

Arrogant Bratva Bastard

*An Age Gap Forced Proximity Mafia
Romance*

Fedorov Bratva


Book 3

Sonja Grey

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Arrogant Bratva Bastard

Blurb

**I've spent my life running from my family's mafia ties.
I never expected it all to end in the arms of an arrogant
Bratva bastard.**

Gia:

Growing up in a mafia family taught me that I want nothing to do with it.

I washed my hands of all of them and ran off with my younger brother before they could sink their claws into him.

Years later, the Fedorov Bratva took down the Rossi mafia.

I thought that was the end of it.

But now it's up to me to go back and take care of my uncle's estate.

Turns out the Russians don't want me here, and they've sent a masked, cocky Bratva member to watch over me until they decide whether I'm a threat or not.

Forced to his house, I resign myself to the fact that we'll be roomies for a while.

I tell myself it'll be easy to hate him, but the attraction between us is sizzling hot, and it's getting harder and harder to remember why I'm supposed to keep my distance.

Yuri:

She's the enemy, plain and simple.

When she catches me snooping around, I have no choice but to keep her with me.

Now I'm on babysitting duty—stuck being around her, watching her every second of every day.

She pushes all my buttons, but it's not just anger I feel.

No, there's also a good bit of lust.

All I need is just one time with her. One time and she'll be out of my system.

Turns out one time will never be enough, and I'll do whatever it takes to keep her by my side, even if that means tying her to the damn bed.

Chapter 1

Yuri

The club is packed tonight. The music too loud, and the men too damn eager, but it's all dollar signs to me. The crazier this place gets, the better. Ever since Artyom got married, I've been slowly taking over most of the duties here. He'd rather be at home with his wife and twins than at a rowdy strip club.

To each their own.

The Sweet Peach is owned by the Fedorov Bratva, and it's been nothing but profit since opening night. I push my way through the crowd and hold my hand up to Sloane, who's busy pouring drinks for three men in business suits. Apparently someone had a good day at work. They're clearly celebrating a business deal gone right. I eye their expensive watches and catch the glint of a wedding band on one of their hands. The hungry look in his eyes as he watches the dancers onstage tells me he isn't feeling even remotely guilty about leaving the missus at home.

Looking across the room, I catch Crystal's attention and nod to the three men. She immediately starts sauntering over, making sure her ample chest shakes a bit with each step. As soon as the men see her, their eyes light up, and I feel my bank account grow right along with their dicks. I have no doubt she'll secure private lap dances with all of them and make herself a ton in tips tonight. Win-win.

Sloane pours me a vodka when the men happily follow Crystal's G-stringed ass to the back. "You're terrible," she says with a laugh.

I take the drink and correct her. “No, I’m a shrewd businessman.”

She doesn’t argue, just refills my drink and leans her hip against the bar, watching the crowd of men catcalling to one of the dancers on the pole. She’s doing some sort of acrobatic maneuver that has them all cheering and reaching for dollar bills.

“God, just watching her makes me tired,” Sloane says with a laugh.

“It’s a workout,” I agree, keeping my eyes on the limber body, wondering if I feel up to a one-night stand tonight. I hate to admit that things have started to feel a bit monotonous, but that’s the truth of it. Women have always been easy conquests for me, and it pains me to say I’m starting to get a bit bored.

Sloane tops off my glass before going to help another large group of men who have walked up to the bar with glazed eyes and easy smiles. She gives them a wink and convinces them to order top-shelf liquor instead of the cheaper shit most men buy. Sloane’s a goddamn natural and the best bartender I’ve ever seen. She’s worth every dime we pay her and the extra bonuses we regularly slip into her account. She’s dependable, skilled, and doesn’t try to sleep with any of us, so there’s never any drama surrounding her, and that is a goddamn breath of fresh air around here.

I take my drink and weave my way through the crowd, heading for the back office. Once inside, I shut the door and sit behind the desk, sorting through the stack of applications Artyom left for me to go through. I don’t feel like dealing with any of it, though, so I shove it aside and instead upload the new schedules his wife sent me earlier. Riley took over scheduling duty, and we’re all thrilled about it. The schedules get done on time, and I no longer have to listen to Artyom bitch about having to do it.

Right as I’ve finished sending out the new schedules to everyone, my phone buzzes in my pocket, reminding me of the time. I scan the text, laughing when I see a photo of the twins, both of them giving the camera big smiles that show off their

new baby teeth. Beneath the photo, Artyom's written the simple message: *They're hungry. Get your fucking ass over here.*

I text that I'm on my way and leave the club, saying a quick goodbye to Viktor, who's at the door checking IDs. Getting into my black Audi, I speed the whole way to their house, yet another perk of working for the most powerful Bratva in town, and park in front of their garage. The slate grey house on the lake looks more and more like a home each time I visit. It used to feel empty and unlived in, but with Riley and the kids, it's quickly transformed into homey and inviting. Fresh flowers line the rocky path to the back deck that's littered with toddler toys. I step around the ride-on toy in the shape of a caterpillar and smile. You'd never know one of the deadliest men in the city lives here.

"About time," Artyom growls, opening the back door for me.

I laugh and step inside, petting the large German Shepherd who immediately gets up to greet me. Beau's a retired police dog who's recently returned to work as guard dog for the twins. He does nap regularly on the job, though. Riley gives me a big grin and walks over for a hug. I return it and kiss the top of her head.

"He gets so cranky when he's hungry," I tell her, laughing at the look he shoots me.

Riley laughs. "I know. He's worse than the twins."

Artyom scrubs a hand over his face and shakes his head, giving me glimpses of the scar that covers half his neck and the skull tattoo that decorates the other side. "He's thirty minutes late," he points out, giving me a pointed look. "Something keep you occupied at the club?"

I laugh and hold up my hands. "I was in the office sending out the new schedules." I look down at Riley again. "Thanks for getting those done, by the way."

"No problem." She walks over to Artyom and swats his ass with the towel in her hand. "Think you can survive five more

minutes without fainting from hunger?”

Her laugh fills the room when he reaches out and grabs her, pulling her against him and sliding his hand down to give her ass a sharp smack. The moan she gives isn't purely from pain, and I step into the living room when Artyom leans down to kiss his wife while leading her into the laundry room. They both know I'll keep an eye on the kids, since, evidently, Artyom now feels like supper can wait a bit.

Anya and Luka are sitting in a large playpen while a Russian cartoon plays on the TV. As soon as they see me, they smile and clumsily get to their feet. Chubby hands grip onto the padded railing while they take a few unsteady steps toward me. I smile and reach down to scoop them up, one in each arm. Anya's big blue eyes widen as she laughs, and Luka grins shyly while his grey eyes study mine.

I kiss their heads and sit on the couch, keeping them in my lap. Even though they're one now, I still think of them as the tiny newborns they were when I first met them. I'm constantly surprised by how fast they're growing. When I turn to look at the TV, Anya cups my face with her chubby hand and pulls my attention back to her. I laugh and kiss her cheek.

“You're going to be a handful, little one,” I tell her in Russian, and then laugh again when I picture Artyom during her teenage years. “You're going to give your daddy a head full of grey hair, aren't you?”

She doesn't know it, but her daddy's nickname is Death, and he's one of the best-trained killers in our Bratva. I almost pity the young fuckers who come sniffing around looking for a date. The pity disappears when I think about what I was like as a teenage boy and decide that I'll probably be sitting on the back deck with a gun in hand right next to Death.

Anya hands me a chunky board book, and I start reading it to them. I've just really gotten a handle on all my animal noises when Artyom and Riley join us. Artyom's wearing a smug grin on his face, and Riley's hair is tousled, and in her haste to get dressed, the top buttons on her shirt are all fucked up.

“Your mommy and daddy are going to have to get a whole lot smoother if they expect to get away with that kind of thing when you’re older,” I tell the twins.

Artyom laughs as Riley’s face turns beet red. He smiles down at her and carefully fixes her buttons before smoothing back her hair. They look at each other in a way that I’ve rarely seen in real life, like their entire existence is wrapped up in one another. Our boss, Mikhail, looks at his wife like that, but other than them, it’s something I’ve only seen in movies. I never actually thought it was real until I saw it with my own two eyes. I shake my head to clear it. I’m thirty-seven, way too fucking old to start becoming a romantic.

Pushing the thoughts from my mind, I tickle a squealing, giggling, Anya and then do the same to Luka before handing them over to their parents so they can get strapped in their highchairs. Supper is lighthearted and relaxed with the twins babbling to each other in their own strange language that they seem to be able to understand perfectly while Riley tells me all about the new trees she wants to plant along their property line and Beau stealthily begs for scraps.

By the time we’re done, I’m stuffed and the twins are a mess. I give them both a kiss goodbye and hug Riley, thanking her for the meal before she and Artyom take them upstairs for a bath. Artyom comes down a few minutes later with the front of his shirt wet with bubbles. He grabs a hand towel and wipes it off.

“Anya’s decided she really likes to splash.”

“She’s going to be a handful, man,” I tell him.

He sighs and nods, already worrying about her future rebellious years, and hands me the vodka he just poured.

We step out onto the deck, bypassing the toys and sitting in the patio chairs while Beau runs off to sniff the yard and piss on every single plant and tree he can find.

“Maybe Luka will turn out to be the handful,” I say with a shrug. “Gotta watch out for those quiet ones.”

“God, I hope so. Rebellious teenage boys, I know a thing or two about, but girls? Fucking hell, I’m not looking forward to that.”

We drink in comfortable silence until both our phones give a soft buzz. Artyom arches a dark brow at me but doesn’t say anything. Mikhail’s the only one who would send us a message at the same time, and I can’t think of any reason why our boss would be doing that tonight. Things have been quiet lately. It’s been downright peaceful on the streets. His text quickly shoots that all to hell.

Jinx found something at the Rossi house. I need you both to come over.

“Fuck,” I groan, sending a quick reply while Artyom does the same before running inside to let Riley know we need to head out. He follows me on his motorcycle, and when we pull into Mikhail’s, I still haven’t been able to piece together what the fuck is going on. The Rossi family used to run this city, and our Bratva killed them all on the night that Antonio decided to kidnap Charlie and beat the living hell out of her. How he thought he could get away with hurting Mikhail’s fiancée, I’ll never understand. Antonio’s men had grabbed me as well, but I’d walked out of there with a bump on my head and a couple of broken ribs. Charlie hadn’t been so lucky. I still cringe when I think about her bloody, swollen face. It had been my job to protect her, and the failure still stings. We’d decimated the Rossi family that night, so what in the fuck is Mikhail talking about? Jinx, our intel guy, is the best there fucking is. If he’s found something, then it must be important.

“I’m just as confused as you are,” Artyom says, noticing the look on my face. “That house has been empty for the last couple years.”

We walk up to our boss’s front door and wait to be let in. There was a time when I would’ve just barged in, but shortly after Mikhail and Charlie got married, I did just that and almost caught them having sex in the kitchen. Mikhail had been furious. I’d laughed my ass off and promised I’d always knock from now on.

When Charlie opens the door, she gives us both a big grin and waves us in, laughing when their son spots us and starts running over and lunging himself into my arms.

“Hey, Lev,” I say, pulling him in for a tight hug. His three-year-old body clings to me before holding his arms out for Artyom. He asks in Russian where Anya and Luka are, and I smile at how good he’s getting with the language.

Charlie laughs at his excited chattering and pats her pregnant belly, letting out a soft sigh. “I wish I had half his energy,” she says while Artyom and Lev chat some more.

Mikhail walks over and wraps his arms around her, resting his hand on top of hers and leaning down to kiss her neck. “Do you need help getting him into bed, baby?”

She smiles and kisses his cheek. “No, I’ve got it. Go ahead and do your man business. I’m going to get him settled and then head to bed. Join me when you can.”

He whispers something in her ear that makes her blush and then kisses her one last time before grabbing Lev. “Be a good boy for Mommy. Your baby sister is making her extra tired today.”

Lev promises he will and then grabs Charlie’s hand, waving a goodbye to us before leading his mom upstairs. Charlie hollers out a bye and then laughs when Lev starts talking to her pregnant belly, telling his baby sister to settle down and be good. The twins have given him a lot of practice on how to be a good big brother, and he’s taking it all very seriously.

We watch them go, and when Mikhail turns back to look at us, he’s in full Bratva boss mode. All the softness that once marked his features is gone, and in its place is the hard look that I know all too well. We follow him to his office, and after he shuts the door, he says, “Jinx just notified me that there’s been more activity than usual at the Rossi house. The Wi-Fi was turned on, and satellite footage shows the maid bringing in bags of food. The place has been maintained over the last couple years, but just the bare minimum to keep it up and running. No one’s ever brought food before.”

He scrubs a hand over his light beard and pours himself a healthy drink, holding the bottle up to see if we want one. We both shake our heads and instead think about what this will mean for us. Mikhail sits behind his desk and brings up something on his computer while Artyom and I sit down in the leather chairs across from him.

“There’s a flight coming in from New York tomorrow, and there’s a Gia Rossi listed as one of the passengers.”

“Who the fuck is that?” I ask.

“Looks like she’s Antonio’s niece.”

Artyom leans closer, resting his hands on his thighs. “Maybe she’s just here to tie up loose ends and sell the damn place.”

“Maybe,” Mikhail says. “Or maybe not.”

Turning the monitor so we can see, he points at the photo that’s now filling his screen. The woman in the photo is so beautiful it surprises me. She has long, blonde hair and big, blue eyes with full lips that I immediately imagine wrapped around my cock.

“Damn,” I whisper before I can stop myself.

Mikhail quirks a brow at me. “How nice of you to volunteer, Yuri.”

“What did I just volunteer for?”

“I need you to go over there and scope the place out. Find out what the fuck is going on and how worried I need to be.” The hand I can see is clenched into a tight fist, and I know this is dredging up a lot of painful shit for him. “The Rossi family is not going to rise from the fucking ashes. I’ll kill every single one of those motherfuckers if they decide to come over from Italy and pick up where Antonio left off.”

“And we’ll be right there with you when you do it,” Artyom says, leaning back in his chair, already envisioning a night of bloodshed. It used to be the only time I ever saw his eyes light up, but his family has changed that. He’s two people now, same as Mikhail.

“So this is just information gathering?” I ask.

Mikhail thinks for a second. “For now. Don’t let her know you’re there, but do what needs to be done. I trust your judgement.”

The three of us have been working together since Mikhail took over the Bratva after his uncle was murdered, and we’ve become a well-oiled machine. First in Moscow, and now in America. No one on earth knows me like these two men do, and I trust them with my life.

“Sounds good. When does her flight come in?”

He doesn’t even need to look back at his screen. He’s already memorized all the information. “At three. She already has a rental car reserved, and the house is a two-hour drive from the airport.”

“I’ll be there,” I assure him, already planning it out in my head.

“Text me updates.” He eyes the two of us. “This stays between us for now. The guys don’t need to know yet, and no way in fuck do I want Charlie worrying about this, especially not with her being pregnant.”

Artyom and I nod in agreement. We leave shortly after, knowing he wants to get back to his family.

“Text me if you need me,” Artyom says, giving me a smack on the back before putting his helmet on.

“I will,” I tell him, giving him a wave when he very slowly drives away so his motorcycle won’t wake Lev. I laugh at how much we’ve all changed over the years. It used to be nights of drinking and random women, and now it’s bedtimes and pattering your motorcycle to the end of the drive so you don’t wake the kids.

I’m not a part of that, I remind myself. I could go out and pick up a woman and fuck her till the sun comes up if I wanted to. I won’t, but I could if I wanted to, damn it. The drive back to my house doesn’t take long. I bought the craftsman-style house on the water last year. I could’ve just stuck with the apartment I had downtown, but I like my space, and I got tired

of worrying about some nosy neighbor seeing me in full tactical gear with weapons strapped to my body. We own the police, but it still would've been a pain in the ass that I'd rather not deal with.

Mikhail runs his Bratva differently than most. We don't sit around in suits, smoking cigars, and you won't find a single pot belly or old man who refuses to get his hands dirty. We're all trained killers, most of us recruited straight from the Russian special forces, and none of us pass the hard work down the line. Mikhail will never send a man to do something that he isn't willing to do himself. He's respected by all of us, and it's well deserved.

Once I'm inside, I start gathering everything I'll need for tomorrow. Gia's photo keeps popping uninvited into my head. I bet she doesn't look anything like her damn photo. That was probably taken years ago, and when I see her tomorrow she won't look near as appealing. It's not like it matters how gorgeous she is anyway. She's a fucking Rossi. Enough said.

After a shitty night of sleep, I get up with the sun and force myself onto my treadmill. My body slowly wakes up with each passing mile until I find my groove and enter the meditative state that I only seem to achieve during strenuous exercise. My mind goes wonderfully numb as everything gets pushed to the side, leaving me with nothing more to think about than my lungs filling with air and the steady beat of my heart.

When I'm covered in sweat and wide awake, I take a quick shower and grab my bag. After a detour to a coffee shop, I make the drive to the house I hoped to never see again. Parking down the street, I grab my bag and head for the mansion, annoyed that someone's taken the time to keep the garden in full bloom. Considering how many people were tortured here, the place should really look a lot more gothic, but there isn't a gloomy thing in sight. The sun is out in full force, the flowers are blooming, and the place looks freshly cleaned and downright vibrant.

It doesn't take much to break in, and once I'm inside, I roll my eyes at how damn gaudy the place is. Antonio was such a

pompous ass. If I never see another gold-dipped decoration, I'll die a happy man. The last time I was here, I was dragged in through a side door and hauled straight into the basement torture room. It had not been a fun time, and I have no desire to see it again. I still remember hearing Charlie's screams and not being able to do a goddamn thing about it.

Resisting the urge to throw some of the expensive figurines on the ground that litter the damn place, I start walking through the large house, deciding where best to position myself. When Gia gets here, I'll be more than ready for her.

Chapter 2

Gia

After a ridiculously long flight from New York, thanks to a four-hour layover in the world's most boring airport, I sink into the leather seat of my rental car and breathe a sigh of relief. What a pain in the ass this is turning out to be, and I'm not even done with day one. Although, truth be told, this particular pain in the ass has really been going on for a couple of years. Ever since my Uncle Antonio and his men were killed by the Fedorov Bratva, his estate has been up in the air while my distant cousins in Italy were tracked down to see how they wanted to handle his property. After a massive amount of bickering in the long, drawn-out way that Italians are so damn good at, the lawyers finally handed it over to me. Now it's my job to find a realtor and sell the damn place.

Before I start driving, I send a text to my baby brother, letting him know I made it okay and that I'll keep him updated on what's going on. He quickly responds with a *Good luck, sis. Let me know if you need any help* and a thumbs up emoji. I tell him I will and pull up the address on my phone. I follow the robotic voice's directions as I turn out of the rental car parking lot.

My brother just turned nineteen, and there's no way in hell I'm bringing him into all this. I've spent my life keeping Dominic away from our family's mafia ties, and I'm not about to stop doing that now. He's in his first year of art school, and that's exactly where his ass is staying. As soon as I turned eighteen, I got an apartment and brought Dom with me, getting him as far away from our dad as I could. I'm the one who raised him, and I'd do anything to keep him safe. That's

why I'm hundreds of miles away, trying to sort through all this shit as quickly as possible. I want the Rossi family, or what's left of it, to keep their asses in Italy. The faster I handle this, the faster it will be over and I can go back to New York and forget all about this.

My phone tells me I have a two-hour drive ahead of me, so I click on my audiobook and try and relax. The narrow, congested streets of the city slowly morph into two-lane highways with woods on either side. When I'm down to my last hour, the trees clear away on one side, and an enormous lake comes into view. I'm surprised by how beautiful and peaceful it is. There are several boats in the distance, but they're too far away for me to make out any details.

I turn off onto a windy side road and follow it another thirty minutes before I see my uncle's mansion looming up ahead. My family has never been short on money, so I'm not at all surprised to see that the place is gorgeous and massive. The place has been maintained since Antonio's death, and I'm grateful that I won't be sleeping in some cobweb-infested house out of a gothic romance.

Parking next to a row of rose bushes, I grab my suitcases and the key that was mailed to me and let myself in. My footsteps echo in the marble-floored foyer, and I can't help but roll my eyes at the elaborate show of wealth. Humble is not a word I would've ever used to describe my uncle. I remember him being scary, cruel, and arrogant to the point of being nauseating. He was just like my father, and I'd be lying if I said I even came close to shedding a tear when I got the news that he'd been killed. I was more surprised that it had taken so long for someone to do it.

I give myself a tour of the house. It takes a while. I count seven bedrooms and nine bathrooms, and I pity whoever had to clean this place. Scrubbing one toilet is bad enough, but nine? No fucking way. When I get to the basement, a chill runs through me. Instead of the finished living space I was expecting, it's more like a dungeon. The flooring is just a slab of concrete, and each room has a drain in the middle of the

floor. I cringe when I think about what my uncle must've used this place for and run my ass back upstairs.

Details were sparse about what happened here. All I was told is that every Rossi working for my uncle was killed that night. I don't know why or how, and I don't want to. When you grow up in a mafia family, you learn very quickly that the less you know, the better. Invisible is the way to go. Invisible and ignorant. Of course the Rossi men always thought of me like that anyway, thanks to my vagina.

Claiming the bedroom with the best view of the lake, I drop off my suitcases and then go in search of some food. I was told the fridge would be stocked for me so I wouldn't have to worry about anything except meeting with the lawyer and real estate agent. After a day of too much coffee and little more than airplane peanuts, I'm more than ready for a home-cooked meal.

Because I hated my uncle, I try not to be in awe of his kitchen, but I am. I love to cook, and this has everything. I eye the five-burner, gas range and huge island and smile for the first time since walking into this sterile palace. Running my hands over the quartz countertops, I step around the island and open the oversized fridge.

"Damn," I groan, seeing the shelves loaded with everything I could possibly need. A scan of the walk-in pantry has me quickly making a mental meal plan. I grab a potato from the bin and some fresh asparagus and a large steak from the fridge. While the steak marinates, I start preparing some vegetables and connect my phone to the built-in Bluetooth speakers. Soon I'm singing along to my favorite songs while the room fills with the delicious smells of cooked steak and sautéed asparagus and potatoes. I even go all out and make myself a fresh Greek salad.

Sitting at the island, I grab my fork and dig in, moaning in appreciation when the first bite of steak hits my tongue.

"Fucking hell, Gia. Job well done," I congratulate myself and then cringe. I'm only twenty-five. That's way too young to start talking to myself. I remember visiting my great-grandma

in Italy when I was little, and I was shocked at how much she talked to herself. She'd putter around the house and in her garden, constantly dictating her day out loud in soft Italian. Looking back, the memory just strikes me as incredibly sad. Her life was nothing but silence, so she'd had to fill it with the sound of her own voice. I promise myself I won't get like that. At the very least I'll get a cat or a dog, because talking to a pet is an entirely different thing.

After eating every damn thing on my plate, I'm suddenly so exhausted I can barely keep my eyes open. I'd had to get up before the sun, and the long day is finally hitting me. Climbing back up the wide staircase, I use the last of my strength to drag my ass to the room I picked out earlier. Too tired to do anything except pull my jeans and shirt and bra off, I fall into the comfy bed and immediately pass out.

I'm not sure how much time has passed before my eyes open and my whole body stills. Something's wrong, but my brain is too fuzzy from sleep to figure it out, so I lay completely still and listen to the heavy silence. I remember everything up until I fell asleep, and nothing was out of place, nothing made me feel like something was wrong, but something most definitely feels off now. I'm still lying face down with my head turned to the large window overlooking the lake, and it's taking everything I have to not roll over and see what's behind me. I feel completely exposed and on display. Every second that passes, the rational part of my brain screams at me that I'm being ridiculous, that I just woke up from a dream and I'm overreacting. The deep, instinctual part of my brain that's kept many women alive over the years is screaming at me that something is most definitely wrong and that I need to get my ass out of here. That's the voice I listen to.

Taking a slow, steadying breath, I brace myself and roll over. I do it fast, not giving anyone the chance to run if they are there. When I see the large man dressed all in black, complete with face mask, I can't help but wish I'd kept pretending to sleep. I feel like just by seeing him I've made him real. He slowly raises his hands in a *everything's okay* kind of way, but it's at such odds with his outfit and the

glaringly obvious fact that he's snuck into my goddamn bedroom. The scream escapes before I even make the conscious decision to open my mouth. I realize it's the worst thing I could've done because the man lunges for me when I can't stop screaming.

His large hand covers my mouth, the weight of him pressing me back into the mattress. He uses his other hand to grab my wrists and pin them to the bed, and that's when I really lose it. This is the worst position for me to be in, and I'm shaking so badly I can barely think. His deep voice breaks through the ringing in my ears.

"Just calm down. I'm not going to hurt you."

As soon as I hear the slight accent, I buck up against him even harder, because I know that accent. My uncle and all his men were killed by a Russian Bratva, and now one of them is right here in front of me, most likely looking to finish off another Rossi.

"Fucking hell," he growls and then says something in a long, fast string of Russian. "Gia, knock it the fuck off!"

My name on his lips has me freezing in place. His hand still covers my mouth, making it impossible for me to speak. I suck in fast, quick breaths through my nose and try to calm my racing heart.

When I stay relaxed beneath him, he growls, "Was that so fucking hard?"

I narrow my eyes at him, wishing there was more moonlight coming in from the window so I can see him better. With the mask, all I can make out are eyes that look either blue or green, almond-shaped with dark lashes, and a full mouth that's currently turned up in an infuriating smirk. His upper body is against mine, but he's being careful to keep his lower body off me. I can feel his strength, though. This guy definitely works out, and there's no way in hell I'm getting up until he wants me to.

I huff out an angry breath through my nose, making his smirk grow. "You're a feisty one," he says with a soft laugh as

if I'm the most amusing thing he's ever seen. His eyes run over my bare breasts and his smile grows. "I have to admit I'm torn between wanting you to behave and wanting you to fight, because goddamn, sweetheart, your tits look amazing when you squirm."

That one line mixed with his smug grin pushes me over the edge. With the last bit of strength I can muster, I dig my heels into the mattress and buck up against him, doing my damndest to catch him off guard. It doesn't work. He's forced to straddle me to keep my body under control, putting me in an even worse position. I silently curse my own stupidity, and then my whole body stills when I feel the hard length of him pressing against my thigh. I'm painfully aware that I'm in nothing but my travel-comfy, cotton panties.

He sees the fear in my eyes and says, "Relax. I'm not a fucking rapist."

I roll my eyes at him because isn't that exactly what a rapist would say?

The heavy sigh he gives lets me know how heavy of a burden he thinks I am. He leans closer, keeping his eyes on mine.

"Are you going to be a good girl and not scream if I lift my hand?"

He smiles at the glare I give him, but I nod my head as best I can.

"Good, because no one will hear you, and you'll just give me a headache."

When he releases his hand, I suck in a quick breath of air, but I don't scream. He's right. It won't do any good.

He taps the tip of my nose and says, "Good girl."

"Jackass," I growl, trying to scurry away, but just because he took his hand off my mouth doesn't mean he's easing up anywhere else.

He laughs, the deep sound of it runs through me and makes me wish he'd put some distance between us. It's hard to think

with his powerful body on top of mine and his erection digging into my thigh, dangerously close to the thin scrap of fabric that covers my pussy.

“You weren’t supposed to wake up, Gia,” he confesses. “I thought for sure after that enormous supper that you’d be in a much deeper sleep.”

My eyes widen in surprise. “How long have you been here?”

The cocky son of a bitch gives me a wink. “A few hours before you.”

My breath hitches when his fingers lightly brush my forehead, sweeping aside a wayward strand of hair. “What exactly are you doing here, Gia?”

“I’m just here to sell the place. I’m not involved in any of my family’s shit, and I sure as hell don’t want any trouble with your fucking Bratva.”

He laughs and tightens his grip on my wrists. “Well, I’m afraid you’ve put yourself on our radar, sweetheart, and I can’t just let you go.”

“What do you mean you can’t let me go? What the hell are you going to do with me?”

He gives a soft shrug and digs his phone out of his back pocket, pressing a few buttons before holding it to where his ear is beneath the mask. He keeps his eyes on mine as he starts speaking Russian. The longer the call goes on, the more obvious it is that he’s not excited about where this conversation is going. By the time he hangs up, his mouth is in a hard line.

“Looks like I just assigned myself babysitting duty,” he growls at me, putting his phone away.

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“It means you’re coming with me, sweetheart.”

“Stop calling me that, and the fuck I am.”

He laughs and gives my cheek a soft pat. “Don’t worry, no harm will come to you as long as you behave like a good girl. You can do that. Can’t you, Gia?”

His patronizing tone has me narrowing my eyes at him. He laughs even harder and pulls his mask off, making my breath catch in my throat, because the man is fucking gorgeous. His dark blond hair is tousled from the ski mask, giving him a boyish look despite the fact that he’s probably in his mid-thirties. When he turns and the moonlight hits him better, the green of his eyes has me sucking in another quick breath. Without thinking, I start to squirm beneath him, making his cock press even harder against me. He lifts a dark brow at me.

“You trying to seduce me, sweetheart?” he asks with a laugh.

“Fuck you,” I growl. “I’m just trying to get your heavy ass off me.”

“Well, that’s a shame. You look beautiful when you’re pissed.”

With that, he lifts himself off me. He runs his eyes over me one more time before saying, “Get dressed. We need to get going.”

I quickly pull the blanket up to cover my nakedness. “I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“Yes, you are. You don’t have a choice in the matter.” He leans closer, filling the space with his powerful body. “I will tie you up and carry your ass out of here if I have to.” He winks and adds, “I might even enjoy it.”

Knowing my options are very limited, I say, “Can you at least turn around so I can get dressed?”

“No,” he smirks. “You might try and bash me over the head with the lamp or something. I can’t take that risk.”

“I might still try and do it,” I mutter, making him laugh. “You’re an odd kidnapper.”

He shrugs. “I wasn’t planning on being one tonight. I’ll try my best to appear scarier.”

I watch him take a step back and cross his arms over his chest. A chill runs down my spine when his whole face transforms into a hard, fierce mask that's just as effective as the black ski mask in making my bladder feel like it's going to let loose. In seconds he's gone from the cocky man who likes to crack a joke to a deadly Bratva member. This is the real him, I remind myself. It's not safe to forget it, no matter how disarmingly handsome he is.

“Get dressed, Gia.”

His tone is hard and leaves zero room for discussion. I nod and walk over to my suitcase, taking the blanket with me. Turning my back on him, I hurry up and put my bra on and then the pair of jeans I'd arrived in and a long-sleeve tee.

When I turn back to him, he's still watching me with that same hard look. He points to the suitcase. “Get the rest of your luggage.”

I quickly do as he says, and when I've got it all, he grabs the heaviest suitcase and motions for me to lead the way. I was hoping my stay at my uncle's would be short, but even I can admit this is ridiculous. I'd assumed the Bratva wouldn't be interested in my visit. I mean, why in the hell would they? I have nothing to do with the Rossi mafia. It doesn't matter now, though. I'd been naïve and stupid, and now I'm paying for it.

It's fear for my brother that makes me drop my bags and run for my rental car as soon as I cross the threshold, already digging into my pocket for the key fob. A loud curse rings out behind me, but I don't stop. I just keep running. I almost make it to the damn car before a strong arm wraps around me from behind, locking me in place against him. His other arm comes up to rest across my upper chest. My arms are pinned, and my whole body trembles as I gasp for air. Adrenaline and anger and fear course through me in equal measure. He isn't out of breath at all, just a solid wall of muscle, calmly restraining me without much effort on his part.

When he speaks, his mouth is by my ear, close enough for me to feel the heat of his breath against my skin. “I'm

disappointed, *ptichka*. My little bird needs to have her wings clipped. I'm afraid I can't let you fly away just yet."

"I'm sorry," I quickly say, wondering if I've pushed him too far.

"If you have nothing to hide, then you have nothing to fear."

I snort out a laugh. "Right, because that's how the fucking mafia works."

"We're Russian. It's a Bratva, sweetheart, and we don't run things like your family."

I turn my head enough so I can see him. "Really? You trying to tell me you don't kill people?"

His green eyes are still devoid of all emotion when he says, "I never said that, but things will go a lot easier for you if you stop fighting me."

"Fine," I whisper, knowing there's no way in hell I'll be able to just run off.

He slides a hand down to my pocket before slowly slipping his fingers in. My heart races, and I know he can feel it. The smug grin on his face is a dead giveaway. He pulls my key fob out and stuffs it in his own pocket before letting me go. Grabbing my wrist, he drags me back to my bags and we both fill our arms.

"Come on. I'm parked down the road a bit."

I fall in line beside him, using the suitcase's wheels to drag it behind me. The moon is full and bright, giving me a clear view of him. His profile is just as mouthwatering. His chiseled jaw is sporting a little bit of stubble, and I'm amazed that any man can look so damn good. I'm equal parts annoyed and disappointed with myself for thinking it. He's taking me away against my will for fuck's sake. I should find him completely revolting. Maybe he'll slowly grow uglier the longer I spend with him, kind of like the guy I dated a few years ago. I'd thought he was so damn good looking, and then I'd seen the shitty way he treated his dog. He'd instantly become

unattractive to me. I run my eyes over the man next to me and have serious doubts that he'll magically grow unappealing.

“What’s your name?”

“Yuri.” He looks down at me and gives me another wink, giving me a glimpse of the other side of him. I like it more than I should.

I follow him down the road to where a black Audi is parked. The lights flick on and off as he unlocks it with the push of a button. Piling my bags in the trunk, he walks me to the passenger side and opens the door for me. I arch a brow at him.

“This isn’t a date, Yuri. You’re fucking kidnapping me.”

“I prefer to think of it as borrowing you until this all gets sorted.”

I snort out a laugh. “Whatever helps you sleep at night.”

He slams the door in my face and quickly walks to the driver’s side. The car feels too small with him in it, our bodies way too close. I need distance, room to fucking breathe, because I can’t think when he’s this near to me. His large hand shifts the car with ease as we speed through the empty streets. If the speedometer is any indication, he’s not at all worried about the police, which means they probably own them. I think about that as Yuri speeds down the winding road with the confidence of an IndyCar driver. If their Bratva owns the police, then that means they own the whole damn city, and that also means I’ve gotten my ass into trouble with some very powerful men.

“I really don’t have anything to do with the mafia shit,” I say. “I have no loyalty to them, and I’m not brave enough for torture, so you don’t need to bother with it. I’ll tell you whatever the hell you want to know. I’ll warn you that it’s not much, though. I’ve made it my life’s mission to stay as far away from all my family’s shit as humanly possible.”

I’m not expecting him to stop the car and let me out, but I’m also not expecting the laugh he gives.

“I’m so happy I amuse you,” I mutter, going back to staring out the window.

“It’s nice to know you’re not brave enough for torture. I’ll keep that in mind. Although,” he turns to look at me, giving me a quick wink before putting his focus back on the road, “I bet you’d look damn good tied up while I tease the living fuck out of you.”

My jaw drops at his words and at the image that pops into my head of me bound to his bed with his head buried between my legs while he teases the hell out of me. I squirm in my seat, making him laugh again.

“Maybe you’re more cut out for torture than you think, *ptichka*.”

I ignore him and the ache that’s blooming between my legs. The rest of the drive is made in silence, and by the time he pulls up in front of a cute Craftsman-style house, my eyelids are becoming heavy and I’m fighting to stay awake.

Before we get out, he turns to me, giving me the hard Bratva stare. “Do I need to gag you and throw you over my shoulder?”

“Why would I ever say yes to that?”

A small smirk breaks through his stony, angry face. “You might like it.”

I look away, because he really is just truly too damn good looking, and say, “I’m not going to do anything stupid, Yuri. I know it won’t do any good.”

“Then welcome to your temporary home. I hope you aren’t disappointed at the lack of a dungeon and torture devices. I don’t have a basement set up like your uncle did.”

Turning my head, I meet his green eyes. “Were you there the night they were all killed?”

His eyes turn hard at the memory. “I was, and those fuckers deserved every damn thing they got and then some.”

On that cheery note, he opens the car door and steps out, leaving me to follow along after him. My eyes scan the houses

around us. Most of them are too far away to see clearly. I just get the impression of vague outlines several hundred feet away, all of them butting up against the huge lake.

Following Yuri inside, I'm surprised to find the place not only spotless but downright cozy.

"Don't look so fucking surprised," he says, startling me. "You thought I lived like a pig?"

I shrug my shoulders but don't say anything, because I was definitely picturing more of a bachelor pad for this guy. I expected empty beer bottles and panties thrown over the back of the couch, maybe some porn playing on his large-screen TV for extra ambiance.

"Are you tired?"

"Very," I say, giving him a pointed look. "Somebody woke me up in the middle of the night and ruined my sleep."

"You were sleeping in nothing but a tiny pair of panties," he says as if that explains everything. Before I can ask what that has to do with him breaking into the damn house, he ushers me up the stairs, following right behind me with the rest of my bags.

"First door on the right."

I follow his directions and step into the room and then immediately start to backtrack my ass out of there when I realize it's his bedroom. I freeze when I hit the brick wall that is his chest. Tilting my head up, I say, "I'm not staying in here with you."

"I'm afraid you don't have a choice."

Chapter 3

Yuri

Gia eyes me like I've lost my mind, and maybe I have. I've been doing this job far too long to make stupid mistakes, but that's exactly what I've done tonight. I never expected her to wake up. I'd watched her come in and make supper, and then she'd passed out from pure exhaustion. I'd peeked in her room, just wanting to make sure she was still asleep before I started snooping around some more, but then I'd seen the way the moonlight hit her practically naked body, and I couldn't resist stepping closer for a better look. The delicate lines of her shoulder and neck, the sexy dip in her lower back, and, my god, the curve of her round ass—it was like I'd been in a trance. And then she'd woken up, making it very clear that I'd fucked up in a huge way. Mikhail had been less than thrilled at the news, and now I'm stuck on around-the-clock babysitting duty.

“I can't watch you well enough if you're in the spare room,” I try and explain to her as calmly as I can.

She lets out a harsh laugh. “I bet you tell that to all the girls you kidnap.”

I let the comment slide because I know she's had a big night and is cranky. Tossing her bags in the corner, I motion toward the door on the other side of the room.

“That's the bathroom if you need it. We can talk more in the morning.”

Ignoring the angry glare she's giving me, I pull my shirt off and start to undo my pants. When I'm in nothing but my

boxer briefs, I look over and smile when I catch her eye-fucking me. She huffs out a breath, grabs one of her bags, and walks to the bathroom, slamming the door behind her. Laughing, I get in bed and check my phone. Mikhail's texted me again, and when I read it the laughter dies in my throat.

Chip her ass tonight. We can't risk her getting loose.

I sigh and tell him it'll be done. Crossing to my closet, I hurry up and get the needle ready from the lockbox I keep it in. All of Mikhail's men are chipped, hell, even his wife is, but I doubt that's going to appease Gia when she finds out what I'm about to do. Once the tracking chip is in the needle, I put it in my nightstand drawer right before Gia walks out looking so damn beautiful it stuns me into silence. The T-shirt she's wearing hits her mid-thigh, giving me a mouthwatering view of her long legs. Her arms are crossed over her chest, but I'm willing to bet that if she moved her arms, I'd see two hard nipples that are just begging me to wrap my mouth around them.

She's not mine to have, I remind myself. She's a chess piece in a much bigger game. I just need to find out how deeply embedded in this game she is and then wash my hands of it. She crawls under the covers, being careful to stay as far away from me as the bed will allow.

"Relax, *ptichka*, I'm not going to have my way with you while you're sleeping."

"Why do you call me that?" She pulls the covers up to her neck and side-eyes me.

"It means *little bird*." I give a small shrug. "You're so damn eager to fly away." I look at her until she meets my eyes. "I'm afraid I need to keep you in your cage for a bit longer, though."

She sighs and then turns on her side away from me. I stare at the back of her head for a few minutes before finally turning out the light. I'm exhausted but I force myself to lay as still as possible until I hear her breathing deepen and fall into a relaxed rhythm. I almost laugh when she starts to snore,

because ladylike is the last word I'd ever use to describe it. It's like sleeping next to a small bear.

Slipping out of bed, I silently go through the bag I saw her put her phone in and then carefully use one of her fingers to unlock it. I pull up her photos and start to flip through them. She's with a young man in a ton of them, and if it wasn't for the strong family resemblance, I'd be jealous, but even though his hair is a bit darker, he has the same blue eyes as Gia, and it's pretty obvious that he must be a younger brother.

