



Vengeful

DEVILLETTE

LEGACY OF VALENTINO
BOOK 2

KYLIE KENT

VENGEFUL DEVILETTE

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BOOK 2

KYLIE KENT

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

If you're picking this book up, please ensure you have read Remorseless Devilette first, as this is book two of Izzy's story!!

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

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

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

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[CLUB OMERTA](#)



My body is cold, so fucking cold, as I stare out over the miles of water in front of me, the deck swaying with the rhythm of the ocean. She's not here. Isabella should be here, on this boat, and she's not. I turn to Theo.

"Where the fuck are they?" I ask him, not expecting an answer.

"Shh, wait. Listen," he says.

I stop moving and that's when I hear it, the banging coming from beneath us. I run towards the stairs and practically jump down to get to the lower level. The banging gets louder. Within seconds, I'm moving a chair from under the handle of a door and opening it. On the other side, I find Romeo

holding Mabilia, who is wide awake but not crying. She's not making a sound.

"Where's Isabella?" I ask, reaching for my daughter. As soon as she's in my arms, she lets out a little whimper and snuggles against my chest. I kiss the top of her head, trying like fuck to remain calm.

"She fucking shoved Mabilia into my arms, turned around, and locked me in here. I don't know what happened. I heard a few voices and then nothing," Romeo tells me.

"How long ago?"

"About ten minutes," he says.

"They can't be far." Fuck, I need to go and find her, but I'm not about to take my daughter into a fight. I look down at Mabilia and then back up at Isabella's cousins. "I have to find her," I tell them.

"Let's go." Theo walks upstairs, gun drawn and at the ready.

I follow him with Romeo behind me. We walk like this, surrounding Mabilia as we make our way back to dry land and onto the chopper. "Get this thing up in the air. Wherever they are, they can't have gone far," I tell Theo, while clutching my daughter close to my chest in the back seat.

"I HAVE TO HEAD TO LAND," Theo says. "There's not enough fuel to keep going."

We've been circling around for an hour with no sight of anything in the water or sky. Not a single boat, ship, aircraft, nothing. It's like whoever the fuck took Isabella has vanished.

I nod my head, not liking it one bit, but I'm also not prepared to run out of fuel with my infant daughter thousands of feet in the air. Thirty minutes later, we land in a yard, and a shit-ton of men dressed in suits come out of the house in front of us.

"Where the fuck are we?" I ask over the noise of the rotor.

"Our cousin Lily's place. Try not to piss off her husband. He's not obligated to keep you alive like we are," Romeo answers.

Great, there's fucking more of them.

I follow the Valentino brothers out of the chopper, keeping my eyes open and my daughter close while covering her ears as much as I can.

We're led into the house and a tall redhead comes running towards us. "Theo, Romeo, what's going on?" she asks.

"It's Iz... someone took her," Theo says and the woman gasps.

"Well, what the hell are you doing here? Go and bloody find her," the redhead yells.

I think I'm going to like this cousin.

"You can't fly a chopper that doesn't have fuel. Besides, she's going to need milk and diapers and shit. Can you sort something out?" Theo nods towards the bundle in my arms.

This has the redhead turning to me. "Oh my god, is this Mabilia?" She approaches me with outstretched arms.

I practically snarl and turn Mabilia away from her reach. Before I can say anything, someone else enters the room. Someone I know well. Someone I didn't expect to see here. "Alex?"

He stops. "Petrov, what the fuck are you doing in my house?" he asks, before coming up, wrapping one arm around me, and patting my back.

"Hold the fuck up... You two know each other?" Theo gestures between us. "How?"

"Business," both Alex and I say at the same time.

"What are you doing with these two?" Alex directs to me.

"They're my fiancée's cousins and she said I can't kill them." I shrug.

"What the fuck? Izzy is not marrying you," Romeo snarls.

"Watch me put a fucking ring on her finger as soon as I find her," I grunt at him, then turn to Alex. "I'm gonna need a baby bottle, formula, and diapers and shit. And then I'll need a computer and an arsenal. Can you do that for me?" I ask him. Because if he can't, I will do it all myself.

"Follow me. There's some formula and bottles in the kitchen. I can dig out some old baby clothes—the rest of the stuff we can have delivered," the redhead answers for him.

"This is my wife, Lily. Also these morons' cousin." Alex laughs, before gesturing a thumb towards the woman in question. "Don't worry, this one said I couldn't kill them either."

"As if you could," Theo grunts.

"Don't listen to them. Theo and Alex are the best of friends now," Lily says.

"That's overkill, Lil. I gotta make some calls. Someone has to tell Zio Neo his daughter is missing."

“You all seem way too calm about this.” Lily scowls.

“It’s Izzy. She’s more than capable of handling herself,” Romeo says. “Besides, whoever has her will hand her back after an hour of being forced to listen to her curse them out.” He shrugs, playing it off, but I see the worry on his face.

I pull my phone out of my pocket. As much as I don’t want to let go of my daughter, I can’t sit around and wait for someone else to find my fucking girl. I call Mrs. Valentino—Isabella made sure to put her parents’ names into my contacts.

“Mikhail? What’s happening?” Angelica answers.

“Isabella is missing. I need you to get on a flight to Sydney. Theo and Romeo brought me to Lily’s house—I’m assuming you know who that is. I have Mabila, and I can’t leave her by herself.”

“What do you mean Izzy is missing?” Angelica questions, her tone rushed.

“I don’t know who has her or where she is, but I promise I’m going to fucking find out. I need you to come and stay with Mabilia. I don’t fucking know who to trust here, Mrs. Valentino, but Isabella trusts you more than anyone else. So, please, I don’t fucking know what else to do.” I practically beg her to come and watch her granddaughter.

“I’m leaving now. It’s a long way to Australia, though. I know you don’t want to, but you can trust Lily. Her mother Reilly is Holly’s sister. I’m calling her to come help you, until I get there,” she says, then asks, “Where was the last place you saw Izzy?”

“Lola’s house. There’s another island about an hour away. We had a larger boat docked there. We were planning on using it in an emergency. She was taken from that boat.”

“And they left the baby?” Angelica questions.

“No, Isabella locked her in a room with Romeo,” I tell her. If it weren’t for the fact I was holding my daughter, I’d be falling apart right now. “I need to get her back...” I whisper.

“And we will, if she doesn’t get herself out first,” Angelica assures me.

I smile, thinking about the hell my kotyonok will be causing any fucker who thought they could take her.



My head pounds as consciousness slowly creeps in. I lie still, not moving a muscle, and fight my every urge to open my eyes and take in my surroundings. Instead, I listen.

“As soon as she’s awake, we start,” a heavy Irish-accented voice says.

“You sure this will work? What if he doesn’t come for her?” another asks.

“Then we kill her and find another way to get him.”

Shit... My head is spinning. I don’t know what they gave me to knock me out. I’m nauseous as fuck, and currently doing my best to keep my breathing even. Steady.

I need more time. I need to be able to fight. And right now, I doubt I can even stand on my own two feet. Whoever the fuck these assholes are, they don't realize who've they've fucked with. If they think for one second I'm going to let them use me as bait to draw in Mikhail, they have another thing coming.

Their footsteps grow distant, a door closes, and an eerie quietness settles over the room, but I still have that feeling that I'm not alone. Someone is watching. Which is why I don't move.

The longer I can give myself, let whatever drug they injected me with run through my system, the better I'll be. The more strength I'll have when the time comes for me to fight them off. My mind drifts to Mabilia. I locked her below deck with Romeo. I know he'll take care of her until Mikhail gets there. That's if he got off the island...

Oh my god, what if I've left her an orphan? The thought of her growing up her whole life and not knowing how much we loved her...

I can't think like that. I refuse to believe that Mikhail didn't get himself off that island. Besides, he wasn't alone. He had Theo and Viktor with him. I have no doubt he's with Mabilia now. I know in my heart that as much as my family may despise the man, they will look after them both. They won't leave my daughter or my... boyfriend? Fiancé? Whatever he is, they won't leave him.

I never said yes to Mikhail's proposals, but now I wish I had. I wish I told him I was falling hard, that I wanted to fight for a future, for our future. Him, me, and Mabilia. I wanted us to be a family.

And fight, I will. Just as soon as I can figure out where the fuck I am and what these assholes think they can gain by taking me. I strain my ears, trying to listen for anything, but the room is silent. So silent I can hear my own breathing.

I take a mental inventory of my body. Other than the pounding in my head and the nausea, I don't feel like I'm injured. I just need to figure a way out of this. I need intel. How many of them are there? If it's only the two morons who were in this room earlier, I have no doubt I can take them.

But how many more are beyond that door? I also don't know how long I've been here. What if it's too late? What if they've already contacted Mikhail? He'd come too. I have no doubt that he, along with my family, would turn this world upside down to get to me.

The door opens and I wait, listening for what's going to happen next. I

hear the click of the door close behind them, then their footsteps as they approach me.

“Isabella, wake up.”

My eyes spring open at the sound of the familiar voice. “Lex? How’d you get here?” I ask, pushing myself upright. The room spins a little as I move.

“We need to get out of here,” he says. “Are you hurt?”

I shake my head. “I don’t think so. Where are we?”

“I have no idea—some Irish fucking hell is my best guess. I saw them grab you and jumped on the boat. I couldn’t get to you until now. They’re all downstairs in a living room drinking. We need to make our move.”

“Okay. Let’s go.” I roll to one side and try to stand on my feet while Lex reaches out to help me balance.

“Man, the boss is going to be going out of his mind,” he mumbles under his breath.

“Well, let’s get home and put that mind of his at ease then, shall we?” I smile. I’d like to say I feel sorry for the wreckage that’s going to come down on these assholes, but I don’t.

Lex opens the door and peers his head down the hallway. When he’s satisfied it’s clear, he makes the sign of the cross and tugs me behind him. Which has me looking at the kid in a new light. I barely know him. He didn’t have to go on this one-man rescue mission. He’s risking his life to try to save mine, a clear sign of his loyalty to Mikhail. Because it’s not me Lex is doing this for; it’s his boss.

We get to the end of a long hallway when I hear a door open behind me. I don’t hesitate as I swing my right fist and throat-punch a tall redheaded man. Then I lift a foot and kick his chest, causing him to fall backwards. His hands grasp at his neck as he struggles to pull in air.

“Shit,” I hiss before jumping on top of him. I start patting him down, looking for weapons. I find a pistol—it’s shitty but it’s loaded. So I tuck it into the back of my pants and continue my search as he struggles beneath me. When I reach his ankle, I finally find what I need. A knife. I bring it to the fucker’s throat and stab it into the side of his neck. It doesn’t take long for him to still. “Think they heard that?” I ask Lex as I turn to find him standing in the doorway. Watching me.

“Let’s hope not,” he says with a raised brow.

I push to my feet and follow him farther down the hallway, until we come to a staircase, a very open staircase. I can hear the sounds of men talking and

moving around in the room below us. They're close. But so is the front door. We just have to get there. Take those small steps to freedom, focus on one problem at a time. That's how you handle situations like this. Remember that it's *them* or *you*. Kill or be killed. There is no other option. And I'm a Valentino, a trained killer. Born and bred to survive.

I sleep fine at night, *mostly*. There is only one face that still haunts me. My first. My fucked-up biological father. I was only eight years old, but even then I knew it was him or us. He was going to hurt my mom and there was no way in hell that I would sit back and watch anyone hurt my mother.

Now is not the time to dwell on the past or how I became who I am today. No, now is the time to get the hell out of this place and find my way back to my daughter and Mikhail.

We get to the bottom of the stairs. Lex opens the door at the same time someone is about to walk through it. A hulky man, flanked by four others, tilts his head and looks at us.

"Going somewhere?" he asks.

I pull the gun from my waistband, but by the time I take aim, he already has Lex by the throat and the end of his own pistol at the kid's temple.

"You have three seconds to drop that before I blow his head off," the guy says.

I look to Lex. Why should I care if they kill him? There's still a chance I could shoot this fucker before Lex's body even hits the floor. Sometimes sacrifices have to be made. Especially in war. Right?

"One," the asshole starts counting.

Lex shakes his head slightly, his way of telling me not to drop my weapon. As much as I want to get out of here, for some ungodly reason, I can't let them kill him. And I find myself dropping the gun to the ground and raising my hands in the air instead.



“Anything?” I ask Samuel.

I’ve had him searching every fucking nook and cranny for whoever the fuck took Isabella and where the fuck they took her. It’s been a week since she went missing, and with each day that passes, my hope of finding her alive fades.

“I’ve got a hit, Belfast. There was noise that Lucky Jim had someone held up in a house. I haven’t been able to confirm that it’s her, Mikhail. But considering your history with these IRA fuckwits, it’s worth checking it out.”

“Fucking Irish bastards,” I growl. I’m going to tear them limb from limb. Each and every last one of them.

“I’ll keep searching. If anything else comes up, I’ll let you know.” Samuel cuts the call.

I dial my pilot and have him ready the jet—*looks like I’m going to Belfast.*

I make my way through Alex’s house. I’ve been here for the last week. Isabella’s parents arrived six days ago to help out. And let’s just say if I thought her father wanted to slice my throat before, his desire to end me now has increased tenfold. I don’t have time to worry about that shit though. All I care about is tracking down Isabella.

I find Angelica with Mabilia. She’s been great at helping take care of her. Although, every time I’ve had to give my daughter a bottle, watch Angelica give her a bottle, my heart fucking hurts. I know how much Isabella loved feeding her. She wanted to breastfeed Mabilia for as long as she could.

“Where’s your husband?” I ask Angelica.

She raises her eyebrows at me right as the man himself walks in. Isabella’s father isn’t someone I’d ever choose to fuck with, on a normal day. But this girl, how I feel about her, makes me do things I’d never usually do.

“Got word Lucky Jim has someone held up in Belfast. I’m heading there to check it out,” I tell Neo.

“Belfast. Right, let’s go,” he says.

I nod my head and then look at my daughter. I’m torn. I know I can’t take her with me. I get that. But, fuck, I do not want to leave her behind either.

“Mikhail, if you don’t move your ass to go bring my daughter home to me, I will do it myself,” Angelica says before her eyes soften slightly. “Mabilia will be fine. I promise I will not let her out of my sight. Please, just bring her mama home.”

I kiss my daughter on her head, whispering to her in Russian. I tell her I love her and that I’m going to find her mother. I can hear Isabella’s voice in my head, warning me not to leave our daughter, but what kind of father would I be if I let Mabilia grow up without her mother? Because I fear if I don’t locate Isabella soon, that will be Mabilia’s reality.

With one last look over my shoulder, I turn and walk out the door. I need to get this shit done. As soon as I fucking find Isabella, I’m going to drag her ass back to my house in New York, where I can better protect them both.

The ride to the airport is quiet. It’s obvious that Neo would rather be doing this alone, or with anyone but me. Guess we have that in common. That, and the fact that we both want Isabella back more than anything in the

world.

I'm honestly surprised he's holding it together as well as he has been. If it weren't for Mabilia, I don't think I would be as calm as I am at the moment. I do it for her. I don't want to be the kind of father she has to fear. I want to show her that when things get tough, I can be relied on. I know she's not going to remember any of this, and that when I find Isabella, this whole week will be behind us. Something I never plan to repeat. However, that doesn't change how I want my daughter to see me.

Settling into the armchair on the Valentino jet, I pull out my laptop and start going through all the intel about the Belfast property that Samuel sent over. I have a twenty-six hour flight to memorize the layout of the house, find any weak spots within the organization, and plot the attack I'm going to rain down on the fucking assholes who thought they could take what's mine.

Neo sits in the chair opposite me. He has two glasses of amber liquid in his hands. Holding one out to me, he raises his eyebrows expectantly. "It's not vodka," he says, then adds, "It's better."

I take the glass. "I doubt that." I smirk, downing the contents and putting the glass down on the side table next to me. I return my attention to the screen.

"We are going to find her," he says.

I look up. "I know." My voice is gruff. I could use another shot of that shitty whiskey, but I won't indulge. I need to remain clear-headed. I need to think.

"Good." Neo nods. "I have people meeting us there. Familia."

Just what I wanted to hear, more fucking Italians. But right now, I don't know who I can trust in my own house, so the Italians will have to do.

"They'll get there before us, start scoping shit out in the shadows," Neo says, his index finger tapping the side of his untouched glass.

I probably should have been more careful about drinking something offered by this man. Other than the Irish, no one wants me dead more than him. Although killing me would hurt Isabella, and I know for a fact her family would never intentionally do that.

"What if..." I let my sentence trail off.

What if I can't find her? What if I find her and I'm too fucking late? What if they've done unthinkable damage to her? The *what ifs* could go on forever.

I shake my head. "I need to get her back," I tell him.

"We all do," he says.

I JOLT awake as the wheels of the jet touch ground. Rubbing a hand down my face, I blink the sleep away—the severity of the task I’m here to do sinking in, the more the fog clears from my brain. My blood is pumping, my skin itching for a fight. I want my girl back, and I have no qualms about who I have to run down to get to her. I know I’m feared, but once the rumor mill gets out about what I’m planning to do, no one with a will to live will ever try to cross me again. The message I’m going to spread in blood all over this city will be loud and clear.

Fuck with what’s mine, and I won’t just come for you. I’ll come for your whole fucking bloodline. I will erase any trace of your kind from this planet.

“Mikhail, before you go in guns blazing, we need to be on the same page,” Neo says, his footsteps following mine off the jet.

“The only page I’m on is the one where I get Isabella back. I don’t give a shit about anything else,” I tell him.

“Good, then we already have an understanding,” he says. “If anything goes wrong, get her out. Do whatever you have to do to get her out.”

“I will.” I nod, interpreting his message. If it comes down to it, leave him behind and get his daughter out of this fucking country by any means necessary.

I don’t have to repeat the words because I already know he’d do the same, as I would expect him to. If it were me, nobody would come before my daughter.

I jump into the back seat of the car, my leg bouncing up and down as I try to will myself to sit still. I’m ready. I don’t know if it’s Isabella they have hauled up in this house. Part of me hopes it’s not, but then another part hopes it is, so I can have her back.

If she’s there, I know whatever they’ve done to her over the last week isn’t going to be something she’s going to recover from. Ever. Especially with what she told me about her biological father. Her reason for inventing the Stiletto Killer. I really wish I had the foresight to bring a bag full of stilettos. I’m sure ending the lives of the fuckers who took her would be somewhat therapeutic. I can always give her a knife. I know firsthand how good she is at using one of those.



I smile through the pain. Something I've discovered these bastards don't appreciate, which only makes me more determined to smile bigger, brighter. The split on my bottom lip opening up every time I do.

My hands are bound behind my back. They learned really early on that I wouldn't just sit here and take whatever the fuck they were going to dish out. The broken nose on the asshole in front of me is evidence of that.

Although, now, with my hands bound, there's not a lot I can do. Except smile. I won't let them break me. I'm a Valentino. It's time they realize just how unbreakable that makes me.

My whole life I've felt I was lacking, not tough enough, not smart enough

to really wear the Valentino name with pride. This, right now? This is my moment to prove to the world that I am a Valentino, whether by blood or not, and it's a legacy I plan to live up to.

Starting by not allowing myself to be broken. It doesn't matter what they do, what pain they cause, because the pain of not being with my daughter is far greater than any physical agony I've ever endured.

"I don't know why ye smiling. It's going to go a lot better for ye if ye just tell me what I want to know," the asshole, whose name I still don't know, says to me.

We've been at this for a week. I don't know where they took Lex or what they've done to him. I don't imagine he's still alive, though. It'd be a miracle if he were. What I do know is that he hasn't given up Mikhail. From what I can gather, I've been here for a week. On the second day, they held a gun to Lex's head and told him to rape me. He refused, said he'd rather die than commit such a heinous act.

I wanted to tell him to just do it. That I didn't want him to die, but I couldn't. The words wouldn't leave my mouth. The man took him out of the room. I heard one gunshot and then nothing. I'm guessing that bullet went into Lex's head. He died because of his loyalty to Mikhail, which is something I won't ever forget. I made him a silent promise that when I got out of here, I would find his family and make sure they knew how wonderful of a man he was. I'd make sure they didn't want for anything.

If he has a family, that is. I don't know anything about the guy, apart from the fact that Mikhail took a liking to him. And now the kid's dead, because of me...

"You can do whatever you want to me. It won't matter because I won't tell you a thing," I say.

They want Mikhail. They have no idea where he is and they think that I know. Even if I wanted to tell them, I don't know the answer to that. I pray that he's with Mabilia, that he's protecting her with everything he has. I pray that she will have a good life. That my family will allow Mikhail to be a part of their lives too. I have to believe that my parents would help him raise her. They did a great job raising me to be the woman I am today, and it's because of them that I can sit here aching in every part of my body and still not cave. Because they taught me to be stronger than the enemy. They gave me the skills I needed to withstand the torture these assholes are dishing out.

I watch as my tormentor walks over to the bench. He picks up a leather

belt, inspecting it before looking at me. “You know, I’m starting to think ye like the whips and chains.” He winks.

It takes everything in me not to throw up all over the ground. I don’t say anything. Instead, I lift one shoulder in a noncommittal shrug and smile.

“Maybe it’s time to introduce ye to something else,” he says, picking up a knife.

I swallow. I know this is going to hurt. I know what’s coming. And as much as I don’t want to show them fear, the moment he nods his head and approaches me with the blade in his hands, I know I didn’t hide my reaction well enough.

“What makes you think I don’t like knife play too?” I ask him. “In fact, if you use that knife to cut the ropes from my wrists, I can show you just how much I like to play with knives,” I suggest.

I can’t help but remember the last time I pierced skin with a blade. It was Mikhail’s. I had tied him to his bed, where I stabbed him. Leaving him there to bleed out. I regret not telling him how hard it was for me to walk away. I regret not telling him how I feel about him. If I manage to get out of this alive and I’m able to find him, the first thing I’m going to do is tell him how I feel. He has to know. I hope he feels it...

“Yeah, you think ye could take me in the state you’re in?” the bastard in front of me asks while cocking his head to the side.

“I think if you weren’t scared, you wouldn’t need to keep me tied down,” I taunt him. There is no one else in the room at the moment. I know that if I can get him to cut me loose, I can take that knife and shove it in his damned throat.

“Scared? You think I’m fucking scared of ye, bitch?” he spits out, getting right in my face.

“Untie me. Prove that you’re not,” I urge him.

He steps behind me and then I feel it. The sawing of the blade as the knife slices through the ropes at my wrist. I quickly draw my arms to my front and shake them out, trying to get feeling back in my sore limbs. Then I push to my feet, or at least I try to, stumbling to the ground as my legs give out from underneath me.

“Pathetic. Get up and fight, bitch.” A booted foot lands on my ribs.

I grit my teeth. *Get up and fight, Izzy. End him.* I can hear my father’s voice in my head. *You can do this.*

I can do this, I tell myself. I can end this fucker. Like I told Mikhail that

first night that feels like a lifetime ago, I'm no damsel in distress. I don't need to wait around to be saved by a man. I can save myself, and right now is my perfect opportunity.

I push up, finally getting myself stable on my feet before turning around to face him. "You underestimated me. That will be your last mistake," I say right as I reach out and snatch the knife from his hands. I jump on him. Pushing us both down to the ground.

The shock of what I've just done leaves him motionless momentarily, which is exactly what I wanted. Before the fucker can react, I stab the end of that knife right into his neck, pull it out, and repeat the action. I stab him over and over again, long after he's already dead.

Finally dropping the knife, I reach into his pockets. I've heard the jingle of keys as he enters and leaves the room over the last few days. I just need to find them. Right as my fist closes around the cool metal, the door to the room swings open. I look up, roll over onto the ground, and let myself sink onto the hard cement floor.

"You're late," I whisper right before the blackness takes over.



“Five minutes out,” Neo says from the front seat of the SUV.

I draw the pistol from the holster on my chest, making sure there’s a round in the chamber ready to tear a hole through the first fucking IRA bastard I see.

“We don’t know what we’re walking into. Don’t go in hot-headed, starting a gun fight, Mikhail. Not until we know where Izzy is. We need to be able to get her out of the firing zone.”

“Fine by me, but once she’s out, all bets are off. I won’t be holding back on these fucking assholes,” I grunt.

There is, of course, the possibility that she isn’t in there. I honestly don’t

know what to do if she's not. Where else to look... I've had as many people as I could out on the streets trying to get intel on who took her. Other than this lead, it's been fucking crickets. Not a goddamn word. Which says a lot in itself. Whatever they want, it isn't money.

"We're going to find her and she's going to be fine. Izzy is the toughest person I know, Mikhail," Theo says from where he's seated beside me.

I look over at him. His face reveals no emotion. I can't tell if he truly believes the words coming out of his mouth or if he's simply saying them for my sake. That would be ridiculous, though. Theo Valentino is not looking to comfort me. He believes that she's going to be fine. Thinking anything else is incomprehensible. I've only just found her. I'm not ready to give her up. I *won't* give her up. With this thought in mind, I follow Theo out of the car more than ready to find my girl and bring her home.

I don't believe in a God, even if my brother did, but I find myself silently asking any divine entity, if one exists, to help me find Isabella alive. I can deal with whatever kind of trauma she's endured. I can and will help her overcome it. But there is no coming back from dead. The odds of finding a missing person alive dwindle significantly with each day that passes. The odds of finding a missing member of a mafia family alive are even worse.

We stopped down the street, four houses down to be exact, and make our way on foot to the property I've now memorized. I know every room within that building. I know all the possible entrances. Every weak point and security breach. By the time we approach the front of the house, I'm leading the way, Neo and Theo flanking my sides. I don't look back, knowing the Valentino and Donatello soldiers are right where they're expected to be. Not that I'm relying on any of them. I'd go in as a one-man army if I had to. I look to Neo, the corner of my lips tilting upwards slightly as I raise my booted foot and kick the flimsy wooden door in.

I storm into the foyer of the house, my gun aimed, my blood pulsing, and my body ready for a fight. I look in every direction, seeking out my first kill of the day. There is only one room in this building that they could use as a makeshift holding cell. The fucking basement. It's the only room on the floor plan that doesn't have any windows and one internal door. It doesn't take a genius to figure it out. All I had to do was put myself in their shoes, envision where I would keep someone I didn't want escaping.

To get to the basement, I need to walk straight down this entryway, turn left and then right. The room I want should be just off the kitchen. Neo kicks

in the first door to an empty living space. We look to each other, both wondering where the fuck everyone is. It's too quiet in here for a house that's supposed to be holding someone captive. We continue down the hall. Theo turns the knob of the next closed door, finding yet another empty room. Not a single piece of furniture.

Eventually, we meet up with the men Neo sent to enter through the back. "No one's here," they say, their guns lowered to their sides.

"Do a thorough sweep of the property. I want every inch of this house upturned," Neo instructs them. With a nod, the men walk past us and head up the stairs.

I continue on the path I have memorized. Something is pulling me towards that damn basement. My gut usually isn't ever fucking wrong. Theo and Neo follow me. But my hopes of finding Isabella dim when I open the unlocked door. It's not until I'm halfway down the stairs that I hear it. A scream that tears right through my soul. I run down the remaining steps, my gun aimed and ready. When I reach the bottom, I come to a stop, my heart hammering in my chest. Isabella is on top of a guy stabbing him over and over again.

She turns and looks me right in the eye. "You're late," she says as she rolls onto the ground and her eyes drift shut.

My gun drops to the floor with an audible clank of metal as I rush forward and fall to my knees in front of her. "Isabella, wake up." I pull her into my arms and hold her to my chest.

I'm not too late, I repeat over and over in my head. I'm not too late.

I can hear screaming and yelling around me. I don't know or care what they're saying. I hold Isabella's body up against mine. "Please wake up," I whisper into her ear, burying my face against the crook of her neck.

"Mikhail, stand the fuck up and get her out of here."

My gaze flicks to Neo, his face hard, his eyes dark. I know he's right. I need to get up and get her out of this fucking building. I need to get her to a fucking doctor.

"Come on, let's go. Either you're carrying her out, or I will," Neo tells me.

I reach my arms under Isabella's limp body and stand, my every nerve ending numb as I follow Neo and Theo out the door. There's an SUV waiting for us at the front of the property.

"I want to know who the fuck that was in the room with her, and where

the fuck everyone else went,” Neo says to Theo, who proceeds to hold the door open as I climb into the back seat with Isabella in my lap. I have no plans of letting her go.

Why isn't she waking up?

The door closes and the car peels onto the street. Theo and some of the other men stayed behind at the house, presumably to get the answers Neo demanded.

My fingers rest along the pulse on Isabella's neck. As long as her heart is beating, everything will be fine. She will be fine.

“IF YOU DON'T GET her to wake up soon, I won't just kill you, I'll hunt down your entire family,” I threaten the doctor that Neo flew in.

We're at an old mansion in Belfast somewhere. Honestly, I couldn't care less where I am. All I want is for Izzy to wake up and to get us both back to our daughter. I want to take my girls home.

