as my vision went in and out, endorphins and adrenaline rushing through my veins until I thought I would pass out.

He lifted his hand and ran his thumb along his bottom lip and I could see a smear of blood on the pad. He looked down at it, then dragged his tongue over the digit, licking at that blood.

I lifted my hand and touched my mouth, feeling the soreness on my lip. He reopened that wound he's given me on our wedding night, broke open the seal so I spilled into his mouth, so he took a part of me into himself.

It was insanely animalistic, wholly primal.

For long seconds he didn't say anything, just stared at me, and I allowed myself to look down the length of his body and saw the massive erection he sported behind his slacks.

He reached down and ran his palm over the hard ridge, causing my breath to catch.

"This is going to be a bitch to drive with." I couldn't help it. A bubble of laughter slipped out of me and I pressed a hand over my mouth. Nikolai smirked and I felt the lightness settle over my shoulders.

“You need to smile more. Prettiest thing I’ve ever seen.”
The last part was so low I didn’t know if I’d heard him correctly.

Who would’ve thought he could joke.

He walked up to me, smoothed his thumb along my cheek, and leaned down to give me the sweetest, softest kiss along my forehead.

And with a harsh breath he turned and left, shutting the front door behind him and leaving me there to sag against the wall and catch my bearings.

Or try to at the very least.

Amara

Nikolai led us toward the restaurant with a steady hand on the small of my back. I tightened the shawl around me, the blistering wintry air picking up and ruffling my hair along my shoulders.

Most of my clothing from back home had come that afternoon, boxes of clothing and personal effects that once I started going through them, they didn't feel like *me* anymore.

I'd have to take Nikolai up on his offer to go into Manhattan and get an entire new wardrobe. I'd waved off the suggestion, but after looking at all the clothing I'd brought from home, all the items that my father had to approve before I'd been allowed to wear it, now seemed toxic.

And as I sat on the edge of the bed and stared at all the clothing I'd pulled out, Nikolai had come into the master suite, as if he'd read my mind, and handed me a white box wrapped in a blood red ribbon.

Inside that box had been what I was currently draped in. A gorgeous full-length dress that seemed far too fancy to eat at a restaurant in Desolation, thigh-high stockings, silky garters,

delicate—intimate—undergarments, and high heels definitely not made for winter.

And as I'd looked at myself in the mirror dripped in lacy black decadence my husband had picked for me, items that were new and strange and never something I'd pick out for myself because it was far too sexy and showed off my curves, I felt more like myself than I ever had.

Nikolai held the door to *Vasyli's* open for me and I glanced up at him through the fall of my lashes to give him a smile. Although he didn't return the gesture, I saw the heat behind those blue irises as he blatantly checked me out right there on the sidewalk, right there where the patrons could see.

Once we were inside, the door shut soundless behind us and the soft hum of conversation filled the interior. Diners stopped their chatter to glance at us. I didn't miss how the women eyed Nikolai with interest, whereas the men swallowed and quickly looked away.

The restaurant couldn't be called anything but authentic Tsar inspired Russian, with traditional Eastern European music playing softly overhead, a Russian flag proudly displayed on one of the walls, and a very imperial royalty atmosphere.

I was so busy looking at the very traditional and culturally aesthetic Russian theme, that I didn't realize we were moving again until I felt Nikolai's palm once again settle on my lower back as we were led to a booth in the back by an older man with a shock of white hair and bright blue eyes.

Once we got to the table, the older gentleman, who introduced himself as Akim, took one of my hands in both of his and brought it to his wrinkly face, giving my knuckles a soft kiss and murmuring something in Russian.

And then he was gone and Nikolai was gesturing for me to take my seat first before he joined me in the spot beside where I sat.

We didn't have to wait long for someone to come by and bring a bottle of wine. They showed it to Nikolai and when he gave a small nod the waiter poured a small sample into a wine

glass. After a taste test and Nikolai's approval, both our glasses were filled and we were left alone once again.

I noticed there were no menus but I didn't question it when the first courses were brought out, as if the chef and staff dropped everything to cater to Nikolai.

I'd never had authentic Russian cuisine before, but with every dish that was presented and a small description by Akim personally, I felt like I'd traveled to a foreign, faraway place and was experiencing firsthand his Mother Country.

I realized, as the minutes passed and I became lighter, more relaxed, that I'd been tense, almost expecting this awkwardness, this uncomfortableness to fill the space. This was our first date. *My* first date. But as Akim initiated so much of the conversation, telling me snippets of his life when he was a child in Russia, and how his mother and grandmother made these dishes, I grew comfortable. I laughed genuinely at his jokes, blushed at his compliments, and felt Nikolai's gaze on me intently the entire time.

The rest of the meal passed pleasantly, with me savoring each and every dish that was brought out, and I got to the point where I didn't mind Nikolai's intense gaze on me. In fact, I felt flushed and heated every time I looked over and his gaze lingered on my mouth as I brought the fork or spoon, or even a cup to my lips.

I'd never felt so attractive in someone's eyes before, never felt like I was the object of someone's obsession. But I knew that feeling now.

Once the table was cleared and a fresh bottle of wine was brought out, I lifted a hand to my face and touched my cheek, the skin warm from the alcohol, a pleasant buzz filling my veins.

Nikolai leaned back, one forearm resting on the table, the other on the armrest of his chair. And of course his gaze on me.

"Come closer," he said in a low voice.

I had a feeling that even though he could have easily reached out and tugged my chair closer, jerk me toward him in a very dominant way, he liked the fact I'd obey him so readily.

But he said nothing once I was close enough to smell the spicy dark notes of his cologne. "What now?" I asked softly and his eyes grew even more hooded as the corner of his mouth curled seductively.

"We're going to sit here and finish off our wine and you're going to act completely natural the entire time."

I felt my brows lower in confusion, not understanding what he meant. But before I could ask or even try to sift through the meaning of his words, the heavy weight of his hand was on my knee, his fingers curling against the fabric of my gown as he slowly pushed it up.

My back went ramrod straight and I glanced around the restaurant. Although it was late enough in the evening and there were only a few tables filled, all I could think about was one of the patrons looking over and seeing what Nikolai was about to do.

"What are you doing?" I whispered and placed my hand over his, which had now crept up to my upper thigh, bringing my dress along with it and exposing the garter of my hose.

I felt like my eyes were so wide as I stared at each person at the tables, but when I heard Nikolai make a gruff noise, I glanced at him and saw his focus was on the black lacy garter on my upper thigh.

"I'm so fucking glad I picked this out for you to wear." He kept moving his hand up, my palm over his adding zero force so he was able to do whatever he wanted. "Grab your wine glass and take a drink, sweetheart."

I swallowed, my throat suddenly so tight and dry it felt like it was closing in. But I did what he said, reached out with a shaky hand and curled my fingers around the stem of the glass.

The liquid inside sloshed ever-so-gently as I lifted it off the table and brought it to my mouth, taking a long drink at the same time he slid his hand inward. The wine had no flavor, not

with how turned on and humiliated I was, not when I couldn't think of anything else but the skilled touch of his fingers.

Anyone could see us, a sliver of shame filling me at the knowledge he was going to touch my pussy, play with me in public.

Nikolai kept snaking his hand along my inner thigh, and then his fingers were brushing along that sensitive area where my pussy and inner leg met. I nearly choked on the wine as I swallowed, and I continued to look around the restaurant, just knowing someone was going to glance over and see what was happening.

“You're doing so good, *printsessa*, being a dirty girl for me.” He moved his lips to the shell of my ear. “But you're only going to be dirty for me, isn't that right?” He had his fingers over the lace that covered my pussy and I sucked in a breath when he added slight pressure.

When I gasped and tried to close my legs, he laughed low and deep.

“You know what would happen if anyone ever touched you?” His voice was so low by my ear that I wasn't sure I heard him. He added more pressure to my pussy, right over my clit, drawing slow circles over that swollen bead of tissue. “Do you know what I would do to them?” He moved his fingers away from my clit and I was about to protest, but the words lodged in my throat when I felt him pull the edge of my panties aside and slip his fingers under the fabric.

At that first touch of his fingers along my bare skin, I let my head fall back on my neck and had to force myself to close my eyes. The pleasure was instant and a soft mewl left me, one that made my face burn with shame and had me snapping my mouth closed and gritting my teeth.

“I'd make them hurt. Real slow. Make it really gruesome.” He rubbed the pad of his finger over my clit and my entire body tightened. “If they looked at you with lust I'd take their eyes.” He twisted his hand so he could still rub my clit but was now circling my opening. “If they touched you I'd take their hands.” He gently pushed his fingers into my body and I felt

my eyes widen and more liquid spill from my pussy. “And if they thought to take you from me, take anything from you, I’ll kill them as easily as I killed Edoardo.”

My pleasure was rising so swiftly, I squeezed my fingers around the wine glass until my hand ached.

“I’ll cut off little pieces of them, then bring my victories to show who’s protecting you, to show you how far I’d go to ensure you’re safe.”

My eyes fluttered closed then as pleasure raced through me. He kept rubbing my clit in slow, steady circles, adding a little pressure as he circled my hole. I felt my orgasm start to climb and knew there wasn’t anything to stop it. But I tried.

“Oh no, baby girl. You’re going to give it to me because you know how much it turns me on when you obey me so fucking well.”

I bit my lip hard enough I felt the wound he’d given me open back up, a coppery flavor bursting on my tongue.

And when he pushed a thick finger into my body and rubbed my clit harder, I came right there.

“That’s it. That’s my good girl.” His lips were by my ear, his breathing harsh, his words gruff. “That’s a good girl, isn’t that right, Amara?”

All I could do was nod and try not to let the pleasure have me crying out where all these people could hear. And when he thrust his finger in and out of my pussy, drawing out the orgasm, I bit my lip harder and moaned louder.

Just as the pleasure receded and I sucked in a sharp breath, I felt Nikolai drag his tongue up the side of my throat, then sink his teeth into the soft spot below my ear.

“The sounds you make when you come make me so fucking hard.”

He kissed my temple and pulled his hand out from between my legs. I sucked in a ragged breath, was panting as I wrapped my fingers around the stem of the wine glass so tightly I was surprised it didn’t crack under the hold.

As consciousness filtered back into me and my vision cleared, I noticed two patrons across the room staring at me with shock and disgust on their faces. But at that moment I couldn't find it in me to care. And so I held their gazes and brought my glass to my lips and finished off the sweet liquid.

The older man and woman looked away sharply and I felt the corner of my lip curl up at the fact I scandalized them. It was then I heard Nikolai speaking low and in Russian. I glanced at him as I adjusted my dress back down my legs and straightened in my seat.

His hard and cruel expression had me sobering and I smoothed my fingers along the soft, expensive material of my dress.

He glanced down at its wristwatch, said something harshly in Russian again, and then disconnected the call and shoved the phone back in the pocket of his jacket. Then he just stared straight ahead, his jaw locked tight, a muscle flexing underneath his tanned skin.

"Is everything alright?" It was two heartbeats before he looked at me, but then he exhaled, as if getting rid of whatever turbulent emotion he had inside of him.

He gave a sharp nod.

"*Da*. My plans were to take you home and finish what we started here."

My skin tingled and felt extra sensitive at his words. He was a ravenous beast. I remembered this afternoon, when he'd come home and made good on his promise of eating me out for lunch. And now he'd given me another explosive orgasm right here in public.

"My beautiful girl, I do plan on finishing what we started here, but we have to make a detour. A quick one."

I nodded, not able to find my words.

The bill was paid, Akim shook Nikolai's hand, and then my husband was helping me with my coat, kissing me on the crown of my head, and leading me out of the restaurant.

Amara

Yama wasn't like anything I expected when Nikolai told me we had to make a stop at one of the establishments he owned. He told me it was one of his fight clubs, not something I really understood, but as I stood at the entrance of Yama, I wasn't exactly sure where this "fight club" was taking place.

The interior of the restaurant, bar, or maybe this was gentleman's club certainly didn't scream illegal fighting. And I had to assume it was illegal given the nature of Nikolai's business ventures.

He slipped his hand along my back, curling his hand around my waist as he led us deeper into the establishment. There were leather couches and chairs aesthetically placed around the room, a roaring fireplace off to the left, and a long bar across from the front entrance. Bottles of clear and brown liquid lined the glass shelves, and the mirrored wall behind the liquor made it seem far larger than it was.

The men were dressed in suits, fat cigars between their lips, the scent of aged tobacco filling the air in a sweet, smoky scent. And the women were gorgeously dressed, with diamonds on their ears, jewels around their necks, and fat

rings on their fingers. Although I could've taken them for customers, guests of the expensively dressed men, I watched them flit around the room like little butterflies going from the bar to the seated men and handing out drinks.

Some of them even sat on the gentleman's laps. And when I saw hands disappearing down waistbands or fondling evident erections, I knew what this place was.

Some kind of escort service.

Nikolai led us through the room and down the hallway, lowly lit sconces on the walls, the carpet plush and soft underneath my heels. His fingers flexed on my hip when we stopped at one of the doors. A second later he opened it and I was ushered inside. It was nothing but a standard office, with a desk and a filing cabinet, a dark and distressed leather couch off to the side, and a coffee table in front of it.