I keep scrolling through the photos, wanting to see more of Gia and the kind of life she lives. Her love for her brother is evident, but so is her love of flowers, old Victorian houses, and small bookstores. She's a good photographer, always managing to capture not just a photo but also a mood. Women her age always seem to be posing and taking selfies, but that's not what she does. She captures small buds that dot twisted tree limbs and old, red-brick buildings of hole-in-the-wall bookstores that are slick with rain.

Forcing myself to look away from her photos, I start to go through her texts. By the time I'm done, I'm pretty convinced that she has nothing to do with the Rossi family business. Looks can be deceiving, but my gut tells me she's an innocent in all this. That doesn't stop me from doing my job, though. I send a text to Mikhail, telling him about her brother so he'll see it when he wakes up.

With her snores still filling the whole goddamn room, I reach over and grab the needle before gently pulling the blankets down. I bite back the groan I want to give when I see that her shirt has ridden up, giving me a glimpse of that perfect ass again. God, I bet it bounces so damn good when you smack it. My cock starts to stiffen, so I hurry up and get to work. There's no way in hell this won't wake her up. I take a steadying, deep breath and plunge the needle in, shooting the chip in and lifting it out of her sweet ass cheek in less than two seconds.

"What the fuck!" she yells, thrashing around to grab her ass. "What was that?"

I laugh and give her cheek a soft smack. “I pinched your ass, sweetheart. You’re hogging the bed, and you snore like a goddamn bear.”

She rubs her sore cheek and gives me an adorable growl as she pulls the blankets back up and turns over again. “I do *not* snore,” she mutters, already close to falling back asleep.

Setting the needle back in the drawer with her phone, I get out of bed. I almost feel bad about what I’ve just done until I walk into the bathroom and lift the lid to take a piss. My toothbrush bobs on top of the water.

“Fucking little ass,” I grumble in Russian, tossing the ruined toothbrush in the garbage before peeing and then scrubbing my hands. I run my eyes over the bathroom that she’s clearly taken over. Face products line the counter, her shampoo and conditioner is already in the shower, and her dirty clothes are piled on the floor. Someone’s clearly made herself at home. With a smile, I grab her toothbrush and brush my teeth.

When I get back into bed, I hear her give a soft laugh from under the covers.

“Laugh it up, *ptichka*, we’re sharing a toothbrush now. I hope you don’t have anything contagious.”

She flips over to stare at me. “You used my toothbrush?”

“You left me no choice. Mine had an unfortunate run-in with the toilet. Did you expect me to just fish it out and use it? Your opinion of me must be really low if you think I’m capable of that.”

“My butt still hurts,” she says after a few minutes of silence.

“I do like the sound of that. Want me to kiss it better?”

“Jackass,” she mutters, rolling back over to fall asleep.

I smile and stretch out, resting my hands behind my head. Years of training have taught me to sleep lightly, and I’m confident I’ll hear her if she tries to slip away. With the tracking chip in her ass, she won’t get far even if she does

manage it. When I do give in to my exhaustion, despite all my training, I end up falling hard, not even her snoring wakes me up.

When the sun streaming in through the window wakes me several hours later, I sit up so fast I make myself dizzy. The bed is empty, and there's no sign of Gia. Cursing my own stupidity for falling into such a deep sleep, I grab my phone and quickly pull up her tracker, breathing out a sigh of relief when I see the reassuring, blinking dot. She's somewhere nearby, and I don't take the time to pull on some pants before darting out of the room and down the stairs.

The enticing scent of waffles and bacon greets me before I round the corner and see Gia standing over the stove. She turns her head and runs her eyes over me. They widen when she spots the morning wood I woke up with.

“What are you doing?”

“What the hell does it look like I'm doing?”

I scrub a hand through my hair and resist taking the bait.

With her back to me, she says, “Maybe you should go get dressed.”

I look down at the hard cock that's tenting my boxer briefs and smile. “Afraid you won't be able to control yourself around me?”

Stepping closer, I run my eyes over the body I'm dying to explore. She's changed into a pair of jeans and a pink T-shirt, but she still looks just as mouthwatering as she did last night. Her blue eyes narrow when she turns them on me.

“I can control myself just fine. You're not my type, Yuri.”

“You prefer men with smaller dicks and less muscle?”

She can't muster up a comeback for that, so she grimaces and scoops the bacon onto a plate, setting it on the counter next to the giant stack of waffles.

“It's so sweet you made me breakfast, *ptichka*.”

She rolls her eyes at me. “Don’t flatter yourself. I cook when I’m stressed.”

I grab a mug of coffee and then start to fill a plate. She does the same and takes the barstool next to me.

“Fucking hell,” I groan when I take my first bite, trying not to orgasm from how damn good it tastes. “Better be careful, Gia. Keep cooking like this, and I’ll never let you go.”

“I spit in the batter I used for yours,” she says, giving me a sweet smile.

I laugh and shrug my shoulders. “We share a toothbrush, sweetheart, a little spit’s not going to bother me.” I give her a wink and add, “Plus, I’m pretty sure we’re going to be fucking soon.”

Her pretty mouth opens in surprise. “Are you always this damn conceited?”

I laugh and tell her the truth. “Ever since I turned seventeen and started to really fill out, I’ve seen the effect I have on women. It’s not so much as me being conceited as me just knowing the truth of it. Women find me attractive and want to fuck me. End of story. It’s hard to be conceited about something you have no control over.”

Forking some more waffles, I add, “The universe just saw fit to bless me. It’s a heavy burden, but someone’s got to carry it.”

She rolls her eyes again and takes another bite.

“You can’t tell me you don’t know what I’m talking about. It’s not like you fell out of the ugly tree.”

When she’s done chewing, she says, “I’ve never had your confidence, and I doubt I ever will. I’m not so sure I’d want it, to be honest. Yeah, sometimes I get hit on, but something tells me I’m a little pickier than you.”

Annoyed that the thought of her with another man bothers me, I stab my fork down harder than necessary, ignoring the little smirk she gives me. I’m not a jealous man, or at least I never thought of myself like that. I’ve seen women that I’ve

been with hanging on other men at the club or even fucking some of the other guys in the Bratva, and I've never given the slightest fuck about it. Why the hell would I? It's not like I want them for longer than a night. I don't do relationships, never have. I like a good time and then a quick goodbye.

Once both our plates are empty, she turns to me, hooking an arm over the back of her barstool. "So what comes next? When are you going to let me go?"

"I don't know yet. You're still being investigated by our guys."

"I couldn't find my phone this morning. I don't suppose there's any way you could give that back to me?"

She tries to look like it's not a big deal, but I can see how badly she wants that phone back. She's not near as good at schooling her emotions as I am.

"Why? Eager to let Dominic know you're okay?"

Her whole body stills at my words, and for the second time since I met her, I see genuine terror in her blue eyes.

"He has nothing to do with this, Yuri. I swear."

I look down, surprised to see her gripping my arm.

"Please," she begs. "Dom has nothing to do with the mafia shit. I've spent my whole life protecting him and keeping him away from all that."

Her fingers dig into my forearm, and as much as I've thought about hearing her beg, this isn't what I had in mind. I rest my hand on top of hers, gently caressing her skin with my thumb without even having to think about it. She's upset, and my first instinct is to make her feel better.

"Relax, *ptichka*. If what you say is true, then your brother will be fine."

"It is true."

I meet her blue eyes and keep stroking her soft skin. "Then you have nothing to worry about."

“Promise me.” Her fingers dig in harder. “Promise me no harm will come to him.”

I’m surprised by how badly I want to give her this and by how badly I want to wrap my arms around her and make her forget about everything except the feel of my cock sliding into her. Instead, I say, “I promise that if your brother has nothing to do with the Rossi mafia, then no harm will come to him.”

It’s the best I can give her, and when her body softens and she gives me a small nod, I know it’s enough, at least for now.

“Can I please text him to let him know I’m okay? There’s no reason to make him worry. You can read my text before I send it. I would never do anything to put my brother’s life in danger. I’m not going to say anything about what’s happened or where I am.”

I think about it for a few seconds, but I know she’s right. Based on the texts I read last night, they’re used to staying in touch. I see no benefit to getting him upset and worried. He’ll only start poking his nose around, and if he is a part of the Rossi mafia, then that won’t be good for us.

“Fine,” I say, and she squeezes my arm again, but this time with a big grin on her face. “But that’s all your doing, and I’m reading it before you send it.”

She quickly shakes her head, and I know she’d agree to just about anything right now. Lucky for her I’m not the giant jackass she seems to think I am.

“Thank you, Yuri.” She looks down and notices that she’s still grabbing onto me, and then her eyes wander over my abs and the obvious dick print that’s quickly growing bigger. “Do you ever think about anything else?” she asks, making me smile.

I run a finger along her jaw, noticing the way her breath hitches. “Not when you’re around, *ptichka*.”

“Oh, please, like you haven’t used that exact same line on a million women.”

I let out a surprised laugh. I’m not used to women playing hard to get. I’m used to them spreading their legs. I can’t

figure Gia out. Technically, I shouldn't even be trying to fuck her, but I wasn't given the direct order not to, so I interpret that as a green light, especially when paired with the fact that I see no evidence that she's lying to me.

"What's the deal with your fridge?" she asks, pointing at the large, stainless steel appliance that's covered in drawings Lev's made me and photos of Anya and Luka.

"What about it?" I shrug. I may not think she's involved with the mafia, but that doesn't mean I'm willing to risk anything when it comes to the kids.

"Are those all your illegitimate kids?"

I smile before I can stop myself. "Something like that," I say, smiling even bigger when I see the annoyed look on her face.

"I cooked," she announces, getting up and tossing her napkin on her empty plate. "You get to clean."

"You're pretty damn bossy for someone who's being held against her will."

"It's my first kidnapping," she says with a shrug. "I'm still figuring things out."

She walks to the couch and plops down on it before grabbing the remote. "I'm going to check out what streaming stuff you have."

I watch her from the kitchen, wondering what in the fuck I'm doing. She should be sitting quietly somewhere, worried that we might find some incriminating evidence against her, not having a fucking vacation, binge-watching shows and kicking her feet up. I'm usually a pretty scary guy, but I can't bring myself to be that man with her. She caught a glimpse of it last night, but it's not a mask I seem to be able to keep on with her. It's annoying.

While she finds something to watch, I start on the dishes. The monotony is broken up by the occasional sound of her laughter, and when I'm all finished, I run upstairs to get cleaned up and dressed before joining her on the couch.

“Don’t you have Bratva work to do?”

I stretch my legs out, using part of the ottoman she’s got her feet on and relax into the couch. “I’m doing it. I told you I’ve got babysitting duty thanks to you waking up last night.”

“If I hadn’t woken up, what would you be doing right now?”

I look over at her and smile. “Watching you, just like I did since you got to your uncle’s yesterday.”

“You were spying on me the whole time I was there?” When I nod, she says, “That’s really creepy, Yuri.”

Laughing, I say, “It’s not like I was jerking off while you were dancing around the kitchen, singing along to your godawful music and then congratulating yourself once your supper was done. That steak smelled amazing, by the way. I can’t believe my growling stomach didn’t give me away.”

“That’s so damn unsettling to know you were watching me the whole time and I never knew. Why did you come into the bedroom then? Were you going to go through my suitcases?”

I think about lying, but instead say, “No, your body looked amazing in the moonlight, and I couldn’t resist getting a closer look. I got greedy,” I say, raising my hands in a *what can you do?* kind of way.

“You’re either really bad at your job or desperate to get laid.”

“I’m neither, actually. You just have a really great ass.”

She wants to look pissed, but I see the soft smile playing at her lips and the soft blush that heats up her cheeks. When I pull her phone from my pocket, her whole damn face lights up.

“I read it before you send it,” I say, keeping the phone just out of reach.

“Yes, yes, I promise,” she quickly says, grabbing the phone as soon as it’s close enough.

She reads through the missed texts, the ones I already read through upstairs, and then her fingers fly over the keyboard,

evidently writing him a short story. When she's finished, she hands it over.

Dom, made it here okay. The flight was boring. I did get stuck next to this really arrogant jackass who thought he was god's gift to women, so that was somewhat entertaining. The house is just as ridiculous as I thought it'd be. Uncle Antonio's place is beyond tacky. You'd laugh your ass off at all the gold-dipped everything. I'm going to be crazy busy meeting with the realtor and everything, but I'll try to keep in touch as much as possible. I love you and miss you! How are classes going? What did your professor say about your last project?

"Some arrogant jackass, huh?" I ask, lifting a brow at her.

"I'm sprinkling a little truth in to make it seem more believable."

"At least I'm somewhat entertaining," I say dryly as I send her text off and then pocket the phone.

She relaxes back against the couch, happy now that she knows Dominic won't worry about her. We spend the afternoon taking turns picking out things to watch, and I have to keep reminding myself that this is work and nothing more. I'm not used to hanging around a woman whose company I genuinely enjoy. She makes me laugh and seems completely immune to my charm which baffles the hell out of me. I've never met anyone quite like her.

When she cooks me a delicious supper of pork chops and sautéed vegetables, I worry that I might be in over my head for the first time in my life. She's gorgeous but doesn't seem to realize it at all, funny, doesn't put up with my shit, and loves to cook. The only problem, of course, is her last name, a fact that my brain refuses to forget, even if my cock did get a quick case of selective amnesia the second I laid eyes on her.

Lying down in bed proves to be more difficult than I anticipated. The shower runs in the bathroom, making it impossible for me to not picture her naked and wet. Vivid images of tan, long legs and that perfect pair of tits that haunt me every time I close my damn eyes run through my head

until I have no choice but to fist my own cock or lose what small grip on sanity I have left.

I stroke myself inside my boxers, but when that proves too constraining, I quickly strip them off and let out a deep groan at the new freedom of movement. Tightening my grip, I work myself hard and fast, needing relief more than I care about prolonging the enjoyment. The fantasy that plays out in my mind is just as brutal as my hand. I swear I can almost feel her soft, long hair in my fist as I imagine pulling it hard, holding her in place as I slam into her from behind. My hips rock up, imagining the round ass that I'm obsessed with pressing against me as her pussy clenches tightly around my cock.

Her whimpers and moans fill my ears, and when I think about her turning her head and locking those fiery blue eyes on mine, screaming my name while her body shudders against me, I barely have time to grab my boxers to catch my seed before I let loose. I groan as the orgasm thunders through me. My nuts tense even more as my cock pulses with each shot until I'm completely spent.

"Goddamn," I groan, catching my breath. Fantasy sex with Gia is the best sex I've had in a very long time. With that depressing thought firmly in place, I get up to put on a new pair of boxers before she comes out. The last thing I want is for her to find me lying here naked with evidence of my own guilt clutched in my hand like some fucking teenager who can't control himself.

Chapter 4

Gia

I walk into the bedroom and try not to ogle Yuri's model-perfect body. He's sprawled out with his hands behind his head, bare chested with the sheet hitting right below his belly button. It'd be so much easier to hate him if he didn't make my mouth water every time I look at him. I've been around good-looking guys before, but I've never had this sort of reaction to anyone else. It's like a magnetic pull that's getting harder and harder to resist.

Scooting under the blankets, I pull them up to my chin and hear him give a soft laugh. He rolls on his side and runs a finger up my forearm, leaving a trail of goosebumps and making my nipples pebble and press against my shirt.

"How about a goodnight kiss?" he asks, giving me a sinfully wicked smile while trailing his finger further up my arm.

"I don't think that's a very good idea."

"Afraid you'll want more?"

I roll on my side and ignore how badly I want to take him up on his offer. "Goodnight, Yuri," I whisper, telling myself that I'll be back in New York soon and that the stupidest thing in the world I can do is fuck the gorgeous Bratva guy.

His fingers trail up my arm again, pushing up the sleeve of my shirt. When I feel his lips on my bare shoulder, I bite back the moan that threatens to come out. "Goodnight, *ptichka*. Wake me if you change your mind."

It takes me a long time to fall asleep, but when I do, it's deep and dreamless. When my groggy brain starts to pull me back to consciousness, my face is pressed against a hard, warm chest and a strong arm is wrapped tightly around me. I'm awake enough to realize it's Yuri and that I should probably scoot away, but the steady beat of his heart thuds reassuringly in my ear, calming me in a way that makes me want to keep my eyes closed and my body pressed tightly to his for a few more precious minutes. I can tell by his deep, steady breaths that he's still asleep, and I realize what a rare opportunity this is. I blink my eyes open and very carefully lift my head a bit so I can study him. Even in sleep, he's the most beautiful man I've ever seen. His dark blond hair is adorably disheveled, and the stubble on his cheeks is sexy as hell. My eyes run over him, greedy and urgent, knowing I don't have a lot of time. The colorful ink that decorates his body makes him look even more like a piece of art. I smile at the bird tattoo on his shoulder, the feathers so black they look almost blue. He's definitely got a thing for birds. My eyes drift up to the full lips that look so damn kissable, and before I can stop myself, I brush the back of one finger along his jaw.

Movement from the corner of my eye catches my attention, and when I look back down, I see the sheet slowly start to tent. When I look back up at Yuri's face, his green eyes are lit up with mischief and grinning at me like the cocky bastard he is.

"Want me to keep pretending I'm asleep so you can touch yourself? I promise I won't peek."

The smug jackass gives me a wink, and when I try to move away, he tightens his arms around me. In an instant, I'm on my back and his large, powerful body is hovering above mine.

"Yuri," I whisper, when I feel the hard length of him against my pussy.

He brings his face to my neck, slowly inhaling with a soft moan. "How do you always smell so damn good, *ptichka*?"

The heat of his breath on my neck has my heart racing, and when he gives the crook of my neck a soft kiss, I let out the

moan that's been dying to break free. His cock grows even bigger, pressing harder against me, and it's impossible for me to think about anything except how fucking good this feels. There are a million reasons why we shouldn't be doing this, but I'll be damned if I can conjure up a single one right now. He starts to kiss his way up my neck and along my jaw, but before he can get to my lips, his phone buzzes on the nightstand.

He groans something in Russian and presses his forehead to mine, cupping my face in a surprisingly sweet gesture. "I have to get that."

I nod, already starting to scurry away, because every single one of those reasons I couldn't recall just mere seconds ago suddenly comes crashing into me. This is a bad idea, and nothing good can come of it.

"It's fine. Get your phone. This needed to stop anyway," I quickly say, jumping up and running to the bathroom. I hear him sigh behind me before he answers his phone. I shut the bathroom door, ignoring the deep voice speaking Russian, because I'm only so strong, and I need to put some distance between me and that sexy language coming out of his gorgeous mouth.

I hurry up and brush my teeth before pulling my hair into a ponytail and throwing on some shorts and a T-shirt. Pressing my ear against the door, I wait until I'm sure he's still on the phone, and then I open it and speed walk the hell out of there, keeping my eyes on the floor the whole way.

I breathe a sigh of relief when I enter the kitchen. It's always been the most peaceful place in a house to me, and my body begins to relax when I start the coffeepot and get out ingredients for an omelet. This, I can handle. Half-naked men who look like they should be on a billboard, not so much.

Several minutes later, Yuri comes walking in. He's thrown on a shirt and a pair of workout shorts. I suddenly become very interested in making sure the omelets are cooking properly, only lifting my head when he sets my phone down on the counter.

“Your brother texted. You can answer him if you want.”

When I reach for the phone, he puts his hand on top of mine, holding me still so I can't pull away.

“We going to pretend nothing happened this morning, Gia?”

I force myself to meet his eyes. “I think that's probably for the best.”

He studies me for a few seconds before giving me a tight nod and letting go. While he pours himself a cup of coffee, I fill our plates and then grab my phone. Dominic texted several times, asking how things are going and then telling me all about the A his professor gave him on his latest drawing. Despite everything that's going on with me right now, I still smile and feel a swell of pride. I'm so damn proud of my brother. I quickly type out a reply, letting him know that everything is fine but busy and that I'm hoping the realtor can find a buyer soon because I'm more than ready to get back to New York.

Before I hit send, I hand it to Yuri. He reads it with his mouth pressed in a tight line before sending it off and pocketing it. We eat in awkward silence, and when we're done, he immediately starts doing dishes. I can't even bring myself to make a joke about how well-trained he's become.

“I'm going to go for a run,” he says, pointing down the hall to where his home gym must be. “Will you be okay?”

“I'll be fine.” I'm surprised he's leaving me alone, but I'm not about to question it. He pauses and watches me for a second before raking his hand through his hair and turning his back on me. I watch him disappear into one of the spare rooms, and then I walk to the French doors that lead out to the backyard. I didn't pay much attention to this part of the house yesterday, but I should have, because it's absolutely gorgeous.

The lake spreads out in front of me, bigger than anything I've ever seen. The early morning sun makes the water sparkle, and it looks too damn inviting to pass up. I'd packed my bathing suit since I knew my uncle had a pool, but this

looks like way more fun. Running back upstairs, I hurry up and change and then grab a towel from the bathroom before heading outside. The wooden deck off the house is filled with patio furniture and when I look to the right, I'm surprised to see an in-ground pool.

Why the hell would you have a pool when you have this humongous, beautiful lake right in front of you?

I ignore it and walk to the shoreline. Looking around, I see Yuri's neighbors spread out to the right and left, but there's plenty of space between the houses, making it feel more private than it actually is. I briefly think about running, but then quickly nix the idea when I think about how useless it would be. Anything I do would just put Dominic in danger, and I'm not willing to do that by attempting a pointless, mad dash to nowhere since I don't even have the keys to his car.

I put my focus back on the water. The waves crash against the sandy beach, and I'm in awe of how gorgeous it is. Staring at the vastness of it, I have to remind myself that this isn't the ocean. Dropping the towel, I run out to the water, laughing when I see how clear it is. It's a little chilly, but the sun is shining down, making it more exhilarating than uncomfortable.

Wading out, I dive under the waves and swim for as long as I can hold my breath, surfacing only when my lungs start burning and I'm forced to. I lazily swim farther out before turning on my back and floating. Yuri's house grows more distant as I kick my feet and arms, letting the current gently pull me along. It isn't until I feel the strength of the current that I start to panic.

"Oh shit!" I yell, lowering my legs and treading water as I try to fight against it. The force of the current is unlike anything I've ever felt, and as hard as I try to swim, it just seems like I'm getting farther and farther away from where I want to be. My arms and legs burn from the effort, my breaths are nothing but ragged gasps, and my heart is racing so fast I can hear it swooshing in my ears and pounding against my ribs.

When I see Yuri run out his back door, I use the last of my strength to scream his name and wave my arm. He runs toward the water, and he's so far away by this point that I can't even make out the features of his face. He dives into the water and starts to swim towards me, but he's still so damn far away, and I'm on the absolute last of my strength. Panic runs through me when my legs give out and I slip under, inhaling water before I can stop it. I paw my way to the surface, gasping and coughing before falling back under again.

Knowing Yuri's on his way gives me enough strength to claw my way to the surface again. I cling to the knowledge that he's fighting to get to me, and I may not have known him long, but I know with absolute certainty that he will get to me and that nothing will stop him from reaching me.

I'm still coughing and about to go right back under again when I feel his arm wrap around my chest. As soon as I feel him, I start to panic, turning and clinging to him, so afraid that he's going to let go and I'll go under again.

"For fuck's sake, Gia," he growls at me. "I'm trying to help!"

I tighten my grip on him, determined to not let the current separate us.

"I'm sorry," I manage to choke out. My voice is raw from coughing, and my whole body is shaking.

Yuri doesn't fight against the current, he works with it, letting it take us farther away before we're finally able to drift out of it and the water magically turns into the peaceful lake it was when I first jumped in.

"What the fuck were you thinking?" He slowly swims us back to shore, putting up with the fact that I refuse to let go of him.

"I was thinking I wanted to take a swim. What the hell was that?"

"A rip current. This isn't some fucking small, inland lake. You could've easily drowned out there! What the fuck would

you have done if I hadn't seen your flailing ass out the window?"

He lets out an angry groan, and as soon as he can touch bottom, he peels me off his back and pushes me toward shore. The hard look on his face should warn me to keep my mouth shut, but all the sexual tension between us is getting to me, and I'm just as frustrated and angry as he is.

I step in front of him, the water hitting me mid-thigh and my body still shaking from everything that just happened. "Why the fuck do you care? Wouldn't it have been easier to just let me drown?"

He steps closer so our bodies are mere inches apart. "If I wanted you dead, you wouldn't be standing here breathing, Gia. Goddamn it!" he yells, scrubbing a hand through his hair. He looks down at me, his green eyes filled with something I can't even begin to decipher. "Is it so hard to believe that I don't want any harm to come to you?"

For one second I think he's going to lean down and kiss me. I know if he did, I wouldn't stop him. Water drips down the bare chest that's still heaving from hauling my ass to shore, and the anger that's still simmering right below the surface is palpable. He cups my face, running his thumb over my parted lips before leaning down to kiss my forehead. He keeps his lips pressed to my skin for several seconds, and all I can do is stand there with my eyes closed, enjoying his touch more than I should and silently wishing for more.

When he pulls away, he says, "Next time swim in the pool unless I'm out here with you." Without another word, he walks out of the water and back up to his house. I watch him until he disappears from sight and then I step out of the water and grab my towel. Wrapping it around my shoulders, I walk back to his house. Before I go in, I use the hose to wash the sand from my feet and then quietly slip inside.

He's already showering, so I grab a bottle of water and study the photos on his fridge while I wait my turn. There's one where he's holding two of the cutest babies I've ever seen, and the smile on all three of their faces has a grin spreading on

my own. They look so damn happy, and a twinge of jealousy runs through me, hitting me full force even as I tell myself it's ridiculous. These can't be his kids. Surely not. I mean, he doesn't have anything that I can see in his house to hint at there being kids living here, even if it is part time. The thought of another woman carrying his baby doesn't sit well with me. I shouldn't care. I know I shouldn't, but that doesn't stop my hackles from raising at the mere thought of it.

“Get a fucking grip,” I mutter to myself. I'm way too young to be experiencing uterus pains at the sight of this gorgeous man holding a couple of babies. The annoying sting refuses to leave, though. I picture Yuri with a big smile on his face, an arm wrapped around his beautiful wife with a miniature version of the two of them nestled against his chest.

I turn my back on the collage of photos, irritated that Yuri is causing such a reaction in me. He's a Bratva thug. It should be pretty damn cut and dry, but each passing minute with him makes me realize there's a lot more to him than just that, and I'm only lying to myself if I continue to deny it. He's keeping me here against my will, yes, but he's also treating me with a respect that I hadn't expected. He's kind to me, even going so far as to save my damn life. I worry my bottom lip as I try to figure him out.

I'm not even close to solving the puzzle when Yuri walks in, freshly showered and looking amazing. There's still tension between us, so many things unsaid, so many things I'm confused about, and instead of facing them, I turn tail and run to the safety of his bedroom. Grabbing my clothes, I lock myself in his bathroom like a damn coward.

Under the hot water, I feel my muscles slowly start to relax. As much as I try to not think about him, my mind keeps returning to the way his lips had felt on my neck this morning, the hard, solid feel of his cock pressing against my core, and the feel of his wet body against mine as he'd pulled me to shore.

My hand is between my legs, a finger slipping inside, before I've even fully decided to act on what I'm feeling. With the water hitting my breasts, I slowly start to fuck myself to

images of Yuri. Closing my eyes, I imagine his lips on my skin, kissing a line up my neck while he slowly slides into me from behind. While I think about soft bites on my shoulder, I bring my wet fingers to my clit, gasping at the shock of pleasure. It's been too long since I've done this, and Yuri's kept me in a near constant state of arousal. My body is poised and ready to fall over the cliff. Bringing my other hand to my breast, I run the palm of my hand over my hard nipple and work my clit even harder.

When the orgasm starts to hit me, it's Yuri's name I moan. It's his presence I feel in here with me, and it's his body, his touch, and his attention that I crave so badly it's a physical ache running through me side by side with the pleasure. I rest my forehead against the blue tiles, catching my breath and softly working my fingers as the aftershocks slowly fade away.

The orgasm sated my physical needs for the moment, but my emotional ones are all over the place. I've never felt so out of sorts in my life. Knowing I can't hide in the shower all day, I get cleaned up, wondering how in the hell I'm going to keep this situation under control. Every second with him makes me feel a little more attached to him. In my heart, I already know the chances of me coming out of this unscathed are slim to none. It's just a matter of how much I'm going to allow myself to be hurt in the process.

Chapter 5

Yuri

My mind is completely wrapped up in Gia, an annoying pattern that's quickly becoming a habit, when I hear the knock at the door. Opening it, I wave Artyom in. He takes one look at my face and laughs.

“Going that well, is it?”

“She nearly got her ass drowned this morning when she decided to go for a swim. Babysitting the twins is easier than keeping an eye on her.”

He just laughs again and walks into the kitchen, grabbing a drink from the fridge and then leaning against the island. “Find out anything else about her?”

“No. I let her text her brother so he doesn't get suspicious, but I've checked everything on the phone, and there's nothing to even hint that she might be working for the family.”

“Jinx hasn't found any connection either.” Artyom takes a drink and says, “Mikhail is still suspicious.”

“Yeah, I figured. I can't say I blame him after what happened with Charlie.”

Artyom eyes me, a smile playing at his lips.

“Just spit it out,” I tell him, knowing that look of his all too well.

“Have you fucked her yet?”

Instead of answering, I grab a soda from the fridge and shut the door with more force than needed.

He laughs and says, “So that’s a no.”

Before I can tell him to fuck off, Gia walks into the kitchen looking more beautiful than any woman I’ve ever seen. There’s a blush to her cheeks and chest, and when she meets my eyes, she hurries up and looks away while her blush deepens. The embarrassed, almost guilty look on her face makes me wonder what in the hell she was doing up in that shower all by herself. The thought of her fucking her beautiful, wet body in my shower has my brain shutting down as all the blood rushes to my cock. When I look over at Artyom, he’s giving me a smug grin. I flip him the bird, but it only makes his smile grow.

Gia’s eyes widen when she sees him leaning against the island. It’s a common reaction, but unlike most women, she doesn’t immediately start giving him fuck-me eyes. It makes me happier than I want to admit. She eyes the skull tattoo that covers one side of his neck and the vicious scar that mars the other side, and I smile when she steps closer to me.

“Apparently she thinks I’m here to finish her off,” Artyom says in Russian. “Do you want me to play bad Bratva killer so you can play the hero? Kind of like good cop, bad cop?”

“I don’t need your help getting pussy,” I remind him.

He gives me a smug grin. “You sure about that? She’s resisted your stellar charm so far. Maybe you’re losing your touch.”

“Fuck off,” I tell him and then switch to English. “Gia, this is Artyom.”

Artyom’s still laughing when he gives her a nod. “Nice to meet you, Gia.”

“You guys work together?” she asks.

“Yes,” Artyom says. He laughs again and asks, “How are you enjoying your visit? Is Yuri being a good host?”

“You mean how am I enjoying being held here against my will?”

Artyom shrugs and takes another drink. “I can promise you you’re being treated a thousand times better than anyone in the Rossi family would treat a young woman they needed to detain. Yuri had the unfortunate experience of being a guest of your uncle’s. It wasn’t exactly a fun time for him.”

Gia looks at me, surprise written all over her face. “My uncle hurt you?”

“Stop fucking telling her things,” I growl in Russian.

Gia’s still staring at me, guilt filling her beautiful eyes. For one brief moment I think she’s going to reach out and hug me, but then she darts her eyes to Artyom and stays where she is.

“I’m not my uncle,” she says, facing him.

“Lucky for you,” Artyom tells her. He doesn’t need to voice the threat. His tone and the look in his eyes is enough. Gia pales and when I run a finger along her jawline, I’m not sure which of the three of us is more surprised.

“She’s not like him,” I say in Russian. “She’s not a part of this, Artyom. I know it.”

He eyes the two of us. “This is not good, man. A whole fucking city of women and you pick a Rossi.”

“I haven’t picked anyone,” I tell him, but my finger is stroking her neck now like it has a damn mind of its own.

“Did you at least chip her?”

“I know how to do my goddamn job.” He looks like he’s about to laugh, so I look away before my urge to punch him wins. “I just need to get her out of my system. One fuck and I’ll forget all about her.”

“Whatever you say, man.”

I can tell he doesn’t believe me, but I don’t give a fuck. I’m just infatuated with her because she’s playing hard to get. It’s as simple as that. Feelings aren’t involved here. The fear I felt when I saw her struggling against the current resurfaces to taunt me and prove me wrong, but I push it away. I can’t fall for the enemy. The problem is when I meet Gia’s blue eyes and she gives me a soft smile, she doesn’t feel like the enemy.

She feels much more than that, much more than I'm willing to name or acknowledge.

"I'll leave you two lovebirds alone," Artyom says, ignoring the scowl I give him. He smacks my back on his way to the door and gives Gia a wave.

"Give Riley and the kids a hug for me," I tell him, because as much as he pisses me off, he's still my closest friend, and I love the bastard like a damn brother.

He smiles and says, "Anya's decided the only thing she wants to eat is chocolate pudding and graham crackers. It's been a fun couple of days."

I laugh and wave a goodbye. When I turn back around, Gia is watching me.

"What were you two talking about?"

"Nothing much."

She thinks for a second and walks to the fridge, looking at the photos again. Pointing at the twins, she gives me a triumphant grin. "They're not your kids. They're his. The little boy has his eyes, and his daughter has his smile." She points at Lev. "I'm not sure who this little guy is yet. Maybe Mikhail's son?"

She seems relieved by this new revelation, but I neither confirm nor deny it. The kids are sacred, and even though I think she's safe, I won't take that risk, not with them.

When she gives me a pointed look and I still keep quiet, she sighs and says, "I guess I should be annoyed that you think I might be a danger to kids, but I can't help admiring your protectiveness. They're lucky to have you in their lives, Yuri. I would've given anything to have an uncle like you when I was little."

I'm touched by her words, surprised by how much it means to me that she thinks the kids are lucky to have me around. While she opens the fridge and starts pulling out lunchmeat and condiments, I ask, "What was it like when you were young?"

She turns to look at me over her shoulder and gives a harsh laugh. “It was horrible.”

I watch her stack everything on the counter before grabbing a loaf of bread. She assembles the sandwiches and starts to tell me about her childhood.

“My mom and dad had a real shitty marriage. He was an absolute dick in so many ways. He beat her. He cheated on her. He was the stereotypical Italian mobster jackass. All the men in the Rossi family are like it.”

She smiles as she spreads the mayo. “Except for Dominic. I made damn sure he wouldn’t grow up to be like that.”

“How’d you manage that?”

“I ran away with him as soon as I turned eighteen. It’s not like my dad cared. He spent most of his time in Italy, and our mom killed herself when I was fifteen and Dom was nine.”

“Fuck, I’m sorry, Gia,” I tell her, cutting off her story.

She shrugs like it’s no big deal, but I can see the sadness in her eyes. “I’d been raising Dom pretty much since the moment he was born, so nothing really changed. Mom had checked out years before she overdosed and made it official. Our dad had always threatened to bring Dom with him on his trips to teach him the family business as he liked to call it. I lived in constant fear of that. I’d wake up frantic, looking around for my baby brother, feeling like I couldn’t breathe until I laid my eyes on him and knew with absolute certainty that he was still with me and safe.”

Putting the plate in front of me, she says, “I can’t say it bothered me too much when I learned that he’d been killed in Italy. I know that’s a shitty thing to say, but all I felt was relief that I’d no longer have to worry about someone coming for Dom. We were already living on our own by that time. I was driving him to school every day, going to the parent-teacher meetings. We were fine. We didn’t need anyone else.”

Her eyes meet mine. “I knew from a young age that I wanted nothing to do with any of that mafia shit. I knew it then, and I know it now. Nothing good ever comes of it. It’s

nothing but men with inflated egos and quick fists who can't keep their damn dicks in their pants.”

I get the feeling she's trying to convince herself of this more than anything else. I still can't help but say, “I've managed to keep my dick in my pants.”

She laughs before she can stop it and mutters “Barely.”

Things soften between us as we eat lunch. We're both holding back, neither one of us wanting to talk about the sexual tension that's continuing to build or the fact that this is feeling less and less like a *you're being held against your will* scenario.

We're just about to watch a movie when my phone buzzes. I read Mikhail's text and sigh.

Come see me at the house. Sergei's on his way to keep an eye on her while you're gone.

I give him a thumbs up emoji and turn to Gia. “I need to go somewhere, but one of the guys is coming over to stay here while I'm gone.”

Her brow scrunches up with worry. When I reach out to massage it away, she briefly closes her eyes and relaxes.

“What if he's not as nice as you?” she whispers.

“Look at me, *ptichka*.”

She opens her eyes, and in this moment I realize how much she trusts me. I'd seen it in the kitchen earlier when she'd stepped closer to me when Artyom was here, and I see it in her eyes now at the thought of being left alone with another Bratva member. I'm not sure when exactly the dynamic changed, but it's definitely shifted. I already knew I was in trouble, but now I feel not only protective of her but *responsible* for her. Fuck me.

“Sergei's a good man, and he's not going to hurt you or even touch you. You have my word on that.”

She relaxes at my promise and at the way I'm gently stroking her neck and nods her head. “Okay.”

Her lips part the tiniest bit, and I want nothing more than to close the distance and slide my tongue between them, gently nudging them open even more before claiming every damn inch of her mouth. I know she wants me to. I can see it in her eyes and in the way her pulse is beating erratically against my fingers. When there's a knock at the door, she lets out a disappointed sigh. She gives me a cute scowl when I wink at her frustration.

“All you have to do is ask, *ptichka*,” I say, tapping the tip of her nose.

Before she can think up a smartass comment that will just ruin the moment, I get up and let Sergei in. He's been with the Bratva for a few years now, and quickly stepped up to become my *let's go out and get laid* pal when Artyom decided to bail on me by getting married. Mikhail recruited him from Russia's elite special forces, the *Spetznaz*, just like most of our guys, and he's done well adapting to this new life. He still has the buzz cut, though. Some habits die hard.

“Gia, this is Sergei. He's going to hang out here for a bit.”

“Hey, Gia,” he says, already making himself comfortable on the other end of the couch and reaching for the remote.

“Hey.” She eyes him warily, but relaxes a bit when he makes no move to do anything except flip through the channels.

“Don't let him hog the remote,” I warn her. “You'll never get it back.”

Sergei doesn't take his eyes off the TV when he says, “Don't listen to him. I'm very good at compromising.”

Switching to Russian, I say, “She has a chip, but keep an eye on her, and don't fucking hit on her.”

He raises a dark brow at that but wisely keeps his mouth shut. I grab my keys and take one last look at Gia. Her foot is on the couch, and she's resting her chin on her knee with her arms loosely wrapped around her leg. She looks over and meets my eyes, giving me a small wave. I can't resist giving her another wink.

“I’ll be back soon. Try and be good, Gia.”

I laugh at the scowl I knew was coming, hollering out a “For fuck’s sake, don’t let her go in the lake” before leaving.

When I get to Mikhail’s, Valentina opens the door for me and then pulls me into a big hug. I laugh and hug her back. She’s the cook who refuses to retire and fill-in grandma to every man in the Bratva. Before I head up to Mikhail’s office, she hands me a container of freshly made cookies and pats my cheek.

“You need a good woman to cook and take care of you.”

“Don’t I know it,” I say, making her laugh. I don’t mention that I do actually have a woman who’s beautiful and makes me laugh and cooks me food. I don’t feel like also explaining that I may or may not have kidnapped her, so I keep my mouth shut and take the cookies.

After another hug, I head up the stairs to Mikhail’s office. He’s waiting for me, so I don’t bother knocking. I join him at the large window that overlooks the backyard, noticing the smile on his face. Following his gaze, I see Charlie and Lev down by the water. They’re working on a sand castle that’s impressively big, making me think they’ve been at it for quite some time.

Charlie tilts her head back and laughs at something Lev’s said while she rests her hand on her pregnant belly. A twinge of jealousy hits me out of nowhere, and I look away before Mikhail can see it. I’m not the kind of guy who looks at babies and pregnant women with envy. I love being an uncle and a lady’s man. That’s who I am. I’m not so sure I even know how to be anyone else. An image of a pregnant Gia pops in my head, and if I was anywhere else I’d laugh because never in my thirty-seven years have I ever imagined a woman pregnant, not in a good way, and certainly not in a sexual one. Getting a woman pregnant has always been my number one *I must never ever do* thing. My brain doesn’t completely reject the image of a pregnant Gia, though. I can feel it being filed away for future use despite my protests.

“So how’s it going?” Mikhail asks, turning away from the window to look at me.

His dark eyes study me, and for once I wish the man wasn’t so damn good at his job. He’s like a fucking human lie detector. Nothing gets by him.

“It’s fine. She’s behaving. A little lippy,” I say with a laugh. “But nothing I can’t handle.”

“Are you fucking her?”