“She's going to wake up. You just have to give her body time,” the doctor tells me.

I look at her. Wires and cords run from various parts of Isabella to machines positioned at her bedside. She has a drip infusing fluids into her body. I've cleaned her up the best I could with warm soapy water and a sponge. Her face is swollen; black and blue bruises mar her entire body. I want the blood of every member of the IRA on my hands for what they've done to her. I want to skin them all alive, rip their limbs from their sockets. I've never wanted to kill anyone as much as I do right now. I've never been this hungry for vengeance before, not even when my brother was murdered in cold blood.

But what they've done to my Isabella... I'll be making sure they pay the price tenfold. This is not a crime that will go unpunished.



I must be dreaming because I can hear Mikhail talking to me, asking me to wake up. Wherever I am, it's warm and soft. If not dreaming, then I'm in heaven, because the cold damp basement I've been locked in for the last week is the furthest thing from *warm and soft*.

"Please wake up, Isabella. I need you. We need you. If not for me, for Mabilia. Don't force her to grow up never knowing how kick-ass and amazing her mother is." Mikhail is talking to me.

My brows furrow as I slowly peel my eyes open, the brightness causing me to close them tight again. My head hurts—*everything* hurts.

"Shit. Shut the blinds." My dad's voice rings out through the room.

“Isabella, you’re okay. You’re okay.” Mikhail’s words are meant to be reassuring. For who, I’m not sure.

“Bel, open your eyes. Tell me you’re okay,” Papa says.

My lashes flutter until I can focus my vision. First, I see Mikhail, who looks like he hasn’t slept in days. I turn my head to the side and find my dad staring down at me. His face hardened, worry clear across his features.

“Papa, I’m okay,” I say, my voice hoarse. I look back to Mikhail. “Where is she?” I ask, my eyes darting around the room in search of our daughter.

“She’s with your mama. She’s okay, Bel. They’re in Australia with Alex and Lily,” Dad says, picking up my hand and giving it a gentle squeeze.

My attention is solely on Mikhail though. He’s supposed to be with her; he should be protecting her. “You left her. Why the hell would you do that?” As much as I try to yell the words at him, my throat hurts too much. I need some water.

Mikhail pushes to his feet and walks out of the room. I look to Dad, who just watches the doorway. “You should give him a break, Iz. He’s been going out of his mind trying to find you. And it wasn’t easy for him to leave Mabilia.”

“He *shouldn’t* have left her,” I say. “And what universe have I woken up in, where you’re sticking up for him?”

Shit, maybe I am still in Dreamland or something? Because no way in hell would my dad agree with anything Mikhail would say or do.

“You don’t understand how fucking worried we’ve all been, Bel. Not knowing where you were. I was really hoping I’d get through life without ever having to experience that again.”

I try to sit up, but everything still hurts. “I need to go... I need to go to Mabilia.” Mikhail walks back into the room with a cup. “Drink this. It’ll help your throat and then you can yell at me all you want.” He smirks.

Fucking *smirks*. I wish I had it in me to knock that smirk off his face. “I need to go. Take me back to her. Please,” I beg him.

“I’ve already got the jet ready to leave,” Mikhail says. “Drink.” He holds the cup to my lips.

I reach up and take it from his hands. I’m not an invalid. I can hold my own damn cup. I take small sips of the icy water. He was right. It does help soothe my throat.

“What happened? How’d you find me?” I ask both my dad and Mikhail.

“My guy had a tip. We followed it and found you,” Mikhail says.

“Izzy, you need to tell me what happened. What did they do? How many were there? If they had any physical characteristics that stood out? I need to know who I’m looking for,” Dad says.

“I... There were five. And then... Oh my god, Lex. Where is he? Did you find him?” I turn to Mikhail.

He stiffens. “What about Lex?”

“They... they... He was there. Did they kill him?” I ask. “We need to find him, Mikhail.” I stress the point.

“He hasn’t been seen... yet. Why would you think they killed him?” Mikhail’s brows knit with the question.

“I heard a shot, right after they pulled him out of the room. He tried to help, Mikhail. He tried to get me out. We can’t leave him here.”

“I’ll have the guys look for him,” Dad says with an encouraging nod.

“We need to get you home, Isabella. And out of this fucking country,” Mikhail adds.

“Okay,” I agree, because I need to get back to my daughter. But I’m not going to forget about Lex. I will find him. I’ll tell Mikhail what he did, how loyal his guy was, when we have more privacy.

I know what my dad is thinking. He’s assuming the worst has happened to me. But a few cuts and bruises are all that they did. Because after Lex refused to follow their instructions and they dragged him out, I never saw any of the other men again. Except the one I killed.

I wish I could do it again. I’d love to make him suffer longer than he did.

Mikhail picks me up. I want to argue with him, insist that I’m capable of walking on my own, but I don’t. Instead, I bury my face in his chest and wrap my arms around his neck. “Don’t let me go,” I whisper.

“Never,” he replies.

I didn’t mean for him to hear my plea, but I’m glad he did. I need to admit how I really feel. I told myself I would tell him if I saw him again. This probably isn’t the right time or place, though, especially considering my dad is walking right beside us. Which is something I can’t quite wrap my head around.

What the hell happened over this past week between the two most important men in my life?

I shift my head so I’m looking up at him. “Mikhail...” I wait for his eyes to drop to mine. “My answer is yes,” I say.

His steps stop. He pulls back as he stares into my eyes. I don’t know what

he's searching for. "Yes?" he parrots.

"Yes," I repeat, and he smiles.

"Holy shit."

"Fucking hell, can this not wait until we're at least out of enemy territory? And I don't recall you asking my permission to marry my daughter," Papa grunts.

"Because I didn't and I'm not. I won't. I asked her. I'm marrying her, not you," Mikhail says, his steps picking up again.

Dad laughs. "It's funny you say that, seeing as when you marry a Valentino, you're marrying into the entire family. But, yeah, good luck with that."

"Papa, stop. You're trying to scare him off." I snuggle deeper into Mikhail's chest.

"That's not possible. I don't scare easily, Isabella," Mikhail is quick to remind me.

I WAKE WITH A JOLT. "MIKHAIL?" I call out. The room is dark. Please tell me it wasn't a dream. He was here. I know he was. "Mikhail?" I yell louder.

A light comes on and I close my eyes. I don't want to see. I don't want to see that it was just a dream. That he's not here, and I didn't get out of the basement...

"Isabella, it's okay. I'm here. I've got you." Strong arms wrap around my shoulders as his voice seeps into my mind.

I open my eyes. "Mikhail?" It's him. He's here. I take in my surroundings. I'm in a bedroom.

"I'm here. You're okay. We're okay, kotyonok," he continues to soothe me.

I smile. I honestly hate the pet name. But I thought I'd never hear it again, and now that I have, I can't think of anything else I'd rather have him call me.

"We only have an hour until landing," he says.

"An hour. Okay. I need to shower. I can't let Mabilia see me like this," I reply, looking down at myself. I'm wearing one of Mikhail's shirts and a pair

of sweatpants. I woke up in these, so I'm assuming he dressed me.

"I'll help you. Come on." Mikhail stands from the bed.

Taking his proffered hand, I let him pull me up onto my feet and lead me into the tiny attached bathroom. As soon as I had a chance to look around, I knew exactly where we were. Inside the Valentino jet.



Standing in the tiny bathroom, I lift the shirt from Isabella's body. My teeth grinding together as I take in all the cuts and bruises that mar her skin. I want to turn this plane around and set the whole of fucking Ireland on fire for what those bastards did to her.

The farther down my eyes go, the greater the fear that they've done something else, something I can't see sets in. I can't bring myself to ask the question that's on the tip of my tongue. I need to know the answer, though. And not because it will change a damn thing when it comes to how I feel about her, but because it will help me know how to help her through this.

How can I fight her demons if I don't know what they are?

I open my mouth and then close it again, swallowing the lump that's formed in my throat. Isabella's fingers touch under my chin, pushing my head up. When my eyes meet hers, I see the unshed tears she's fighting to hold back.

"No. I know what you're thinking and the answer is *no*. They didn't," she says, shaking her head.

"It's okay. Nothing will ever change how I feel about you, kotyonok."

"Lex..." She inhales a deep breath and closes her eyes. "They held a gun to his head and told him to... they told him to rape me."

My hands physically shake with the rage I'm barely containing. Isabella takes hold of them in hers.

"He didn't. *He wouldn't*. Said he'd rather die than betray you like that." She opens her eyes. "They dragged him out of the room. I heard one gunshot, then nothing. I didn't see him again, Mikhail. We need to find him. If he is still alive, we need to find him," she tells me.

I had a good feeling about the kid the moment I first saw him. It's why I took him to Italy. Then again, I would have laid my life down for Ivan; he was my best friend throughout my entire childhood and the last person I ever thought would betray me.

"We will find him. I'm going to send more of my men to Ireland to search. Don't worry, kotyonok. If Lex is alive, I'll find him."

"He deserves a pay raise." She smiles.

"He does." I nod my head. Reaching behind her, I turn on the water. "Let's shower so we can land this jet and get back to our daughter."

Isabella lets the tears fall now. "I thought of her... and you. I thought *at least she has you*. If she'd never have me, she would at least have a father who loves her."

"Shh, don't talk like that. Mabilia will always have you, kotyonok. I'm not letting anything happen to you," I promise, even though we both know that in this life, promises like that are nothing more than words.

Isabella doesn't say it, but I know she's thinking the same thing I am. I can see it on her face. I've already let her get hurt. She said it herself when I stepped into that room.

You're late.

It shouldn't have taken me a week to fucking find her and they should never have been able to get to her in the first place. I was careless. I wasn't diligent enough in my efforts to protect her.

“I’m okay, Mikhail. It will take a lot more than this to break me,” she says, waving a hand down her body.

“You don’t have to always be strong with me.” I step her into the shower while standing just outside the stall. The small cubicle isn’t big enough for the two of us. Grabbing a loofah, I squirt the soap on top, picking up her right arm, and gently run the sponge up and down, leaving a trail of suds on her skin.

Isabella tips her head back and closes her eyes, letting the water cascade down her hair as I continue to run the sponge across her collarbone, until I reach her left arm and repeat the process. When I slowly rub the sponge over her breasts, Isabella opens her eyes.

“I can’t feed her anymore. I can’t even give her the best start to life,” she says with a sadness I’ve never heard from her before.

“Mabilia already has the best start to life. She has a mother who would do anything for her. She has a family who will drop everything to come to her aid. Our daughter is blessed because of you, Isabella. You have given her everything she will ever need—*love*.”

“How... what has she been drinking?”

“Lily helped. She showed me how to mix up the formula. I was feeding Mabilia every bottle. Even when your mom arrived and wanted to take over. I didn’t let her... not until I had to. I didn’t want to leave her, *kotyonok*.”

“I know. I just... No one will love her like us, Mikhail,” she says. “My parents love her, of course—my whole family will—but it’s not the same.”

“You don’t think your parents would sacrifice their own lives for Mabilia?” I ask, not doubting for a second that any of the Valentinos would lay down their lives for my daughter’s. I’ve seen how that family operates, and selfishness doesn’t seem to be a trait any of them possess. For a crime family, they’re abundant in love and loyalty. Probably the most I’ve ever witnessed.

“No, that’s not what I’m saying. I know they would. But she’s not theirs. She’s *ours*. She is a part of you and a part of me.”

“Hopefully she’s more you than me.” I smirk. “If our daughter grows up to be half as amazing as you are, I’d be fucking thrilled.”

“I went out and had a one-night stand with the enemy, resulting in pregnancy.” She laughs.

“Well, she can skip that part because our daughter’s not having one-night anythings,” I grunt.

“What if...” Isabella stops herself.

“What if *what?*” I urge her to continue.

“When I was little, my mom used to dream of running away, just the two of us. Leaving the whole mafia life behind,” she says.

I’m not sure I like where Isabella’s going with that thought. If she’s thinking of running away with Mabilia, I’ll hunt her down and drag her home. I’m not giving either of them up.

“What if we... What if we just left? Took her away from this ugly world?”

We. She said *we*. She wants us to run away. Together. “Running away is a fairy tale. It’s a fantasy for people like us, Isabella. We don’t get to run away. We don’t get a different life than the one we have. What we do get is each other and Mabilia, and we need to do whatever it takes to hold on to that.”

“I know. I just sometimes wonder if the grass is greener on the other side.”

“Promise me you won’t do anything to find out, Isabella. Because I can guarantee it’s not. I don’t know a single person who’s ever run and lived to tell the story.”

“Lana and Alexei did,” she’s quick to counter.

“And where are they now? Their daughters were left orphans. And besides, from what I hear, they didn’t just run. They were forced out. We’re not being forced to do anything. We can’t run. You do know that, don’t you?” I can’t have these thoughts in her head. She needs to realize that running isn’t a viable option.

“I know.” She sighs.

“We might not be able to run, but we can buy our own little slice of paradise. A place no one but us knows about.”

“Like the island?” she asks with a renewed hope in her voice.

“Yes, anywhere in the world. We can take Mabilia there for vacation, just the three of us.”

“Deal. Anywhere but Ireland. And it has to be someplace warm,” Isabella agrees.

I’m already wishing we had this place, a place that I could whisk them off to. *Just the three of us.*



I open the door of the car before it comes to a complete stop. Both my dad and Mikhail grunt at me to wait, but their voices fall off behind me as I leap out and dash towards the front door of Lily’s house. Before I make it to the top step, one of the guards standing there opens the door, allowing me to run straight through and into the foyer.

“Mama?” I yell at the top of my lungs. I could rush around and try to find them myself, but it would take longer than just yelling and causing a scene amongst Alex’s men. “Mama, where are you?” I try again while spinning in a circle.

Seconds later, my mom walks down the right-hand staircase with Mabilia

in her arms. I don't wait for her to make it to the foyer. I run up the last few steps and reach for my baby. As soon as I have her in my arms, I drop to my knees. Rocking back and forth with Mabilia tight against my chest, I let the tears fall freely. I honestly thought I'd never see her again. I fought. Every day. I withstood whatever those assholes dished out because I knew if I just held on a little bit longer, I'd get free. My papa or even Mikhail would find me.

I fought to stay strong so that I wouldn't return a broken mess when I reunited with my daughter. She doesn't deserve a mother who can't handle her shit. She deserves a mother who can protect her against the ugliness of the unfortunate world she's been born into. Mabilia is the daughter of a Russian Pakhan, the granddaughter of the Don of the Donatello family. To say she's not at risk of being a target would be stupid. And my parents didn't raise me to be stupid.

This one little girl has changed the course of both my and Mikhail's futures. She has brought us together, brought a peace amongst the two otherwise rivaling families.

Mikhail sits on the ground next to me. He says something in Russian. I have no idea what and I really don't have it in me to ask him right now. I'm whispering into Mabilia's ear, telling her how much I love her, how much I've missed her.

My mom lowers herself on the opposite side of me. Her arms wrap around me as she peppers my forehead with kisses. "My Bella, thank God you're safe. Are you okay? What happened? Tell me what I can do?"

I look over to her, tears still falling like two rivers down my cheeks. "I'm okay, Mama. I'm okay," I repeat, not really sure if I'm telling her or myself at this point.

Mabilia cries a little. I look back down at her, bringing her face up to mine, and cover her tiny cheeks with kisses. I don't know how long I stay like this, on the floor by the stairs of Lily's foyer, but eventually my legs feel numb and I glance around. My family is all here: my dad, my mom, my cousins Theo and Romeo. My uncle T is here too. Then there's Alex and Lily—who isn't technically my family but she is cousins with my cousins on their mother's side.

As I look around at everyone, all sitting on the marble floor with me, I can't help but be thankful. When shit gets tough, we come together and we fight for each other.

“Bella, you good?” Uncle T asks with a tilt of his head. The question seems harmless, but I know differently. I know for a fact if I said *no*, he’d have no qualms about detonating a nuclear weapon on whomever hurt me.

“I’m okay, Zio T,” I tell him.

“Okay, let me show you to your room. I might have gone overboard on buying stuff for Mabilia while you were away, but thanks to a certain someone’s sperm, I never had the chance to buy little girl clothes and got stuck with two boys,” Lily says.

At the mention of her sons, they come barreling down the stairs. “Mum, Bray hit me,” Levi, the older of the two, says.

“Hit him back,” Alex tells his son.

“Do not hit your brother,” Lily warns in a motherly tone.

I look to Mikhail. “Mabilia is definitely going to be an only child,” I tell him.

He blinks and stares at me. “Whatever you want, kotyonok,” he eventually says in that same smooth, panty-melting voice he used on me the very first night I met him.

If every inch of my body wasn’t hurting right now, I’d find a way to jump his bones. But that would involve me having to put my daughter down, and I don’t plan on doing that anytime soon.

Mikhail helps pull me to my feet. “Are you okay? Want me to carry her up?” he asks quietly, so that only I can hear him.

I shake my head and hold Mabilia a little tighter. “I’m okay.”

Mikhail is right beside me as I follow Lily up the stairs, one of his palms on my back with the other resting on top of my hand that holds Mabilia against my chest. We walk like this all the way to the landing, where Mikhail keeps his hand on my back but lowers the one that was touching our daughter. He says something in Russian under his breath, turning my face to his.

“What did you say?” I ask him.

“I said... *I can’t wait to take you home, both of you.*”

“Home?” I question. “Where exactly is home going to be?”

“Yes, home. Back to New York.”

I don’t say it, but we both know I can’t return to the city right now, not until the whole mess with the Feds is cleared up or put deep under a rug that will never be lifted.

Lily stops at a door and gestures with her arm for me to enter. “Oh my

gosh, Lil!” I exclaim the moment I step inside.

The room is absolutely beautiful. There’s a huge four-poster bed in the center. Right next to it is an oval-shaped bassinet that looks like the basket is woven out of silver and gold with white and pink flowers threaded around the sides. But that’s not it. There is pretty much every piece of baby furniture you could ever want in this room too. A changing table, fully stocked with wipes and diapers. A mechanical swing with a pale-pink blanket on top...

“I have no words. You really didn’t need to do all this. I can’t...” I shake my head.

“Nonsense. As if I wouldn’t use any excuse to buy up the baby store. The closet is full of clothes for her... and for you. I wasn’t sure what you’d want, but you’re welcome to stay here as long as you need. There is absolutely no rush to leave, Izzy,” Lily says.

“Thank you,” I tell her.

“Okay, I’ll let you guys settle in. If you need anything, let me know—or just ask any one of the people constantly floating around this house,” she says before walking out of the room.

My parents are both standing in the doorway, wearing that same look they had when they found me after I was kidnapped at eight. It took them six months to let me sleep on my own after that. Even then, my dad had a connecting door built between their bedroom and mine.

“I really am okay,” I tell them.

“I will never get that week I missed with you back, Izzy. I’m allowed to look at you for as long as I want,” my mom says.

I turn to Mikhail. “Get used to them staring,” I tell him.

To my surprise, he smiles, walks over to the doorway, and stands next to my parents. “I think they’re right. This view is not something to be taken for granted and I also have a whole week to make up for.”

“Oh my god, what have you done to him? You’ve broken him. Brainwashed him or something,” I accuse my parents.

“I don’t know? I think he’s right, Bel. We do have a whole week of looking at the beauty that is you to make up for,” my dad says.

“Papa, I’m a mess. And honestly too tired for this.” I sigh.

Mikhail walks back over to me. “You should lie down,” he says, reaching for Mabilia. I don’t want to hand her over to him. Not yet. I’m not ready to let her go. “Hop on the bed. I’ll lay her next to you and go get her a bottle. She’ll be hungry soon.”

I nod my head, letting him take her from me. As soon as I'm on the bed, he places Mabilia next to me just like he said he would. Bending down, Mikhail kisses my forehead.

"I'll be right back," he says.



As much as I've been trying to convince Isabella that we're okay, I know deep down that the fight has only just started. We have hurdles ahead of us that we're going to have to face together to be able to knock them down.

I have no doubt that we will see the light at the end of the tunnel, that we'll get our happily ever after. I just need to keep her and our daughter safe through the war first—the one I know is coming. I should send them to a safe house. I have one in upstate New York, a place where she could go. Except Ivan knew about it, and right now, I have no idea where his betrayal ends. What I do know is that I need to get back to the city and clean house, get rid

of all the fucking scum dirtying up my organization. Samuel has already sent me a list of men I need to target. As well as a list of men who seem to be loyal, which is the longer of the two by far. *Thank fuck.*

“What are your plans?” Neo asks me as he enters the kitchen.

I secure the lid on the bottle I was preparing and shake it, mixing the powder and water together. “Plans?” I repeat, needing him to be more specific.

“We both know you can’t stay away from New York for much longer. Your organization won’t survive. And Izzy can’t exactly return yet. So, like I said, what are your plans?” he asks again, with his arms folded over his chest this time.

I know a lot of men would be intimidated by him, a lot of lesser men. He is the Don of the Donatello Family, appointed by Angelica’s father, making him the boss of bosses in the Italian crime organization.

Does he scare me, though? Not one fucking bit.

“I’m not going back without her,” I tell him. I don’t care what I have to do. I will be taking Isabella and Mabilia home with me.

“She’ll be arrested the moment you step foot in the city,” he says.

“I’m working on it. We’ve eliminated the rat, and I have guys working to erase the rest of the evidence.”

“What about the cops who were on the case?” He continues his line of questioning.

I raise a brow. *Really? He’s worried about the cops?* I’m not. They’ll be the easiest fucking loose ends to tie up.

“I think what you should be asking is why your daughter felt like she had to take it upon herself to rid the city of a bunch of good-for-nothing rapists,” I throw back before walking past him.

I shouldn’t have said it. I know he’s going to ask questions now. I know my words will roll around and around in his fucking head until he approaches Isabella for the answers. Ones she won’t ever give him. I understand her need to keep that secret to herself. But then again, as a parent myself, I couldn’t imagine something like that happening to my daughter and not fucking knowing about it. Not being able to help her.

I walk back upstairs. Angelica is sitting on the edge of the bed next to Isabella, so I walk around them and sit on the opposite side. “Do you need anything?” I ask her.

“No.” Isabella shakes her head and smiles up at me.

That smile is enough to send a feeling of peace right through to my soul. A soul that shouldn't ever be feeling any kind of peace—the crimes I've committed don't allow for eternal peace. But when Isabella smiles at me, I feel it.

“Okay, I'll be around if you need me, Izzy,” Angelica says as she pushes to her feet and crosses the room.

“Okay, thanks, Mama,” Isabella replies.

I wait for the door to close. “Did you mean it?” I ask.

“Mean what?”

“That you'd marry me?” A little bit of self-doubt seeps in. I really fucking hope she meant it and it wasn't just her momentary fear talking.

“I mean... wait... Do you not want to marry me anymore?” Isabella blinks up at me. “I would have married you months ago, kotyonok. There is nothing that will change my mind on that.”

“I want to marry you. I love you, Mikhail. I know I didn't say it before, and I should have because I felt it. But I was scared,” she tells me.

I lean down and gently press my lips against hers, being careful to avoid the cuts. “I love you, more than I ever thought possible.”

“You know we make no sense, right? Us as a couple,” she says.

“Does love ever really make sense?” I counter.

“I guess not...”

“I know that I'm willing to fight. I will go to the ends of the earth for us, kotyonok. Are you willing to fight alongside me?” I ask her. I can't help but replay the conversation about her wanting to run away.

“I will be right there next to you, Mikhail. Whatever comes our way.” She picks up my hand, entwining her fingers with mine. Mabilia starts to stir between us. I pass Isabella the bottle. She takes it, pauses, and stares at the contents. “I don't like this.”

“I know.” I hate this for her. I remember how much she loved feeding Mabilia. She told me it was an experience like nothing else. A bond that was unbreakable. “Your bond will never sever. You have to know that,” I say aloud.

“I hope so.” Isabella pushes herself to a sitting position while I reach for Mabilia to place her in her mother's arms.

“You have no idea how thankful I am that you're back,” I say.

“Me too.”

“You can tell me anything. Whatever comes to mind, I want you to talk to

me about it. I don't want you to keep shit in because you think I won't be able to handle it, or you're afraid of my reaction."

"I know. But there really isn't anything to say, Mikhail. They kept me in that room the whole time. At first, I wasn't tied down. But then, of course, they realized their mistake when I broke one of their arms, another's nose, and one guy... I think I cracked a few of his ribs." She grins at me.

"Good girl," I praise her. I knew she wouldn't go down without a fight. And I'm fucking proud of her for that. Isabella is not your usual girl next door. She knows how to fight back and she's not afraid to try.

"Then they tied me down. I couldn't stop the hits. Or anything they did," she says. "Lex was in the room with me for a while. He tried to fight too, but we were outnumbered."

My phone vibrates in my pocket. I pull it out and look at the screen. Samuel. Pressing the green button, I take the call. "What have you got?" I ask him.

"Lex was delivered to your house," he says, as if the universe somehow heard us.

"Alive?" I ask.

"Barely. The doc is with him now," Samuel tells me.

"Okay, do whatever—get him whatever care he needs."

"He keeps asking for Izzy. He keeps saying he has to find her," Samuel says.

"Just keep him alive and away from the fuckers on that list," I instruct and hang up.

With Ivan out of the game, I don't have a second-in-command. I know Samuel is my go-to guy for information, but he's not a member of the Bratva and I've been relying on him far too much. It's time I announce a new second. I scroll through my phone until I see the name. Paul, he was my brother's best friend. He hasn't been around as much since Vlad was killed. I hit the button and dial Paul's number.

"Boss. You back yet?" he asks.

It's an odd thing, hearing him call me *boss*. I've been avoiding him. I guess being around him reminds me too much of my brother. But now, I don't have much of a choice.

"Not yet. But I need you to get some shit done for me," I say.

"Sure, whatcha need?"

"Ivan is gone. I need you to fill his shoes," I tell him without saying the

words. He's now in charge of shit in my absence.

"When will you be home?"

"Ah, soon. I'm working on it."

"What's going on, Mikhail?" Paul asks.

"I can't say. But I'll be home as soon as I can." I cut the call. It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him about Mabilia, about Isabella. But I can't do it. Not yet.



“Lex turned up at home, in New York,” Mikhail says after he sets his phone on the bedside table.

“What? How? Is he okay?” I fire off question after question.

“He’s with a doctor, but he’s alive.” Mikhail stares at me. I’m not sure what he’s looking for.

“Okay.” I sigh because I really don’t know what else to say.

“I want to get married.”

“Didn’t we already agree to this?” I ask him.

“We did. But I mean now. I want to get married now. I don’t want to wait for you to be my wife.”

I must have taken one too many hits to the head over the last week, because even though I know his idea is crazy, I can't stop myself from agreeing. "Let's do it—tomorrow, though. I'm tired and I need to find a dress."

"Deal. Tomorrow. I'll make the arrangements, handle all the legalities," Mikhail says.

"I should be making you sign a prenup. I am an heiress after all." I smirk at him.

"Prenups are for people who get divorced. Kotyonok, you and I will never be getting divorced. And you're not an heiress. You're a fucking koroleva," he says.

"What does that mean? Koroleva?" I ask him. It's not the first time he's said it. He called me that once before, and although I tried to look it up, the only translation I found was *queen*.

"Queen, you are my queen," he says, as if reading my thoughts.

"Or maybe you're my king." I smile.

"I'll bow at your feet any day, Isabella. I will worship you for the rest of our lives," he tells me.

"You just have to survive my dad and Zio T when they find out we're getting hitched tomorrow." I laugh.

"Your father secretly loves me." Mikhail smirks.

"Sure he does."

AS TIRED AS I WAS, I couldn't sleep much last night. I was too damn excited *and* filled with nerves.

"Are you sure, Izzy? You know there is nothing wrong with waiting," Mama says for the tenth time.

Lily and her twin sister Hope are both on their phones, making arrangements to have the bridal stores deliver dresses. They've organized hair and makeup—although, looking at my reflection, I realize it's going to take one hell of a talented makeup artist to do anything with my face. I've never really been that hung up on my looks. I guess I was blessed with my mother's genes and her natural beauty. But I also never envisioned myself getting married while looking like I went ten rounds with Tyson. A tear falls down

my face. I know that Mikhail doesn't care. He won't be bothered by the fact that I'm not the beautiful bride he deserves on his wedding day.

"Hey, ah, why the fuck are you crying?" Romeo asks, storming into the room before stopping in front of me.

"Look at me? How can I get married like this?" I wave a hand over my face.

"You are always stunning, Izzy. You know that. And if that ass you've chosen to marry doesn't see it, then I'll shoot him." Romeo shrugs as if it's that simple—honestly, to him, it probably is.

I slap his shoulder. "He's not an ass, and you're not shooting him."

"You really don't need to worry. Anyone with eyes can see how head over heels that guy is for you, Iz. Don't get me wrong, if I had my way, you'd be marrying a nice Italian boy. But everyone tells me it's not my choice," Romeo huffs.

"Thank you." I wrap my arms around my cousin's shoulders. "Thank you for keeping her safe."