"Nikolai?" He turned his head so he could look down at me, his hand still around my waist. He curled his fingers tighter and I felt like it was in reassurance. Maybe he could see the confusion written across my face. It certainly felt like it was there, a neon sign flashing that I knew nothing about the real world. Not really. Not where it really counted.

"I have something to take care of. It'll be quick. I want you to stay in this office."

I opened my mouth, not sure exactly what I was going to say. To protest? Agree easily? Before any words could come out he was lowering his head and brushing his lips across mine. Little shock waves of pleasure filled me at that gentle pressure. The kiss wasn't dark or demanding like his other kisses had been. It was soft, gentle.

"You're just going to leave me here?" I said and looked around the office again. I wasn't saying it because I needed someone to stay with me, but I was shocked he was giving me this freedom, so to speak. I'd never been left alone, never without a guard or chaperone. So I was a little... taken aback.

"Sweetheart," he said that endearment so sweetly it poured over me like melted butter. "I trust you."

My heart thundered. He didn't know me, not enough to trust me, but still, I felt pleasure at hearing him say that. And the tone of his voice told me he meant what he said.

“And,” he said and cupped my cheek gently. God, so gently. “I own this establishment. I own all the people in here, including the soldier at the end of the hall that'll make sure no one fucks with you.”

God, his use of profanity to emphasize his points shouldn't have made me wet. Yet here I was clenching my thighs together.

He stroked his thumb over my bottom lip, his focus trained on the act. And then he was leaving the office before I could even get my bearings. I lifted my hand and touched my tingling lips as I watched him go out the door and take a left. I didn't know what propelled me to move forward, but I found myself at the entryway looking down the hall and watching him disappear through a doorway at the end.

I looked back into the room, then turned and walked around, touching the desk, running my fingers over the smooth leather of the couch. I stood in that room for five minutes before I once again found myself walking toward the entryway.

I glanced to the right, seeing a big, beefy man standing at the end of the hallway dead center, his legs spread apart, his arms crossed. His stance was intimidating, threatening. Then again his size alone would've done the job of making anyone cower back. And I was only looking at his back. I could imagine the hard scowl on his face. But he didn't look at me, just stayed immobile. Like stone.

And then I was taking a left out of the office and making my way across the soft carpeted hallway, and stopping right in front of the door I'd seen Nikolai go through. I should've listened to him, I knew that. I knew I should have stayed in that room and wait for him. But energy filled me, the dangerous kind, the kind that would probably get me killed.

I turned the handle and pushed it open. A set of descending stairs greeted me, and industrial lighting lined either side of

the stairwell.

I gripped the banister and walked down, the air becoming colder. I wasn't stupid to think I wouldn't be greeted with roadblocks of some kind. This wouldn't be as easy as I hoped, as it had been so far.

And that became clear when I reached the bottom step and rounded the corner to come to a stop in an anteroom made up of cement. There was an industrial sized light hanging from the ceiling, a metal cage protecting the bulb.

There was another door right in front of me, and a massive man standing in front of it, a jagged scar across his cheek. He, too, had the same stance as the man upstairs. Legs braced apart. Arms crossed over his chest. His nasty expression was directed right at me.

The smart thing would have been to just turn around and go back upstairs. Nikolai didn't have to know I was here; didn't have to know I'd disobeyed his direct orders.

But I didn't do any of that, because either way I knew someone would tell him.

I found myself taking a step closer, morbidly needing to know what was behind that door. My stupid curiosity was having me do things I never would've done before, never even contemplated.

If Nikolai wanted a woman who could stand beside him and watch the ruins of his destruction, then I needed to start being that woman.

He told me he wanted a wife who was strong, a queen to stand beside him. So here I was, doing just that even though I didn't know what the consequences would be and was scared as hell because I knew I probably didn't want to know what was behind that door.

I was about to open my mouth, not sure what I was going to say, maybe tell him I was Nikolai's wife as some kind of flex, but before I could say anything the guard was stepping aside, reaching behind him without taking his focus off of me, and turning the knob to push the door open.

Well. Okay then.

I was greeted with another chamber. Another door. Another guard. And it was the same process. He looked at me, as if he knew who I was, and I supposed maybe he did. Nikolai was high on the Bratva chain, a Pakhan, an heir. I had to assume something as big as news about him getting married, especially to the daughter of a member in the Cosa Nostra, would make its way around the rumor mill with his soldiers.

I could hear the steady *thump-thump* of music, maybe shouting coming from the closed door. And then it opened for me and the sound exploded outward to surround me. I stepped inside, and when my eyes adjusted, my breath caught in my throat.

The door shut behind me with a *clang*, and I was so startled I jumped and looked over my shoulder to stare at that red steel barricade that now caged me in with the chaos I willingly walked into.

I couldn't believe it had been so... easy.

No guards, no babysitter standing behind me. Just doors opening for me like I had.... power.

Petrov power.

I took a step forward, and another one, my heels getting stuck in the tiny slats of the metal flooring platform I was on. I stopped in front of a steel banister and took my shoes off, letting the straps hang off my fingertips as I looked down at the lower level, at the cage situated in the center.

Good God. What was I witnessing?

There were so many people it was mind blowing in its chaos. The shouting was earsplitting, with the need for violence, more blood... even death swirling in the air until you could taste it on your tongue, until it hit the back of your throat and made you gag.

They kept chanting one thing over and over again.

Razoreniye.

I was halfway down the steps before I realized I moved. I was focused on the wave of people moving back-and-forth, arms up in the air, hand curled into fists as they pumped the air, shouting for *Razoreniye*.

Razoreniye. Razoreniye. Razoreniye.

When I got to the bottom of the stairs I only had a few feet in front of me before the crush of bodies would swallow me whole. And as much as I wanted to get closer to the cage, a dark and rested curiosity filling me, I also wasn't foolish.

If I fell I'd get trampled on, nothing but debris under all those shoes.

With each passing second I could hear the shouts growing louder. I could feel the energy rising in the cavernous room. God, this place was huge. All exposed rock walls as if they'd been dug out and just left to their own natural severity. The flooring was standard gray cement, the ceiling a highway of red beams, wires, and caged fluorescent lighting.

And then there was the cage, a massive structure that seemed to dominate the space. I rose on my toes to see if I could get a better look. I caught glimpses of rusty colored smears on what was probably a once white cage mat.

Razoreniye. Razoreniye. Razoreniye.

The name was shouted over and over again, ringing in my ears.

Whatever was going to happen was going to happen soon

Whoever—whatever—they were shouting for was about to make itself known.

I kept to the farthest back wall, but my focus was on the cage. And with each passing second the crowd seemed to get even more frantic, as if whatever was about to happen was what they'd come here for.

I was at the corner of the room when I stopped, rising up on my toes and getting a good vantage point of the cage. An announcer started saying something overhead but the crowd wouldn't be quiet enough for me to understand or hear clearly.

And then a second later the crowd erupted in shouts and roars, and I swear the entire interior of the room was shaking, the walls threatening to crumble from the force itself

I couldn't see anything, not with as many people as there were, not with how short I was. I contemplated moving further up when I saw the top of a dark head, and broad, bare tattooed shoulders.

The crowd calmed slightly when the announcer started speaking again, when the beast of the man climbed into the ring.

“The one. The fucking only. *Razoreniye* is in the motherfucking ring to destroyyy.”

Skull splitting noise so that I had to cover my ears.

“I know we have some newbies in the crowd tonight. Get ready, you sick bastards, to watch the man they call Ruin, a Russian killing machine who is a certified sociopath.”

The crowd erupted in excitement after that.

And then I saw him, a hulking beast of a man who made Nikolai seem almost... soft in comparison. And it was because as I looked into his face I saw absolute nothing.

Nothing but focus, concentration, and a very clear need for the ruin his namesake was derived from.

The entire front of his chest was covered by a massive wolf's head, a snarling beast with death in its eyes and blood on his snout. His body was covered with Bratva insignia tattooed on his scarred, tanned flesh.

I was frozen in place as I watched his opponent enter the cage, a man not nearly as tall or muscular, but still beefy, his hands like anvils, his bald head covered in swirling ink.

I didn't know how long I stood there after they started fighting, but as blood and spittle painted the mat, as punches were thrown, flesh bitten out, cracks of bones being broken, and screams and roars of pain and violence, I knew I'd made a mistake.

A terrible mistake. I should have listened to Nikolai. I shouldn't have come here, shouldn't have inserted myself where I didn't belong.

I was backing up, one hand held out behind me until I touched the cold wall. I curled my fingers around the straps of my shoes in my other hand, tightening them so hard around the delicate leather my knuckles ached.

I didn't take my focus off the cage until I'd moved ten feet or so, not realizing I'd walked so far into this underground coffin. And that's what this place was. A home for death.

I was about to turn and run back up to the main level and barricade myself in the office. But when I spotted Nikolai standing off to the side of the cage, his dark head bent low as someone said something in his ear, a thick yellow envelope being passed to him, I was once again rooted to the spot.

Although Nikolai stood still, a scowl on his face, not doing anything threatening, he exuded power and strength, dominance and severity in whoever went up against him.

The crowd roared and I snapped my focus to the cage, saw *Razoreniye* tackle the other fighter to the ground and start throwing his fist against the side of his head. Blood sprayed everywhere, and when I glanced back at Nikolai, I watched as he stared at the cage, a splatter of blood on his cheek.

He ran a finger over that blood, a slow grin covering his face as if he got off on the violence. I clenched my thighs again as a wave of heat slammed into me.

And then it's over, the fight finished, *Razoreniye* climbing off his unmoving opponent, his chest pumping up and down, sweat and blood dripping off his body. And I didn't think the latter was his. Not a drop.

Razoreniye walked to the edge of the cage and curled his hands around the fencing, his biceps flexing as he strained against it. Nikolai stepped forward and I could see his mouth moving, see the other man nod once. I found myself taking a step forward, some unseen force pulling me toward my husband.

But before I could move, a heavy arm wrapped itself around my waist and yanked me back so hard my head snapped back on my neck, my shoes fell from my fingertips, and I cried out in pain.

I instinctively reached for the arm, clawing at it, trying to get it off of me, but the grip was like iron, vice-like. And the harder I fought, the more I was dragged away into darker parts.

A grunt sounded when I raked my nails down the forearm, a low laugh as I was pulled deeper into the shadows.

A string of gruff Russian words were said behind me, followed by a response from a second man I hadn't known was there. More laughing, more pulling me further from the crowd until I was tossed aside and fell to my knees.

Another harsh cry left me as my palms and knees connected with the unforgiving cement. They started laughing and speaking in Russian again, and I quickly pulled myself off the ground and faced them, keeping them both in my line of sight.

They'd pulled me into some alcove. I could see the lights from the main room pouring into the opening. I could hear the shouts and roars from the crowd, but they blocked the entrance, and trying to move past them wasn't going to be successful.

"You're making a mistake," I said with more conviction than I thought I could muster. I opened my mouth to tell them Nikolai was my husband, using my husband's status and power to put the fear of god—and the Bratva—in them.

But before I could utter another word one of them came at me, hand wrapped around my throat, and used his strength to push me back against the wall.

He said something low and deep and no doubt disgusting. When he leaned in closer I turned my head and started fighting him again.

I managed to lift my leg and knee him in the groin, and was satisfied when a grunt of pain left him. He growled

something nasty abasing the side of my face, and I braced for the hit that would surely come, but a rough grunt and groan in the corridor had both of us tensing.

I heard something hit the ground, a meaty, wet sound following. And then the man who held me abasing the wall was off of me and the motion was so sudden I sagged.

It took a moment for my eyes to adjust, but then I saw a massive body standing five feet from me. I felt his gaze on me, this beast.

Razoreniye.

I could smell the sweat and blood that clung to him, and heard it dripping onto the floor.

A heartbeat passed of us staring at each other before he took a step closer. I pressed my back to the wall, about to scream, when he bent and picked up the man who'd been pulled off me.

Razoreniye had a huge hand wrapped around his neck, and the entire time he stared at me, I knew he was squeezing hard and harder.

He let the body fall to the ground and I thought he'd killed the man, but when he groaned and tried to rise, I snapped my focus back to the one they called Ruin.

He stepped aside just as another body moved closer.

Nikolai.

Nikolai stepped into the corner, his hands in his pockets as he looked at me and then at the man who was still groaning on the ground. He stopped when he stood right beside the wounded asshole.

Nikolai stared down at him for so long I didn't think he'd ever speak, but then he murmured low and deadly, "you thought you could touch my wife?" There was this deceptive calm in his tone that was more frightening than anything else right now.

My fearsome husband looked at me then, his gaze lingering on my neck where the man had grabbed me. It

throbbled and stung, and I knew it was red, and would possibly be marked come morning.

“I didn’t know she was yours—” The man said in English, responding to Nikolai.

“—You didn’t know she was mine?” Nikolai cut him off and produced a knife from his pocket, the blade catching the filtering light from the main part of the room for just a second. “You didn’t know she was mine,” he said again, low, his voice even, as if he was asking the question in a conversational manner.