I scrub a hand through my hair and sit down in one of the leather chairs. “Nope.”

“But you want to.”

It’s not a question, so I don’t answer. Instead, I say, “I think she’s clean, Mikhail.”

He sighs and walks behind his desk, waving a hand at his laptop. “Jinx sent me a file on her, and I agree that she looks clean.”

“But?”

His dark eyes meet mine. “But she’s a fucking Rossi, and I don’t trust any of them.”

I nod because I understand his anger, but Mikhail isn’t a stupid man, despite it being damn near impossible for him to see past his rage over what Antonio did to his wife.

“She’s not her uncle, Mikhail.” I wait a second and add, “Just like you’re not the same man your uncle was.”

He raises a brow at me. “You’re seriously going to throw that out at me?”

I lean back and groan. “Fuck, you know what I mean. When your uncle ran the Bratva, everyone knew what a monster he was. You took over, and people expected you to be the same kind of man, but you’re nothing like him. All I’m saying is it’s not fair to judge her for her uncle’s actions. You of all people should know that.”

“Believe me, I fucking know it, Yuri. If I didn’t, she’d be dead right now.”

“I’m aware.”

He sits down behind his desk and leans forward. “Something tells me you would have a problem with that order.”

I hold his gaze and tell the truth. “I would.”

The man I’ve given my entire life to studies me. We’ve bled together, killed together, gained power together, and I’ve done it all with absolute loyalty and no regrets. I’d give my life for his in a second, and he knows it. He’s always known it. We’ve never disagreed about anything, but this is different. We both sense it. I will never turn my back on my Bratva, but I also won’t stand by and allow Gia to be taken out.

Finally, he says, “I hope you’re right about her, for all our sakes.”

“I am,” I say it with a certainty that I hope like hell isn’t misplaced. I know in my gut that Gia isn’t a part of all of this. My instincts have never been wrong, and I’m trusting that this time won’t be different.

“I’ve always trusted your judgement, Yuri, and you have my word that nothing will happen to her without solid proof.”

“I know you’d never act rashly,” I tell him. “You’re too damn smart for that.”

“And you never get hung up women. You’re too damn stubborn for that.”

I sigh and give a shrug. “She’s gotten a little under my skin,” I admit.

He laughs and leans back. “Women don’t get under your skin, Yuri. They never have. Does Artyom know? He’s going to enjoy this immensely.”

“He came by earlier and met her.”

“It just had to be a fucking Rossi,” he mutters, shaking his head.

“It’s not like I’m marrying her,” I remind him. “I just said she’s gotten under my skin a bit. I’m sure it’ll go away after

we fuck.”

“Yeah, you keep telling yourself that.”

“I will,” I tell him, and he laughs at my stubbornness. “So what’s the plan for now?”

Mikhail opens his hands before threading his fingers together again and resting them on his lap. “We wait. We’re keeping tabs on her brother, and Jinx is watching all the flights coming in from Italy. My guess is they’ll reach out soon when they realize Gia hasn’t sold Antonio’s house like she was supposed to. Let her keep texting her brother and let me know if anything changes.”

“Sounds good.” I get up and grab the container of cookies. Nodding toward the window, I say, “Go spend time with your family. I know you’re dying to.”

He smiles and walks out with me. “I did promise Lev I’d go swimming with him. Plus, I didn’t see a moat around that sandcastle. Did you?”

“I did not. How the hell can you have a sandcastle without a moat?”

“Yeah, that needs to be fixed,” he agrees.

I laugh and wave a goodbye as he goes to put on some swim trunks. Valentina’s already left for the day, so I let myself out, anxious to get back home. Sergei hasn’t texted, so things must be going okay, but I don’t like not knowing for sure. I send him a quick text, asking what’s going on. His response is quick.

Watching a movie. She does not do well with horror.

I tell him I’m on my way and speed the whole way back. It’s ridiculous to admit that I miss her, but I do. This morning rushes back to me. A smile plays at my lips while I think about how she’d touched me when she thought I was sleeping. If Mikhail hadn’t called me, I wonder if she would’ve given in to how she feels. She might be fighting this thing as much as I’ve been, but there’s no denying the attraction between us. It’s growing stronger, and soon it’s going to reach the breaking point.

Horror movie music greets me when I unlock the front door. Sergei's closed the blinds and turned off the lights, trying to create as spooky of an experience as possible. I try not to laugh when I see Gia on the end of the couch, holding a blanket up to her chin like it's a piece of armor with one hand covering her eyes. She's left the tiniest of slits between her fingers to allow her to sort of watch the slasher flick. I sit down next to her, laughing when a jump scare makes her yelp.

"It's not funny," she whispers at me. "This shit is scary!"

Sergei laughs when the next person comes to a gruesome end. Apparently, he thinks we're watching a comedy.

"What a dumbass," he says, shaking his head at the stupidity that got the character killed.

I reach over and grab the bowl of popcorn that's on the coffee table and sit back to watch. Gia keeps her hand over her eyes and reaches over for some popcorn. I smile when the movie gets scarier and she scoots closer to me so our bodies are touching. When a particularly violent part comes on, she turns and buries her face against my chest.

Laughing, I kiss the top of her head and wrap an arm around her. We spend the rest of the movie with me whispering in her ear what's happening while she pretends to watch it. The music alone makes her jump, and each time it makes me laugh. If I had any suspicions left about her being an integral part of the Italian mafia, they float right out the goddamn window. She has zero tolerance for blood and gore.

"You're such a baby," I whisper. "God, it's going to be so easy to scare you later on tonight."

"You wouldn't," she gasps, lifting her head to look at me. The fear in them is genuine, and I quickly decide that I much prefer her running to me for comfort rather than running from me in fear. I brush my finger over her bottom lip.

"Open," I whisper.

Her eyes widen in surprise, but when I pick up a kernel of popcorn, she smiles and opens. I bite back a groan at the sight

of her with her mouth open and ignore my painfully hard cock while I toss a kernel at her. She gets it and gives me a big grin.

“Good girl.” I give her a wink when her cheeks redden.

Sergei leaves after the movie, muttering in Russian about feeling like a third wheel. After he’s gone, Gia gets up and starts hunting around my kitchen like she owns the damn place. I smile and follow after her. She bends over and roots around the bottom shelf, giving me a mouthwatering view of the ass I’m already obsessed with. Reading my thoughts, she looks over her shoulder and says, “Seriously? You’re like a fucking teenage boy.”

I laugh and hold my hands up. “What? You don’t even know what I was thinking.”

Shoving the crisper drawers shut, she stands and turns to me. “What were you thinking?”

Keeping my eyes on hers, I reach out and brush a strand of hair behind her ear. Her pupils dilate and her breath hitches when my thumb brushes her cheek.

“I was thinking about how much I’d love to fuck you while you’re bent over like that. Then I could fill your pussy while also smacking that perfect ass of yours.”

The soft moan that escapes before she can stop it makes her cheeks heat up and my cock grow painfully hard.

“Yuri?” she whispers.

“Yes, *ptichka*?”

“Get control of your cock. We need to go grocery shopping.”

Chapter 6

Gia

The look on Yuri's face is pure shock, the same look he always gives me when I turn him down. Judging by his good looks and confidence, I'm guessing no woman's ever said no to him. I'm not about to be just another notch on his damn belt, though. The situation is weird enough as it is, but as odd as it sounds, I don't feel like I'm in danger when I'm around him. I've intentionally pushed his buttons, feeling him out to see what I can get away with. I expected a smack a time or two, something the men in my family would've had no problem doing, but he'd surprised me by laughing at my smartass comments and he did save my life today and let me bury my head in his chest during the scary movie, so there's definitely that.

"You want us to go grocery shopping?" He scrubs a hand over his stubbled jaw while I try to ignore how gorgeous his hands are. They're big, of course, but his fingers are long and almost delicate looking. They look like they should be playing a piano instead of wielding weapons. Despite his deceiving fingers, there's nothing even remotely delicate about Yuri. His palms are calloused and every part of him is rock-hard. He's an alpha in every sense of the word, the kind of man you could probably drop off on the side of a mountain and then come back three months later and he'd have a damn log cabin built, complete with a roaring fire and a bearskin rug.

"Yes, we need food," I tell him, taking a step back for some much needed distance. When he hesitates, I add, "I'm not stupid, Yuri. I'm not going to scream or try to run away."

You know who my brother is. That's enough to guarantee I'll behave."

He thinks about what I've said and then smiles. "Only if you promise you'll cook me a steak like the one you made at your uncle's."

"Deal."

He grabs his wallet and key fob, and when I spot a container of homemade cookies, I hold them up and ask, "Where'd you get these?"

"Valentina made them for me."

A ridiculous twinge of jealousy hits me when I think about another woman, most likely a gorgeous Russian one, making him cookies.

He laughs and hooks a finger under my chin. "Someone jealous?"

"No." I try to jerk my head away, but he tightens his grip, holding me in place.

"It might make you feel better to know Valentina is in her seventies."

"I really doubt that would stop you."

He groans and shakes his head. "God, don't say things like that. She's like a grandma to me. That's fucking nasty, Gia."

I laugh and follow him to his car, relieved about Valentina. "I'm surprised you go grocery shopping," I tell him once we're on our way. "My uncle always had employees do that sort of thing."

"Well, your uncle was a pompous ass." He turns and flashes me a grin. "I prefer to keep myself humble."

"Humble? Yeah, that's exactly the word I would use to describe you."

"You don't know me as well as you seem to think, *ptichka*. There are many sides to the enigma you see before you."

I snort out a laugh. "Humble, like I said."

He smiles but doesn't say anything. We pull into the grocery store parking lot, and while he searches for a spot to park, I eye the families coming out, pushing carts filled with groceries. The moment is so surreal. All these people around us, and none of them have the slightest clue that there's a dangerous Bratva member right here in their midst.

"Don't make me regret this, Gia."

His words have me turning to face him. "I won't."

His green eyes study mine for several seconds before he gives a slight nod. We get out of the car, but instead of walking next to me, he surprises me by wrapping an arm around me like we're a couple out getting some groceries together.

When I look up at him, he gives me that cocky grin that makes his eyes shine with mischief. "We need to look believable, *ptichka*. Don't want to draw any unwanted attention."

I don't say that he probably draws attention every damn place he goes. The man couldn't blend in even if he wanted to. My thoughts are proven correct when we walk in and every female eye turns to him.

"Good grief," I mutter, grabbing the cart.

Yuri rests his hand on the back of my neck, wrapping his fingers around me in a possessive grip that makes the base of my spine tingle. God, this guy has way too powerful of an effect on me. Leaning closer so his mouth is right by my ear, he whispers, "Don't be jealous, sweetheart. We're a couple shopping for groceries, remember? That means I'm all yours."

The heat of his breath on my ear sends a shiver all through me. I notice the women looking at us, and I can't help but feel special, and I kind of want to kick my own ass for feeling that way, but it's the truth. It's downright intoxicating to have the undivided attention of a man like Yuri. I haven't dated much at all, and I've gotten into the habit of just being alone. For me, grocery shopping involves me in zero makeup and a cart full of groceries for one. It's kind of nice to have someone next to

me, and if that someone happens to be jaw-droppingly gorgeous, then so be it.

Yuri's lips brush my ear in the lightest of touches before he pulls back. He gives me a wink when he sees the blush hit my cheeks. Even in just jeans and a T-shirt, the man looks amazing. He keeps his hand on the nape of my neck and his body close to mine as I start to push the cart. Is this how he would be if we were a couple? God, he'd make even the most boring of chores exciting.

We start down the first aisle, and I can't help but laugh when a muscled, tattooed forearm quickly snakes out in front of me so he can hurry up and grab a box of chocolate brownies and toss them in the cart.

"Hey, what the hell?" he asks when I put them back. "I like those."

I look up at him because I've never seen him pout before, and it's oddly cute. "I can make you better brownies than that."

He lifts a brow at me, his mouth quirking up in a soft smile. "You're going to make me brownies?"

I shrug and mentally add the ingredients to the list. "It's always a good idea to keep your kidnapper happy."

"Really? Because you had no problem turning my cock down earlier, and that would've made me very happy."

He says it loud enough to catch the woman's attention in front of us. She looks at me like I must be nuts for turning him down. I can't say I blame her. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't curious about what it would be like with him. Being a virgin at twenty-five isn't something I planned. It just sort of happened. All my focus was on my brother, and my nonexistent sex life just sort of fell to the wayside. It makes me feel at a real disadvantage when dealing with Yuri, who's obviously fucked his way through life.

I ignore his cock comment and scan the shelves for things we need. When I see the toothbrushes, I grab one and toss it in the cart to replace the one I ruined. He smiles and kisses my

head. While we shop, he keeps his hand on me, giving me soft caresses at the base of my neck, little strokes on my arm or along my jaw, and it's downright distracting. By the time we're about halfway through the store, my panties are soaked and I'm having a hard time remembering what we need.

"Could you please keep your hands to yourself for five minutes?" I finally growl when I realize I've missed something we need yet again.

He laughs and runs a finger under my shirt, stroking my lower back in a soft, lingering touch. "Having trouble focusing, *ptichka*?"

I groan in frustration, refusing to answer him, and return to the aisle we just left. The rest of the trip takes way longer than it needs to, because my brain refuses to work right. My mind keeps betraying me with images of Yuri fucking me while I'm bent over, sharp smacks to my ass with every hard thrust. By the time we go to check out, I'm a flustered mess. The amused smile he gives lets me know I'm not hiding my feelings well at all. He helps me unload the cart and throws in a candy bar at the last minute, giving me a cute, shy grin while he does it. Yuri has a sweet tooth. He must work out like an animal to combat his sugar habit because the man has a body unlike anything I've ever seen in real life.

He pays for our groceries, seemingly oblivious to the young cashier who's eyeing him like she's trying to memorize every damn detail. I know it doesn't escape his notice, though, because he turns to me when he's done paying and wraps an arm around my upper chest, pulling me back against him. It reminds me of the night at my uncle's when I'd tried to run off and he'd grabbed me from behind. I know I shouldn't be turned on right now, that it's all kinds of fucked up, but my body isn't listening to reason. It's too busy listening to the warm, hard body behind me that smells fucking amazing and looks like a mythological god come to life.

"Your heart is racing, *ptichka*," he murmurs in my ear. He runs a finger along my earlobe, making me suck in a quick breath. I hear the smile in his voice when he says, "I'd love to

keep teasing you, but I'd rather not walk out of here with an obvious erection."

He gives my temple a kiss and steps back, taking the receipt the blushing cashier holds out for him.

"Thank you," he tells her, making her blush deepen.

Once we're too far away for her to hear, I ask, "Do you ever get tired of it?"

He shrugs, knowing exactly what I'm talking about. "I'm like a ray of sunshine, *ptichka*. I brighten everyone's day."

"Good god, I hope you're joking," I say with a laugh, because I honestly can't tell. He's either the most arrogant bastard I've ever met, or he has an amazing sense of humor. I'm beginning to think it might be a mixture of both.

Back at his house, we unload the groceries, and then I set to work on preparing the steaks I promised him while he runs upstairs to take another shower. I've just finished checking on the roasted vegetables when he walks in. His hair is still wet, making it look a few shades darker than it usually is, and his face is freshly shaved, showing off that chiseled jaw even better than usual. He's wearing grey joggers and a white T-shirt, and he looks so damn good that it takes me a second to realize how badly I'm eye-fucking him.

He smirks and steals a cucumber from one of the salad bowls. Before either one of us can say anything, the doorbell rings. I watch his ass as he goes to see who it is, wishing the sweatpants weren't blocking my view. I hear a woman's voice and then a soft giggle. My hand tightens around the knife I'm using to chop tomatoes, and when a gorgeous woman walks in, I start to feel like a giant idiot. I'm standing here like a moron with domestic bliss fantasies while the truth of what this really is stares me in the face. I'm a job to Yuri, plain and simple, and just because he wants it to be a job with benefits doesn't mean shit, just another conquest of many. The woman in front of me is proof of that. She's thinner than me, prettier with longer legs, and chesty doesn't even begin to describe her. I fall short in comparison to her in every fucking way possible.

“Hi,” she says, giving me a small wave.

“Hi,” I manage to say, hoping I appear completely normal.

Yuri smiles at the woman. “Give me just one second, Crystal.”

“No problem, Yuri.”

The smile she gives him has me gripping the knife handle even harder. They’re obviously pretty familiar with one another and that annoys me more than I want to admit. As soon as Yuri leaves the room, she turns to me and gone is the sweet little puppy dog look, and in its place is the true Crystal, the one that wants to rip my throat out for being in Yuri’s kitchen. I don’t like her, and the thought of her with Yuri pisses me off. I know I have no right to feel jealous, that it’s absurd for me to feel anything towards him, but that doesn’t slow my heart down or stop me from analyzing everything they do when Yuri comes back in with a stack of papers in his hand and her face magically transforms to pure sweetness.

“Here you go.”

He hands her the papers, and she takes them with another cutesy smile and giggle. I barely resist rolling my eyes. They walk back out of the room together, and I hear one more annoyingly girly giggle before the door shuts. Not my damn business, I remind myself. I’m slicing the tomatoes a bit harder than I need to when Yuri walks back in with a grin playing at his lips. He eyes the destroyed tomato and lets out a soft laugh.

Gesturing at me, he says, “A beautiful woman cooking me a delicious meal. This is every man’s fantasy.” He laughs at the scowl I give him. He steps closer so our bodies are almost touching. “Next time you just need to do it in some sexy lingerie.”

I don’t know what comes over me. Maybe it’s sexual frustration, maybe it’s the gorgeous woman who was just here that I’m pretty sure he’s fucked, or maybe it’s just all the stress from the Rossi family shit. Whatever the hell it is, it makes me completely lose it. I let out a rage-filled groan and push his

arrogant ass up against the cabinets. He wasn't expecting it, and that's the only reason I'm able to get him in this position. He's also not expecting the knife I point at his chest.

"You are such a dick!" I yell at him, stepping closer. "Maybe I should just end all this right here. What's stopping me from stabbing you and getting my ass on a plane back to New York? Fuck all this mafia shit. I don't want any part of it. I never have!"

He doesn't move, doesn't even try to stop me. He just stares down at me with his mouth in a hard line. His green eyes are a mix of too many emotions, making it impossible for me to know how pissed he is right now. My mouth drops open when his cock grows hard fast, straining at his grey joggers and pressing against my stomach.

"How the fuck can you be hard with a knife to your chest?"

"The same way you can be wet while holding the blade against my skin, *ptichka*."

He reaches up, not to shove the knife away, but to run his thumb over my parted lips before slowly sliding in. My tongue brushes over him on pure instinct, and when his eyes darken, it makes me brave enough to give him a suck. He growls something in Russian, and when I give him one more suck, he grabs my wrist, bending it in such a way that the knife falls uselessly to the floor before he spins me and presses me against the counter, pinning me there with his body. I realize now that the only reason I was able to get the upper hand is because he allowed it to happen. His hard cock digs into my ass while he slides his thumb back into my mouth.

"Suck, sweetheart," he murmurs near my ear. When I give his thumb another hard suck, he groans and whispers, "Good girl."

My hands press against the counter, and I give a soft moan when he slides his other hand to the button on my jeans, making quick work of it before pulling the zipper down. When I squirm and start to panic, letting out a soft whimper, he gives my ear a kiss and says, "Relax, *ptichka*, I'm not going to fuck

you. I'm just going to give you something you desperately need."

I suck in a quick breath through my nose when he slides his hand into my panties and cups my pussy.

"Holy fuck, baby, no wonder you're so goddamn tense and irritable. You're soaking wet."

I give his thumb a soft bite, making him laugh.

"Do you want me to make you feel better?"

He runs one finger lightly over my clit, pulling a deep moan from me as I rock my hips against him. He gives another soft laugh at my reaction, but I'm too far gone to care about something as silly as pride. I *need* this, and I want it more than I've ever wanted anything in my life. Pressing the pad of one finger against my swollen clit, he rubs me in slow, intoxicating circles until my legs feel shaky and my breaths are coming in fast pants.

"You never answered me, sweetheart. Do you want me to make you come?"

"Mm-hmm," I moan around his thumb, gripping the counter tight enough to turn my knuckles white.

"Good girl," he murmurs before sliding a finger inside me. "God, sweetheart, you are so fucking tight."

My eyes close when he slides in another finger and starts to work me. The sounds of my wet pussy fill the kitchen, making it impossible for me to deny the effect he has on me any longer. He knows the truth of what he does to me. I'm guessing he has from the beginning.

"Keep sucking, baby," he reminds me, slowly pulling his thumb from my mouth until I suck hard enough to pull him back in. "Fuck," he groans, and a thrill runs through me at knowing I'm the one who caused it.

Pulling his fingers from my soaking wet pussy, he starts to run them over my slippery clit. Every touch nearly pushes me over the edge, but just when I think I'm about to explode, he pulls back enough to stop it. I whimper and moan and rock my

hips as much as he'll allow, but none of it does any good. He wants me to know that he's in charge of my pleasure and that I'm not coming until he wants me to.

The wet heat of his kisses on my neck have me squirming even more until I feel like I'm going to lose my damn mind. He runs his tongue over the crook of my neck before giving me a soft bite. Pulling his thumb out, I release him with one last hard suck, and then his hand is on my hip, roughly jerking my jeans down so my ass is exposed.

"Goddamn," he growls, separating our bodies enough so he can see my bare ass as I keep rocking against the fingers that are still teasing the hell out of my clit. I feel him do something behind me, but it's not until he starts kissing my neck again that I realize he's jerking himself off.

"Yuri," I moan when I feel the thick head of his cock hit my ass cheek as he gives my clit a soft pinch.

"I've got you, Gia," he murmurs against my skin.

The sound of my name on his lips and the deep groan he gives when I rock my hips even harder brings me so close to the edge that all it takes is one more rub of his fingers over my slippery bundle of nerves and I'm screaming his name and grinding my pussy even harder against his hand. He bites my shoulder and growls right before I feel the wet heat of his release hit my ass.

"Fuck," I whimper when he gently pinches my clit again, softly coaxing another orgasm out of me in a way that I hadn't even known was possible. It seems unfair in a way. I've been fucking myself for years, and I've never been able to pull this kind of mind-numbing, vision-darkening type of pleasure from my own body, but he's able to do it so effortlessly.

By the time I start to come down, I'm gasping and my whole body is trembling. Yuri gives my shoulder one last kiss and nuzzles his face against my neck in a gesture that surprises me by how intimate it feels. He gives my clit a soft pat before bringing his wet fingers to his lips. I turn my head, watching him close his eyes as he sucks his fingers clean. When he

opens them and sees me staring, he gives me a wink and grabs one of my ass cheeks, giving it a good squeeze.

“God, I love your ass, baby.” He smiles and keeps his eyes glued to my backside as he rubs his seed all over my cheeks. Before he pulls my pants up, he gives me one hard spank that makes me yelp in surprise and him groan in appreciation. “Someday very soon I’m going to spank this ass until it’s beet red and you’re begging me to fuck you.”

When he turns me around, my eyes immediately drop to the semi-hard cock that’s still on full display. Holy shit, this guy is huge! Even at half mast, that is a proud, proud flag he’s flying.

“See something you like, *ptichka*?” He leans closer, resting his hands against the counter on either side of me. My pants are still unbuttoned, my panties and shirt all askew, and when he closes the distance and I feel his bare cock press against my lower belly, I breathe out a heavy sigh. He lowers down so our lips are almost touching. I suck in a quick breath when he closes the distance with his tongue, giving my upper lip a teasing lick.

“All you have to do is ask,” he reminds me, running his tongue over my bottom lip.

I’m so drunk on need I can barely think, and before I can talk myself out of it, I whisper, “Please kiss me, Yuri.”

With a groan, he cups my face and presses his lips to mine. The kiss is hungry, days of pent-up sexual frustration, but he doesn’t rush it. He savors my mouth, worships it with soft sucks of my lips and deep, lingering licks to every inch of my mouth, making it impossible to not think about him fucking me. I moan and open my mouth even more for him and run my hands up his shirt. My greedy fingers explore all the peaks and grooves, pulling another groan from him. He’s fully hard again and pressing into my stomach. I slide one hand down to take him in hand, amazed that he can feel so soft and so damn powerful all at the same time.

The sheer size of him reminds me of what we’re quickly headed towards. Do I really want to give my first time to a

man who probably won't remember me a week from now? Yeah, it'd be an experience of a lifetime, but I'm not so sure my heart can take it. It's the thought of that heartache that has me letting go of the cock I so desperately want and pressing against his chest.

"Yuri, we can't," I say, but he runs his thumb over my cheek and gives my tongue a soft suck, deepening the kiss again. I get lost in it for several seconds before I push him harder and turn my head. "I'm sorry," I say, unable to look at him. "I'm sorry. I just can't."

My eyes start to fill, but I fight like hell to keep it in check. This drop-dead gorgeous man isn't mine to have. He's a Bratva member, a player, and not someone who's willing to give all that up just for me. We're both breathing heavily and trying to get back under control. He cups my face and gently turns me back to him. I've managed to keep the tears in check, but I know my eyes are glassy. His face softens when he sees it.

"What are you so afraid of?"

"Nothing can come of this. I'm not like you, Yuri. I can't just fuck someone and then walk away the next day."

He sighs and rests his forehead against mine, wrapping me up in a hug. His arms envelop me, comforting me like nothing else ever has. I know on some deep, intuitive level that this is the safest place in the world for me, and it guts me that I can't stay here, that I can't have this, that I can't have *him*. When he starts to pull away, I tighten my grip on him, refusing to let him go.

"Please, not yet," I whisper.

He relaxes against me and kisses the top of my head, holding me for as long as I need him.

Chapter 7

Yuri

I hold Gia, ignoring the faint smell of burning veggies coming from the oven and wish like hell I could think of something to say to make her feel better. I want to fuck her. I want to fuck her more than I've ever wanted to fuck any woman, but then what? I'm not walking away from the Bratva, and she knows it. She's made it abundantly clear that she wants nothing to do with my lifestyle. She's only here because I'm not allowing her to leave. The second I open the door to her, she'll be on the first flight out of here. I try not to think about how much that bothers me.

“Oh no,” she moans, trying to scoot around me. She opens the oven and grabs a towel, taking out the tray of blackened vegetables. She looks up at me with watery eyes, and when a tear spills over it makes me want to wrap her in my arms all over again. “I'm sorry I burnt them.”

Her voice cracks, and she looks so fucking adorable. She brings out so many instincts that I never knew I had. I want to protect her and take care of her. The things I feel for her go so far beyond just a simple need to fuck her. It scares the hell out of me, but at the same time, it's the most amazing thing I've ever felt.

I get my pants straightened so I'm no longer flashing cock and lean down so we're face to face. “Hey, *ptichka*, don't worry about the vegetables. We have salad, and the steaks are still marinating, so those are fine. Do you want me to cook them? Are you hungry?”

She sniffs and shakes her head. “No, I wanted to make them for you.”

I smile and kiss her forehead. “I’ll help. Just tell me what to do.”

She nods and takes a deep breath, getting herself under control. I give her head one more kiss before letting her go so she can get the steaks. I toss out the burnt veggies while she gets a skillet, and soon the steaks are sizzling and the smell of burnt food is replaced with the mouthwatering scent of cooking meat.

“Who taught you how to cook?” I ask, resting my ass against the counter by the stove so I can watch her.

“I taught myself. I watched a lot of cooking shows and YouTube videos and stuff like that. I didn’t want Dom only eating things that came out of a microwave.”

“He’s lucky to have you, Gia.”

She smiles and flips the steaks. “I think I’m the lucky one. I don’t know what I would’ve done without him.”

I don’t want to upset her by mentioning that I’d like to meet him one day, but I would. I push the thoughts aside, knowing they’re impossible, and instead focus on the present. She’s here in my kitchen now. I have her for a little while longer, and I don’t want to waste it thinking and worrying about shit that I can’t change.

She forks the steaks onto a couple of plates and adds a square of butter to the tops of them so it’ll melt into it. My mouth waters at the sight. Aside from Valentina, no one’s ever cooked for me, and I love it. I’m an okay cook, but Gia takes it to a whole new level. When we sit down and I get my first taste, I close my eyes and groan.

“Holy shit, this is amazing.”

When I open my eyes, she’s beaming at me, clearly pleased that I’m enjoying it so much.

“When I smelled this at your uncle’s, I knew it would taste good, but, damn, this is even better than I imagined.”

“I’m really glad you like it.”

We eat for a few minutes in silence, mainly because I’m too busy stuffing my face to speak, and when I finish, she hands me my salad. “You need some vegetables since I burned the others.”

I smile and take the salad, making quick work of it. With the bowl empty, I sit back and rest my hands on my stomach. “You’re going to make me put on weight if I’m not careful.”

She runs her eyes over me, the hunger still evident, even though she tries her best to hide it. “I’m guessing that won’t be a problem.”

Giving her a wink, I grab the dishes and head to the sink, already comfortable with my new position in the house. I’m the dishwasher, and I’m more than happy to do it. Gia walks over and grabs a rag so she can wipe down the island. We’ve fallen into an easy routine. I’ve never lived with a woman before. Hell, I’ve never spent more than one night with one. I never got attached, and I sure as hell didn’t want them getting attached to me.

Gia is different, though. Instead of feeling trapped and wishing she’d leave, I want to keep asking her questions so I can learn every damn detail about her, and I want to explore every part of her perfect body, memorizing it inch by inch until it’s seared into my brain just like the taste of her pussy is.

By the time everything is cleaned up, she’s yawning and I’m exhausted for so many different reasons. It’s a constant struggle to keep my mind in line, to stop it from drifting to things that I can’t have but that I so desperately want.

“Come on, *ptichka*, let’s get you to bed before you fall asleep standing up.”

She gives a sleepy nod, and instead of pushing me away like I fear she will when I put my arm around her, she relaxes against me and lets me lead her up the stairs and into what’s already feeling like *our* bedroom. While she goes into the bathroom, I strip down to my boxer briefs and pull the covers

back, waiting for my turn to brush my teeth. She comes out in one of my T-shirts and gives me a shy smile.

“Is this okay? I need to do laundry.”

“Yeah, of course,” I say, trying to act like it’s no big deal, but all I can think about is how great she looks in my shirt and how much I love seeing her in something that belongs to me, because as much as I try to fight it, she feels like *mine*. She feels like she belongs to *me*.

“Thanks, Yuri.” Her voice is soft and breathy, and when she holds my gaze for a few seconds longer than necessary, she blushes and quickly turns to the bed. I watch her get under the covers because the movement makes the shirt ride up, showing me several more inches of thigh. It’s painful to watch what I can’t have, but I can’t bring myself to look away.

Once she’s covered, I brush my teeth and think about the long night I have ahead of me. It’s getting harder and harder to not close the distance between us. She’ll be less than two feet away, and I know there’s nothing but a thin scrap of lace between me and the pussy I fingered earlier. God, just the memory of how tight and wet she’d been has me so goddamn hard I can barely think.

Things just get worse when I lay down and turn the light out. Gia whispers a goodnight and then tosses and turns for a good hour. She’s clearly just as frustrated as I am. Finally, she drifts off to sleep, filling the room with the snoring that makes me laugh every night without fail. It takes me a long time to fall asleep, but when I do, it’s with my ass on my side of the bed. I resisted pulling her against me, but at some point during the night, our bodies find one another. I wake to my hard cock nestled against her ass and my arms wrapped around her. My nose is buried in her hair, and the scent of her surrounds me.

I tighten my grip on her. Her shirt is bunched up, leaving her ass bare except for a thin, see-through scrap of lace. God, it’d be so easy to just rip it off and slide my cock into her tight pussy. She moans and reaches back to run her hand through my hair when I start to kiss her neck. Every part of her tastes so damn good, and when she rocks her hips, grinding her ass

against me even harder, I groan and bite the crook of her neck before licking and sucking the sting away.

“Yuri,” she moans. “We can’t,” but she rocks harder against me even as she’s saying the words.

I know she doesn’t want me to fuck her and leave her, that she needs more than that, and it surprises me how badly I want to be the lucky bastard who gets to give her all those things. I have nothing I can give her, though, except a life that she wants no part of.

When she moans my name again, I kiss her shoulder and slowly slide her shirt up even more. “Easy, baby,” I murmur against her skin as I slide farther down in the bed to kiss her bare stomach. “Let me make you feel good, *ptichka*.”

I nibble and kiss a line across her stomach, positioning myself between her legs. Pressing my face against her panty-covered pussy, I inhale her scent and groan at the exquisite torture I’m about to willingly put myself through. Nuzzling my nose against her clit, she whimpers and brings her hands to my hair. When I run my tongue up her slit, she moans my name. Sick of the barrier between us, I pull back enough to roughly rip them from her.

“Fuck,” I growl in Russian when her bare pussy is on full display in front of me. She’s shaved and soaking wet and more than ready for me. I grab the backs of her thighs and spread her legs wider, muttering another string of Russian when her pussy parts in invitation, exposing her pink, inner lips to me.

“Yuri,” she whispers, and the worry in her voice has me immediately looking up to meet her eyes.

“Let me taste you, sweetheart.” I kiss her inner thigh. “I just want to make you feel good. I want to give this to you.”

“What about you?”

I smile and give her thigh a soft bite. “Don’t worry about me, *ptichka*.” I kiss a line further up her thigh and then give her a long lick that makes her gasp. “That’s what I’m going to do to your pussy, baby. I’m going to fuck you with my tongue and lick and suck every inch of your sweet little cunt, and

you're going to come so many times for me, sweetheart, aren't you?"

"Yes," she moans, her hips already starting to rock with the need that's consuming her.

"Good girl," I whisper against her skin.

Her fingers run through my hair, sending a shiver of pleasure down my spine. My nuts are already tensed up with my need to come, but I push aside my own discomfort and slowly lick a line up her wet slit.

"Fuck!" she gasps, clutching my hair tightly between her fingers.

I growl at how fucking good she tastes and slide my tongue into her, fucking her in long, slow strokes. She whimpers and moans and rocks her hips even harder, desperate and eager to come. I'm drunk on the taste and feel of her. Her scent is everywhere. She consumes all my senses, and I welcome it, embracing every damn thing I can get, because the truth is I want it all.

My nose presses against her clit as my tongue delves deep, and she takes full advantage of it, grinding and riding me until I feel her pussy tense right before she screams my name and bucks even harder against me. With a growl, I lap her juices like a goddamn starving man until she's gasping and shaking and her hands go slack in my hair.

Slowing down, I let her savor the aftershocks. Sliding my tongue out, I kiss and suck on her pussy lips before kissing my way to her clit. She's still sensitive, so I gently rim her swollen bundle of nerves until she's tightening her grip on my hair again, letting me know she's ready for more. I give her clit a soft flick, smiling when she gives a surprised gasp. Pressing the pad of my tongue against her, I rub her in firm circles, coaxing another orgasm out of her.

I feast on her pussy like a damn glutton, bringing her to climax over and over again. This isn't about teasing her and withholding pleasure, although I'd like nothing more than to tie her up and tease the fuck out of her. This is about me giving

her as much pleasure as I possibly can. I want to make her feel good. I've always been a generous lover, but I'm not selfless, not like this. For the first time in my life, just watching this beautiful woman come again and again from my touch is enough for me.

"Yuri, I can't," she whimpers right after I've slid two fingers into her and made her come again.

"You don't think so?" I ask, lifting my eyes to her.

She's panting and flushed, her eyes heavy-lidded and glazed over with ecstasy. She's beautiful, completely and utterly perfect.

"I think you can give me one more, *ptichka*."

"I can't," she whines, shaking her head and trying to wiggle her worn-out clit from my tongue's reach.

I laugh and give her thigh a kiss. I watch her as I hook my finger and start to stroke the inner wall of her pussy. Her eyes widen in surprise, making me think that she's been with some really shitty lovers in the past. The thought of her with another man pisses me off too much to think about for longer than a second. I don't want her with anyone else. This pussy that I now know every damn inch of is mine, goddammit. It's mine to touch and lick and suck and savor, and soon it will be mine to fuck. Every fiber of my being knows it. She's *mine*.

"Yuri," she moans when I start to work her harder.

"I've got you, baby. Be a good girl and give me one more."

Her pussy clenches around me, and when I know she's seconds away, I give her clit a long, slow lick and rub her G-spot even harder, throwing her right over the edge. She lets out a ragged cry and tenses beneath me, completely lost to her own pleasure. I watch her from between her legs with my lips wrapped around her clit, drinking in the sight of her coming undone as I keep her orgasm going.

My fingers slow when her body goes limp. I gently lick her clean, sucking the taste of her off my fingers before taking my time with her pussy. When I'm satisfied, I kiss my way up her stomach. Unable to resist, I lift her shirt and wrap my lips

around one taut nipple, pulling another whimper from her. For my own sanity, I force myself to let her go. With one last kiss, I pull her shirt down and bring my face to hers. The look in her eyes stops me cold. Her blue eyes are filled with a raw pain that threatens to undo me.

“Baby, what’s wrong?” I brush aside her hair and cup her face. “Did I hurt you?”

“No,” she whispers. Her voice is ragged and shaky, and she looks so small and vulnerable. It kicks all my protective instincts into high gear.

“Please tell me what’s wrong.”

Her eyes get watery, but I can tell she’s fighting like hell to keep it in check. She wraps her arms around me and buries her face in my neck.

“I’m sorry. That felt amazing, and I’m just fucking it all up.”

I cup the back of her head. “Don’t apologize, Gia. Just please tell me what’s wrong.”

“I’m going to miss you,” she admits. “I know it’s stupid. I barely know you, but I’m going to really miss you.”

My heart breaks at her words, and for the first time in my life, I wish I was someone different. I wish I was just some normal guy with a normal job, because then I could give her everything she wants and deserves.

“I’m going to miss you, too, *ptichka*.”

Her body shakes beneath mine, and I know she’s crying. Grabbing onto her, I roll us over and sit up against the headboard, keeping us chest to chest. She wraps her arms around my neck. The heat of her breath against my skin mixed with her hot tears and the soft shaking of her body leaves me feeling helpless in a way that I’ve never experienced.

“What can I do?” I finally ask, because it’s clear I have no idea how to fix this. “Please tell me what to do, Gia. You’re breaking my heart, baby.”

She tightens her grip on me and lets out a shaky breath. “I’m sorry. I swear I’m trying to not act like a blubbering idiot.”

“You’re not an idiot.” I keep one hand threaded in her hair, cupping the back of her head while my other hand rubs circles on her back. “You’re hurting, and I’ll do anything to make it go away.”

“There’s nothing you can do. It is what it is. Your life is here with your Bratva, and mine is in New York with my brother.” She runs her fingers along my jaw. “Can I ask you something?”

“You can ask me anything, and I promise I’ll do my best to answer.”

“What happened the night my uncle died?”

“What did you hear?”

She shrugs one shoulder. Her fingers have moved to my neck, exploring my skin like she’s trying to memorize me. “I just heard that my uncle and his men were killed at the house by the Fedorov Bratva.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it,” she whispers. “I know the kind of man my uncle was well enough to know he must’ve done something really bad to warrant that kind of response.”

I can’t help the hardness of my tone when I say, “He did. Are you sure you want to hear this? It’s not pleasant.”

“Yes, I want to know.”

I think about that night and decide on a condensed version that won’t reveal any Bratva details. “Your uncle took Mikhail’s wife, well, she was his fiancée at the time. I was supposed to be protecting her, but they got the upper hand.” The familiar pang of anger and guilt run through me at the admission, but I ignore it and say, “They took us back to your uncle’s basement. His men took me into a room and had their fun with me while Antonio dealt with Charlie.”

“What did he do?” she whispers. Her palm rests against my neck, every part of her pressing against me like she’s afraid that any second I’ll get up and leave.

“He beat the shit out of her and was just about to rape her when Mikhail stormed in and ended his pathetic life.”

“No wonder you all hate me.”

The sadness in her voice pulls me out of my own anger. Grabbing onto her, I shift her so she’s sitting up, straddling me and doing her best to avoid my face.

“Look at me, Gia.”

I wait until she brings her eyes to mine.

“I don’t hate you. I never have, not when I first saw your photo and learned who you were, and not even when you acted like a little hellcat and tried your best to knee me in the balls when I scared the hell out of you that night.”

I brush the tears from her cheeks and smile when she leans into my touch, the movement so automatic and natural.

“None of us hate you. You’re not your uncle. We all know that.”

She gives a soft nod and watches me. “I’m really sorry for what he did. I’m sorry about Charlie, but I’m also sorry for what his men did to you. It makes me sick to think about it.”

“It’s not your burden, *ptichka*. Charlie recovered and so did I. No permanent physical damage to either one of us.”

“I knew there was something off about that damn basement. I couldn’t even stay down there. It was like a dungeon.”

