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LOVE
THAT *Binds*

AVA PRESSLEY

A LOVE THAT BINDS

MAFIA VOWS OF DECEPTION

AVA PRESSLEY

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Epilogue - Lia

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ANYA

He coughed again, this time into his handkerchief, where when he pulled it away, droplets of blood spattered the white fabric. I sat down next to him, offering a glass of cold water as he sat up. Taking care of my sick father was not something I ever thought I'd have to do, but here I was. Lymphoma and the following chemo treatments had done a number on his body, and he still had several left.

“Here, drink this.” I took the handkerchief and replaced it in his grip with the water. He sat back against his padded headboard, the black satin material a stark contrast to his pale skin. As he did, I rose to situate a pillow behind his back to make him more comfortable. The coughing had gotten worse as the doctors told us it would.

“Thank you, Anya.” He sipped slowly, a shaking, weak hand holding his half-full glass to his lips. I waited until he had quenched his thirst and retrieved the glass, setting it down on his nightstand next to his pills.

“Papa, it's going to get better. They said this is highly treatable, so this sickness is only here a little while longer.” I sat again, taking his frail hand. I'd never seen him so weak, possibly because my father was the head of the family, and by family I mean *family*. The leader of the Bratva brought to his knees by an invisible enemy working from the inside out to destroy him.

He smiled at me, patting my cheek. His hand was cold, but I didn't shy away. “I know, dear. And you are my ray of

sunshine here to warm me on this cold December morning. It is a Christmas miracle that you have grown to be such a beautiful strong woman. Your grandmother would be so proud of you.”

I looked to the door where I heard noise reverberating beyond and down the hall. Dominic was on his way in, my brother and a constant irritant to me. He did things unthinkable to me, but then so had my father when he was full of vigor. Mother turned a blind eye to it all, playing housewife to the Russian mob and baking cookies for neighborhood children. I wasn't like her.

I wanted peace.

“Papa, we have to let the family rest. We need to pull back, give them time to heal from their wounds and reorganize.” Turning back to him, I saw the scowl on his face. I knew by pulling back, we'd be showing a bit of weakness, but in my opinion it was far wiser to retreat, heal, and come back presenting a united strong front, than to wither away in refusing to admit we were being assailed.

When he opened his mouth to speak, a coughing fit took him over again. I offered the handkerchief again, with which he covered his mouth and let his body expel the mucus that clogged up his bronchial passages. While he struggled, the door opened and Dominic strutted in, gun affixed to his hip, hands crammed in his pockets. He always brought an air of rage with him wherever he went. Since Lia vanished and his father was murdered, we all had a tinge of grief. His was mostly displayed as anger.

Of course, she was his younger sister.

“Dom...” I acknowledged him, knowing my place was next to my father, not him. Dominic was one of my oldest friends, but his insistence that he take his father's place as brigadier and eventually boss was misplaced. That position was solely my father's and perhaps one day maybe mine.

“Dominic,” dad coughed out, wiping his mouth, “so good for you to come. How is your mother?”

Dad's concern for his flock was genuine, especially given that the family had lost father and daughter in a span of less than two years. If only his concern went as far as to call off his ridiculous business plans and spare them another loss of Dominic's life too.

I peered down at my hands, folded in my lap around my father's trembling fingers, and marveled at how thin his skin was. Skin of the aged, lined with dark blood vessels and brown skin spots.

"Listen, we got a problem." Dominic paced the room, scowl intact on his forehead. His own bodyguard had been gunned down in an alley only weeks ago, and this was the last straw for him. We'd heard the reports of each and every one of his houses being shut down, cops and Italians behind it all. I inwardly celebrated that the women had been freed, despite the hit to my father's businesses. It had come at a time when he was ailing and offering more and more responsibility to me too.

"What is it?" Dad choked out.

"The Italians are decimating us. We need to fight back; we need a way to get them out of our territory." Dominic glared at my father, fists now at his side.

I looked up at him. "Start with their finances. Find what is fueling their onslaught against us, then we will devise a plan. If you cut off the fuel, the car will not start." I had heard my father give that exact advice a number of times.

"You don't know what you're talking about." Dominic looked like he could smack me if I were the only one there, unwatched by my father—the boss.

"No, she is right." My father squeezed my hand. "Do as she says. Report back to me tomorrow, or when you have news."

The way he said the words left no room for dispute. Dominic stormed out as quickly as he had come and my father patted my cheek. "You are wise beyond your years, Anya. You will do fine as my substitute while I'm ailing."

The praise was well earned, but I would have traded it all for him to be healthy again.

“Thank you, father. But I asked about pulling back. Letting our men rest.”

His coughing returned again, this time so violent I had to call the doctor to see if we could get a cough suppressant for him. If he was going to listen to me, it would be after he felt better.

LEO

I look out my sixth-story window, tapping my pen on the edge of my desk. The city is alive with activity, bustling about doing errands and work, while I sit stoic. All I can do is think of the beautiful Russian girl I ran into the day of the drive-by shooting. She was quite a bit younger than me, but there was a wisdom and maturity in her eyes. And something about her was so mysterious I couldn't shake it.

I had leveraged my entire network, trying to search out who she was, even having gotten our friend Liam—the cop on our payroll—to snag photos of her from the police crime scene files and send them to me. Those photos lay spread out on the desk in front of me, useless without someone with knowledge to pin her down. Even the police had no idea who she was. She'd offered an alias, Yaya Genrich. That person did not exist, nor did the street address she'd given police.

Being that she was Russian and secretive, my guess was that she was Bratva and probably the daughter of a high-ranking member too. But my reach was limited. I'd moved to Brighton only because my time in North Brooklyn had been so successful that the boss appointed me over Jimmy's turf when he died.

I heard voices outside my office; Carol, my receptionist, was talking to someone. I'd sent for Isabella to come in for a chat. I knew she was Russian, though I knew little about her. Only that Jimmy and Dante, my predecessor and his direct report—now my direct report—both vouched for her. She was on our side, and for that I was grateful. By her help we'd

almost singlehandedly taken out the Russian slave trade Brighton.

There was a tap on the door and Carol popped her head in. “Sir, Isabella is here.” Carol smiled and opened the door wider, stepping back so Isabella could enter. She strolled in confidently, Carol shutting us in to our nest of privacy.

“So glad you could come.” I rose to greet her and gestured at the seats across from my desk. Isabella sat, crossing one leg over the other. Her brilliant platinum hair and ruby lips contrasted with her white wool trench coat, fur collar and cuffs hugging her cool complexion. She unbuttoned the coat and let it slide off her shoulders.

“No problem, Leo. I’m here to serve.” She clasped her hands in front of herself, leaning on one elbow rested on the arm of the chair. I could see why Dante was so smitten with her having challenged the enter organization to work with her after she defected from the Bratva. Her eyes scanned the desk in front of me, and I thought I saw recognition in them, maybe a hint of emotion. But she had complete control over her facial expressions—yet another reason she was perfect for this family.

“This woman... Do you know her?” I pushed an image toward her, turning it around so she could see the girl’s face clearly. Isabella blinked hard, pursing her lips and then staring me down like I was a dog after her bone.

“What do you want with her?”

Very pointed question. Well done, Isabella. She would not give up information about someone she cared about, and based on her reaction I could tell she cared a great deal for this woman. How they knew each other, I did not know, but I would stake a bet on the fact that it was a close relationship. Perhaps lovers? Friends? Not sisters, the bone structure was too dissimilar.

“I have only good intentions, I assure you. I met this young woman during a shooting that took place at one of my restaurants. She left this behind.” I produced a woman’s clutch containing only a tube of lipstick, a few dollars, and a key.

This was not at all related to the woman in the photos, but Isabella didn't need to know that.

She eyed the clutch, picked it up and opened it, rifled through its contents, snapped it shut and tossed it on the desk. "It's not hers." She had assessed my statement a lie so quickly, I knew now I was correct. Isabella knew and was fond of this woman. "So let me ask you again, what do you want with her?"

She sat back in her chair so smoothly I wondered if I was dealing with a trained killer or an ex-Bratva runaway as I'd been told. Her stare was calculating, her posture firm.