"Always. You don't need to thank me for that," he says, returning the gesture. "Also, just so you know, you have a shit-ton of angry cousins who are less than thrilled they're not here to see this."

"Sorry," I say.

Romeo pulls back and holds me at arm's length. "Don't be. This is about you and no one else. But I did come in here to see if you needed an escape. Just blink twice if you do."

"I don't need an escape. I need to hurry up and get married," I tell him.

"Okay, well, offer still stands. If you get out there and change your mind, know that I'll swoop in and save the day."

"Romeo, do not do anything stupid. I don't need saving, and I won't be blinking," I warn him.

"Just doing my duty as your cousin." He holds both hands in the air. "Also, if you ever lock me in a room while you try to take on an army again, I'll replace all of your shoes with knockoffs."

My eyes widen. "You wouldn't dare."

"Oh, but I would." He backs out of the room with a smirk on his face.

"Okay, the dresses will be here in thirty minutes," Lily announces from her spot on the sofa.

"I don't even know how to thank you. You've done so much for us, Lil. We've basically taken over your house," I say.

“Don’t be silly. You’re family.” She waves me off.

“I do appreciate all your help. I won’t forget it,” I tell her.

“Okay, the hair stylist will be here soon. And then makeup not long after. What else do you need?” Hope asks me.

“I don’t know?” I look to my mother.

“I have something for you,” she says, removing a chain from around her neck. It’s one she’s always worn, a Saint Michael medallion. “This can be your something borrowed.”

“Mama, thank you.” I take the gold chain and place it around my own neck. Turning around, I hold my hair to the side and let my mom secure the clasp.

“This was my grandmother’s. She wore it every day until she found out I was pregnant with you. Then she gave it to me for protection. I know it’s supposed to be borrowed, but I think it’s time for you to keep it. One day, it will be Mabilia’s too.”

“Thank you Mama.” I hug her. I honestly don’t know what I would do without her. “I hope that I can be half as good of a mother as you are.”

“You’ll be better.”

“Not possible.” I shake my head.

“BEL, YOU LOOK AMAZING.” My dad peers down at me, his eyes watery. “I know most fathers think of this day with fondness—walking their little girl down the aisle and giving her away. Not me. I’ve dreaded it. I don’t want to give you away, Bel. No matter where life takes you, who you marry, or don’t.” He pauses with a raised brow, then sighs. “Fine, I guess you’re getting married. But no matter who you’re married to, you will always be my daughter. You will always be a Valentino first.”

I used to feel pressure on my chest at the thought of having to live up to the Valentino legacy. All of my cousins are successful; they have their shit together. They knew what they were doing from a young age. Me? I’ve coasted through life, doing odd jobs here and there with no real meaning. But something has shifted. I finally feel like I belong, like I deserve my adoptive family.

“Thank you for being my papa. I couldn’t dream up a better father than

you,” I tell him.

“You’ve been the biggest blessing in my life, Bel.”

“This was left at the door for you,” Mom says, holding out a white box. I take it from her and sit down on the chair. Removing the lid, I find a card on top of white tissue paper.

Isabella,

You are my queen, today, tomorrow and forevermore. Wear these shoes to walk down the aisle. I'll help you use them when the time comes to find your peace.

XX

Mikhail

I read the card three times, before I move the tissue paper aside to reveal an absolutely stunning pair of white Manolo Blahniks. This isn't just Mikhail gifting me a pair of shoes; this is him acknowledging his acceptance of me, the good, bad, and ugly.



I'm standing in Alex's garden. Somehow, he managed to have a white floral arch set up with white wooden chairs lined up in front of it. It's not the wedding that Isabella deserves. I know that. And one day, when things are settled back in New York, I'll make sure she gets a celebration deserving of the queen she is. With all of her friends and family there to witness it.

Mabilia is wearing a lacey white floral dress that Lily bought her. With my daughter firmly in my arms, I turn to Alex. "I don't know how you did this, but I appreciate it," I say.

"Don't mention it," he tells me. "Besides, Izzy is family, and now it

seems you are too. Just don't fucking hurt her. I've always liked you. But I will choose her."

"I'm not going to hurt her," I grunt. I would cut my own hands off before that happened.

"Good." He nods his head. "I'm a little impressed you managed to survive this far, to be honest," he says, eyeing the chairs that Theo, Romeo and the Don himself—the one and only T Valentino—have just claimed.

"I think their bark is worse than their bite." I grin.

"It's not. I've seen their bite. Trust me, if Izzy gave them the signal, any signal, you'd be strung up quicker than you could blink." Alex laughs.

"You do realize you married into the same family?"

"Yep, but I've got a whole-ass ocean between them and me. Besides, my father-in-law fucking loves me. Yours looks like he wants to kill you every time I see him."

"If Neo wanted me dead, I'd be dead already." I shrug, knowing my words ring true.

The music starts. "Perfect for Me" by Bradley Marshall plays through the outdoor speakers. It's the song I chose for Isabella to walk out to. I want her to take in every lyric because it says everything I feel for her.

As soon as she steps out of the back door, one of her parents on each side of her, my heart stops. I fucking get winded at the sight. This woman could wear a potato sack and still look drop-dead gorgeous. But right now, in a white silk dress that ends just above her knees at the front and has a long train dragging behind her, she's fucking breathtaking.

I swallow the lump in my throat, trying not to fucking cry because I can feel my eyes watering. I bring my face down to Mabilia's and inhale her baby scent before placing a little kiss on the top of her head. "Your mother is amazing," I tell her in Russian.

I wonder if it's a thing to have a wedding every year. If not, I'm going to make it a thing because this is a moment I want to relive over and over again for the rest of my life.

Isabella's eyes stay fixed on mine as she walks down the small path. When she reaches me, she kisses both of her parents on the cheek. Her mother takes her father's hand and leads him over to the chairs. I don't think he would have gone and sat down otherwise—although I can't really blame him. I'm not sure I'll ever be able to give my daughter away to anyone else.

"You look... There are no words, Isabella. You're fucking stunning," I

tell her.

“Thank you. You’re not so bad yourself,” she says, eyeing me up and down with a grin. Somehow, Alex managed to get me a tux on short notice. It’s good to have friends in high places, I guess.

“Shall we begin?” the celebrant, who I totally forgot was standing here, clears her throat.

“Yes. Please,” I tell her. I don’t know what the woman says after that. I’m too focused on Isabella to hear anything that’s coming out of the celebrant’s mouth. It’s not until Isabella starts speaking that I really start to listen.

“Mikhail, after just a few hours with you, I was obsessed. I thought of you every day for months before I saw you again. I never told you this, but I wanted you to fight for this—us. Although some of my choices didn’t always make that clear, I fell in love with you the night we met.”

I shift Mabilia’s weight and pick up Isabella’s hand with my free one, giving it a little squeeze of encouragement while silently urging her to continue.

“You will never know how sorry I am for the time I wasted, for the things I did that kept us apart, and I’ll spend the rest of our lives together trying to make it up to you. Trying to prove to you that you’re it for me. You are the only one for me. I love you and I can’t wait to start our lives together. I promise to be the queen you deserve. I promise to always fight alongside you and never against you. I promise you my loyalty, my faith, and my love in this life and the next. Until the end of time.”

Well, fuck, I was doing so fucking well at not shedding a tear, but how is anyone supposed to remain dry-eyed after that?

“It’s your turn,” Isabella whispers to me.

“Oh, shit. Fuck. Okay.” I inhale a deep breath. “Isabella Valentino, I don’t think there are any words to express what you mean to me. *I love you* doesn’t seem like enough. It’s more than love, deeper. My soul wasn’t complete until I met you. You, Isabella, are everything I never knew I was waiting for. I’m grateful for every day I get to wake up with you. I couldn’t ask for a better partner to spend the rest of my life with. A better mother for our children. I will never stop fighting for us, for our forever. In this life and the next, I am entirely yours.”

“Do you, Isabella Valentino, take Mikhail Petrov to be your lawfully wedded husband?” the celebrant asks, and I hold my breath, waiting for her confirmation.

“I do. Yes,” Isabella says, nodding her head.

“Do you, Mikhail Petrov, take Isabella Valentino to be your lawfully wedded wife?”

“I do,” I say right before I fuse my lips with hers, careful not to crush Mabilia between us.

“I guess you can kiss the bride.” The celebrant shrugs.

Ignoring everyone around us, I look at Isabella. “We did it. You’re my wife.” I smile.

“We did,” she tells me.



“It’s not safe. You need to wait longer,” Mom says.

“She’s right. I’m not having you end up behind bars, Bel. I’d rather buy you your own fucking country. There is no need for you to return to New York,” my dad is quick to add.

I refrain from rolling my eyes and stomping my foot. I love my parents. I really do. But we’ve been going back and forth over this topic for the last hour. I know that Mikhail needs to return to New York, and the only thing stopping him is me. I refuse to start this marriage out by being a burden to him. Not that he would ever say that I was. He’s the Pakhan and, honestly, how he’s managed to stay away for as long as he has is a miracle. He needs

to be present; you can't lead when you're not there.

"I'm going back. I won't leave Mikhail's house," I tell them.

"Our house," Mikhail says, entering the living room.

I turn to look at him. Every time I see him, I get these little butterflies. It's been a week since we exchanged vows. A week of this man—this hot as sin, adoring man—being my husband.

I smile. "I was just telling Mama and Papa that we're returning to New York."

"I see," Mikhail says, rubbing a hand across his jaw as his gaze shifts from me to my parents.

"Do you really think it's wise? To take her back while the cops are still working a case against her?" my father asks him.

"If my wife wants to go home, then I'm going to take her home. Also, the cops are always trying to work a case against every single one of us. They have no evidence; they have no witnesses anymore."

I swear my dad's jaw tightens as he grits his teeth every time Mikhail refers to me as his wife, which is often. I think he tries to throw it in every conversation on purpose. Not that I'm complaining. I like hearing it.

"Look... I can't hide out in Australia for the rest of my life. Besides, last I checked, the States and Australia were friends. If they know I'm here and wanted me, the Feds would have me extradited anyway," I remind them.

"We know we can't stop you, but if you go, then so am I," Mom says.

"We're leaving tonight. There's a small airfield upstate that we'll fly into. From there, we'll be driving," I tell them.

"Tonight?"

"Yep. Thanks, Mama, Papa." I stand and take Mabilia from my mom, who has been hogging her as much as she can.

"Why don't you leave her with me and you two go and get your things ready?" Mom offers.

"It's okay. We're already packed," I tell her. I don't like not being in the same room as my daughter. I need to be able to see her at all times.

"Actually, that would be great, Angelica," Mikhail says, plucking Mabilia out of my arms and handing her back to my mom. "Isabella, I need your help with something real quick. Upstairs." He takes my hand and pulls me out of the living room behind him.

"What? Mikhail, what's going on?" I ask him, tugging against the hold he has on my arm.

“Kotyonok, you can either walk upstairs with me or I can carry you up.”

“Or I can kick your ass and leave you squirming in pain on the floor while I step over your ass,” I hiss in reply.

Mikhail chuckles. “You could do that, but then you would miss out on the orgasms I’m planning on giving you the moment we make it upstairs.”

Orgasms. Those I could really use. Mikhail has been insistent that we needed to wait until my body was healed more. Even on our wedding night, he went down on me, made sure I came, and then wouldn’t let me do the same for him. Said he could wait, that the next time he came would be inside my pussy, not my mouth.

“You could have led with that, you know,” I tell him, pushing at his back. “Come on, let’s go already.”

“You wanted me to tell you in the room, with your parents, that I needed to fuck you?” he mutters under his breath.

“No, don’t be stupid. That would get you shot. Probably not fatally but I don’t want to be stitching you up either.”

“Your parents wouldn’t shoot me,” he says, with a little too much confidence.

I don’t bother correcting him. If he wants to underestimate just how crazy my parents can be, he can learn that lesson all on his own. I know they wouldn’t kill him, but I wouldn’t put it past either my mom or dad to cause him extreme pain if he said something about fucking me in front of them. Then again, my parents have been really accepting of Mikhail, more so than I gave them credit for. My whole family has been, really. I should have known that they would do their best to welcome him into the fold. Anything that’s ever been important to me, they’ve always wanted to be supportive of it too.

The bedroom door slams closed the second we’re through it. Mikhail spins me around, pushing the front of my body against the closest hard surface. His back presses into me. I can feel the hardness of his cock against my ass. Mikhail brushes my hair away from my neck, and I tilt my head to the side, giving him all the access he needs. He takes the unspoken invitation, his mouth running up and down while leaving a trail of kisses in his wake.

“Are you wet for me, kotyonok?” he whispers right into my ear.

Chills run through my body. “Yes,” I tell him. I’m always wet and ready for him. I’ve been trying to get him to do this for the past week.

“What do you need?” he asks me. His fingers grip the base of my neck. He turns my face, placing his lips mere millimeters from mine.

“I need you, Mikhail. Only you,” I huff out.

“You need me to fuck this sweet little pussy?” he says as his free hand snakes around to cup me over my denim shorts.

“Yes. I need you to show me, Mikhail.”

“Show you what?”

“Show me how you fuck your wife... show me how I’m yours.” I push my ass back against him, grinding onto his cock.

Mikhail unfastens the button on my shorts and then slides the zipper down. He pushes his hand under my panties and his fingers glide right through my folds. “Good fucking girl. You’re not just wet for me, kotyonok. You’re fucking drenched,” he says as he shoves a finger into my opening.

“Oh, fuck,” I groan as I push against his hand.

Mikhail slowly drags his finger in and out of me, while the palm of his hand presses on my clit. I can feel myself building. The ledge is right there in front of me and I’m running towards it.

“I want you to fucking come for me. Show me how good my fingers feel fucking you,” he grunts into my ear before his teeth clamp down on the skin just underneath.

“Fuck, oh god. Oh shit,” I moan.

Mikhail picks up the speed of his movements. His hand tightens around my throat, and I swear I can see stars.

“I’m...” My words die off as an explosive orgasm throws me over that cliff into oblivion.

“That’s one. We’re going to get three,” Mikhail says, pulling his hand out of my panties and spinning me around. “We’re going for the trifecta, kotyonok.”

“The trifecta?” I parrot.

“Three orgasms. One on my fingers, one on my tongue, and one on my cock. The trifecta,” he explains. Then he drops to his knees in front of me.



On my knees in front of my koroleva, my everything, there is nowhere else I'd rather be. Isabella peers down at me, her face glowing with that post-orgasmic bliss. I fucking love this look on her. I really haven't seen it enough. I'm not sure I will ever get enough of seeing her like this.

My fingers curl into the waistband of her shorts and panties, dragging them down her legs. I fucking love her legs. I lift her right foot to help her step out while her hands land on my arms for balance. Placing her foot down, I lift the left one and pull it through, then I proceed to toss the clothing across the room. I don't set this foot down on the floor, though. Instead, I bring her

calf up until her knee is resting on my shoulder. My lips meet the inside of her thigh and I kiss my way up. Her skin is silky smooth beneath my fingertips. I stop when I see the faded bruising on her upper leg.

I can't wait until all of her bruises are gone. I know she says that nothing sexual happened when she was kept prisoner for that week, but every time I see these marks on the inside of her thighs, I can't help but doubt her. I don't want to. I want to believe her, trust that she wouldn't lie to me. But knowing she's lied about what happened to her as a child to her entire family for most of her life... there is that niggling doubt in my head I can't shake. It's why I've been putting this off. I didn't want to rush her. As much as I love fucking her, the love I have for this woman goes far deeper than physical attraction.

"Mikhail?" Isabella's voice brings me out of my own thoughts.

"Shh, I'm taking in my favorite piece of art." I smirk up at her as I stare at her glistening pussy.

"Your favorite art wants the attention of your tongue, not your eyes," she counters.

Well, fuck, I don't need to be told twice.

I wanted to draw this out, make her whimper with need, drive her out of her mind. But as soon as my tongue slides through her folds, the hunger takes over. I don't relish it slowly, no. Like a starved man, I fucking feast on her. My tongue pushes into her opening, licking the walls of her pussy. Her taste is something else. I want it for breakfast, lunch, dinner, and dessert.

My hands dig into her thighs, holding them open as I bury my face in her mound. Her fingers pull at the ends of my hair, her nails sinking into my scalp. I don't stop. I can't fucking stop. The moans coming from her only encourage me to keep going. I need more. I want her screaming this whole house down.

I bring my tongue up to her clit, flattening it out on the hardened little bud. My teeth gently graze her lips as she grinds herself down on my face, claiming her pleasure. I let her take control for a minute before I recapture the reins. This is my show, not hers. Pushing her hips against the door, I shove two fingers into her pussy, wetting them with her juices before replacing them with my tongue.

"Fuck, Mikhail. Shit. Oh god..." Isabella holds a palm over her own mouth to stifle her cries of pleasure.

I bring my hand around to her ass—those fingers that I just juiced up push at her asshole. At the same time, my tongue dives in and out of her

pussy. Isabella freezes at the intrusion, but soon enough, she leans into it and my fingers push through the resistance. I drag them in and out, matching the rhythm of my tongue. Her thighs shake and then she's rising on her tiptoes. The front of her body falling forward as she comes apart while screaming my name.

Withdrawing my hand, I place her left foot back on the floor, stand, and pick her up with me. Then I turn around and walk over to the bed, where I throw her down. "That's two," I tell her.

She blinks her eyes open at me. "Two." She smiles.

"I'll be right back, and when I return, I want that shirt gone from your body," I say, walking into the bathroom.

After washing my hands, I strip out of my clothes. I open the cabinet and look at the box of condoms staring back at me. My arm reaches out before I change my mind and close the door. I don't want anything between me and my wife.

When I enter the bedroom again, I find Isabella completely naked, sprawled out on the bed and waiting for me. I stand at the edge of the mattress and stare down at her. "You really are a work of fucking art," I tell her.

"Mmm, you're not so bad yourself," she says, running her eyes up and down my body before they stop at the scar on the side of my torso. The one she put there.

"I'm going to tattoo your name right above this mark. So I never forget what you're capable of," I tell her with a smirk.

"Don't worry, I won't let you forget," she says in reply.

"I have no doubt." I climb onto the bed, positioning myself between her legs. My hand tugs at my cock. It's hard, fucking angry that it's had to wait so long before getting a piece of heaven. "Are you ready for number three?" I ask her.

"More than ready. Hurry up. Stop playing with it and put it in me already, Mikhail," she huffs.

My body hovers above her, my lips smash onto hers, and I push my tongue into her mouth. My cock is lined up. I enter her as slowly as I can, ready for her to change her mind at any moment. Isabella pulls away from my kiss.

"Mikhail, if you fuck me like I'm broken, I'm going to stab you again," she says with a smile that's much sweeter than the words it accompanies.

“You’re not broken, kotyonok. I’m simply taking my time. You’re my wife, which means I get to fuck you for the rest of my life, and I intend to do that in as many ways as humanly possible. But right now, I don’t want to *fuck* my wife. I want to make love to her, so shut that pretty little mouth and let me love you the way you deserve to be loved,” I tell her.

Isabella parts her lips to reply. I lean forward and swallow whatever words she was going to say. My tongue twirls around hers and I continue to sink into her, inch by inch, as slow as I possibly can. Savoring this moment. The moment I sink into my wife for the first time. Sure, I’ve fucked Isabella before, but she wasn’t my wife back then.

When I bottom out, I drag my length back and then slide in again. I repeat the process and make sweet, slow love to her. It doesn’t take long before I feel her pussy clench around me. Her spine arches and her nails claw down my back as she comes all over my cock, right before I follow, emptying myself inside her.

“Fuck, I love loving you,” I tell her.

“Mm, I love you loving me too,” she hums.

“That was three. We reached the trifecta, kotyonok.”

“Three.” She smiles, and I promise myself right then and there that I will do whatever it takes to keep seeing that smile on her face.



I'm sitting in the back of an SUV with Mikhail, on the way to his house. Mabilia is in a car seat on the row in front of us. I know every mother thinks it, but Mabilia really is the perfect baby.

My knee bounces with nerves. I feel like I'm walking into enemy territory without a disguise. Because that's exactly what I'm doing. Mikhail insists that everything is going to be fine. But I can't help but hear the story of Maddie's parents in my head. Her mother, Lana, was one of my dad's best friends and she was an Italian mafia princess who fell for a Russian. They ended up getting run out of town, hunted down, and eventually killed. I know I've said I'd love to get away, but I don't think I want a life of hiding. I don't

want Mabilia to be threatened and hunted down, especially by people who are supposed to be her family—who share the same blood.

I love Mikhail. I truly do, but I won't hesitate to take our daughter and disappear if she's threatened by the Bratva. I really would do anything for the man, but when it comes to my daughter, nothing and no one will ever come before her.

Mikhail picks up my hand and then reaches for Mabilia's. He says something in Russian before letting go of her. He keeps hold of me, placing our joined palms on his thigh.

"What did you say?" I ask him.

"Family above all, and we always collect."

"We always collect?" I know it's the code his organization goes by, but how it relates to Mabilia or me, I have no idea.

"It's a promise. Anyone who so much as thinks of doing you or her wrong, I will collect their souls myself."

"You know, if it's too soon, I can take her to my place. We don't have to do this yet. Maybe you should go and see what it is exactly you're coming home to first," I suggest.

"Nyet," he growls. It's not often Mikhail shows frustration. The man is the epitome of cool. But anytime I mention going somewhere else, he's quick to voice his displeasure. He doesn't want to be separated from our daughter any more than I do.

"Okay." I bring our joined hands up to my mouth and kiss each of his knuckles. "I will take your lead on this," I tell him. Until I feel it's too dangerous. That's when I won't ask him for permission.

"You know I'm not going to let anything happen to you, right? I want you both with me. We are family and family sticks together. Always. No matter what," Mikhail says.

"I know."

"History is not repeating itself here, Isabella. I won't allow it."

"I'm sure Alexei thought that too." I sigh.

"Alexei was a soldier. He wasn't Pakhan. You, my dear, are married to the king, not the soldier."

"King, huh? I'm sorry, your highness. I didn't realize I was in the presence of such royalty. If I'd known, I would have dressed nicer." I grin.

Mikhail runs his eyes up and down my body, and I swear goose bumps erupt all over me as he does. "That dress is far too fucking nice. If anything,

you should have dressed less... *nice*," he tells me.

I look down at myself. I might have overdone it, but I wanted to dress to impress. I couldn't exactly rock up as his wife in a pair of cutoff shorts and an old band tee. I'm wearing a black lace dress with a nude slip underneath it. The material hugs all of my curves and shows just the right amount of cleavage to be respectable but still distracting to anyone who looks, while the hem ends just before my knees. I paired the dress with a simple pair of six-inch black Louboutins.

"You don't like my outfit?" I ask, knowing full well when he saw me in this, his eyes bugged out of his head. I saw that same look the very first night we met. Hunger. Lust. Intrigue.

I know for the past week I haven't really been myself. I didn't feel like getting dressed up, putting makeup on or anything like that. Other than the day we got married. I must admit I do feel better following my old routine. I know I don't need it and shouldn't need to feel—for lack of a better word—*pretty*. But I just feel more like myself when I'm in nice clothes and a really good pair of heels. If that puts the whole women's rights movement back ten decades, well, then so be it.

"I like the dress too fucking much. That's the problem. Do you have any idea how hard it is to concentrate around you, Isabella? I'm going in there to put the fear of the grim reaper into my men, and all I'll be thinking about is how much I want to take you up to our bedroom and fuck you senseless," Mikhail huffs.

"Oh my god!" I lean forward and cover Mabilia's tiny little ears. "You can't say shit like that, Mikhail. You're going to traumatize her."

The look that comes over his face is priceless. "What? Is that a real thing? Shit, how do I undo it?" His eyes bounce between me and Mabilia.

"Relax. I was joking. She won't remember or understand what you say right now. But we should get used to speaking more... child-friendly," I tell him.

"You're right. I'll make a *no cursing* rule in the house. The last thing I need is my little princess developing a vocabulary that'd put a sailor to shame." Mikhail nods like it's a done deal, like he can really expect everyone to enter his house and watch their language.

Shit, I'll be hard up to make that change myself. But I don't bother to tell him it's an unreasonable expectation. He can find out for himself.

The car pulls into a driveway that I know is his house, and memories of

the last time I was here flash through my mind. I walked out of those doors and didn't look back. I thought I'd never see him again. I thought I was doing the right thing for my daughter. I realize now that stealing her chance to know her father, especially since Mikhail is taking the whole father thing so seriously, was the wrong decision. I really can't fault him for how overprotective he is with her. He loves our daughter, and every little girl should get to experience that kind of love from a father.

If it wasn't for Neo adopting me, I never would have had that. And I can't help but wonder what I would have turned out like without his influence, guidance, and endless support. I might not be his by blood, but no one would ever know that. He has never treated me like anything less than *his* daughter. Even before he married my mom, he referred to me as his.

"I'm really sorry for how I left things last time I was here," I tell Mikhail.

"You mean when you left me bleeding out and tied to my bed after stabbing me?" he asks with a raised brow.

"Yeah, that..." I say.

"It's okay. I know why you did it. I understand."

"You wouldn't have handled the situation the same?"

"No, I wouldn't have, but we are not the same person, Isabella—thankfully you're much more level-headed than I am." He laughs.

"Me, level-headed?" I point to myself. "Stabbing you and leaving you to die was not level-headed."

"Well, I was planning on kidnapping you and locking you in a tower for the rest of your life." He shrugs.

I want to laugh. I want to think he's joking, but the seriousness of his tone and his stone-like expression tell me otherwise.

"I would have escaped your tower anyway," I counter.

"I have no doubt," he says.

The car comes to a stop in front of the house. I look to the door and then to Mabilia, who is sleeping peacefully in her car seat.

"You ready?" Mikhail asks.

I take a deep breath. "Yep." I try to keep the panic, the fear of the unknown out of my voice. Running a hand down my left leg, I feel for the knife I secured to my thigh with a garter.

"You won't be needing that. If you do need a weapon, though..." Mikhail leans into me. "...there's an arsenal at your disposal on the top floor. The code for the door is one-zero-four-five," he whispers into my ear,

straightening and then knocking twice on his window. The door to the car is opened, and Mikhail climbs out before reaching back inside and plucking Mabilia from the safety of her car seat.

Well, here goes nothing, I guess.

Time to see if I've made the best or possibly the most reckless choice of my life by agreeing to trust my husband's judgement.



I have my daughter in one arm and my free hand on the small of my wife's back as I walk my family into our home. I know that Isabella does not see this as her house right now, but she will. Maybe she can spend time redecorating it to her tastes. God knows the old mansion could use a makeover. I don't think this place has changed since my mother was alive and the woman of the house.

Isabella is nervous. To the untrained eye, anyone who didn't know her, you would think otherwise. But I see it. It's in the tiny little tick of her jaw, the tightness in her shoulders. There isn't anything I can say to put her at ease. I've tried. This is something she's just going to have to see for herself.

A car pulls into the driveway behind us just as we're about to walk up the stairs. My new in-laws climb out and I smirk. I knew they were following us.

"Oh my god, I told them not to come," Isabella groans.

"It's fine. They're your parents. They have an open invitation to our home, Isabella," I tell her.

"Those are words you're going to regret. Do me a favor and don't tell them that," she says between clenched teeth.

I hide my chuckle under a cough. I'm sure her parents can be overbearing, but at least they're alive. And as my daughter's only living grandparents, I want them around for her. Family is the most important thing to me. This unconventional union will be a good thing, for both of us. Really, if any of the generations before us were smart, they would have arranged a marriage to end the war. It wouldn't be the first time in the history of crime families for opposing sides to do so.

"Are we too early for the housewarming?" Neo asks.

"Just in time, actually. Come in," I tell him, turning Isabella around and guiding her to the now open front door.

I instructed Paul to have all the elite members in attendance. A lot of them have their own homes on the property—although a few are currently waiting in the basement for me to deal with. That's something that can wait till later.

When I walk in, Paul is the first to step up and greet me. "Boss, welcome home," he says, wrapping an arm around me and bringing me in for a hug. I position myself at an angle so he's not squishing Mabilia. When he steps back, his eyes go from mine to the infant in my arms. "Been busy, I see." He smirks.

"You could say that." I nod. "Paul, I want you to meet my daughter, Mabilia. And my wife, Isabella." I gesture beside me.

"Wife? Shit, Mikhail, you could have told me. I would have sent... something," he says while scratching the back of his head. "Welcome to the family, Isabella," he adds with a polite smile. I see the questions behind his eyes, the ones he won't dare ask in front of her. I also know Paul. He hasn't missed the fact that Neo Valentino is standing in my house. "Vlad would be fucking proud of you," Paul says to me in Russian.

Vlad, my brother. I still don't have answers to his death, still haven't avenged him the way he deserves. And now that I'm home, I plan on rectifying that. Along with everything else I have to fucking fix.

“Thank you. Is everyone here?” I ask while looking past Paul into the house’s interior.

“Yes, boss. Everyone.”