“Well, let’s be honest, sweetheart, the whole house is godawful ugly.”

She laughs and the sight of her smiling face eases the tightness in my chest. “Yeah, it is. It’s so gaudy. I’m beginning to think you did me a favor by getting me out of there.”

“Are you thanking me for kidnapping you?” I ask, giving her a wink.

“When you put it like that it sounds a bit nutty, but I’m well aware that I got very lucky with you walking into my bedroom instead of someone else.”

The thought of someone else taking her, someone like Antonio, makes me want to kill someone. She sees something on my face that makes her eyes widen a bit, so I force myself to take a calming breath and tap the tip of her nose, making her smile.

“No more worrying about what-ifs or Rossi dickheads. I can promise you no one’s going to hurt you when you’re with me.” The promise comes easily, sliding off my tongue without me even having to think about it because I know it’s true. I would protect her with my life. She’s the only person outside of the Bratva that I can say that about.

She nods and grabs my hand, kissing the palm of it. “Thank you for the orgasms, Yuri.” She blushes so deeply I can’t help but laugh. “I’m sorry I ruined it by crying afterwards.”

“You didn’t ruin anything, and I’ll happily bury my head between your thighs anytime you want me to, *ptichka*.”

She smiles, but I can still see the pain she’s trying to hide. We’re both feeling the loss that hasn’t even happened yet. I didn’t even know it was possible to miss someone before they’re gone, but I miss her already. Every fucking part of me aches for the separation that could happen any day now. Once she’s fully cleared by the Bratva and we’re sure what remains of the Rossi family is staying in Italy, then Gia will be free to go, and I’ll never see her again. No matter how many times I try to tell myself it’s for the best, I still don’t believe it. My heart rebels at the thought of her getting on a plane and disappearing from my life. I wrap my arms around her, holding her tighter, wondering how in the hell I’m ever going to be able to let her go.

Chapter 8

Gia

The next couple of days pass by quickly while also feeling like the slowest kind of torture. Yuri isn't at all how I first thought he was. Well, he is sexy and arrogant, but there's so much more to him than that. He has a killer sense of humor and is able to make me laugh no matter how sad I'm feeling or how close I am to losing my mind from sexual frustration. He's just easy to be around, and he makes me happy in so many ways. He's perfect, the exact man I would choose if it were up to me, but it's not. He already belongs to something. It may not be another woman, but it might as well be for the loyalty it inspires. He will never walk away from his Bratva. We both know it, and the knowledge sits between us like a ticking time bomb. One day it will explode, and it's going to tear me to shreds when it does.

“Hey, what are you doing?”

His deep voice with the sexy accent that I can't seem to get enough of pulls me from my morbid thoughts. I smile when he wraps his arms around me. After that amazing morning when he made me come more times than I could count, we haven't done anything. That doesn't stop us from constantly touching one another, though. Every night I fall asleep cuddled up against him, and every morning I wake with his arms wrapped around me. I'm constantly battling with myself to just give in. It's only the fear of what it will do to my heart that keeps my pussy in check. I'm not sure I'd survive it. How the hell could I possibly go from Yuri to any other man? If I give him my body, then it'll be the final piece. He'll have all of me, and I know I'll never get myself back again. I'll leave to go home,

but my heart will stay with him. I'll be damning myself to a life of loneliness.

I take a deep breath and relax into his touch, smiling up at him when I have myself back under control. "I promised you brownies," I remind him.

His whole face lights up, making me laugh.

"I think it's really cute that you have such a sweet tooth."

He smiles and nuzzles his face against my neck, breathing in the scent of me as a shiver runs down my spine and my pussy clenches in need. The wet heat of his tongue brushes lightly along the crook of my neck before he gives me a soft bite.

"I could eat sweet things all day, *ptichka*, and you are the sweetest thing I've ever tasted."

I groan when I feel him harden against my ass. "Behave and let me bake these for you."

He gives me one more kiss and steps back. The smack on my ass isn't unexpected, but it still makes me yelp. When I turn to glare at him over my shoulder, he just smiles and gives me a wink. God, that man is too damn handsome. It's impossible to stay irritated with him. The mischievous glint in his green eyes lets me know he's well aware of his effect on me.

Ignoring him as best I can, I start preparing the brownies. While they cook, I marinate the chicken I'm going to make for supper. The house fills with the sweet smell of brownies, and when Yuri grabs a bottle of vodka and raises a brow at me, I nod my head, figuring why the hell not. I've been avoiding alcohol, but I'm even antsier than usual today, and I could use something to take the edge off.

Instead of just pouring me a glass, he starts gathering snacks, loading the counter with crackers, some smoked salmon, some veggies, anything he can find that catches his eye. When I arch a brow at him, he smiles and says, "You shouldn't drink on an empty stomach."

Pouring me a shot, he hands it to me and holds his up in a toast. “*Za tebya,*” he says before slinging it back and drinking it in one swallow.

I do the same, or try to, and end up coughing while he tries not to laugh. He hands me a cracker with some salmon on it, urging me to eat. I chew while my throat continues to burn and he fills our shot glasses again.

“What did your toast mean?”

“*To you,*” he says, handing me another shot. “If we were in Russia, you’d have to listen to a million different toasts being made, and you’d be expected to drink after every one of them. That’s why we eat while we drink. No one would survive the night without passing out if we didn’t,” he says with a laugh.

We do a couple more shots, each one goes down a little smoother, but even with the snacking, I feel the alcohol start to hit me. I welcome the heat spreading through me and the numbness that starts to quiet my racing mind. Taking a break from the vodka, I take out the brownies and then set to work on the chicken. I smack Yuri’s hand away from the brownies when he tries to steal one.

“Those are for dessert.”

“You’re really going to make me wait?”

I laugh at the pouty sound of his voice. He looks so damn sad at the thought of having to wait until after supper.

“Fine, but just one or you won’t be hungry later.”

He laughs and swats my ass. “You realize I’m twelve years older than you, right?”

“You’d never know it, though, would you?” I ask with a smirk.

“There’s my sassy girl,” he says, making me smile.

“Eat your damn brownie.” I butt him out of the way with my hip and put the chicken in the oven.

“Holy shit,” Yuri says around a mouthful of brownie.

“I told you they’d be better than the boxed ones at the store.”

He mumbles something as he chews, and he looks so damn mouthwateringly adorable that I have to look away before I do something crazy like vault across the kitchen island and rip his shirt off before licking the chocolate from his lips. Grabbing a bag of potatoes, I harness all my frustration and peel the hell out of them. I put them on to boil and then turn and pour myself another shot. Yuri eyes me but doesn’t say anything. I’ve decided that if I’m going to survive this, I’m going to have to do it slightly buzzed. It’s the only way to get through it without losing my mind.

After two more shots, I hold up the bottle, eyeing what’s left and quickly deciding that it’s not enough. “Do you have more of this?”

“You want to have a little fun tonight, *ptichka*?”

I’m already feeling a good buzz, and I know I should probably quit, but I’m so sick and tired of worrying about everything. I need a break, just one night to shove everything out of my mind and force myself to relax.

“I do,” I tell him. “Do you have more?”

“I’m Russian, sweetheart. Of course I have more.”

“Good, ‘cause we’re gonna need it.”

He laughs and drinks another shot with me. By the time I get done preparing supper, I’m more than halfway to drunk. I’ve been snacking, but it’s not enough to soak up all the liquor I’ve been tossing back. Yuri stifles a laugh when I pile my plate high in an effort to sober myself up a bit. The vodka doesn’t seem to have had the slightest effect on him.

We eat and laugh and drink, and my reasons for keeping my distance from him grow quieter and quieter until soon I can’t hear them at all. Instead of cleaning up after supper, he grabs the dish of brownies and more vodka while I grab a deck of cards.

“You want to play a game? I should warn you that I’m very good at cards.”

I snort out an unladylike laugh and sit with him at the table. “I think I can handle myself.”

He forks more brownie, not even bothering with a plate and shrugs his broad shoulders. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you, sweetheart.”

Smiling, I shuffle the cards and start to deal. I’m shit at poker, like godawful horrible at it, but that’s not the point. I have every intention of losing more than a few hands of poker tonight. When he gets his cards, he holds them so I can’t see, already putting them in order and no doubt planning his moves out perfectly. I stare at my cards, trying to remember what the hell a flush is. It doesn’t take long for me to lose. Yuri laughs and shuffles the deck again.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” I ask, tossing back another shot for courage.

“And what’s that?”

“I lost, Yuri. Aren’t I supposed to take something off?”

He arches a dark brow at me. “You really want to do this, *ptichka*, because as shitty as you play, you’re going to be naked soon.”

I keep my eyes on his and reach down to pull off one sock, holding it up before tossing it aside.

“Oh, it’s on, sweetheart,” he says, already dealing out a new round of cards.

We drink and share a fork, making quick work of the brownies while I slowly lose all my clothes. Soon, I’m in nothing but my bra and panties, silently thanking myself for wearing a matching pair in red lace and not the sensible cotton pair he first saw me in.

His eyes run over me, hungry and dangerous. My thighs part slightly as if they have a mind of their own, making him take in a ragged breath and scrub a hand over his jaw.

“You sure you want to keep playing?”

I set my pathetic pair of twos down and slowly bring my hands behind my back to unclasp my bra. His whole body

stills, watching the straps fall off my shoulders before I pull it off and let it fall to the pile of clothes at my feet.

“Fuck,” he groans, eyeing my tits like a starving man. I know that look. It’s the same look he gave me right before he buried his head between my legs and slid his tongue inside me. The memory has my hips rocking gently, grinding my pussy softly against the chair.

He shakes his head to clear it and takes another shot before dealing out the last hand. His concentration wavers because he can’t stop staring at me, almost ruining my plan of losing, but he finally pulls it together enough to beat me. He leans back in his chair as I stand up, groaning when I hook my fingers under the thin lace at my hips before I slowly start to slide them down. He murmurs something in Russian as I bend over to step out of my panties, and when I stand back up, completely naked and feeling more exposed than I’ve ever been in my entire life, the raw need on his face has me sucking in a quick breath.

“You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen, *ptichka*.” Reaching out he grabs onto my hips and pulls me closer, pressing his face against my stomach. He groans and kisses my skin, sliding his hands around to cup my ass. With a pained sigh, he looks up at me. “Please get dressed, baby. It’s too much.”

The pain in his voice cuts me to the quick. Reaching up, I run my fingers through the hair I love so much. There are so many shades to his dark blond hair, and I never get tired of playing with it.

“I don’t want to get dressed, Yuri. I was thinking maybe you could get undressed instead.”

His body stills before he looks up at me. “You didn’t want to, Gia. Is this because of the vodka?”

“I changed my mind, and I’m not drunk.”

It’s true, thanks to all the food I’ve eaten, but there is enough alcohol running through my system to make me forget that I’m supposed to be protecting my heart. All I can think

about is how badly I want this, how badly I *need* him. I may only have this one moment with him, but I know it will stick with me for the rest of my life. I've reached the point where I'll welcome the pain instead of the agony of always wishing I'd said yes.

“Please, Yuri. I want this.”

He searches my eyes, and when he's convinced I'm sober enough and sincere, he kisses my stomach once more before standing and picking me up. I wrap my arms and legs around him, burying my face in his neck and breathing in the comforting scent of him. He groans and squeezes my ass harder when I run my tongue up his neck. I yelp when he gives my ass a hard smack.

“Behave, sweetheart, or we're not even going to make it to the damn bed.”

I nip at the crook of his neck, earning me another sharp smack on the ass. I briefly think about telling him this is my first time, but I don't want to make this into a big deal and freak him out. We both know we're not getting a happy ending, and the last thing I want to do is pile on the virginity card and make him feel even more guilty, or worse, make him decide that we really shouldn't do this at all. It's for the best if he never knows. I want him to be my first, and I'm willing to suffer the consequences later for these precious moments with him.

When he lays me on the bed, he smiles when I immediately start to pull his shirt off, because god I want him naked. The sight of his bare, tattooed chest pulls a moan from deep within me. He hovers his body over mine, tracing a finger along my jaw.

“I've thought about this so many times.” He leans closer and gives my bottom lip a soft suck. “Fucked my hand to fantasies of you every goddamn day since I met you.”

His tongue runs along my lips, making my mouth part in a gasp at how it sends a rush of pleasure straight between my legs.

“I can’t get you out of my head, Gia.”

I run my nails over his back, pulling him tighter against me. “Please, Yuri,” I beg.

He meets my eyes and runs his thumb along my cheek, and the moment is so intimate it makes my chest ache. “As if I could deny you anything.”

Pain flashes across his green eyes, but it’s gone in the next second when he pulls back long enough to step out of his jeans and boxer briefs. He gives me the same cocky grin I’ve seen on his face a million times, the one that never fails to make my heart speed up and my panties grow wet. I run my eyes over him, drinking in the amazing sight that is Yuri fully naked. My eyes widen when his enormous cock gives a healthy jump at my clear appreciation of him.

I’d seen him the night in the kitchen when he’d first made me come, but I’d convinced myself that my memories were exaggerating his size. Nope. My memories were spot on. The man is huge—thick and long and rock-fucking-hard. I’m thankful for all the vodka still running through my system, because this is going to hurt like a motherfucker. Hopefully, the alcohol will dull the pain enough so it won’t be obvious I’ve never done this before.

His eyes run over me, and when I put my feet on the bed and part my thighs, he groans out a “Fuck” before closing the distance. His mouth is on my pussy in the next second, licking and sucking, devouring me with every stroke of his talented tongue. I clutch at the bedding, already feeling the beginnings of an orgasm stirring right out of reach.

“Yuri,” I moan, rocking my hips up to his greedy mouth. He wraps his lips around my clit, giving me a suck that pulls a scream from me as my vision darkens and I buck my hips against him, fully embracing the feral side of myself that I never even knew existed. He keeps working me, prolonging my orgasm until I’m squirming away to protect my overly sensitive clit. He gives my pussy one more kiss before working his way up my body.

“God, I love your body, sweetheart,” he whispers against one of my tits before giving my nipple a flick of his tongue.

I look down, watching him tease my nipple while I stroke the side of his face. He meets my eyes, giving me a wink before wrapping the wet heat of his mouth around my tit and sucking me in.

“Fuck,” I gasp, arching my back off the bed in an effort to give him more. I wrap my legs around him, groaning when I feel the thick head of his cock nudging my slit. He doesn’t try to enter me, just keeps himself pressed firmly against my pussy, a constant, tantalizing reminder of what’s about to happen. He cups my other tit with one hand, pinching my nipple while he gently bites the other. When I feel like I’m seconds away from losing my goddamn mind, he lets go of my breast and kisses a line up my chest.

“What the hell are you doing to me, Gia?” He whispers the question in between licks and soft bites that leave a trail of goosebumps along my skin. “This is only going to make it hurt worse, baby.”

“I know.” I tighten my arms and legs around him, cupping the back of his head, refusing to give in to the tears that are already on the brink of spilling over. “Please give me this, Yuri. Let me leave here with the memory of what it’s like to be with you.”

He lets out a pained groan at my words before bringing his mouth to mine, kissing away all the worry and sadness that threatens to consume us both. I get lost in his kiss, completely giving myself over to him. When he starts to slide in, my body instinctively tenses up, making it impossible for him to go any further.

“God, you’re tight, sweetheart,” he murmurs against my lips. I take a slow breath, willing my body to relax, and when his thick head slips inside, I bite my lip to keep from yelling out. My pussy clenches around him, pulling another deep groan from him. When he brings a hand between us and starts to rub my clit, I welcome the distraction from the sting of his thick cock. He already knows my body so well, easily bringing

me to another orgasm, and when I start to come, he groans and slides in the rest of the way.

I gasp at the mix of pain and pleasure, riding the wave as he stretches and fills me beyond anything I thought possible. When he's deeply seated inside me, he pauses to rest his forehead against mine.

“How will I ever let you go?”

He doesn't wait for an answer, knowing I can't give him one. Instead, he kisses me slowly, until I'm drunk on the taste of chocolate and vodka, and when he starts to fuck me, I lose all sense of reality. Nothing else exists except him and me. With each stroke, the pain recedes while the pleasure grows stronger. The kiss turns hungrier, the thrusts harder, and soon I'm digging my nails into his back while he swallows my screams. He groans when my pussy tightens around him, urging him to let go with me. Resisting, he threads his fingers through mine, pinning my hands to the bed.

“Not fucking yet,” he growls, and I smile at how thick his accent is. “I've waited too long for this.”

He lifts up enough so he can watch me as he starts to fuck me harder, groaning at the sight of my tits bouncing with each hard thrust. The moonlight streaming in through the window is enough for me to see the way his muscles tense with his movements. God, he really is a work of art. Watching Yuri fuck is an experience unlike anything I could ever dream up. My wildest fantasies could never have done it justice.

My eyes roll back in my head when he starts to circle his hips, hitting places inside me that have my toes curling and my hips rocking up for more. He lowers his head, catching one of my nipples between his lips, sucking hard and speeding his hips up.

“Yuri,” I moan, knowing I'm close again.

He gives me a hard enough bite to make me gasp before lifting his head so he can watch me come undone. I keep my eyes locked on his, wanting him to see what he does to me. I give him all of me in this moment. I let him see everything,

and this time when I start to come, he doesn't fight it. His cock grows even bigger right before he groans my name and lets go. He pulses inside me, giving me everything he has while pure ecstasy rushes through every cell in my body. I'm lit up from the inside, feeling like I'm going to burst apart at the seams and float away. His green eyes bore into mine. He doesn't hide himself from me, and I recognize this as the gift it is. Neither one of us may be willing to voice exactly how we're feeling, but I see it in his eyes just as surely as he sees it in mine.

Bringing one of my hands up, he kisses my inner wrist before letting it go and doing the same to the other, and then he lowers his forearms to either side of my face. I'm completely cocooned by him, and I realize with absolute certainty that I never want to be anywhere else. He keeps himself buried inside me and presses his lips to mine. The kiss is so soft and sweet that it threatens to tear down every wall my heart is trying so desperately to build. It's a lost cause, though. I've already given every part of myself to Yuri, and there's no going back. From this moment on, my heart is slowly going to be ripped to shreds, and there's not a goddamn thing I can do about it except try to survive it.

When Yuri gives my bottom lip one last suck before pulling back, I run my fingers along the side of his face, memorizing every detail of this moment.

"How can one man be so damn gorgeous?" I ask, voicing the question that's been running through my mind since he pulled the ski mask off and I got my first look at him.

He laughs and gives me a wink. "Don't forget that I also have a great sense of humor, I'm pretty damn good in bed, and, as you already know, an excellent poker player."

"And humble," I say with a laugh.

He laughs and taps the tip of my nose, a cute habit he's picked up that would infuriate me if anyone else tried to do it.

"You're the gorgeous one, *ptichka*. Every time I look at you, everything else disappears. It's impossible for anything else to exist when you're near."

I give him a wobbly smile because it's taking everything I have to fight my watery eyes. He gives me a small smile while trying to hide the pain in his own eyes. I'm grateful when he slowly starts to slide out of me because it forces the sadness away and reminds that I need to think of something quick or he's going to realize that I just gave him a lot more than my heart.

The room is dark enough for him not to see any evidence, but I know it's not enough. Pressing my hand against his chest, I urge him to roll over, and when he's on his back, I give him a quick kiss. "Wait here for a sec."

He smiles and laces his hands behind his head just like he does when he sleeps. "Yes, ma'am," he says, giving me a wink and running his eyes over me as I get up and run for the bathroom.

I turn on the light once the door is shut and look around, praying to whoever is listening for there to please be a candle in here somewhere. He hears me banging around and yells, "What are you looking for, *ptichka*?"

"Do you have a candle?"

I hear a laugh before he says, "No."

Ignoring the light problem, I start to fill the tub, adding in my own bubble bath so the water is covered in a layer of bubbles. I walk back into the bedroom, hoping like hell he doesn't see any evidence on his cock and start asking questions.

Chapter 9

Yuri

Gia walks back into the bedroom looking like a goddess who's just been fucked good and hard. She's beautiful beyond anything I've ever seen, and it's not just because of her looks. It's everything, and I've fallen completely in love with her. I shouldn't have let things go this far, and I sure as fuck shouldn't have slid into her without a condom, something I've never in my life done, but there was no way in hell I could say no to her when she offered me her body. It wasn't just her body she offered, though. She gave me all of her, and I happily returned it, knowing I would pay for it later, that we both would.

She leans over and gives me a kiss. "Come take a bath with me."

"Is someone feeling sore?" I tease, reaching out to cup the pussy I'll never be able to get enough of.

She scoots out of reach and grabs my hand. "Yes, now come on before the water spills over."

I smile at how bossy she is and let her drag me out of bed. When we get to the bathroom, she flicks off the light.

"Too late to get shy, baby. I've already seen every inch of you, and every inch is perfect."

"The light is too harsh." She steps into the tub before motioning for me to do the same. She doesn't relax until I'm sitting down, then she sighs, turns off the water, and leans back against me.

I wrap an arm around her chest and kiss her temple. My hand drifts to one of her wet tits, cupping it and gently massaging her. She lets out a soft moan when I pinch her nipple between my fingers. I'm obsessed with her body, completely and absolutely obsessed.

The sound of her voice has my chest tightening again. It's barely more than a whisper when she asks, "What happens now, Yuri?"

I tell her the truth, unable to lie to her even if I wanted to. "I'm going to enjoy every damn second I have with you, and then I'll watch you walk away, wishing like hell I could be the man you need me to be so that you'd stay and I could keep you."

She nods her head, but I hear her shaky breaths, and I know how hard she's trying to keep it together. She manages to hold out for a few more seconds before she turns around and straddles my lap, wrapping her arms around my shoulders and burying her face against my neck. I hold her while she sobs, feeling my own heart shatter until I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that it will never be whole again. Running my hand over her back in soothing circles, I kiss her head and tell her in Russian how much I love her and how I'll miss her every day for the rest of my life.

I feel her body give one last shudder before she takes a deep, steadying breath and lifts her face to mine. The bathroom window lets in enough light for me to see her well enough to notice the swollen eyes and splotchy cheeks. I cup her face, brushing aside the last couple of tears with my thumbs.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, knowing it's not enough.

"No more tears." Her voice is raw from crying, but I hear the strength in her words, and I know she means it. "I'm not going to waste what little time we have like this. I don't want you to remember me as a blubbering mess."

"Never, *ptichka*. I'll remember so many things, all of them perfect details of you, and you couldn't be a blubbering mess even if you tried. You're always beautiful to me, sweetheart."

She nods and takes another shaky breath. “I think if we had sex again, it might make me feel better.”

I laugh, knowing she’s the only person on earth who could get me to do that right now. “Patience,” I tell her, giving her a soft bop on the nose that earns me a cute scowl. “First I’m going to take my time and wash every inch of you, and then I’m going to fuck you until you can barely move.”

She moans and rocks her pussy against my cock. I’m already semi-hard again, and I’m guessing she won’t be the only one who’s sore tomorrow, not that I’ll ever admit it. Taking my time, I explore every perfect, wet inch of her, and by the time I carry her back to bed, she’s moaning and begging me to let her come. Eventually, I do. When we fall asleep, it’s with our limbs tangled together, both of us a sticky mess but too damn exhausted to do anything about it.

The sun is already high in the sky when we wake, and I feel more rested than I can ever remember being. With my eyes still closed, I tighten an arm around Gia and bury my nose in her neck, surrounding myself in her scent as I grab onto her thigh, lifting her so the head of my cock can press against her pussy. She moans, slowly waking up, and brings a hand back so she can run it through my hair. When I slide into her, she hisses out a breath and clutches my hair tighter.

“A little sore, baby?”

“Mm-hmm,” she moans.

“Want me to stop?”

“Don’t you fucking dare.”

I laugh and slowly ease into her, groaning at how good she feels. The wet heat of her wrapped around me is unlike anything I’ve ever felt. She’s so easy to get lost in. I’m not used to giving up control, but losing myself in her feels second nature. Holding part of myself back never even occurs to me. For the first time in my life, I understand the phrase *making love*. Fucking Gia isn’t just fucking. When she spreads her thighs for me, she’s giving a part of herself to me that goes beyond just the physical, and I’m doing the same with her. She

has all of me, every damn part, and when she moans my name into the pillow and pushes me over the edge with the tight clench of her pussy, I hold her even tighter, wondering how in the fuck I'm going to be able to let her go.

The rest of the day passes way too quickly. I want to freeze time, to make everything else stop so that I can stay in this moment with Gia forever. I knew our time was short, but the next afternoon when Mikhail sends me a text letting me know that five Rossi men just booked a flight and will be arriving in three days, the finality of it still hits me like a punch to the gut. The Rossi family knows something is wrong, and they're coming to investigate. A million questions run through my mind, and I don't have an answer for any of them.

Sighing, I rest my head in my hands and try to brace myself for what's about to happen. I was never supposed to catch feelings for her. She was a babysitting job, a simple *keep an eye on her until we can let her go* situation, and I've gone and fallen completely in love with a woman who wants nothing to do with the life that I live.

Gia walks into the room and sits down beside me. Without a word, she wraps an arm through mine and rests her head on my shoulder, just being with me, and it's more of a comfort than a thousand words from anyone else. My heart aches, a tension headache is brewing and threatening to give me hours of discomfort, and all I know is that I can't let her go without a fight. I have to at least try.

"Looks like the Rossi family is getting suspicious. They'll be here in three days."

Her body tenses beside me. "What's going to happen?"

"I don't know," I admit. "It's not a great sign that they're invested enough to come and check things out."

"Let me call the realtor back. She's left me a couple of voicemails about potential buyers, maybe if I call her back and just accept one, then they won't come."

I shake my head and give her hand a squeeze. "No, *ptichka*. I've allowed you to keep in touch with Dominic, but

that's it. We need to know what the Rossi family is willing to do. We need to know how far they're willing to go and if they plan on building their ties back up here. The only way to find that out is to wait and see."

We sit in silence while I think about what to do, and when I say, "Do you want to come with me to the Peach?" I do it because I need to talk some things over with the guys and not because I think she's going to enjoy the trip.

"What's the Peach?"

"It's a club the Bratva owns," I say, not mentioning that it's actually a strip club.

"Sure."

I watch her walk off to get ready and then quickly text Sergei and Artyom, asking if they can meet me there. Sergei immediately gives me a thumbs up, and Artyom replies with a *How important is this? I need to decide if it's worth Riley's wrath.*

I tell him it's very important and that I'll make it up to Riley.

I'll be there, he texts, even though I know he really doesn't want to go. He's a happily married man, and the last place he wants to be is in a crowded strip club. I get it, but I also need him, and this is the easiest place for us to meet and talk. I need to go in there and check on a few things anyway, and I could also use a fucking drink since Gia and I drank all the damn vodka the other night.

I don't warn Gia about the place, and when I pull into the parking lot, she eyes the building and the long line of men waiting to get in and shoots me a look that has my balls threatening to curl up into my body.

"The Sweet Peach? You've got to be fucking kidding me, Yuri. Did you seriously bring me to a strip club?"

"I just need to take care of a little bit of business," I tell her, holding my hands up in an effort to quell the storm that's brewing. "The Bratva owns the club. Artyom used to run it,

but after he got married, it's pretty much fallen to me to look after everything."

"Oh, I bet you just fucking love that," she growls, rolling her eyes and reaching for the door. "Let's get this over with."

I follow her, feeling the rage pouring off her, convinced that if I touched her right now I'd burn my damn hand. Viktor's manning the door, and he takes one look at her and quickly steps aside before giving me a sympathetic smile. I smack him on the back and ask him if Sergei and Artyom are here yet.

"Yeah, they're both here," he tells me in Russian, checking the ID of the guy in front of him as I pass by.

I thank him and lead Gia in. As soon as we walk through the doors and she sees all the women dancing at various poles scattered throughout the place, she shrugs her shoulder hard enough to make my hand fall from where I'd been touching her.

This was a very bad idea.

Walking further in, I see Artyom and Sergei sitting at a table in the corner and give them a nod, pointing at Gia to let them know I'll be with them in just a sec. I lead Gia to the back office. I don't want her anywhere near the dancers or the overeager men. I just need her to sit here for a few minutes. When I open the office door and point to the chair behind the desk, she turns to me, eyes narrowed and mouth in a hard line.

"You want me to just sit back here while you go and enjoy yourself?"

"It's not like that," I try to explain. "I just need to talk to a couple of the guys and sign a few invoices and approve a couple of things. It won't take me long. Please, Gia, just sit in here, and I'll be done as soon as I can."

"Do you fuck the dancers?"

Her question stings, and when I hesitate a second too long, she lets out a harsh laugh.

"It's not like that, Gia," I try to explain.

“Oh really? So you’ve never fucked any of them?”

When I don’t say anything, she mutters, “Crystal with her big fake tits showing up at your house makes a whole lot more sense now.”

“She was just there for paperwork,” I say, but even I can hear how much that sounds like a shit-poor excuse.

She shakes her head as if I just confirmed her worst fears, but she goes to the chair and sits down. Waving her hand at me, she refuses to meet my eyes and says, “Go, Yuri, you don’t want to keep them waiting.”

I sigh and scrub a hand over my jaw, the tension headache quickly blooming into a migraine. “We’re not done talking about this,” I warn her. “Just sit here, and I promise I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

When it’s clear she’s not going to say anything or even look my way, I leave the office, shutting the door behind me. I push my way through the crowd, heading to the back table, and when Artyom sees the look on my face, he passes me a shot of vodka that I quickly down.

“I’m guessing that one fuck didn’t do the trick?” he asks, lifting a brow. His whole aura reads *I told you so*, and he laughs when he sees how badly I want to punch him for it.

“So you thought bringing her to a strip club and shutting her in the office would help?” Sergei asks, making Artyom laugh even louder.

I point a finger at him. “Don’t you fucking start.” I take another shot that I desperately need and ask, “You got the text about the Rossi family flying in?”

“I did,” Artyom says while Sergei nods.

I lean back and groan. “This was not supposed to happen,” I admit. “What the fuck am I supposed to do? If the Rossi family tries to rebuild here, it’s a declaration of war, which makes our relationship very dangerous, and it’ll put her brother in danger which will kill her. If they’re just here to settle shit and then go back home, it still doesn’t change things, because she hates her mafia family and wants nothing

to do with that kind of life, the *only* kind of life that I can offer her.”

The loud music keeps our conversation private, but it's doing my headache no favors. Sergei gives one of the dancers a wink, and she immediately starts to walk over.

“Can't you keep your dick in your pants for five fucking minutes?” Artyom growls at him.

“All I did was wink. And for the record, I did not whip my dick out while sitting at the table with you two.”

“You're not helping things,” I tell him, groaning when I realize it's Crystal he winked at. She flashes me a big smile and comes sauntering over in nothing but a thong, high heels, and some sparkly pasties to cover her nipples but not a damn thing else.

She smiles at Sergei, ignores Artyom because she knows better, and then settles her eyes on me. “Hi, Yuri.” She steps closer so her tits are dangerously close to my face. “You want a dance?”

“No,” I say, and I'm just about to tell her to back the fuck up when a bunch of men start whistling and hollering.

“Oh fuck,” Sergei says when he looks over.

The look Artyom gives me lets me know I'm not going to like what I see. Pushing a frowning Crystal aside, I scan the crowd, and when I see a familiar dark blonde head spin around one of the poles on the floor, a rage starts to build inside me.

“Easy, man,” Artyom says, standing up beside me.

When I see the way Gia's dancing and the hungry male faces that are eye-fucking the hell out of my girl, I start pushing bodies aside in an effort to get to her.

“Don't kill anyone,” Artyom yells at me in Russian, but I don't even look back. All my focus is on the woman who's about to have her ass spanked red.

I tear a hole through the fucking crowd of rowdy men. Some yell and start to reach for me, but as soon as they see the look on my face, they quickly back off. One handsy jackass is

too busy trying to reach out to Gia to notice me. I spin him around and punch him in the nose, breaking it in a satisfying crack that does little to appease the rage inside me. When one of his friends steps forward, I land a few more punches to knock him on his ass. No one else steps forward, so I turn back to the woman who's no longer dancing and instead staring at me with a wide-eyed look on her face.

Without a word, I grit my teeth and haul her over my shoulder, storming her ass back to the office. The crowd parts like I'm Moses and it's the goddamn Red Sea.

"Yuri," she starts to say.

I smack her ass hard enough to cut off her words. "Not a fucking word, Gia."

She slumps against me, the fight quickly leaving her, but I'm just getting started. I slam the office door shut and sit on the desk before positioning her over my lap. Grabbing a rag, I wipe that fucker's blood off my knuckles and toss it aside.

"What the fuck are you doing?" she screams when I unbutton her shorts and start to pull them down, taking her panties right along with them.

"I'm spanking your fucking ass, sweetheart."

She squirms, but she's no match for me. I wait for her to wear herself out, watching her perfect, round ass while she bucks and wiggles before finally giving up with an angry huff of air. My cock is rock hard, and I know she feels it digging into her stomach. The more she struggles, the bigger it gets.

"You finished with your tantrum?"

"Fuck you," she pouts, making me laugh.

The first smack reverberates off the damn walls because I have no intention of going easy on her. She yells and tries to turn her head to glare at me. Her cheeks are bright red, and the look of pure disbelief that I actually had the nerve to put her over my knee has me laughing again. The second spank is just as hard, so is the third and fourth.

“What the fuck were you thinking?” I demand, watching my handprints bloom on her ass as images of her dancing in front of those men fill my mind.

“Why the hell do you care?” Her voice is thick and shaky, her cheeks streaked with tears when she looks back at me. “I saw you, you jackass.”

“Yeah, because you didn’t wait in here like I told you to.”

“No, I didn’t.” She narrows her eyes at me. “You’re not the damn boss of me.”

The next spank is hard enough to pull a yelp from her pouty mouth.

Another tear slips down her cheek. “I saw you with Crystal. She was bent over with her big titties right in your fucking face. I can’t believe I thought you were different. Mafia men are all the fucking same! You couldn’t even wait for me to leave before you started fucking around.” Her whole body shakes with her next sob. She puts her hands over her face. “I can’t believe I let you be my first.”

The last sentence is so muffled that I almost don’t catch it.

“What did you just say?” A whisper is all I can manage, but I know she heard me.

“Nothing,” she growls, turning her head away.

I run my hand over her red, sore ass, pulling a soft moan from her before she can stop it. The first night we had sex runs through my mind, replaying detail by detail as all the pieces fall into place—her unbelievably tight pussy, the way she’d winced, the tenseness of her body before it had softened into pleasure, and the final damning bit of evidence, the bath she’d been so eager for me to take and her refusal to turn on the light. God, I’m such a fucking idiot.

“Gia, why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because I didn’t want to make it any harder for you.” She wipes a tear away, keeping her focus on the other side of the room instead of looking at me. “That was before I knew what a bastard you are.”

“*Ptichka*,” I say, but she cuts me off.

“Don’t fucking call me that. You don’t get to call me cutesy names in Russian anymore.”

Fed up with her refusal to look at me, I lift her up and switch places with her so her ass is on the desk and I’m standing in front of her, leaning over with my hands on either side of her.

“Enough, Gia. You’re wrong about what you think you saw. I brought Sergei and Artyom here so I could ask them advice about you. Crystal came over, but I was just about to tell her to leave when you started your little dance. Why did you do that? Do you have any idea what that did to me to see you dancing like that for those men?”

“Probably exactly what it did to me to watch you hang out with a stripper after shutting me in your damn office.”

“Yes, but you were wrong about what you saw. You assumed I was like every other guy, but I’m not, *ptichka*,” I say, because I’ll be damned if I’m going to stop using my pet name for her.

“Then what are you?”

Her blue eyes search mine, and I’m so damn grateful that they’re no longer filled with anger. I cup her face and press my forehead to hers.

“I’m a man who’s fallen completely in love with you, and I’m not letting you go.”

“Yuri,” she whispers, and I hate the worry and fear in her voice, the obvious tone of *this can’t ever work* that I don’t want to fucking hear right now, so I cut off her words with my lips.

The kiss turns hungry fast, fueled by the spanking I just gave her and the fact that her pussy is flush with my desk as she slowly starts to rock her hips. I slide my tongue along hers and thread my fingers through her hair, cupping the back of her head and holding her tighter against me. Her hands run down my chest before making quick work of my pants. When she reaches in and wraps her hand around my cock, I let out a

feral-sounding groan as everything else fades away except my need to be inside her.

As soon as she frees me, she wraps her arms around my shoulders, clinging to me as I scoot her closer to the edge and tilt her back enough to position the head of my cock against her soaked slit. I pause right at her entrance and fist her hair, pulling her head back enough to meet her eyes.

“This pussy is mine, sweetheart, and *only* mine. No other man will ever be inside you, and no more showing other men what belongs to me, *ptichka*, because I swear to you, if it happens again, I will fucking kill them. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” she moans, pupils blown and her breaths coming in fast pants. “Please, Yuri. I need you inside me. Remind me who I belong to.”

I feed her my cock in one hard thrust, loving the gasp she gives and the way her eyes roll back in her head as I fuck her hard enough to make the desk scrape against the floor. I have no intention of ever letting her forget who she belongs to. Her legs wrap around me while she digs her nails into my back and kisses me hard, claiming me just as much as I’m claiming her.

Knowing I’m the only man to ever be inside her, that my cock is the only one her sweet pussy has ever been wrapped around, sends a thrill through me. It ignites the primal, caveman part of my brain, the possessive part that makes me want to kill any other fucker who dares to look at what’s mine. With each hard thrust, I remind her that she’s right where she’s supposed to be—splayed out on my desk and taking my cock like the good girl she is. Right before she starts to come, she whispers, “I love you,” against my lips, sending me over the edge right along with her.

My cock pulses inside her as her tight pussy milks me of every damn thing I have until we’re both gasping and shaking, and I know with absolute certainty that I’ve found my home.

“We’ll find a way, baby,” I whisper, cupping her face and kissing her softly. “I promise we’ll find a way.”

Chapter 10

Gia

I cling to Yuri's words and body, never wanting to let him go. My emotions are all over the place, and I feel raw and exposed in ways that I hadn't even thought possible. When I'd seen him with Crystal, I just assumed the worst and ended up making a giant jackass of myself. I don't know why I did it except that I was hurt, and I wanted him to hurt. I wanted him to feel jealous of me, to give him a taste of what I was feeling. Well, I got my wish and some overeager guy got his nose broken and another is going to have one hell of a headache tomorrow. I've never seen anybody look as angry as Yuri had when he saw me swinging around that pole.

His fingers run down my cheek, and he gives me one more soft kiss before slowly pulling out of me. I rest my hands behind me on his desk as he grabs my knees and tilts me back, spreading my thighs even wider. He groans and runs his eyes over me.

"Goddamn, baby," he whispers, resting my foot on his hip so he can drag a finger up my thoroughly used pussy. "You look so beautiful after I fuck you—swollen, pink, and dripping my seed."

He meets my eyes and the smile he gives me is so sweet and filled with so much love that it makes my throat ache and tears threaten to spill over again.

"What have you done to me, *ptichka*? I've never not worn a condom, but I can't ever bring myself to wear one with you. I don't want anything between us." He drags his finger up my slit again, pressing hard enough to lightly dip inside and pull

another moan from me. “Plus, I have to admit, filling you up with my seed is the hottest fucking thing in the world to me. Just the idea of it drives me wild.”

I smile as he leans in to kiss me. “Everything about you drives me crazy,” he whispers before giving my bottom lip a soft suck. I open my mouth to him, wanting more. He drags his tongue along the roof of my mouth, and when I start to run my nails along his chest, he groans and pulls back before we end up spending the whole night here.

When he steps back and sets me on the ground, I wince at how sore my ass is. Rubbing a stinging cheek, I say, “You didn’t have to spank me so damn hard.”

“Oh yes I did, and don’t think I won’t do it again.”

He smiles at the scowl I give, and tucks his cock back in his pants before stepping closer and cupping my face. Running his thumb over my bottom lip, he says, “Maybe next time we’ll do it more for fun instead of a punishment.”

I blush at the memory of my ass being exposed as he spanked me. I’d felt how hard he was, each spank seemed to make him grow even bigger, and as much as my ass had hurt, a part of me had enjoyed being at his mercy. The idea of him spanking and fingering me is something I think I could definitely get onboard with.

Reading my thoughts easily, he smirks and gives me a wink. “I told you when we first met that I thought you might like being tied up, *ptichka*.” He taps the side of his head. “Tied up, teased, spanked, so many things going on the to-do list.”

I laugh and get dressed while Yuri fixes his desk and then pulls me onto his lap while he quickly does the small amount of paperwork that he actually came here to do. When he’s done, I turn his face to mine and give him a kiss.