The man pulled himself off the ground finally and stumbled backward until he had nowhere to go. A beast at his side, a wall behind him, and my husband stalking him from the front.

“You touched her.” Nikolai stopped and looked down at his knife, smoothed a finger over the blade. “And for every mark you left on her body, I’m going to cut into you, take a piece from you.”

And that was the only warning Nikolai gave. He had his hand in the man’s hair, yanked his head back, and proceeded to take chunks out of him, bits of flesh he tossed to the ground so they made a disgusting wet slopping noise as they hit the cement.

The man screamed, begged, pleaded and cried. But his sobs couldn’t be heard over the roaring coming from the crowd. But I had a feeling he wouldn’t have gotten help anyway, not when Nikolai was calling the shots.

I didn’t know how long this went on, but long enough that I tasted blood in the air, a coppery flavor that coated my throat and had me gagging.

And when the man was a ruined, barely breathing mess on the ground, as his blood pooled around him and snaked its way toward me, I watched in stunned–sick–fascination as Nikolai grabbed one of the man’s hands and started cutting off the pads of his fingers.

He did this to all ten digits, the man giving one last gurgled sound as his throat was cut open, his eyes staring up at nothing.

Nikolai wiped his blade on the other guy's jacket, pocketed it, and faced me. I was so stunned by what I'd just witnessed I felt like I was swimming underwater, unable to breath, my body feeling almost detached.

He didn't move for long seconds, just watched me. Without breaking eye contact, he said something to the mountain of a man behind him, and a second later we were alone. But that only lasted for a few minutes and then two men were coming and dragging the two bodies away.

I covered my mouth with my hand as I watched the dark, inky looking blood trail behind them.

"*Printsessa*," Nikolai said and there was this weird note in his voice.

When I looked back at him, I also took note that his expression was off. He was hiding something. Masking how he really felt. But I was too shocked by what happened to see too deeply into it.

And so I let him wrap his arm around my shoulders, felt him kiss the top of my head, and let him lead me out of that underground illegal fighting room, up the stairs, out the doors, and back into the hallway of the main establishment.

It was then when the noise rushed back into me. The sound of women giggling, glasses clinking filled my head. I blinked several times, the world settling itself around me. It was as if what I'd just witnessed happened to someone else. Elegance and lavishness surrounded me from top to bottom. Gone was the scent and taste of blood in the air, of the violence and shouting filling my head.

How did nobody hear what was going on downstairs? How did nobody know what was happening in the underbelly of this place?

The man who was initially guarding the front of the hallway glanced over his shoulder and lowered his brows. He

looked between the two of us, then faced us and held his hands out. He started speaking quickly in Russian to Nikolai, and the entire time Nikolai held his arm around me, keeping me close to his side.

“Give me a minute,” he said and before I could question him, he had his hand curled under my chin and tipping my head back so he could press his mouth to mine.

He slid his other hand up the length of my spine and cupped the back of my head, curling his fingers against my scalp, tangling his fingers in the strands. He kissed me long, slow and deep and everything else faded away.

My fear, the anxiety and the shock of what I witnessed all melted away under the onslaught of his mouth devouring mine. He was slow as he pulled his mouth back, languished as he dragged his tongue over my top and bottom lip. He dragged his tongue over my lips again, an act, I realized, he did every time after we kissed, as if he were marking me.

He pulled back fully and looked down at me, that strange expression still on his face. And then he was striding up to the guard that stood several feet away. I brought my hand up to my mouth and touched my tingling lips, my body light, my pussy liquid. A shocked cry left me when out of nowhere Nikolai slammed his fist into the side into the man’s jaw.

The sound of something cracking filled the short hallway and I stumbled back, feeling my eyes widen as I watched Nikolai continue to slam his fist into the other man’s face over and over again.

“Stop.” My voice was threadbare. “Nikolai. For God’s sake stop.” I was shouting now, tears streaming down my cheeks. He turned and faced me, his chest rising and falling, a cold, hard and dead look in his eyes.

“He didn’t protect you,” he said matter-of-factly. “He had one fucking job to do and he didn’t fucking do it.”

I was shaking my head before he finished. “It’s not his fault. It’s not his fault.” I felt like I kept saying those words over and over again. “You don’t have to do this. You don’t.” I

had my hands out, palms facing forward, moving slowly toward him. I didn't know why I thought doing so was a good idea, with the blood and gore covering him, the cruel look on his face.

But the closer I got, the lower his brows went, as if he were confused I was coming closer, as if he didn't understand why I would risk being so near to a feral creature.

I didn't know the kind of upbringing Nikolai or his brother had, but I could imagine. Being a male in the Cosa Nostra meant you were brought up to be ruthless, with little love and an iron fist always in your face.

I could imagine it was the same with the Bratva. I could picture a small Nikolai as a child, his dark hair tousled, his blue eyes looking in horror as his father made him do unspeakable things. I could picture his innocence being stripped away, bit by bit, layer by layer until he'd been shaped and molded into the man who stood before me right now.

Beating the hell out of someone for the simple infraction of not seeing that I snuck away.

"It's my fault. Not his. You don't have to do this." I kept my voice soft and low and reached up and cupped either side of his face. I could feel the scruff underneath my palms, and heard his breathing start to slow down as the seconds ticked by.

I didn't dare look at the man he'd just attacked, but I could hear him moving, the groans and grunts as he pulled himself off the ground and stood. Without looking at him I said in a steady, even voice, "you need to go. You need to leave me and my husband alone." Nikolai growled and I clicked my tongue. "Hey, you just focus on me. He's no one, okay? He's no one."

Thankfully he didn't question, didn't speak. He kept his movement slow and steady, probably realizing Nikolai was right there at the precipice of breaking down once more, using violence to get his point across because that's all he knew, all he'd ever been taught.

“It’s okay. I’m okay.” I smoothed my fingers over his cheekbones and added a little pressure to bring his head down toward me so I could brush my lips across his.

He had splatters of blood on his neck and on the white collar of his button down shirt. But I didn’t care. Talking him down from the proverbial ledge was my only focus.

Despite knowing I should’ve been terrified of him, fearful he’d use that power against me, I knew he wouldn’t hurt a hair on my head.

“Take me home,” I whispered again, and he sighed, as if he were releasing the pent-up aggression that kept him caged. I knew a man like Nikolai—the things he’d seen and done through his whole life—couldn’t be “healed”.

And I didn’t want to change him.

I just didn’t want the darkness to swallow him whole.

Amara

I could feel the wild energy pouring off of Nikolai. Although I thought I'd talked him down back at Yama, it wasn't until we'd gotten back to the apartment that I realized he was an expert at masking what he felt

Maybe he had calmed down slightly, enough to not kill that man, which was where he'd been headed. So there was that. But now I was alone with him. Right now I felt like the sacrificial lamb and he was the lion, pacing his cage as he waited to take me down.

As soon as we'd stepped through the door and it clicked shut behind us, Nikolai had made his way to the bar. Sasha had seemed to sense his volatile temper also, as she eyed him, then padded over to me to bump her nose against my leg before making her way down the hall and out of sight.

I stood there for a moment just staring at him, seeing how tense his shoulders were, the flex of his muscles underneath his jacket.

I hadn't said anything, worried that stopping him from taking out his aggression on that soldier hadn't been the right

move. But what was I supposed to do? Stand there and watch him kill somebody with his fists?

I couldn't live with that, and was surprised I was handling everything that happened tonight as it was. So I'd silently excuse myself to the bedroom, knowing we both probably needed to be alone.

And that's where I was now, standing in front of the window and staring out at the city that was now my home. My reality. For a split second I felt a twinge of homesickness. It wasn't for my father, not really for my mother in the sense that I missed her loving embraces and her soft words

But I missed my sister and brother, when I did see him. I missed the routine I had, all the things that were familiar to me. Small items that I'd taken had helped me feel slightly more at ease, but everything had changed in such a short amount of time that it was hard to grasp my footing.

I felt like I was on a slab of ice running but not making any headway, not putting any distance between me and the life that I'd had.

With a sigh of defeat, or maybe of acceptance that I had no other choice but to grab the proverbial horns and hang on, I reached behind for the zipper of the dress. I struggled for a few seconds, but then I felt a heavy presence behind me, body heat spearing into the skin that was exposed. It was my turn to tense, not sure how Nikolai would react, not sure what he would do.

Would he finally show me his true side? Would he be just like my father and take out his aggression on me with fists and cruel words?

And even though in my heart I didn't feel like he was like that, would never harm me, I was braced for it, knowing I could fight all I wanted but he was bigger, stronger. I closed my eyes when I felt him gently brush my hand away from the zipper, his fingertips sliding along the dip in the back of my gown.

A moment later he was pulling the zipper down, the sound of the teeth unhooking seeming overly loud in the quiet room. I felt his knuckles graze the length of my spine as he kept pulling it down.

“You’re trembling, *kukolka*.”

When the zipper was undone I didn’t move. The straps hung loosely over my shoulders, and I pressed my hand to the center of my chest to keep the dress on my body.

“Are you afraid of me?” I felt like his voice was deceptively calm given the violent energy surrounding him. I didn’t speak right away, just continued to stare out at Desolation, feeling the gentle brush of his finger up and down the length of my spine.

“I’m not afraid of you,” I finally said. “But I am afraid of the power and violence you have at your fingertips, how you can destroy lives as easily as taking a breath.”

I felt like it had been beaten into me since I was old enough to walk that the men in my life held life and death in their hands.

Nikolai was no different, but even in the short amount of time we’d been together he never hurt me, never so much as said a cruel word or gave me a hard look.

“I’d never hurt you.” His voice was still soft... but sharp like the edge of a blade. “I’d never raise my hand at you in anger.”

Up and down. Up and down. His touch on the center of my back was slow. Thorough.

I turned and faced him, his hand sliding from my body to rest on my hip. I stared into his eyes, his pupils spreading out and eating up the blue, looking as dark as the night upon us, as dark as what swirled around him.

He was trying so hard to stay in control, the adrenaline still pumping through his veins from what had happened tonight. I could see it, sense it. *Feel it.*

“You know,” he said in an even tone as he dipped his gaze down to my mouth.

I wet my lips, his intense stare having my entire body tingle. Nikolai was like an exposed electrical wire, and getting too close to him had the hairs on my arms standing on end.

It had danger flashing in me, like big bold letters, my mind telling me not to touch, not to get too close because I would get hurt.

Yet here I was, wanting that pain... but only by him.

“The only reason I didn’t kill Yuri for not watching you properly was because I didn’t want you to see me kill another man.”

He lifted his hand and at first when he smoothed his thumb over my bottom lip the touch was gentle. But when he did it again he added pressure, making it hurt, pressing my flesh against my teeth.

“It’s easy to hide insanity, but it’s more fun to let that mask slip.”

I wasn’t sure what he meant by that, but before I could question him, faster than I could anticipate, he curled his hand around my throat and used pressure to walk me back until the window stopped us.

For long moments he did nothing but keep that palm and finger collar around my throat, his gaze locked on me, heartbeats filling the space between us. He leaned his head forward, his mouth brushing along the curve of my jaw until I could feel his warm breath teasing my ear.

“I don’t think you understand how much control I’m exerting right now for you.” As if to emphasize his point, he squeezed my neck.

Instinctively I lifted my hand and curled my fingers around his thick, tattooed wrist, but I didn’t do it to push him away, to fight him. I did it to keep him right where he was.

“I can’t think straight right now.” His words rumbled against my ear and he pressed his lower body against mine. I

felt the hard outline of his erection digging into my belly. “I feel destructive, all that energy and anger I couldn’t get out, couldn’t finish off on that piece of shit who couldn’t keep you safe.”

He rolled his hips, circling them against me, pressing his hardness against my softness. I let out a little sound, one that was a plea, a desperate noise.

“I’m going to fuck you for the first time tonight, so hard that you’ll still feel me next week.” His words were matter of fact and I whimpered. “It’s going to be hard and rough. I’m not going to be gentle. I’m going to ruin you, ruin you for anyone else, Amara. Do you understand that? Are you ready for that?”

I opened my mouth but a cry left me instead of actual words. How did I convey that he terrified me, that he aroused me, that he awoke something in me that I never knew I had? It was a dormant darkness, this tendril of inky smoke that wound around my arousal and tempted me with corruption.

His name was a breathy moan from me, and when he bit down on my earlobe I cried out, that pain mixing with my pleasure and causing my inner muscles to tighten up.

Before I knew it was happening, he spun me around and pressed my body to the glass. He was rough and harsh as he jerked my dress down my body, material tearing, the sound of fabric rendering filling my dazed mind and heightening the ecstasy that I was slowly drowning in.

He inserted his booted foot between mine, kicked my legs further apart until I became unsteady and had to brace my palms on the window. My breathing was frantic, fogging up the glass, clouding the visage of his reflection.

“Mmm, this ass is perfect, firm in the right places, but plump enough I’m going to sink my teeth in and bite hard enough you cry for me.” His hands were on the cheeks, his fingers digging into the flesh.

I looked over my shoulder and watched him sink down to his haunches, curling his fingers harder into my ass, his big,

tattooed paws dwarfing the twin mounds. I held my breath, not sure what his plans were, but when he spread the cheeks and I felt cool air brush along that hidden part of me, a soft whimper left me.