I chuckled. "Isabella, I do not wish to harm Yaya." This statement brought tears brimming in her eyes, though only briefly, and never a change of her expression was detected.

"Then answer me what you want of her and I will tell you what I know, *besstrashnyy lider*." The Russian compliment slid off her tongue as her eyebrows rose.

"I admit I'm attracted to her. She, like you, spoke of bringing peace to the city and stopping the senseless violence. I am not a man of war, Isabella, though I know I'm quite good at it. I have taken a strong fist in the wake of Jimmy's death, but it's time to let the city rest a bit.

"I'd like to know this woman a bit better, see where her heart lies. If she has influence with the Bratva, then it is possible we could combine our efforts and do just that."

She eyed me as if testing my sincerity, and I softened my expression to let her know I was serious. For a moment she remained silent. Then she pushed the photo back at me.

"Anya Shukhov... And if you harm her, I will kill you myself without blinking."

"The daughter of the Pakhan?" My mind raced... Shukhov had a daughter? No one knew this. How had he kept her so hidden?

"Yes, and my beloved sister in blood. I am serious, Leo. You do not harm a hair on her head, or your neck will be at the end of my blade." She stood, picking up her coat.

“You have to help me meet with her. I insist. I must see her.” My desire to learn more about this woman deepened as I rose to see Isabella out.

“I will make a plan and send you details. I know where she will be, and when she will be there.” Isabella opened the door herself and let herself out, and I watched her strut over to the elevators, wondering who she really was. She turned and gave me a serious expression as she donned her coat. “Not a hair on her head.”

The instant the elevator doors closed, I was back at my computer searching for any information I could about Anya and her father. This was better than I expected.

ANYA

Mom took a bite of a roll and smiled, the warm butter glistening on her lips. Dad was having a good day, so she invited me to have a late lunch with her at our favorite place across town. It was a cold day, but perfect for hot soup and this little dive had the best lentil and bean soup in the city.

“I’m glad you brought me out here. I have been so starved for interaction with Papa being so demanding of my attention.” I sipped my hot cocoa then set it down. Mom swallowed her food and smiled at me before wiping her mouth clean.

“He trusts you, Anya. And that is a good thing. He had no sons to take over his place in the family when he dies. This sickness has given him a lot of confidence in your ability to lead in his stead.” Mom talked about Dad’s cancer as if it were an everyday topic, though she hardly interacted with him in the home, as if she thought it were contagious.

“I think his trust is misplaced, but who am I to judge?”

I watched in slow motion as the waiter for the table next to us, spun around, his tray balanced precariously on his arm. A stray spoon slid from the tray, dropping into my soup and splashing it all over my arm. It scalded me, causing me to leap to my feet with a shout, and to make matters worse, he bumped into me, making the entire table jostle and the soup bowl spill. The hot broth ran across the table and dribbled to my feet.

I cursed myself for wearing heels instead of boots. It was too cold to wear heels, but I wanted to feel attractive, not like I was a caveman escaping my habitat for a jaunt out for lunch.

“Gosh, I’m so sorry.” The waiter pushed my chair back and set his tray down, dropping to his knees with a napkin in hand to dab at my scorched feet. Mom set in giving the boy a lecture, but I stepped away.

“It’s okay. Really, I’m fine.” I didn’t want him touching me but I didn’t want to seem rude or ungrateful.

He looked up at me with sorrow written on his face as I backed away, eyes already turned toward the bathroom. “I’m so sorry, miss.”

I hobbled away, feeling the heat in the burn seep deeper into my arm and my foot. The minute I was in the bathroom, I plunged my arm beneath the cooling flow of water, and noticed someone had followed me in. I tried not to look, after all it was rude to make eye contact in a private place like that. But the woman did not seem to care about propriety. She stared me down, hand covering her mouth.

I turned the water off, reaching for a paper towel, and asked, “Can I help you?”

The woman shook her head. I started to feel nervous, as if this entire thing were a set up. If this lady thought she was going to mug me in the toilets, she was wrong. I had left everything at my seat.

“Listen, I have nothing of value. Even my earrings are fake—paste. Not diamond.”

She unraveled the silk scarf wrapped around her head, then removed her gaudy sunglasses. I felt my heart rate increase as it began to dawn on me that I knew her. And when she tussled her platinum hair, then blinked out some fake contact lenses, I recognized her.

“Lia?” I looked hard at her face as tears streaked across her cheeks. She nodded then came at me with arms wide. “But how? You’re dead.” I thought I’d have a heart attack right there, like I was seeing a ghost.

“Shhh...” She held me for a second, then pulled away and held her finger to her lips. “Come with me.”

Lia took me by the hand and peeked out the door. She led me out of the bathroom and through the kitchen to a small room in the back of the restaurant. When she opened the door, I got a glimpse of someone else I recognized, but wasn't fully aware of what was going on. It was the man from the restaurant, the night of the drive-by shooting. It happened in the fall, before my 21st birthday. Why was he here?

I looked up at Lia with confusion. “But?”

“Welcome, Anya.” The man gestured at a table set up with three chairs. “Please sit.”

Lia nodded, smiling brightly.

“I don't understand.” I moved forward slowly, unsure of what to make of all of this. The attractive man who had helped me calm down during the aftermath of that shooting, my best friend long since dead, and my racing heart.

“Isabella was kind enough to help me learn your name so we could meet again.” The man pulled out a chair that I dropped into and still the shock had not worn off.

“Don't worry, Yaya.” Lia used my childhood nickname. “I will explain everything.” Lia sat next to me patting my arm.

If she could explain how she came back from the dead, I'd never need another question answered for the rest of my life. But first I needed water...

LEO

Two weeks...

That's how long it had been since Isabella introduced me to Anya. How long I'd had to work to get her to agree to meet me again. It seemed she was either a very hesitant person, or her personal life was quite busy to the point where she had very little time. I was a patient man, however, biding my time and waiting.

The nightclub was brimming with street life, half-dressed women and men with massive egos and sexual tension. I ignored them all, sitting in the corner booth with the curtains mostly drawn. I watched her approaching, weaving in and out of the mass of gyrating bodies as she approached. She wore jeans, covered by brown leather boots that rose to the thigh, and a long sweater that draped down like a dress in back, hugging her breasts in the front. Her midriff was bare, tempting me to undress her with my mind.

As she approached, I stood, offering a customary kiss to each cheek as a greeting. Her dark hair fell in waves around her face, framing in her mauve lipstick and high cheekbones. If ever there were a Russian beauty who could charm this Italian soldier, it was Anya.

"So good of you to join me." I gestured that she should sit, and rather than placing myself on the opposite side of the booth, I sat directly next to her. The surprise on her face was evident, but it didn't deter me. I wanted to be as close to this woman as possible.

“Thank you for the invitation, Leo.”

I rested my arm along the back of the booth, angling toward her. Her scent was intoxicating, strawberries and honey. She angled toward me, her knee pushing against mine. She looked uncomfortable, eyebrows lightly furrowed, hands clasped in her lap. At our last meeting she'd asked so many questions of myself and Isabella, and when I'd left them both to catch up, I wasn't sure what Isabella had told her, but she was here now. And that was what mattered.

Our entire evening was spent behind the closed curtain, with the loud music somewhat muffled by it. The waiter served us drinks, only water for Anya, but a hefty dose of wine for me. She told me of her father's sickness, and her apparent inheritance of his position of Pakhan. She knew nothing of who I was or what this sensitive information might mean in the wrong hands, and I, being the gentleman I was, promised to keep her confidence.

“Why are you taking an interest in me, Leo?” Anya, now soothed by the conversation of the evening and wooed by my compassionate shoulder, moved closer to me. She turned completely, drawing her knee across the bench seat until she sat facing me directly. She leaned her head against my hand, still stretched along the back of the booth.

“Other men would have taken what you shared and used it against you, Anya. Lesser men. They would have sought blood, perhaps held you for ransom, even used you as a pawn to extort money from your father.” I angled toward her more, leaning forward. “I am not those men.”

“What do you want then? You won't take me, hold me hostage, blackmail my family? You know who I am. Who are you?” She looked up at me through thick lashes.

“I am a man with like interests. I want to see the city at peace. That is all I am and nothing more. A businessman, just like your father, who wants nothing but the warring and killing to end. Just like you.”