“I’m sorry I overreacted and ruined your meeting.”

“I understand why you spied on me, Gia. Believe me, I get it, but I promise you that you don’t have to worry about that. I could never cheat on you. Just the idea of it sickens me. I’m yours and only yours.”

He kisses my hand, closing his eyes and letting out a heavy breath. When he opens them, I'm surprised by the pain I see haunting his green eyes.

"What is it?" I ask, afraid that he's worrying about my family again.

"I wish I had known it was your first time, baby." He shakes his head and winces. "I was rough with you." When he brings his eyes back to mine, I can see how tortured he is by this, and it breaks my heart to see it.

"Yuri, I'm fine." I pull him closer and kiss his face, first his cheeks and then his furrowed brow, and finally his full, perfect lips. "It felt amazing, and it was the best first time that anyone could ever hope to have. I felt safe with you, completely and utterly safe and loved. It was perfect," I say, meaning every word of it. I smile and add, "The vodka did help dull the sting. You're not a small man."

He can't resist giving a small smile at that, which makes me laugh and kiss him again. He's earned the right to be a bit smug. His cock is amazing, and I know how damn lucky I am.

"Let's go home, *ptichka*. I don't like having you here."

"Why?"

He points at the door and says, "Because every single one of those fuckers is going to look at you when we walk back through, and I know exactly what they're going to be thinking. That's why I wanted you to stay back here."

I feel guilty for not trusting him, but I had to know. The spanking was worth it. He gives the tip of my nose a soft bop and then laughs at the face I give him.

"You're so damn cute, baby."

I laugh and stand up so he can do the same. He runs his eyes over me, making sure everything's covered and then wraps his hand around the nape of my neck in a possessive grip that sends a little flutter of pleasure straight between my legs. Everything Yuri does is sexy, but being on the receiving end of his attention and affection is downright intoxicating. I've quickly become addicted to him.

We step out into the loud, thumping music and hollering men. I try to ignore the way the dancers eye Yuri, and I force myself to not try and pick out which ones he's slept with. When I see Crystal giving a man a lap dance, a chill runs through me. Her body is everyman's dream, and the thought of her with Yuri makes me feel nauseated. She turns as if sensing me and locks eyes with me briefly before turning her full attention to Yuri. She grinds her hips against a man who looks like he's in absolute heaven, while giving my man serious fuck-me eyes.

I look up at Yuri, wanting so badly to trust him but also worried that I'm going to see something in his eyes that I don't want to see. The hard look on his face isn't at all what I'm expecting. His eyes are empty, reminding me of the man he'd transformed into the night that we met, and his jaw is held in a tight line. His thumb strokes my neck in a soothing gesture as he gives a sharp whistle and motions for Crystal to get her ass over here. She freezes in place, eyes wide and surprised, before hopping off the lap she'd just been grinding on and making her way over. The man yells something at her, but she ignores him.

"Yuri," I say, trying to back away, having no desire to get to know her better.

Yuri leans down and kisses me before pressing his lips to my ear. "Relax, sweetheart. I'm just letting her know what I expect from now on." He gives my earlobe a soft suck before pulling back so he can give me a wink. When he turns around, Crystal is in front of us. Her perfect body very nearly on full display. She gives me a sneer before turning an innocent smile at Yuri.

Yuri kisses the top of my head and pulls me closer before turning his eyes to her. "Cut the bullshit, Crystal," he says, and his tone is hard and to the point. "This is Gia, my girlfriend, and I won't have you disrespecting her by giving me fuck-me eyes from across the room. Go do your fucking job or find a new place to work."

Her face pales at his words. "I'm sorry, I thought—"

“I know what you thought,” Yuri says, cutting her off. “But it’s not going to happen. This is the only warning you’re going to get about this. Understood?”

“Yes,” she quickly says, realizing her job is on the line.

“Get back to work.”

She turns and practically runs back to the man who’s still wondering why the hell she got up in the middle of a dance that he’d already paid for. I look up at Yuri, glad that when he looks down at me his expression has softened.

“I’ve never fucked her, Gia. I tried to tell you that earlier, but you were too pissed to believe me.”

I smile in relief, knowing I can scrub my brain of images that I don’t ever want to think about again. I know he’s been with women, lots of women, but knowing it in some vague sense and actually seeing proof of it right in front of your face are two very different things.

“The only woman I want to look at is you, sweetheart. Soon, I hope you’ll believe me.”

When he presses the palm of his hand against my face, I lean into it and give him a nod. He knows I’m trying, and for now that’s enough. He pulls me against him as we fight our way through the crowd. The large bouncer at the door says something in Russian before laughing and stepping aside to let us out. Yuri answers him, and as soon as we’re free of the crowd, I ask him what he said.

“Viktor said I left a mess for him to clean up, and I told him those bastards shouldn’t have been looking at what’s mine.”

“What’s yours, huh?” I ask with a grin.

He stops by his car and pulls me flush against him. “I meant every word I said in there, *ptichka*. You are mine, every single part of you, and I don’t fucking share.” He cups my sore ass, smiling when I wince. “You bring out every possessive instinct I have, sweetheart. You might want to get used to it, because I have a feeling it’s only going to get worse.”

Giving my ass one more squeeze, he groans and opens the door for me. “Get in before I end up fucking you in the damn parking lot.”

I smile and get in the car. His phone rings as we’re leaving. Answering it through the car’s Bluetooth, he starts speaking in Russian. I recognize Artyom’s voice, and when he laughs and says, “Hey, Gia,” in English, I laugh and tell him hi.

They go back to speaking Russian. I turn so I can watch Yuri. He’s so effortlessly sexy, and it always takes me by surprise. He shifts from one gear to the next, handling this beautiful car with ease while speaking the sexiest language I’ve ever heard. As if sensing my arousal, he takes his eyes off the road long enough to give me a wink. My breath catches in my throat, and when he rests his hand on my inner thigh and starts dragging his fingers further up my leg, I bite my lip to keep from moaning out loud.

Yuri keeps talking to Artyom as he teases me by running a finger up my shorts and pressing it against my panty-covered clit. I grip the edges of my seat and rock my pussy against him, already feeling how soaked I am. When he pulls his hand back to shift the car again, I let out a soft moan of protest that makes him laugh. He says something in fast Russian before ending the call and bringing his hand back where I want it.

“You’ve been insatiable since the first time I slid into that tight pussy of yours, sweetheart.” He rubs my clit in soft, firm circles. “I wonder if you’ll always be this way.”

“It’s your fault,” I tell him. “You’re way to good with your hands, and your cock is so much fun to ride you should be charging admission.”

His laughter fills the car, and the sound of it is so damn infectious that I can’t help but join in. He pats my pussy before pulling back so he can downshift and turn onto the road that leads to his house.

“I love how much you make me laugh, Gia.” He pulls into his driveway and stops the car before turning to look at me. “You may not be my first in the same way I’m yours, but you are my first in so many different ways.”

“I’m the first woman to make you laugh?” I ask, rolling my eyes in disbelief.

“Don’t roll your eyes at me. I’m being serious. You’d be surprised at how many people don’t have a sense of humor at all, and I never hung out with anyone long enough to get to know them. They were too busy trying to be the kind of woman they thought I wanted.”

“I guess they should’ve just showed you their ass in the moonlight and then cooked you a steak. You would’ve been good to go.”

He smiles and laughs. “I know, so easy, right? I can’t believe no one thought of that before you.”

I lean closer and kiss his stubbled chin. “I’m really glad they didn’t.”

“It wouldn’t have mattered even if they had,” he whispers against my lips. “It wouldn’t have been you, so it wouldn’t have been enough.”

“That sweet talk is going to make my panties fall right off.”

He smiles and runs a finger down my neck, making my nipples tighten and my breathing pick up. “I’m counting on it, *ptichka*.”

When he carries me upstairs and takes me to bed, I’m more than ready for another round. The next morning finds me tangled in sheets with a delicious ache between my legs. I smile, thinking about last night’s marathon session. God, the man’s stamina is impressive as hell. With my eyes still closed, I reach my arm out, searching for the warmth of his skin. When my fingers hit nothing but cold mattress, I open my eyes and sit up.

The room is empty, so I get up to use the bathroom and pull on his discarded T-shirt from last night before heading downstairs. I let out a surprised gasp when I walk into the kitchen to find a bare-chested Yuri scrambling eggs and frying bacon. He looks over his shoulder when he hears me, his smile lighting up his whole face.

“Morning, sleepyhead,” he says, giving me a wink. He keeps stirring the eggs while he motions me over and as soon as I’m close enough, he pulls me in for a kiss. I cup his face and moan when he parts my lips with his tongue. Yuri never half-asses anything, so even though he’s still making sure he doesn’t burn our breakfast, the kiss is thorough and skilled, and when he pulls back and kisses the tip of my nose, my inner thighs are already slick with my arousal since I didn’t bother with panties before coming down to find him.

He snakes a hand up my shirt and cups my bare ass, groaning as he squeezes a cheek. I rest my head against his chest, listening to the reassuring beat of his heart. “You made me breakfast?”

He laughs and gives my ass one last squeeze before flipping the bacon. “I know it’s hard to believe, but I actually do know how to cook, a little bit anyway. And, yes, I wanted to make you breakfast. It seemed only fair since I made you so sore last night.”

“True enough, and I’ll take it. I’m starving.”

“I bet you are,” he says, running his green eyes over me. He smiles and runs his thumb over the outline of one of my hard nipples before giving it a hard enough pinch to make me gasp. “Go grab a plate. You need calories before I fuck you again.”

I know he’s right, but I still pout a bit as I turn to get a couple of plates for us and pour myself some coffee. He dishes out the food and then takes my phone out of his back pocket, handing it over to me.

“Dominic keeps texting. You should probably call him after we eat.”

“Really?” I ask, knowing how big of a step this is.

“Gia, I love you. I want to be with you, and I trust you. I don’t want a relationship with you where I keep your phone and check everything you do. From here on out, you’re here because you want to be, not because I’m forcing it. All I ask is that you don’t have any contact with anyone in your family

other than Dominic. I still don't know what they're planning, but I want you as far away from it as possible."

"Thank you. I promise I won't be in touch with any of them," I say, throwing my arms around him. I knew the dynamic between us had changed, but to hear Yuri say he trusts me means the world to me. I'm still scared to death about what's to come, and his Bratva ties hang heavy over me, but I want to believe that we can make this work.

I eat every bite on my plate, earning me a proud smile from him. "Maybe you should start cooking from now on," I tease him.

"I'll cook for you anytime you want, sweetheart, but I'll warn you now, the menu is going to be very slim. You'll have about three meals to choose from, one of which you just ate."

I laugh and start gathering the dishes, but he takes them from me and says, "I'll get these. Go ahead and call your brother."

"What should I tell him?"

"Tell him whatever you want, baby." He smiles and adds, "Just maybe don't mention anything illegal."

I nod and call my brother. He answers after the second ring, and hearing his voice puts a smile on my face. We chat for a few minutes about how he's doing and his latest art class assignment before he starts asking about our uncle's house.

"There haven't been any offers yet or anything? How long are you going to have to stay there?"

I sit on the couch and sigh, still not sure how much I want to tell him. I've spent so many years protecting him that it's an ingrained habit at his point. I settle on some half-truths.

"There have been a couple offers, but the realtor is still sifting through them and trying to get us the best price. I'm not sure how much longer I'll be here." I watch Yuri scrubbing dishes, momentarily mesmerized by his muscled back and tell Dom, "I kind of met someone here."

“What? My sister who never dates found someone in a city where you don’t know a single soul? How’d you manage that?”

I laugh at his teasing tone, hearing Yuri laugh when I say, “Well, he was kind of interested in Uncle Antonio’s house, and we got to talking.”

“Well, I’m really glad you’re having some fun. Remember how you did that so you can do it again when you get back home. You shouldn’t be alone so much. You deserve to find someone, Gia.”

“Thanks,” I say, feeling doubts start to creep in when I think about my younger brother all alone in New York. He lives in a dorm during the school year but always comes back to our apartment during the summer. I’ve been taking care of him for so long that I hardly know where to begin to let go.

We talk for a few more minutes before he needs to get to class. When I hang up, I feel like small holes have just been poked into my happy ending with Yuri. Reality is slowly creeping in, but every part of me rejects it, wanting to keep believing that we’ll find a way to be together. Yuri walks over and sits down beside me.

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah,” I say, forcing a smile that I can tell by his quirked brow he’s not buying in the slightest. I shrug and say, “I just miss him a bit, and I worry about him.”

“I understand, *ptichka*, and once this is all over, we can visit him or he can come to see us anytime he wants.”

I rest my head on his shoulder and relax into him when he wraps an arm around me. Being held by Yuri, surrounded by his scent and the feel of his strong body against mine, makes me feel like we can make this work, that despite everything, we can get through it and make a life together. I let his presence push aside all my worries and fears and snuggle in deeper against him.

The day passes quickly, and by the time the sun is setting, I’m feeling better about everything and starting to let myself

believe in the fairytale. The buzz of Yuri's phone and the look on his face when he reads the message sends a jolt of fear through me as I feel all that newfound confidence slip through my fingers.

"What is it?" I force myself to ask, even though I'm not so sure I want to know the answer.

I see the regret in his green eyes before he says, "I'm sorry, baby, but I have to go."

Before I can question him about it, he's up and running down the hall to one of the spare rooms. I follow him and stop short when I see the closet he's opened. It's filled with tactical gear and a gun safe. I watch in silence as Yuri strips down and starts changing into black pants and a black, long-sleeve tee before strapping on a Kevlar vest. He works quickly, efficiently, like he's done this many times before. Knives are sheathed, guns are checked and holstered, and when he turns to me, I'm looking at Yuri, the dangerous Bratva killer, and it breaks my heart to see it. I've stepped right into the life I swore I'd never get involved in.

"Don't look at me like that, *ptichka*," he says, quickly closing the distance between us. He's so loaded with weapons, I'm not sure where to touch him, so I keep my hands at my sides. He cups my face and locks his eyes on mine.

"It's still me, sweetheart, and I wish like hell I had more time to convince you of that, but I have to go."

Leaning closer, he presses his lips to mine, and when I hesitate, he lets out a pained groan and gently coaxes my lips open with his tongue. I kiss him back, because no matter how much my heart is hurting, my body belongs to him, will always obey him over anything and everything else. I run my hands through his hair and let my teeth graze over his bottom lip.

"Fuck," he groans, pulling back and then giving me one more quick kiss. "I love you, Gia, and I'll be back as soon as I can, baby."

“I love you, too,” I say, and then cup his face and add, “Be careful,” because the thought of something happening to him makes me feel like I can’t breathe.

He smiles and taps my nose. “Always, beautiful.”

One more quick kiss and he’s running out the door. A loud rumble fills the air a few seconds later, letting me know he’s taken his motorcycle instead of the Audi. I hug my arms across my body and look around, taking in the damning evidence of who exactly the man I’ve fallen in love with is.

Over the next three hours, I pace the floor and try like hell to convince myself that I’m not following in my mother’s footsteps. Yuri is not my father, and I’m not going to end up miserable and popping pills just to get through the damn day. That can’t be our future. I won’t fucking allow it.

When I feel like I’ve formed a permanent path in the carpet, I switch to baking. I force my mind to think about ingredients and mixing everything together properly and not on whether or not the man I love is even still breathing right now. By the time I hear his motorcycle, I’ve just finished icing my thirtieth damn cupcake and my nerves are so frazzled I’m shaking.

I hear the door open, but I don’t move. He steps into the kitchen, looking disheveled, mouthwateringly sexy, and his green eyes are filled with a wild lust as they run over me. It’s clear he’s still riding his adrenaline high, except now all that adrenaline isn’t working to keep him alert and alive, it’s all focused on getting inside me as soon as possible.

The air is charged around us. I feel his need for me in every cell of my body, and when he closes the distance between us, I barely have time to drop the last cupcake before he’s pressing his mouth to mine in a hungry kiss and roughly pulling my yoga pants down. His tongue is insistent, probing every inch of my mouth, laying claim to me as he unzips his pants and frees his cock. With a feral-sounding growl, he lifts me up and slams into me, filling me completely in one hard thrust.

Backing me up, he presses me against the cabinets while his fingers dig into my ass, holding me in place. He kisses me hard while he fucks me in a brutal rhythm that quickly rips a scream from my throat that's muffled between our lips. I tighten my arms around him, fisting his hair and kissing him harder. One of his guns digs into my thigh, and I can feel his sheathed knives and the hard Kevlar vest he's still wearing—a constant reminder of who he is and what he just got done doing. Instead of being disgusted, I dig my heels into his firm ass and use him as leverage as I work my hips, meeting his every thrust until my whole body shakes with my orgasm. I tighten around his thick shaft, forcing him to let go with a growl, and as soon as I feel him start to pulse inside me, I cup his face and give his tongue a hard suck. His whole body shudders with his release. He gives one last hard thrust, burying himself inside me as deeply as possible, locking our bodies together. He softens the kiss, gently sucking and licking my bruised lips before resting his forehead against mine with a sigh.

“That was intense,” I say with a lazy laugh.

He gives me a soft smile and gently massages my ass. “Was I too rough?”

“No,” I whisper, running my fingers lightly over his stubbled cheek. “I'm glad you're safe. I was worried.”

He looks over at the countertop of cupcakes. “I see that.” He laughs and carries me to the island, gently setting me down on it before sliding out of me. He smiles at the soft moan of protest I give when our bodies separate. Reaching behind me, he grabs a cupcake and peels the wrapper off. He finishes it off in seconds and grabs another.

“Damn, baby, these are good.”

I laugh and pull him closer, licking icing from the corner of his mouth. When I knock on his vest with my knuckles and lift a brow at him, he just shrugs his broad shoulders and gives me an adorable grin.

“It's just a precaution. Getting shot's a pain in the ass. I know it's hard to believe, but not everyone is as taken by my

charm as you are.”

“That is hard to believe.”

He laughs at my sarcasm and finishes off the second cupcake.

“I take it I’m not going to be getting any details about what happened tonight.”

“You will not be,” he confirms, and then taps the tip of my nose when he sees the irritated look I give him.

“So my job will be to just wait here, picturing you dying in a million different ways, and then when you come back, *if* you come back, I get rewarded with amazing sex?”

“I wouldn’t call it your job,” he says, trying to make me laugh. When it doesn’t work, he adds, “Well, obviously, you can also make cupcakes while you wait.”

I groan and punch his chest but all it does is make me wince when my knuckles hit Kevlar. He grabs my hand and kisses away the sting.

“You know this is who I am, baby, and that I can’t change it.”

“I know,” I whisper, thinking about how many hours I’m going to be spending worrying about him in the future. Fidgeting with the handle of one of his knives, I tease him and say, “Maybe I should try and get on the right side of the law, find myself a rule follower.”

“How boring,” he says, giving me a wink. “A lifetime of low passion and mediocre sex before he goes back to eating his bag of chips and watching the news. Sounds like a blast. Not to mention that he wouldn’t be able to protect your ass when you get it in trouble like you’re so quick to do.”

“I am not,” I protest.

“You, sweetheart, need a firm hand, and some dorky pencil pusher isn’t going to be able to handle it, and if you’re thinking of finding yourself a cop, well, I hate to break it to you, but we own them in this city.”

I roll my eyes and try to fight my smile. “Why am I not surprised?”

“Face it, *ptichka*, we were made for each other, and no one else will do.”

I don’t bother arguing with him because I know it’s true. There could never be anyone else for me. It’s him or nothing. I laugh when he grabs a third cupcake and then picks me up, carrying me to the shower with him. By the time my head hits my pillow, I’m already drifting off to sleep, exhausted, sore, and happier than I ever thought possible.

The next morning, he turns to me over breakfast and says, “I don’t want you to freak out or anything, but my boss wants us to come over for supper tonight.”

“Wait, what?” I lift my head to look at him. “The head of the Fedorov Bratva, the man whose wife my uncle tortured and almost raped, wants me to go over there and eat?”

“That’s not how he sees you, none of them do. Mikhail knows how important you are to me, and he wants to meet you. Artyom and his family will be there too. Believe me, baby, if they didn’t trust you, they wouldn’t be letting you near their families.”

He runs his finger down my cheek before hooking it under my chin to turn me back up to him. “I want you to meet them. They’re my family, and it’s important to me that they get to know you. Although, I have a feeling Anya is not going to be happy,” he says with a laugh.

“Who’s Anya?”

“Artyom’s daughter, the one on the fridge with her twin brother, Luka. She doesn’t like to share my attention.”

I smile at the thought of a little girl being enamored by Yuri. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Look on the bright side,” he says with a laugh. “We have plenty of cupcakes to bring over.”

I laugh and eye the cupcake-covered island, proof of how much I’d been worrying last night. Yuri smiles and gives my

ass a smack before leading me upstairs and handing me my bikini. We spend the day down by the water, and it's one of the best days I've ever had. Every time I go into the water, he's right beside me, worried that I'm going to get caught up in the current again. We kiss and swim and lay on the beach and kiss some more until we have to go inside to get ready.

In the shower, he picks me up and holds me against the tiled wall while he fucks me until I'm screaming his name and forgetting about all the worries that keep trying to steal my happiness. Right here in this moment with his cock buried inside me, his mouth on mine, our bodies locked together, nothing else matters. Our love will be enough, I tell myself, clutching him tighter as the water pours over us and he empties himself inside me.

"I love you," he murmurs against my lips, cupping my ass even harder as gives one last thrust and then shudders and lets out a heavy sigh. His green eyes lock onto mine. "Everything I have is yours, baby. My heart, my body, my goddamn soul, every part of me is yours."

I cup his face and pull him closer so our foreheads are touching. "Every part of me is yours, too, Yuri. There could never be anyone else. I love you in a way that terrifies me."

He smiles and says, "I know exactly what you mean. I'm scared, too, *ptichka*, but as long as we're together, we can handle anything. It's losing you that I couldn't survive."

I feel my throat start to tighten and let out a soft laugh. "You're going to make me cry again, and I said no more tears."

He kisses me once more before slowly sliding out of me and setting me down. I can't resist running my hands up his wet, muscled chest, and when that's not enough, I lean forward and run my tongue over a tattooed pec. He groans and fists my hair, pulling me back and giving me a smirk.

"You are such a fucking temptress. If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were nervous about tonight and trying to get me to fuck you in the shower again so we'll miss dinner."

He's not entirely wrong, and he sees it on my face. He laughs and taps my nose.

“Nice try, *ptichka*, but we're going. You're going to just have to be a good girl and keep that tight little pussy of yours in line.” He reaches down and cups me in a possessive grip, groaning at the feel of my smooth, wet skin, still swollen from the hard pounding he just gave me. “I will make it up to you later, baby, I promise, but we're going to Mikhail's tonight.”

I nod my head, knowing how much this means to him. Shoving my nerves aside, I smile and grab onto his hand, pressing him harder against me so the long finger that was pressed against my slit starts to slip inside. His eyes darken, and his jaw tenses.

“I can be good,” I promise him, “and I can't wait for you to make it up to me later.”

Chapter II

Yuri

The next hour is an exercise in willpower as Gia tries to tempt me into sex, even though she swears she's not. It's purely coincidental that she bent over wearing a thong right as I walked in, flashing me a perfect view of her ass. Running across the room without a bra on? That was only because she forgot something and she knows I don't want to be late.

When I'm two seconds away from losing my goddamn mind, I finally growl, "I swear to god, Gia, I'm going to put you over my damn knee again."

She has the nerve to laugh and pat my chest like she's trying to calm a rabid dog. "Easy, killer. Don't go turning my ass beet-red just yet. I'm all ready to go." She looks down at the jeans and black shirt she picked out. It has thin straps and exposes enough of her back to ensure I'll constantly be touching her all night. I can't ever keep my hands off her smooth skin, and she knows it. "Do I look okay? Not fancy enough?"

I lean down and kiss her shoulder. "You look beautiful, baby, and it's perfect. It's not going to be fancy," I say with a laugh. "Three kids under the age of four and Mikhail's wife is very pregnant. It's going to be very casual."

Taking her hand, we grab a plate of cupcakes and leave the house to make the short drive to Mikhail's. I can sense Gia's nerves. I rest my hand on her thigh whenever I'm not shifting, and she grabs my hand and squeezes tightly every time I do it.

When we arrive, I open the door for her and pull her in for a hug.

“Just relax, *ptichka*. I’ve been with these men since the beginning, and I trust them with both our lives. They’re going to love you.”

She nods and tightens her arms around my waist. I kiss her forehead and walk with her to the front door. Gia eyes the impressive house and squeezes my hand when I knock. I give her a wink and kiss the back of her hand right before it opens. Mikhail fills the doorway, and I feel Gia tense beside me. He can be an intimidating man, but he’s not giving her his *I’m a scary Bratva boss* look. He’s smiling and stepping aside, waving us both in.

“Nice to meet you, Gia,” he says, holding out his hand when we’re both inside. “I’m Mikhail.”

“Hi,” Gia says in barely more than a whisper and shakes his hand.

“Yuri!”

I turn and laugh, holding my arms open right before Lev jumps in them. I pick him up and spin him around, making him laugh and wrap his small arms around me even tighter. Still holding him, I smile at Gia and say, “This is Lev. Mikhail and Charlie’s son. Lev, this is Gia.”

Lev waves at her and says hi in Russian.

“She doesn’t speak Russian, Lev,” I tell him.

He quickly switches and says, “Hi.”

Gia laughs and says hi to him right as Charlie walks over. Mikhail smiles down at her and immediately wraps an arm around her, pulling her close.

“Gia, this is my wife, Charlie.”

“Hey, Gia,” Charlie says, holding a hand out to her. “We’re so glad you could come.”

“It’s nice to meet you. Thanks so much for inviting me.” She holds out the cupcakes and Charlie takes them with a big

grin on her face.

“These look amazing. Thank you so much.”

Gia looks between Charlie and Mikhail, and I know she’s thinking about what her uncle did. I can see the guilt written all over her face, and I’m not the only one who notices. When Gia looks at me, and I see how close she is to losing it, I set Lev down so he can run back into the kitchen and pull Gia in close to me.

“It’s not your fault, baby,” I whisper.

She looks at Mikhail and Charlie. “I’m sorry. I’m trying not to make this awkward, and instead I’m just really making this awkward.”

“I despised your uncle, Gia,” Mikhail says, “And I took great pleasure in ending his life.”

“Mikhail!” Charlie whisper shouts at him.

He looks down at her and shrugs. “What? He deserved it for what he did to you.”

“Yeah, but maybe don’t say it in front of her.”

“No, I understand,” Gia quickly says. “I know what kind of man my uncle was, or at least I knew enough. I didn’t realize he was quite as evil as he actually was. I’m truly sorry for what he did to you. I wish there was something I could do to make it right.”

Charlie smiles and surprises Gia by pulling her in for a quick hug. “Thank you, but you don’t need to apologize for his actions. It’s over and done with.”

She steps back and gives me a smile. “Yuri’s told us enough about you for us to know what kind of person you are.”

“You’re welcome here, Gia,” Mikhail says, giving her a smile. “That’s what I was trying to get around to, but my wife is obviously a little more eloquent about it.”

Charlie laughs and grabs his hand, motioning for us to follow her. “Come on, Artyom and Riley are already here with

the twins.”

Before we follow them in, I stop Gia and cup her face. “You okay?”

She smiles and nods. “I’m good. They’re nicer than I thought they’d be.”

“You’re doing great, baby,” I tell her, giving her a quick kiss before we walk into the kitchen.

The island is covered in food, and the smell of grilled hamburgers is wafting in from the back deck. I scoop up some dip with a chip before waving at Riley. She’s holding Luka and balancing a plate of veggies.

“Hey, Riley, this is Gia,” I say, grabbing another chip and then taking Luka from her so she can eat.

She gives me a grateful smile and then turns to Gia. “Hi, nice to meet you. I’m Artyom’s wife. And this little guy is our son, Luka.”

Gia smiles and shakes her hand before turning to Luka. “He’s beautiful.”

Luka smiles at her and then buries his head against my chest in embarrassment.

I laugh and kiss his head. “Where’s Artyom?”

“He’s on grill duty,” she says with a laugh. “You might want to go make sure he doesn’t burn anything.”

“I heard that, *milaya*,” Artyom yells from the deck.

Riley laughs and sits back down to finish her snack.

“Is Anya with him?”

“Of course, but she’ll be jumping into your arms as soon as she sees you.” She looks at Gia and says, “My daughter is infatuated with Yuri.”

“Can you really blame her?” I ask, making them both laugh.

Keeping Luka in my arms, Gia and I walk out the French doors to where Artyom is holding Anya while talking to her in

Russian and flipping burgers. As soon as she sees me, her face lights up in a grin. She claps her hands and squeals.

“Wow, you weren’t kidding,” Gia says with a laugh.

“It would hurt my feelings if I didn’t know how much she loves me,” Artyom teases, giving his daughter a kiss that makes her laugh and press her chubby hands against his cheeks. “You want to see Uncle Yuri?”

She laughs and shakes her head yes. I look down at Luka and ask him if Gia can hold him. He seems hesitant at first, but when Gia gives him a big smile and holds her arms out to him, he grins and reaches for her. I swear I see Gia fall in love with the little guy right then and there. She holds him on her hip like a pro, reminding me that she raised her brother and is used to being around and taking care of kids. He looks up at her in awe, already reaching for a lock of blonde hair to wrap his fingers around. The poor little guy’s a goner. I can see it in his grey eyes.

Anya squeals, stealing my attention away just like she knew it would. I laugh and grab her, covering her face in kisses, making her give the deep belly laughs that I love so much. I talk to her in Russian, and when I look over at Gia, my breath catches in my throat. There’s so much love in her eyes that it overwhelms me. No one has ever looked at me the way she does. It’s the perfect mixture of lust, trust, and absolute, unconditional love. It’s the kind of look that brings grown men to their knees, the kind that a man would give his life for, the kind that starts wars.

It very well could be a war that’s headed our way, and I’ll gladly fight it. For her. I’d do anything for her.

When all the burgers are cooked and the twins secured in high chairs, we all sit down to eat. It’s the first time I’ve brought someone with me, and it feels damn good. I rest my hand on Gia’s thigh under the table, and she quickly grabs it, giving me a squeeze to let me know she’s okay.

“This is all delicious,” Gia says, smiling at Charlie.

She laughs and says, "I'll let Valentina know you liked it." Her hand rests on her stomach. "I haven't been doing much cooking lately."

Mikhail smiles and rests his hand on top of hers. "You're doing enough, baby. All you have to do is be pregnant. We'll do the rest."

"Being pregnant is enough," Riley says with a laugh.

"Ain't that the truth?" Charlie says, rubbing her lower back. "I think she's growing by the minute."

"When are you due?" Gia asks.

"In a couple of weeks."

"Wow," Gia says, "You look amazing."

"She does," Mikhail agrees, giving his wife a smile.

Charlie blushes, making Mikhail laugh before she looks over to thank Gia.

We laugh and eat until none of us can take another bite, and then the kids each attack a cupcake before getting set up in the living room to watch a cartoon while we sit around and try to muster up the strength to tackle dessert.

"You're trying to kill me," I say, rubbing my stomach.

Gia laughs and says, "Oh, please, you should have seen him the other night with the dish of brownies I made."

They laugh while I give her a wide-eyed look. "I believe I had some help with that."

She laughs and then blushes because we both know what happened that night. I'll never look at a brownie the same way again. It will immediately conjure up images of her losing at strip poker and then screaming my name while she came around my cock.

"It's so good to see you with someone, Yuri," Charlie says, making me laugh because even though I'm older than her by a good decade, she's taken to mothering all of us as the Bratva boss's wife.

“It is,” Riley agrees, giving Gia a big smile. “He gave Artyom hell when we got together because they were supposed to die bachelors together, or some ridiculous shit like that.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I say when they all laugh at my expense. “If you remember, Riley, I did say I was wrong, and I’ve also babysat your kids many, many times, including not that long ago when you and Artyom snuck into the pantry for a not-so-subtle quickie.”

“I can’t believe you just said that,” she laughs, turning to Artyom for help, but he’s laughing too hard to be of much use.

“I’m merely reminding you of the sacrifices I’ve made.”

“You’re terrible,” Gia says, laughing.

I give her a wink, glad to see that she’s enjoying herself.

“You need someone to keep you in line, Yuri,” Riley says, and then gives Gia a pointed look, even though I can tell she’s fighting a grin, “and I think you might be just the woman to do it. I heard things got interesting at the Peach the other night.”

Charlie tries to hide her laugh and fails, which means the story has been passed around to everyone by now.

Gia covers her face and groans. “Oh god, please tell me you all didn’t hear about that. That’s not how I usually behave.”

“Oh, I get it,” Riley says. “He drove you nuts and you went a little crazy. We’ve all been there. Trust me.”

“Do you know what they’re talking about?” Artyom asks, looking from me to Mikhail, his face the perfect mask of innocence.

“No fucking clue,” Mikhail says, making Charlie snort out a laugh that has Mikhail’s dark eyes filling with amusement. “You’re the only person on the planet who could make that sound seem cute.”

Gia watches them with a smile on her face. Most likely she was expecting something closer to the Rossi family, and that’s exactly why I wanted her to come so badly. I wanted her to see

that it's different, that we're a family, that it's not the horrible mafia experience that she grew up around.

We spend the next hour laughing and talking, and when Charlie yawns and Mikhail starts giving her worried looks, we all take the cue and start picking up.

“Oh, you don't have to do that,” Charlie says, and then laughs at the look Mikhail shoots her. She cups his face. “Don't give me that grumpy look. I was merely suggesting that they can leave it and you can do it all.”

He laughs and kisses her hand. “Pregnancy makes you feisty, *zaichik*.” He tells her in Russian that he loves her and to go rest on the couch while we clean things up. She smiles and lets him help her up before waddling to the couch. Lev quickly jumps up to rest next to his mom. She runs her hand through his hair while he rests his hand on her belly and watches his cartoon.

The rest of us get to work, and it doesn't take long before the leftovers are put up and the kitchen is spotless. Before we leave, Charlie and Riley give us both big hugs, and then Charlie gives me a not even close to being subtle thumbs up that makes Gia laugh. I can tell she's surprised when Artyom pulls her in for a hug and then Mikhail. The kids are passed out around the living room, but I still kneel down to give each of them a kiss goodbye and whisper in their little ears that I love them.

By the time we get in the car, Gia's deep in thought and worrying her bottom lip. I reach over, gently pulling her lip free and run my thumb over it.

“What are you thinking about?”

“It's just so different from how I thought it would be. I mean, they're so nice and normal.”

I laugh and say, “You expected Mikhail and Artyom to be standing around in track suits while they yell at their kids and smack their wives around?”

“Maybe not quite like that, but I didn't expect them to be so obviously in love with their wives and kids.” She looks

back at the house. “Do they cheat on them, like have mistresses on the side or whatever?”

“Are you kidding? Those two won’t even look at another woman.” I gently pull her face back to mine. “We’re not like your family. That’s what I wanted you to see tonight. I’ve been with Mikhail and Artyom through a ton of nasty shit. I’m not saying we don’t get our hands dirty. What I’m saying is that family is everything, and we work our asses off to make sure none of it touches them.”

“It was nice of them to let me come here. They acted like you don’t often bring women over.”

I laugh and shake my head. “*Ptichka*, I’ve never brought a woman over here, and I’ve certainly never introduced one to their wives and kids.”

Her eyes widen at my confession before she gives a soft smile and kisses my hand. “Thank you for bringing me. I really enjoyed it.”

“I’m glad you did.”

She smiles again before I start the car. The drive is quiet, and I know she’s going over everything that happened tonight. I was hoping that seeing everyone would make her feel better about joining herself to this life, about joining herself to *me*, but when we walk into the house, she’s still chewing on her bottom lip and looking worried. She walks to the fridge, looking at the photos of me and the kids. Her fingers lightly brush over my smiling face before she crosses her arms over her chest and turns to face me.

“The only reason all this trouble is coming is because of me,” she says, and my heart starts to race at the tone of her voice and the look in her eyes.

“Don’t do this,” I tell her, knowing exactly what she’s thinking. “We had trouble with the Rossi family long before you showed up here.”

“But they’re only coming back because I disappeared and haven’t sold the house yet.”

“Well, that’s my fault, isn’t it?” I counter.

She shakes her head. “I’m the one putting all of you at risk.” She closes her eyes and sighs. “They have wives and kids, and Mikhail’s wife is about to give birth. What if one of them dies because of me?” She lets out a shaky breath and opens her eyes, pinning me with her stare. “What if something happens to you?”

“This is what we do, baby,” I say, stepping towards her. “I never said it wasn’t dangerous, but we’re damn good at it, and, no offense, but the fucking Rossi family isn’t going to be the thing that ends us.”

“But what if more come? What if it never stops? What if my presence here causes a fucking war that destroys all of you?”

“Don’t do this, Gia,” I beg, feeling her push me away with each passing second.

“I’m not doing anything, Yuri, except seeing this for what it is.”

“Oh yeah, and what’s that?” I can feel my anger rising right along with the wall she’s busy building between us.

She shakes her head, her eyes growing glassier by the second. “Something that was doomed from the start. You and I both know it’s true.”

“Bullshit,” I yell. “You’re just scared, so you’re pushing me away.” I face her across the kitchen island. “Don’t fucking do this.”

“I’m putting you all in danger, and you’ll always choose the Bratva over me.”

“They’re my brothers. They’re my fucking family! I pledged my life to this Bratva long ago, and there’s no changing it. They’ve risked their lives for mine, and I’ve done the same for them, and I’ll do it again in a second.” I hang my head and sigh, unable to believe that everything is falling apart so fucking quickly. “Don’t make me choose, Gia, because I can’t.”

“Because you’ll choose them,” she says so softly I have to strain to hear her.

Raising my eyes to hers, I smack my fist on the counter and yell, “Because there is no fucking choice! I don’t get a choice. You’re the one with a goddamn choice, Gia. You can choose to accept me and all the baggage that goes along with that, or you can leave, but make no mistake, sweetheart, it’s not what I want, and you’ll be killing a part of me if you walk out that door.”

She’s crying by the time I finish, and for one horrible, gut-wrenching moment, I think she’s going to turn and walk away from me, but she doesn’t. She gives another sob and runs for me, throwing herself in my arms and clinging to me like she’ll never let me go. I bury my face in her neck, holding her as tightly as I can. Her body is shaking, her breaths are fast pants against my neck, and she seems so incredibly fragile, so breakable.

“You’re my family, too, Gia,” I whisper against her neck. “You will never come second to me, *ptichka*. That, I can promise you.” I cup the back of her head and tighten my grip on her. “I love you so fucking much. Please don’t ever scare me like that again. I can’t take it, Gia. You are mine, sweetheart, and we’ll make this work.”

One moment she’s crying into my neck, and the next she’s cupping my face and pulling me closer, kissing me like her life depends on it. I groan against her hungry lips, already grabbing her shirt and breaking our kiss just long enough to pull it off her before our mouths are crashing against one another again. She gives my bottom lip a hard enough bite to pull a growl from me as I unclasp her bra and start to unbutton her jeans.

There’s no way in fuck we’re going to make it to the bed, so I pick her up and carry her to the back of the couch. When she’s up against it, I kiss my way down her neck while pulling her pants down. She kicks off her shoes and starts kicking her jeans off, and when I wrap my lips around one of her taut nipples and cup her wet pussy, she moans my name and throws her head back. I want to tease her, to torture her for daring to think about walking out that door, but my need to be

inside her, to remind myself that she really is here, is too strong.

I give her nipple a soft bite and plunge three fingers into her, making her gasp and rock her hips against me. My fingers delve between her slick folds, filling the air around us with the erotic sounds of her arousal as I finger fuck her harder. Sucking as much of her tit as I can into my mouth, I keep working her until she screams my name and bucks against me even harder, embracing her orgasm and letting it consume her.

As soon as she starts to come down, I grab onto her hips and spin her around so she's bent over the back of the couch. I undress in record time before pressing my body against hers. She moans when she feels my hard cock pressing against her ass. Reaching between us, I position my cock so my shaft is flush against her soaking wet slit. She quickly starts to rock her hips, grinding her pussy against me, coating me in her juices as I kiss a line along her shoulder. When I get to the nape of her neck, I give her a not-so-soft bite before kissing and licking my way down her spine.

"This isn't going to be gentle," I warn her. The heat of my breath against her skin makes her shiver beneath me.

"Good," she moans, rocking even harder against me. "I want bruises tomorrow, Yuri. I want to look in the mirror and remember how hard you fucked me."