I want to tell him to drop the whole *boss* thing and call me Mikhail. It’s fucking weird hearing it from him. Especially when it was something he used to call my brother for all those years.

“I know I’ve been absent, but I’m back now. It’s time to get the answers we’ve been looking for,” I assure him.

He nods and turns around before leading us farther into the house, where all thirty of the highest members in our organization are lined up. They’re standing stock-still, silent, waiting for my word.

I walk to the middle of the line and stop. “I know I’ve been gone for a while. I had shit that couldn’t *not* be dealt with. I’ve returned, with more family,” I tell them. “This is my daughter, Mabilia.” I turn her around so they can see her face, then hold out a hand for Isabella to take. She’s standing next to me, her eyes scanning the room. “And my wife, Isabella.” There’re a few gasps amongst the men but no one says a word. “You’re here because you’re the elite. You’ve proven your loyalty to the Bratva again and again. You’ve proven your loyalty to *me*. And I expect that, that same loyalty extends to my wife and daughter without question. If any of you have an issue with this, speak now.”

I wait, taking my time to look each and every man in the eye. When I get to the last soldier, and no one has spoken up, I nod.

“There has been unrest within our organization. Some members have been aligning themselves with the authorities. They will be dealt with the only way that’s fitting for someone who betrays the family—a rat amongst men.” I hand Mabilia over to Isabella. I don’t like talking about this while she’s in my arms. It feels wrong. Even if it’s the reality of the world she was born into. “My marriage brings a union of two great families, the Petrovs and the Valentinos. I don’t expect you to share your finest vodka with them, but I do expect you to show respect and to honor the peace between us,” I tell them, pausing for emphasis before clearing my throat. “Now that the formalities are over, we’ll have a feast. Drink and eat—and while you indulge, remember that we always collect.”

“We always collect,” they repeat the motto in unison.

Each man waits his turn to congratulate me and verbally welcome Isabella to the family, while eerily eyeing her parents who have positioned

themselves behind her. If you'd asked me a year ago if I could imagine myself standing here with the Valentinos without guns being drawn, the answer would have been a strong no. But here we are.

Once my men have all offered their respects, I dismiss them to the dining room, telling them I'll join them shortly. I want to show Isabella to our room and get her settled. I know my men, and a room full of Russian mobsters drinking their weight in vodka is no place for an infant.

"Will you be needing a guest room?" I ask Isabella's parents.

They both look to their daughter. I can see it on their faces. They don't want to leave her here. I get it. If it were my daughter, there's no way I'd be leaving her in what I thought was enemy territory either.

"No, they won't," Isabella answers for them. "Mama, Papa, I love you. I really do, but I will be fine. *We* will be fine. And I'll call you in the morning. Go home."

"It's really not an issue if you want to stay. I can have one of the maids show you to a room," I tell them. To which, Isabella shoves an elbow into my ribs. "Ow, fuck."

Neo laughs. "Thank you, Mikhail, a room would be great," he says.

"Actually, we can't stay. I have... that thing." Angelica turns to her husband.

"What thing?" he questions her.

"*That* thing." She raises her eyebrows. "I told you about it. Now, come on. Let's go."

"Mikhail has offered us a room, Angel. It would be rude to refuse it," Neo argues. A slew of heated Italian comes out of Angelica's mouth as she waves her hands around. "Okay, shit. Well, thanks for the offer, Mikhail, but apparently my wife has a thing," Neo says, then leans in and kisses Isabella and Mabilia. "I'll see you tomorrow, Bel."

"Or, you know, the day after. No rush, Papa," Isabella tells him. Angelica pulls her daughter in for a hug. "Thanks, Mama," Isabella whispers.

"Call me, for anything," she replies.

"I will."

Once Neo and Angelica leave, I take Isabella upstairs. I had Samuel arrange to have a crib and some supplies for both Isabella and Mabilia brought in, without informing the others. Judging by the surprised looks on everyone's faces downstairs, I'm guessing he managed to keep the secret.

Opening the door, I let Isabella walk ahead of me. "Oh my god, it's so..."

pink,” she says.

I look around to see what she’s talking about. There is pink everywhere. A pink bassinet, a pink stroller. There’s even a pink rocking chair in the corner where I used to have a black leather one-seater. The spot where my wet bar used to sit has been transformed into a... bottle-making station?

What the fuck? I know I told Samuel to make sure we had the necessities, but this is a lot to take in.



I wrap Mabilia up in a warm pink towel. When Mikhail went downstairs to talk to his men, I decided to run a bath. Mabilia loves being in the water and Mikhail's bathroom is freaking amazing. I pop her down in the little baby swing. It's odd, seeing Mikhail's bedroom turned into a baby wonderland, because I honestly can't find a better description. I don't know who he tasked with the job, but whoever was in charge of putting the room together spared no expense at all. And apparently they also thought everything needed to be pink.

I quickly dry myself off and grab the bathrobe that's hanging on the hook on the back of the door. "Well, baby girl, let's go find you some clothes to

sleep in.” I reach for Mabilia, who just stares back at me.

Walking into Mikhail’s room, I stop at the changing table, lay Mabilia on top, find the baby powder, and sprinkle some over her skin before putting a clean diaper on her. I pick her back up and walk into the closet. One side is full of Mikhail’s suits, the other is stocked with women’s clothing. And along the end wall are racks of what look to be neatly folded baby clothes. Considering the various shades of pink, I’m assuming their baby clothes anyway. Which is confirmed when I pick up a little pink onesie with white polka dots. If I weren’t so exhausted, I would explore the contents of this wardrobe further, but right now, all I want to do is curl up on the bed and sleep.

After Mabilia is dressed, I make her a bottle and lie on Mikhail’s bed with my daughter in my arms. It doesn’t take long for her to fall asleep. And as soon as I know she’s out, I close my eyes and let sleep take over me too.

I WAKE with a jolt when I feel the bed dip. My eyes spring open.

“Shh, it’s just me, kotyonok. I’m moving her to the cradle,” Mikhail says, gently scooping Mabilia into his arms.

I hold my breath as he places her in the cradle, hoping she doesn’t wake up again. I really want to go back to bed. She’s a great baby, and I honestly don’t mind waking up to her cries at all hours of the night. But all the traveling, the stress of the last couple of weeks, it’s catching up to me. And right now, all I want to do is sleep.

Mikhail pulls his shirt over his head and then drops his pants to the floor before he climbs into bed, next to me. His arms pull me up against his chest.

“You smell like vodka,” I tell him.

“Vodka doesn’t have a smell,” he counters.

“It does.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be. How’d it go down there?” I ask him.

“It was good. It’s good to be home. There’s a lot of shit I have to sort out.”

“Anything I can help with?” I offer.

He’s silent for a minute before he replies, “I don’t want you to worry

about any of it. I want you to focus on our daughter, on yourself. Do whatever you want to do, kotyonok.” He kisses the top of my head.

“I’ve never really known what I wanted to do. My whole life, I’ve done odd jobs for my family. But I’ve never had a passion, not like my cousins do with their careers. But being Mabilia’s mother, I’m passionate about that. I really like being a mother—a lot more than I thought I would.”

“You are a great mother. If that’s the thing you want to do, then do that. I’ll happily impregnate you as many times as you’d like.”

“Let’s wait at least a year,” I tell him. Although, the night before we left Australia, we didn’t use protection. I should be concerned, but I’m not. Whatever will be will be.

“Okay,” Mikhail agrees. “Go to sleep. If Mabilia wakes up, I’ll feed her.”

THE SUN SHINES on my face as consciousness seeps in. I roll over and feel the cold sheets. When I open my eyes, I already know he isn’t going to be here. Mikhail is an early riser. I’m really not sure how the man functions on such little sleep. I shove the blankets off and climb out of the bed. Peering into the cradle, I find it empty as well.

It’s okay. Mikhail will have her somewhere, I tell myself. I tighten the tie on the robe and walk out of the bedroom in search of them while trying to remain calm and rational.

The house is quiet. I manage to make it to Mikhail’s office without spotting another soul. I guess the fact that I memorized the layout the last time I paid him a visit will be useful now that I’m living here. I push open the door and release the breath I was holding. My hands still shake slightly but I feel my body relax as I take in the sight of Mikhail sitting behind his desk with Mabilia in his arms. He uses one hand to type something on his keyboard while he focuses on his laptop screen.

“I don’t like waking up alone,” I say, walking into the room.

“I didn’t want to bother you.” Mikhail looks up at me with a lopsided grin.

“How long have you been up?” I ask him.

“A few hours. She didn’t want to go back to sleep, so I thought I’d start teaching her the business.” His smile widens.

“You know what? Let’s wait until she’s at least five to teach her all the insider secrets.” I sit on the edge of his desk, right next to him. “What are you working on?” I ask while eyeing the screen. He has a range of bank accounts pulled up.

“I was ordering you cards and giving you access to accounts,” he says.

My eyes drop to the screen. There are a lot of zeros on those balances. “I don’t need your money, Mikhail. I have plenty of my own.”

“You can’t use your cards right now. We need to make sure the case against you is dead before anyone outside the family knows that you’re here,” he reminds me.

“I still don’t need your money. I have multiple accounts, in multiple names. I’m not stupid.”

“I married an assassin, didn’t I?” He laughs.

“You did, actually. Do you regret it?” I ask him.

“Not a fucking bit.” He tugs on my robe, bringing me closer to him. “But you’re still taking my money. You’re my wife, Isabella. That means I provide for you now. Not your parents, not your grandfather or uncle. *Me.*”

“I’m not saying you can’t provide for me. For us. I’m just stating a fact. I don’t need it. I can provide too. It’s the twenty-first century after all.”

“It is, but this isn’t up for debate. You’re getting cards. Use them or don’t. I can’t force you to spend our money.”

“Great. Look how easily we just came to an agreement. I think you and I are going to rock this whole marriage thing.” I smile.

“We sure are.” Mikhail nods. Mabilia lets us know what she thinks with a wail. For someone with such tiny lungs, she sure can make a lot of noise.



I don't think I realized how much I missed home until we pulled up in the driveway yesterday. Although, having Isabella and Mabilia here has a different feel to it. It's more... complete. I know it's going to take some time for my men to get used to the changes, to get used to the girls being a part of the family. But, so far, no one has dared to say a negative word against them.

That could just be because they know I've returned to clean house. No one wants to be on the receiving end of the punishment I'm planning to dish out to the rat bastards currently locked up in my basement. There is only ever one way to deal with rats, and that's to exterminate them and anyone else

they've infected with their traitorous disease. Once that's done, I'll have the fun task of cleaning up the mess Ivan left behind in my various businesses. It seems betraying me wasn't his only pastime over the last few months.

No, he wasn't just trying to fuck up my relationship with Isabella. He was also adamant about ruining every legitimate business the Bratva has at their disposal. And he didn't just stop there. Somehow, he managed to negotiate various weapons deals I never would have signed off on. I don't pretend to be a good man, never will. But even I draw the line at some of the shit the underworld dabbles in. Human trafficking being one of those lines. And, now, thanks to fucking Ivan and my blind trust in him, I have the pleasure of breaking ties with some fuckers who don't deserve to be breathing, let alone in business with my family.

The problem is, I need to do this without causing all-out war and having my wife and daughter caught in the crossfire. Worse yet, because they wouldn't just be caught in the middle; they'd have targets on their backs. I can understand why my brother never married or had children. He always said loved ones were a weakness and he'd never bring a child into this world to be used as a weapon against him.

I get that. I do. But, fuck, one look at Mabilia and I couldn't imagine not having her. It's sad that Vlad never got to experience the bond a father has with his child. He never got to experience the once in a lifetime kind of love that I have found with Isabella.

I shake off the thoughts of my brother as I enter the basement. I left Isabella upstairs with her parents, who turned up at exactly nine this morning to make sure their daughter was still in one piece. If I didn't love her so damn much, I would have told them to fuck off and get out, irked that they think I'm not capable of protecting her. But then again, the fact that she has so many people around her, looking out for her well-being, is a good thing. Better than good, it's fucking great. I can't fault them for their worry either. If I were forced to spend a night without Isabella—well, *fuck that*. I'd sneak into her room anyway.

The stench hits me first as my boots touch the last few stairs. That odor of rotting flesh and feces. Then it's the sounds, the groaning and whimpers of a man who would do anything to end it all. I pull on the string above my head, causing the fluorescent lights to flicker on. The bright bulbs blind the ten men currently hanging from chains that are hooked up on a pulley system—Vlad's installation. It allows you to move the bodies without actually having to lift

any of their fat asses.

“Miss me?” I ask, walking into the middle of the room.

“Boss? Whatever you heard, it’s wrong. I didn’t do shit.” Anton, my father’s childhood friend, is the first to speak up. He’s been a part of the Bratva for longer than I’ve been alive. How the fuck Ivan managed to turn him against me, I have no idea, but I’m about to fucking find out.

“Anton, my father would be disappointed if he were here to witness your betrayal. He looked at you like a brother,” I tell him.

“I didn’t do it, Mikhail. I swear.”

“You see, I have concrete evidence to suggest that you did. You aligned yourself with a rat, with Ivan, and you know what that makes you, Anton?” I ask. He doesn’t answer. I didn’t expect him to. “It makes you a fucking rat.” My anger takes over as I lash out, throwing a right hook that connects with his already broken nose. I wait two whole minutes for his screams to die down. When they do, I glance at my watch. I really do have better shit to be doing. “I have one question, Anton.” I pause, forcing him to look up at me before I continue. Well, as best he can with how swollen his eyes are. “What did he offer you? What made you turn on your family? On me?”

“You don’t deserve to be Pakhan. You knocked up the Valentino girl. That’s why. Everyone knows, and not one of them will stand by and let you ruin what we have spent generations working to build,” he says.

“I have news for you. I didn’t just knock her up. I fucking married her. And as for ruining the family, well, you’re not going to be around to see how it plays out anyway.” I extend a hand. Kon, one of the elite members who’s been down here for a few days keeping these men company, places a knife in the center of my palm. I step up to Anton. Digging the knife into his chest, I cut off the Bratva tattoo. He doesn’t get to wear it any longer. “Take him to the barn,” I instruct Kon.

The barn is the only place these rat bastards deserve to end up. I wait until my men unclasp his chains, take him by the arms, and drag him up the stairs. Turning around, I flick on the television screen that’s mounted on the wall. Every fucker in here will have a high-definition view of what their futures will hold.

The surveillance camera in the barn turns on, and hundreds of rodents come into view as they scatter around the brick room, scavenging for any piece of food they can find. They’re about to have a feast when I’m done here. I know it’s fucking disgusting, having a room full of rats. But it’s a

recent addition. I had Paul find them for me after reading about a hitman who had his targets eaten alive by rodents, and I fucking liked the idea of having the rats eating the rats.

Once again, I never said I was a good man. I pull up a chair. "I'm going to give you a show," I tell the other nine fuckers still hanging from the ceiling.

Some of them kick and pull at the chains; others just hang loosely, the fight already drained from their bodies. Five minutes later, we watch as Anton is tossed into the makeshift pit from the manhole in the ceiling. There are no doors, no windows, no ways out of this brick room.

The moment his body hits the concrete floor, the rats are all over him. I wait to hear his screams but they never come. The fucker is already dead. He was supposed to go in kicking, endure every bite and scratch as the rodents ate him alive.

I should feel something. This man was around for every birthday, every Christmas when I was a child. Now, he's nothing more than rat food. Instead of sadness, I feel lighter. Knowing that's one less fucking traitor I have to deal with.



I 'm going to kill him.

That's my first thought when I watch two of Mikhail's men drag a body, bleeding and oozing, through the house. Right past me. Right past my *daughter*. The guy isn't dead, though, because he looks at me and immediately spits out a mouthful of blood and saliva. Which I saw coming and quickly turned, so that shit didn't land on Mabilia. One of the soldiers carrying him glances at me with wide eyes and apologizes.

"Wait," I tell them as they continue to drag the bastard down the hall. "Where are you taking him?"

"Boss wants him in the barn," one of them says.

“And where is the *boss*, right now?” I ask, putting extra emphasis on the title.

The two soldiers look at each other, neither willing to respond. “You want to see what you married, go and look in the basement, bitch. You’ll be the death of this family, unless we stop you,” the guy on the ground answers for them.

“Wait here a sec,” I tell Mikhail’s men before walking into the living room, where my parents are seated.

I hand Mabilia to my dad. Mostly because I feel like my mother has more self-control than he does, and I know if he’s holding her, he’s not killing anyone.

“Can you watch her for a minute? I’ll be right back,” I tell them without waiting for a reply.

When I’m back in the hall, I look at the bloodied man who clearly despises my existence. I will not have anyone disrespect me. I don’t care who they are.

“I didn’t get to introduce myself,” I say in a polite tone. “I’m Isabella Valentino Petrov. But you already knew that, didn’t you?” He doesn’t respond. So I continue. “What you didn’t know is that I’m not the kind of woman to sit around and let bitter old men like you disrespect me, in my home, in front of my husband’s men,” I tell him. “You see, my mama and papa taught me my worth, which is far more than yours will ever be.” I pull out the small blade that I have tucked into the garter on my thigh. “They also taught me how to use a knife,” I tell him, before digging the sharpened tip right into the side of his neck and pulling it back out.

I half-expect Mikhail’s men to do something, to help the bastard or try to stop me. But they don’t. They stand there and smile. *Fucking smile*. “Welcome to the family,” they both say in unison.

“Thank you. And, uh, sorry for the mess,” I reply while wiping the bloodied blade on the old man’s jeans.

Leaving the guys to do whatever it was they were going to do with the body, I head for the basement in search of my husband. If I remember correctly, the door is just off the kitchen. Where a guard is presently standing and blocking my entrance.

“Open it, please,” I ask him.

“Sorry, ma’am, I can’t.” He shakes his head.

“You won’t. There is a difference between *can’t* and *won’t*. But don’t

worry, when Mikhail finds out that you stopped me from sharing a piece of imperative information about his daughter with him, I'm sure you'll learn for yourself," I tell him.

The guy looks from me to the locked door. "Either way, he's going to be pissed at me. This is a lose-lose situation."

"Open the door. He's not going to be pissed."

"If you think that, you don't know him at all," he says but does as he was told anyway.

That's the second time in less than five minutes that it's been strongly implied that I don't know my husband. I fucking hate that they're probably right. I mean, what do I really know about Mikhail other than how he makes me feel? How he loves both me and Mabilia? Because *that* I do know. I don't know what his favorite color is, what his favorite foods are. I don't even know what kind of car he prefers.

All these questions fill my head as I make my way down the stairs of the basement. I know I'm not supposed to be here, and that Mikhail obviously didn't want me to interrupt whatever it is he's doing. I honestly don't even know what my purpose was for coming to find him. Other than the fact that I was pissed off. I got spat at and disrespected. I had to watch as a man was dragged through the house, the same house my husband keeps insisting is our *home*. And I'm not going to have my daughter grow up in a place where she's forced to witness the darkest parts of this world. I want her to keep her innocence for as long as she possibly can.

When I reach the bottom of the stairs, I find Mikhail sitting in a chair, one leg propped up over a knee. Casual, like he doesn't have a care in the world. Until his eyes meet mine and I see the darkness swirling in their depths, the anger. I know he's far from the cool, calm, and collected man he's looking to portray.

"Kotyonok?" He questions me without actually questioning me.

Ignoring the fact that there are a bunch of men dangling from chains that are attached to the rafters, I focus solely on Mikhail. "I just had to shield my daughter—*our* daughter—from being spat on by some filthy Russian bastard in what's supposed to be her home," I tell him, my arms crossed at my chest.

Mikhail blinks at me. Once, twice, three times. Before a sinister smile overtakes his face. "Well, that explains why Anton is being eaten dead, instead of alive." He gestures to the television on the wall.

I look at the screen and do my best not to vomit. I've seen some nasty shit

in my life. I've *done* some nasty shit, but watching a man get eaten by rats... that's messed up. But also, kind of fitting.

"I don't see the appeal," one of the men hanging from the ceiling says.

I snap my head in his direction and squint my eyes. "Well, that's just fucking rude."

"Kotyonok." Mikhail stands and takes the two steps to get to me. "Go back upstairs. I'll be there shortly."

I tilt my head at him. "Now, why would I do that when you're down here having all the fun without me?" I ask him with a smile.

"Fucking hell," he curses under his breath. "This isn't your concern. Go back upstairs."

You see, the thing my husband needs to learn about me is that the more he tells me I can't do something, the more I want to do it. And the more I'm going to do that exact thing just to prove that I can.

"Nope," I say, popping the P. "I think I'll stay. It seems I have some fans down here." I step around Mikhail—but let's be honest, he lets me—stopping in front of the man who had something to say about my *appeal*. I smirk at him. "*My appeal...* goes far deeper than skin level," I tell the guy, looking around the room until my eyes land on the table full of tools.

I walk that way, fully aware that every eye in the room is currently on me, and stop at the bench and pick up the first knife I see. It'll do. Turning back around, I approach the asshole who obviously thinks he's better than me.

"There was a time when I wanted to be an optometrist, you know. I thought I could help people see things more clearly," I tell him, as the small knife twirls around my fingertip. "Perhaps I can practice on you, since your eyesight is clearly shit," I add, then stab the blade through the middle of his right eyeball.

He screams. So fucking loud.

I turn to Mikhail. "Please tell me this basement is soundproof."

"It is." He nods from where he's now leaning against the wall with his hands tucked into his pockets. He has two men standing at his side, each gaping at me.

"Good. Cutting out vocal cords gets fucking messy," I say, returning my attention to the asshole who is now at the top of my shit list. I pull the knife from his eye. "See the appeal yet?" I ask him. He doesn't say anything, just continues screaming, so I repeat the process with the left. "Just to be safe, we should fix both." I then look around at the other men in the room. "Anyone

else *not see the appeal?*” I ask them, holding my arms out and doing a little twirl.

No one says a word.



My cock is rock fucking hard right now. Watching Isabella show these assholes who the fuck she is, it's the biggest turn-on ever.

“Wait until tonight, then put them all in the barn. Make sure these fuckers experience the live version of the feeding,” I tell Paul, who is still staring wide-eyed in amazement at my wife. She *is* pretty fucking amazing. Pushing off the wall, I grab hold of Isabella's hand and tug her towards me. “Let's go,” I say before stepping to the stairs.

“What? Why? I was just getting started,” she huffs.

I turn back to her and lean in, stopping at her ear. “Because I'm not fucking you in front of all these men. And right now, I really need to fuck my

wife,” I tell her.

“Oh, well, you should have led with that. Let’s go.” She grins and willingly follows me up the stairs.

“Where is Mabilia?” I ask her.

“With my parents. I left them in one of the living rooms,” she says.

“Good.” I drag her out of the basement and then down the hall that leads to my office. I don’t have the patience to take her all the way up to our bedroom. I need to be inside her. Now. “Take off your clothes,” I tell Isabella as soon as the door closes behind us. I secure the lock, not that anyone is brave enough to barge in without an invitation.

Well, anyone but my wife, it seems.

“You first.” She raises an eyebrow and steps back.

“Isabella, this isn’t up for a debate. I want you fucking naked, now,” I say at the same time I unbutton the sleeves of my shirt.

Isabella reaches behind her back and pulls the zipper of her dress down before she lets the material flutter to the floor. She’s standing in front of me in nothing but a pair of black lace panties and a matching bra. My eyes take her in, every single glorious inch of the woman who is now my wife. One of the things I love most about Isabella is her self-confidence. She never shies away or attempts to shield herself. She is one hundred percent comfortable being stripped completely bare. I love that she knows how beautiful she is.

As soon as I reach the bottom button on my shirt, I slide the material down my shoulders before tossing it on the floor and kicking off my shoes and socks. Isabella’s tongue darts out to wet her lips. Full, soft, pouty, fuckable lips. I groan, moving faster to remove my pants.

“Why aren’t you naked yet?” I ask her.

Her eyes are glued to my cock. Instead of answering me, she drops to her knees, wraps a hand around the base, bends forward, and takes it right into her mouth.

“Fuck, kotyonok, warn a guy before you do that.” My knees wobble; my balls tighten. I’m ready to fucking burst. The feel of her mouth is too fucking good.

She takes me all the way to the back of her throat, gagging a little before she hollows out her cheeks and slides back up to the tip. Her tongue circles around, slowly, before she takes me down again.

My hand fists in her hair. “Fuck me, you’re fucking too good at this. Isabella. Fuck. That feels good,” I groan.

She hums around me, spreads her legs, and reaches her free hand down between them. Fuck that. I pull on her hair, tugging her off my cock and lifting her from the ground. She looks up at me, confused.

“No. That pussy is fucking mine to touch, not yours,” I growl. Pulling her over to the desk, I turn her around and push on her back, so her ass is up in the air and her chest is flat on the wood surface. “Sweet Jesus, I need a fucking photo,” I say in Russian. I don’t take one. That would be reckless. I would never risk the chance of anyone else ever seeing her like this.

“Mikhail, either you touch me right now, or I will touch myself,” she says.

“The only time you will touch yourself is when I give you permission,” I tell her, slapping a hand on her ass. “This ass is mine. This pussy is mine. *You* are fucking mine,” I grunt while tugging her panties down her thighs, leaving them hanging around her knees. I slide a finger through her folds. “Fuck, have you been this wet all day?” I ask her. “Is this for me, kotyonok?” I circle my fingers around her clit.

“I’m always wet for you,” she says.

“Only me,” I tell her. I don’t need her to confirm it. I know this woman is mine and mine alone. It’s like every fucking wish list item was ticked off when God made Isabella. “Do you have any idea how fucking sexy you are?”

“Yes,” she says, glancing over her shoulder and smirking at me.

“Of course you fucking do. You’ve seen your reflection.” I slide my fingers up and push them inside her, three times, before I pull them out again. Then, lining my cock up with her entrance, I slide into her. The walls of her pussy convulse around me. “Jesus, maybe I should retire, just so I can fuck you all day, every day. Working is overrated anyway.”

“Mikhail, shut up and fuck me already,” she hisses, pushing her ass against me.

My hands hold her hips still as I drag my cock out of her, almost all the way, until I slam back inside. Her hands reach out to grip the edge of the desk. I repeat the motion, over and over again, fucking her until she’s screaming, her head turning from side to side. Her back arches and her pussy clenches around me as she shatters. And I swear her cunt is going to break my cock off with how tight it’s holding me hostage. I feel my balls tighten and now I’m about to empty myself inside her.

Once we’re both panting, I lean over her, push her sweaty hair to the side, and press my lips to that spot just under her ear. “You’re so fucking beautiful

when you come,” I tell her.

“Only when I come?” she asks.

“No, you’re beautiful all the time, but when you come, it’s fucking magical,” I say as I pull out of her. The second I don’t feel her wrapped around me, I regret not staying there for just a little longer. I help Isabella up and lead her into the adjoining bathroom. Turning on the shower, I make sure it’s warm before I pull her under the running water and wrap my arms around her waist. “I really fucking love you,” I tell her.

“I really fucking love you too,” she says, laying a kiss right across my heart.

I wash up quickly. As much as I want to wash her too, I don’t. Because if I start, I won’t be able to stop. “Take your time. I’m going to get Mabilia,” I tell her, stepping out of the shower and wrapping a towel around my waist. I pause at the door. “Kotyonok, how would you feel about your parents moving in with us?”

Her eyes widen. “No fucking way. Mikhail, don’t even joke about that. And why would you want them to move in?”

“Because when they’re around to watch Mabilia, I get to fuck you more often.” I shrug.

“No,” she says as I walk out the door.

I wouldn’t actually ask her parents to do that. I mean, her father has his own businesses to oversee. The fact that he’s even in my house is hard enough to get my head around.



I wake up to a cold, empty bed. Again. I should be used to it, but I'm not. I hate it. I would really like to wake up to my husband beside me every now and then. After a month of living here with him, I've yet to experience that, and I doubt I will. Unless I tell him that I want it, but I hate sounding needy.

I roll onto my back and look up at the ceiling. I haven't left the house since we returned to the city. It's been a month. Mikhail says that the case against me is still ongoing, and until he's certain that the cops aren't looking for me, he doesn't want me showing my face around town. I know he's right, but I'm going out of my mind being cooped up here. I also don't know how

to keep Bianca from sending out her own search party if I don't reach out to her soon. I've been avoiding inviting her over because, well, my husband is the freaking Pakhan of the Bratva.

There are always soldiers standing around, and although I haven't come across any more bodies being dragged through the house, I know the reality of what could go down here at any given time. Bianca knows about my family. She knows exactly who Mikhail is, but she doesn't know just how involved I can be in this world. She doesn't know what I'm capable of doing to a person. I love my best friend, and I don't want to taint her with the darkness inside me. I do miss her though, and I do need to try to meet up with her.

I toss the blankets off and head for the bathroom. After showering, I throw on a black leather miniskirt and pair it with a white blouse and thigh-high black boots. I blow-dry my hair and leave it hanging in loose curls and then apply a heavy dose of makeup, including a smokey eye and a deep plum-red lip. Once I'm satisfied with how I look, I go in search of my husband. Although I suspect he's either in his office or the home gym.