Anya scooted closer. I could see the need in her eyes. She was weary. Tired of caring for a sick parent, in need of a

breath of air, connection, anything that reminded her that life was worth living. Some people would call that a daddy issue; I called it a craving. And I felt it too, the stirring in my body every time she looked at me.

“And you are like my father?” The question struck me as odd, but maybe she was searching too. I was not Russian, though my New York accent would hardly give me away as Italian either. And I looked like any other American businessman. But when she asked, I could see in her eyes the real question. She wanted to know if I was *like* her father.

I answered the only way I knew how. “I will never lie to you, but there are things I can never tell you.”

Before she could answer, captured her lips. I expected her to pull away or turn her head, but she embraced my advance warmly, hooking her arms around my shoulders. It was not my intent to manipulate her into arousal, but I wasn't averse to her response here. My cock begged to have her, to spread her open and devour her as dessert, but I held back. Not wanting to make a show of her in public.

With my forehead pressed against hers, her arms not allowing me to back away, I whispered, “Not tonight. Not like this.” And when I had finished speaking her lips claimed mine again. This time the passionate hunger I tasted on her was eager, demanding even. My hands tasted of her skin, clasp her hip and pulling her onto my lap. The table jostled as she ran into it, dishes clattering as she straddled me.

Anya was not shy at all, not the picture I had painted in my head of her. I wasn't sure if she knew what she was doing to me, but I pulled her hips downward as I ground my pelvis up to meet her to make my point known.

“Not here...” I told her again as she pulled away panting. She nodded.

“Then when?”

THE FRANTIC SEARCHING of her eyes, the way her hands worked through my hair. She was putty in my hands, but did I

want it? I was her enemy and it would put us both in grave danger. The war raged on and we had no way of extinguishing the flame once it was set ablaze.

“In time,” I told her, but I couldn’t help myself. My hand slid up her side, beneath her shirt. I expected the soft fabric of a bra and found instead an erect nipple, supple breast beneath my hand as I squeezed. “Fuck...”

“In time then...” she whispered, standing and extricating herself from my lap. She collected her purse, leaning in front of me in a way that exposed the side of her ribcage. I held her for a moment, sinking my teeth into her flesh, then letting her go. She winked and blew me a kiss as she backed away, disappearing out of the curtain and into the mass of dancers. And I wished I could follow her out to the parking lot and fill her with myself.

Maybe I was in deeper than I thought.

After all, she was the daughter of the Pakhan.

ANYA

“T here you go.” I helped my father sit up straighter. He had a tray of soup and rolls on his lap, his juice and water on his nightstand. With only three more treatments to go, he was doing much better according to the doctors, but the chemo still ravaged his body. He ate with shaking hands, weak from weight loss and low blood sugar.

“Thank you, Yaya.” He smiled weakly at me. “Your love is so special to me.”

I nodded, smiling in return. He was my world, though lately I’d felt a strong liking for Leo. I couldn’t tell Papa though because if I did, he’d ask who Leo was, and I had purposely not asked Leo that. He swore to not lie to me and I had my suspicions, which were fears at the same time.

“Sir?” Dimitri poked his head in. Second in command to only my father, the older man carried weight, and several guns. If there was one person in the family I was intimidated by, it was this man. He scared me more than Dominic or his father.

“Yes, yes, come in.” Father waved his hand, gesturing for Dimitri to enter.

“Sir, I’d like to discuss our plan.” He raised his eyebrows and looked at me then back to my father. As if I couldn’t hear what my father was doing with business. Didn’t this idiot know I was going to take over for him one day?

He rolled his eyes and said, “Speak, Dimitri. Anya is no trouble.” With a wink, he picked up his spoon and had a bite.

He moaned his pleasure at the taste and smiled at me. “So good.”

I was glad to have prepared his food the way he liked it, but I was eager to hear what Dimitri thought was so important I couldn't be privy to the conversation.

“Sir, I know you're ill right now, but now is the time to move. The Italians have been quiet lately. I think they're limping. It's time we plan a full-frontal attack, take out their safehouses all at once. If we push hard, we can drive them back north and Brighton will be ours.” He stood with hands clasped in front of himself. He looked like a schoolboy asking to use the toilet during class.

“I see...” Papa took another bite of soup and turned to me. “What do you say, Anya? What should we do?”

Dimitri scowled at me, pursing his lips. “She's a woman. What does she know?”

“Enough!” My father's shout shook the tray of food and startled me. He did not tolerate insubordination and I wasn't about to make him angrier. SO when he looked at me I answered as honestly as I could.

“Well, if it were me, I would wait.” The man scoffed but did not speak, so I continued. “I would watch them, see what they're doing. I'd track their patterns, calculate how many there are, what their weapons are, where they live. Then and only then would I make a careful plan on how to move forward. There is no sense in going out wasting our men and ammunition. Any plan must be strategic. In fact, if we follow their money, we may be able to shut them down from the inside out. No need for violence at all.”

I held my tongue, waiting to see if my father would be receptive to my advice. He grinned broadly and patted my knee and I knew I had done well.

“So be it. Dimitri, see to everything Anya said. This, my lad, is why my daughter will lead this family when I die, and not you. Is this clear?”

The man's nostrils flared and he opened his mouth to speak, and faster than I could even think, my father's hand drew a gun from beneath his pillow and it was pointed at Dimitri.

"Do you understand?" he asked again, chambering a round as he took his eyes off of me and looked at Dimitri.

"Yes, sir." Dimitri's expression did not soften a bit.

"Anya," Papa said, taking my hand, and placing the weapon in it. "Let Mr. Alnikov understand who his boss is."

The gun shook in my hand, the smooth cold steel standing at odds with everything inside of me. But my father had agreed with me, and this man stood between me and the peace I wanted to bring to the family. So I raised the weapon, pointing it dead at his chest. He stared me down as if he were not afraid of me, and I gave him a cold look in return.

"It's time you follow orders, Dimitri. Now go do as you were asked so we do not have a problem." I hoped no one saw the slight shaking of my hands. Dimitri shook his head and walked out. I received my praise from my father, returned his gun to him, and promptly walked to the toilet to vomit, well out of earshot.

I was not the sort to threaten with violence, even if my father thought I was. But I wasn't about to let my desire go unseen, and after my conversation with Leo the other night, I knew he was onboard now too. It was the only explanation for why the warring had diminished.

I sent him a text message, asking him to meet me at the restaurant where we first met. I had to learn more about him, and thank him for helping me.

LEO

Anya wasn't just another thing I fit into my busy schedule, but today had been stressful, and I had merged a few meetings just to make time for her. I sat in the back room of the restaurant where we first met that day during the shooting, talking with two of my men. The cop on payroll, Liam, offered insights into the decrease of violence. While I hadn't officially pulled our men back at all, the lull in shootings or incidences of vandalism had fallen. It was a good thing for both sides, which I was certain was the reason Anya wanted to see me.

"So we just need to keep this stalemate going." Luke, an arms dealer with an attitude, sipped his whiskey and set the glass back on the table just as the door opened. Anya strolled in, followed by another one of my men, Tito. Muscle and security, as if a petite woman was any harm to me.

"Welcome my guest, gentlemen, then be on your way. I have business with the beautiful Ms. Shukhov here." I rose as she entered, nodding at Tito who backed out. Luke and Liam stood, grumbling something they would later regret, and I scowled at them as they scurried away like roaches when a light is turned on.

Alone with Anya, I gestured to a chair next to me, but she remained standing. I sat, taking my glass of whiskey and finishing the contents. She looked beautiful, dark hair swept behind her back and clasped with a bright blue clip. Her eyes sparkled, a coy smile turning her lips.

“You didn’t tell me what a powerful man you were, Leo.” She set her clutch down on the table and moved a few steps closer to me. Her manicured fingernails dragged across the white tablecloth, brushing against my arm.

“I told you what you needed to know, and I kept my word.” I recalled telling her in that nightclub that I would never lie to her, and I hadn’t.

When her hand slipped into mine, I noticed how cold she was. As if the frigid temps outside had bitten down on her porcelain skin, and now she begged my warmth to envelope her.