“I’m not going to be destroying *this* hole tonight, baby girl. I’ll save that for after I’ve broken in your virgin cunt.”

Oh God, his words were so filthy.

He slid his hands over my ass to grip my hips and jerked me backward so my breasts were pressed to the cold glass, my lower half popped out and my legs spread even more.

I knew what he planned before I felt his hands smooth back down to curl around my cheeks, spreading them open once more. I felt his mouth latch onto my soaking pussy and cried out at the shocking intensity of that feeling.

I should have been ashamed by the sound I made, that little *umpf* of shock and pleasure as he ate me out, licking and nipping, lapping up my juices and fucking me with his tongue.

The grunts and groans he made as he ate out my pussy was wet, the sound of him sucking at me so loud that I rested my forehead on the window, my breathing harsh, the humidity from my panting causing my face to feel humid, the glass to fog.

He put his entire mouth over my pussy at the same time he brought his palm down on one of my ass cheeks, the smacking sound filling the room. He groaned when I popped my ass out more, shamelessly grinding myself against his mouth.

I was so close, his lips latched around my clit, the sucking motion almost bringing me over the edge. He brought his palm down on my ass once more, the sting instant, the pain having me rise up on my toes, trying to get away yet not wanting to because I needed his mouth to stay on me.

Right before I fell over the edge, he was off of me, spinning me around so quickly I gasped, the world spinning for just a second. He had his hand wrapped around my throat, his other snaked down the center of my back. And when he

curled a palm around my bottom once more, I gave him the moan I knew he wanted.

“I wish I could say I want to give you sweet and gentle for your first time.” His words were nothing but a husky growl against my ear, his fingers flexing around the column of my throat. “But I’d be lying. I want it rough. I want it to hurt. I want you to *feel* me.”

He gave my ass one more smack and squeeze before moving his hand between our bodies. I heard his zipper being pulled down and then he was rubbing the pre-cum slickened tip of his cock against my belly.

“I’m going to destroy your pussy tonight so you’ll know you’re mine.”

He pressed his lips to mine, not kissing me, just holding still, as he continued to rub his cum soaked cock tip along my belly. I felt like this was a primal act, marking me in a very visceral way. And then he bit my bottom lip hard enough I cried out. He soothed the sting by licking at my lips and then plunging his tongue inside.

I felt like a kitten as I sucked on his tongue, making the most embarrassing noises imaginable.

He slid one hand over my ass, down my thigh, and curled his fingers against the back of my knee. When he lifted my leg I instantly hooked it around his waist, knowing where this was going, desperate for it to happen.

Although it had only been a few days since the wedding, I felt like I’d been waiting an eternity for us to consummate the marriage, for me to fully be Nikolai’s in every single way. I knew he needed this just as much as I did. I could feel the tenseness in his body, the way his hand shook, the forcefulness of his kiss as he devoured my mouth.

He broke the kiss and dragged his tongue over my cheek and down my neck, biting his way, snarling and growling like he was a feral animal. But then again I’d always felt that primal power simmering underneath his skin, waiting to

explode. And I was going to experience it firsthand. I was going to absorb it all and ask for more.

So when I felt him place the tip of his cock at the entrance of my pussy I didn't tense even though I wanted to desperately. His cock was big, so big that I knew it would hurt when he was inside of me. He'd split me in two, fill me up so much the pain would be unbearable.

"I'd say I'm sorry it's going to hurt, but I'm not." He moved his hand down the curve of my shoulder, his fingers moving away from my throat and over my jaw, his thumb being shoved into my mouth. I sucked on that digit for only a second, and in one fluid move he thrust up and into me so hard, so forcefully that I sunk my teeth into his thumb, realizing that's why he put his finger in my mouth.

My cry was muffled, the tears spilling out the corners of my eyes, the burning, the stinging pain, the fullness and stretch unlike anything I could've ever imagined. He grunted as he buried himself fully as he kept pushing inch after inch into me. God, it was never ending.

"Just a little bit more and you'll have taken me all. What a good girl, look at you stretching for me, taking all my cock." He pushed in another inch. "I bet you feel like you're splitting in two, don't you?"

I couldn't answer, couldn't even form a coherent word

"Look at you being my little whore and taking it all, giving me those tears I desperately want."

I was sobbing now, my hands curled around his shoulders, nails digging into the material of his shirt. I wanted him to be just as naked as I was. I felt as if I were on a ledge, bared to him as he stood there still fully dressed, his cock pulled out the fly of his slacks, my back sliding up and down the glass as he pushed more and more and more of himself into my body.

He grunted and buried his face in the crook of my neck, biting me over and over. My throat. My collarbone. The underside of my jaw. He dragged his tongue over my cheeks, licking up my tears, kissing the corners of my eyes.

I was lost in the sensation as he stilled, every inch of his hardness now embedded in me, his balls pressed against the curve of my ass. My inner muscles clenched from the penetration, from the stinging fullness, the breath stalling intensity of my virginity being ripped away from me.

Nikolai was savage as he started fucking me, thrusting his hips back and forth, pistoning his huge cock in me so all I could do was hold on and take what he gave.

He was groaning words in Russian, speaking a fast string of the foreign language against the side of my neck between biting me. The pain was all-consuming, my wetness and no doubt virgin blood making his cock slippery and slick as he continued to fuck me.

He'd already ruined me, taken my innocence and locked it away so only he had the key.

"Look at you," he groaned, then followed it with harsh Russian words. "Taking it all, being my good little slut."

God, his words should have offended me, hurt me, but I found myself growing wetter, my inner muscles clenching around his girth. He grunted and picked up his speed at the same time he moved his hand between us and rubbed my clit.

I squeezed my eyes shut and made a long, embarrassing moan as pleasure sparked in me even more.

"You feel so good, your cunt so perfect. You're going to come for me, aren't you? Yeah, you're going to come and soak my cock."

He rubbed my clit harder, faster. Every part of me was winding up for an explosive orgasm. "That's my girl. You like that, baby? You like my cock in your pussy and my thumb on your clit."

I couldn't speak. I could only make keening noises of ecstasy and pain.

"There is nobody better than you, nobody that could ever please me like you can."

And it was that praise, the pain, the embarrassment of how sloppy our sex sounded, that I came, my body seizing, my pussy clamping down hard.

He said something in Russian, his voice guttural as he quickened his pace. “Fuck, baby girl. I can feel you squeezing me. Oh fuck you’re so good, so tight and hot, so damn wet. I’m coming.” He curled both hands fully around my ass and really started pushing into me and pulling out, his fingers painful on my body, his mouth on the side of my throat as he continued to suck and bite.

I came again and lost all feeling in my arms and legs from the pleasure. He held me up, though, keeping me impaled on his dick as his cock thickened a second before he spilled inside of me and filled me with his hot, thick cum. He was so hard, so big that I felt dainty in his arms.

“My little doll,” he murmured, his breath hot and fast as he panted against my throat.

He wrapped his arms around me and lifted me off the ground. I instantly wrapped my legs around his waist, my arms more firmly around his shoulders. His cock was still deep within me, my face buried in the crook of his neck now as he turned from the window and carried us to the bed.

He gently laid me down, and when he pulled out of me I gasped, feeling his cum start to slip out of my body. I closed my legs but Nikolai growled and curled his big paws around my knees, jerking my thighs open so he could watch as his seed trickled out of me.

“Look at you, so dirty. My filthy fucking beautiful girl, making a wet spot on the bed as my cum slides from that tight cunt and down the crease of that perfect ass. You’ll let me watch, let me degrade you again. I know this fucking embarrasses you, doesn’t it, baby?” He looked at me briefly. “Look at how dilated your pupils are, how much your breathing has picked up. You shy to let your husband see how swollen and wet your cunt is after fucking it?”

I bit my lip and moaned, my hips moving slightly. I was humiliated that he was watching his cum spill for my body. It

was so... obscene.

He lowered his gaze back down between my thighs. “You filthy fucking beautiful girl,” he whispered and I gasped when I felt even more of *him* come out of me. His nostrils flared, a low rumble left him, and then he let go of my knees and started undressing.

I didn't bother closing my legs, leaving them wide and open, knowing that's what he wanted. I was transfixed at seeing him fully naked, at the prowess that was... *him*, at all his tattoos, the lean muscle, his semi-hard cock that was still huge and intimidating. Although his cock was glossy, covered in his orgasm and mine, streaked with what could only be from my broken hymen, he didn't bother cleaning up.

And I didn't want him to. I just wanted to feel him, wanted a softer side of him to comfort me right now.

When he was in bed with me, Nikolai covered us with the comforter, pulled me in close, and just held me. I didn't care that I was sore and sticky between my thighs, didn't care that I still felt his cum slipping from my pussy.

I closed my eyes, rested a hand on his warm chest, and listened to him speak to me in a low, deep voice, his Russian words beautiful, lulling me to sleep.

“Sleep, *krasavitsa*. I'll keep you safe.”

And I knew he would. With his life.

Amara

Because I knew how to work the coffee machine, my cup this morning didn't taste like ass, and I didn't have to put as much cream and sugar in it. I'd woken up pretty early, before the sun had even risen, and saw Nikolai was already gone.

The sheets beside me had been cold, telling me he hadn't slept beside me for quite some time. I tried to call him but it had gone straight to voicemail. Although I knew he left early for work, I couldn't help but have this strange feeling in the pit of my stomach.

When I'd come downstairs I saw a note tacked to the refrigerator, informing me someone named Arseny had taken Sasha for the day. I admitted the house felt lonelier, empty without her here, and although she kept to herself, a silent companion, she was still the latter nonetheless.

I was now curled up on the leather couch, my coffee mug in one hand, my cell phone in the other as I dialed Claudia's number. I shifted where I sat and hissed out as the soreness between my thighs was intense. Then it had me blushing because that pain felt... good.

It had been a couple of days since I talked to her, but she'd been on my mind the entire time. My worry for her was not something I could get used to or push to the back burner.

I pressed the phone to my ear and listened to it ring as I brought my coffee mug up to my mouth and took a long drink. I stared at the splattering of clouds in the distance, an almost hazy fog over Desolation making it seem even more depressing.

True, I hadn't done any "sightseeing" of the new city I called home, but I was pretty sure Nikolai wouldn't want me to go walking around the city anyway. Maybe he'd take me out of the city frequently. Maybe I could make this work and not feel like I was living some stranger's life.

"Hello?" I sat up straighter and focused my attention on the phone call. Claudia sounded groggy, as if I just woke her up. And although it was going on lunchtime, she'd always been a heavy sleeper and late riser.

I cleared my throat and said, "hey." I heard some rustling on the other end, and could picture her lifting a hand and rubbing her eyes.

"Amara? It's so early."

I chuckled. "It's going on noon."

She groaned.

"How are you? I feel like it's been forever since we talked or saw each other." I was being ridiculous seeing as I'd just seen her a few days ago, but we'd never been apart this long

"Fine, I guess." She yawned and I couldn't help but smile.

Even though she was fifteen and starting to become more of a woman, she was still and always would be my little sister.

"How's mom? Gio?" I didn't ask about our father was because I was sure he was the same as he was just days before. An aggressive bastard who didn't care about his family or if they were happy. I heard Claudia groan softly then more shuffling.

“Mother is fine,” she finally said. “Gio left the day you came over, after your wedding.” I could hear her moving around, then a moment later the sound of water running on came through.

“Gio’s gone? Where did he go?” My body was tense when I heard that. Gio said he would watch over her, but if he wasn’t there the only explanation was father had sent him away. “Did father send him away?”

“I don’t know. I just heard him and father arguing. And then that afternoon he was leaving with a bag packed slung over his shoulder. He told me he’d come back as soon as he could. He kissed me on the top of the head, and that was that.”

I set my coffee down and thought about her words, my dread turning to anger.

This wasn’t a coincidence. My father had sent our brother away because he knew Gio would stand in his way of treating Claudia like shit, taking his frustration and anger out on her. Of breaking her down so she was pliable.

“Father can be unbearable.” She finally said and after a second I could hear the phone click on to the speakerphone, the sound amplified, almost echoed. There was more splashing of water, then the faucet was turned off.

“I don’t know what you and him talked about that day you came over after your wedding, but he’s been on a rampage.” A long moment passed before she replied and then I heard a soft sigh come from her

“What? What’s wrong?” When she didn’t respond right away I was about to push her again.

“It’s nothing. Really.” Claudia was an awful liar, but given the topic at hand my mind jumped to the worst case scenario.

“Are you alone right now?” I had to assume she was in her room but I wanted to make sure.

“Yeah. Why?”

I cleared my throat and said, “did father hit you? Has he hurt you?” She didn’t respond for a solid few seconds and I

knew what her answer was going to be before she spoke. “Claudia.” I kept my voice soft and low, gentle.

She wasn’t a stranger to our father’s temper, had been struck by him in the past for disobedience. But I’d always been there to help deflect his anger, to take it on myself.