Every morning, Mikhail grabs Mabilia and hangs out with her in one of those two rooms. There have even been a few times where I've found him walking on the treadmill with her in his arms. Though, usually, she's asleep in a baby swing while he lifts weights. I'm not going to lie. Whenever I find Mikhail in the gym, in workout shorts and no shirt, I do spend a few minutes standing in the doorway, watching him. But you would too if you saw him.

I start with the gym, see that it's empty, and head to his office. Where I find him sitting behind his desk with Mabilia on his lap. She's getting so big now, and all I want to do is pause time and stop her from growing so fast. Both pairs of eyes look up at me when I walk in.

"What the fuck? Kotyonok, where did that outfit come from?" Mikhail asks, pushing his chair backwards and standing.

I glance down at myself, then back to him. "The closet. Where else?"

"Burn it," he says.

"This skirt cost me six thousand dollars. I'm not burning it," I tell him.

"Fine, I'll burn it," he grunts.

"No, you won't. What's wrong with it anyway?"

"You look like a fucking wet dream. That's what's wrong with it," he growls.

"A wet dream, huh? Well, I'll take that as a compliment. Still not burning

it though.” I grin but drop it when I add, “We need to talk.” I lower myself down on one of the chairs in front of his desk, making a point to cross my legs, before uncrossing and crossing them in the other direction.

Mikhail groans. “I’m not going to be able to talk to you while you look like that. Fuck, kotyonok, are you trying to give me a damn stroke? Because, right now, I’m at risk of a blood clot or a heart attack.”

“You’ll survive. Sit down,” I tell him. I reach out an arm and take Mabilia from his.

Mikhail adjusts himself in his pants before taking a seat. He doesn’t say anything, just looks directly at me and waits. I’m not stupid. This man didn’t get to the position he’s in by being shit at negotiations.

I do, however, happen to have a lot of experience in dealing with men just like him. “I’m going out today, and I need you to get on board with the idea sooner rather than later,” I tell him.

“No,” he counters.

“It wasn’t a question, Mikhail. It was a statement.”

“You’re not leaving the house. It’s not worth the risk of having you arrested. No,” he repeats, like he’s speaking to one of his little minions and his word is final—no arguments or objections.

“As I mentioned, I wasn’t asking.” I scowl at him. “I need to see Bianca. She’s been asking to meet up and I’ve been putting her off. I’m out of excuses. And I can’t keep ghosting my best friend,” I tell him.

“Firstly, I’m your best friend. She can be number two. Secondly, I really would prefer it if you stayed. What the fuck am I supposed to tell our daughter if you get arrested and don’t come home?” He lifts a brow in question.

Wow, talk about hitting me where it fucking hurts. I look down at Mabilia, who smiles up at me. Fuck. Maybe he’s right. I can’t imagine having to be away from her again. I really, really don’t want to.

“Why don’t you just have Bianca come here? I can send a car to collect her,” Mikhail adds, like a businessman looking to close the deal.

“Because this house is Bratva capital. I don’t want her to get mixed up with any of *this*,” I tell him while gesturing a hand in the air.

“You had her staying with you at your grandfather’s estate in Italy. I don’t see the difference,” Mikhail reminds me.

“The difference is... I don’t know what the difference is. But she doesn’t know what I do, Mikhail. What if she overhears a conversation or somehow

discovers how deeply I'm involved? I know no one is going to slip up around my family, because very few of our men actually know what part I play."

"Nobody is going to be talking about you here, Isabella, and if they do, I'll cut their fucking tongues out."

"There's no need for that. Besides, I'd do it myself if I thought it was necessary. I just... I don't know. I've always tried to protect Bianca—the less she knows, the better off she is, you know?"

"This is your home, our home. If you can't bring your friends here, then what kind of home is it? If you need a different house, we'll find a different house. I don't care where I live as long as you two are there."

"Okay, no need to be so dramatic." I sigh. "I'll invite her here."

"Thank you," he says and pushes to his feet. Mikhail comes around to the front of the desk. "You know, I've sat across the table from cartel leaders, bosses from other families, and various other cold-hearted bastards from the criminal underground. And none of them ever made me fear what was going to come out of their mouths the way you just did."

"Well, that's probably because you weren't married to any of those men." I smile.

Mikhail rakes a hand through his hair. "I don't want to keep you prisoner here, Isabella. I just want to be certain you're not going to be arrested if you leave the house. I want to be certain that the bullshit case with the Feds is closed. As soon as it is, you can come and go as you please."

"Even if you wanted to, you'd never be able to keep me prisoner anywhere, Mikhail," I tell him, standing from the chair. I plant a quick kiss on his lips before stepping aside. "I'll let you get back to work. I'm going to go call Bianca."



T sabella is getting bored. I can see it. She's restless, sitting around this house all day and not being able to leave. I want to fix that for her. I have no idea why it's taking so fucking long to get the Feds to drop the case they have against her. I've eliminated the cops who were working on it. They're no longer looking into it, and the witnesses are gone. But the case remains open, and she is still their number one target. New detectives have been assigned to the task force. I could eliminate them too but others will only take their place.

I pick up the phone and call Matteo. I've been checking in with him weekly. He never has anything new for me, but I check anyway. "Do you

know what time it is?” he answers the call.

“No, and I don’t care. What are the chances of Isabella getting picked up if she were to go out?” I ask him.

“No one knows she’s here. She hasn’t been seen anywhere. That’s the best way to keep things right now,” he says.

“I know that, but that’s not what I asked.”

“Look, I don’t know. I know they don’t have witnesses and no real evidence. At best, they could pick her up for questioning and keep her as long as they could—but she knows she can walk out at any time. They’d try to rattle her, get her to break before she does that,” he says.

“Isabella is unbreakable,” I tell him, confident in that fact.

“You’re right. She is. But they’d try anyway,” Matteo says. “Why are you asking? Did she go out?”

“No, but she wants to.”

“Tell her she can’t.” He sighs.

I laugh. “Have you ever tried to tell your cousin she can’t do something?”

“Plenty of times,” he admits.

“And how’d that go down?”

“Okay, I get your point,” he grunts into the receiver. “If she did get taken in for questioning, she’s smart—she’s trained for this. She won’t say anything and will request her lawyer. And I’ll get her out on the basis they have no real evidence,” he tells me.

“Okay. Thanks.”

“Mikhail, don’t let her go out with Mabilia alone. If she does get taken in, they won’t let her bring the baby into the interrogation room with her. They will try to separate them and that’s not going to go down well with Izzy. So, if my cousin does leave the house, go with her. She won’t freak out as much if she knows Mabilia is in your care.”

“Okay, thanks,” I say, hanging up the phone.

This bullshit needs to end. The detectives assigned to her case haven’t taken any bribes. They can’t be bought off. But there’s something I *can* do. Something I was hoping I wouldn’t have to do, because if I get caught, it will just make her look even more guilty.

Scrolling through my phone, I call Samuel. He doesn’t answer but I leave a message for him to call me right back.

“WHAT DO you mean they’re missing?” I yell at Paul, who just strolled into my office, informing me that a whole fucking shipping container of guns is MIA.

“I mean, the ship never made it to the docks,” he tells me.

“Pirates?” I question.

“Could be, or...” He trails off.

“Or what?”

“Word on the street is that the IRA is still gunning for you. They’re not likely to just stop.”

“Let the fuckers come at me then.” I hold my arms out wide in an open invitation.

“They can’t get to you, so they’ll do the next best thing. They’ll attack the businesses.”

“Fucking hell. Find the ship and whoever the fuck messed with our cargo. Send a loud fucking message,” I tell him.

He nods his head in agreement. But doesn’t make any motion to leave.

“Is there something else?” I ask him.

“Where was Ivan the night Vlad was taken out?” He crosses his arms over his chest.

This question has gone through my own head a million fucking times over the last month. Ivan was the one who had me convinced it was an attack from the Valentinos. That the Italians killed my brother. I haven’t ruled it out. I trust my wife, though, and she insists it wasn’t her family. I believe that she believes that. I’m also not stupid enough to think she’d know every single detail when it comes to their dealings.

“I don’t know. He wasn’t with me,” I admit.

I remember waking up in my office, at the bar, memories of the best sex I’ve ever had with the hottest fucking woman on my mind. And then Ivan barged in, looking like he’d seen a ghost. He was distraught over my brother’s death. But then again, I came to learn he was a good fucking actor. Or I’m just a fucking gullible idiot who should have seen through his act. I relied on him too much. I let him have too much control over the businesses. I’ve been back a month and I’m still finding more shit of his to clean up.

“I don’t know how much truth there is to it. But there’s a girl... She came to me a few months back and insisted that Ivan confessed to her that he killed Vlad. I didn’t think too much of it at the time. I thought she was just some chick who got rejected and wanted revenge or some shit,” Paul says.

“What’s the girl’s name?” I ask him.

“I don’t recall.”

I pick up my phone and search for the girl who reported Ivan to Isabella’s website. I know Isabella wanted her to remain anonymous but I had this sick feeling in my gut. I needed to know. When I find her profile, I click on it and turn the phone around. “This her?”

“Yep. Who is she?”

“The little sister of a guy we went to school with. She’s ten years younger than us.” I rub a hand over my face. “There could be some truth to her claim.”

I feel sick. I don’t remember the last time I threw up, but right now, I feel like my entire insides are going to expel from my mouth. My best friend murdered my brother.

And for what? What the fuck was his end game?

“This isn’t your fault, Mikhail. None of this shit is on you,” Paul says.

“Isn’t it? He was my best friend. I should have noticed something changed. I should have seen what he was doing. Instead, I was too busy chasing a woman across the fucking world. While the man who killed my brother infected everything.” I throw an arm in the air, sending documents flying across the desk before they flutter to the floor between us.

When I look up, Isabella is standing in the doorway. Her eyes widen momentarily, then a blank expression crosses her face. “Sorry, I should have knocked,” she says, before shutting the door.

“Fuck!” I pick up a cup that’s sitting on my desk and hurl it across the room.

“Ah, I’ll get out of here so you can fix that,” Paul says, gesturing a thumb over his shoulder.

I don’t respond. I’m already on my way out the door to chase down Isabella yet again. I didn’t mean for the words to sound the way they did. I don’t fucking regret following her to Italy... or Australia. Honestly, if she stayed in New York, I’m not sure she’d even be alive. If Ivan took out my brother, his boss, nothing would have stopped him from killing Isabella too. I would spend my life chasing this woman around the world if it meant keeping her.

Let’s hope it doesn’t fucking come to that.

I walk down the hall to the foyer. *Where the hell did she go?* This house is too fucking big and she could be anywhere. I draw my phone from my

pocket and open up the security camera app. It doesn't take me long to find her in Mabilia's playroom.

"I'm sorry," I say the moment I approach the threshold.

"For what?" Isabella asks with that same blank expression—one I fucking hate seeing when it's directed at me.

"For what you heard. I didn't mean it like that."

"So you're sorry that I heard it, or you're sorry that you said it?"

"Both."

"Well, I'm sorry I made you chase me around the world. I'm sorry I've caused your life to go to shit, Mikhail. I'm sorry that we are a burden you weren't looking to bear," she says, pulling Mabilia to her chest.

"You're not a fucking burden, Isabella. You're my wife."

"Same thing, really, isn't it?"



I don't know what to do. I want to run out of this house. I want to take my daughter and leave. But I can't do either of those things. That's not what mature, married people do, right?

But I do need to get away from my husband for a while. I'm angry and I'm hurt. And the last thing I want to do is say something I'll regret later...

"You know what, Mikhail? I never asked you to follow me anywhere. I never asked anything of you. I gave you plenty of outs. I didn't even tell you she was yours. You chose to chase me down. You chose this. So don't you ever blame me for whatever's going wrong in your life. I told you to forget about me—*us*," I remind him, and it takes everything in me to keep my voice

calm.

I want to yell. I want to scream, hit, kick, maim. But I can't do that in front of my daughter. I have to keep my cool for her.

"You're right. You didn't fucking ask me to chase you down. I wanted to. And I'd do it again, in a heartbeat. You and Mabilia are the only things that matter to me, Isabella."

"Don't say shit that's not true." I turn around, set Mabilia in her swing, and power it on. The swing rocks her from side to side and she instantly starts to close her eyes. I walk over to Mikhail and push him out the door. We are not arguing in front of her. I never once witnessed my parents fight as a child, and my daughter won't either.

"It's the truth," Mikhail says.

I close the door behind us. "Oh, yeah? What about the Bratva? Your businesses? Your family's legacy? None of that matters? I'm not an idiot, Mikhail, so don't treat me like one."

"I'm the fucking Pakhan, Isabella. I didn't ask for this. I don't have a choice but to do the job I was given. That doesn't mean that you come second. You will always come first," he says, raking a hand through his hair.

"It's sad that you believe that. And perhaps, if I were any other girl, you could convince me too, but I know who I married. I don't need empty promises or pretty words."

"What is it that you need?" he asks, caging me against the wall.

My hands land on his chest to shove him back a step. I don't want to be so close to him right now. Having him invade my space like this, it makes me forget why I was mad in the first place. But he doesn't budge an inch, no matter how much I push.

"What is it that you need, Isabella?" he asks again.

"I need space. I need you to move back," I tell him.

Mikhail tilts his head to the side. "Space?"

I nod. Unable to say the words again while swallowing the lump in my throat. I know what I heard. It's because of me that he wasn't here to see what Ivan was doing to his businesses. It's because of me that he has spent the last month working day and night, trying to fix everything.

"Space?" Mikhail repeats. "That is something I will never give you," he grits out between clenched teeth. *Oh, good. Now he's angry.* "You're my wife. You will always be my wife. You don't get to have fucking space from me anymore."

I'm tempted to bring up a knee and connect it with his balls. Just as I'm thinking it, Mikhail places one of his thighs between my legs.

"Don't even think about it, kotyonok," he growls.

"I..." I don't even know what to say to that. How the hell can he read me so well?

His thigh presses against my core and I almost melt on the spot. I push my back harder into the wall, attempting to create distance between us. It doesn't work. He just presses into me harder. His hands are right next to my face, his lips so close to mine I'd only have to move ever so slightly to have them on me.

"I'm going to show you just how much space you can ever expect me to give you, kotyonok," he says. His hand slides up the inside of my thigh, snaking under my dress.

I should tell him to stop. I want to tell him to stop. But the thought of that hand working me over... I want that too.

His fingers slide under my panties and sink right into me. A smirk greets me when he discovers how wet I already am.

"Space, huh? You wouldn't be this wet for me if you wanted space," he says and then slams his lips onto mine. His tongue pushes into my mouth and we fight for domination. My arms go around his neck as I pull him closer, if that's possible. His fingers slide in and out of me, slowly, so fucking slowly.

I push down on his palm, trying to get more friction where I need it. I know I'm mad at him, but right now, all I can think about is the promise of an orgasm—the kind I've only ever received from him. Instead of forgetting my anger altogether, I use it to get what I want. My fingernails dig into the skin on his neck. I smile when I feel the warm trickle of blood hit my skin. It's surface deep; it's not going to hurt him much, but it still brings me a little joy all the same.

Mikhail grunts into my mouth before he pulls away. He withdraws his fingers and I fight the urge to beg him to put them back. When I see him undo his pants and free his cock, though, I know I don't need to worry about begging. He picks me up and slams me against the wall. Pushing my panties to the side, he shoves his cock inside me. I tense at the intrusion. He's so fucking big it burns.

"Is this enough fucking space for you, wife?" he asks as he pulls out and thrusts right back in.

I don't bother answering him. I bring my lips to his. My teeth sink into

his bottom lip, drawing blood, while my legs clamp around his waist, trying to hold him inside me. Mikhail has one hand under my ass; the other, he brings to my hair and pulls, angling my head to allow him better access to my mouth. Then he tugs harder, rougher. And I swear I feel it send bolts of lightning right down to my core.

Mikhail pulls away from my mouth. “Feel this?” he asks as he fucks me as hard as he possibly can while holding me up against the wall. “This is all the space I’ll ever fucking give you, kotyonok.”

I know he’s just trying to prove a point, and it’s working. But right now, all I care about is the impending orgasm. My legs tighten and my muscles stiffen as I chase that bliss right over the edge. My whole body ignites, and nothing else matters except this sensation.

I feel Mikhail empty himself inside me. At this point, I’d be surprised if I wasn’t already pregnant again, with the amount of unprotected sex we’ve been having. I also wouldn’t be disappointed by the idea. We make fucking amazing babies together. And I kind of do want Mabilia to have a sibling.

Mikhail’s chest rises and falls against mine as his body rests on me. He hasn’t let me down yet. His fingers grip my chin, forcing me to look at him. “Don’t ever fucking ask me for space again. We don’t do that. Until death do us part, Isabella,” he says and then kisses me softly on the lips, the gesture a complete contradiction to what we just did. It’s like he’s pouring his love into this kiss—an unspoken apology maybe?

Whatever it is, I know I don’t want it to end. And I also kind of want to see what will happen if I ask for space again. Because, holy fucking shitballs, being fucked by an angry Mikhail... that’s a whole new level of hotness I wasn’t expecting.



I have the flatscreens that line one side of my office walls turned on, live feed from the various security cameras on the premises playing in front of me. I don't think she'll try to leave, but I haven't been able to get the fact that she said she wanted space out of my head.

What the fuck does she want space from? The house? My men? *Me*? Like I told her a few hours ago, when I left her with shaky legs and post-orgasmic bliss standing in the hallway outside of Mabilia's playroom, space is something I will never give her.

It's been three hours and she hasn't left that playroom. Mabilia woke up about an hour ago and Isabella bathed and fed her, and is now sitting cross-

legged on the floor while Mabilia lies on her tummy and reaches out for toys. I know my wife is still fuming over what I said. I should never have said it in the first place. So I don't blame her. The fact that I spent so much time away is on me, not her.

I pick up the phone and call her cousin Theo. "Is Izzy okay?" he asks in way of greeting.

I roll my eyes. I swear her entire family is just waiting for me to fail as a husband. "She's fine. I was calling to invite you and your wife to dinner."

He's silent, doesn't say a single fucking word, and then he laughs. *Fucking laughs.* "Why the fuck would I come to your place for dinner?" he finally asks.

"Because your cousin misses her fucking family and she can't go visit you. That's why."

He thinks on this for a minute. "Fine, but I'm not coming alone. I'll bring my brothers and their wives."

"Just what I always wanted, to host a houseful of Valentinos."

"Probably should have thought about that before you married one," Theo is quick to fire back.

"See you tonight." I hang up. I really don't care who the fuck comes over as long as it will make my wife smile. She loves her cousins, and I know seeing them—having them all here—will lift her spirits. Probably won't get me out of the doghouse, though.

I shut down my computer. It's not like I'm going to get any work done while I'm obsessing over whether my wife is going to try to leave the house or not.

Opening the door to Mabilia's playroom, I sit on the floor across from Isabella. Neither of us says a word. Both too stubborn for our own good.

I know I shouldn't have just left after fucking her the way I did. It was an asshole move, but I was fuming. It was either walk away or start another argument. So I chose to give us both a few hours to calm down.

I look over at Mabilia, who is smiling up at me with dark eyes that match her mother's. "Hey, baby girl, thanks for keeping your mama company," I tell her in Russian, picking my daughter up and peppering her tiny face with kisses.

Isabella remains tight-lipped. She's just sitting there, staring at me with that damn blank expression. Does she know how much I fucking hate it? Is that why she's doing it right now?

Probably.

“Your cousins are coming to dinner, with their wives,” I tell her. She blinks but still doesn’t speak. “If you want me to call them back and cancel, I will. But I thought it would be good for you to see them.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean *why*?”

“Why would it be good for me to see them?” she attempts to clarify.

“It *will* be good, because I know how much you miss them. I never wanted to keep you apart from your family, Isabella, or your friends. This is your home and I want you to be able to have anyone here. I want you to be comfortable here.” After we agreed that she’d invite her friend Bianca over to visit her, she still hasn’t done it. I’m not sure why she doesn’t want people in our home. “Is there something about the house or me that you’re ashamed of? That you don’t want them to see?” I ask her.

“Don’t fish for compliments, Mikhail. It’s beneath you. You know damn well I’m not ashamed of you. If it were up to me, I’d be dragging you all over the city to different events as my arm candy.” She smiles.

“Trophy husband, huh?”

“Again, don’t fish for compliments.” She rolls her eyes and looks away.

“I’ll hire a catering service for dinner. I don’t think Marta can do Italian food justice,” I add. Marta is one of our housekeepers. She does most of the cooking for us.

“Don’t. Just have her make something Russian. My family will eat whatever we serve them,” Isabella says. “And if they don’t like it, they can leave.”

“Okay.” I nod. “I am sorry, you know.”

“I know.”

“I don’t blame you. I never have, not even for a minute. This mess is all on me.” “If I didn’t run off to Italy, you would have been here and you would have caught on to what Ivan was doing sooner. I know that.”

“He would have killed you if you stayed in New York,” I tell her.

“I would have liked to see him try.” She laughs.

“I’m almost certain he killed Vlad too.”

“How can you be sure?”

“The request you got on your website. I looked into it—it was from Gabby. She’s the little sister of a friend from school.” I place Mabilia back on the floor so she can play with her toys. I also don’t want to be holding her

when I talk about this. “She reached out to Paul a few months ago, claiming that she knew Ivan had killed Vlad, because the bastard had told her as much.”

“You shouldn’t have looked into who made that request, Mikhail. The whole idea of that website is anonymity.”

“I know. I’m sorry. But I had to know. I *had* to know who it was. I feel responsible for not putting a stop to it. For not seeing it,” I admit.

“You are not responsible for the actions of anyone but yourself. You didn’t hurt that girl. You wouldn’t do that.”

“I hurt you. Today, I hurt you. I’m so fucking sorry, kotyonok.”

“Your words stung, but I’ll be fine. I’m a big girl, Mikhail. It will take a lot more than that to truly hurt me.”

“I don’t like fighting with you,” I tell her.

“Oh, dear husband, this was not a fight. If it were, you’d be on the floor bleeding and begging for your life.” She laughs.

“Considering I have the scars to prove it, I believe you.”

Her eyes flick to my torso. She can’t see the mark under my shirt, but I know she hates it. It’s funny. Something that should have made me despise the woman only made me fall harder. The fact that she was willing to sacrifice everything for our child, that’s admirable and a quality I hope she never regrets having.

“Want to play Fifty Questions?” she asks.

“What more is there to possibly know?”

Isabella came to me after the whole basement incident and introduced me to her take on the game Twenty Questions. She said she had far too much to learn about me, so she needed *more questions*. And so we’ve played a round, every day, for the last month.

“Plenty. I’ll go first,” she says. “What’s your biggest fear?”

“That’s easy, losing you and Mabilia,” I answer, without even having to think about it. “My turn. Who is your favorite cousin?”

Her eyes widen. “You can’t ask that.”

“Why the fuck not?”

“Because you’re not supposed to have favorites,” she tells me.

“Okay, let’s say we’re in a pretend world, where it’s okay to have favorites—who is it?”

“Promise you won’t tell?” She side-eyes me.

“Cross my heart.” I make a point of drawing an X over my chest. “I’d

never repeat anything you told me anyway, Isabella.”

“Romeo,” she says.

“Huh, not who I was expecting. Why him?” I ask.

“Nope, that’s two questions and it’s my turn.” She shakes her head. “How many women have you dated?”

This is one of the truths I’ve been dreading. I’m actually surprised she hasn’t brought it up sooner. But there’s a loophole with her choice of wording. “Dated? One. You’re the only woman I’ve ever taken on a date,” I tell her.

“You took me on a date? When?” She throws a hand to her chest in mock surprise.

“Italy. You had dinner at my shitty-ass apartment,” I remind her.

“That was not a date, Mikhail. That was you feeding a heavily pregnant woman after you had your dirty little way with her.”

“I miss you being pregnant,” I tell her.

“You’re avoiding the question.”

“I answered the question. I haven’t dated anyone before you. I’ve slept with plenty of women and honestly couldn’t give you a number even if I wanted to, but dated? Never,” I say. “My turn. When can we get you knocked up again? Maybe we should go and do it in the office at the bar? It worked the first time.”

“It will happen if it’s meant to happen. My turn. Have you ever had a threesome?” My eyebrows shoot up. “Why would you want to know that?”

“Because maybe I never have and want to try it out?” she says.

I see fucking red. “Not happening. Ever. You think I’m going to share you with someone else? You’re out of your fucking mind, Isabella.”

“Relax. I was kidding.” She laughs.

“That wasn’t funny,” I huff.

“Oh, but it was.” She grins.



Romeo and Livvy are the first to arrive. I don't know why I'm so nervous. Except for the fact that I haven't had anyone over yet, and I didn't exactly get any time to plan an actual dinner party the way I would have liked to.

I lead them into the dining room. The table is set up beautifully, thanks to one of the hired maids. "So what's new?" I ask Romeo.

"Is he treating you well, Iz? Because if he's not, just blink twice."

I roll my eyes. "Romeo, if he wasn't treating me well, do you honestly think I'd be here? Or that he'd still be breathing?"

"No, I guess not. But I have to ask." He shrugs.

“And that’s why you’re my favorite.” I hug him.

“I thought we weren’t supposed to admit who the favorite is, Isabella?” Mikhail says from behind me.

“Wait a minute.” Romeo backs up with a huge grin on his face. “If you told him I’m the favorite cousin, then it has to be true. Oh my god, I fucking knew it!” he screams.

I can’t help but roll my eyes all over again. “No, I didn’t. He doesn’t know what he’s talking about,” I say.

“It’s really not a big deal. So you like one of your cousins more than the others. Who cares?” Mikhail says, wrapping an arm around my waist.

I throw an elbow into his ribs. “You’re not helping,” I hiss.

“Holy shit, wait till my brothers find out. Damn, Iz... although I did always know you liked me best. I mean, how could you not?” Romeo says.

“I tell all of you that you’re my favorite. It’s not a big deal. And as if any of your brothers would believe you.”

“Luca will,” Romeo says confidently. He’s probably right. They have that creepy twin connection going on.

“Anyway, Livvy, let me get you a drink. Wine?” I ask her.

“Yes, please,” she says politely.

Livvy has always been the quieter of my cousins’ wives. She’s also the brainiest and probably the one I connect with most, because of her trauma. I remember when she was attacked, shortly after she and Romeo first started dating. I also remember finding out who was behind setting up that attack—some bitch named Samantha. Livvy doesn’t know it, but I had two of the Valentino soldiers find the girl and string her up on her own ceiling fan. They made it look like a suicide. I then took Livvy to Samantha’s house under the guise of confronting the girl; instead, we found her dead. Romeo was furious at me over that one, but Livvy thanked me for helping her. She just doesn’t know how much I put into play.

I step away from Mikhail and reach for a bottle of wine that’s in an ice bucket, alongside several bottles of vodka, in the middle of the table. After pouring a serving for Livvy, I pick up an empty glass and fill it with water. I’m not drinking on the off chance Mikhail has managed to knock me up again already.

Matteo and Savannah arrive a few minutes later, followed by Theo and Maddie. And then finally Luca and Katarina. We’re all sitting around the dinner table. The first course has been placed in front of us and Maddie

smiles at the dish. Mushroom Julienne. I only know what it is because we had it a few nights ago and I loved it. Mikhail must have told Marta to serve the meal again.

“My father used to make this,” Maddie says. “I hated it as a kid but grew to love it.”

“You’ve never said you liked Russian food.” Theo looks at her like he’s learning something new about a wife he probably thought he knew everything about.

“That’s because you don’t like Russian anything,” Maddie says to him.

“That’s not true. You’re part Russian and I fucking love you,” Theo counters.

Maddie blushes and hides her face a little. “Thank you,” she whispers.

“Well, you’re in for a treat, Maddie, because every dish tonight will be Russian. Marta is a great cook.”

“I almost didn’t come, you know,” Matteo says to me. “I thought you might have been trying to cook, and I didn’t feel like risking a dose of food poisoning today.”

Savannah slaps him over the head and tells him to shut up. I thank her. I would have done it myself but he’s at the other end of the table. I’m also currently holding Mikhail’s hand, which is fisted so tight I’m scared he’s going to break a knuckle.

“It’s okay. This is what cousins do. We talk shit about each other. Relax,” I whisper into his ear.

“I don’t like people talking shit about you,” he grinds out.

“Matteo, did you know that around one hundred people a year die from mushroom poisoning?” Livvy asks him.

“Why would I know that?” Matteo looks at her, confused.

“Well, if you’re eating mushrooms, you should know the chance of you dying from them.” Livvy shrugs.

“One hundred doesn’t seem like that many. I think the odds are still in my favor,” Matteo says.

“It’s not that many, but it’s still not zero. And I’m sure those poor one hundred people thought the same thing.”