“I know what you’ve done, and I’m here to offer my gratitude. I’m working with my father now, to settle some things and maybe bring peace.” Her fingers trailed up my arm to my shoulder as she moved closer still. She walked around behind me, hand tracing the shoulder seam of my suit coat across my back.

“Gratitude?” It was possible that she thought I had been responsible for the decrease in violence, and given our last conversation about wanting to bring peace between the families, I could see how she’d made that assumption. “I just do what my heart leads me to do.”

Anya moved my arm away as she lifted her leg and reached it across my lap. As she straddled me, in the same compromising position we’d found ourselves in that damn nightclub, I found my cock responding quickly. Her jeans, however, posed a problem.

“Is this the time and place?” She loosened my tie, concentrating on what her hands were doing, not on my face where I tried to hide the lust burning inside of me. A good fuck was one thing, but this woman had gotten under my skin. She was dangerous. She was the enemy. So why did I want her?

“It could be. What do you have in mind?” I let her remove the tie and begin unbuttoning my shirt. Her chilly fingers brushed over my skin as she pulled the shirt out of my waistband.

“I find you irresistible, Leo. And while there are things I don’t know about you, things I suspect might make my father enraged, I find myself so drawn to you. Life is short, and I don’t want regrets, so when I see something I want, I just go after it.” Anya shed her coat, letting it fall behind herself.

“And what is it that you want?” I rested my hands on her thighs, the pressure in my groin needling at me. I knew what I wanted.

“Well, for starters, I want you to take my clothes off. Then I want you to make me feel amazing. Then I want you to feel amazing. And after that, we can talk business.” She grabbed my belt, unbuckling it with ease before loosing the button on my slacks and reaching into my boxers.

“I wasn’t aware that you were so forward, Anya. I got the impression that you were a shy girl.”

“You got the wrong impression.” She gripped my now-rock-hard cock. “I hope you don’t mind.”

Since that night in the club I’d wanted to taste her, so no, I didn’t mind one bit. But I kept my guard up anyway. If she knew who I was, she’d know I was not to be trifled with, but I had a feeling she didn’t quite know. Or maybe she did, and she didn’t care. She was half my age, and girls like this—with massive daddy issues—were easy to pluck. Like taking candy from a baby.

This one, though, she had struck a nerve. I didn’t want to just pluck her like a flower in spring, ruin the beauty that she was. No, I wanted to *know* her. To care for the tender roots her heart put down, and nurture her existence. But I got the feeling she was begging to be plucked more than she realized her need for nurturing.

“You’re very young for this sort of thing.”

She stroked me, the way she bit her lip as she looked up at me through her dark eyelashes taunting my inner beast.

“Do I have to do the work myself? Or do you not want my thank you gift.” Anya leaned forward and kissed me, and that was all it took to spring the trap and let my lust out. She was

naked from the waist down and spread on the table like the meal I'd been craving faster than she could pant my name.

I knelt next to that table, drinking her in, plunging my tongue into her nectar as deeply as I could. Her hands made a mess of my hair as I ate her. She pushed against my shoulders with her feet as I sank my fingers into her slick folds, searching her out.

“Fuck...” She moaned as I fingerfucked her, her pants growing louder with each thrust. Her salty-sweet flavor had me craving more, and when I stroked myself and felt the amount of precum on my cock, I knew I'd never last. “I'm gonna cum.” Her hands clenched around my hair, pulling me upward. “Fuck me now.”

I had no problem obliging her. I rose, leaning over that table and pushing my cock into her pussy as deep as I could. She clawed at my sides, and I hooked my arms beneath her body, pulling her shoulders downward as I thrust in. The entire table shook and I swore it would break into pieces beneath us, but I didn't hold back.

Even when I heard the door creak open then shut, I continued pounding her against that tablecloth. A glass shattered, victim to the quaking I gave her and the table, and her loud moans turned to a scream of pleasure as I felt her pussy clench down around me. I slowed for a moment, feeling the way her body gripped me, enjoying the sensation as she spasmed in my arms.

And when her cries grew softer, I let my body release. My heat filled her, our sex puddling on the tablecloth beneath our joined bodies. She lay panting. I swore I felt the trickling of blood across my side, but with my dick buried inside of her, that was the only sensation I cared about.

“I find you irresistible too.” I kissed her deeply, lingering longer than I should have. And when I pulled out, it hit me that we hadn't even thought of protection.

Offering her a hand, I stood with my half-hard dick protruding out the fly of my jeans. She sat up, sliding off the table, then collected her jeans and panties, boots tossed aside. I

knew the reputation of her father. If he knew that she was here, in Italian territory, doing what she was doing, I'd be the top name on his hit list.

That didn't worry me as much as what my emotions were doing. I actually liked her, and that was far more dangerous than the bullet in her father's gun with my name on it.

After she was dressed and I'd put my cock away, she stood next to me, her fingers splayed on my chest. "What possessed you tonight?" I wrapped my arm around her waist, having been surprised by her sudden forwardness. We'd spoken several times via phone or text message, but we'd only spoken in person twice before this.

"I like you, Leo. I'm drawn to powerful men, but don't get me wrong, it wasn't that. I live in a world of powerful men, men who use that power to hurt others. You're different. I sense that. And I'm drawn to that." She shrugged. "Besides, you're really hot, and a girl gets horny now and then."

Her grin was priceless. I kissed her again. "So you used me to sate your lust?" I chuckled.

"I said thank you for your kindness and for helping me realize the dream I have to stop the fighting between our families." Her eyes sparkled again, mischievously. I hadn't told her who I was, but she'd learned it on her own. Though, she had the resources at her fingertips through her father's connections to know everything about me, of that I was certain.

"Our families?" Still playing dumb, I released her and began buttoning my shirt.

"I don't care how much territory you take in our portion of the city so long as our men are not killed, and our women are respected. Our business ventures only need to coexist. There is enough money and space for both of us, something my father and the men who work for him cannot understand. But you—" she looked me in the eye "—you understand."

"So next time?" I tucked my shirt in, watching her slide her arms into her coat.

“Next time, you can sate *your* lust.” She winked and slipped out before the smile had finished stretching across my face.

I was definitely in trouble with this one.

ANYA

I couldn't get his clothes off fast enough. It had only been three days, but my thirst for more of Leo had gotten the better of me. I told him I needed to meet with him and insinuated that my need was physical, and he'd sent a car for me in under an hour. Now I lay sprawled out on the ivory sheets of the hotel room he'd booked for us. The Rockaway in Queens was hardly the Ritz, but for a place to rendezvous for a booty call, it would pass.

"Shit, I need you," I hissed as Leo's fingers worked at my bra closure, the last vestige of clothing remaining between the two of us. He struggled, so I pushed his hands away, making quick work of the lacy garment. His dick prodded at my leg, dripping precum and tempting me.

"You're a naughty girl, Anya." Leo's stubble scraped across my shoulder as he lay on top of me, nestling his cock against my moisture. I spread my legs wider, hoping to receive him but he held back.

"Just give it to me." I kissed his shoulder, raking my teeth against his skin. "Please, I need you."

"Need is a very strong word. Are you sure you mean it?" I felt little pulses from his cock, as if it, too, wanted the union to occur. His hips pushed forward enough to tease me, dipping in and pulling back before the ache was quashed.

"God, you're infuriating."

For three days my body had screamed his name. After he spread me out on that table and drove me to pleasures I'd

never experienced before, I'd been jonesing. If someone could have offered me a direct IV of his cock, I'd have been first in line. Leo didn't just give me feelings of ecstasy; he was the embodiment of ecstasy itself.

I lifted my hips, pussy sliding upward around his dick, and tried to make him penetrate me, but he maneuvered his cock, and frustratingly it slid across my clit, pinned between our bodies.

“Ah, ah, ah, be a good girl now. Let me enjoy this.”

Leo grabbed my wrists, pinning them above my head. The haze over his eyes as he stared into mine was intoxicating. That gaze had the power to bring grown men to their knees, and it seemed that using his power on me meant causing me to lie there quivering, begging for his cock.

“Just fuck me. Please. My body...”