But I knew if she got struck in the last couple of days it had nothing to do with her acting out and everything to do with me. Which had more guilt and shame filling me, and even more resolve that as soon as I talked to Nikolai again I was demanding we get my sister out of there.

At this point I didn’t care if it started a war. I wanted my baby sister out of that house.

“Listen, this isn’t something that you have to worry about, not something I want you to even think about. You’re married now. You should be having an incredible honeymoon somewhere tropical and working on getting me a niece or nephew?”

Her voice was light, but it was forced. I knew Claudia well enough to know that the tightness I heard was because she was trying to put on a brave face, trying to make it so I wasn’t worried about her. Did she know I’d always want to protect her?

“Let’s not get crazy with a niece and nephew talk this early.” She laughed softly and it was genuine, music to my ears at that moment. “Listen,” I said softly and stood, walking up to the window and curling my free hand around the edge of my shirt. “I’m going to talk to Nikolai about having you come visit us.”

She started to talk but I cut her off, needing to get this out.

“I think it would do you some good to come here. That’s what father and I were talking about the day after the wedding. I wanted you to come stay with us, to keep me company. He obviously didn’t like that idea.” I squeezed my eyes shut and breathed out slowly. “It’s not going to be easy. But I’m not going to stop until he gives in, and I know Nikolai is in my corner, yours too.” Although he never said as such, I knew

he'd help me, knew he'd help Claudia because she was my family. Now his.

"It's fine," she whispered but I could hear the tightness in her voice, and knew she was about to cry. "Things are just tense right now. Once everything from the wedding settles down everything will be fine."

Even I heard the underlining question in her tone. She and I both knew things weren't going to get better. They weren't before I left, and they certainly wouldn't now that I was gone. She didn't have a buffer between his anger, not with me away and Gio now coincidentally being sent away.

"Listen, you just hang in there and I'm going to talk to Nikolai. We're going to figure something out. Even if at first you can only come for a short time, a small visit, we're going to make it happen. Okay?"

I was on the verge of tears myself, picturing my sister dealing with all of this. She was so young, but had grown up so fast. Far too fast. If I didn't get her out of there, the next three years until she was pawned off to a man of my father's choosing would wear her down until she was nothing but a shell of a woman.

That or she'd destroy herself and her wild ways, getting back at our father any route she could.

"It hasn't been all that bad," she finally said on an exhale. "Francesca's actually been coming over and keeping me company."

Something funny happened in my chest, my heart starting to beat faster, my belly clenching.

"Francesca?" I didn't say anything more. They weren't friends, never had been. "When did this start?" It had to have been within the past few days, which seemed suspect as hell, but I kept that part to myself.

"At the reception, actually. I was sitting at the table alone as father and mother danced. I didn't know where you had gone. I saw her walk into the ballroom and she looked so upset. So I tried to talk to her, to make her feel better.

I smiled to myself because Claudia was so good at heart. She might be a spitfire and have the stereotypical temperament of a feisty Italian woman, but she had the kindest heart of anybody I knew.

“So of course I started talking to her, asking her if everything was okay. She told me how she had some personal things going on, family problems. And the rest is history. We just kind of hit it off.”

I thought back to that night, what I had seen between her and Edoardo, how the “family problems” had nothing to do with why she was upset that night. But of course I didn’t say that.

“What have you two been doing?” I kept my voice conversational, but red flags were rising up in me, one after the other, my anxiety for Claudia increasing.

Claudia didn’t answer for a moment as I heard her brushing her teeth. The faucet turned on, she spit, the sound of her rinsing, and then she finally answered.

“Nothing really. She comes here and we just hang out in the library, or watch movies and eat junk food.”

“Sounds fun, like she’s keeping you busy.” I started worrying my bottom lip as I continued to stare out the window. “Does she talk about anything? Me?”

“You?” Confusion in her voice. “Why would we talk about you?”

“It just seems... weird she’s hanging around suddenly, no?”

Claudia didn’t answer right away, maybe thinking about it, or maybe angry with me. I didn’t want to make things awkward, or plant seeds of distrust in her mind, but surely she had to see how strange it was Francesca, three years older than her, all of the sudden showed an interest in hanging out. Not to mention this was no coincidence, not after what I’d seen her and Eduardo do, not after Nikolai had killed Francesca’s lover.

“Maybe, but right now I’m not going to complain about having someone hang out with me.” There was a sour tone in

her voice and I knew this subject was done. I wouldn't push it, even tried to tell myself maybe I was overreacting.

"You're right," I finally said and heard her exhale. "Tell me about school. Any cute boys?" She giggled and was glad she could be easily swayed by the conversation.

For the next five minutes we talked about her school and how the boys were cute but not smart enough for her.

I talked about mundane things that I thought would keep her mind off the uncomfortable topic of our father and Francesca.

I was laughing at something she said when I heard the elevator stop at the floor, then the sound of heavy footsteps in the anteroom. A second later the front door opened and Nikolai stepped inside.

I gasped at the sight in front of me.

"Amara? What's wrong?" There was concern instantly laced in Claudia's voice.

I smoothed my hand down my sweater, tried to compose myself, and in a steady, even tone I said, "nothing. Just dropped my coffee and it spilled everywhere." The lie came easily because the truth was something I wouldn't ever reveal to my sister. "Listen, let me call you back so I can clean this up."

I disconnected the call and let the cell drop to the couch cushion.

And then I stared at Nikolai. He hadn't moved from his spot by the front door, and it wasn't the dark look in his eyes that horrified me. It was the fact blood was splattered on the collar of his white button down shirt and at the base of his throat.

I found myself taking a step toward him, and another, and another until I was only a foot from where he stood. I only took a moment to stare into his blue eyes before I lowered my gaze down his face and neck and stopped at where the splatter of blood was.

“What happened?” My voice was raised and loud in the sudden deafening silence.

“I had unfinished business to take care of.” His response was to the point, cut and dry. Hard and sharp.

He unbuttoned his jacket, shrugged it off his broad shoulders, and tossed it over the back of the kitchen counter chair. And then he turned and walked over to the bar, pouring himself a drink.

I kept the comment to myself that it was barely noon, because the more I let his words sink in, the more I let the sight of that blood on his neck and collar filter through my consciousness, it was that I realized the truth.

His “unfinished business” was him taking out the man from the club. I didn’t know how I came to the realization so quickly, or how it also solidified in me.

But as if he read my thoughts he looked over his shoulder, lifted his whiskey glass to his mouth, and took a long drink as if silently agreeing that I was correct.

“You can’t go around killing people.” I had no idea why I said those words. They were the worst possible thing to say at this moment.

He didn’t respond right away, just finished off his glass and poured himself another before turning and facing me. Then he took a step closer, and another one until we were only a few feet apart.

“Sweetheart, don’t you know who you married?” He brought his glass to his mouth and took a long swallow, watching me over the rim. When he pulled the glass away he said, “I’m Nikolai fucking Petrov. I can *and* will do whatever the hell I want, and that includes taking lives of anyone who fucks with you.”

I shivered at his tone and bit my tongue to keep myself from saying something that would make the situation worse

“When someone threatens you—“ he stepped forward.

I had to crane my neck back to look into his face. He finished off that second glass of alcohol and said, “—that’s unfinished business I need to handle.”

I felt like an eternity had passed before he finished that sentence, and all I could hear was how erratic my heart was beating.

“But...” I slowly licked my lips and glanced away. “You can’t just go around killing people who threaten me.” He smirked and that act shouldn’t have made my body come alive with awareness.

“Oh, sweetheart. That’s exactly what I do.”

I shook my head before he finished speaking. “You killed Yuri?” I remembered the name of the man who’d been tasked with watching over me at the fight club.

Nikolai said nothing, just continued to watch me with a steady, predator-like gaze.

“But he didn’t threaten me.”

Nikolai took another step toward me. “He didn’t realize you wandered off. You got hurt because of that. He’s also to blame for putting your life in danger. So I had to take care of it. He couldn’t be trusted any longer.”

I slowly shook my head, backing away. But he advanced, a little growl leaving him. “Don’t look at me that way.”

I wet my lips and said, “what way?” Of course I knew what he was talking about. I could feel the fear coating me like a full vat of honey. It was thick and sticky, almost suffocating.

“Like you’re terrified of me.” I did stop then. Because although I wasn’t terrified of him, I was once again frightened of the power he wielded.

I looked at the blood on his collar once more, pictured in the heinous way he killed that man, a man who didn’t deserve to die because he literally did nothing wrong.

And I knew telling—asking—Nikolai to stop hurting people was a lost cause. That was like trying to stop the starving dog from eating a steak.

“I’m not so much scared of you,” I whispered when he stopped right in front of me. “But scared of the fact you act before you think.” I would’ve never thought of saying this to my father.

But I didn’t brace myself for a hit, didn’t expect pain from my disobedience and putting my foot in my mouth, speaking my mind and my opinion. Instead Nikolai lifted his hand and cupped my cheek, staying silent for so long I didn’t know if he’d ever respond.

“I am who I am.” His words were finally spoken after long moments, his voice low, almost distant in tone. “I’m not a good man.” He’d been previously looking at my lips and slowly trailed his gaze up to my eyes, his hand still on my cheek, his thumb sweeping gently under my eye. “But you’re the only good thing I’ve ever had in my life.”

I sucked in a short breath and then held it in.

“Don’t you know I’d never hurt you? Don’t you know I’d never let anyone ever harm you again.” His eyes flashed fire and ice, his voice a balm that soothed my battered soul.

I knew he was referring to my father and I got emotional over it.

“Hey now,” he crooned and brushed an errant tear from my cheek. “You save those tears for when I’m fucking you and you’re begging for more.”

My heart was pounding so hard it was painful, threatening to burst through my ribs. How could I hate this man? How could I loathe what he did when he said things like that, when he protected me above all else.

“Nikolai...”

“Tell me you’re mine. Only mine.” His gaze was back on my lips and I wet them, my throat feeling tight, dry. My pussy was soaking wet, and I clenched my thighs together, a little needy sound leaving me.

“I’m yours.” The words were breathless, and as I watched his nostrils flare, his eyes spark fire once more, I knew what

was going to happen. I knew he was going to take me fast and hard, brutal and unforgiving.

Amara

“E asy, baby.”

Nikolai’s voice soothed me and I glanced over at him as the car that had picked us up from the airstrip stopped in front of my childhood home. Even after only being gone for less than a week, staring at the massive two-story structure made me feel nothing but empty hollowness.

It didn’t feel like home. Not anymore. Not when I felt alive for the first time being with Nikolai. He gave me that genuine feeling, that sensation that I actually belonged somewhere.

The sun started to set and I was thankful that we wouldn’t be here that long. Dinner, Nikolai and my father speaking, and then hopefully we’d be able to plan for Claudia to come stay with us.

Thinking she’d be able to come back with us tonight was wishful thinking, and something I wasn’t holding onto hope for.

I wasn’t surprised that the front door wasn’t opening for us automatically, even though I knew everyone was aware we’d arrived. The way we left last time had no doubt put a toxic

wall between us. I'm sure my father hated me even more than he already had.

And the fact he didn't welcome us, didn't have staff there to greet us, showed me as much. In his eyes I was not welcome here as family.

Maybe Nikolai felt my physical reaction, because my muscles certainly felt like they constricted at the thought. He smoothed his hand up and down the length of my spine, murmuring something in Russian, something I couldn't understand because it was so soft. But it sounded sweet, encouraging even.

Nikolai brought his knuckles down on the front door. Three hard, almost aggressive raps that almost had my lips twitching. He was in full alpha mode it seemed. He wanted to fight my battles, and I wasn't ashamed enough to not welcome it. I might be strong in several aspects of my life, but when it concerned Marco Bianchi, I'd take all the help I could get.

And who was going to turn down help from Nikolai Petrov, head of the Bratva?

After thinking that, I turned and looked up at him, his dark hair catching the sun and appearing to have an almost blue tint to it. His profile was so masculine I felt my ovaries explode. Square jaw, full lips, severe blue eyes, and dark scruff covering his cheeks.

Just as he turned and looked down at me, our eyes catching and holding, the front door opened. I forced myself to look away from my husband and saw the wait staff standing on the other side, head bowed low, refusing to meet our gaze.

I didn't recognize her, but then again over the years we'd had a revolving door of servants thanks to my father getting displeased with any and all small annoyances he had with them.

"Mr. and Mrs. Petrov," the servant said in a soft voice, sweeping her arm out to allow us entrance.

Nikolai ushered me to go first, his hand on the center of my back, as he followed me inside. The door shut behind us

and the servant gestured for us to go to the sitting room.

Once at the entrance, I saw my mother standing over by the bar mixing a drink, and Claudia sitting on the leather couch with her head lowered and her hands in her lap. She was wearing an elegant gown, something you wouldn't normally see for a family dinner.

My mother heard us enter and looked over her shoulder, her smile instant, but when she took in my appearance that pleasantness faded.

I wasn't dolled up like they were, in fact I wore a pair of soft leggings and a cashmere tunic. But my mother's mask of social pleasantries fell back into place and she set her glass down before turning fully around and walking toward me.

She embraced me but even I felt like it was stiff, and that pain of hurt and realization settled in my chest.