"Goddamn," I groan, lifting up so I can dig my fingers into her hips before slamming into her, feeding her every thick inch of my cock in one hard thrust. She grips the couch, using it for leverage so she can meet my every thrust. I dig my fingers in even harder, watching her perfect ass bounce when I start to fuck her harder. Needing to go deeper, I lift her up, angling her so her feet are off the ground and she's completely at my mercy.

"Fuck," she moans into the couch when she feels how much deeper I can get in this position.

"You like being fucked like this? Hard and completely at my mercy?"

“Yes,” she moans, unable to do anything except lay here and take it.

“Touch yourself, Gia. Play with your pussy while I fuck you, baby.”

She moans and slides a hand beneath her stomach and between her legs. I groan a long string of Russian when I feel her fingers on my cock. She’s split her fingers against her pussy, so I’m fucking the V of her fingers with every stroke. She tightens them, pulling another deep groan from me. The combination of tight, wet pussy and the firm grip of her fingers threatens to undo me. I grit my teeth until I’m only seconds away. Refusing to give in just yet, I dig my fingers in harder with one hand and free the other so I can give one of her bouncing cheeks a hard smack.

Her yelp turns into a moan when the mix of pain and pleasure hits her. I spank her three more times, watching my handprints bloom on her ass, not at all surprised when she quickly moves her hand so she can focus on her clit. As soon as I feel her pussy grip my cock even harder a second before she screams my name, I let go with a growl, giving her ass one last hard spank as we go over the edge together.

My vision darkens as a pure ecstasy that I didn’t even know existed before Gia explodes through every part of me. My cock pulses inside her, filling her with everything I have until I’m completely spent, gasping for air, and my goddamn ears are ringing. Her body is slack, crumpled against the couch, impaled on my still semi-hard cock, and lightly shaking.

She mumbles something into the cushion, but her words are too muffled to hear. I give her ass a soft pat before slowly sliding out of her, groaning at the sight of her used pussy. Gently lifting her up, I cradle her in my arms and smile at the loopy, ecstasy-drunk look on her beautiful face.

“What was that, baby?”

She sighs and rests her head against my shoulder. “I said I don’t think I can walk.”

I laugh and kiss her forehead. “Good. That means I did it right.”

She gives an exhausted laugh and kisses my pec as I carry her to bed. She’s so worn out that as soon as we lay down, she cuddles up against me and within minutes, she’s snoring softly against my chest. I run my fingers through her hair, fully understanding how close I came to losing her tonight. I didn’t mean to fall for her, but I did, and I fell hard. I can’t lose her. The mere thought of going back to a life without her makes me feel sick.

It takes me a long time to fall asleep. I feel like I’ve only just managed it when I’m thrown back into the waking world in the best way imaginable. Gia’s lips are wrapped around my cock, the wet heat of her mouth surrounding me as she slowly takes me in. When I open my eyes, the room is still pitch black, so I don’t bother keeping them open. I run my fingers through her hair, fisting it and groaning when she gives me another good suck and lightly runs her fingers over my balls.

“Fucking hell, Gia,” I groan, lost to the pleasure she’s giving me.

She keeps working me, quickly bringing me to the point of no return. When I let go, it’s with her name on my lips. I feel her swallowing everything I’m giving her, and the sensation sends a shiver down my spine, prolonging my orgasm longer than I ever thought possible. When I’m completely spent, she licks and kisses every inch of me like she’s trying to memorize every detail of my body before she kisses her way up my stomach and chest.

“Goddamn, baby,” I say, pulling her back into my arms.

Draping her leg over me, she snuggles in closer and rests her head on my shoulder before kissing my cheek.

“I love you, Yuri, more than I ever thought it was possible to love someone.”

“I love you, too, Gia, and I always will, baby.”

She sighs and runs her fingers over my chest. “Go back to sleep.”

I can already feel myself slipping back into the darkness, and the next thing I know, it's morning and I'm alone. Looking around, a sense of dread starts to fill me when there's no sign of Gia. She's gotten up ahead of me before to start breakfast, but something feels off this morning. The house feels empty and silent. Throwing back the covers, I run downstairs, and when I don't see her anywhere, I fall to my knees and let out a guttural moan as my head falls into my hands and I realize that I've lost her. My heart shatters as all the pieces fall into place. She left me. Without a word, without a fucking goodbye, she just up and left.

Chapter 12

Gia

With each passing mile, it gets harder and harder to breathe. Leaving Yuri is the hardest thing I've ever done, but I love him too much to put him at risk. The only reason my family is coming here is because of me. If I'm not here, then there's no reason for them to stay, and there's no reason for them to even involve themselves with the Fedorov Bratva.

I chew my nail and look out the airplane window, wondering if I'm going to be able to last without grabbing the vomit bag. Everything about this feels wrong, and just when I've managed to convince myself that as soon as I land I'm just going to hop on another flight right back to him, I start to think about Dom. My actions affect him, and I won't put him in danger, not for my own happiness, not for anything.

After Yuri had falling back asleep, I'd held onto him, breathing in the scent of him, memorizing every detail of him until I'd finally forced myself to get up. I'd grabbed my phone and my bags and written him a note before calling an Uber to take me back to my uncle's. Once I was there, I'd left a message with the realtor, explaining that I wasn't feeling well and had to leave and that I'd like to accept the highest offer on the house. Then I'd left a note for any relatives who might show up, telling them the exact same thing. The house was sold. I was fine and back in New York. End of story.

Knowing I'd lose it if I heard Yuri's voice, I'd shut my phone off and driven to the airport. My heart aches at the thought of him waking up alone, wondering where I am, and

then finding the note I'd left. His cologne still lingers on my skin, and as painful as the reminder is, I cling to it, breathing him in and missing him more than I ever thought possible. He's a part of me now, and I know with absolute certainty that I'll carry him around with me for the rest of my life, always missing him, always aching for him. What I'm feeling right now in this moment is the future I've doomed myself to, but I'd do it again in a second if I thought it would keep him and Dominic safe.

My resolve manages to hold out for the remainder of the flight, it even lasts long enough for me to walk to my car and make the thirty-minute drive to my apartment. It lasts right up until I shut the door and turn to face the empty room. Then I crumple to the floor and cry until I can barely breathe.

The next morning, I wake to a massive headache and a heart that still feels raw and battered. I force myself to shower, and when I see the small fingertip-size bruises on my skin, the ones I'd asked him to give me last night while he had me bent over the couch, I lose it. Sitting in my shower with my arms hugging my legs, I cry until there's nothing left. When the water turns cold, I force myself to get out. After I've gotten dressed and made a cup of coffee, I walk down the street to the store on the corner and buy myself a new phone because I can't bring myself to turn on the one I have. I don't trust myself to text him back or answer if he tries to call. I'm only so strong, and I used every ounce of my strength leaving him naked and gorgeous in the bed that I'd come to think of as *ours*.

When I have it all set up, I text Dom and tell him I'm back and explain that my old phone kicked the bucket so I had to get a new one. He responds immediately, telling me he's on his way. I pace my small living room, trying to get myself under control, but when I open my door twenty minutes later, Dom freezes in place, eyeing me, his face etched with worry.

"What's wrong, Gia?" he asks, pulling me into a hug.

I hug him back and give a laugh that sounds fake even to my own ears. "I'm fine, Dom. Just tired from traveling."

He shakes his head and walks into the kitchen to pour himself some coffee, grabbing the French vanilla creamer that we both love from the fridge. Taking a drink, he sits at the small table in the corner. He scoots the other chair out with his foot, nudging it in my direction.

“Sit down and tell me what’s really going on.”

I refill my mug and sit. “I guess I miss that guy I mentioned,” I admit, but just saying that out loud has me on the verge of tears again. I shake my head and take a deep, steady breath. “I really don’t want to talk about it right now.”

Dom nods his head but doesn’t say anything, just watches me over the rim of his mug as he takes another drink. His hair is darker than mine, more brown than dark blond, but we have the same blue eyes, and he has our mom’s dimple. When he smiles, it shows itself right in the center of his left cheek. He’s not smiling now, though. He’s looking at me and worrying.

“I’m fine,” I tell him. “Show me what you’re working on.” When he hesitates, I reach over and squeeze his forearm. “Please, you know how much I love to see your stuff.”

He grabs his phone and pulls up his photos before passing it to me. Years ago he got into the habit of taking photos of his drawings because I constantly asked him what he was working on and wanted to see all stages of it.

“Wow, these are really good,” I say, zooming in on a drawing of a flock of ravens. I force myself to not think about Yuri’s pet name for me or the sexy tattoo on his shoulder and instead focus on the skill needed to make the birds appear so lifelike.

I look up at Dom and smile. “You just keep getting better and better.”

He tries to downplay it, but I can see he’s proud of how much he’s accomplished. He should be. He’s worked so hard to get where he is. I’ll never forget how excited he was when he was accepted into art school. There were better ones he could’ve applied to, but he said he liked it here. I’ve always

worried that he stayed because he felt guilty leaving me, but he seems to genuinely love his classes here, and they're definitely helping him to improve.

When I scroll through to the next drawing, I laugh when I see the scene he's captured. It's a little boy with a mop of dark hair, walking through the rain while he pulls his little, red wagon behind him. It's loaded with his toys, and judging by the look on his determined face, he's decided to take for the hills, no doubt running away only to decide an hour later that he'd much rather be back at home with his mom. The colors are so vivid, and I'm amazed at his ability to bring everything to life like he does.

"One day, I'm going to be walking through a bookstore, and I'm going to see a line of children's books, all illustrated by my amazing brother."

Dom laughs and blushes. "Maybe one day."

"No maybes about it. It's going to happen." I pass the phone back to him and take another drink. "So what's been going on? Meet anyone yet?"

He surprises me by blushing. "Maybe, but I've been so busy with classes. I haven't had much time to do anything except draw and study."

"What's her name?"

"Samantha." He laughs and rubs the back of his neck. "She's studying ceramics. Her stuff is really amazing."

I smile, and my happiness for him momentarily pushes away my own pain. I want nothing more than for him to be happy and safe.

"Well, I know you're busy, but don't forget to take breaks, too," I remind him. "Go out and have some fun with Samantha."

He quirks a brow at me as if suggesting I take some of my own advice. I ignore him and finish my coffee.

"So what's the deal with Uncle Antonio's place?"

“I told the realtor to just accept the highest bid. I’m sick of dealing with it, and the faster we get rid of it, the better.”

“Yeah, even in death he’s a real pain in the ass,” Dom says. “I’ll be thrilled if we never see another member of the family ever again. I’ll never understand what in the hell Mom was thinking when she got involved with them.”

I shrug and say, “She fell in love.”

“I would understand if Dad had been a good guy, but he was an ass. He treated her like absolute shit and did the same to us.”

“I guess he showed her a different side when they were dating. I can’t imagine she would’ve fallen for him otherwise.” I think about the shell of a woman our mom had become before she died. “I think he broke her heart. I think she loved him, and he destroyed her with his cruelty and his constant affairs.”

“What a bastard.”

“Yeah,” I say, agreeing with him.

He sighs and stands up, putting his phone back in his pocket. “Well, on that cheery note, I need to get to class.”

I stand up and give him a hug. “Thanks for coming over and for showing me your stuff. I’m so proud of you.”

He smiles and pats my head like I’m the younger one, a habit he started when he turned seventeen and shot up several inches above me. “I’m glad you’re back, sis. Try not to be sad. Maybe that guy you met can come visit you here.”

“Yeah, I don’t think that’s going to happen.” I give him the best smile I can. “I’ll be fine. I promise.”

After he leaves, I spend the day on the couch, crying and feeling sorry for myself. When that one day of self-pity turns into a week, I realize I’m on a dangerous, slippery slope that’s not going to end well for me. I pace my apartment, desperate for something to get me out of my head. Finally, I grab my old camera and head outside. I spend the next hour taking photographs of anything that catches my eye. I used to love

photography, I'd even considered taking a few classes and maybe putting a book together one day, but eventually I'd just stopped doing it. I set it aside when Dom was in high school and never got around to picking it back up again. I'd forgotten how much I love this.

On a whim, I decide to go to the park and spend the rest of the day snapping photos. I get a ton of a Golden Retriever, who tirelessly runs around catching Frisbees that his owner is throwing for him, before heading down to the small lake the park is built around. There's a family of swans that I've always loved to watch, and there's always a ton of Canada geese waddling around. I've always loved upstate New York. The beauty of the place never ceases to amaze me, and I capture it in photos as best I can.

When I sit down to look through the photos I've taken, my first instinct is to show them to Yuri. He'd laugh at the ones of the dog and smile at the one that I managed to get of a baby duck waddling after its mom. I miss the sound of his laughter. I miss every damn thing about him, even the cocky, arrogant grins that used to drive me so crazy when we first met. Before I know it, my cheeks are wet and I'm beginning to think I may not survive this after all.

Clutching my camera, I go back home. I'm all set to put my pajamas on and curl up with a pint of ice cream when my phone rings. My heart jumps in my chest and my first thought is of Yuri, but he doesn't have my new number. When I see the realtor's name pop up on my screen, I hurry up and answer it.

"Gia, this is Miranda. Good news! I've got all the paperwork ready to go for the offer you accepted. I'm overnighting you some papers to sign, and once you do, everything will be in place."

"Thanks so much, Miranda. That's great to hear." I start brewing a pot of tea and ask, "So did my relatives ever show up? They were on a flight from Italy, but they never got in touch with me. I assumed they just went straight to the house after I had to leave."

“No, I haven’t met anyone. When I went and checked the house one last time, I didn’t notice anything out of place. I saw the note you left on the counter, but other than that, it was exactly the same.”

“That’s weird. I guess they changed their minds about coming.”

“Yeah, I guess so. Anyway, you’ll have the forms tomorrow. If you could overnight them back to me, that’d be great.”

I promise her I will and then hang up. Sitting on the couch, I think about what she just said. If they never showed up, then maybe they realized there wasn’t a problem and just went back to Italy, or maybe they ended up not coming at all. Either way, I breathe out a sigh of relief because it means that Yuri is safe. It means that all of them are safe. I don’t have to worry about Yuri being hurt or Charlie and Riley losing their husbands, their kids losing their daddies. I sacrificed my heart, but it kept them safe. I hope in some small way, my actions have helped to undo some of the damage my uncle did. That hope is the only thing that keeps me going. Not turning my phone on and calling Yuri is a constant struggle. I’ve even gone so far as to hide the damn thing away in a drawer because I don’t trust myself. I wonder if he’s left me any voicemails. If he has, then I could at least hear his voice again. I grit my teeth and stand up, grabbing the pint of ice cream instead. If I hear that deep voice and sexy accent, it’ll destroy me.

I park my ass on the couch with a giant bowl of ice cream and start hunting for a feel-good movie to take me out of my head for a few hours. It doesn’t work, but it does manage to push most of the painful memories aside enough for me to breathe a little easier. I fall asleep on the couch during my third movie, but once my eyes close, I can’t keep Yuri away. He always finds me in the dark. Every night, he comes to me in my dreams, and I wake with my throat burning, my lungs straining for air, and my body feeling completely empty. Since I left his house, I’ve felt like a shell of a person, like I left the most important part of myself back there with him, and I don’t know how to function anymore without it, without *him*.

Four weeks after leaving Yuri, I wake and immediately clap a hand over my mouth and run for the toilet. Nausea rolls through me as my stomach cramps and empties of what little I have in it. Fisting my hair out of my face, I gasp for air as my mind does some frantic math. My period is late, I knew it was late, but it's not unusual for stress to knock me way off course from time to time. I've skipped months before. When I left with Dom, I was terrified and ended up going two months without a period.

I try to convince myself that the same thing is happening again, but deep down I know that's a load of bullshit. I just threw up, my period is late, and my boobs have been sore as hell, a detail I'd mistakenly blown off as PMS, and the most damning evidence of all is the insane amount of unprotected sex I'd been having. Forcing myself off the bathroom floor, I brush my teeth, pull my hair back in a messy ponytail, and throw on some sweats and a T-shirt. I'm not looking to impress. I just want to get my ass to the corner drugstore as quickly as possible.

Walking into the brightly-lit store has me hunching in on myself and wishing I'd worn a baseball cap. The feeling is absurd. It's not like anyone is watching me buy a pregnancy test. I scan the aisles until I find what I'm looking for. Not having the faintest idea which test is the best, I go ahead and grab three different kinds. When I turn, I'm surprised to see a man standing only a few feet away. He's incredibly good looking with dark hair and hazel eyes that are quickly scanning the array of pregnancy tests I'm clutching to my chest. My face heats up, and the enormity of how much I miss Yuri hits me full force. He should be here with me, sharing this moment, cracking jokes to make me laugh and then pulling me in for a big hug as we wait for the test results. Instead, I'm all alone, and the gorgeous man staring at me is just reminding me that no man will ever be able to replace the cocky Russian that I'm in love with.

"Excuse me," I manage to say, stepping around him and getting the hell out of the aisle without a backward glance.

Before I run for the check-out, I stop to grab some prenatal vitamins, thanking the universe that I didn't decide to drown my sorrows in alcohol over the last month like I really wanted to. I take my stash to the counter. The teenage boy who rings me up looks like he's facing his absolute worst fear as he scans the pregnancy tests and vitamins and waits for me to pay.

"Thank you," I mutter, grabbing the receipt and speed walking out the door.

Inside the safety of my apartment, I lean against the door and practice some deep breathing. I can do this, I tell myself. No matter what the test says, I can fucking handle this. Taking one last deep breath, I push off the wall, grab a bottle of water, and head for the bathroom. I chug the water and rip open the first test.

Five minutes later, I'm staring at three positive pregnancy tests and trying not to hyperventilate. My hand rests on my stomach as I think about the life inside me, the life that Yuri and I created. My heart aches at the loss of him, but as scared and sad as I am, I'm also so incredibly happy that I have this part of him with me, that I'll always have some part of him. I know I have to tell him. It would be cruel to keep this from him, but the thought of calling him and hearing his voice almost sends me to my knees. What if he hates me for leaving like I did? What if he wants nothing to do with me or the baby? For all I know, he's already forgotten about me and is busy fucking other women. That thought alone pulls a sob from me as I stumble to my bed and crawl back under the covers. Wrapping my arms around my legs, I curl into the fetal position and whisper to our unborn baby.

"I promise I'm going to take care of you and love you more than any baby's ever been loved. You're going to have the best uncle in the world, and your daddy," I try to finish, but my voice cracks, and I can't get the words out. Partly because I'm crying too hard to speak and partly because I have no idea what Yuri's going to do. I know I can't put off calling him any longer, though. Soon, I promise myself. I'll dig my old phone out, listen to his messages, and call him to tell him the news. I dread and long for the sound of his voice. Curling up tighter

under the covers, my eyes grow heavy, and my last thought is that I'd give anything to feel his arms wrapped around me and his Russian accent in my ear, telling me that everything is going to be okay.

Chapter 13

Yuri

“**A**bout fucking time,” I growl before standing up and straightening the suit jacket I’m wearing. Artyom gives me a nod before we follow the dark-haired Italian across the marble floors. He opens a set of French doors and motions for us to go in, closing them behind us and disappearing back into some recess of this huge mansion.

Lorenzo Rossi sits behind an elaborate, cherry-wood desk and motions for us to sit. He’s the stereotypical picture of an old, Italian mobster—round belly stuffed into an expensive, tailored suit, shrewd eyes that have seen more bad than good in this world, and a smile that doesn’t even come close to being genuine.

“So the Fedorov Bratva finally decided to come to Italy and grace us with your presence.”

His accent is thick, but his English is good. When Artyom and I remain silent, Lorenzo sighs and sits back in his chair, resting his hands on his sizeable paunch.

He nods his chin at Artyom, noticing the scar on his neck. “So you’re the one they call Death? I’ve heard stories about you. My men are afraid of you, I think.”

“I’m not the one they should be worried about right now,” Artyom says.

Lorenzo sighs and turns his eyes to mine. “Yes, I suppose you’re right. Are you done killing my men, Yuri Nikitin?”

“That depends on what you’re planning,” I say, leveling my gaze on one of the last Rossi men that I’ve allowed to keep breathing, not at all surprised that he’s done a bit of research on me. “You sent five men to our city.”

He cuts me off and says, “And you killed them all.”

“You shouldn’t have sent them, and don’t fucking interrupt me.”

His face turns an unhealthy shade of red, but he wisely keeps his mouth shut. We may be in his country and in his house, but he’s no longer in charge, and he’s smart enough to know it.

“Your family is done in our city.”

“And what of Gia?” he asks. The sound of her name cuts through me, a fresh slice to the heart that’s barely continued to beat without her.

“She is not your concern.”

“She’s family,” he says, giving a shrug as if I’m supposed to believe that he gives a shit about someone he’s never met just because they share a last name. “So is Dominic. I was hoping to bring him to Italy, show him the family business.”

“Lorenzo,” I say, leaning back in my chair, “you fucked up. You got greedy. When we took out Antonio, you should’ve learned your lesson, but you didn’t. You sent five more men and started to snoop around.”

“I sent them there because Gia hadn’t sold the house like she was supposed to. She never met with the realtor. She just vanished. I thought the Fedorov Bratva might have something to do with it, and it looks like I was right.”

“Really? Because your men became very chatty once we started talking.” I look over at Artyom and we share a laugh.

“They squealed like little piggies,” Artyom says, still grinning.

I smile at Lorenzo. “We can be very persuasive in getting people to talk, and your men sure did have a lot to say.”

Lorenzo's face goes from beet red to pasty pale as it starts to dawn on him how much trouble he's in. He pulls a silk handkerchief from his pocket and starts blotting his sweaty forehead.

"Men will say all kinds of things when under duress," he says like Artyom and I are new to the business and this is breaking news. "It doesn't mean it's true."

"Of course not," I agree. "That's why we had one of our men hack into your computer and verify everything. You left an obvious money trail, Lorenzo. You're getting sloppy in your old age."

"Fuck you," he spits out, making me laugh. Old men hate to be called old men. They hate to be reminded that their time is coming to an end and that they're no longer useful in their line of work, but the truth is, Lorenzo made careless mistakes and fucked up big time.

"You sent your men to America to stop Gia from selling the house. You'd changed your mind, got greedy, wanted to take possession of it yourself and set up ties in our fucking city. You were planning on coming after us for killing Antonio and his men."

"He was family!" Lorenzo yells, smacking a meaty palm onto his desk.

"That doesn't mean he wasn't an asshole," Artyom says.

Lorenzo glares at the two of us before a smug grin starts to form. I recognize it all too well. He's under the impression that he's untouchable, that he's going to walk out of here unscathed. Men like him always mistakenly think that because they were once powerful and feared that they'll continue to be that way, but it's nothing more than a lie. Powerful men can become weak and lose it all in a second. Past victories don't mean shit in this business. Everything hinges on how powerful you are in the present moment, and Lorenzo is a weak man. All three of us sense it. Only one of us refuses to believe it.

"This is about more than just the Rossi family trying to regain its roots in America," he says to me like he's all of a

sudden become some wise fucking sage of a man. He points a finger at me and broadens his grin. “I think this is about Gia.”

I want to rip out his goddamn tongue for daring to speak her name, but I don't. Instead, I say, “We had a nice talk with Giovanni Farina today, didn't we, Artyom?”

Artyom looks at me and laughs. “We did.” He turns back to a fuming Lorenzo. “He was also kind enough to offer us some espresso. He even gave us those Italian cookies I like so much.”

“Amaretti,” I say.

Artyom snaps his fingers and smiles. “That's it. Amaretti. You didn't even offer us a water, you fat fuck.”

“How dare you come into my home and talk to me like that.” Lorenzo is putting on a brave face, but his courage is failing and quickly, especially when all his outburst accomplishes is another laugh from Artyom.

“The Farina family had some interesting things to say about you, Lorenzo.” He pulls his attention back to me. “It seems they're just as tired of you as we are. In fact, if I'm being honest, I'm pretty sure they're just waiting for you to keel over.”

“I've been working closely with the Farina family. We have an arrangement.”

“You *had* an arrangement,” I correct him. “Giovanni was very interested to hear that you were trying to expand back into America without him.”

Lorenzo is silent, watching us with the look of a man who knows it's all over but is trying desperately to grasp at anything he can to prolong his life for just a little bit longer. I'm not at all surprised when the next words out of his mouth are “I can pay.”

“I'm sure you can, but I don't give a fuck about your money.”

“What do you want?”

“I want you dead. I want your fucking family to no longer be a threat, and the Farina family are more than willing to help us out with that. Well,” I add with a laugh, “not the killing you part. I’ll be taking care of that, but we have an agreement with them that they won’t ever try to set up in our city, which is more than you were willing to give us.”

“I won’t,” Lorenzo quickly says. “I’ll stay in Italy.”

Standing, I unbutton my suit jacket and say, “You know, that’s the problem with this line of work. We’re all criminals, and it’s hard to trust the word of a criminal. If I let you live, then I’ll always be looking over my shoulder, wondering if you’re going to show up to hurt me or someone I care about.”

The real Lorenzo shows himself when his eyes narrow and he points a hairy finger at me. “She’ll always be a Rossi,” he spits at me. “You remember that the next time you fuck her.”

Reaching inside my jacket, I pull out my gun and shoot him in the stomach. The silencer keeps it quiet, but his scream probably reaches every damn corner of this massive place.

“I was planning on a quick headshot, but you just had to be a dick, didn’t you?”

Lorenzo presses his hands against the wound, trying to staunch the blood that’s already soaked through his suit and started to drip onto the floor. He groans, knowing it’s the kind of shot that means a slow, painful death.

“Can we get some more gelato after he dies?” Artyom asks, treating this trip to Italy like it’s a mini vacation instead of my desperate attempt to get rid of anyone and everyone who could possibly pose a threat to Gia and her brother before I go and get her stubborn ass back.

“You’re having way too much fun with this.”

He shrugs and gives me a big grin. “This is my first trip to Italy. That reminds me, we need to go shopping before our flight leaves. Riley will kill me if I don’t bring her back something.” Turning to Lorenzo, he asks, “Any suggestions?” When all Lorenzo does is let out a pained grunt, Artyom

waves his hand at him as if it's no big deal. "I'll think of something."

I check my phone while we wait, pissed that Gia still hasn't called or texted. I send a message to Volodya, asking for an update. He's been in New York watching over her since the day after she left, reporting back to me on what she's doing and sending me photos that are almost too painful for me to look at. I miss her more than I ever thought it was possible to miss someone. After I woke up and realized she was gone, I'd immediately pulled up the tracking chip in her ass and called Mikhail and Artyom. They'd calmed me down enough to make me realize that I couldn't just go and get her. All her worries and fears would still be there. Nothing would've changed, and we would've been right back where we started. I knew where she was, and with Volodya watching over her, I knew she was safe.

The last month has been the worst fucking thirty days of my life. I can't sleep. I can barely eat. I've put all my focus on hunting down these bastards and ending the threat against her and her brother. I can't change the fact that I'm in a Bratva, but, goddammit, she's just going to have to accept it because I can't accept a life without her.

"Oh my god, I'm fucking hungry," Artyom groans like a five-year-old, while Lorenzo stubbornly keeps breathing.

Raising the gun, I fire off two quick shots, one to the heart and one to the head, ending the Rossi line in Italy. The Farina family already took care of the remaining Rossi men who were still committed to carrying on the family business. The others can live out their lives peacefully as long as they stay far away from the mafia. I leave the gun on the desk, knowing someone will be by shortly to clean up and get rid of the body.

"Finally," Artyom says, standing up and already heading towards the door. "First stop is gelato, and then, I'm sorry to say, we have to shop."

After Artyom has his precious gelato, we head for the stores. I tell him I'll meet back up with him in a couple of hours before he disappears into a Prada store and I turn and

walk down a small cobblestoned side street. I'm not sure what I'm looking for, but when I see a jewelry store tucked away with hanging baskets of flowers and a colorful awning, I feel compelled to walk in. The small bell on the door rings softly when I enter, and a few seconds later, a small, elderly man walks out from a back room, greeting me in Italian.

I answer him, and then ask if he speaks English or Russian. He switches to English with a grin. "Can I help you find something?"

Looking around at all the glass cases, I scan the diamonds laid out on velvet and say, "I need to get an engagement ring."

The man's eyes light up as he waves me over to a special display in the corner. "These are my best rings," he tells me in his thick accent. "I designed them myself."

I study the rings, not quite knowing what I'm looking for but easily recognizing the skill involved and the beauty of the jewelry. They're all gorgeous, and when I scrub a hand over my jaw, he takes pity on me.

"Maybe you would like to see my latest creation?" Before I can answer, he holds up a finger at me. I'm a good foot and a half taller than him, but his brown eyes still manage to seem like they're looking down at me when he wags his finger in warning. "I must tell you, young man, that this ring is not for just any woman. I did not create such a thing of beauty for you to just give it to some random lady who catches your eye. I'm old enough and wealthy enough to be selective of my customers. This is a ring for true love, a ring that is meant to last a lifetime, and it won't come cheap."

I smile, liking him immediately and nod my head to let him know I understand. "I'd very much like to see this ring."

He disappears in the back and returns holding a black, velvet box. Before he opens it, he pulls on a pair of gloves and lays out a square of velvet. His eyes light up when he opens it and I get my first look at the large diamond that I immediately know in my heart was always meant to be on Gia's finger. He gently, almost reverently, takes the ring out and lays it on the velvet. It's delicate and feminine and big enough to please any

woman without being ridiculously ostentatious or tacky. There's a large diamond in the center with several smaller pink diamonds surrounding it. The finishing touch is several small diamonds that trail along the delicate band.

"It's perfect," I tell him. "Absolutely perfect."

"You must really love her," he says, watching my reaction to his creation.

"I do," I say. "More than anything." I meet the old man's eyes. "It's her or nothing for me."

He smiles and nods as if I've passed his test, and when I don't even blink at the million-dollar price tag, his smile grows even bigger. "She's a lucky woman," he says, gently putting the ring back in the box.

I shake my head to disagree. "I'm the lucky one." I don't bother telling him that my soon-to-be fiancée ran off and left me a month ago because that's a detail I plan on fixing very soon. While he wraps up the box, I look at the wedding bands. With his help, we settle on one that will match her engagement ring beautifully and then a simple platinum band for myself. After I've paid for everything, he shakes my hand and wishes me a happy future.

On my way back to Artyom, a red dress catches my eye in a display window. I've never shopped for a woman before, and I'm surprised to find how much I'm enjoying it. The thought of Gia in that red dress is enough to have me reaching for my wallet with a quickness. I add in a pair of matching lace-up heels. The red ribbon is going to look sexy as fuck tied around her ankles.

The woman behind the counter keeps trying to catch my eye while I pretend I don't notice. She's an attractive woman, but she's not Gia. I haven't even looked at another woman since I first laid eyes on Gia. It's like she flipped some sort of switch inside me, and now it's her or nothing. I haven't gone thirty days without sex since I first became sexually active, and I can't say I care for it, but the thought of being with anyone else feels wrong. Even if I could get my mind around it, my cock has made it abundantly clear that it's Gia's pussy

or nothing. That stubborn woman owns every part of me, body and soul, and nothing has felt right since she left.

Grabbing the bags the woman hands me, I thank her and walk out the store, my head filled with images of me fucking Gia in her new red dress. When I finally find Artyom, he's loaded with bags and looking more than ready to get the fuck out of here.

"All right, I think I've got everybody." He looks over at me and eyes the jewelry and garment bag I'm holding. "Poor Gia. Her ass is going to be so sore."

"Fuck yes it is," I say, already picturing her beautiful ass covered in my handprints.

We make one last stop to get a box of chocolates for Riley, Charlie, and Gia, and then take a taxi to our hotel. Once we're in our suite, I call Volodya for an update. I can immediately tell by his voice that something's happened.

"Is she okay?" I ask, feeling my heart speed up with each passing second.

"She's fine, man. I mean, she's lost weight and came out looking like she'd just rolled out of bed, but she's hanging in there."

I'd noticed the weight loss and pale skin from the photos he'd sent over the last few weeks, but those are all fixable things, and I fully intend to make sure she's getting enough to eat once I get back to her.

"What aren't you telling me?" I ask, picturing a million different horrible scenarios, the main one being he saw her with another man. The mere thought of it is about to send me into a rage. I will kill any motherfucker who dares to lay a goddamn finger on her. I force myself to ask, "Was she with someone?"

"No, no, Yuri, nothing like that. Hell, she barely leaves her apartment. There hasn't been anyone else. Her brother comes around a couple times a week, but that's it."

"Then what the fuck is it?"

He hesitates, making me want to reach through the phone and strangle him.

“We can talk about it when your flight gets in,” he tries to say before I cut him off with a harsh laugh.

“Spill it, Volodya, before I lose my goddamn mind. What the fuck is it?”

“She went to the store today and bought some stuff. She saw me, but she has no idea who I am.”

“And?” I ask, pacing the floor and trying to remain calm.

“She was buying pregnancy tests, like a bunch of them.”

I stop my pacing and feel my whole world go a little more off-kilter. “You’re sure?”

“Yeah, man. I saw them, and she looked scared to death.”

I let out the breath I’ve been holding and say, “Thanks, Volodya. Keep an eye on her, and I’ll be there tomorrow.”

After I hang up, I walk to the veranda and look out at the city, wishing like hell Gia were right here by my side. The thought of her having to go through this on her own kills me. I should be there with her, taking care of her and holding her hand. A baby? I still can’t wrap my brain around it. I never thought I’d get married and have kids. Hell, I’d been adamantly against it until Gia walked into my life and turned everything upside down, but now, thinking about her pregnant with our baby, goddamn, it makes me hard as hell and happier than I’ve ever been.

When Artyom finds me a few minutes later, I’m still standing on the veranda, imagining a baby with Gia’s big, blue eyes and dark blonde hair.

“Volodya saw her buying pregnancy tests today,” I tell him as he leans against the railing next to me.

“Holy shit.” He studies me, sizing up my reaction, and when he sees how happy I am, he grins and smacks me on the back. “Congratulations, man.”

“It might not be positive. She might just be late from stress or something,” I tell him, more as a reminder to myself to not get my hopes up, but even if she isn’t pregnant, I fully intend to get her that way as soon as fucking possible.

“Yeah, but the fact that you’re excited about is everything. I never thought I’d see the day,” he says with a laugh. “God, Mikhail’s going to laugh his ass off.

“Yeah, yeah, I can admit when I’m wrong.”

“Since when?”

He laughs at the look I give him.

“I just needed to meet her, I guess. It never made sense to me before why a man would give up everything for one woman.”

“But you get it now.”

“I get it now,” I agree.

“Better late than never,” he says with a laugh. “You always were a slow learner.”

“Fuck you.” I smile and grab my phone, checking the flight schedule. When I see there’s still two tickets available for a red-eye flight, I hold the screen out to him and lift a brow.

“Fuck yes,” he says. “Italy’s awesome and all that, but I miss my family, man.”

“I appreciate you coming,” I tell him while I switch our tickets out for the new flight. I know he hates being away from Riley and the twins, but he hadn’t even hesitated when I’d asked him to come.

He smacks my back and starts heading inside to pack. “Anytime. I wasn’t about to let you come here alone. This is Bratva business, Yuri. You know that.”

“Yeah,” I agree, knowing I’d do the same for him in a heartbeat. Mikhail would’ve come with us, but Charlie ended up having an emergency C-section two weeks ago that had scared the hell out of him. She’s still recovering, and there was

no way I was going to ask him to leave her. When Artyom and I landed, we'd been met by some of Giovanni Farina's men. Mikhail may not have been able to leave his wife and newborn daughter, but he'd been busting his ass back home, ensuring we'd have all the backup we needed while here.

As soon as Artyom and I get everything packed up, we take a taxi to the airport and catch the last flight out. Knowing I'll be cut off from all communication for the nine-hour flight has me more tense than usual. I put on some headphones and try and watch a movie, but every few seconds my mind drifts back to Gia until I finally give up and order a drink. Artyom sprawls out in the chair next to me, taking advantage of the first-class perks by fully reclining his seat into a bed and taking the pillow and blanket the overly friendly flight attendant was more than happy to get for him. He's asleep in minutes, and I envy him on a deep level. I'd give just about anything to pass out and wake up when we've landed.

After surviving the longest nine hours of my life and feeling more stir crazy than I've ever been, the plane finally starts to descend. I elbow Artyom awake. He stretches, looking refreshed and ready to go.

"You look like shit," he says when he looks over at me. "Didn't you sleep at all?"

"No," I mutter, tapping my foot a mile a minute, more than ready for this fucker to get on the ground.

Once we land and disembark at JFK, Artyom and I split to go our separate ways. He's taking a flight back home, and I'm getting my ass on a plane for Syracuse.

"Go get her," Artyom says before leaving. "Bring her ass back home where she belongs."

"I will. I don't care if I have to hog tie her and throw her in the back of a rental car."

"That's the spirit," he says with a laugh. "I think she'll really love that."

He waves a bye before heading for his terminal while I go in the opposite direction in search of mine. I'm exhausted,

hungry, worried, and more than a little irritable by the time the plane lands in Syracuse. I must be putting off a pissed-off vibe because everyone's giving me a wide berth as I grab my bags and head for the rental car counter.

Instead of going straight to Gia like I'm dying to, I text Sergei and tell him I'm on my way. He meets me near the dorms, and when I see the two cups of coffee in his hand, I give him a grateful smile and quickly take one. When the caffeine hits my system, I slowly start to feel human again.

"Is he inside?"

"Yeah. His first class is in two hours. He usually leaves about now to go see Gia, so you got here at the perfect time. How was Italy?"

"Hot and crowded."

"Sounds wonderful."

"Artyom had fun. He ate his weight in gelato."

Sergei laughs and then turns his attention to the building behind us when we hear the door open. I recognize Dominic as soon as he steps out. I tell Sergei he can catch a flight back home with Volodya before walking over to Gia's brother. He sees me coming towards him and stops. His eyes run over me, and even though I'm several inches taller and outweigh him by about fifty pounds of muscle, he stands his ground, which I can't help but respect.

"Dominic Rossi?" I ask, stopping a few feet away from him.

"Yeah. Who are you?"

I hold out my hand to him. "I'm Yuri Nikitin. I'm the man who's going to marry your sister."

Dominic surprises me by laughing and shaking my hand. "So you're the guy my sister can't seem to get over." He studies me for a second. "You know she's devastated, right?"

"I do, but I'm about to fix that."

"Took you long enough. Why didn't you come sooner?"

“I had some things I had to take care of before it could work between us.” I motion to a bench that’s not far away. “Will you talk with me for a minute?”

He nods his head and follows me. Gia has apparently protected him from everything. My accent isn’t bringing up any red flags for him, and he doesn’t seem the slightest bit concerned about anything mafia related. I wonder if he has any idea how lucky he is to have a sister like her. His life could easily be a mess right now, but he’s thriving, well-adjusted, and living out his dream at a great art school.

“I wanted to introduce myself before I go and see Gia,” I tell him once we’re seated. “I need to know your feelings about her moving. She’s very protective of you.”

“I know she is. I keep telling her that I’m fine and that she needs to stop worrying about me. I want her to be happy.” He rests an arm against the back of the bench and sighs. “She’s always looked out for me, sacrificed so much to take care of me. I mean, she raised me. Our mom didn’t do shit, and our dad was an abusive ass. Gia had to become like a mom to me, but she also had to step in and protect me from our dad.”

I think about everything he’s saying, imagining a young Gia who sacrificed everything for her younger brother. I already love her as much as any person can love another, but I also respect the hell out of her and admire her.

“I know we only just met, but I can promise you, Dominic, that I will never allow any harm to come to your sister. I will love her and protect her for the rest of my life. You have my word on that. And if you decide you want to transfer schools to live closer to us, I’ll do anything I can to help make that happen.”

He thinks about what I’ve said and looks around at the campus. “I appreciate that, but I really like it here, Yuri. My classes are great, I’m making friends, and I kind of met someone.” He gives a shy grin that’s so similar to Gia’s.

I smile and ask, “What’s her name?”

He laughs and says, “Samantha.”

“Well, you can visit anytime you want, and feel free to bring Samantha along.”

“Thanks. Are you going to see Gia now?”

“Yeah, I just wanted to meet you first.”

“I’m going to grab some breakfast then and let you two sort it all out. Tell her to call me whenever.”

“I will.” Standing, I look down at him and say, “Gia showed me some of your artwork. You’re incredibly talented.”

He blushes a bit at my praise and runs a hand through his hair. “Thanks.” He stands and slings his backpack over his shoulder. “I’m glad you came to see her. She’s never been like this about anyone before. I was starting to get worried.”

“I swear I’m going to fix it,” I promise him.