I whimpered and raised my hips again, and he dutifully avoided my panicked thrusting. His lips covered mine, and I craved the feeling of his flesh under my fingernails, but his grip on my wrists was iron-clad. Even if I wanted to, I wasn't getting up. But I didn't want to. That was the last thing on my mind.

He teased me, grinding his body against mine. His dick rubbed across my clit, smearing the cum from my pussy around. His kisses made it impossible to beg him, but the way my hips continuously shifted position, hoping to ease my suffering and feel his cock sink, probably made it obvious to him how bad I wanted him inside of me.

And the more our bodies ground against each other, the worse the ache became. Like he knew exactly what he was doing. I bit his lip, for which I was rewarded with a long hard squeeze of my breast. His rough hand pushed me into the mattress harder. I felt my body tensing for orgasm; if only he would just penetrate me.

When he finally let my hands go free, pulling his hips back, I reached immediately for my clit, finding it soaked with cum. I pressed on it, massaging and stimulating as he stole my

breath. His cock filled me, touching every place inside that ached for him, and quenching the thirst I had.

He thrust in, over and over, pushing me to my limit, past my breaking point, until both of our bodies convulsed in rhythm with one another. I drew blood; he gushed out of me, and both of us collapsed, tangled in the crisp white sheets. He pulled me into his chest, letting his sex drain onto the bed.

Sweat dampened my skin, my body melting into the mattress. His soft kisses traveled from my lips up to my nose and across my forehead. His chest pounded, and I pressed my ear there, against his skin, listening to the frenetic beating of his body in post-orgasmic afterglow.

I didn't care that he was my father's enemy. I didn't care that he was nearly twice my age. The only thing that mattered was that in his arms I felt safe. I'd tried playing it out in my head, sorting the pieces out to make sense of it all so I could explain to my father when he inevitably asked why I was in my enemy's bed. The only thing I could deduce was that in the aftermath of that shooting, Leo had been the picture of confidence.

“What are you thinking?”

He pushed a few strands of my long dark hair out of my eyes and cupped my cheek, drawing my gaze upward to meet his. I saw the mauve tint on his lips, stains of love that would wash away, but the memory would remain vibrant in our minds for days.

“You.” I used my thumb to smudge away the lipstick from his lips, and he pushed my hand away, leaning down to kiss me again, making the lipstick stains worse. The way he leaned into me caused his body to weigh me down again, pinning me to the bed, and when he pulled away, he did not let up. I didn't want him to.

“I'm falling for you, Anya, and I don't know how to explain why or how it's happening.”

I smiled at him softly, knowing exactly how he felt. I was falling for him too, knowing full well I was entertaining a lion.

The bullet with his name on it had yet to be chambered in my father's gun, but it would be the moment he learned of my indiscretions. Still, I couldn't stop myself. Something about him was more addictive than cocaine.

"Be careful now. Remember I'm the enemy." I grinned at him playfully tickling his side, but he didn't flinch. He was as serious as could be. His intense stare quickened my heartbeat.

"I keep my friends close, and my enemies closer."

"This is about as close as we can get." Still being playful, hoping to lighten his serious mood, I pushed my hand between our bodies and found his dick, still moist from my body, but no longer erect. "Unless?" I stroked him gently and found him responsive.

Leo afforded me space to fondle him, and I saw the hunger reignite in his eyes.

"I think for this particular enemy, maybe I should be much closer than I am right now."

He rose again, hovering over me, my hand still stroking him. If this is what life was like with him, I could get used to it.

"I think you should too. You might need to do some deep research."

I knew I had to go home, give Papa his medicine, and answer for where I'd been all afternoon, but another round of pleasure with Leo wouldn't hurt. It might be days before we even got to speak again. I'd take everything he would give me.

Fairy tales weren't real, but this sure the hell felt like one.

LEO

Liam's long legs stretched out, propped on my desk like he owned the place. I wasn't exceptionally fond of the man but he was an asset I couldn't afford to lose at this stage of the game. I had taken a fond liking to his wife and child, though, which is why he still sat in front of me, running a line off my desk.

"So what do you make of it then?" I watched the clock. With under an hour left until Anya was due to arrive, I wanted to finish this business and be ready for her. I tapped my fingers on the smooth mahogany and watched Liam's head flip back as he held the snow in. He pinched his nose on one side and snorted again.

Cops like Liam were a disgrace to the city. If our law enforcement officials couldn't be straight, then how could they expect anyone to go straight? I shook my head and glanced at the clock again.

"I think things are in a lull for a reason. You ever count how many of them bastards were taken out? How many were injured? They're limping Leo. Now is not the time to go weak and back down. Now is the time to advance. Hit them while they're down and squash them."

Liam dragged the back of his wrist across his face and sniffed again. A drop of blood drained out of his nose, one reason why I had never touched the shit. This guy took his addiction seriously and if he didn't start performing better I

might be tempted to cut him loose. See how he fared without our protection.

“So you want to draw them out and then step on them?” I didn’t for a second believe that complete annihilation of our enemy was the right step. Anya was correct when she said that both families could operate within Brighton and still have plenty of space and money. Our goal should be to coexist to the best of our ability, not to drive one another to the brink of all-out war.

I leaned forward over my desk, bracing my elbows on the smooth surface and folding my fingers together. The smudge lines on the sheen from Liam’s habit would need polished off, and I had half a mind to use his face to do it. I decided, however, to humor his line of thought.

“Yes, it makes sense. You’ll have all the territory then, all the money. The business owners won’t have to choose between the two families, and with cops like me on the payroll, you’ll be king.” Liam stuck his straw into his inner coat pocket, the leather jacket squeaking as he moved. “Trust me.”

“Trust you?” I chuckled. “I’m supposed to march right into the Russian headquarters and what, nuke them?”

He shook his head. “Nah, you have to be more subtle than that or it will awaken the sleeping giant. We just want them out of this part of the city. We don’t want the mother coming after us.”

I sat back, crossing my arms over my chest and glanced at the clock again. If challenging him didn’t work, then perhaps agreement would show him how stupid his idea was.

“So, this is our plan then. We just create chaos everywhere. Little things like vandalism, theft, arson, kidnapping. We continue to push the envelope on every street corner, at every turn. We take them out little by little, applying pressure on every nerve until the ones who remain are running scared. Then—“

The door burst open and Anya stepped through. Her hurt expression and the tears brimming in her eyes told me she'd heard far more than was needful. Her mouth hung open as if she couldn't believe what she'd walked in on.

“Leo...”

I stood immediately, knowing I had to explain what was actually happening. I charged over to her, taking her by the elbows as the tears drained down her cheeks. She stammered out a few protests and backed away, holding up a hand to fend off my attempts at comfort.

“Anya, you don't understand.”

“No!” She pushed my chest, smacking at my arm as she backed up a few steps. “I thought you were different, but you're just like them.” She waved her hand wildly at Liam, who sat snickering like I was the bad kid in class who was getting scolded by the teacher for being caught passing a note during class.

“It's over.” Anya turned and stormed out the door, but I followed her, trailing behind her angry rampage through the office. Heads turned my direction as I tried to grab her wrist. She glared at me and jerked away, and as she walked past the reception desk, she swiped her arm across the entire thing, knocking pens, papers, and even the computer monitor to the ground.

“Anya, please.” I stood outside the elevator as she pressed the button to descend. She glared at me through tears.

“No, Leo. You swore you'd never lie to me, and I don't fuck liars.” The doors closed with a ding, and I turned around to make the walk of shame past all the disrupted employees. Each step heavier than the one before it, my gut started to roil.

By the time I got back to my office and shut the door quietly, Liam had another line cut and his straw out. As I walked past, I slammed his head to the desk, forcing that damn straw up his nose. The blood that poured out afterward was just icing on the cake.

I sat down as he jumped up, cradling his nose. The line on the table was ruined, now clumpy and caked with blood. He screeched and took a tissue from the box perched on the small table across the room.

“What the hell was that for?” Blood dripped from his chin, soiling my carpet, but it was nothing my cleaners couldn’t handle. They’d done jobs way bigger than a nosebleed.

“Sit the fuck down and shut up.” Liam scowled at me, as if he had any leverage between us to stand on. He sat nursing his wound with a tissue when he needed a fucking bath towel.