Once again my father was twisting my mother up, turning her against her own children. I vowed silently I would never be like this, never allow a man to control how I acted and thought, how I felt, no matter how much I feared him.

Those days were done.

"It's so good to see you, Amara."

I closed my eyes and exhaled, wanting the mother I'd known as a child to come back, the one who nicknamed me Sparrow not that long ago. The woman looking at me wasn't a mother admiring her daughter.

It was of a woman who was looking at someone she might pass on the street.

And God, that hurt more than anything else.

She pulled back, her hands curled around my shoulders as she smiled at me. "Married life suits you. You're glowing."

I found a flush stealing over my face as I thought about exactly where this "glow" came from, and it wasn't because of nuptials. And as if Nikolai knew where my thoughts were, the hand that was still resting in the center of my back flexed.

It was as if we were both thinking about what we'd done in the private jet just a couple hours before, how he'd pulled down my leggings, hooked my legs over either side of the armrest of the leather seat, and ate me out until I came twice.

I cleared my throat and willed myself to stop blushing. I gave my mother what I hoped was a polite smile. "Thank you." I wasn't sure what else to say. But thankfully she turned her attention on Nikolai, cutting off the weird energy that moved between us.

"Mr. Petrov, a pleasure."

He gave her a tight-lipped smile and said, "Oh no, Fernanda. Call me Nikolai. We are, after all, family now."

The look my mother gave him was one of surprise, but there was something else, something that subtly screamed right in your face that she'd never see him as family. That, right there, the clouded hatred in her blue eyes, was reminiscent of my father looking through her.

Oh mamma.

She cleared her throat and inclined her head. "Claudia," our mother said and I looked at my sister.

Playing it off like I didn't want to rush over there and embrace her was one of the hardest things I'd ever done. But I couldn't keep that mask in place when I saw the nasty bruise on her cheek.

"Claudia," I whispered and was standing in front of her before I even realized I'd moved. "What happened?" I let my fingers hover over her face, afraid to touch her cheek and harm her further.

"It's nothing. An accident." My mother was the one to speak and I gritted my teeth as I kept my focus on my sister.

An accident. I felt my blood boil. "Father did this." My voice was so low only Claudia would hear. And it wasn't a question.

"It's fine," Claudia said in a hard whisper and I knew she didn't want to talk about it. But she didn't have to.

Our bastard of a father had hurt her.

I reached out to take her hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze, a slight smile covering my lips that I hoped conveyed I'd make sure everything would be okay.

When I exhaled and looked over my shoulder at Nikolai, I could see his focus on me, his jaw set hard. His gaze slid to Claudia, and I saw a muscle under his jaw tick as he no doubt saw the bruise she sported.

"I know Marco mentioned having a word with you before we sit down for dinner," my mother addressed Nikolai.

He casually placed his hands inside his coat pocket and stared down at her with a blasé expression. "And where is he? He couldn't greet us at the door? He sent you to be his errand boy?"

Although I didn't approve of Nikolai speaking to my mother with such a hard tone, at that moment I didn't care because my sister had been hurt and clearly my mother didn't see any issue with it, not with her calling it an "accident". So I couldn't find the energy to care if she was offended. Which she clearly was by the startled gasp she made.

"Excuse me, Mr. Petrov?"

Nikolai gave her a tight smile. "You heard me. How about you tell Marco we're waiting in here for him. If he needs to speak with me he can walk his ass to his own sitting room and address me himself instead of sending his wife to do it."

My mother's face turned red and she bristled, but she knew better than to say anything else. She smoothed her hands down her dress and nodded once before side-eyeing me and Claudia, and then leaving the room. When she was gone I exhaled and Claudia gave a little laughter.

"Holy shit," my sister cursed and I held in my laughter at hearing her say it. "That was probably the greatest thing I've ever seen."

We didn't say anything else and only a few moments passed before I heard the heavy footsteps of my father approaching, the sound of my mother's heels clicking softly

following. I pulled Claudia off the couch, my hand still in hers, and together we moved over to Nikolai. Once again I wasn't ashamed to have Nikolai in my corner. I'd take any ally I could get.

The sitting room doors burst open and I felt my father's fit of anger before I even saw him. His cheeks were colored beet red, his dark eyes narrowed on my husband. My mother stepped in behind him, turned to close the door, and then moved off to the side where she could clasp her hands behind her back and stay silent like a good little Italian wife my father had shaped.

For so long I hated this life for her, loathed how she'd been beaten and brainwashed, molded into the woman she was today. I'd love her regardless. I was still a little girl who wanted her mother to brush her hair and tell her everything was okay, but I saw things for how they were and how they'd never change.

I could have overlooked, could have ignored when she looked the other way when our father took his anger out on me or Gio. But what I would not stand for, what I would not ever be complacent in, was how she could let him do the same thing to Claudia after seeing how much it had hurt us.

She should've been my younger sister's champion. She should've protected her. She just should've been our mother.

I felt like I was watching a volcano about to erupt as I stared at my father. He all but had steam coming out of his ears.

"You come to my home, insult my wife, and demand things of me?"

I had a feeling this had nothing to do with how Nikolai had spoken to my mother, or how he wanted my father to join us in the sitting room. Maybe there were things going on in the background between the Bratva and the Cosa Nostra, things I'd never be privy to.

Things I didn't want to know about.

There was definitely something going on between them. That was the only explanation for how my father was reacting right now. Or maybe it had nothing to do with any of that. Maybe there was something else. Surely it couldn't be because of the Edoardo situation.

“You forget who you're talking to, Bianchi.” Nikolai didn't move, didn't raise his voice. He was a pillar of calm and collected as he stared down my father.

And when Marco took a step forward I didn't even sense the slightest tenseness in Nikolai.

My father started speaking in Italian, low words of insults and slurs. I felt my eyes widen as he called Nikolai horrible things, as he talked about how the Russian and the Bratva were nothing but dogs.

“Father,” I finally snapped and took a step forward. “You will not speak to my husband that way.” Nikolai's arm snapped out instantly, a bar in front of me that kept me from going any closer.

I curled my hands into tight fists at my sides and hoped all my anger and disgust for the man who was nothing but a sperm donor, didn't show through.

“You cannot talk to my husband like that.” The words were pulled from me again. I felt something monumental change in me, one that had me growing stronger. Being that queen Nikolai said I was.

And I would not let this man, who hurt me while I grew up, who was now hurting my sister, do the same to the man I was falling for.

Have fallen for.

My father laughed darkly, his chuckles making my hackles rise. “Is this what the Russians allow?” He addressed Nikolai but he was staring at me. “You let your women fight your battles?”

Now it was Nikolai's turn to laugh. “A man is only as strong as the woman at his side. For there wasn't just Satan, but Lilith, as well.”

My father narrowed his eyes before looking at Nikolai.

“And if you have a weak woman beside you, well...” Nikolai shrugged, the unspoken insult speaking loudly.

My mother was weak, subjective to my father’s whims and demands.

My father opened his mouth just as the doorbell rang and for a second no one moved. I didn’t think anyone even breathed. I could hear the soft sound of shoes in the foyer, the door opening, followed by soft, unintelligible voices slowly filtering into the sitting room.

Yet still no one spoke, my father still glaring daggers at Nikolai, my husband’s arm still held in front of me, and my hand still wrapped tightly around Claudia’s.

“Why don’t you just tell me why you’re really here, *Russian*.”

Although my father had arranged this marriage, it was very clear he didn’t agree with it. Marco Bianchi may be high ranking in the Cosa Nostra, but he didn’t call the final shots, and I was sure me being pawned off to Nikolai had come from someone much higher.

So it didn’t matter if my father saw this as a bad union. He’d never go against orders.

“Why am I here?” Once again Nikolai’s voice was even. “I thought we were here to have dinner with *family*?” The way Nikolai spit out that last word told me he didn’t consider Marco such.

And the truth was, neither did I. After moving out of my childhood home I realize that this has never been my family.

My mother started speaking to my father quickly in Italian, but my father refused to look away from Nikolai, and when he lifted a hand in her direction, she became silent instantly.

And then all of our attention was turned to the entryway as two people stopped right inside. One of the servants stood beside Francesca, the latter looking at everyone with wide

eyes, her oversized jacket dwarfing her, and her hair looking windblown.

The silence stretched out heavy and thick, and as I stared at Francesca, I felt my brows lowered. There was something off about her, something about her demeanor that screamed panicked. Although she appeared fine, relatively speaking, her eyes had a glossy tint to them and were red rimmed.

She looked around the room with a startled expression on her face, her hands moving up and down her jacket.

“Oh. I didn’t realize there were... family plans going on.”

“It’s okay,” Claudia said and let go of my hand to walk around myself and Nikolai to stand beside Francesca.

I was still so confused over the friendship between my sister and Francesca that none of this made sense.

“Now is not the time, Francesca.” My father spat out the words and cast a withering stare in her direction, which had her cowering and taking a step back.

“I just wanted to talk,” she whispered, as she stared at Marco.

My father huffed out and stormed toward her, taking her by the arm and pulling her out and into the foyer. Everyone left in the room stared at each other with clear confusion on their faces.

I walked toward the entryway and peered out to see my father and Francesca standing in the foyer, my father a foot from the small girl, his hand swinging between them and his hushed voice slightly raised in clear anger.

“I don’t understand what’s going on,” I whispered more to myself, but before I could turn back around to stand beside Nikolai and wait to get this over with, father was striding away from Francesca, who was now crying heavily by the front door and staring at him as if he’d just torn her heart out.

I felt Nikolai’s hand curl around my wrist and then he was pulling me back to his side.

“Claudia,” my father barked out once he was back in the sitting room. “Deal with her and get her out of the house. She’s causing a scene.”

Claudia looked at me with wide eyes and confusion on her face before she left the room and went to tend to Francesca.

“What was that about?” I asked but my father didn’t answer. He paced back and forth as he ran a hand over his hair. He murmured low, his words muffled so I couldn’t understand him clearly.

I looked at Nikolai, who gripped my waist with his firm hand, squeezing me gently in reassurance. I slipped out of the room and walked into the foyer, where Francesca was still standing. She was sobbing at this point, and the closer I got to her, the more I realized she wasn’t just upset. She was drunk. The scent of alcohol poured from her.

My heart hurt for her. I could only assume how much pain she was in over Edoardo. It wasn’t like she could actually confess her feelings about him. She’d have to take that secret to the grave with her or risk tarnishing her and her family’s reputation.

“Francesca?” I said in a gentle voice and stopped a few inches from her, not moving or speaking again until she sniffed, wiped her cheeks, and then looked up at me.

She wiped her eyes quickly and cleared her throat. “I’m sorry. I’m a mess. I just... I felt so out of control. I walked out of my house and didn’t realize I was here until I was knocking on the door.” She wiped away a few more errant tears again I looked over my shoulder and into the sitting room to where everyone still was.

“I’m sorry if my father said something that upset you further. He’s... well, he’s like all the men in our lives.” I knew she would understand what I meant, but what I didn’t expect from her was the expression on her face. Narrowed eyes and pure hatred.

For long moments she didn’t speak to me, just stared as if I were the worst thing she’d ever seen. It was as if a switch had

been turned inside of her. Gone was the girl who appeared to have a broken heart and in her place was one who appeared to not even have one.

“Look at you,” she sneered. “Got everything you wanted. A marriage where your husband clearly treats you well.” She pursed her lips. “The way I’ve seen him look at you...” she shook her head. “A man who would level anything who tried to hurt you. He’d never toss you away.”

I had no idea what the hell was going on. “Is everything okay?” Something inside of me said I needed to back away, to go back to Nikolai, the room full of people. But I had a feeling I knew what this was about. She probably blamed me for Edoardo’s death.

If I hadn’t stepped into that hallway, hadn’t seen what I’d seen, Edoardo wouldn’t have a bullet in his head thanks to my husband.

And a part of me couldn’t blame Francesca, couldn’t hold any ill will toward her in that regard. If the roles reversed and something happened to Nikolai, I would’ve definitely blamed Francesca as well.

I found myself lifting my hand and placing it over my heart, my chest suddenly aching, a premonition that something horrible was going to happen.

Nikolai.

I looked over my shoulder and could see him and my father speaking. I was thankful no one was paying attention to me out here.

“This is all your fault. It has been from the very beginning.”

I faced forward again, my face no doubt showing my utter shock and confusion. “I’m sorry about what happened to Edoardo. It was a ‘wrong place at the wrong time’ kind of thing. I know how hard this must be for you, especially since you can’t tell anyone about your relationship or how you felt about him.”

Francesca slowly shook her head. “Edoardo?” she chuckled humorlessly again. “You think this is about *him*?”

“I—”

“No, this is about how *you* ruined everything.” Her voice was high-pitched. It was reminiscent of what I assumed someone sounded like who was losing their mind. “Do you think these tears are for Edoardo? Stupid bitch. No, I’m not crying because he died. I’m crying because Marco found out what I was doing behind his back with that low-life foot soldier.”

For a minute I was stunned speechless. I had no idea what she was talking about. What did my father have to do with this? I looked over my shoulder again but Nikolai and Marco were still speaking. The longer I looked at my father, the more my thoughts started turning.