He nods, trusting me at my word. We say our goodbyes, knowing we’ll be seeing each other again soon. My heart starts to speed up when I get back in my car. In just a few minutes, I’ll be at Gia’s apartment. I swear I can already feel her soft skin against mine and smell her sweet scent. After four long weeks, it’s time to take back what belongs to me.

Chapter 14

Gia

I hear Yuri's voice in my ear, and the sound of it pulls a pained moan from my sleepy brain. My dream floats right at the edges of my mind, and all I want is to get back to it, to get back to him.

"Wake up, *ptichka*," he whispers in my ear. The heat of his breath tickles my ear, pulling another moan from me.

My eyes jerk open when I realize it's not a dream, and as soon as I see his beautiful, green eyes, I try to reach for him, but my arms won't move. I tug harder and then let out a surprised gasp when I realize he's tied me to my damn bed. My arms and legs strain against the restraints, but it's completely useless.

"What the fuck?" I yell, giving one last tug.

He smiles and leans closer. His fingers run down my cheeks, every touch sending little shivers of pleasure all through me. Resting his forehead against mine, he says, "God, I've missed you, Gia."

"I missed you, too," I say, drinking in the sight of him like a damn glutton. It feels like forever since I last saw him. Even though he looks tired and like he's been worrying way too much, he's still the most beautiful man I've ever seen. "Why am I tied up?"

"Because we need to talk, and I don't trust you to not try and fly away again, *ptichka*."

He cups my face and meets my eyes. “You left me, baby. You just got up in the middle of the night and left without a fucking word.” The pain in his eyes has tears forming in mine. “Do you have any idea what that did to me?”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper. “It killed me to do it.”

“And then you turned your phone off.” He shakes his head as if he can’t stomach thinking about it anymore.

“I thought it was my only option. I couldn’t put you and the others in danger. I left to keep you safe, and it worked. The realtor said that my relatives never showed. I will do anything to keep you safe, even if it means breaking my own heart.”

He sighs in frustration and sits up, looking down at me like I’m a disobedient kid that he has no idea what to do with. “It didn’t work, Gia. You shouldn’t have left. You should have trusted me. We could’ve worked through it together.”

“What do you mean it didn’t work? Did something happen?”

“You could definitely say that,” he says with a harsh laugh. “Your stubborn ass didn’t think we could be together while the Rossi family still posed a threat, so I eliminated that threat.”

My mind is still struggling to catch up with everything that’s happened, so when I give Yuri a confused look, he stands and walks to the end of my bed to look down at me.

“They’re gone, Gia. You don’t ever have to worry about them again. I just got back from Italy a few hours ago. I’m exhausted, and I’ve just lived through the worst fucking month of my life, and I’m never fucking doing it again.”

“They’re gone?” I ask, still filtering through all the information.

“Yes,” he confirms. “You and Dom are safe from them forever. You don’t ever have to worry about them again.”

I let out a relieved breath. Never again will I have to worry about someone stealing Dom away and forcing him into the mafia, and I let out a soft gasp at knowing I won’t have to

worry about them coming after our baby. Yuri's gaze softens when he sees my tears.

"I have so much to tell you," I whisper.

"I know, sweetheart, but first I need to make sure you're never going to run from me again."

I have no idea what he has planned, but when he gives me a heated look and lowers himself between my legs, my whole body sparks to life. Four weeks of separation slam into me, pulling a needy moan from my throat as I try to spread my legs wider for him.

"Did someone miss me?" he asks, arching a brow at me.

"Yes, god, yes," I moan.

"Well, that does make me happy, baby, and that's going to make your punishment so much more excruciating."

"What punishment?"

He doesn't answer. Instead, he brings his lips to my inner thigh and starts to kiss his way up my leg. I try to get free of the restraints again, but it's no use. I let out a frustrated groan.

"I want to touch you, Yuri, please."

He gives my thigh a soft bite. "Good. I've wanted to touch you every second of every day for the last month, but I couldn't do that, could I, sweetheart?"

"No." The word is nothing more than a whisper when I realize what punishment he has in store for me.

He laughs and runs his tongue up my leg, making me moan again. "I see you've figured it out." Pulling my sleep shirt up to expose my breasts, he looks down at my body and groans. "I've missed you so much, and as much as I want to bury myself inside you and erase every second of the last month, I can't do that just yet. First, I'm going to tease the living fuck out of you, *ptichka*, and I'm not going to let you come until I'm satisfied you've learned your lesson."

"I won't ever leave again," I quickly say. "I promise. You don't need to tease me."

He laughs and hovers his mouth above my panty-covered pussy, letting me feel the heat of his breath against my touch-starved skin. “I’m not convinced yet, sweetheart.”

His tongue runs over my panties, making me gasp at how damn good it feels. I’d been too depressed to even touch myself, and the full force of how badly my body has missed his hits me like a damn sledgehammer.

“When was the last time you came, *ptichka*?”

“With you when you bent me over the couch.”

He groans and nuzzles my pussy, gently hitting my clit with his nose. “I’ve replayed that night over and over again.” When a whimper escapes and I try my best to grind against him, he tightens his grip on my hips and forces me to be still. “Your body’s dying for an orgasm, Gia. If I’m not careful, you’re going to accidentally come.”

For one brief second, he presses his tongue flat against my achy clit and gives me a firm lick. When he pulls away, I let out a pained groan, knowing it would only take a couple more seconds for me to explode. The smug grin on his face lets me know he knows it, too. My eyes widen when I look down and see him opening a deadly looking blade.

“Careful, sweetheart,” he murmurs when I start to squirm. “Don’t move.”

I hold still as he slowly slides the blade under the lace at my hip. All he has to do is angle the blade up, and the fabric tears easily without any effort from him.

“God, that’s sharp,” I whisper, wondering about all the places that knife has been.

“It is,” he says and leaves it at that.

He brings it to my other hip and tears through the other side before closing the blade and putting it back in his pocket. Tossing my destroyed panties aside, he sighs and leans closer to kiss me right above my clit.

“I’ve missed you so fucking much.”

His voice is strained and the pain in it breaks my heart. I knew my leaving would hurt him, but I didn't think it would destroy him in the same way it did me. I'd been wrong. When he turns his green eyes back up to mine, they're glassy with unshed tears, and the raw pain in them cuts me to the core.

"I'm so sorry, Yuri."

He gives me a small nod, accepting my apology but not ready to let me off the hook just yet. Keeping his eyes locked on mine, he starts to rim my clit as one tear spills over and runs down his cheek. Cupping my ass with one hand, he tilts me up and slides one finger into my pussy, lighting my whole body on fire. Already, I can feel how close the orgasm is. A month of abstinence has made me overly sensitive in the best possible way. Each stroke of his finger, each swirl of his tongue, it all works together, pushing me closer and closer to the edge. Right when I feel the pleasure building to the breaking point, I suck in a quick breath, embracing the sensations running through me and arch my back as my body starts to tense.

The sharp smack on my pussy is the last thing I'm expecting. I'm so stunned it takes me a second to realize what the hell is going on. I look down at Yuri who's giving me a wink from between my legs. My pussy stings, my orgasm fades away more and more with each passing second, and I don't know whether to cry or yell. I decide on the latter.

"What the hell?"

"It wouldn't be much of a punishment if I let you come so soon."

"You spanked my pussy," I say, making him laugh at my shock.

"I did, and I'm going to do it again. I'm going to kill so many orgasms, sweetheart."

I struggle against the restraints even harder, but there's no way in hell I'm getting loose. Even in this, he's made sure to take care of me. The restraints are padded, and even though they're annoying me at the moment, they can't hurt me.

When I settle down and huff out a breath, he brings his lips back to my pussy, kissing away the sting. Sliding a finger back into me, he starts to tease me all over again. I lose track of how many times I've been on the brink of an orgasm only to have him kill it with a sharp smack to the clit. It's the most insanely frustrating and erotic thing I've ever experienced. It's an exquisite torture that soon has tears falling down my cheeks as my need for him becomes unbearable.

The next time he teases me, he pushes it further, letting me feel a few precious seconds of the orgasm before he kills it, leaving me sobbing and more pissed than I've ever been.

"You bastard!" I scream at him.

He gives my stinging clit a soft kiss, mixing pain and pleasure until I feel dizzy with the raw, primal need I feel for him.

"I may be a bastard, but I'm your bastard, sweetheart. A detail you seem to have forgotten."

"Please, Yuri," I beg. "I need you inside me. You don't have to let me come, but please, just let me touch you. I need to feel you against me."

He runs his tongue over my clit one last time before standing up and quickly undressing. I drink in the sight of him like a starving woman because that's exactly what I am. I need him more than anything. I've gone too long without him, and every part of me aches for him. When he's naked, I struggle even harder to get at him. He looks painfully hard, and my pussy clenches at the sight of him.

"Careful, sweetheart," he says, stepping closer and slowly unclasping one ankle before doing the same to the other. As soon as he's close enough, I wrap my legs around him, moaning when our skin touches. He positions himself on top of me before working on my wrists. When I'm free, I wrap my arms around him, sobbing at the feel of him against me.

He cups my face, not even bothering to wipe away the tears, and slowly slides into me. Before he's even fully seated inside me, I'm coming so hard my vision darkens around the

edges. All those denied orgasms come crashing into me with a force unlike anything I've ever known. He groans and kisses me deeply, sliding his tongue along mine as he fucks me slowly. I run my hands through his hair and tighten my legs around him, so afraid that he's going to disappear if I let go of him.

Bringing one hand to his back, I lightly drag my nails along his skin, pulling a deep groan from him as he slams into me even harder. His kiss turns hungrier, harder, neither one of us able to get enough of the other. When I feel another orgasm building, I let out a whimper and fist his hair while my other hand clutches his shoulder hard enough to dig my nails in. He growls against my lips, thrusting into me even harder until I'm bucking against him, clenching so tightly around his cock that he has no choice but to let go with me.

All the love I feel for him and all the pain I've felt from missing him comes crashing into me right along with the pleasure until tears are streaming down my face and I'm clutching him so tightly I'm surprised he can breathe. He keeps kissing me, and when I feel his tears hit my skin to mix with my own, I cup his face, wanting to take all the pain I've caused him away.

"I'm so sorry," I whisper against his skin, holding him and kissing the tears away. "I'm so sorry. Please forgive me."

"I love you, Gia. There's nothing to forgive. I know you did it to keep me safe." He looks down at me and begs. "Promise me you won't ever do that again. I can't survive it, sweetheart. I can't live without you. It's as simple as that."

"I promise I won't ever leave again."

"Even if you think it's to keep me safe?"

"Yes, I promise. I'll stay, and we'll handle it together."

He lets out a heavy sigh and rests his forehead against mine. In a voice that's barely more than a whisper, he asks, "What did the test say?"

"What? How did you know?"

He gives me a small smile. “I’ve had someone watching over you since shortly after you landed. Your brother, too.”

“You have?”

“Of course. I wasn’t about to let anything happen to you. I wanted to hop on the first flight out here, but Mikhail and Artyom talked sense into me. I knew nothing would ever change, not really anyway, until after the Rossi threat was taken care of.”

“But how did you know where I was? I could’ve taken Dom and run anywhere. How did you know to send someone here?”

“Don’t change the subject. My guy saw you at the store, said you were buying a bunch of pregnancy tests.” He searches my face, and I smile at the small glimmer of hope I see in them. “What did the test say?”

“It was positive,” I say, starting to get all weepy again.

A huge smile lights up his whole face that I immediately return. He kisses me and laughs. “We’re going to have a baby?”

“Yes.” I hug him and bury my face in his neck, breathing in my favorite scent that I’ve missed so damn much. I love his cologne, but it’s what’s underneath that really gets me. “I’m so glad you’re happy. I was so worried about what you’d say when I told you.”

“You were going to tell me?”

“Of course I was. I could never keep something like this from you.”

He gives me another kiss before slowly sliding out of me and laying back on the bed. I turn and snuggle up against him, smiling when he immediately tightens his arms around me.

“You’re lucky I didn’t have morning sickness today. That would’ve ruined your plans big time.”

“You’re having morning sickness?”

I kiss his chest at the worried tone of his voice. “Just a couple times so far. It’s not too bad yet.”

“I’m so sorry I wasn’t here to help you.”

“It’s my fault you weren’t, Yuri, and you’re here now. That’s all that matters.” I lift up and rest my chin on his chest. “You never answered me. How did you know I was here?”

He gives me a sheepish grin and scrubs a hand through his hair before resting it behind his head. “Remember the first night at my place when you woke up and I told you I’d pinched your ass because you were hogging the bed?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I didn’t actually pinch your ass. I put a microchip in it so I could track you in case you escaped.”

I sit up even more and wait for him to laugh and tell me it’s a joke. He doesn’t. “You put a tracker in me?”

“It’s perfectly safe and very small,” he says as if that’s going to make all the difference. “Even I have one.”

“Why do you have one?”

“Everyone in the Bratva does. Charlie and Riley do, too.”

“Did they agree to it or were their asses chipped while they were unconscious, too?”

“Charlie, yes, but Riley gave permission after she and Artyom were married.”

“Well, isn’t Artyom the gentleman.”

Yuri snorts out a laugh. “Yeah, that’s him in a nutshell.” He looks at me, his face turning serious again. “I have to know your safe and that I’ll always be able to get to you. I’m afraid it’s nonnegotiable.”

“It is, huh? Well, I think maybe one day you’ll wake up and find yourself tied to the damn bed while I tease the hell out of you for chipping my ass without permission.”

He really laughs at that and pulls me back down to him. “I love you, baby.”

“I love you, too.”

I pull the covers up over us, knowing he’s exhausted and close to passing out. He turns on his side, spooning me and resting a hand against my lower stomach, softly stroking the belly that’s going to be growing bigger with each passing month.

“I forgot to tell you that Dominic said for you to call him whenever you want.”

“You met Dom?”

“Yeah, I went and introduced myself to him before I came here. I like him. He’s a good kid. He wants you to be happy, Gia.”

“I know he does.” I turn my head and kiss his chin. “Thanks for coming back for me, Yuri, for not giving up.”

“I could never stay away, *ptichka*. You’re my life, baby. Nothing feels right when you’re not with me.”

I smile and kiss him again before snuggling even closer. I’ve slept like shit for an entire month, and for the first time since leaving Yuri’s house, I drift off to sleep easily and peacefully. I’m no longer worried and terrified about what’s going to happen. I’m calm and excited and feel like I’m exactly where I should be.

When I wake up, the sun is low in the sky, and I feel like my bladder is about two seconds away from bursting. I slip out of Yuri’s death grip, being careful to not wake him, and speed walk to the bathroom. While I’m in there I brush my teeth and hair, and when I come back out, Yuri is still sleeping peacefully in my bed. It’s an image I never thought I’d see, and before he wakes, I grab my camera and start snapping photos.

He’s so effortlessly sexy. The man doesn’t need to do a damn thing to get my panties wet. He just needs to exist. It still amazes me that he loves me and wants to be with me. I’m not sure how I got so lucky, but I do know that there’s no way in hell I’m ever walking away from him again.

When I've taken about thirty photos, I see his mouth turn up in a grin before he gives a big stretch. "Are you seriously taking pictures of me while I sleep? Should I be creeped out or flattered?" he asks with a laugh.

"Flattered," I say, still snapping more photos. "You can be creeped out when I blow them up and frame them all over our house."

He laughs and reaches out for my wrist, pulling me onto the bed with him. Burying his face in my neck, he breathes me in and groans. "That's the best I've slept all month. You've ruined me, *ptichka*. I can't sleep now unless I have my little snoring bear next to me. It's too damn quiet without you."

"I don't snore," I try and protest, but he starts tickling me and I can barely get the words out.

"Oh, baby, yes you do. I'm surprised your neighbors don't complain." He looks around my bedroom, studying the place. "The walls can't be that damn thick."

"Oh, whatever," I laugh. "Everyone has a fault. There, you found mine."

"Just one, huh?"

"Yes, just the one," I say, trying not to laugh. "If you find any more, I don't want to know about them."

"To me, you're perfect, baby."

"Such a sweet talker." I smile and kiss his chest. "Come on, I'm starving. I'm eating for two now, and I intend to make the most of it."

He laughs and gets out of bed, pulling on a pair of jeans and using the bathroom, before following me bare chested into the kitchen. When I turn and see him leaning against the counter, I let out an appreciative sigh before starting the coffeemaker for him. I'm trying to limit my caffeine, so I grab some herbal tea for myself and start the kettle. When I turn back around, I'm surprised by the heat I see in his eyes.

I raise a brow at him and smile. "What are you thinking about?"

“I’m picturing you very pregnant.”

I laugh and shake my head at him like he’s nuts. “Uh-huh.”

“You think I’m joking?”

“Yes, I do.”

He pulls me to him, and when I feel the hard length of him straining against his pants, he quirks a brow at me. “Still think I’m joking?” He slides a hand down to lift my shirt, groaning when he sees I’m still not wearing panties. His fingers graze my stomach. “God, baby, just imagining you with a big, swollen belly, fucking hell.”

I feel his cock swell even more, and when he slides his hand lower to cup my wet pussy, he groans something in Russian and runs a finger lightly over my slit, gently parting my lips before burying two fingers inside me.

“Yuri,” I moan, clinging to his biceps and bringing my mouth to his chest. I kiss and lick a line across tattooed muscle, completely lost to the pleasure he’s giving me. He quickly brings me to the edge, and when I come, it’s so powerful that my knees start to buckle. I whimper his name and bite and suck on his beautiful body as everything else fades away except the feel and taste of him and the intoxicating scent of his skin.

When I open my eyes, he gives me a wink and kisses my forehead. “There’s nothing on earth as beautiful as you letting go and giving into your pleasure, *ptichka*. It’s the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen.”

I smile and kiss the bite marks I left on him. “I’d say I’m sorry for those, but it’s your fault.”

He smiles and slides his fingers out of my pussy. He gives me a soft pat before slowly sucking his fingers clean. “Don’t ever apologize for being a wild little thing. I love it.” He smacks my ass and pours my tea when the kettle starts to whistle. “Sit down, baby. Let me make you something to eat.”

I sit at my small table and watch Yuri cook us eggs and bacon. When it’s ready, he fills my plate and brings it over

before grabbing his and sitting across from me. He looks around at my small apartment.

“I like seeing where you live. I snooped a bit while you were sleeping,” he admits, not looking the slightest bit guilty about it. “I like learning more about you.”

“How did you even get in here?”

“I can break into most places pretty easily. Yours was terrifyingly easy, and I’d never be able to sleep again if you were staying here without me.”

“Well that’s unsettling.”

“You don’t need to worry about it anymore because you’re coming back with me, and no harm will ever come to you when you’re with me.”

He says it so matter of fact, and it’s not just Yuri being cocky. It’s just the truth. The safest place in the world to be is right next to him. I can’t believe I didn’t realize that sooner.

“I’m glad you’re taking photos again, by the way. You looked so beautiful down by the park, snapping photos of the swans and geese.”

“Wow, you really did have someone keeping tabs on me.”

“The whole time. He gave me updates several times a day and sent photos sometimes. They were too painful to look at for more than a few seconds, but I had to know you were okay. I’m just glad I didn’t see you with another man. I couldn’t have handled that.” He shakes his head softly to rid the image from his head.

I reach across the table and grab his hand. “I could never have done that, Yuri. It didn’t even occur to me.” I grip his hand tighter and look down at my plate. “I worried about you being with someone else, too.”

“Look at me, *ptichka*.”

I look up and meet his eyes. “I haven’t been with anyone else. There’s no way in hell I could have. I didn’t even want to.” He gives me a sexy grin. “Thirty fucking days without

sex. I think you were trying to kill me. Prepare yourself, sweetheart. Your pussy is going to be sore as hell.”

He laughs when I squirm in my seat a bit. He’s not the only one who wants to make up for lost time. We finish our food, and when he pulls me into the shower, I happily go with him. We take our time, savoring the feel of one another until the water turns cold and we’re forced to get out. He watches me with heavy-lidded eyes as I put lotion on, making me feel like the most desired woman on the planet. I’ve always been pretty shy about my body, but Yuri makes me feel beautiful and sexy. He helps me forget about all the imperfections that seem so obvious to me. It’s hard to think about all the things I don’t like about myself when he’s staring at me like he’s two seconds away from grabbing me and fucking me until I can’t walk.

“I want to take you to dinner tonight.” He steps closer and runs a finger along my collarbone. “I got you something in Italy.”

Grabbing my hand, he pulls me into the bedroom and grabs a garment bag that I hadn’t noticed he’d brought with him. When I see the Valentino label, my jaw drops. He smiles and holds it out to me.

“I saw it in the window, and it reminded me of you.”

“Yuri,” I whisper, unzipping the bag and taking out the most beautiful red dress I’ve ever seen. My fingers stroke the soft fabric, making him laugh as he watches me pet the damn thing. It’s strapless and one of those dresses that might be mistakenly called simple, but really it’s just timelessly elegant.”

“It’s beautiful,” I say, still whispering. “I’ve never owned anything so nice.”

“I’m glad you like it. I also got you these to go with it.”

He hands me a pair of red, lace-up heels, the ribbons on them just as soft as the dress. I hug them to me and look up at him. “You didn’t have to get me so much. This must’ve cost a fortune.”

“I wanted to, *ptichka*, and I’d be lying if I said this gift wasn’t also for me.” He smiles and runs his eyes over me. “You have no idea how much I’m going to enjoy seeing you in this.” Tapping my nose, he says, “I have one more present for you, but you don’t get that one until later.”

I smile, wondering what in the hell it could be. By the time we need to start getting ready, I’m more curious than ever, but I quickly become distracted when I slip into my new dress. I made Yuri wait for me in the living room, wanting to surprise him, and when I slip into the heels and tie the red ribbons around my ankles, I feel like fucking royalty. The full-length mirror on the back of my door reveals a woman I barely recognize. I’d spent more time than usual on my hair and makeup, and seeing the end result makes it all worth it.

Giving one last spin to make sure my ass looks okay, I smile and open the door. Nerves start to eat at me as I walk down the hall. When I turn the corner, I’m fidgeting and hoping like hell I’m not sweating too much.

“Holy shit,” I whisper when I see Yuri standing by the window in a black suit that looks like it was perfectly tailored just for his exquisite body. He turns to me, the vivid green of his eyes standing out even more against the dark suit. Yuri is a gorgeous man no matter what he’s wearing, but seeing him in a suit, goddamn, the sight makes me weak in the knees.

His eyes run over me while a sexy grin plays at his lips. “Wow,” is all he says as he slowly walks around me, taking it all in before stopping in front of me. “You’re breathtaking, baby.”

I run a hand over the front of his suit. “You’re not so bad yourself.”

He smiles and hooks a finger under my chin, leaning close enough for me to feel his breath on my lips. “This evening is going to be an exercise in patience, sweetheart. The whole time I’m going to be thinking about how badly I want to fuck you in this dress.”

Sucking my bottom lip between his, he gives me a soft bite that sends a shiver of pleasure all through me.

“I’ll try my best to wait until we get back, but no promises.”

My heart speeds up at his words and the images he’s just put in my mind. When I cup the back of his head and pull him closer, he groans and kisses me like I need him to. One hand slides down my back to palm my ass, squeezing me as he pulls my body flush against his while his tongue runs along the roof of my mouth. When he hears me whimper, he groans and forces himself to pull back. Resting his forehead against mine, he lets out a soft laugh.

“We haven’t even left the damn apartment yet. There’s no way I’m going to make it through the night.”

I smile and slide my hand down to press against the hard length that’s already straining against his pants.

He taps the tip of my nose. “You’re a troublemaker, sweetheart.” He winks and takes a step back, putting some distance between our bodies. “Keep it up and see what it gets you.”

I’m tempted to put that to the test, and he sees it on my face. Smiling, he takes my hand, threading his fingers through mine and leading me to the door.

“Let’s see how long you can behave yourself, *ptichka*.”

Chapter 15

Yuri

Gia in that red dress is an exercise in willpower unlike anything I've ever known. It takes everything I have to not pull to the side of the road. Seconds are all it would take to scoot my seat back, free my cock, hike her dress up and lower her onto me. The temptation is strong, but I want tonight to be perfect. This is the only time I'll ever propose to a woman, and as much as I'd like to start the night with a quickie on the side of the road, I'm trying to be a gentleman. It's not going to last long, especially not with her in those heels, but I'd like to at least get to the damn restaurant and let her eat.

"Oh, wow," she says, looking out the window at the steakhouse I managed to get us reservations for. "I've never been here, but it's supposed to be amazing."

"I'm glad you've never been here. I was worried that maybe you'd been here on a date or something."

She laughs and shakes her head. "Yeah, you don't have to worry about that. I've been on very few dates, and none of those guys took me to places like this. One guy did take me through a drive-thru when I complained about being hungry, though. He was also kind enough to let me pay."

"Damn," I mutter, pulling in line for the valet. "Want me to kill him?" I ask, only partially joking.

"No. Although, he did try and get pretty handsy at the end of the night."

"I'm definitely going to pay him a visit."

She laughs and runs her finger along my cheek. “Don’t worry. He didn’t even get a kiss goodnight.”

“Good.”

She smiles at my tone and obvious jealousy at the thought of her with someone else. I kiss her hand before pulling up to the valet and getting out. He’s already reaching a hand out to help her up with a look on his face that makes me want to kick his ass.

“Take the car,” I tell him, handing him the fob and giving him a look that lets him know this isn’t up for discussion. He takes it and scurries around to the driver’s side while I hold my hand out for Gia.

“Wow, you are possessive, aren’t you?” she whispers, looking at me with clear amusement in her eyes.

“You have no idea, sweetheart.”

Resting my hand on her bare back, I lead her into the restaurant. The bubbly hostess behind the stand widens her eyes when she sees us and runs them over me in a way that makes Gia’s body stiffen slightly next to mine. Keeping my hand on her back, I bring my other hand to her face and turn her so she’s looking up at me. Ignoring the hostess, I lean down and kiss her softly, wanting her to know that I don’t give a shit about any other woman.

“I love you, *ptichka*,” I whisper against her lips.

She smiles and gives a small nod, letting me know she understands what I’m doing. “I love you, too.”

I hold her gaze for a couple more seconds before turning back to the hostess who has a much more professional look on her face now.

“Reservation for Nikitin,” I tell her.

Gia laughs next to me and whispers, “How in the hell am I just now learning your last name?”

I laugh and kiss her head before we follow the hostess to a corner table with a view of downtown. “You had other things on your mind, baby.”

She slides her hand under my suit jacket to grab my ass. “That I did.”

The hostess looks back when I let out a surprised laugh. Gia’s eyes are lit up with amusement. “I knew you were going to be a handful the second I laid eyes on you sprawled out on that bed.”

I pull out a chair for her and thank the hostess before she walks away. Sitting down next to Gia with my back to the wall so I have a view of the restaurant and everyone in it, I rest my hand on her thigh and give her a squeeze. The restaurant is packed tonight, but the lighting is low, and it’s easy to believe it’s just the two of us. We eat and talk about the future that seems almost too good to be true.

“You know, if it’s a girl, Anya is going to be very jealous.”

“Well, Alina will be good practice for her.”

Gia gives me a confused look. “Alina?” Then her eyes widen before she lets out a groan. “I’m such an ass. I didn’t even ask how Charlie’s delivery went.”

I grab her hand and kiss it. “You’ve had a lot on your mind, baby. Charlie and Alina are doing great. She did scare the hell out of Mikhail when she ended up needing an emergency C-section, but everything went fine.”

“I’m so glad they’re okay. Were you able to see her, or were you in Italy when it happened?”

“I was there. She had her two weeks ago. Artyom went with me to Italy since Mikhail didn’t want to leave her while she was still recovering. We were in Italy for about a week.”

I grab my phone and pull up the photos I took of Alina. Gia smiles and swipes through them, stopping on one that Mikhail took of me holding his daughter. Alina’s hazel eyes are open and staring up at me while I cradle her in one arm and squeeze Lev into a hug with the other.

“She’s so beautiful.” She sighs and hands the phone back to me. “You look damn good with a baby in your arms, Yuri.”

I give her a wink and put my phone away. “Soon it’ll be our baby in my arms.”

“I can’t wait.”

“Me either, *ptichka*.”

When the waitress comes back, we both order chocolate mousse for dessert, and all the hormones I’ve been trying to keep in check go all haywire again when she starts moaning around her spoon and then licking the last of the chocolate from it when she’s done. She gives me a wink and slowly sucks the spoon clean.

“Thinking about anything in particular, Yuri?”

“I’m thinking about when I woke up with your pouty mouth wrapped around my cock.”

She smiles and sets her spoon down. “Good. Maybe you’ll get lucky and I’ll wake you up like that again.”

“Anytime, baby.”

When she slides her hand under the table and starts to massage my cock through my pants, I motion for the waitress to bring us the check. Gia gives a soft laugh and runs her nail over the head of my dick.

“What’s the matter?” she practically purrs, working me even harder under the table. “Ready to leave so soon?”

I smile and let her have her fun while I hand the waitress my card. Once I’ve paid, I discreetly adjust myself so my erection isn’t leading the damn way and then stand before helping my little temptress up. She gives me an innocent smile and wraps an arm around me as we leave. With her heels I’m not too much taller, and I intend to take full advantage of that in a few minutes.

While we wait for the valet to bring the car around, I kiss her shoulder and ask, “What’s your favorite part of the city?”

“I love the park.”

“The one from the photos Volodya sent me?”

“Yeah, it’s peaceful, and I love the swans. Did you know that most of them mate for life, and if a mate dies, the surviving swan will actually go through a grieving process?”

“No, I had no idea.”

When she catches me smiling, she laughs. “What?”

“I had no idea you were such a little ornithologist.”

“How did you learn English?”

“Surprised I know what ornithologist means?” I ask, giving her a wink and then opening the door for her when the car arrives.

“I am, and your English is spot-on. I’m very impressed, but I do love your accent.”

“What accent?” I ask, making her laugh because if I try really hard, I can sound just as American as her. “I learned it in school, but it didn’t really start to make sense until I moved here.”

“Okay, stop,” she says, lightly smacking my arm. “I miss your accent.”

“As you wish, *ptichka*,” I say, speaking normal again. “What about you? Do you speak Italian?”

“I do, but I’m a little rusty. When I was little, it was the only language I spoke with my dad and his side of the family.”

“You would have been helpful in Italy. I only speak a few words of it.”

“I would love to have been there with you.”

“We can go there anytime.”

She smiles and sits back while I drive us to the park she loves so much. The sun hasn’t fully set, and there are still a couple of people wandering around. We get a few odd looks at being so dressed up, but I don’t give a fuck. Gia can wear that dress every damn day of the week for all I care. She’s stunning, and judging by the way all the men are looking at her, I’m not the only one who’s noticed.

Pulling her closer so it's abundantly clear she's taken, we follow the path down to the small pond and sit on a bench under a towering oak tree.

"Do you come here a lot?"

"Yeah. It's a good place to read or take photos."

She smiles and points at the water. The swans have come around the bend to investigate.

"I like seeing the places you love. Are you okay with moving away? Do you think you'll be happy?"

Turning to me, she gives me a smile and leans her head against my shoulder. "I'll miss this place, but not near as much as I've missed you. I don't care where we live, Yuri. The only thing that matters is that we're together."

I kiss her head and squeeze her shoulder, watching the swans with her while the sun dips behind the trees. After a few minutes, she asks, "What are you thinking?"

Smiling, I point to the tree behind us. "I'm thinking about how I'm going to fuck you up against that tree in just a little bit."

"No you're not," she says, laughing and looking up at me like I'm crazy.

"Oh, yes I am. I was going to pick you up, but I don't want your back getting all scratched up from the bark. You're wearing your heels, though, so I'm thinking I'll just take you from behind while you brace your hands against the tree." I nod, happy with my plan. "Yeah, that's what I'll do. That way I can fuck you and play with your clit while I cup one of your perfect tits."

Her cheeks heat up at my description. I smile and brush my lips over hers in the lightest of touches.

"Does that sound good to you?"

"Mm-hmm," she moans and nods her head, but then she gets nervous and starts darting her head around to see if we're alone.

I smile against her lips and slide a hand up her dress. “Relax, *ptichka*. We’re alone. There’s only a couple of other people here, and they’re all too far away to see what’s going on.”

“Do you always pay such close attention to your surroundings?”

“Yes.”

“How many swans were there?”

I laugh at her test, and without looking away, I say, “Five, and the one in front looked like he had an injured wing. There are also seven Canada geese not too far behind me.” I give her bottom lip a soft bite. “Do you want me to tell you the make and model of all the cars in the parking lot?”

“Smartass,” she mutters, making me laugh.

I slide my hand further up her leg. “Now be a good girl and part those pretty thighs for me.”

Her breath hitches at my words, because as much as she always likes to pretend to be annoyed when I call her good girl, I can tell she loves it. When she parts her legs and my fingers immediately hit bare, wet pussy, I let out a groan and stroke her soft skin.

“Well, aren’t you full of surprises.” I drag my finger along her slit, watching her eyes go heavy-lidded and her lips part in a gasp. “I think someone was hoping to get fucked. Is that what you wanted, baby?”

“Yes,” she moans when I start to slide one finger inside her. She clamps down on me as the wet heat of her pussy surrounds me, making my brain freeze and my cock go painfully hard.

“Does public sex turn you on?”

“I guess so,” she says, making me smile. “I mean, I really like this. I wouldn’t like it if people were spying on us from the bushes, but I like being outside.”

“No one’s spying on us, baby. I would never allow another man to see you like this. I’m the only one who gets to see this

side of you.”

She grasps the back of my head and brings her lips to mine when I slide another finger into her. Pressing my thumb against her clit, I run my tongue along hers and quickly bring her to the edge. She rocks her hips, eager and ready for her release, and when she starts to come, I growl at the feel of her tightening around my fingers. Her body tenses as she moans softly and fists my hair even tighter, wanting me as close as possible.

When she starts to come down, I slow my fingers, letting her enjoy the aftershocks until she lets out a soft laugh and gives me an adorable grin.

“Wow,” she whispers. “We need to eat out more often.”

I laugh and slowly pull my fingers out before sucking them clean. The taste of her fills my mouth, and I want nothing more than to stand her up against the tree, but there’s something I need to do first. Cupping her face, I run my tongue over her lips, delving in and letting her suck her own juices from my tongue. She moans and deepens the kiss, sucking my tongue hard enough to make my balls tense with the need to fill her of every last drop I have.

When I pull back, she looks so beautiful my chest aches to look at her. Her wet, swollen lips are slightly parted, her big, blue eyes are dark with a feral lust that matches my own, and there’s so much love in them that it stuns me.

I take the black, velvet box from my pocket and drop down on one knee before grabbing her hands in mine. Her eyes widen when she realizes what’s happening.

“I love you more than anything, Gia. The second I laid eyes on you, I knew my life was never going to be the same. Before you left, I knew I wanted to marry you, but after you left, I realized that I can’t live without you. You’re the only woman I’ve ever loved, baby, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Please marry me, *ptichka*.”

She’s crying by the time I open the box, and when she sees the ring, she gasps and brings her eyes back to mine.

“Will you marry me, baby?”

“Yes,” she whispers, making me happier than I’ve ever been. She cups my face and kisses me. “I love you so much, Yuri.”

“I love you, too, sweetheart.” I take the ring out and slide it onto her finger. It fits perfectly, just like I knew it would.

“It’s the most beautiful ring I’ve ever seen.” She wiggles her fingers, looking at it like she can’t believe it’s actually there.

“I’m so glad you like it. I bought it while I was in Italy. I found the store while I was out looking around and met the man who designed it. He was very picky about who he’d sell it to,” I say with a laugh, “but I convinced him that you were a once in a lifetime kind of love and that this ring was made for you.”

“Thank you.” She wraps her arms around me, pulling me into a tight hug. “I’m so happy. *You* make me so happy, and I’d be just as happy even if you couldn’t afford to get me a ring at all. I’d marry you penniless with nothing but the clothes on your back, Yuri Nikitin.”

“I’m glad to hear it, *ptichka*, but I’m happy to say we won’t be penniless.”

I stand up and take her with me. She sees the look on my face and lets out a soft moan, sliding her hand down to palm my hard cock.

“You ready to make this official?” She teases.

“Absolutely.” Leaning down, I kiss her slowly and carefully lead her backwards to the tree. I smile against her lips when I hear my zipper being pulled down. She unbuttons my pants, freeing my cock and pulling a groan from me when she lightly dances her fingers over my shaft.

“Fuck,” I groan when she breaks our kiss and leans down to wrap her mouth around my head, slowly sucking me in. I brace my hand against the rough bark of the tree as she lowers onto me. Her hands grip my waist for leverage because she doesn’t want to get on her knees and ruin her dress. The wet

heat of her mouth surrounds me, making my damn head spin, and when she flicks her tongue around my head before sucking me even harder, I pull her off me with a growl and turn her around. She presses her hands against the tree and widens her stance for me as I roughly pull her dress up. Fisting my cock, I position my head right at her soaking wet slit and slowly slide in.

“Yuri,” she moans, leaning her head back against me.

“I’ve got you, baby.” I kiss her shoulder and give the crook of her neck a bite when I’m balls deep inside her. I keep still, holding her in place with my dick until she’s whimpering and trying like hell to move her hips.

“I’m going to fuck my fiancée now,” I whisper against her neck, softly nipping at her skin.

“Yes,” she begs. “Please, Yuri.”

“You’re going to come all over my cock like a good girl, aren’t you, baby?”

“Yes,” she moans, digging her fingers into the bark as her body shakes with need.

“Don’t scream, sweetheart. There are still a few people here.”

She nods her head quickly, letting me know she understands, and when I slide a hand under her dress and pinch her clit, she clamps a hand over her mouth to stifle her moans.

“Good girl,” I murmur against her skin before pulling back and thrusting into her again.

I kiss and suck on her neck while I roll her clit between my fingers and bring my other hand to one of her tits. When it’s not enough, I slide my hand under her dress and bra, filling my hand with bare tit and groaning at how damn good she feels. I pinch her nipple and clit while I fuck her harder, and in seconds, she’s screaming into her hand and clenching around my cock so tightly I have to grit my teeth to keep from joining her.

When I feel her body soften, I slow my fingers, rimming her clit as she shivers and lets out another sexy moan. Wanting to see her, I slide out of her just long enough to turn her around and pick her up. Switching places with her so it's my back up against the tree, I lower her onto my cock as she cups my face and kisses me hard. Her tongue lays claim to every inch of my mouth, greedy for the taste of me. When she gives my bottom lip a hard enough bite to hurt, I dig my fingers into her ass even harder and slam into her with enough force to make her gasp.

“Yes,” she moans against my lips. “Harder, Yuri.”

“Fuck,” I groan, because god do I love it when she says that.

Circling my hips, I thrust into her even harder, hitting her exactly where she needs me to, and when she starts to whimper and clings to me like her life depends on it, I give one more hard thrust and send us both over the edge. She cups my face, meeting my eyes as she bites her lip to keep from screaming, letting me see her at her most vulnerable. She gives me everything, and I do the same for her. There isn't a single part of me that doesn't belong to her. Everything I am is hers.

“I love you,” she whispers against my lips, kissing me and cupping my face in her hands.

“I love you, too, baby.” I slowly slide her off me and set her down, smiling when it takes a second for her to get control of her wobbly legs. “Thanks for showing me this place, *ptichka*.”

She gives a soft laugh and rests her hands against my chest while I tuck my cock away and button my pants

“Something tells me we're going to be spending a lot of time outdoors.”

She smiles but doesn't deny it.

“I think my fiancée is going to keep me very busy.”

I thread my hands through her hair when she leans closer. “I sure hope you can keep up. You are twelve years older than me.”

I laugh at her feisty tone. “Those are fighting words, sweetheart. I think someone’s begging to be tied up again.” Fisting her hair hard enough to make her moan and part her lips, I say, “I think I was too easy on you before.” I run my tongue over her bottom lip before giving it a soft suck. “I obviously let you come way too soon. I won’t make that mistake again, sweetheart.”

Smiling at the mix of hunger and the *what in the hell have I gotten myself into* look on her face, I give her ass a hard smack before leading her back to the car. My sweet fiancée will learn soon enough that I can most definitely handle her.

Chapter 16

Gia

The next morning, I wake up and snuggle deeper against Yuri's warm body. For about five seconds, everything is absolutely perfect, and then a wave of nausea hits me so hard that I have no choice but to scare the living hell out of him as I scramble out of his grasp and run naked to the bathroom. I make it to the toilet without a second to spare as everything and then some comes pouring out of me.

"Oh, baby," Yuri says from behind me, leaning next to me and gently pulling my hair from my face and holding it while I continue to retch.

"I don't want you to see me like this," I cry before I get sick again.