“We’re not in this game to decimate an entire family. We are civilized businessmen. Got that? And if violence is the only option, we take it.”

“What kinda hold does that bitch have over you? You know who she is right?” Liam shook his head at me, the silent chastisement about to earn him another knock to the head.

“I know exactly who she is, and who I fuck is none of your business.” Calmly, I leaned forward. “Now, call off your dogs or the fun stops here. That bloody line is all you’ll ever get out of me, and not a crystal more.”

Liam scoffed, wiping his nose again, which was now not bleeding as badly. “And if I don’t?”

I chuckled, which turned to an all-out laugh. This man thought he was tough, but he had no clue who he was dealing with. “Maybe you haven’t learned your lesson yet... I own you Desantes. I own your wife, your child, your home, your car, your job.” I pulled out my Beretta, mounted beneath my desk and silenced for just such the occasion. “You do as I say now.”

“Christ, Scarpelli.” He stood, raising both hands. Blood trickled out his left nostril still.

“There is a reason they call me The Lion. I am the apex predator here. You do as I say. Now call off the dogs. Keep the rollers off my streets; stop stirring shit up. Let my boys handle the rest.”

Liam retreated with a few more curse words, leaving his bloody line for me to clean. But my thoughts were already on Anya. I'd have a lot of explaining to do in order to convince her what she heard was not what it seemed.

ANYA

My father sat across from me at the dining table for our evening meal for the first time in months. I'd been nursing him patiently, and thankfully it was paying off. He looked like a corpse walking, but his doctor had visited today and assured me that was normal. Like always, mother was out "running errands" while the doc was in. It bothered me, but what was I to do?

"This goulash is incredible, Anya." He slurped up a spoonful and smiled. "Better than your mothers. Shh... don't tell her." His grin was mischievous.

"Thank you, Papa."

I ate in silence, still stewing over my interaction with Leo earlier in the week. I knew he was a man like my father, but I had hoped against hope that he was the sort of man I could place my trust in. It became painfully clear to me at that moment, overhearing his plan discussed with one of his cohorts, that Leo was just like every other man in this business. He was not interested in peace—only power.

The goulash swirled around in my bowl as I swept my spoon in a circle. The part that hurt the most wasn't the fact that Leo had been proven a fraud. It wasn't that his sex was incredible and I would be denied that now. Not even that I'd fully realized he was my enemy. What hurt the most was that I was falling in love with him, and now I had no one to tell my heartbreak to.

Maybe Lia would be there, or Isabella as Leo had called her. But given that she was now on the opposing side, maybe that wouldn't be a good idea. The more I sat and obsessed about it, the worse I felt.

“What troubles you?” He took another bite of his soup before setting his spoon down. He dabbed at the corners of his mouth and I shrugged. I couldn't tell him anything. As angry as I was with Leo, I cared about him. If father knew of my indiscretion, Leo was dead. It was that simple.

“Boy troubles.” I forced a smile and set my spoon down. “You ready for dessert? I made *medovik*.”

His eyebrows rose. “Ah, honey cakes, my favorite. Thank you, yes. I'll have a slice.”

I left the half-eaten soup and went to the kitchen, collecting a few dessert plates, forks, a knife, and the cake I'd spent hours yesterday preparing. I found that baking helped regulate my emotions somehow, or maybe it was licking the spoon after creating the sweet frosting.

Either way, the smile on my father's face when he bit into the confection was worth it. He moaned out his thanks and scarfed the entire slice of cake down quickly enough that I was left serving him up a second before I had half of mine down. I was grateful for the slight distraction his enjoyment of my dessert had afforded me, but when he cleared his throat and said my name, the tension in the air leapt up.

“Anya.”

I tensed, setting my fork on my plate of half-eaten cake. I stared at it like I'd stared at that damn lemon pie the day I met Leo. If only I could take that back, the pie the day at the restaurant, meeting him for sex.

“Yes?” I did not look up at him. I knew the tone of his voice. He was upset about something. Dessert had only served to soften the blow for me.

“Dimitri tells me you have ordered our ladies off the street. Is this true?” I heard his fork scraping against his plate, but

still did not look up. I answered truthfully, but shame still filled my thoughts.

“Yes, that is true.”

“Anya...” He said my name in that long, drawn-out tone of disappointment. Like I had let him down and broken his heart. “Without our ladies out there, we will lose territory, money, power. This is not how we work. I’ve told Dimitri to reverse the orders and send them back.”

My head popped up and I looked at him. I couldn’t hide the hurt; I knew it was coming through my eyes and my expression. I swallowed the words I wanted to say; lashing out would do no good. But I sincerely hoped that rational discussion might.

“Papa, those women—”

“Are my employees, and you are my beautiful daughter, but maybe I was wrong about putting you into a place of power. Maybe you’re not ready yet.”

Tears stung my eyes, not because I’d lost his respect or faith, but because I realized my father was not going to change. “Drugs, guns, schemes—none of them are the same as those women.” I stood calmly, pushing myself up from the table. “Those women are someone’s daughter. What if it was me on that street?”

“Would you like to do that job?” The coldness in his tone shocked me. I never thought my father capable of being so heartless.

Without speaking I left the dining room and locked myself in my bedroom. Leo was not who I thought he was, and though my father was exactly the man I knew him to be, my heart was still broken. I curled up beneath the covers and cried. I wished Lia was here.

LEO

Four days I sat outside that damn house waiting for Anya to surface, and not once did I see anything more than a passing shadow in a window behind a curtain. Several times, men who worked for me questioned what I was doing, why I wasn't in the office or monitoring business. I ignored them.

If this was any other woman, I'd have given up long ago, but this wasn't just any woman. Anya had hit me at a point in my life when I had given up hope of finding a woman who could go toe-to-toe with me. Any woman who approached me had one motive—to gain my money or my power. I had no interest in a trophy wife—I wanted a partner.

Anya was the only one who came close.

And it didn't hurt that we had so much in common. Forget the fact that she was young enough to be my daughter; we were perfect for each other. So I sat there outside her house and down the street a block, watching and waiting.

Around four in the afternoon, she appeared, bundled in a coat, jeans and boots. She bounced down the stairs of the front porch and out onto the sidewalk. I considered driving up and asking her to get in the car, but figured that would scare her. So I got out of my car into the frigid winter temps and hurried to catch up. It took me three blocks, but when I caught up, it was worth it.

She glanced at me, scowling then shoving her hands in her pockets and looking down at her feet. "What?"

“Can we talk?” I put my hands in my coat pockets and fell into step with her, though she didn’t really respond. At least she wasn’t running away. That was a plus.

“Listen, I’m sorry about the other day. What you heard was not my plan for the city. I was only agreeing with Liam to prove just how stupid his plan was. When you left I laid into him.”

She glanced up at me and then turned her face back down. We continued walking for a moment in silence. Her measured breathing came in puffs of crystalized air. The traffic around us was a backdrop for the ice-cold tension between us, drowning out my thoughts. I wanted to pull her into my arms and hold her safe again, so she knew how I felt.

“This way,” I said, gesturing. I knew of a place we could talk that was far more private than the street corner, and she followed my lead.

“My father will never change, Leo. Our families will stay at war as long as he is living. I may have even ruined my chance of taking over for him.”

I heard the emotion quivering her voice. “I’m so sorry, Anya. Please, let’s go in here and talk.” The small hostel I led her into had been my home away from home at one time, back when I was barely older than her and trying to make it as a capo. Her eyes held a glimmer of attraction as she looked up at me then the marquee over the door.

“A hostel?” I opened the door and she walked in without questioning me again.

“Let’s just talk.” As I strolled through the small entryway, past the desk, the owner looked up from his magazine, a loud box and tube television playing the evening news. He nodded at me knowingly and acknowledged his nod.

“Room 6.” His grunt was all the approval I needed. So I took Anya by the hand and led her to the third floor, opening the door for room six and guiding her in. I shed my coat and hung it on the back of a chair, and watched as she strolled to

the glass sliding door that led to a balcony, from which the view of the city was limited.

“You really don’t want the families at war anymore?” She stared out the window as I rubbed my hands together, trying to warm myself.

“I told you I’d never lie to you and I meant it.”