“I don’t understand,” I said softly and faced her once more. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. You were afraid my father would find out about you and Edoardo? Why would he care?” I held my hands out, palms up, shaking my head.

“Are you really that dense? You really can’t let the truth sink in.” She took a small step toward me. “*Really* think about it, Amara. Really think about what I’m telling you right now.” She gave a humorless laugh and shook her head. “I have nothing now. Nothing to lose. I don’t care who knows the truth.”

I looked into Francesca’s crazed eyes, replayed her words over and over again, but I didn’t want to accept the truth that I’d come to. I didn’t want that to be my reality because it made no sense.

“You and my father?” The tone in which I said it must have spoken volumes, because she gave me a hard, tightlipped smile.

“Since I was sixteen. You wouldn’t believe how hard it was at first. He’s not a gentle man, as I’m sure you would know being his daughter. But over the last two years I grew to love him.” The smile she sported now was as if she were

recalling a time that made her happy, and her gaze was latched onto something over my shoulder. No, not something, but someone.

“You’ve been sleeping with my father since you were sixteen?” The voice didn’t sound like my own. “I—”

“Don’t believe me? I don’t really care. He doesn’t want anything to do with me now. He found out about Edoardo, blames me as well for the death and how the situation has gone from bad to worse between him and the Russians.” Her expression hardened. I saw pure hatred on her face directed right at me. “He wants nothing to do with me. He just threw me away as if what we shared the past two years meant nothing.” She started crying again, but it wasn’t one of sadness. It was one of pure rage. It was one that a human had who had nothing else to lose. “I thought he loved me,” she whispered.

“But if you loved my father, why were you with Edoardo?” I should’ve kept my mouth shut. I knew that was the worst thing I could’ve said because her gaze was crazy and cold.

“Edoardo found out about me and Marco, threatening to ruin my reputation, the reputation of my family. I couldn’t let that happen. I couldn’t let Marco know. I knew I’d lose him if he found out. He’d kill Edoardo if I told him. And Edoardo told me he had contingencies in place if anything happened to him, things that would ruin everything. Everything.” Her voice was rising even more now. “Edoardo wanted to rise in my father’s rank, wanted me to get him in good with my father. He used me like every person in my life has.”

I covered my mouth with a hand, feeling my eyes widen.

“He made me do things with him. Do things *to* him. I didn’t have a choice. I refused to have him ruin everything. My life, Marco’s, my family.”

Everything in me said I needed to leave, that being around her when she was like this wasn’t safe.

“You came here tonight to try and convince my father to stay with you?”

She didn't bother wiping the tears from her eyes now. “I've been hanging out with Claudia and hoping to talk to him, to make him see I love him and only him. But he avoids me at all costs. But I kept trying. And nothing was working. And now it's over. It's over.” She shook her head. “If he thought Edoardo's death was a mess that I helped cause, I'm going to make sure to make a bigger one. Because I have nothing else to lose now.”

I took a step back. Her words were too final.

Everything happened so slowly as I watched her reach inside her coat pocket. My heart was racing when I saw the light catch the metal of the gun she pulled out. She held the weapon between us, her hand shaking.

It was my turn to shake my head. “No. You can put that away. You don't have to do that.” I didn't dare look over my shoulder to see if Nikolai or anyone else saw or heard what had happened.

“He doesn't want me. He doesn't want to even see if the baby is his.” She wiped at her cheeks. “He said even if it was, it's nothing but a bastard.” She squeezed her eyes shut.

Oh God. The situation had gone from horrible to disastrous. Francesca was pregnant? And the baby was possibly my father's? My stomach churned and nausea filled me. She opened her eyes and looked over my shoulder and I knew Nikolai and my father were aware of what was happening.

“Put that away before you hurt yourself, you foolish girl.” My father's voice was rough and hard, scolding as if she were nothing but a child instead of a young woman he'd been having an affair with for the past two years. The girl he'd been sleeping with since she was only sixteen.

God, I was going to be sick.

“You said you'd take care of me. You said I was the only one.”

I felt like I was drifting away, my mind hazy, thoughts not making any sense. I wanted to look at Nikolai, to garner some strength, a little stability. I knew he'd give that to me, but I was rooted in place.

"Francesca," my father snapped out. "Put the fucking gun away."

She was shaking her head vigorously, the tears falling so fast and heavy that I knew she wouldn't be able to see clearly.

"How about we all just take a breath." It was Nikolai who spoke, his voice even. My heart started beating faster as I stared at the gun Francesca held, the gun pointed right at me.

"You kept me on the side. You told me you'd leave her. You told me we'd be together." She put a hand on her belly and I heard my mother gasp but it sounded distant, as if I were underwater.

"Maybe I should take away something you care about." Francesca's voice rose and rose and rose. "Tell them," she screamed at Marco. "Tell them you want me to get rid of the baby, even if it is yours."

The foyer was deathly silent, no one even breathing after that bombshell was dropped.

"You're acting like a dramatic child." My father's voice became icy and cold, collected and calm. "And you're making a scene."

"Fuck making a scene," Francesca screamed. "I'm going to take from you what you hold important. I'm going to force your hand in life like you're doing with mine. Fuck you, Marco." I watched as Francesca shifted her body, her arms swinging out so the gun was pointed off to the side.

The next sequence of events happened in slow motion as I looked over my shoulder and saw that the gun was trained on Claudia.

I was moving before I realized I was in motion. Although time seemed to slow, I knew it was going fast. Precious seconds that made everything happen in the blink of an eye.

I heard a shot ring out a second after I took Francesca to the ground. I heard a man roar out. Nikolai.

Adrenaline pumped through me as we both struggled. All I could think about, focus on, was getting the gun away from Francesca. Another shot rang out, and shouts came from behind me.

“Please. Please.” I was whispering, screaming, begging and pleading. One more shot and both of us froze, her eyes wide as she stared at me, the expression in her face probably a mirror image of mine.

I was floating, my body lifting off hers, strong arms wrapped around my body and cradling me close.

“Claudia,” I shouted. I could hear the words in my head, felt my lips move, but as everything came rushing back to me, I realized I wasn’t actually making any noise at all.

Sound faded away and all I heard was the *whoosh-whoosh* that filled my ears. *Whoosh-whoosh. Whoosh-whoosh.*

When did it become so cold? Why couldn’t I hear? Why couldn’t I speak?

I found myself on the ground and staring at the ceiling. I blinked, my focus going in and out. But then Nikolai’s face became clear. I saw the pure, stark terror on his face as he stared at something straight ahead, as his mouth moved but I heard no sound. He had this crazed look in his eyes, his face becoming red as he shouted something, as he lifted a hand and swung it wildly in front of him.

And then nothing else mattered as everything faded and I let the frigid hands that had a firm grip on me drag me down into the abyss.

Amara

I was warm but it didn't feel real, like when you're staring into a television screen at a roaring fire and can imagine the heat moving to you, through you, yet it's not your reality.

But as consciousness slowly altered through me, stronger and faster with each passing moment, I was aware of sounds and smells filtering through my nose, ears, and brain.

A crackling fire, the scent of real wood burning.

Something strong, stringent close to me. Antiseptic.

I felt a heavy weight on me, but it wasn't suffocating, it didn't hold me down even though I couldn't move.

"You won't leave me."

At first I didn't know if I'd heard the words correctly, recognized the voice. But then I felt warmth—real heat—cover the side of my face.

A palm. Big and strong. Familiar.

"I forbid it."

Nikolai.

I turned my head toward that hand, that warmth.

“That’s it, my good girl,” he crooned gently. “You’ll stay with me because there is no other option.” Nikolai started murmuring in Russian. Prayers maybe.

I wanted to tell him praying couldn’t stop death, and I felt like that’s where I was headed as the events leading up to right now came rushing back violently, painfully.

“Come on, my sweet, beautiful girl.” His words were whispered soft, his tone gentle. I’d never heard him sound like this before. “Open and let me see that gorgeous ocean color.”

And as if his words were what I needed to find that inner strength, to push past the pain and drugged sensation that tried to keep me under its spell, I opened my eyes.

I kept thinking about what had happened with Francesca. The gun, the shots I’d heard. I didn’t remember after that, after she’d looked at me with these wide eyes and this shocked expression on her face.

I blinked several times and stared at the ceiling. I looked around the room, seeing familiar things, items and fixtures from one of our guest rooms.

“I’m still here.” My voice was thick, my throat tight as I formed the words and pushed them out with a thick tongue.

There was a man who started speaking in Russian. Nikolai barked out something that sounded vile and dangerous. A threat.

He turned his head so he was screaming at something across the room, presumably the man who’d spoken. But I was still too heavy to follow his gaze. A muscle under his cheek ticked, his neck flexing as his face turned red as he continued to spit out angry words to the man.

But still he kept his hand on my cheek, his thumb gently sweeping right under my eyes.

“Do it all. Whatever it takes,” he responded in English. “Your life depends on hers.” The words were sharp and cold and hard. I was glad they weren’t directed at me. And then he was looking at me again.

I realized my mouth was moving, but the words I tried to speak were too low. I felt too weak and I God, everything hurt. I closed my eyes and the words coming through were louder.

He leaned in and whispered, “what is it, *malishka*?” His voice was soft, softer than I’d ever heard it.

“It’s cold.” I didn’t know if I said that out loud, but when my teeth started chattering I felt Nikolai’s other hand cover each side of my face.

“Little doll.” His voice sounded funny. His face started to bleed out of focus. I didn’t want to stop looking at him.

“You’ll be fine. You’ll be fine.” He kept saying that over and over again. He stroked my cheeks and brought one of his hands up to show me that my tears covered his fingers. “Your tears are so sweet, but not like this, not right now. You’ll give me more of these sweet tears when you’re better. Only then, when we are laying together in our bed and I can use my body as a shield protecting you, only then will you give me these tears because they’ll be in pleasure.” He leaned down and kissed me on the lips. “You’ll give me all that because I won’t accept any less.”

Then there was someone standing beside me, the blankets being pushed aside, and the sensation of tugging moving my body. But I never stopped looking at Nikolai.

“Because these tears are as sweet as the hold you have over me.”

And it was those words that pulled me down. I fought and fought and fought, not wanting to get dragged to the undercurrents and taken away from Nikolai.

But like almost all aspects of my life thus far, I had no choice but to comply.



I HEARD the gentle sloshing of water, then felt the warm droplets along my brow. I furrowed my brow and heard someone shushing me.

When I opened my eyes it was to see the wavy, out of focus visage of Claudia sitting at my bedside.

“Hey you,” Claudia said softly and ran the rag over my temple and down my cheek. “Scared the hell out of all of us.” More sounds of water sloshing, of dripping, and then the soft sweep of the rag on the other side of my head. “Gio arrived late last night. He’s freaking out, of course, going all beast-mode on everyone, threatening to kill anyone who gets too close to you—”

“—you’re okay,” I cut her off and lifted my arm—which felt far too heavy—to place my hand on her thigh. “I thought, God, Claudia, I thought you were going to get shot.”

She gave me a sad smile and shook her head, a stray tear sliding down her cheek. “I’m fine. I’m fine. And it’s because you acted, even if it was dumb and crazy and I hate you for getting hurt because of it.” She smiled sadly and for the first time my sister didn’t seem like she was a girl. She held herself like a woman who’d already seen far too much. “But...” She looked away.

“But what?” I tried to sit up but gasped in pain, my side burning, searing, like I was consumed by fire.

“Hey, hey, hey,” she said and shook her head vehemently. “Stay put. You’re going to ruin the work the doctor did and then that’ll piss off Nikolai and he’ll either kill someone or kick Gio’s ass again.”

I stilled and Claudia chuckled. “When Gio first arrived he strode in here like his ass was on fire. You woke up but you were out of it. You started thrashing on the bed. Nikolai dragged him out by his throat, kicked his ass in the hallway, and told him the next time he hurt you—even inadvertently—he’d put a bullet in each of his knees caps.” Claudia rolled her eyes and exhaled. “Men.” She said that lone word like it explained everything and I smiled.

I had no recollection of Gio coming in here or thrashing around. But that wasn’t important. Because the longer I stared at her face the more I knew something was wrong. Really wrong. “Tell me,” I croaked out.

She exhaled on a huff and tossed the rag in the small bowl on the bedside table. “Francesca shot off three rounds. One of them hit you in the side, but thankfully Nikolai acted fast and got a Russian doctor here. He was covered in your blood.” Her face blanched. “Pressure on the wound, and was the only one not freaking out. As long as there isn’t an infection and you don’t strain yourself, he said you’ll make a full recovery.”

I closed my eyes and wet my dry lips. “But?” I knew there was more.

“The first bullet hit father, and the last got Francesca and she’s dead, too.” I slowly opened my eyes and stared at my sister. “Father is dead.”

I waited for the shock of that to hit me, the sorrow, that sadness of losing a parent. There was... nothing.

She looked down at her hands, her fingers twisted together in her lap. “Is it bad that I don’t feel anything?” Her voice was low, strained.

“Oh, Claudia.” I tightened my fingers around her thigh until she glanced up at me. “I don’t feel anything either.” I rested my head fully back on the pillow, staring at the ceiling. “In fact,” I said harshly. “I’m glad he’s gone.”