Matteo and Livvy work together. They’re both lawyers and always have these odd conversations about random shit.

“You know, sometimes I wish Romeo had found someone with a little less brains.” Matteo points his fork at her.

“No, you don’t, because then you wouldn’t have me to solve all of your cases.” Livvy laughs.

I smile. “Thank you,” I tell Mikhail. I really did need this. I’ve missed these people way too much.

“For you, I’d suffer through anything. Even a dinner party with your cousins,” he says.

“Technically, Maddie is your cousin, so this is on you too,” I remind him.

“On a scale of one to ten, how pissed would Theo be if I brought that up? I have some things to give Maddie that belonged to her father. There was a box in the storage shed with his name on it. I have no idea why my dad held on to it but he did,” Mikhail says.

“I would say from one to ten, he’d be about a fifty. But do it anyway. It’ll be entertaining.” I grin.

“After dinner.” Mikhail says.

The rest of the evening flows perfectly. Mikhail initiates conversations with each of my cousins, feigning interest in their lives, which I appreciate. And the end comes naturally when Mabilia’s cry rings through the baby monitor.

“I’ll get her,” Mikhail says, excusing himself from the table.

As soon as he’s out of earshot, all of my cousins stare at me. “I’m really glad you’re happy, Iz,” Theo says.

“Thank you,” I tell him.

“I mean, have you seen the man? How could she not be happy?” Katarina asks and then laughs at Luca’s sour expression. “Don’t worry, Luc, he has nothing on you.”

“Or me,” Romeo adds. “Because we look the same, except I’m prettier.”

“I’m really glad you all came,” I tell them.

“Okay, I don’t want to overstep or anything, but you know I’d offer you my services at no cost, right?” Savannah asks, her eyes bouncing around the dining room.

I know what she’s thinking. The décor in this house is seriously outdated. Mikhail said I could do whatever I’d like with the place, but I haven’t wanted to touch it. It feels wrong to just come in and change everything. I already upended the man’s life. I don’t need to upend his home as well.

“What services?” Mikhail asks, walking into the dining room with Mabilia in his arms.

“Interior design,” she says, then adds, “No offense.”

“None taken. And Isabella would love to hire you to redo the whole house. But I’ll pay for your services, of course.”

“Nonsense, we’re family and I don’t charge family. Besides, it’ll give me an excuse to spend more time with Izzy and Mabilia,” Savannah says.

“Thank you.” Mikhail reclaims his seat next to mine. I stare at him. I really hate when people speak for me. But I’d look like a bitch if I told Savannah that I don’t want her help now. So, instead, I lock my annoyance down with the full intention of bringing it up to Mikhail as soon as everyone’s gone.

“I’ve set up games in the living room,” I announce.

All four of my cousins groan. “Really, Iz? You baited us with dinner but really you wanted a game night,” Luca says.

“Actually, Mikhail invited you all to dinner, not me. I just made the night more fun by adding games.” I shrug.

“More fun for whom, exactly?” Matteo asks.

“Me.” I smile.

“What am I missing here?” Mikhail questions, looking around the table.

“You obviously haven’t played games with Izzy.” Theo sighs.

“Oh, Isabella and I have played plenty of games together,” Mikhail says with a smirk.

I slap his arm. “Not the kind of games they’re talking about, Mikhail.”

“Jesus, Livvy, get the bleach out, babe. I need to clean my ears,” Romeo groans.

“Bleach would burn your ear canal, Romeo, and you’d probably go deaf. So, no, I’m vetoing that idea,” Livvy tells her husband.

“Right. Follow me and let the games begin!” I exclaim before plucking Mabilia out of Mikhail’s arms. “Watch, baby girl. You’re about to see Mama kick everyone’s ass,” I tell her. To which, she smiles and reaches her hands out to grab my face.



I'm witnessing a side of my wife I've never seen before. Her competitive nature and her inability to lose gracefully. It's amusing more than anything else. Although the huge, huge smile that covers her face when she does win—that's a thing of beauty. And I want to rig every single fucking game just to make sure she wins, so I get to see it again.

“Okay, this next one is called the Marriage Game. How well do you know your partner?” Isabella announces.

“You've been married for all of five minutes. You really think you have a chance of winning this one, Iz?” Matteo asks her.

“Absolutely. There isn't anything Mikhail and I don't know about each

other.” She smiles up at me. “The questions will appear on the screen. You have thirty seconds to jot down your answer, and no peeking at what your partner writes.”

“We’re so winning this,” I tell Isabella.

“Of course we are,” she says, full of confidence. “Ready?”

Everyone waves their whiteboards and pens in the air. I can’t help but laugh. I’ve never in my life seen a room full of made men playing couples games. Nor did I ever think I’d participate in such a thing myself—another credit to the joy that my wife brings to my life.

“Okay, first question.” Izzy presses the button on a remote and words pop up on the screen.

Where did you meet?

Well, this is an easy one. I write down *Sveta*, the name of my bar. Fuck, I miss that place. Things were so much simpler back then.

At the sound of the buzzer, everyone turns their boards around. Both Izzy and I wrote *Sveta*. Theo and Maddie wrote a coffee shop. Matteo’s and Savannah’s whiteboards say kindergarten, Romeo’s and Livvy’s say the library, and Luca and Katarina both wrote the football field.

“Guess that one was easy for all of us,” I say aloud this time.

“When the fuck did you go to *Sveta*, Izzy?” Theo grunts.

“The night I met him and got knocked up, obviously.” She throws a thumb in my direction.

“And you didn’t know there was a Valentino in your bar?”

“To my defense, she was in disguise. Wearing a really short blonde wig, and she told me her name was Jolene.”

“You knowingly walked your ass into a bar, owned by our rivals, without telling anyone where you were going?” Matteo asks her with furrowed brows.

“If I told you, you would have tried to stop me and I wanted to go out for the night. So I did. It’s really no big deal. I survived, clearly,” she says. “Next question.” Isabella points the remote at the board and the next question pops up on the screen. We go on for another ten rounds, everyone’s boards matching each time. “This game sucks. Why do you all know each other so well?” Isabella complains, obviously not happy about this turn of events.

“It’s fine, kotyonok. In my eyes, you’re the only winner,” I tell her.

“Right back at ya.” She grins.

“Okay, well, this has been... something else but we need to head out,”

Luca says, pushing to his feet and pulling his wife up next to him.

“Yep, us too,” Romeo says.

“Same here,” Savannah adds, following suit.

“We do?” Matteo questions her.

“Yep, we have that thing,” she tells him.

“What thing?” Matteo asks, oblivious to the hint his wife is trying to stress.

“Matteo, your parents have the babies and I plan to take full advantage of that before we pick them up in the morning. Let’s go,” Savannah clarifies.

I’ve never seen a man move so damn fast in his life. Within seconds, Matteo is up and leading his wife out the door. “Thanks for dinner, Iz,” he calls over his shoulder.

Now we’re left with just Theo and Maddie in the room. “Before you go, I have something for you, Maddie,” I tell her.

Theo stiffens from where he’s seated beside her. What does the asshole think I’m going to do? Pull out a machine gun and start firing?

“I found a box with your father’s name on it in an old storage unit. I thought you and your sister might want it,” I tell her while pushing to my feet.

“What’s in it?” she asks.

“No idea. I didn’t open it.” I shrug. “Be right back.” I head to my office and retrieve the box. When I return, Theo is holding Mabilia, and Maddie and Izzy are talking about baby clothing labels or some shit. “Here.” I set the box on the table.

Maddie looks at it, and then up at me. “Can... can you open it for me?” she asks.

“Of course.” I’m about to fetch a knife when Isabella just so happens to pull one out from under her dress. She hands it to me. “Thank you,” I say, my brows furrowed.

“You can never be too safe.” She shrugs. I shake my head as I cut through the tape.

“What’s in it?” Maddie asks, peering into the open box.

“Looks like a few old trophies and other trinkets.” I pick up a soccer trophy with her dad’s name on it.

“He never told us he played soccer,” Maddie says. “I wonder what else about his life he left out...”

“Whatever he didn’t tell you, I’m sure he did it for a reason, Maddie. His

family, our grandparents, were not nice people. Fuck, my parents weren't either," I tell her.

"I know. It's just... they lived a whole different life before me and Lilah," she says.

"Bambolina, they took you away from that life for a good reason. Don't blame them for protecting you and your sister," Theo says, wrapping an arm around her shoulders.

"Here, let me take her." Isabella reaches for Mabilia and sits back down with our daughter nestled in her arms.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean for this to upset you. I just thought you'd want it," I tell Maddie.

"No, it's not your fault. Thank you, Mikhail. I really do appreciate this and I know Lilah will too." Maddie jumps up and throws her arms around me.

I stand there, with my hands out to the side, not knowing what to do. I look at Isabella for help and she just smiles at me. Slowly, I bring an arm around and pat Maddie on the back a couple of times. "Don't mention it," I tell her. "Really, it was nothing." Then I turn to my wife. "Isabella, why don't you show Maddie what you've done with Mabilia's playroom?"

Isabella raises her eyebrows at me. "If you want a moment alone with Theo to further deepen your bromance, just say so." She stands and reaches for Maddie's hand. "Come on, I'll show you around the house. Give you the full tour."

I wait for the girls to leave the room. Theo sits up on the sofa, straightening out his shoulders. "What is it?" he asks.

"I have to get rid of this case. Isabella is going out of her damn mind here, without being able to leave the property."

"What're you thinking?"

"I'm going to point the evidence in another direction. I have another piece of scum who could use a visit from the Stiletto Killer," I tell him.

"You're going to frame someone else? Who?"

I shrug. "If I tell you, then you won't be able to deny involvement *if* and *when* it comes back to me. I'm not putting you in that position."

"Then why are you telling me anything in the first place?"

"Because, if it does come back to me, some people are going to be fucking pissed. And *if* that happens, you need to get my wife and daughter as far away from me as possible."

“Okay. I can do that.” He nods his head.

“Thank you.”

“You don’t need to thank me. She’s my cousin,” he says.

“You don’t find it odd?” I ask him. “That we married each other’s cousins?”

“I didn’t until you just mentioned it. Thanks a-fucking-lot, dipshit,” Theo grunts. I stand and laugh. Then I pour us each a glass of vodka, handing one to him. He looks at the clear liquid and cringes. “Next dinner party is at my place,” he says.

“Can’t wait,” I lie.



I'm nervous. After having my cousins here for dinner last week, I finally caved and invited Bianca over. Of course, she said yes right away, but not before screaming “fucking finally” through the phone line.

Now I'm walking up and down the foyer, biting my nails, waiting for her.

“Kotyonok, you're going to wear a path in the marble if you don't stop pacing,” Mikhail says from where he's standing on the bottom step.

When did he come downstairs?

“I'm sure I can afford to replace the marble,” I tell him. “Besides, I don't doubt Savvy has already picked out new flooring for the entire house.”

The day after our little dinner party, Savvy sent me an email with her

ideas and already had mood boards for the few rooms she's seen. She's excited about this project, probably because she knows there's no budget, which means she can go wild on whatever she wants.

"New flooring? I thought it was just furniture and shit? Why is she picking out new flooring?" Mikhail asks me.

"Because you told her to redecorate the whole house. That's a green light for remodeling. She's not going to just throw a few new pieces of furniture around," I say.

"If the house is being remodeled, I'll find someplace for us to stay until it's finished. We're not living in a construction zone. And I'm not having you and Mabilia exposed to God knows who, coming and going through all hours of the day."

"I love you, but you really do worry way too much."

"Says the woman pacing up and down the foyer because her second best friend is visiting," he fires back.

I laugh. He really hates the idea of not being my number one everything. I'm not going to bother arguing with him about the title or position. "I haven't seen her for months, Mikhail, *months*. What if she's really mad at me?"

"She's not mad. Besides, I'm pretty sure you can take her, kotyonok." He smirks.

"Not funny. I'm not scared of her." I glare at him.

"Then what are you worried about?"

"I don't know. I don't exactly have a lot of friends if you haven't noticed. I don't usually let people in. But I like her. She kept coming around and snuck into my little bubble. I don't want to lose her."

"You're not going to lose her, Isabella. Bianca is fiercely loyal to you. She's probably just as anxious as you are right now."

"You're right. I'm being ridiculous." I run a hand through my hair. The doorbell rings and I hold my breath.

"Want me to get it?" Mikhail offers.

"Nope, I got this," I tell him. I walk over to the door and open it. Within seconds, my best friend's arms are wrapped around me and we topple backwards into the house. Somehow, Mikhail makes it over to us, stopping me from falling to the ground. He places a hand on my back to support my weight. "Okay, ease up. Jeez, Bianca, did you start working out?" I say, closing my palms around her biceps.

“Nope, but I did take up pole dancing. It’s great for upper body strength. You should try it.” She beams at me.

“Not a fucking chance in hell.” Mikhail’s voice booms from behind us. “Remind me again why we like her,” he asks me.

“I’m not really sure why. We just do. A lot,” I tell him.

“Right. Well, I’ll be in my office if you need anything,” he says before leaning down and claiming my lips. I was expecting a quick, chaste kiss. But, no, that’s not how my husband does things.

By the time he pulls away, I’m practically whimpering and my panties are damp. He winks at me before turning around and walking off.

“Is it hot in here? No? Just me? Okay. Hot damn, Isabella, now I see why you didn’t have time for me,” Bianca says while fanning herself.

“Shut up. Now, come on. I have someone who really wants to see you.” I grab her hand and pull her towards the living room. I left Mabilia in there playing with Marta, who has taken to her like a grandmother. “Marta, this is my friend Bianca. Bianca, this is Marta,” I introduce them.

“It’s nice to meet you, Marta,” Bianca says.

“Likewise. Let me know if you need anything, Mrs. Petrov,” Marta replies, bowing her head and walking out of the room.

“Mrs. Petrov... that’s going to take some time to get used to.”

“Yeah, even I’m not used to hearing it and I’ve heard it every day since I said *I do*,” I tell her.

“He calls you that when he’s... you know? Doesn’t he?” Bianca raises her eyebrows up and down a few times.

“No. He doesn’t,” I lie—truth be told, she’s a hundred percent spot on. Mikhail loves to remind me I’m his wife any chance he gets. I bend down and pick up Mabilia. “This is who you’re really here to see, isn’t it?”

“Finally! I didn’t want to be rude and just grab her.” Bianca holds out her hands. “I’m your Auntie Bianca. You and I are going to be the bestest of friends, Mabilia,” she says, cuddling my daughter to her chest and peppering her cheeks with kisses. “She’s so beautiful, Isabella. You really did good.”

“I know. She’s amazing, isn’t she?” I stare at my daughter, who is looking up at Bianca and smiling.

“I want one. Maybe I should just go and have a few one-night stands and hope I get as lucky as you did,” Bianca says.

“You’re not that lucky,” I deadpan.

“Well, gee, thanks for ruining a girl’s dream.” She laughs. “Now, sit

down and tell me everything. I've missed so much, and don't even get me started on the whole you getting married without me. I was born to be a maid of honor. Now I'll have to wait for your second marriage for that to happen."

A growl erupts from the doorway. The man standing there has impeccable timing. He glares at Bianca but doesn't say a word. *Thank god.*

"I thought I'd come take Mabilia, so you two can catch up. Marta has put some tea out in the garden," Mikhail says.

"Thank you." I take Mabilia back and walk over to my husband. "Don't worry, there won't be a second marriage. You have completely ruined me for good," I tell him.

"I'm not sure I like your friend," he says while eyeing Bianca over my shoulder.

"You'll get used to her. I did." I laugh.

I'm surprised there aren't the usual hordes of men walking the grounds. I've been looking but haven't seen a single one. Something tells me Mikhail had a hand in that.

Bianca and I have stuffed ourselves with cakes and tea. I really should have thought to set something like this up for us sooner. Thankfully, I have a very thoughtful husband, who I'm definitely planning on showing my appreciation to later.

"You look really happy, Izzy," Bianca says.

"I am really happy," I admit and mean every word.

"Good, you deserve this. You deserve him, and he seems to be besotted with you too."

"*Besotted?* Nobody says *besotted*, Bianca." I laugh. I don't think I've laughed this much since... well, I don't know when. But it's been a while. She makes me laugh; she makes me carefree and reckless. This is what I love most about her. The way she can make even the worst of days brighter. Not that today was bad. I just didn't realize how much I missed her. "I really missed you," I say aloud.

"Good, because you're not going to be able to get rid of me now. Tell me, how many guest rooms do you have here? One of them has to have my name on it." She grins.

“Of course. I will always have a room for you, Bianca.”

“You think you can find me a cousin or something? We could double date.”

“I’ll keep an eye out,” I say, though I have absolutely no intention of following through. Bianca needs to find herself a nice, normal guy with a normal job. I don’t want her mixed up in this world any more than she already has been.



“I have to go out for a bit. I’ve called your parents. They’re coming over to have dinner with you and Mabilia,” I tell Isabella.

“You called my parents to babysit me while you go out? Seriously, Mikhail, what the hell?” she screeches at me. *Yes, screeches.* That word seems very accurate at the moment.

I scan our immediate surroundings, making sure there isn’t anything she could possibly use to stab me. Although, knowing my wife, she likely has a knife strapped to her body somewhere. “No, I called your parents because they haven’t been around this week. At all. I called them to make sure they were still alive. And then I invited them to dinner.”

“While you’re off doing God only knows what?” she asks, crossing her arms over her chest.

“I’m working, Isabella. It’s not like I’m out gallivanting around town,” I tell her. I’ve done my best to have everything handled without me having to leave the premises. I’ve only gone out a few times, and most of those were when Isabella was asleep. I feel bad that I’ve kept her cooped up, which is why I’m putting a stop to it tonight. I have to fix this for her. She cannot be a prisoner in her own home for the rest of her life.

“You’re doing something dangerous. I can tell and I don’t like it,” she says.

“I’m going to be fine. Trust me, kotyonok. I’ll be back as soon as I can.” I kiss her lips gently, then walk over to Mabilia’s crib and kiss my daughter’s sleeping head. “I love you. I’ll be back before you even have a chance to miss me,” I tell Isabella.

“Impossible. I already miss you,” she says. “I love you, Mikhail Petrov. And I swear to God, if you don’t come home, I will marry someone else just to get back at you and then you’ll have to watch it all unfold from the pits of hell.”

“You know, you have a real nasty streak, Mrs. Petrov.” I smirk. “As if I’d ever let you marry someone else. Even dead, I’d find a way to make sure you stayed untouched for the rest of your natural life until we met again. In hell, together.”

“Forever and ever,” she says.

“Forever and ever,” I repeat, leaning in and kissing her once more.

I check my watch as I walk down the stairs. Her parents should be here soon. I may have invited them over so she wasn’t alone. Not that she’d really ever be alone. I have hundreds of men around the house, but I have trust issues lately, and her parents happen to be two of the only people in the world I trust to truly jump in front of a bullet for my wife. I also wanted to keep her occupied so she’s not sitting around worrying about me, because I know she worries. I’ve seen the look on her face whenever I return home after being out. Her eyes travel up and down my body before she sighs and relaxes, like she’s expecting me to come back with missing limbs or something.

Walking out the front door, I climb into the back of a blacked-out SUV. I might have hacked into Isabella’s website to get the name of tonight’s target. I know she’s going to kick my ass as soon as she finds out, but at least her name will be cleared.

Paul is in the front seat of the car. When I look at the driver's side, I'm shocked to find Lex. "What the hell are you doing here? Have you been cleared by the doc?" I ask him.

"Sure have, boss. Given the all-clear. Never felt better," he tells me. Lex spent the last month undergoing physical therapy. Those Irish assholes really did a number on him. He was unrecognizable.

"Has my wife seen you yet?" I question him. Isabella has asked about him almost daily. I've been giving her the same reports that I've been getting from the doc—that he's doing better every day. I've also been to see him a few times, to make sure he had everything he needed.

"No, boss." Lex shakes his head. "How is she doing?"

"Good, but she's going to be really happy to see you," I tell him. He doesn't say anything; instead, he starts up the car. "Wait." I land a palm on his shoulder to stop him. "Lex, do me a favor and stay back, with my wife and daughter. If anything looks even a little bit off, get them to one of the panic rooms and call me."

"Are you sure, boss?" he asks. "I didn't... I mean, I couldn't stop her from getting hurt..." I know he's referring to the incident in Ireland, when he was outmanned and outgunned.

"That's not on you, Lex. And you did what a million men in your position wouldn't have. You put her safety above your own. That, I will be eternally grateful for," I tell him.

He nods and climbs out of the car before jogging up to the front door. I can hear Isabella's surprised scream as I step back out and head for the driver's seat. I smile, knowing without question that someone on my team will take a bullet for her. Lex has proven his loyalty, which means he's definitely someone I want around my wife and daughter.

"Most men wouldn't be happy to hear their wife so excited to see another man," Paul says as we pull away from the house.

I tell him about what happened in Ireland, how Lex refused to do her any harm and dared those IRA fuckers to shoot him instead.

"Shit, really? That is what every fucking Bratva member should do," Paul says.

"But we both know not all of them would."

"Unfortunately our line of work attracts some selfish bastards." The rest of the drive is silent. When I pull over and park the car along the curb of a darkened street, Paul glances in my direction. "What's the plan?"

“The plan is to make it look exactly like one of her kills and leave behind the fingerprints of the fucker tied up in the trunk,” I tell him.

Paul’s eyes dart to the back of the car. The guy we have stashed there is an IRA member; he’s unconscious but not dead. He won’t remember a thing about tonight, but he will wake up in a cell. I’ve already put in a call to some of the cops I have on my payroll. They’ll take him in under the guise of a different charge and his fingerprints will come up as a person of interest. Eventually, they’ll connect him to this murder, along with all the others.

“Let’s get this over with,” I say.

Paul knows the drill. He’s seen the pictures of the crime scenes. What my wife left behind—well, let’s just say it’s not exactly pretty. That’s for sure.

“Why the stiletto?” Paul asks as we make our way up the street, dragging the unconscious Irish bastard along with us.

“No idea. I never asked her.”

“You never asked her? You two were playing that game for weeks and that was never one of your questions?”

“No, it wasn’t. I don’t care why she uses the stiletto. I know why she did it. That’s all that matters. I know why all those men deserved what they had coming to them. That’s enough for me.”

Paul shakes his head. “Can I ask her then?”

“Not if you want to keep your tongue in your head,” I tell him.

“The ladies love my tongue. It’d be a shame to lose it,” he mumbles.

When we get to the house we’re looking for, we drop the body on the ground. I glance at Paul and count to three before I kick in the door. Then I draw my gun from its holster, and we both storm inside.



“**M**rs. Petrov? You around?” a familiar voice calls out. A very familiar voice.

I grab Mabilia from her crib and practically sprint down the stairs. “Lex?” I stop right in front of him. “Oh my god! How? What? When did you get here? Are you okay?” I rapid-fire questions at the man as my gaze runs over every inch of him. I haven’t been able to see him. I know that Mikhail has visited him a few times, assuring me that the loyal soldier was making a good recovery, but I wanted to see it for myself. With my own eyes.

“I’m good. You? How are you holding up?” he asks me.

“I’m really good,” I tell him. “I wanted to find you. When Mikhail and my father came for me... I told them to look for you.”

“I found a way home. You don’t need to worry about me. I’m really glad you’re okay,” he says with a lopsided grin, his gaze averted and a hand scratching the back of his neck.

“Same. I’m sorry that you got caught up in my mess.”

He lifts his eyes to meet mine. “Your mess? That was not your mess, Mrs. Petrov. That was the IRA being the fucking assholes they are,” he growls. “Shit, fuck. Sorry.” He curses under his breath, then apologizes as he looks up at Mabilia. “She sure has grown a lot.”

“She has. And don’t worry, at this point, I’ll be surprised if her first word isn’t *fuck*.” I laugh.

“You should start a swear jar. It’ll pay for her college tuition,” Lex suggests.

“Good idea. Maybe I will.”

“Anyway, I’ll be around if you need anything.”

“Does my husband know you’re here?” I stop Lex in his tracks—surely Mikhail will want to see him too.

“Yep, just saw him outside.”

“Okay. Great.”

The doorbell rings, and Lex straightens his shoulders and heads for the foyer. “Stay there.”

“It’s fine. It’s just my parents,” I tell him.

“Humor me then and wait,” he says, looking through the peephole before his shoulders relax and he opens the door. “Mr. and Mrs. Valentino.” Lex nods, stepping aside to let my parents pass.

“Lex, it’s good to see you,” my mom says. And my dad nods a greeting. They’ve been keeping tabs on the kid too, ever since I told them what he did for me.

“I can’t believe he called you to come and babysit me,” I huff.

“Babysit you? Why would we need to do that?” Mom lifts a brow in question.

“Ask my husband, because it seems awfully convenient that he invites you over on the same night he has to go out.”

“Where’d he go?” Dad pries.

I send a glare in his direction. Does he really think I know the answer to that? I honestly didn’t even ask my husband where he was going. I’m not

stupid and this isn't my first rodeo. If Mikhail says he has work to do, and that work is happening under the cover of darkness, well, you just know not to ask.

"I have no idea." I shrug. "But I did tell him if he doesn't make it home, I'm going to remarry."

"That's just mean, Bel," Papa tells me.

"Is it? I thought it was an incentive to not get himself killed."

"Well, it's that too," Mom interjects. "Now, give me my granddaughter. What are you feeding this kid, Izzy? She's grown inches in just a week."

"She has," I agree and can't help but smile at my baby girl.

"Mrs. Petrov, shout if you need anything," Lex says, excusing himself from the room.

"Thanks, Lex, we'll talk later," I tell him. I want to make sure he really is okay after what he went through. Being held captive and abused isn't a fun experience for anyone, and I know a thing or two about repressed trauma.

"I have a call to make. I'll meet you in the living room," my dad says before pivoting on his heel and walking down the hall towards the kitchen.

"What's up with him?" I ask my mom as I guide her into the living room.

"No idea," she says, then leans in. "So, what do you think Mikhail is really up to?"

"No idea." I mimic her actions.

"How's everything going here? I heard you had all the boys over for dinner last week."

"I did. It was good actually. Nobody got shot."

"Not even Luca? That is a good day then." She laughs.

It's a running joke in our family that my cousin Luca likes to catch bullets. He's only been shot twice, but that's twice more than most of us. And the guy literally jumped in front of a bullet to save his now wife Katarina during the opening ceremony of what was supposed to be his first professional football game.

At the mention of my cousins, my mind drifts back to how Mikhail insisted on getting Theo alone. Which is odd, seeing as they like to pretend they don't like each other. They're more similar than either wants to acknowledge though.

"Can you watch Mabilia for a second? I forgot to grab my phone," I say to my mom before rushing out of the room and up the stairs. I find my phone on the bed and call my cousin.

“Izzy, what’s up?” Theo answers.

“What’s Mikhail doing tonight?” I ask him.

“You’re calling me to find out what *your* husband is doing tonight? Why the fuck would I know what he’s doing?” Theo says instead of answering my question.

“Because you do. What did he want to talk to you about the other night when you two were alone in the living room?”

“Izzy, this is a conversation you need to have with your husband, not me.”

“Theo, tell me what he’s up to, and why do I have a bad feeling that it’s something stupid?”

“Probably because you married an idiot.” He chuckles. “Look, just sit tight and wait for him to come home. Whatever he’s doing, he’s doing it for you, Iz.”

“*Sit tight*. When have you ever known me to sit tight, Theo Valentino?” My voice rises as I try to maintain my composure. I can’t believe he just told me to *sit tight*. Then his words click.

Whatever he’s doing, he’s doing it for you...

“I gotta go.” I hang up and head to Mikhail’s office.

I open his laptop and my eyes immediately flick to the door. This isn’t going to look good if someone sees me snooping around in here. I’ve slowly been trying to build the trust of the people who work for my husband. And the last thing I want is for them to think I’m some sort of spy for my family. That being said, right now, I don’t have much of a choice. Not when Mikhail’s out there doing God knows what to try to protect me.

My gaze drops back down to the screen and I sigh. Of course it’s locked. *What would his password be?* I try Mabilia’s date of birth first—it’s not that. That’d be way too obvious. So I try our wedding date. Shit, it’s not that either. What the hell could it be? I type in the word “kotyonok” with no luck.

Think, Isabella, think.

I open the calendar app on my phone and scroll back to the date we first met, the night I walked into his bar. I remember I marked it with the words: *I’ll never forget this day*. I just didn’t realize until much later how right I would be.

I type the corresponding numbers into the text box and Mikhail’s desktop boots up. Opening Safari, I go right to the history tab. Unfortunately, my husband is too smart for that, and he doesn’t have anything logged. But I’ve

learned a thing or two from Romeo over the years and there are backdoors to pulling up shit someone thinks they deleted.

After two minutes, I'm in and I cannot believe what I'm looking at. I'm going to fucking kill him myself. I know I say that a lot but that's because he's constantly doing shit like this.