It wasn’t the Rockaway in Queens but at least it had a working heater, and somehow they had managed to keep the carpet in the hostel clean despite all the snow and grit on the ground outside. I watched Anya press her head against the glass as it fogged up with each breath almost hiding the snow-covered balcony behind the frosted glass. I could picture Anya on a good day standing naked on the balcony, her ass firm against the concrete with the Manhattan skyline as a backdrop. This girl could be a centerfold; she was that good looking. My eyes ran around the room, searching for a way to break the ice, and get her to loosen up to me.

I scanned the aged room, after turning up the thermostat to something more comfortable. My eyes skimmed across the old TV set with the DVD player mounted below and a select few DVDs, really showing the hotel’s age. It was a room, and that’s all that mattered. I walked over to Anya, her breath continuing to fog up the glass, almost like she was making a game of it.

I could see the soft smile on her face as my arms wrapped around her, removing the winter jacket she had on. “Hey, you’ve seen Titanic right?” I asked, seeming it was fitting for a literal icebreaker *and* one of the DVDs on the shelf.

“Yeah, what are you hinting at? You be Jack and I be Rose, and we fuck in someone’s car then you draw me naked?” She turned and a smirk crossed her face. I chuckled at her brevity.

“I have a better idea,” I said, grabbing her top and pulling it off. She wasn’t wearing a bra again, but with a chest like she had, she really didn’t need too. I picked her up as she turned, shocked by my sudden movement. It had been too long and the separation too great. We needed this—I needed this.

Her smile and the way she chuckled told me I had her, that she believed me. She tugged the hem of my shirt and pulled it off and threw it to the floor. As she did, I dropped her onto the bed. “I’m not the best artist, so I won’t insult you with my drawing skills, but fuck... Your body is a fine piece of art. I tugged her jeans and panties off, dropping them on the worn carpet before shedding mine.

Anya positioned herself on the bed and posed, resting her head on a hand, propped on one elbow. “Well, if you can’t paint me like one of your French girls, you can at least take a photo, but if you show anyone. I will personally kill you, Leo.”

I reached for my phone and snapped a photo, then tossed it aside and climbed up onto the bed. She spread herself for me, and my fingers searched her out. She arched her back and gasped as I rubbed at the bumpy spot on the inside of her pussy. She reached up and grabbed the back of my neck and pulled my head down to meet hers, and kissed me. She bit my lip as I positioned myself between her knees, then lifted one of her legs and pressed into her. My dick sunk deep into her, and I pressed hard against her insides, driving her into the sheets. She writhed around begging to be fucked hard, and I wasn’t going to disappoint. I leaned back and picked her up, her legs wrapped around my waist, and carried her across the room, setting her on the table next to the TV and pounded her into the wall.

Anya bit her lip, but I couldn’t tell if it was the cold air getting to her, or if she was just over the top horny, as her nipples hardened and stood as small peaks on her perfect body. I pulled out and looked at the hole where my dick just was and stroked myself as Anya stood up and touched herself, her cum smeared around my cock and her pussy. She pressed her fingers into herself then tasted them with a grin.

“Titanic you say,” she said looking at the fog on the window.

She slid her perfect ass from the table and walked over to the window and wiped her hand across the glass, leaving a huge handprint just like the one from the Titanic as she bent

over. She pressed one hand against the glass and with the other, held herself open and invited me to finish what I started. “I want you in me,” Anya said coyly.

I pressed my dick against her ass as she looked out over the city, through the foggy windows and pumped had into her. I could see her hand forming into a fist as she grabbed hold of the curtains. Her knees buckled and she struggled to stand. I could feel her pussy squeezing me.

“Do it!” she gasped, her handprint now across the glass. I could feel it; I was about to blow and I slammed into her one final time. I could see her neck arch as if I had gone too deep. She smacked the glass patio door a few times with her palm then I stumbled backward, still inside her and pulling her with me back onto the bed. I knew it wouldn’t be long until the heat of our actions were replaced by the chill of the air, so I pulled the covers over us and lay there holding Anya, feeling her shake through her afterglow.

I had to convince her to remain steadfast in her pursuit of peace. That—or she had to come be with me.

There were no other alternatives.

ANYA

Having Lia back after two years of believing her dead was almost as traumatizing as having lost her to begin with. And knowing she had joined the Italians as a means to bring some sort of hope to the Russian women who were enslaved by the hand of my father was a difficult pill to swallow. She had embraced our enemy fully, to use their support.

But one thing I learned was that if the Italian don was anything like my father, no amount of schmoozing was going to make him truly join the cause. Leo and I had shared several very intense discussions about the fact that I was not out to destroy my Russian heritage or my family. He understood me loud and clear that I would not sell out—not like Lia had.

If I joined Leo's side, it would be to make it clear to my father that I did not approve of his business dealings and I would do anything in my power to free the women under his control. No fake name, no disguise, no hiding in plain sight.

Lia had draped herself over the end of Leo's desk, the knee-high boots she wore still dripping snow to his carpet. She looked well for having been lost for so long, but then she wasn't truly lost. She had just been incognito.

"See the results for yourself." Lia dropped a stack of photos onto the desk in front of me. I sat in Leo's chair, hugging my arms across my stomach.

"Isabella has some great images here." Leo stood behind me, rubbing my shoulders. I didn't bother looking at the images. I had heard the reports every time a safehouse was

emptied of women. I knew Lia's brother Dominic was behind most of the slave trade too, which had to be difficult for her.

"Can we just call her by her name now?" I eyed Leo and then Lia. She grimaced and shook her head.

"I've changed my name, Yaya. I did it to help the women we are rescuing, over 150 of them now and counting. You can be a part of this too." She slid off the desk and knelt beside me, taking my hand into hers.

"You left me with only a note to tell your family you loved them, and even that was written in some awful code." A memory of the day she vanished remained etched in my mind as painful as the day it had happened.

"I did what I had to do, or I would have been forced to marry that horrible man." She squeezed my fingers, lacing them between her own. Leo watched on, silent but vigilant. "Is that what you want, Anya? You want your father to marry you off to the highest bidder, the one who will gain him the most power or respect? You deserve so much more than that."

I shuddered to think my father might do that, especially after having tasted how close I was to the power myself. He could have put me in charge of the entire thing, and if I had done as he asked me, as he would have done, I would have been given even more authority in the family.

I looked up at Leo and frowned. He hadn't weighed in yet. If I left my family I needed a place to go, and he was the only one I could even fathom being with. He offered me a tissue, plucked from the table across the room. His confident silence was the strength I needed.

"I don't know what to think. I need time to sort through this. Lia, you are my sister in blood. If you think this is the right move, then I am disposed to thinking that it is the right move too. But if I leave my father, if I make that point, that his ways are not okay, and that I need him to be different, I will lose everything. My ties to my mother will be cut off, my source of everything. I will have no home, no food, no job."

“I’ll take care of everything.” Leo crossed his arms over his chest and set his jaw. Either he was firmly in agreement with Lia—Isabella—or he just wanted me.

“I’d like to have time to think. Is that okay?”

Lia stood, backing away from me. She nodded.

This might very well be the hardest decision of my life, one that Lia’d had to make herself at one point. I didn’t want to make the wrong choice. Once Lia was gone, I stood, pacing the room until Leo met me mid-stride and held me against his chest.

“You’ve done all you can from that side, Anya.” His soft kiss on my forehead warmed my heart, but not as much as they way he cradled me in his arms. I clung to him, listening to his heart beating.

“I could still change things.” My mumbles into his chest were hardly audible. I wasn’t even sure I believed myself, but I wasn’t about to give up and stop trying. Lia had done so much since breaking free from the family, but it had cost her dearly. Her father was dead, many of the men she knew, and now her brother had a bounty on his head, placed there by her.

“No one respects you, Anya.” Leo’s words were cold, exacting. I winced, then pulled away from him. I was certain he hadn’t meant to offend me, but he had. I hugged myself and walked to the large picture window that overlooked the city and stared out across the park.

“That was harsh.” The room’s temperature seemed to drop ten degrees. I shivered and watched the snowflakes flutter past the window on their way to blanket the streets.

“I didn’t mean to sound harsh. Here, listen...” Leo reached into his pocket and withdrew his phone, walking toward me. I mostly ignored him, favoring the winterscape outside to the dreariness that my life had become.