I should’ve felt callous for saying that, but I felt so numb at the moment that I didn’t want to bring up any of that. I didn’t want to talk about my father or what he’d done with Francesca.

I know if I hadn’t stopped her she would have shot Claudia, maybe even my mother, God maybe Nikolai if she’d been quick enough. I was glad things happened the way they had because if not everything would’ve been so much worse.

I closed my eyes and breathed through my nose slowly. “He was a bastard. Cruel and heartless and deserved what he got.” I squeezed my eyes tighter and felt acid rise up my throat. “Francesca was lost, lost in the grief and her love for a piece of shit who could never give her the love she deserved.” I rubbed my hands over my eyes, my chest tight. “How is mother?”

When I heard Claudia sigh I opened my eyes and looked at my sister. “She’s fine. Shaken up, but I’m pretty sure it’s not because she saw father bleed out in the foyer.” She gave a humorous laugh and shook her head. “I’m sure she’s trying to process everything that Francesca told her, although you and I both know he was no saint, and obviously didn’t take his marriage vows seriously.”

She ran a hand over her face and for the first time I noticed the dark circles under her eyes.

“I can’t believe he was having an affair with Francesca of all people, and when they started she was so young.” Claudia made a disgusted face. “And the baby, Amara..” She looked at me with sad eyes. “She was pregnant. Possibly with father’s baby—”

“—hey, let’s not think about any of that. Because at the end of the day it doesn’t matter. What’s done is done.”

“He could have survived,” Claudia whispered, her eyes wide.

“What do you mean?”

She moistened her lips and looked at the closed bedroom door. “Father.” She glanced back at me. “He might have survived, but Nikolai wouldn’t let the doctor he brought in help. Nikolai demanded he only focus on you, and told everyone to stay where they were. No one, not the staff, not us, were to call anyone for help. He said he’d take care of everything.”

My heart was beating a mile a minute at the revelation.

“And as the doctor was working on you, Nikolai had the coldest look on his face as he stared at father, who was bleeding out all over the tile. Mother was crying and kneeling beside him, but she wouldn’t touch him, just kept shaking her head and staring at where Francesca lay dead.”

My breath hiccuped in my chest. Oh God. Nikolai had let our father die, and had watched him. And I knew why he’d done it, why he hadn’t saved Marco. Because if my father died at the hands of Francesca, this way it wouldn’t cause a war

between the Cosa Nostra and the Bratva. It would look like Francesca, a scorned lover, had shot my father and killed him in a fit of rage.

If Nikolai had killed a Capo in the Cosa Nostra, family or not, alliances or not, our families would have been at war. The organizations would be at war.

And as I thought about all of that, as I thought about the circumstances that led up to it all, and pieced together the calculation Nikolai had done to make sure my father died the way he had, my chest felt like it was closing in.

“Oh hey, I didn’t tell you to upset you, Amara. Calm down. Calm down. It’s okay.” She softly murmured and pulled the blanket up to my chest.

What I knew, and what I wouldn’t tell her, was that what I felt right now had nothing to do with being upset our father died and Nikolai could have prevented it. No, I felt like this, felt like I couldn’t breathe, because Nikolai had done what he’d done to ensure Claudia was safe.

He did this for me.

“You need to rest. I can tell you’ve probably been up since all this happened.” Her shoulders sagged and she nodded once more. “How long have I been out anyway?”

“Three days.”

God, I’d lost seventy-two hours and I had no recollection of anything but pain and drifting away.

“But now that you’re up and talking, and look relatively well, I feel like I could probably sleep for a month.” She gave me a small smile. “Besides, Nikolai asked,” she rolled her eyes and murmured, “demanded more like it, that I let him know the moment you were up. He’s been pacing this bedroom the entire time. The only reason he’s not here right now is because his brother flew in from New York and he and Nikolai are speaking with Gio in the study. Now that father is gone Gio has taken up Head of the Family. I’m sure they have to get their houses in order and what this all means for the organizations.”

Amara

A month later

I heard Sasha whine at the door and got off the couch, my hand going to my side instinctively because I knew the movement and shift in position would tug at my still healing wound.

But I kept my expression neutral, not wanting Nikolai, who was just in the kitchen and on the phone, to see the discomfort on my face. All that would accomplish was him narrowing his eyes, growling low, and hovering over me as he demanded I stay on the couch with my feet propped up.

Even after a month, healing was slow going, and at this point I was frustrated because I felt like an invalid thanks to Nikolai not letting me so much as put my own shoes on.

And then there was the no sex rule he'd put in place until I was fully healed.

A month with no sex. Four weeks of not having my very ravenous husband touch me in a way that would get me off. And God did I want to get off.

I turned on the video monitor for the security camera outside the door, saw Dmitry staring at the lens with a smirk on his lips, and hit another button to unlock the door. I could still hear Nikolai speaking in the kitchen, but I also felt his gaze on me. Nothing got past him.

After taking a step back, the door swung open and Dmitry strode in. He crouched immediately in front of Sasha, started murmuring and cooing in Russian to her, then kissed the top of her head right between her ears before rising once more.

Sasha whined and moved over to me, butting her sleek head against my thigh and looking up at me.

“She’s always in a grumpy as fuck mood when I come and get her, like she’s pissed at me for taking her away.”

Nikolai stepped out of the kitchen, pocketed his phone, and came to stand beside me. He slipped his hand up my back and curled his fingers around my nape.

Dmitry snorted. “You’re so fucking possessive.” He clicked his tongue and Sasha gave another whine but trotted over to him. He started speaking to Nikolai in Russian, and the entire time he stroked his fingers over the back of my neck. The longer he did that, the more I grew aroused, wet and achy between my thighs, annoyed because I knew he wouldn’t do anything about it to ease my frustration.

Dmitry gave a nod toward me and I smiled, trying to appear like my pussy wasn’t throbbing right now. Then he was gone and I was alone with my husband, who still stood beside me stroking my nape. I breathed out, about to beg him shamelessly to fuck me, but before a word could spill from my lips he was kissing my temple and moving away.

I gritted my teeth and looked over at him with narrowed eyes. “Really?”

He braced his hands on the kitchen island, his upper body curled forward, his head slightly tipped up as he looked at me from under his lashes. And he smirked, the devilishly handsome bastard smirked at me.

“You did that on purpose,” I seethed out.

He cocked a dark brow. “Did what, little doll?”

I curled my fingers into my palms. “Got me all worked up knowing you won’t do anything about it.” He didn’t move or speak or even blink as he watched me. But then he stood to his towering height and moved around the island.

“Is your tight little pussy drenched for me?” He slowly came forward and I wet my lips and found myself taking a step back. “Are you wanting me to fill you, baby girl?”

God, his words had my inner muscles clenching painfully. Yes, yes I wanted to be filled by him. “I’m healed,” I whispered. “I don’t see why you’re trying to be so careful now. Things are fine with me. Even your doctor said so.”

He smirked and kept coming closer as I kept taking steps back. “You think I don’t notice the wincing on your face whenever you stand? You think I don’t see the way you clutch your side when you walk?” He cocked an eyebrow. “I see everything that concerns you.”

I ran my hands up and down my thighs, feeling my body light up even more as I grew even more desperate for him.

“Is my beautiful girl pouting because I haven’t gotten her off in far too long?”

I started panting and moved away from him. He kept his focus on me as he stalked me through the house, down the hallway, up the stairs, and when I was in the master suite and the bed stopped my retreat, he stilled.

He looked so calm and collected, and I found it so attractive, so dangerous and alluring. “Get naked for me, *krasavitsa*.”

He chuckled low as I quickly started tearing at my clothes, the anticipation and excitement of knowing he was finally going to fuck me causing a light sheen of perspiration to dot my body.

When I stood there naked I saw his gaze lower to my side. Although the wound was healed on the outside, there was a nasty bullet wound scar of puckered red flesh. Instinctively I

placed a hand over it, shameful at how disgusting it looked causing my face to heat as I lowered my head.

“No,” Nikolai said sharply, with anger in his voice. He was in front of me before I heard him move, and had his knuckle under my chin and tipped my head so I could look at him. “You don’t hide from me.” The sharpness in his voice, the fierceness in his eyes, had me nodding. “You are gorgeous. Even if you were covered in scars and missing limbs, I’d still find you the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. I’d still desire you like nothing else in my life.”

And then he was touching me, stroking me between my legs, working me up to a fever-pitch. And the entire time he held his gaze with mine, his nostrils flared, his eyes blazing with passion.

“You like my fingers in you?”

I bit my lip and nodded, aching for him already. But I also knew he liked to tease me, toy with my body until I was crying and begging to be fucked.

He leaned in close and whispered gruffly against my ear, “I won’t make you wait tonight, baby girl.” With a final bite to the side of my throat, followed by the tip of his nose pressing right under my ear so he could inhale deeply, he thrust his fingers into my pussy.

I cried out and arched my back, feel the fullness, the stretch of him being two fingers deep in me.

“Go on darling. Show me how badly you want this.”

And I did.

His mouth was by my ear and his harsh breathing, coupled with the feel of his hard erection digging into my belly, told me how turned on he was by this. “You’re doing so good fucking yourself on my fingers, being a good girl and getting off for me.”

I cried out when he thrust his fingers deeper into my pussy and curled them inward, hitting that swollen, secret spot in me that had me crying out and fucking myself even harder on the digits.

“You feel so good.” He had his other hand on the small of my back and jerked me forward even more. I rose on my toes and let my head fall back as I moaned. “You’re the best.” He ran his tongue along my cheek, licking me before biting the side of my throat. He was thrusting his fingers in and out of me, harder and faster. Painfully. “Keep being good for me.” I moaned his name. “Yeah... that’s it.” His mouth was by my ear as he grunted, “come for me, *printsessa*.”

And I did on that command, gripping his thickly corded biceps, my mouth at his neck, my teeth latched onto the muscular column as I came.

“Mmm,” he hummed. “You’re gushing for me, baby girl, getting my hand all soaked like my good little whore.” He took my mouth in a hard, possessive kiss, biting my tongue, my lips. “You’re making a mess, my dirty little girl.”

The orgasm kept going on and on, and all I could do was hold on, working my hips and pussy on his fingers, giving into the pleasure that had been denied to me for too long.

As if he read my thoughts he groaned, “never again. I’ll never deny this hot little cunt again, never deny you anything.”

I sagged against him and rested my forehead on the center of his chest, panting, my mind hazy with the post-euphoric orgasm. Just when I felt like my legs would give out, he scooped me into his arms and laid me on the bed. I watched with half-closed eyes as he got out of his clothes and climbed into bed beside me.

“Tell me you’re mine.” He pulled me close, held me, and buried his face in the crook of my neck.

“I’m yours. You know I’m always yours.”

“Yeah you fucking are. Only mine,” he murmured. I heard him inhale deeply. “God, you always smell so incredible.” His arms tightened around me.

“I love you.” I brought one of his hands that rested against my chest to my mouth and kissed his tattooed knuckles.

“*Zhizn moy*a.” *My life*. “I love you, too. More than anything else in my worthless life. I love you, would kill for

you, lay down my life to protect you.” He inhaled again and I closed my eyes. “Not even the devil could come up from the fiery pits of hell and pry you from me.” He kissed the side of my neck.

And that’s how I relaxed, with Nikolai’s hard cock nestled between my ass cheeks, his warm breath along the side of my throat, and his words of slaying the very devil himself to keep me in his life the last things I heard and felt as I let sleep take me under.

Ruin

They called me Razoreniye. Ruined. And I suppose that's what I was.

A broken shell of what was once humanity, a man who once felt empathy.

I'd been shaped and molded into the killer I was today, started at a young age to be a weapon for the Bratva. Bloodshed gave me sustenance, violence was my strength. And destruction was my power.

They'd taken my memories, stripped them from me and replaced them with orders and routines, rigorous training and aggression so I knew nothing else. Expected nothing less.

And I accepted it.

I embraced it.

I enjoyed playing their god, holding their fragile life in my hands and staring into their eyes as I snuffed it out.

And I was good at what I did. The best. Because when you had nothing in life, nothing to lose, nothing else mattered.

But there was one thing they could never take for me. One memory that I held onto like that last petal on a flower before the frost snapped it in half.

There was one image, one sight that would always be mine, forever buried in my black, corrupted soul. And although it had been decades since I last saw her, since I heard her voice, or smelled that soft, floral scent that clung to her hair, she was mine.

If there ever was a time of a retelling, it was now. My beauty with the scarred, monstrous beast, too pure and good for someone like me. I didn't deserve her, should have stayed away, but our stories were always meant to be told, our lives intertwined.

And I made sure that was our destiny as I stayed to the shadows and stalked her in the dark.

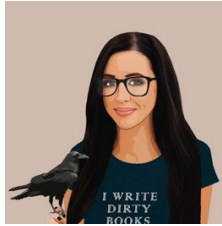
She was mine, and it was time I finally took her.

The End.



Want to read Razoreniye's (Ruin's) story? Check out **CORRUPTION**, another standalone story in the *Underworld Kings* series.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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