He logged into my website—no, *logged* isn't the right word, more like hacked into it. The fact that I'm hacking into *his* computer right now doesn't escape me. It also doesn't make me any less pissed. These women trust that site; it's the only place for them to go for help.

I scroll through the last report he looked at, taking note of the name, the face, and address of the guy. It's someone I've never heard of, but as I continue reading, I realize the perp is an IRA member.

Fucking hell, can this get any worse? What the hell are you up to, Mikhail?

I quickly power down the laptop, run into my closet, and change into a pair of black jeans and a black hoodie. I then make my way to the armory. I've never had to go into this room before, but tonight, I'm loading up and I'm not sure if I'm about to use these weapons on my husband or the man he's likely paying a visit to.

When I return to the living room, my parents are both doting on Mabilia. "Can you guys stay with her for a bit? I have to run out and do something real quick." I smile up at them. "Like kill my husband," I add under my breath.

They look to each other. "You're not going out alone, Bel. Call one of your cousins to come get you," my dad says.

"Will do. Thanks, Papa," I lie before turning to my mother. I have no intention of calling anyone. "Mama. Love you. I won't be long." I run into the garage and pause. For a guy who doesn't leave the house much, Mikhail sure does have a lot of cars.

"I'd pick that one," Lex says from where he's leaning against the wall behind me while pointing to a yellow Lamborghini.

I turn to look at him. "You can either get in and come with me, or stay here and pretend you didn't see me," I tell him.

"Jesus, you're going to get me killed," he groans.

My face drops. I shouldn't do this to him again, seeing as I did almost get him killed. And not that long ago.

"Relax, I'm kidding. But if I'm coming, I'm driving," he tells me, then climbs into the driver's seat. By the time I slide in on the other side, he's

tucking his phone back into his pocket after furiously typing on the screen. No doubt sending a message to warn my husband that I'm on my way.



Have you ever walked in on something you wished you could unsee? That's what's happening to me right fucking now. I've seen a lot of messed-up shit in my life. Shit, I can stomach practically anything. But what I've just witnessed, what I've just walked into—yeah, I can't fucking unsee that.

This pathetic excuse for a human being was on top of a girl, a fucking girl who can't be any older than fourteen. Her screams and pleas for help were the first thing I heard when I stepped inside the house. I pulled him off her, and when I noticed the blood between her legs, the angry welts all over her

naked body—I saw fucking red. I lost it.

Paul untied the girl and wrapped a blanket around her shoulders. She's now sitting in the corner of the room, refusing to talk or look at anyone. I don't want to traumatize the kid any more than she has been. So I drag the fat fucker out of the bedroom. He's unconscious, and for what I want to do to him, I'm going to need the son of a bitch to wake the fuck up.

I can wait, though. I pull the cable ties out of my pocket and bind his hands behind his back and his feet together at the ankles. Leaving him hog-tied like the pig he is, I walk to the front door where I left the asshole from the trunk.

When I found this case on Isabella's website, it was as if the gods were handing me a gift on a silver platter. The guy who's about to find out what happens to men who rape innocent women and girls is a reasonably high-level IRA member. While the fucker who's being framed is another Irish bastard looking to climb the ranks.

The thing about the Stiletto Killer, they've been targeting made men from every organization all over the city. There isn't a syndicate around that won't want to seek revenge for their lost brothers. Even if those so-called brothers deserved everything that was handed to them.

Dragging the heavy fucker inside, I kick the door shut and leave him in the hall. He isn't waking up anytime soon with the amount of drugs I forced into his system. Then I position myself on the sofa and wait for my main event to come to. I don't want to start the show without him.

Paul exits the room a few seconds later, his face pale and his shoulders tense. He doesn't like the scene we walked into any more than I do. "She won't talk. What are we going to do with her?"

I have no fucking idea. I don't blame the girl for not talking. After what she's been through, I wouldn't want to talk to a pair of strange men who busted through the doors wielding guns either. Especially when it's obvious those men aren't cops.

My phone buzzes with a text before I can answer Paul. Pulling the device out of my pocket, I stare at the words on the screen.

Lex: Mrs. Petrov is on her way, boss. I couldn't stop her. I'm driving though. Her parents are with the baby.

Fucking Isabella, I should have known she wouldn't let things lie. How the fuck did she find out where I was headed?

"Did Lex know where we were headed tonight?" I ask aloud.

“No, I was going to plug the address into the GPS when you told him to go inside,” Paul says. “Why?”

“Isabella is on her way here,” I groan.

Paul smiles. “Your wife never ceases to impress me, boss.”

“Yeah, me too,” I say, unsure if I should be more proud or annoyed at the moment.

“It could be a good thing. I mean, that girl in there...” He points to the room he just exited. “...needs a woman to talk to. She ain’t gonna trust us. We can’t help her the way Izzy can.” Most of my men refer to my wife as *Mrs. Petrov*. Paul is the only one who uses her shortened name.

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” I say.

“I usually am.” Paul shrugs before dropping down next to me on the sofa.

If Isabella just left the house, that means she’s going to be here in around twenty minutes. By then, the show will be well on its way. So Paul and I sit in silence until the fat Irish fucker finally decides to come to. He pulls at his wrists while his legs buck on the ground.

“There really is no point trying. You won’t get out of those ties. Besides, if I need ’em, I have plenty more where they came from,” I tell him. Pushing to my feet, I close the distance between us. His face is already bruised from where my fist connected with it earlier—the one punch that knocked him out cold.

“Fuck you. You’re fucking dead,” he spits.

“Am I though? Seems to me like I’m here in the flesh, living and breathing,” I say, patting my hands down my chest. “You, on the other hand? I’d say you’re about to meet your maker, but we know there is only one place scum like you go. Straight to the pits of hell.”

“I’m going to skin you alive,” he threatens.

“I’m right here. What are you waiting for?” I ask, holding my arms out wide. “Oh, that’s right, your hands are a wee bit tied right now.” I laugh.

“That slut wanted it,” he tries to argue.

“Yeah, you see, it didn’t really sound that way to me.” I kick my booted foot at his ribs, smiling when I hear the crack of bones. He screams like a fucking banshee. “Paul, muzzle it. I don’t want to hear that shit.”

Paul draws a pocket square from his jacket and then pulls a roll of duct tape out of the bag he had at the ready. I watch as he shoves the fabric in the guy’s mouth and then tears off a piece of tape, securing it over the bastard’s lips.

“That should do it,” Paul says.

I look at my watch. I probably have about five minutes before Isabella shows up guns blazing. I bend down and take the knife from my ankle. She liked to focus her attention on certain parts of her target’s bodies. I need to make sure I stab the exact same spots to make this appear as though it’s a legit Stiletto Killer job.

I bring my knife to his face first and draw a line from just under his right eye to his chin, cutting only skin deep. I then repeat the process under his left eye. Stepping back, I take in my handiwork, noticing how the tiny droplets of blood drip down from his jaw. They look like tears, bloody tears.

Is this why Isabella does it? To represent the tears of the countless women and children these assholes abuse. Sometimes I wish I could climb inside my wife’s brain and read her thoughts.

The front door swings open with a bang and I hear the telltale click-clack of a pair of heels heading towards me. Stepping around the fucker who is making god-awful grunts and groans through his makeshift gag, I meet Isabella halfway across the room. Where I take hold of the back of her head, tilt her face upwards, and slam my lips onto hers, pushing my tongue past the seam of her closed mouth. She opens on a moan that I greedily swallow. I escape into that kiss, into being connected to Isabella like this is fucking everything. I can’t get enough of the feeling she gives me.

Pulling away slightly, I growl, “What the fuck are you doing here, kotyonok?”

“The same thing you’re doing here. What on earth were you thinking?” she says, shoving at my chest. I take a step back because I want to, not because she’s forcing me.

“I was thinking I was clearing my wife’s name so she can carry on living her life to the fullest,” I tell her.

“You should have told me you had some cooked-up idea.” She steps around me, examining the room, with barely a glance at the two bodies on the floor. “What exactly is the plan here?” she asks.

“The plan is to mimic one of the murders, spread this fucker’s prints everywhere, and wait for the dumb fucks to connect the dots.” I cross my arms over my chest and watch her.

She looks at both men. And then smiles. “That’s actually not as stupid as it sounds.”

“Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence,” I huff.

“Ah, boss?” Paul grabs my attention. He nods his head towards the bedroom door where the girl is still seated. She hasn’t moved, hasn’t made a peep either.

I give him a nod and turn back to my wife. “Isabella, when we got here, he wasn’t alone,” I tell her.

“Okay?”

“There’s a girl in the room. She’s... distraught, for lack of a better word, and won’t talk to either of us. We had to pull him off her.” I pause until Isabella catches my meaning.

She doesn’t say anything as she steps up to the guy on the floor and kicks a pointy-toed shoe at his groin. “Filthy fucking bastard,” she hisses, then peers back up at me. “Don’t touch him. I’m going to talk to her.” Isabella disappears into the room, and like a pup anticipating its next command, I wait for my wife to return.



I can't believe the depths that Mikhail is willing to go to in order to get me out of a mess I created long before I met him. Don't get me wrong, I'm still pissed as hell that he hacked into my website and didn't tell me what he was planning to do.

Then again, at the same time, I think this is probably the most romantic thing anyone has ever done for me. I know... murder and shit shouldn't be romantic, but it's the gesture behind the blood and gore that had me practically swooning at my husband's feet. I probably need therapy—though that's not going to be something I'm seeking soon. Because when I married Mikhail, I accepted all parts of him, just as he did with me. We are two

twisted souls who found each other against every possible odd that wasn't in our favor.

When I walk into the room, I have to count to ten to stop myself from going back out there and unleashing all hell on the fucking asshole who is currently squirming around the floor. The girl is sitting in the corner, her knees drawn up to her chest and a blanket wrapped around her shoulders. For a moment, I have a flashback of my Zia Lola on the floor of her bedroom in this exact same position. I quickly shake that image away and focus on the task at hand.

This girl can't be older than fifteen. She's tiny, fragile, and when she looks up at me, all I see in her eyes is fear. It's a good thing, though, because at least her gaze isn't blank yet. That means she's still fighting. She hasn't taken herself someplace else, leaving behind an empty shell.

I kneel down in front of her. "Hi, my name is Isabella. My friends call me Izzy," I tell her. "What's your name?"

She peers up at me with tears streaming down her face. "Are you going to tell them?" she asks.

"Tell who?"

"The men who sold me to him? I don't want to go back. Please don't send me back," she begs, and I can hear the desperation in her voice.

"I'm never going to let you go back. Okay? I'm here to help you," I assure her, then repeat my question. "What's your name?"

"Zoe. My name is Zoe," she says.

"It's nice to meet you, Zoe." I smile, keeping my hands on my knees. I don't want her to shy away and I know the last thing she wants right now is to be touched. "How old are you, Zoe?"

"Seventeen."

"Where are your parents? Do you live near here?" I continue to probe her for information while trying to ensure I don't come off too demanding.

"I..." She shakes her head. "My dad gave me to those men," she says.

I want to pick this girl up and wrap her in my arms. I can't believe a parent—any parent—would do such a thing to their own child. I'm going to find out who her father is and add him to the top of my hit list. Fucking asshole.

"It's okay. I'm going to get you out of here. I'm going to take you home with me and then we can figure things out from there, okay?" Zoe doesn't say anything, but she does nod her head, so I continue. "I need you to do me a

favor, Zoe. I need you to cover your ears. Don't come out of this room until I come back to get you. Think you can do that for me?"

"Where are you going? Please don't leave me here. Don't leave me with them." She starts panicking.

"I'm not leaving. I'm just going to be in the living room. I need to make sure that the man who did this to you can't ever do it again to anyone else," I tell her.

"Please, don't leave me." She's crying now, fresh tears streaking her dirt-riddled skin.

"I promise I'm not leaving you." I glance behind me to the door. "I have a friend out there. Lex. I can get him to wait with you if you don't want to be alone." Her eyes widen, and terror overtakes her once more. Which was exactly what I feared happening. I don't blame her for not wanting to be around men, but I don't have many options at the moment. I decide to change tact. "It's okay. You know what? I'm going to bring you home now. Come on." I hold out my hand for her to take.

"What about the man?" she asks. "He'll find me again."

"No, he won't. My husband is out there and he'll make sure he's gone."

"Your husband?"

"My husband is the one who found you. Mikhail."

Zoe nods again, then she places the palm of her hand in mine. She's nothing but skin and bone under the blanket. How fucking long has she been enduring this nightmare?

Maybe I should call Zio James and have him sit down and speak with her. He's a trained therapist and an expert in this kind of trauma. But that would mean letting his wife, my Zio Lola, know what's been going on, and I don't want to take her back to her own nightmare—the one she endured when she lived in captivity for ten years.

I don't stop moving when we make it to the living room. I lead Zoe right down the hallway. I don't want her to witness the scene that's playing out in there. "Mikhail," I call through the house and wait for him to follow me. He looks from Zoe to me. "I'm taking her home. I need you to finish what you started here."

"Home?" he questions.

"Our place. She doesn't have anywhere to go. I'll explain later." I lean up and kiss his lips quickly before walking out the door with Zoe in tow.

By the time we get to the car, Lex is running to catch up with me. Zoe's

body completely freezes as he approaches us. “I’m driving, but we have to take the SUV. It’s just down the road.”

“Okay, well, we’ll wait here while you go and get it,” I tell him. Lex turns around, and within two minutes, he’s pulling up next to the curb. I open the passenger door and wait for Zoe to get inside. “It’s okay. Trust me. He’s one of the good ones,” I assure her. Her hand strangles mine as she climbs into the back seat of the car. I follow after her and shut the door.

The ride home is quiet. I can tell Zoe isn’t sure what to think about all that’s happening. I have so many questions I want to ask her, but now isn’t the time. I’m the first to break the silence. “Lex, can you ask the doctor to meet us at the house?”

“Sure thing, Mrs. Petrov,” he says.

“Thank you.”

WHEN WE ARRIVE HOME, I ask Lex to send my mom up to the guest room directly next to mine before leading Zoe there myself. Her eyes are wide as she takes in the house.

“This is where you live?” Her voice is filled with awe.

“Uh-huh, I haven’t lived here long though. This is my husband’s place. I just moved in.”

“Is he... never mind.” She shakes her head.

“Is he what? You can ask me anything, Zoe. It’s okay,” I urge her to continue.

“Is he going to send me back?”

“No, he would never do such a thing, and if he tried—not that he would—I’d kill him,” I tell her.

“I don’t want to be a bother,” she says, seemingly unaffected by my threats of murder, which tells me more than I wish it did.

“You are not a bother.”

“Izzy, what’s going on?” my mom questions me the moment she enters the room.

“Where’s Mabilia?”

“With your father. He’s been hogging her all night.” She pouts.

“Mama, this is Zoe. We need to find her some clothes, help her shower,”

I say. “Do you want a shower, Zoe?”

The girl nods her head.

“Okay, the bathroom is right through here. There are towels and everything you should need in there. You go ahead. I’m going to find you something to wear,” I tell her.

After Zoe walks into the bathroom, I ask my mom to wait in the bedroom while I run to my closet to find a shirt and some comfy pajama pants. They’re going to be too big for her, but at least they have a drawstring she can tighten. I place the clothes on the bed and sit down. The sound of the shower running carries through the bathroom door, which was left slightly ajar.

“What’s going on?” Mom repeats.

“Mikhail went to recreate one of my scenes. When he got there, he found the guy assaulting her.” I gesture to the bathroom. “She doesn’t have anywhere to go. Her father sold her to traffickers, Mama. What kind of person would do that?” I know the answer, though. Because I know firsthand what kind of person would do that. My biological father was a trafficker himself, a sick fuck who got off on hurting children and women.

“So, she can stay with us. We have room,” Mom offers.

“I think I’m going to let her stay here. I need to help her, Mama.”

My mom brushes a hand down the side of my face, sweeping my hair aside. “Okay, baby, what do you want me to do? How can I help?”

“I don’t know,” I say.

A loud wail comes from the bathroom, and I bolt inside to find Zoe rocking back and forth on the shower floor. Stepping into the stall, I wrap my arms around her and pull her into my chest.

“Shh, it’s okay. It’s going to be okay. I promise. I have you. I’m not going to let anyone hurt you again.” I sit there and hold her until the water goes cold. Then I push to my feet, bringing Zoe with me, and pull a huge fluffy towel from the rack. I ensure she’s covered before grabbing one for myself too.



“Think it’ll work?” Paul asks as we drive away from the house. The cops just took a still-unconscious Irish fucker into their custody.

“It will,” I say. It has too. Because short of changing identities and running off, I don’t know how else to get the authorities off Isabella’s tail. We’re always going to have the attention of the cops. The trick is to never let them gather any evidence.

I don’t know how many people those original detectives interviewed. I have no idea how many cops know about the now-missing witness or that Isabella was their key person of interest. Which leaves certain things out of my control. I don’t like feeling out of control.

When we pull up to the estate, all I want to do is have a shower, clean the filth off me, and climb into bed. I know the likelihood of that happening isn't good. I walk through the side door, instead of the front, and up the stairs from the kitchen that take me to the second floor. I pause just before I reach my bedroom, when I hear what sound like sobs coming from one of our guest rooms.

Pushing the door open slightly, I find Isabella holding the girl from the house. The teenager is crying into my wife's chest as they sit on the bed together. Isabella's eyes connect with mine. I can see that she's feeling this girl's pain. I want to take it all away. I fucking hate seeing pain on my wife's face.

Closing the door, I make my way to our bedroom where I find the last person I expected to be inside. My father-in-law. "Did you get lost?" I ask him.

"No, but it looks like you did? Have a good night?" he asks, pushing up from the chair where he was seated.

"I've had better," I admit, undoing the buttons on my sleeves before starting on the ones that run down my chest.

"Mabilia's been asleep for two hours. Bel wanted me to wait for you to come home before I left the room."

"Thank you." I look into my daughter's crib and see her sleeping peacefully. She's so fucking incredible.

Neo walks over to the door, then pauses. "I know what you did tonight. For Bel. You could have asked me for help."

"If I need your help, I'll ask for it. Trust me, when it comes to my wife, I don't have any pride. I'll do whatever's necessary to make sure she's okay," I say, noticing his jaw tick just a little less than it usually does whenever I call his daughter *my wife*. I'm not going to lie. I fucking love saying it, reminding everyone that she's mine. The fact that it bothers him is just a bonus.

"Good, glad we're on the same page." He nods, then asks, "You know, don't you?"

"Know what?"

"Why she does it? The whole Stiletto Killer thing."

I nod my head, confirming his suspicions. My mouth, however, it remains shut. I'm not going to be telling Isabella's secrets. She trusted me enough to share them with me. I won't break that trust. Ever.

"I don't expect you to tell me everything," he says, as if reading my mind.

“But tell me this. How hard should I pressure her to come to me herself?”

“If it were me, and my daughter, I’d want to know,” I admit. I don’t know what else I can say. I’ve told Isabella she should confide in her parents. I’m not going to force her to do it, though—not that I can force that woman to do a damn thing.

“Okay, thanks.” Neo throws a hand out. “Go get cleaned up. I’ll wait around a bit longer, in case she wakes up.”

I make my way into the bathroom and close the door. What the hell has my life come to that I have Neo Valentino watching my infant daughter, in my bedroom? I shake my head at my reflection in the mirror.

Fucking Isabella, the one woman who can turn my entire world on its ass and still have me chasing her through a burning building if it came down to it.

I strip out of my clothes and turn the water onto scalding hot. It’s what I’ve always done after a kill. I don’t lose sleep over it, never have. But I have that feeling of filth all over me that I need to remove the only way I can. By burning it off. Knowing my father-in-law is waiting for me just outside the door, I don’t spend as long in the shower as I’d like to. Instead, I flick the water off, grab a towel, and walk into the adjoining closet in search of a pair of pajama pants.

“Thanks for watching her,” I tell Neo the moment I reenter the room. “Are you guys staying the night?”

“Yeah, Angelica didn’t want to leave Bel tonight.”

“Okay, let me know if you need anything.”

“Will do.” Neo gets to the door before he turns around for a second time. “You know, I can take her to our room for the night if you want.” He dips his head towards Mabilia.

“No, it’s okay. I’ve got this,” I tell him. I don’t think I’d get a wink of sleep if my daughter wasn’t in the same room as me. Isabella has suggested getting Mabilia set up in her own room, since our perfect baby girl almost always sleeps through the night. But I’m not ready for that. And honestly—even though my wife suggested it—I know she wouldn’t last one night either.

I sit on the bed and wait. I know Isabella will come in here as soon as she manages to calm the girl down. Speaking of, I really need to find out what that kid’s name is. I hate referring to her as just *the girl*.

Two hours go by and I’m about to get up and go make sure my wife does intend to come to bed, because fuck if I’m sleeping without her, when she

walks through the door. Isabella looks exhausted. Without saying a word, she takes off her robe and climbs onto the bed, resting her head on my chest and her arm around my waist.

“I love you,” she says.

“I love you,” I tell her in Russian. It’s one of the few phrases she learned quickly, considering I say it as often as I can.

“Thank you. I don’t tell you enough how much I appreciate you, Mikhail. But I do. More than I can even say.”

“You don’t need to thank me.” We’re both silent for a few minutes before I ask, “What’s her name?”

“Zoe.” Isabella sits up and faces me. “She’s seventeen. Her asshole father sold her to traffickers, who then sold her to that scum you dealt with tonight.”

“Her father sold her?” I parrot. Fucking hell, the world is full of pieces of shit.

“Yep. She doesn’t have anywhere else to go, Mikhail. I can’t let her leave knowing that.”

“You also can’t hold her hostage here either. If she wants to go, you have to let her,” I counter.

“I know, but right now, she wants to stay. Can she stay?”

“This is your house, Isabella. You don’t need my permission.”

“Thank you, but if the shoe were on the other foot and you wanted another woman to stay in this house, I’d kill her in front of you and then I’d kill you.” She smiles.

“I wasn’t aware there were other women in the world. You’re the only one I see, kotyonok.”

“Good answer,” she says, lying back down and snuggling up to me again. “How’d tonight go?”

“Well, I came home to find your father in our bedroom, so that was unexpected.” I chuckle.

“Sorry, I didn’t want Mabilia to be left alone.”

“It’s fine. The shock has since worn off,” I say, kissing the top of her head. “I think the plan is going to work. The cops have the guy in custody and they’ll keep him long enough for his prints to come up in the system and match the unidentified ones they have on file. Then trace everything back to all those crime scenes.”

Isabella flinches. “When you say it like that, it makes me feel like a serial killer.”

“Hate to break it to you, but you kinda are.”

“And yet, you’re the one sleeping next to me every night. I think that makes you crazier than I am.”

“I never said you were crazy. Every kill you’ve made has been justified. That makes you more of a vigilante than a serial killer.”

“Mmm, maybe I need a cooler name than the Stiletto Killer,” Isabella mumbles.

“Or maybe you need to stop.”

She freezes in my arms. “If I stop, who is going to help all these girls? You saw Zoe, and there are thousands more like her, out there suffering as we speak.”

“I love that your heart wants to help them. I do, but perhaps we can find an alternative. A better way. A *safer* way.”

“Maybe,” she agrees.



“Zoe, I have someone for you to meet,” I announce, stepping into the guest bedroom. I didn’t want to leave her last night, but I also couldn’t sleep there either. I did keep the baby monitor turned on, so if she woke up, I would have heard her and been able to return.

“You have a baby?” Zoe asks with a genuine smile gracing her face.

“I do. Her name is Mabilia,” I say.

“She’s so adorable.” Zoe’s eyes are glued to the infant in my arms.

I sit on the bed and place Mabilia on her tummy, facing Zoe. My daughter has the ability to brighten anyone’s day. Just one look at her chubby little face and you can’t help but feel joy.

“She’s the best thing I’ve ever done,” I admit.

“She’s lucky. I think you must be a great mom.”

“Thank you.” This gives me pause. Zoe hasn’t mentioned her mother. “Did you know your mother?” I ask aloud.

She nods her head. “He killed her,” she says. “My father. When I was nine. I came home from school and my mom was on the kitchen floor with a knife in her chest. My father was washing the blood off his hands in the sink.”

“Oh, honey, I’m so sorry.” I really need to find out who the fuck her father is and put an end to him.

“It’s okay. It was a long time ago.”

“It’s not okay, no matter how long ago it was. No one should ever have to witness that. Especially a child,” I tell her.

“What do I do now? I don’t know what I’m supposed to do?”

“How much school have you missed?” I ask her.

“A year.”

“Okay, I’m going to help you get your GED and then we’re going to figure out what you want to do from there. You can do anything you want to do, Zoe. Study, go to college, get a job. I’ll help you do whatever it is you want to do in life. But there is no rush. I spoke with Mikhail, and he agreed that you can stay with us for as long as you’d like.”

“Why?”

“Because you need us, and I want to help you,” I answer honestly. “I know you didn’t want to see the doctor last night, but if you change your mind.... if you want to speak to any kind of doctor, I can have them come here. To you. You don’t have to go anywhere until you’re ready,” I tell her.

“I want to forget. I want to erase my mind and make it so it never happened,” she says and I can hear an undertone of hopelessness there.

“I know. That, unfortunately, is one thing I can’t do. But what I can do is give you the tour of your new home. This place is huge—it should probably be a museum.” I pull Mabilia into my arms and stand. “Come on.”

Zoe slowly shoves the covers off her legs and follows me out of the room. Her face swivels from side to side as she takes in the house in the light of day while I lead her down the stairs.

“This is the first living room—the one I use the most.” I gesture to the room that is piled high with baby toys.

“I like it,” Zoe says.

Next, I show her the library, walk her past the gym, and then up to Mikhail's office. "I know my husband can come across as a grump but, trust me, he's nothing but mush underneath," I say, pushing the door open. "This is his office."

Mikhail looks up from where he's seated behind his desk and a smile instantly greets me. "Kotyonok, good morning." He stands and walks around his chair. Closing the distance, he grabs my chin with two fingers, tilts my head, and kisses me. He then takes Mabilia from my arms and kisses her all over her face while greeting her in Russian. "Good morning. Did you sleep well?" he asks Zoe.

She nods her head but doesn't say anything. I know she's scared. I don't want to scare her. But at the same time, if she's going to be living here, she has to get used to my husband.

"I was just giving her the tour. I've invited Bianca over and we're going to spend the day by the pool," I tell Mikhail.

"Sounds fun," he drawls sarcastically. He's not a fan of my best friend ever since that comment about me having a second marriage. It was a joke. I've tried to explain it to him; he just doesn't have much of a sense of humor.

"Oh, I can't find my laptop. Have you seen it?" I ask him. Mikhail walks around his desk and plucks my MacBook from a shelf before handing it back to me. "Why do you have that?" I narrow my glare at him.

"I had Samuel put some extra security measures on it." He shrugs.

"What if I had nudes on there, Mikhail? You can't just give my computer to some random person."

"First of all, you didn't have nudes on there. Second, Samuel isn't a random person. He works for me."

"Well, if I did have nudes, I guess you'll never know now. Samuel probably kept a copy of them for himself." I smirk.

"You didn't have nudes on there," he repeats, then pauses. "Did you?"

"Well, not so sure of yourself now, are you?"

"Isabella, I actually like Samuel. Don't make me kill him because you're playing games with me," Mikhail grunts.

I see Zoe flinch. I reach out and grab hold of her hand. "Don't worry. It's okay," I tell her, then turn back to my husband. "I'll be in the pool if you need me. Have a great day. I hope you get lots of work done." I wink, spin around, and drag Zoe out of the office, shutting the door as Mikhail calls out my name. Zoe's shoulders bunch in on themselves. "Shit, I'm sorry. It's

really okay. Trust me. I do this all the time. Have to keep him on his toes.” I laugh.

“Isn’t he going to come after you?” she asks, her eyes darting back to the door.

“Nope, he’s going to call his friend Samuel, probably threaten to tear his eyes out, and poor Samuel will have no idea what he’s talking about because there were no nudes on this laptop to begin with,” I explain.

“Are you sure? He sounded pretty mad.”

“When you find the right man, Zoe, you can make him as mad as you want, and he will never hurt you because of it. Trust me. Also, I think I can probably beat him in a fight. My parents taught me how to do a lot of things as a kid.”

“Can... can you teach me? How to fight?” she asks hesitantly.

“I’m going to teach you how to kick ass, Zoe girl. Just you wait, no one will ever want to mess with you ever again.” The doorbell rings and Bianca’s voice echoes off the walls. “That’s my best friend,” I explain to Zoe.

As soon as we make it to where Bianca is banshee-calling from the foyer, my best friend rips Mabilia from my arms. I see two of Mikhail’s men frowning at her as they stand at the door.

“Mrs. Petrov.” They nod a greeting at me.

“Morning. Sorry about her.” I gesture to Bianca.

“It’s okay. She’s no bother.” One of them smirks. Bianca turns around and pauses as her eyes travel up and down his body.