He held his phone out toward me, and a recording of a man’s voice started. I tuned my ear in immediately, recognizing Dimitri and Dominic speaking.

“Well the old man ain’t gonna live forever.” Dominic’s voice came across loud and clear.

“Yeah,” Dimitri said, “and he’s going to leave that bitch in charge. She can’t even hold a gun straight. Let me tell you, if she takes control there will be anarchy and I will lead it.”

He stopped the recording as my jaw dropped. “I know those men...” I searched Leo’s expression and saw concern there.

“They will never follow you, and from the moment your father hands over the reins you’ll be running for your life, if he hands them over to you and doesn’t marry you off like Isabella insinuated. I want more for you.”

He pocketed his phone and grabbed my elbows, forcing me to turn to face him. “So what do I do then? Desert my family? My mother?”

“I’ll make sure you can see your mother for as long as she wants you in her life. But you have to commit to leaving. We can do so much more from this side, working together. Join us, Anya.”

“Is this why you stalked me and got Lia introduce us? You just wanted my help turning my family out of the city?” I was apprehensive, until he responded.

“No, Anya. I did that because I couldn’t get you out of my head. And now, with you by my side, I feel like I can do anything. I want you here with me, because I want you.”

He kissed me, parting my lips with his tongue as he poured every ounce of affection he had into the act. I wanted nothing more than to run away with him and leave all of this behind. I’d never felt safer than I did with him.

“I’ll join you, under one condition.”

“Name it.” His forehead lingered against mine.

“We stop the violence. I can’t stand by and watch more people get killed in this ridiculous squabble over territory and power.”

“Done.” He kissed me again. And I knew it was the beginning of something beautiful.

Powerful and beautiful.

EPILOGUE - LIA

I'd arranged for the meet before I'd fully decided what I would say or do. I'd been living as Isabella for nearly two full years now. Life with Dante was amazing; I was so in love. We'd drained the swamp, so to speak, returning hundreds of women to their homes or even back to Russia from where they came. But so long as the snake remained alive, the organization would continue to grow.

My father was gone, that was a blow I thought I'd not come back from, not being able to say goodbye to him. But I was managing.

Tonight would be far worse.

I lingered in the shadows near the family bookstore, knowing Anya's father was ailing and Dominic would like take his place should he die. The cancer had returned, somewhere a few months after Anya left home to be with Leo. My sources told me this sort of cancer was different than the previous one, much more aggressive, much less treatable. I hadn't told Anya yet; she didn't need to worry about it. In due time, I'd set up a meeting between her and her father to ensure she got to say goodbye, the thing I mourned about losing my father most.

Dominic's car pulled up, his driver leaving him at the front of the store and pulling away. He'd lost a lot too—his father, his bodyguard, most of his business, and me, his sister. I sighed, thinking how this would be the final blow for him, in more ways than one.

He approached the store, keys in hand, and unlocked the building. The way he sauntered in without locking up behind himself made me upset with him. If any one of Dante's men, or Leo's for that matter, had followed him, he'd be dead already. As it were, I was more of a threat than anyone, and they hadn't even bothered to change the locks since I went missing.

I followed him, not attempting to silence the bell that hung over the door. He was all the way to the back before I entered. I noticed him turn around, but I didn't hide myself.

"We're closed. Get out." His rough voice, laced with the slurs only alcohol can induce, was tired. I felt the weight of a thousand lifetimes in that tone. My heart ached to run to him and comfort him like I had so many times as a child. Like the night Dante held a gun to his chest after he'd already been shot, and I'd stood between them to keep the man I loved from killing my brother.

"Dom." I didn't try to disguise my voice. I took calculated steps toward the back of the store. Books lined the shelves, creating a barrier between us, but I knew he could see my movement between them.

"I said, we're closed. Get the fuck out."

I heard the sharp sound of metal on metal and knew he'd chambered around in his gun. Then I saw the movement between bookshelves too. He approached me. I had my own gun at ready, not wanting to use it like this, but prepared if I had to.

As he rounded the corner, recognition dawned on his face. I'd let my hair grow out, back to its natural color. I hadn't worn the colored contacts, and I dressed in my favorite sweater, one my father had gifted me for Christmas almost 5 years ago, when I was just a child still.

"Lia?" Dominic tilted his head, his eyes thinning to slits. In the lower light, I knew he might not fully recognize me, and to him it would be like seeing a ghost. After all, I was dead—I had been for years.

“Dom.” I offered a smile, but I kept my gun hand ready hidden behind my back. He stepped away from the bookshelves, shoving his weapon down the waistband of his jeans. He charged over to me, wrapping his arms around me.

“Lia, oh my god. You’re dead. How are you here? What happened? Where have you been?” His questions came all at once, a jumbled mess of words and emotion. He held me for a second before gripping my face and offering a kiss to my forehead the way our father would have. He was all I had left. Him, my mother—god only knew where she was—and Anya.

“That’s not important.” I backed away, my hand still at the ready.

“What do you mean it’s not important? We thought you were dead for years. Dad’s been murdered, Mikael, Xander, a dozen more. We’ve lost almost all of our ladies, half our territory... You need to come help. Even Anya has gone missing for months now.”

“She’s not missing.” I spoke calmly, watching him study my face. I saw recognition cross his features. His chest rose and fell in hastened breaths, whether from the shock of seeing me or the anger that I watched growing on his face, I didn’t know.

I noticed the tiniest hint of movement in his hand, his fingers wiggle as he reached for his weapon, and I raised mine, pointing it at his chest.

“No.” I flicked the tip of my gun, indicating his hand should move away from his gun.

“What? Lia, this is insane. What are you doing?” He was angry, and rightly so. I wasn’t playing games. I’d seen enough people be hurt and killed at his hand. I had made it very clear to Dante, Leo, Jimmy, anyone who would listen. If Dominic was to fall, it would be by my hand alone.

“I’m sorry, Dom. This is the way it has to be.” I reached for his gun, plucking it from his waistband and tossing it. He watched it skitter across the floor then looked back at me.

“Why are you doing this?”

“Because you haven’t gotten the message. Kira tried to tell you when you kidnapped her, held her hostage... When Liam had to bust her out. We saved Nadia, and when she came back to you because she was loyal, you almost killed her. We brought you to your knees but you keep standing up.” I pointed at the ground with the weapon and pursed my lips.

“What? No.” He scowled at me, refusing to stoop down, so I fired off a round into the ceiling, knowing this meant I had only minutes left with him. Tears stung my eyes as he lowered to the ground.

“I wanted you to walk away. I pleaded for your life. I told them not to touch a hair on your head, because I believed you’d see the wickedness of your actions and turn. But you are blind. You’re like father, like. Mikael. Like Anya’s father. You have to be stopped Dominic.”

“No, Lia. I’ll do what you want.” His eyes locked on his gun across the room, and I knew then that given the chance he’d gun me down. My heart sank. Like Anya, I was realizing my past was my past, and those I loved would never change.

“I’m sorry, Dominic. Tell father I love him.” I pulled the trigger without thinking again. His blood peppered the wall behind him, my sweater, my shoes, my hand. The way his head hit the ground with a sickening, hollow thud made my stomach churn. I stood over him trembling, tears streaming down my face. I never heard the door chime but it had. I felt arms around me and looked into Dante’s face.

He led me to the front of the store, to the waiting arms of my Yaya and the man she loved. If the world was going to be a safe place to raise my children, this was the one thing that had to happen.

“You did the right thing,” Anya whispered, kissing my forehead as I draped myself across her lap in the SUV. “It’s going to be okay.” She smoothed my hair as she had done so many times before, lying on her sofa as a child, eating popcorn and watching movies.

My brother was dead. The only last trace of my bloodline on American soil that could tie me to the Bratva. The children

I had would now never know of their heritage. They would be free from the pressure of living up to that name.

But I would never be free.

My heart would remain trapped in this war for years to come, until I had put an end to this evil slave trade and set free the women who remained trapped in the death grip of Bratva scum.

For now, however, I would rest. Because the war would rage on, but the life inside of me needed to be nurtured. In this child the families were joined. And one day I believed he would lead them all.