Knowing something extremely inappropriate is about to come out of her mouth, I grab her arm and tug. “Nope, not happening, Bianca. Let’s go. I need to show Zoe the rest of the house,” I interject. I take Zoe’s hand in mine again and she visibly relaxes at the contact. “Bianca, this is Zoe. Zoe, Bianca.” I gesture between them. “Ignore just about everything she says. That’s what I do,” I direct to Zoe.

“Why is she your best friend if you ignore her?” she asks.

“Because I can’t get rid of her.” I shrug. I lead the girls into the kitchen and introduce Zoe to Marta, who welcomes her to the family with a hug. I guess Mikhail has already told everyone that the teenager is staying. Then we continue to the indoor pool, which is heated. Mabilia loves it. So we spend a lot of time in here.

“Oh, I bought you some things. There’s a swimsuit in there for you.” Bianca hands a bag to Zoe, who proceeds to look from the bag to me and

back again.

“It’s okay. I asked her to pick up a few essentials. The rest we’ll take care of with a bit of online shopping. That’s why I needed this,” I say, holding up my MacBook.

“I... I don’t have money to pay for it.” Zoe’s voice is quiet, her eyes focused on her feet. She refuses to look up at me.

“Even if you did, I wouldn’t ask you for money, Zoe. It’s okay. Trust me. I’ve got this. Go and get changed and come back out here. Wait until you feel the water. It’s amazing.” I point to the corner, where there’s a small changing stall with an attached bathroom.

“Are you good?” Bianca asks me the moment Zoe is out of earshot.

“I am, you?”

“Me too,” she says, before changing the subject. “What’s happening with the reno project?”

“Savvy has been sending me a shit-ton of mood boards and ideas. I haven’t really decided on anything yet. I don’t know. It doesn’t feel right changing this whole house. Mikhail grew up here, with his brother. I don’t want to change everything and take those memories away from him, you know?”

“You redecorating will not erase his memories, Izzy,” she says.

“I know.”

“Do you?”

“Come on. Let’s swim before Mabilia hulks out because she can see the water but can’t feel it. You do not want to be on my daughter’s bad side—trust me.” I laugh, effectively shutting off the serious conversation that I just don’t want to have right now.

All I want is a nice relaxing day in the pool. I want to give Zoe some normalcy with some, well, *semi-normal* people. Where she’s not being hurt or abused. I know it’s going to take more than that for her to heal, but her journey has to start somewhere.



“**E**verything set up?” I ask Paul.

“Yep, tonight, eight, by the docks,” he confirms.

“Good, thanks. I’ll meet you out front at seven thirty,” I tell him.

“What are you going to tell Izzy?”

“Nothing.” I shrug.

“Okay, good luck with that.” The fucker laughs as he exits my office.

And as if she has a sixth sense, my wife walks in five minutes later. “You really need to stop inviting my parents around and not telling me,” she says, her arms already crossed over her chest and a single eyebrow raised. She’s an expert at shooting me a glare that tells me I’m in trouble without ever having

to say the words.

“Why?”

“*Because* I need to be prepared. I didn’t know we had dinner plans. I wanted to spend a night in with you, not an evening dedicated to entertaining people.”

“They’re your parents, Isabella. You don’t need to entertain them,” I tell her.

“I just want to snuggle in bed with you and watch a movie.” She pouts.

“And we will, as soon as I get back and they leave.”

“What do you mean as soon *as you get back*? Where are you going?” she questions me.

“Out. I have a meeting.”

“With?” she draws out. I stare at her, keeping my lips firmly shut. We’re locked in a staring contest. One I don’t plan to lose. Eventually Isabella huffs. “Fine, don’t tell me. But when you sleep tonight, you might want to keep one eye open.”

“Isabella,” I call after her before she walks out of the room.

She turns around with those arms folded back over her chest again. “What?”

“Shut the door and lock it,” I say, pushing my chair from my desk. I stand, unbuttoning my pants, as I approach her. If her parents are here, that means they’re watching Mabilia, which also means I’m able to steal my wife away for a few minutes... or longer.

Isabella’s eyes immediately heat up as she watches me free my cock. Fisting it, I rub a hand up and down its length. I’m already hard, but then again, I’m always hard when I see my wife. She shuts the door before walking back over to me as she grips the hem of her dress, pulls it over her head, and discards it on the floor.

“Jesus Christ, you’ve been walking around all day wearing that?” I ask, taking in the matching hot-pink silk and lace panties and bra she’s wearing.

“Uh-huh.” She nods.

“Fuck, kotyonok, get your ass on this desk now.” I swipe the paperwork out of the way, making room for her to sit her hot little ass right in front of me. She’s quick to comply, spreading her thighs apart without having to be told. Her fingers slide down to her pussy and rub over the material. Snatching her hand away, I replace it with mine. “Your panties are soaked, kotyonok.”

“That’s because I seem to have a thing for you,” she says.

“Just me?”

“Only you. Always only you, Mikhail.”

“Fuck, I love you.” I slam my lips down on hers, capturing her mouth and her moans. Sliding her underwear to the side, I line up my cock with her entrance. As much as I want to take my time with her, we don’t have it to spare. I have a meeting to get to, and the last thing I want is Isabella’s parents coming to look for her while I’m balls-deep inside her. “This is going to be hard and fast. Hold on to the desk, kotyonok,” I warn right before I slam home.

“Oh, fuck,” she screams and grips the edge of the desk with her hands.

I fuse my lips with hers, muffling the noises she makes as I fuck in and out of her pussy. Isabella wraps her legs around my waist, tilting her pelvis up slightly, which gives me a better angle to go deeper. I close a palm around her throat and squeeze—not enough to cut off her air supply, but enough to give her that extra little kick I know she gets off on.

“Mmm, I want you to come, kotyonok. I want my wife’s come all over my cock,” I murmur into her mouth. Her pussy quivers around me, and I know she’s close. “Come for me, Mrs. Petrov,” I command her, and she doesn’t disappoint. Her body tightens up, her pussy holding my dick hostage as it milks me dry and my cum coating her walls. When I pull out, I watch our combined fluids leak onto her thighs. “Do you think we should see a doctor?” I ask her.

“Why?”

“You’re not pregnant yet. We’ve been fucking for months without protection and you’re still not pregnant again,” I say.

Isabella had her period two weeks ago. She wasn’t impressed with it at all. And, honestly, neither was I because she wouldn’t let me fuck her while she was bleeding. That’s something I’ll have to work on with her, though, because I am not going without fucking my wife for an entire week every month.

“It hasn’t been that long, Mikhail. I’m sure it will happen when it’s meant to. Greatness can’t be rushed, you know, and the baby we created is pure greatness,” she says.

“She really is, isn’t she?” I grin.

AFTER ISABELLA LEFT my office with a smile on her lips and a bright flush on her face, I locked the door and walked out the side of the house. Meeting up with Paul at the front.

I'm now standing on a freezing fucking cold dock, waiting for Edgar to show up. He's the second-in-command for the Colombian cartel. After cleaning house and getting out of all the shitty deals Ivan had gotten us into, I now need to look for new customers. Not that I have to look far. They always find me. Edgar isn't really new, though. I've worked with him before. We had a solid arrangement before Ivan went and fucked it up.

Ten minutes later, five blacked-out SUVs roll to a stop in front of me. Edgar steps down and walks up, holding his hand out. "Mikhail, it's been a while," he says.

"It has. How've you been?" I ask him.

"Good, good. You?"

"Can't complain," I say.

"I hear you went and married the Valentino girl. Gotta say... surprised you're still standing." He laughs.

"You and me both," I agree.

"Now, let's talk business. Our old agreement is out. I want a ten percent cut on total costs," he says.

I was expecting this. He knows I want this deal, otherwise I wouldn't have reached out to him. But ten percent? Yeah, I'm not that fucking desperate.

"I want a vacation in Maui but that's not happening anytime soon either," I deadpan. "I'll give you a three percent drop on the original price."

"Five," he counters.

Five percent is going to cost me two million a month. It's not ideal but it's not exactly going to break me either.

"Five percent for the first twelve months. After that, three," I tell him.

He thinks on it for a minute and then nods his head. "Deal." We shake hands. "It's a pleasure being back in business with you, Petrov," he says.

"Likewise."

"Give my best to your new bride. Be sure to mention me by name." He smiles before jumping back into the car.

Well, that wasn't fucking odd at all.

"Paul, find out how the fuck Isabella knows Edgar," I tell him. Although I have every intention of asking my wife exactly how she's connected to the

cartel myself.

By the time I make it home, Isabella's parents are gone. And Zoe and Isabella are in the living room watching a movie with Mabilia sleeping on my wife's chest. I walk over and kiss Isabella before gently pressing my mouth to the top of Mabilia's head.

"Hey? Have a good night?" I ask her.

"Yep, you?" she replies.

"Yep." I turn to our new houseguest. "Zoe, you good?"

She still hasn't spoken to me. I've tried not to push, knowing she will do things in her own time, when she's comfortable. But I don't want to ignore her presence either.

"I'm okay. Thank you," she says, which has both Isabella and me staring back at her.

"Good. Be sure to let me know if you need anything at all, okay?" I tell her.

"Thank you," she says with a slight smile on her lips. There's something sad about it when she adds, "I wish all men were good like you."

"Yeah, me too," I reply, not letting her on to the fact that there really isn't a lot of good in me. "Let's get her to bed," I say to Isabella, picking Mabilia up from her chest.

"Good night, Zoe. Come get me if you need anything," Isabella says.

"Good night." Zoe nods and returns her attention to the movie. Since Isabella brought her into our home, the teenager hasn't slept much. She likes sitting down here watching movies. I've woken up every morning to find her curled up on the sofa.

After I've placed Mabilia in her crib, I turn to my wife. "Tell me how exactly you know Edgar Leyva?"

Isabella smiles wide. "You had a meeting with Edgar tonight, didn't you?"

"Answer my question. How do you know him?"

She shrugs. "I've known Eddy since we were kids. Our parents did business together. What's the deal you have with him?"

"Who says I have a deal with him?" I throw back, not liking that she has a nickname for him. Though I know the use was intentional. My wife loves getting under my skin.

"Because you went to meet him, and for Edgar to be in the States, it must have been important to him. He hates New York," she tells me.

This bit of information would have been helpful *before* my meeting with the guy. “Did you date him?” I ask her.

“No, Mikhail, I have never dated Edgar Leyva. You do realize I know a lot of people in this world of ours, right? And I already mentioned that I’ve never, ever dated a made man or any kind of underworld member before you,” Isabella says.

“Thank fuck, I’d hate to have to start a damn war.” I comb a hand through my hair.

“Now, tell me what deal you made with Edgar.”

“I don’t think you need to worry about that. I’ve been doing business with him for a long time, Isabella.”

“Fine, don’t tell me. I don’t need you to,” she says and pulls her phone out of her pocket. She then dials a number and places the call on speaker.

“Little Iz, I’d say this is a surprise but it’s not.” Edgar’s voice sounds on the other line.

I raise an eyebrow at her. *Little Iz?*

“Edgar, I already know you met with my husband tonight, so what was the deal you made with him?”

“Have you tried asking him?”

“Remember that time in France when you...”

“Okay, damn, Little Iz—fucking harsh bringing that up. We shook on a five percent cut from our original agreement for the first twelve months and then three percent afterwards.”

“Five percent? How much is that exactly?”

“Approximately two mil a month,” Edgar replies.

“You’re stealing food from my daughter’s mouth, Eddy. I thought we were better friends than that,” Isabella says.

I stand there and watch, in awe of my wife yet again.

“Two mil is a lot of food for a baby, Little Iz.”

“She likes to eat,” Isabella deadpans. “I’m vetoing those terms, and because we are such good friends, I’m going to pretend that you didn’t come to New York to rip me off.”

“Last I checked, I was in business with your husband, not you,” Edgar says.

“Times are changing. When you find yourself a woman who can actually stand your ass for longer than five minutes, you’ll see the light too. Now, two percent or I’ll take your deal and give it to José,” she tells him.

Of course, she fucking knows the leader of the Mexican cartel as well. At this point, I shouldn't even be surprised.

They agree on new terms and Isabella cuts the call. "Now, don't you wish you had just told me what you were doing *before* you left the house?"

"You know, most men wouldn't stand for what you just did... undermining your husband, making him look incompetent to another mob boss..."

"Most men are idiots. Thankfully, you're not."

"You are truly an amazing person. That being said, next time you plan on making a deal on behalf of the Bratva, run it by me first."

"I just saved you millions of dollars," she says.

"I don't want these men thinking they can come directly to you. I don't want you involved in this any more than necessary," I tell her.

"Trust me, Edgar will not come to me for business, not willingly." She laughs. "I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't have done that. And, honestly, if it were anyone else, I wouldn't have. But Edgar is like a cousin—our families vacation together."

"I get it." I pull her into me, holding her tight against my chest.

"Mikhail?"

"Yeah?"

"Can we go to the cemetery tomorrow?"

"Sure, but why do you want to go there? If you have a hole in the ground waiting for me, kotyonok, know that I will claw my way out again." I chuckle.

"No, I want to meet your brother," she says.

I stiffen. I've been avoiding going to Vlad's grave. Our family plot is located along the back of the estate. I feel guilt over his death. I should have known what Ivan was up to.

"We don't have to," Isabella says when I don't immediately answer her.

"No, it's fine. I just haven't been there in a while."

"You know that it's not your fault. I didn't know your brother personally, but I heard the stories about the Petrov brothers. And in those stories, he loved you fiercely, Mikhail. I can't see someone who loves you blaming you for what happened."

"I think he sent me to you," I admit for the first time. "I didn't know it back then, but by the time you walked into my bar, he was already gone."

"Well then, I think I need to thank him for guiding me to you," she says,

and I swear this woman amazes me more and more every day.



I run down to Mikhail's office, almost slipping in my haste to get to him. He did it! He fucking did it. We've been sitting here for two weeks, waiting for this to happen, and it finally did. Today. I woke up to my phone blowing up, all of my cousins telling me to turn on the news. As soon as I did, I couldn't stop the happy tears from falling down my cheeks.

Mikhail's plan to pin the Stiletto Killer's murders on that IRA member worked. The guy's face was plastered on every news outlet as they stated that the killer had been caught and remains in custody. I know I shouldn't be so ecstatic that someone else is taking the fall for the crimes I committed, but it's not like that fucking asshole is innocent. I have no sympathy or remorse

where the IRA is concerned. What I do have is a hunger for vengeance, which my husband was finally able to feed by taking the bastards down.

Now, I get to sit back and watch as multiple organizations go on the attack against those Irish bastards. Nobody is going to be happy about it, and the IRA—well, as far as they know—one of their own killed a high-ranking member. They'll be so busy trying to figure out whether they have another rat in their midst that they won't see anything else coming.

“Mikhail!” I scream, pushing open the door to his office.

He stands so quickly that his chair topples over, and within seconds, he's in front of me. “What? What's wrong?” he asks, his voice panicked as he looks over my shoulder.

“You did it. It worked. Turn on the news. Quick!” I exclaim, stepping around him to find the remote. When I flick on the television, the news report comes up and I just stare. “We're finally free,” I tell him with a smile.

“Way to give me a damn heart attack, Isabella,” Mikhail says, wrapping his arms around me from behind.

“Sorry. I was just excited.”

“I'm glad.”

“Thank you... for doing this. I know I haven't been the easiest person to be married to, but thank you for choosing me.” I turn around in his arms.

“You *are* the easiest person to be married to, Isabella. I couldn't even fathom not being married to you. Thank you for letting me wear you down enough to agree to marry me.”

“The orgasms are what sold it.” I smile.

“So you only want me for my body?”

“And your sperm. You make pretty babies,” I clarify.

“Our daughter's beauty is all you, kotyonok,” he says.

“We're going out tonight. Be ready. I'm going to call my parents to come watch Mabilia, and we are going dancing.”

“Dancing?”

“Yes, *dancing*,” I tell him excitedly. “Oh my god, I have to call Bianca, and Maddie, and Savvy, Livvy, Katarina...” I untangle myself from my husband and lean up on my tiptoes to kiss him quickly before running back out his office door.

“WHEN YOU SAID you wanted to go dancing, I didn’t think this is what you had in mind,” Mikhail says in my ear. He’s standing at the bar, behind me, while I have my ass perched on a stool.

I wanted to stop at *Sveta* for a drink before we went to meet everyone else at the nightclub Bianca insisted on. “This is us pre-gaming, Mikhail. Our night is only just beginning.” I smile.

“Boss, another?” the bartender asks.

“Do me a favor? Jump behind the bar and pretend this is the first time we’re meeting,” I whisper into Mikhail’s ear.

He smirks. “I really like how that night ended.” Mikhail jumps over the bar top. “I’ve got this,” he says to the guy on the other side, then my husband turns to me. “You’re not from here,” he repeats and I smile. That was the very first thing he ever said to me and he remembered.

“I think what you meant to say is: what can I get for you?” I tell him.

“What will it be then?”

“I’ll have a whiskey sour,” I say. And then hold out my hand. “I’m Isabella. My friends call me Izzy.” This time, I introduce the real me, something I couldn’t do that first night we met.

“Isabella, I’m Mikhail, but you can call me *yours*.” He smirks.

“Oh, you’ve got lines.” I laugh.

“I speak nothing but the truth, kotyonok.”

“What is kotyonok?” I ask, much like I had the first time I heard the word.

Mikhail crooks his finger and my body moves towards him on instinct. “Kitten,” he whispers in my ear. “Those claws of yours are going to feel so fucking good scratching down my back as I fuck the shit out of you.”

“Take me to that office of yours and fuck me like you own me. Because you do own me—every single fiber of my being is yours, Mikhail.”

And once again, just like the first night we met, Mikhail effortlessly hurdles himself back over the bar, takes hold of my hand, and lifts me off the stool. “Let’s go,” he says.

We don’t even make it to the office before I jump on him, wrapping my legs around his waist. Our lips crash together. “You need to make this quick. We have plans, remember?” I say, pulling away from him briefly.

“The plans can wait. My dick, however, cannot,” he says, opening the door to his office and slamming my back against the wall. I’m wearing a short black sequin dress, giving him extremely easy access to my pussy,

which he discovers is barely covered in a lace thong. “Fuck, I need to be inside you,” he says, shoving two fingers into my dripping pussy.

“I’m ready. Fuck me already, Mikhail.” I grind against him. I need him to fill me.

Somehow he manages to hold me with one arm while his other hand unzips his pants, frees his cock, and lines it up with my entrance. I don’t wait for him to push inside me. I sink myself down onto him myself. Tightening my legs around his waist.

“Fuck. Kotyonok, fuck, you feel good. Too fucking good,” he grunts as he begins to thrust into me. We fuck like hungry, horny teenagers seeking nothing but that promise of a release. Racing to the finish line—although I know he won’t allow himself to get there before me. He never does. “I need you to come. Now Isabella, come,” he demands. And like an obedient wife, my orgasm tears through me until I’m barely standing on shaky legs. Mikhail comes with me, his seed coating my walls. “I fucking love the shit out of you, Isabella,” he says.

“I love the shit out of you too,” I tell him.

After cleaning up in the bathroom, I walk out to find Mikhail waiting for me. He’s leaning against the desk, his ankles crossed and his hands in his pockets. It’s a fucking sight.

“Mikhail, why do you never call me Izzy?” I ask him.

“Because your name is Isabella.” He shrugs.

“But everyone else calls me Izzy.”

“That’s not true,” he reminds me. “Your father calls you Bel; your uncle calls you Bella. Do you not like Isabella?”

“I do. I was just wondering.”

“I like that I’m the only one who calls you that. I like the way the name rolls off my tongue, and I like the way it sounds,” he says.

“Okay. Should we go?” I ask him.

“If we must. You know, I can turn some music on and we can dance the night away. Right here. Just the two of us.”

“If I don’t show up, my cousins will send a search party,” I tell him. “But now that I’m free to roam and all, I fully expect you to take me on frequent date nights, where it’s *just the two of us*.”

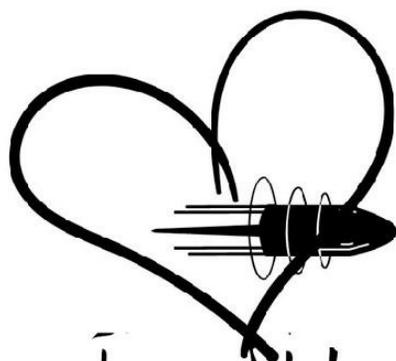
“Date nights? What do those entail, exactly?”

“Romance, Mikhail. Dinner, movies—I don’t know, just dates.” I lift a single shoulder.

“Well, be prepared to be swept off those pretty little feet, because I’m going to romance the fuck out of you.” He grins.

“I can’t wait,” I tell him as we walk out of *Sveta*. This bar will always have a special place in my heart. It’s where my entire life changed for the better. Where my past ended and my future began.

EPILOGUE



Mikhail

Two years later

“Mabilia, go tell Mama: *ya tebya lyublyu*,” I whisper in my daughter’s ear, and then watch as she jumps down from my lap and runs over to Isabella.

“Ya tebya lyublyu,” Mabilia says word for word, almost fluently, as she wraps her arms around her mother’s neck and smacks a slobbery kiss on her mouth.

“Ti amo,” Isabella says in response. “I love you too,” she repeats in English.

This is how we’re teaching our children both of our languages while learning each other’s at the same time. It’s how my long-lost cousins learned as kids. According to Maddie, their parents would each tell the girls to give the other messages in their native tongue.

It’s working too. Mabilia comes out with Russian, Italian, and English words all the time. For a two-year-old, she has a huge vocabulary already. Our son, Neo Vladimir Petrov, was born precisely nine months after Isabella was cleared of all pending charges. I’ve been attempting to drag her back to the office at *Sveta*, because I’m convinced it holds some kind of magical pregnancy-inducing spirits or some shit. Seeing as I’ve only managed to knock my wife up in that office. No matter what anyone says, that’s not a coincidence.

Isabella, however, is not as superstitious as I am. She thinks it’s pure luck and insists that if it’s meant to happen again, it will. She also says that having a two-year-old and a one-year-old is exhausting—amazing but exhausting—and if she were to have another baby, she’s going to work and make me become a stay-at-home father.

Truth be told, I’m not convinced she wouldn’t do a better job at running the Bratva than I can, but that’s not how our organization works. As capable as my wife is, and I know her to be, the organization will never be run by a woman. It’s just not the way things are done. And some traditions can’t be changed. No matter how outdated they may seem. I wouldn’t attempt to change that, though, because when I look at my daughter, I want her as far away from any Bratva business as I can keep her. I want to cover her in bubble wrap and lock her away so the world can’t hurt her. Isabella vetoed that idea real quick when I suggested it.

As soon as Mabilia started walking and falling over, I tried to get Sof'Fall installed all throughout the house so she wouldn't hurt herself. Once again, my wife was not on board. She's the voice of reason between the two of us, I guess.

I still count my blessings and thank my brother every day. I strongly believe he sent me this woman because he knew I needed her. She changed my life for the better in countless ways.

"Have you heard from Zoe?" I ask Isabella.

The teenager has lived with us for the past two years, like an adopted daughter. She left two weeks ago to start a job in Melbourne. Savannah set her up with a company there, and Zoe jumped at the chance to get out of New York.

Over the last few years, I've built a good relationship with the kid. She's become family. She's still skittish around males and doesn't speak to them much. She does speak to me, though. Often. I built up trust with her because she needs to know that not all men are monsters. I hate that she's on the other side of the world without me there to protect her. I don't want to see that broken girl I found in that house ever again. And as much as I know there are plenty of decent people in the world, I also know there are just as many predators.

"I spoke to her this morning, right after you did." Isabella smirks.

"That was ten hours ago, Isabella. What if something's happened? Maybe we should just go to Melbourne for a while, until she settles in," I suggest, and not for the first time.

"Mikhail, she *is* settling in. You need to let her do this. She wanted to do it. She *is* doing it. She'll be okay. And if she's not, she knows that she has us to come home to. She knows that this will always be her home too."

"I don't like it."

"I know you don't, and I love you all the more for how much you care. But for the love of God, let the girl start her new life." Isabella gives me that look that says she knows she's right and she's just waiting for me to figure it out myself.

"I know that you're right, but I don't have to like it," I admit aloud.

"I'm always right, Mikhail, just like when I told you that the office at *Sveta* wasn't full of voodoo pregnancy shit." She shakes her head.

"That's still to be confirmed," I counter. "I think we should go back there, so I can f-u-c-k you again and see what happens." I spell out the word

because, yes, as soon as Mabilia learned to talk, she was cussing worse than any Bratva member I've ever known.

"No need," Isabella says, pulling something out of her pocket. She slams the stick on the table. "I really hope you're ready to be an at-home dad, Mikhail, because you did it again."

I look at the stick and then back at my wife. "I fucking hope it's twins," I say with a grin.

"Do not put that shit out into the universe." Isabella scowls at me.

I jump to my feet, grab my wife, and pull her into my arms. "I fucking love you," I tell her, crashing my lips down onto hers.

"I love you too," she says.

"I fucking love you, Papa," a sweet little voice parrots while tiny hands tug at my pants.

Isabella and I burst out laughing. "We really need to get on top of this swearing," I remind my wife as I bend down to pick up Mabilia.

"We do," she agrees.

As if on cue, Neo comes barreling into the room. He's just learned to walk—well, he skipped walking and went straight to running. He's followed by his grandfather. "Little N woke up and wants gelato," Isabella's father says.

"He does or you do, Papa?" Isabella asks him.

"It's a Neo thing, Bel. You wouldn't understand it," her father says, catching up to my son and leading him into the kitchen.

"I'm already regretting the name." Isabella sighs.

"No, you're not," I tell my wife, then turn to my daughter. "Come on, Mabilia, let's go join your brother and Nonno and get some gelato."

"If those kids don't eat their dinner, I'm blaming the two of you." Isabella yells after us.

"You can take it out on me later tonight with those claws, kotyonok." I yell back just as I'm entering the kitchen.

My father-in-law pauses his spoon midair. "If you weren't holding my granddaughter right now, I'd stab you," he grunts.

"Sure you would." I smirk. He likes to act as if he hates me, but deep down, I know he doesn't. Because if I didn't fuck his daughter—and often—he wouldn't have two amazing grandchildren. With another one on the way.

I grin at the thought...

EPILOGUE



Many years later

“I need you to clear your schedule for the month, Mikhail,” I tell my husband.

He stops what he’s typing and looks up at me. “Why?”

“We have to go to Italy. Zia Holly has planned a family reunion.”

Mikhail stares at me with his brows furrowed. “Kotyonok, your family is here every week. What the fuck do they need a reunion for?” he questions me.

“I have no idea, but Zia Holly wants us all there, in Italy, for a month. It’s weird—I agree—but we have to go,” I tell him.

“Can’t we just fly in for the weekend or something? I mean, a whole month in New York, knowing none of your cousins will be coming around? Yeah, that sounds like fucking bliss.” He grins.

“You’d miss them. But it’s okay. You don’t have to come. I’ll just go with the kids.” This suggestion does not go over well. As I expected it wouldn’t.

Mikhail’s face hardens. “As if I’m going to have you spend a whole month away from me—are you trying to kill me? I’d die from missing you too much.”

The scary thing is... he actually believes what he’s saying. My husband cannot spend one night away from me. He’s more attached than our kids ever were when they were little.

“Well, I guess you’re coming to Italy. Mabilia is already packing. Neo and Lex will be back from my parents soon. I’ll tell them when they get home.”

We named our third and final child after my husband’s right-hand man. Well, until little Neo is old enough to take over, which won’t be that much longer—seeing as he’s really not all that little anymore.

“Do you think something’s wrong? Like, is someone dying or something? Why does Zia Holly want us all in Italy for a whole month?” I ask Mikhail.

“Isabella, your family is like a bunch of cats—they all have nine fucking lives. Even if you wanted to, you can’t kill them off.” Mikhail smiles.

“Yeah, you’re right, but I just have a bad feeling. Something feels off...” I nibble on the bed of my nail as I consider all the worst-case scenarios.

“I’m sure everything will be fine,” he says. Then Mikhail stands, walks

around the desk, and pulls me to his chest. This is the only place in the world I feel complete. In my husband's arms.

"I love you." I lean my face upwards.

"I fucking love you, Mrs. Petrov," he says and presses his lips to mine.

Find out why Zia Holly has called for the trip to Italy in [*A Valentino Reunion*](#).

**Want to know how Zoe's life in Melbourne turned out?
You can read her story in [*A Sinner's Virtue*](#).**

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

About Kylie Kent

Kylie made the leap from kindergarten teacher to romance author, living out her dream to deliver sexy, always and forever romances. She loves a happily ever after story with tons of built-in steam.

She currently resides in Sydney, Australia and when she is not dreaming up the latest romance, she can be found spending time with her three children and her husband of twenty years, her very own real life instant-love.

Kylie loves to hear from her readers; you can reach her at: author.kylie.kent@gmail.com

Let's stay in touch, come and hang out in my readers group on Facebook, and follow me on instagram.