"Don't be silly, *ptichka*," he murmurs, rubbing my back in soothing circles. "I love you more than life itself. A little vomit isn't going to change that."

"It's a lot," I groan, making him give a soft laugh.

He stays with me until my stomach feels completely hollow and empty, murmuring to me in Russian and stroking my back and neck, calming me with his very presence. When I have nothing left to give, he gets me a cool washcloth and my robe. I brush my teeth, avoiding my beet-red face in the mirror.

Coming up behind me, he kisses my head and rests his hands on my stomach. "I'm sorry you feel so bad. I wish I could say this is the last time our baby will cause you stress, but I have a feeling he or she is going to be quite the handful."

I laugh and spit out the last of my toothpaste before grabbing the bottle of mouthwash. When I'm done, he leads me back to bed to rest while he makes me some tea.

"Do you want a boy or a girl?" I ask, taking the steaming mug of tea from him.

He sits down next to me and runs his hand over my stomach again. "I don't care. One of each eventually, but hopefully one at a time. As much as I love Anya and Luka, I don't know how in the hell Riley does it. It's exhausting just babysitting them."

"I hadn't even thought about twins." Yuri laughs at the face I make. "Yeah, one at a time would be fantastic. Birthing one baby is going to be hard enough."

"I'll be right there with you, *ptichka*. I promise." He leans down and kisses my stomach. "We do need to get back home, though. We need to get you set up with a doctor."

I sigh and run my fingers through his hair. "I know. We can have Dominic over for supper and tell him about everything. I wish he'd move too."

"He likes it here, baby." He lifts his head and smiles at me. "He told me about Samantha, and he really loves the university here. He seems genuinely happy, and I told him he could come and visit anytime he wants."

"You're right. I'm being too protective of him. He needs to live his own life."

"He loves you, Gia. You've done an amazing job of raising and taking care of him, and I know he'll visit every chance he gets."

He gives me a kiss before handing me my phone so I can text and invite him and Samantha over for supper. I've been dying to meet her, but I'd been such a wreck this last month that Dom didn't even suggest bringing her over. Dom quickly responds with a yes and then Yuri and I spend the day making plans. After our dad died, we'd been left a large inheritance, that on top of the sale of their house meant that we didn't need to worry about money anytime soon. I'd used part of my

inheritance to buy this apartment and pay for Dom's college so that he could keep his untouched. I'd managed to sneak that one by him, and I'm sure he'll argue with me if he ever figures it out, but I don't care. I like knowing that he has more than enough to get settled after he gets his degree, especially with the sale of our uncle's house. He'll be able to look for the perfect job instead of having to quickly settle for the first opportunity.

"Are you sure this is all you want to take?" Yuri asks, looking around. We'd stacked everything I want to take with me on one half of the living room. It's mainly books, clothes, and a few knickknacks.

"I want to leave the furniture here. I'm definitely packing up the kitchen stuff. I really missed my fancy mixer."

"Yeah, I definitely don't have one of those, and I'll be packing it up, baby. You can just sit on a stool and look beautiful while you point out what you want. I'll call a moving company to take care of all this, and then we can fly out tomorrow." He pulls me in for a hug and kisses my forehead. "I'll make sure to get an evening flight."

"Yeah, that's probably for the best," I say, cringing at the idea of getting sick on a crowded plane.

He gives me a kiss before reaching for another stack of boxes and leading me into the kitchen. "Okay, *ptichka*. You point, and I'll pack."

By the time he tapes up the last box, my kitchen is stripped bare of everything except the barest of essentials and we have just enough time to place a pizza order before there's a knock at the door.

I squeeze Yuri's hand as we walk to the door and open it. Dom's grinning face is the first thing I see, and then my eyes drop to the short brunette he has his arm wrapped around. Her brown eyes are wide behind her glasses as she looks from me to Yuri, and I can tell she's nervous about meeting us, but when she looks at my brother, all that fades away. The affection I see on her face is mirrored in his as he looks down at her, and I feel a weight lift off my shoulders at the sight of

it. Yuri squeezes my hand and opens the door wider so they can come in.

“It’s so good to meet you, Samantha,” I tell her, pulling her in for a hug. “I’m Gia, Dom’s sister, and this is my fiancé, Yuri.”

“Fiancé, huh?” Dom teases.

Yuri smiles and smacks his shoulder. “I told you I was going to marry your sister.”

“Wow, that’s gorgeous,” Samantha says, eyeing my ring.

I smile up at Yuri. “Yeah, he did pretty good.”

“Pretty good?” he asks with a wink.

“Okay, pretty damn good,” I say, making him laugh.

Dominic and Samantha sit on the couch while Yuri takes the chair and pulls me into his lap. “So you’re at the university, too?” I ask Samantha, smiling at the way she’s grabbed Dom’s hand to lace her fingers through his. He’s had girlfriends before but nothing serious, and I’m so incredibly happy for him.

“Yeah, I’m studying ceramics.”

“Her pottery is amazing,” Dom says, making her blush. “She can make damn near anything.”

“That’s incredible. I’d love to see some of it.”

She smiles and looks around at the packed boxes. “You’re moving soon?”

I look at Dom and nod my head. “We’re flying out tomorrow.”

Yuri’s hand rests on my hip, giving me a reassuring squeeze. “You two are more than welcome to come visit anytime you want. Just let us know when, and we’ll take care of the tickets,” Yuri tells them. “And of course you have to come out for the wedding.”

I squeeze Yuri’s hand and add, “You might want to free your calendars for about seven-and-a-half, eight months from

now, too.”

Dom’s eyes widen as Samantha gives us a big smile. “Are you serious?” Dom asks.

“Uncle Dominic,” I say with a laugh.

“Wow, congratulations.” He’s clearly stunned by the news, but his face is lit up in a big smile.

“Congratulations,” Samantha says. “I should’ve known. You’re practically glowing.”

“She is, isn’t she?” Yuri asks, lightly stroking my cheek and making me blush. He smiles and kisses my cheek before whispering in my ear. “You are so beautiful, baby. Maybe I should just keep you pregnant.”

Before I can even respond, the doorbell rings. He laughs and lifts me up so he can get the pizza.

“Sorry it’s nothing fancy tonight,” I tell them. “The kitchen is all packed up.”

“Pizza’s great,” Dom says while Samantha nods in agreement.

Yuri brings in the pizza, a stack of paper plates, napkins, and drinks, and sets it all down on the coffee table. We sit around, laughing and talking and eating every last slice of pizza. When they ask Yuri what he does, I almost choke on my food when he smiles and says, “I own a few businesses with some friends. Nothing exciting, I’m afraid.”

He gives me a wink before finishing off the last of his slice. Boring businessman is the most inaccurate description of Yuri I’ve ever heard, and it’s so absurd I almost laugh and ruin his cover. After we’re all stuffed, and I’m about to fall asleep in Yuri’s lap, Dom and Samantha stand up to leave. I give her a hug and tell her how much I enjoyed meeting her. While she says goodbye to Yuri, I pull my brother into a hug and try not to cry. To me, he’ll always be the shaggy-haired little boy who refused to go anywhere without his stuffed bear.

“I’m really happy for you,” he says close to my ear. “Take care of yourself, be happy, and I can’t wait to meet my little

niece or nephew.”

I nod my head and step back. “Be careful and call or text me anytime.”

He laughs but nods his head and promises to keep in touch.

“I almost forgot. Here’s the new set of keys for this place. Yuri called a locksmith over to install a new deadbolt.” I smile and hand him the keys. “The apartment is yours now.”

“What?”

“I don’t want to sell it. You can keep your dorm room if you don’t want to make the commute, or you can just stay here on the weekends and breaks or whatever. You used to live here,” I remind him. “It’s always been just as much yours as it is mine.”

“Wow, thanks, Gia,” he says, looking over at Samantha with a big smile on his face. I’m guessing they’re going to like having a place without roommates. Dom shares a dorm with three other guys, and as much as he swore he wanted the whole college experience, I’m pretty sure the appeal of that has already worn off.

“All the furniture will still be here. I’m just taking the stuff that’s already boxed up.”

Dom’s still grinning when we give a final round of goodbyes before they leave. With the door shut, Yuri pulls me close and looks down at me.

“You okay, *ptichka*?”

“Yeah,” I tell him, surprised that I actually mean it. “He’s going to be fine, and I’m excited about starting a life together. I’m ready to go home, Yuri.”

He smiles and pulls me in for a kiss, reminding me that as long as I have him, I have everything I need. In less than twenty-four hours, we’re getting on a plane and heading back to the house I thought for sure I’d never see again. Walking back into the Craftsman-style house feels like coming home in the best way possible. It’s already filled with so many memories, and I can’t wait to make more.

“I’m sorry it’s kind of a mess,” Yuri says, wrapping his arms around me from behind. “I didn’t do so well after you left.” He points at the couch that looks like it’s been used as a makeshift bed. One of the pillows from his bed is there along with a couple of blankets.

“I couldn’t face the bed without you,” he explains. “The sheets smelled like you, making it too painful to lay there, but I couldn’t bring myself to wash them and lose your scent, so I finally just decided to sleep down here.”

“I’m so sorry.” I rest my hands on top of his arms and lean my head back against his chest, trying not to think about the hell I put him through.

“No more being sorry, baby. I’m happier than I’ve ever been. You’re here with me, and that’s all that matters.”

The next month is a whirlwind of morning sickness, wedding plans, doctor visits, and enough sex to make up for all the lonely days we spent apart. We wanted to get married as soon as possible, especially since I’m going to really start showing soon, the sooner the better or I’ll be waddling down the aisle. We decided to do what Mikhail and Artyom did and have our wedding at the house. Neither one of us wants anything flashy, and I love the idea of creating more memories here. We can say our vows in front of the lake that Yuri angrily dragged my drowning ass out of. I smile every time I think about it.

The morning of our wedding, I roll over and watch my soon-to-be husband sleep. The morning sunlight hits his hair, highlighting all the different shades of it and making me smile at how ruffled and sexy it looks. The stubble on his face just accentuates his chiseled jaw, and I feel like I need to pinch myself. I can’t believe he’s about to be my husband. Unable to resist him when he looks this damn yummy, I slip my T-shirt and panties off and lean over to kiss his chest.

He moans and smiles, blinking his eyes awake as he grabs me and pulls me on top of him. “Fuck, baby,” he says, running his hands over my naked body. “You give the best goddamn wake-up calls.”

My hormones have been in high gear lately, whether it's from the pregnancy or just from being around him, I'm still not sure, so me waking him up for sex is not unusual. I grab his boxer briefs and pull them off, anxious to have him inside me again. When he's naked, he gives me an amused grin and runs a finger down my cheek.

"Someone's hungry this morning."

"I'm just taking advantage of the fact that the morning sickness finally seems to be over. Plus, you look so sexy when you sleep, Yuri."

He gives me a wink and then groans when I run my pussy along his thick, hard shaft.

"God, you're gorgeous," I tell him, running my eyes over all the tattooed muscle beneath me.

He laughs and smacks my ass. "I love how horny pregnancy makes you, *ptichka*, and there's nothing sexier than watching you ride my cock."

Grabbing me, he scoots me up so his head is pressing against my slit before thrusting his hips up as he lowers me onto him. I bite my lip to keep from screaming out and waking Dom and Samantha. They came in for the wedding, and just because I wanted to wake Yuri up doesn't mean I want to wake the whole damn house.

Bracing my hands against his hard chest, I start to rock my hips, grinding against him. He reaches up to cup my breasts. They've definitely gotten bigger, and Yuri can't seem to keep his hands off them. He pinches my nipples, making me gasp and throw my head back. He moves his hips, rocking up to meet me, pushing me closer and closer to what I so desperately need. My nails drag over his chest, pulling a groan from him as my whole body tenses with my release. Leaning down, I kiss him hard to stifle the scream that I can no longer contain.

As soon as he feels my body start to soften, he rolls us over and takes control. Grabbing behind my knee, he hikes my leg up so he can go deeper. He fucks me hard while he kisses

me slowly, and the combination has my body lighting up again. His lips work their way down my jaw and along my neck, light nips and soft sucks that leave me panting and fisting his hair.

Kissing his way to one breast, he runs his tongue over my nipple as I breathe out a “Fuck,” that makes him give a soft laugh.

“I think you’re even more sensitive than usual, baby.”

The heat of his breath on my wet nipple has me squirming beneath him, proving his theory correct.

“Interesting,” he murmurs, giving me another lick like he’s conducting the world’s most fascinating experiment.

I squirm again and narrow my eyes at him. “Don’t you dare keep teasing me, Yuri. I need to come again, and I need it now.”

He laughs and grabs my wrists, pinning them to the bed with one hand, putting me completely at his mercy.

“Oh, sweetheart, one day you’ll learn.”

Still grinning, he lowers his mouth back to my breast and takes his time, licking and sucking on my sensitive skin as he slowly fucks me.

“Bastard,” I whimper, feeling like I’m about to lose my mind.

He laughs and gives my nipple a not-so-soft bite. Wanting to even the playing field, I rock my hips up to his and clench my pussy as tight as I can, pulling a growl from him as a smug grin lights up my face.

“Something wrong, baby?” I ask him, relaxing my muscles only to tighten them again when he thrusts back into me.

“Fucking hell, that’s not fair,” he growls, speeding up because his body isn’t giving him a choice.

He gives my nipple one more suck before bringing his lips to mine and slamming into me even harder, working his hips just like he knows I love, and when I start to come, my pussy

grips him so tightly he has no choice but to let go with me. His hand releases my wrists so I can wrap my arms around him, pulling him as close as I can. I lose myself in him completely, overwhelmed by the pleasure and the love I feel for him.

When his body shudders, he murmurs a “Goddamn,” against my lips that makes me laugh. “You’re insatiable, sweetheart,” he says with a smile.

“It’s a good thing you’re up for the challenge.”

“I definitely am.” He gives me one more kiss before slowly sliding out of me. Kissing his way down my body, he rests his head against my stomach. It’s not much of a baby bump at this point, but I have noticed some of my pants are starting to feel a bit snug. He kisses my belly and whispers, “Your mommy is a wild woman.”

I laugh and grab his head. “Don’t tell them that!”

He laughs and kisses my stomach again. “I love you, little one. Your mommy and daddy are getting married today.”

I run my hands through his hair, smiling when he starts talking to our baby in Russian. I have no clue what he’s saying, but I love the sound of it. He knows how sexy I think his language is, and he’s started to use it against me. The last time I got irritated with him, he switched to Russian, refusing to speak English. Eventually, I forgot why the hell I was angry and started to undress him.

He gives my belly another kiss and looks up at me. “Are you ready to become Mrs. Nikitin? God, that sounds so weird. In Russian the feminine version is Nikitina. That’s what your Russian passport will say.”

“I’m getting a Russian passport?”

He smiles and scoots up to lay beside me. “I have dual citizenship, so that means you will too. Congratulations on becoming Russian, *ptichka*.”

“Neato,” I say, making him laugh. “I need to learn the language.”

“I’ll teach you.” He taps the tip of my nose. “If you’re nice.”

“I was always a good student in school.” I dance my fingers over his chest. “Always willing to do extra credit.”

A lazy grin spreads across his handsome face. “I’m sure we can work something out. You didn’t answer my question, though. Are you ready to get married? Any second thoughts?”

I brush a strand of hair off his forehead. “None. You?”

“Not at all. I’ve never been more sure about anything in my life. I can’t wait to marry you, baby.”

I rest my head on his chest and listen to the steady beat of his heart, enjoying this last moment of calm before everything turns hectic. When we finally leave our room, we find Samantha and Dom in the kitchen, putting the finishing touches on breakfast. They look so damn cute together, and judging by how they’re looking at one another, things are stronger than ever between them.

“You guys didn’t have to do this,” I say, smiling and taking the plate of bacon and waffles from a smiling Samantha while Dominic hands me a cup of tea.

“We wanted to,” Dom says, “You need to eat, and you shouldn’t have to cook on your wedding day.”

“Wow, somebody raised that kid right,” Yuri says, giving me a wink.

I smile and sit down to eat. The rest of the morning feels like it goes by in seconds. Soon it’s time for me to get in the shower, and when I get out, Samantha, Riley, and Charlie are ready and waiting. Everyone knows to keep anything Bratva related under wraps around my brother and his girlfriend, and so far they don’t seem to be suspicious of anything. There’s no reason for them to know and a ton of reasons why they shouldn’t.

I haven’t had many friends, but I’ve grown close to Riley and Charlie, and Samantha is already starting to feel like the sister-in-law I’m fairly certain she’ll be one day. When they lead me to the full-length mirror and I see myself as a bride for

the first time, I suck in a quick breath and try not to cry. They've made me look like a damn princess. The white satin wedding dress is strapless and fitted right below my breasts, but then it fans out so it's not tight against my stomach. The lacy veil is attached to my hair with clips that are decorated in sparkly crystals and pearls. The lace falls down my back in a long train, and even though my feet are a bit swollen, I managed to find a white pair of heels that are just like the red ones Yuri bought for me in Italy. He really likes to see me tied in various ways, and I can't wait to see his face when he sees the ribbons wrapped around my ankles.

"You look so beautiful," Charlie says, giving me a big smile.

"Everything's perfect," Riley agrees while Samantha nods and claps her hands excitedly.

When Charlie's phone buzzes, she reaches for it and laughs. "Mikhail says Yuri is pacing and fidgeting and about to lose his mind if you don't get down there soon."

"It's kind of cute that the man who not that long ago swore he'd never get married is now pacing around downstairs, so anxious to tie the knot that he can't even sit still. Is he afraid you're going to shimmy down the drainpipe or something?" Riley laughs and points at Charlie. "Because that's really more her thing."

I laugh, remembering the story they'd told me of Charlie escaping from Mikhail's window after he'd caught her breaking into his house and refused to let her go.

Charlie gives Samantha a wink. "My cat burglar days are over."

Samantha laughs, thinking she's joking. I look around at my small group of friends, thrilled that we all get along so well. Charlie and Riley aren't at all how I imagined they'd be. I pictured beautiful, stuck-up women that I would have nothing in common with. They are beautiful, but they're about as down-to-earth as they come and completely devoted to their families. I realize that I'm about to become a permanent part of their extended family, their Bratva family. Once I say I do to

Yuri, there's no going back. Instead of feeling nervous or hesitant, I smile and rest my hand against my small baby bump, more than ready to become his wife.

I nod my head to let the others know I'm ready and then take a deep breath before following them downstairs. Everyone else is already seated down by the water, and I wave goodbye to Charlie and Riley when they leave to go join their husbands and kids. Dominic is waiting by the door for me, looking all grown up and handsome in his black tux. Samantha gives him a quick hug and kiss and then leaves to join the others. When he looks over at me, he gives me a big smile and holds out his arm for me to take.

"You ready to get married, sis?"

"Absolutely." I pull him in for a hug before wrapping my arm through his. "I'm so glad you and Samantha could be here for this."

"Are you kidding? We wouldn't have missed it for the world." Before he leads me out, he rests his hand on my arm and studies me for a second. "I'm only going to bring this up once, and then I swear it'll never come up again."

When I don't say anything, he looks out at the waiting crowd, the rows of Russian men in dark suits, and then turns back to me with an upturned brow.

"There's an awful lot of Russians out there, Gia, and more tattoos and money than I can count. I'm not stupid enough to ask questions about them, but I do need to ask you one. Are you happy? Is this really what you want?"

"That's two," I tell him, making him smile despite how serious the moment is. I squeeze his hand and look out the window, smiling when I see Yuri pacing at the front like he's about to say *fuck it* at any second and just run up and get me. I meet my brother's eyes and say, "I've never been happier in my life. I love him. I love him so damn much it hurts sometimes, and I feel completely safe with him. He's a good man, Dom. I promise."

Dominic smiles and turns back to the door we're about to walk through. "That's all I needed to know."

He leads me outside, and I know the topic will never come up again. As soon as we get closer, and I get a clear view of Yuri, everything else fades away. Dom leads me up to him. He kisses my cheek and tells me he loves me before putting my hand in Yuri's. While he takes a seat next to Samantha in the front row, I turn and face the man I'm about to marry. His black tux fits him beautifully, accentuating his broad shoulders and trim waist, but it's his face that holds all my attention. His green eyes are filled with so much love that it makes mine start to tear up.

"You look so beautiful, *ptichka*," he whispers, running a finger down my cheek. "I love you so much."

"I love you, too," I whisper back.

I'm sure the officiant says some really nice things, but I don't hear any of them. I'm too busy staring at the man I'm marrying. He slides the beautiful wedding band on my finger, and I do the same to him, and soon everyone's cheering and Yuri's cupping my face and kissing me so damn sweetly that it makes my chest ache with how perfect it all is. He rests his forehead against mine.

"My wife," he whispers with a big grin on his face.

"My husband," I whisper back, laughing because I'm too damn happy to hold it all in.

We turn to our guests and let them pull us in for hugs and congratulations. Mikhail is holding a sleeping Alina when he gives me a hug and welcomes me to the family. He hasn't stopped beaming since the birth of his daughter, and knowing that the head of Yuri's Bratva is such a dedicated family man is a tremendous comfort. I trust him to keep my husband safe, and when I return his hug and thank him, it's genuine and from the heart.

The other Bratva members smack Yuri on the back and laugh, saying god knows what to him in Russian before he laughs and shoves them toward the open bar that's already set

up and ready to go. When he turns back around, his eyes search the crowd for me, and as soon as our eyes meet, my skin breaks out in goosebumps and my body shifts into high alert. By the time he's standing in front of me, my legs are shaky and my breaths are coming faster and faster. He leans down and presses his lips against my ear.

"I need to be inside you, *ptichka*," he whispers. "I need to be inside my wife."

I nod, unable to speak when he gives my earlobe a soft suck. He grabs my hand and leads me back to the house. When Artyom sees us, he laughs and says something to Yuri in Russian. Yuri yells a response and then speeds up.

"Yuri, I'm in heels," I finally say when I almost trip trying to keep up with him.

He immediately turns around and picks me up. "I'm sorry, baby." He carries me inside, heading straight for our bedroom.

"Aren't we supposed to wait for the guests to leave?" I ask, laughing at how damn determined he is.

He kicks our bedroom door shut and sets me down, pinning me against the wall. "Sweetheart, you don't know me at all if you think I can wait that long. Don't worry, we'll go back out in a few minutes."

"A few minutes, huh?" I ask with a laugh.

He smiles and starts to lift my dress. "That's all I need. I swear I'll make it up to you later."

His mouth is on mine in the next second as he groans and runs his hand up my thighs. Wanting to see, he pulls back from our kiss, lifting my dress above my waist to run his eyes over my heels and thigh highs.

"Goddamn, sweetheart," he groans.

Using one hand, he unzips his pants and makes quick work of the button before reaching in to free himself. A soft moan escapes when I see how hard and ready for me he is.

"Do you see what you do to me, *ptichka*?" he asks, slowly stroking himself.

I smile and hook my fingers under the sides of my thong, before slowly sliding it down. Stepping out of it, I widen my stance and meet his hungry eyes.

“Do you see what you do to me?”

He groans and cups my pussy in a possessive grip, closing his eyes and growling something in Russian when he feels how sloppy wet I am for him. Keeping my dress bunched up between us, he grabs onto my ass and lifts me up because even with my heels on, he’s still too tall. I wrap my arms around his neck, moaning when he presses his thick head against my slit. Even though we’ve already done this so many times, this time is different. We both feel it, and when he slowly slides into me, he does it with his eyes open and locked on mine.

This may be a quickie, but Yuri takes his time in every way that matters. His kisses are hungry and deep, his thrusts hard and fast, and when the dam starts to break and pleasure explodes through every cell in my body, he whispers that he loves me against my lips as he lets go and joins me. I tighten around him, feeling my body give way to another orgasm when he pulses inside me, filling me with everything he has.

I clutch the back of his head, kissing him until my body is shaking and I’m completely spent. He holds me tighter, keeping himself buried inside me as I kiss his cheeks and jaw before giving his full bottom lip a soft suck.

“There’s no going back now,” I tell him with a grin. “The marriage has been officially consummated.”

He smiles and kisses the tip of my nose. “There was no going back from the first second I saw you, *ptichka*.”

“The first second I saw you, you were wearing a ski mask and scaring the living hell out of me,” I say with a laugh, “but once you pulled it off, I was a goner.”

“It’ll be a fun story to tell the kids one day.”

He laughs and then lets out a sigh when he slowly slides out of me. Giving me a wink, he leaves me standing there with my dress in hand and my pussy swollen and dripping his seed before coming back to me with a warm cloth. He’s already

tucked back in his pants, looking sexy as hell and not nearly as disheveled as I feel. Bending down, he gently runs the rag over me, cleaning me with a reverence that makes me feel like the luckiest woman alive. He gives my clit a soft kiss before pulling my thong back up. I drop my dress as he stands and steps closer. Brushing a wayward hair back into place, he looks down at me and smiles.

“Ready to go back down?”

I laugh, feeling my cheeks heat up. “They all know exactly what we’ve been doing.”

“Of course they do,” he laughs.

When my face heats up even more, he cups my cheek and smiles. “Be happy I was able to show enough restraint to wait until we got into the bedroom. You have no idea how close you came to being bent over the couch again.”

“I’m sure the photographer would’ve loved that.”

He laughs and gives me another kiss. “I’d love a photo like that, but no one else is allowed to see your O face but me, sweetheart. We could do a camera on a timer though, couldn’t we?”

His smile grows the longer he thinks about it. “Yeah, we definitely need to do that.”

My face heats up even more at the thought of my ass being photographed in every conceivable position. “We should definitely get back downstairs,” I tell him, wanting to get that idea out of his head as quickly as possible.

He gives me a wink, clearly onto my game. “Okay, *ptichka*. Let’s go back so I can show off my beautiful wife.”

I grab his hand, smiling when I feel the wedding band that’s snugly around his finger. We leave the room together, joining our guests, who, judging by the raucous laughter, have been taking full advantage of the free drinks. When they see us come back outside, we’re surrounded by catcalls and good-natured joking around, but those stolen minutes with my husband were worth any slight embarrassment I may feel. He can pull me aside any damn time he wants to. When the DJ

switches to a slow song, Yuri grabs my hand and pulls me out onto the deck. I smile and dance with my husband, knowing life doesn't get much better than this.

Chapter 17

Yuri

Six Months Later

I lean against the doorway and watch my very pregnant wife run her hand over the crib that in just a couple of weeks our baby girl will be sleeping in. One of her hands rests on her round belly while the other fidgets with the mobile, making sure the little colorful dogs are hanging just right. Every day I swear she grows more beautiful. When she senses me watching her, she turns, a smile playing at her lips.

Walking over to her, I place my hand on her pregnant belly, marveling at the fact that our little girl is snug inside there, perfect and healthy and without a care in the world.

“How are you feeling?” I ask her, knowing Mila’s been kicking up a storm lately.

Gia smiles and gives a soft laugh. “Big. I feel very, very big.”

“Well, you look absolutely stunning.” I run my eyes over her, feeling my cock start to wake up. I always liked the idea of Gia pregnant, but I had no idea that my body would respond to her quite as strongly as it has. I can’t keep my damn hands off her, and when I bring my other hand up to cup one of her full breasts, she sighs and leans into my touch.

“You’re going to be so sad when I’m no longer pregnant,” she teases.

“Well, that’s an easy fix, sweetheart.”

Her eyes widen in a *you're out of your mind* way, making me laugh.

“I want at least three years in between kids, Yuri. I can't just stay permanently pregnant.”

“I'll think about it,” I tell her.

I press my lips to hers, cutting off whatever smartass comment was about to come out of her pouty mouth and slowly lead her to our bed. It seems like her body is changing week by week now, and discovering all the new changes has become my favorite thing. Her breasts have become especially sensitive to touch, and when I run my thumb over the hard nipple that's pressing against her top, she closes her eyes and brings one hand to the back of my head, pulling me closer.

I smile and pull her shirt off, groaning at the sight of her. She's spilling out of her damn bra, and the sight of her swollen belly does something to my brain every time I see it. I can't explain it, but it makes me hard as hell and impossible to think about anything except how badly I need to be inside her.

“You're so beautiful, *ptichka*,” I whisper, bringing my lips to the swell of her breasts, kissing and licking a line across her skin as I slide my fingers up her back to unclasp her bra. When it falls to the floor, I groan at the sight of her bare breasts and completely forget my English. Switching to Russian, I tell her how much I love her and how badly I need to be inside her.

When I wrap my mouth around her, tonguing her hard nipple and sucking in as much of her as I can, she moans my name and starts to tug on my shirt, eager to get me naked. I give her nipple another flick of my tongue before pulling back. She gives me a hungry look as I strip out of my clothes and then make quick work of the maternity yoga pants that look so damn cute on her.

With her being so pregnant, sex has become a bit trickier, so I've taken to letting her lead the way as far as positions go. I'm not at all surprised when she presses her hands against my chest and pushes me onto the bed before straddling me as quickly as her pregnant body will allow. Bracing her hands

against my chest, she grabs onto my cock, putting me right where she wants me before slowly sliding onto me.

“Fuck,” she moans when I’m deeply seated inside her.

I groan and run my hands over her body, cupping her tits in my hands as she starts to slowly ride me. Sex is slower now, but it’s just as intense and feels just as amazing as it always has. When I pinch both her nipples, her lips part in a gasp and she starts to grind against me even harder. I move my hips, meeting her rhythm while being careful to not go too deep or hard. I let her take full control, enjoying every second of the show she’s giving me.

Keeping one hand on her breast, I bring my other to rest on her belly as her eyes go heavy-lidded and she finds her release. I watch my wife come undone, groaning when she clenches so tightly around me that I have no choice but to let go too. Her nails scrape my chest as she throws her head back, moaning my name. Watching her adds to my own pleasure, and by the time we both start to come down, my goddamn ears are ringing.

Wanting to cuddle up against me, she slowly eases off me and maneuvers onto her side. I roll over so I can spoon her, kissing her gently when she turns her face to mine. She grabs my hand and brings it high up on her stomach so I can feel our daughter kick. I smile against her lips, in complete awe of the daughter that I can’t wait to meet.

When my phone buzzes, I groan and quickly give her another kiss before reaching for it. I read the message, and as soon as I turn back to Gia, she knows what I’m going to say before the words are even out.

“I’m sorry, *ptichka*.”

She watches me jump up and run across the room. To keep things safer and out of reach of curious little hands, I’ve moved all my tactical gear into a large safe in the back of our closet. I dress quickly, pulling on my black pants and long-sleeve shirt before getting my weapons. I was afraid this call would come, but I’d hoped like hell it wouldn’t. We’ve been having issues with one of our arms dealers. The last time we

picked up a shipment, he'd jacked the price up at the last minute. Mikhail's already found a replacement, but we still have one more shipment coming in from this jackass. If they're calling me in, then things must be really bad. Mikhail knows how close Gia is to delivering our baby. He wouldn't have texted if it wasn't an emergency.

I walk out, pulling the straps tight on my Kevlar vest and slipping a gun into a holster under my arm. She's still naked on the bed, her blue eyes filled with worry as she watches me. I walk over and cup her face, kissing her lips before lowering down to place quick kisses on both her tits, her belly, and then unable to resist, I gently spread her thighs and give her clit a quick suck that pulls a deep moan from her.

"Now you're just being cruel," she says, grabbing my hand and kissing it.

"I'm sorry, baby. I'll make it up to you. I promise."

"Be safe, Yuri. I love you."

"I love you, too, *ptichka*. I'll be back as soon as I can."

She nods and worries her bottom lip. I give her a wink and force myself to turn my back and walk out the door. Leaving her never gets any easier. I know she'll worry the whole time I'm gone, but I have no choice but to push everything aside and put all my focus on my job. That's the best thing I can do for her. I can't afford to make stupid mistakes, and there's no way in hell I'm missing the birth of my daughter because I did something stupid like get my ass killed.

I run to my motorcycle and speed to the address Mikhail texted. The city disappears behind me as I weave in and out of traffic, heading closer to the old warehouse district that's filled with rundown buildings and people who are up to no good. I can already hear the gunshots as I turn down a side street that will take me to the docks. Parking my bike beside Artyom's, I grab my gun and head to the side of the building where I see Sergei and Mikhail leaning against the side.

Mikhail waves me over, and as soon as he can hear me, I ask, "What the fuck's going on?"

“Simion found out we have another buyer lined up,” Mikhail growls in Russian. “I tried to explain that we needed to break up and that it was for the best, that it’s us, not him, but he’s having none of it.” He shakes his head and laughs. “He’s acting like I popped his cherry and then broke his heart in front of the whole damn high school or something.”

Sergei and I both laugh at the description because Simion does have a tendency to be overdramatic.

“He’s the asshole who raised the prices,” I say, peeking around the corner to see four men firing off a boat that’s docked about two-hundred feet away.

“I gently reminded him of that,” Mikhail says, “and that’s when he decided he’d just rather start shooting at me.”

“Where’s Artyom?” I ask, noticing some of the other Bratva members against one of the other warehouses. When one of them flips me the bird, I know I have the answer to my question.

Mikhail laughs before looking back at me. “His team will come in from the left. We’re coming in from the right. The others are searching to make sure Simion didn’t put any shooters in the warehouses. I’ve also positioned Volodya up there.”

Volodya’s an ex-special forces sniper, so I have no doubt bodies will start hitting the water soon. Another round of shots has my attention turning back to the boat. “Just the four of them?”

“As far as we know,” Mikhail says, “but he’s got a shit ton of ammo on that boat. We need to end this quickly.”

Sergei fires off a couple of rounds, but Simion’s men are positioned low in the boat, making it damn near impossible to hit them, and the last fucking thing we want is for a goddamn boat to explode. Mikhail holds up his hand at Artyom’s group, letting them know we’re about to move. As soon as Simion’s men stop to reload, we fan out and start shooting, hitting them from too many angles for them to keep up with. I hear a loud

rifle shot from above right before a body splashes into the water.

Even in the middle of all the chaos of gunshots and men yelling at one another, my brain is eerily calm. I have no doubt our Bratva will be the victors of this little shootout, but that doesn't mean we'll all survive it. The fear doesn't come, though, just the same calm nothingness that I always feel in battles like this. Adrenaline rushes through me, and when I see one of Simion's men poke his head up just high enough, I don't hesitate to take the shot. His head jerks back as he loses half his skull, dead before he's even hit the ground.

With only two men left, Simion knows he has seconds to live. I'm not surprised when he starts shouting in heavily accented Russian for us to stop. None of us speak Romanian, and his English is even worse than his Russian. He holds up his gun and motions for the last remaining man to stand.

"Fucking drop the guns," Mikhail barks at them, while he keeps his own gun trained on them.

The men lower their guns and then raise their hands back up as we step onto their boat. Mikhail talks with Simion while I walk around, making sure there aren't any other men hiding anywhere. I've just turned the corner when I hear Artyom yell my name. The tone of his voice has me sidestepping quickly right before I hear several gunshots and feel a bullet rip through my arm. The momentum nearly knocks me on my ass, and when I look back I see one of Simion's men lying dead from a sizeable hole in his head. He must've hid in one of the crates when the shooting started and thought now would be the best time to come out.

"Fuck, man," Artyom yells, running up to me and grabbing my arm to see how badly I've been hit.

While he fusses over me like he's my mother, I wave up at Volodya who's just saved my life. He's too far away and it's too dark for me to see him, but I know he can see me in his gun's scope. Artyom grabs a roll of gauze from one of the pockets of his cargo pants and starts to tie it around my arm. I

turn my head just in time to see Mikhail put one last bullet in Simion before walking over to me.

“How is he?” he asks, already grabbing his phone to call Jack, the Bratva’s on-call doctor.

“It went clean through,” Artyom says. “It’s bleeding like a motherfucker, though.”

He hands Artyom his keys. “Take him to my house. Jack will be waiting.” Turning to me, he squeezes my good shoulder and says, “Don’t fucking pass out.” Then he mutters, “Gia’s going to kick my ass for this.”

I laugh and let Artyom lead me to the car, already feeling a bit woozy from the blood loss. “I can’t believe he’s going to let me bleed all over his Aston Martin. That’s real love, Artyom.”

He laughs and helps me get in the car. I check my phone while he runs around to the driver’s side. I read the text Gia sent and start laughing. *I love you more than anything, Yuri. Be safe and come home to me as soon as you can. Also, if it’s not too much trouble could you bring me a candy bar and a jar of pickles, just in case?*

“What’s so funny?” Artyom asks, starting the car and speeding down the road.

“We need to stop by a store.”

“What? Are you fucking kidding me?”

I read Gia’s text to him and then laugh some more. Turning to him, I ask, “Have you ever heard anyone ask for a jar of pickles *just in case?*”

“No, man, but going to the store is the last thing you need to be doing right now.”

“Well, I’m doing it. You can go with me and catch me if I pass out or sit in the car while I go in alone. My very pregnant wife wants a candy bar and pickles, and she’s damn well going to get them. Plus, she’s going to be pissed enough about this. If I show up shot and without the things she asked for? No fucking way.”

“Fine,” he finally growls, “but we’re hitting the damn minimart on the corner, and if they don’t have it, then I’ll take the blame for it.”

“You’re a good man, Artyom,” I tell him. “Thanks for the heads up, by the way. You just saved my life, man.”

He shrugs like it’s no big deal. “Anya would be devastated if you died.”

“She really would be,” I agree. “I think she might love me more than you.”

“Keep it up and next time I’ll keep my goddamn mouth shut.”

I laugh and when he pulls up in front of the minimart, I try like hell to get the dizziness under control before I get out. Artyom and I are dressed like we’re part of a SWAT team, and I’m bleeding all over the damn place, but we walk in like nothing is out of the ordinary and smile at the older woman behind the counter. I walk down the aisle, smiling and smacking Artyom’s shoulder in triumph when I spot a jar of pickles. We grab it and a candy bar and walk to the counter to pay.

The woman looks scared to death, so I smile and dig my wallet out while keeping my injured arm tight against my chest.

“You okay, honey?” she asks, eyeing the puddle of blood I’m leaving on her floor.

“Just a scratch,” I say with a grin. “It seems I got myself into a bit of a pickle.” I hold up the jar while Artyom mutters a “holy fucking shit” under his breath and tries not to laugh.

I ignore him and continue. “I’m about to get stitched up, but my beautiful, pregnant wife asked for some snacks.” I laugh and shrug my good shoulder. “I can’t seem to deny her anything.” I read her nametag and ask, “Brenda, have you ever heard of anyone asking for a jar of pickles *just in case*?”

Brenda relaxes when she realizes we’re not here to kill her and takes my money while she shakes her head. “No, I’ve never heard of that, but I guess it’s better to have them and not

need them.” She bags the jar and candy bar and hands them to Artyom with my change.

“That’s very true,” I agree. “Don’t you think so, Artyom?”

“You’re killing me, man,” he groans in Russian. Switching to English for Brenda’s benefit, he says, “Definitely better to have a pickle and not need it.”

“Good luck,” she says before Artyom pulls me toward the door.

I holler out a thanks and then lean harder against Artyom’s shoulder. “Just between you and me,” I whisper, “I’m feeling a bit woozy.”

He groans and loads my ass into the car. I clutch my bag of goodies while he races us to Mikhail’s house. Jack is waiting when we get there. He takes one look at my bloody arm and the jar of pickles I’m still holding onto and gives a heavy sigh.

“Let’s get you taken care of, Yuri,” he says, helping me into the house and down to the room in Mikhail’s basement that’s set up for surgery.

As he’s struggling to get me into the bed, I look over at Artyom. “I need to call Gia. She’s not going to be happy about this.”

“I’ll take care of it,” he promises, helping Jack to get me situated.

“Don’t tell her I’ve been shot,” I warn him.

“I’m not a dumbass,” he tells me, and when I raise a brow at that, he gives me a heavy sigh. “For fuck’s sake, you think I’d ever hear the end of it from Riley if I did that. I’m going to call Riley and have her go get Gia and bring her here so she can see for herself that your ass is fine.”

I laugh and say, “My ass really is fine.” I turn to Jack. “I do a lot of weighted squats.”

He laughs and starts to cut my shirt off. Artyom shakes his head and ruffles my hair like I’m his kid brother. “I’ll see you after you’re all stitched up, man.”

I nod as he leaves and then lay back and let Jack do his thing. After the X-rays, he tells me that the bullet missed the bone and that there shouldn't be any lasting damage.

"I want to put you under while I clean and stitch you up," Jack says, but I quickly shake my head and then regret it when it makes me dizzy.

"No way, Doc. Just pump me full of some shit and close these damn holes. I don't want to be knocked out when Gia gets here. She's going to be scared enough as it is."

"Fine, but it's going to hurt."

"I'll try my best not to cry."

He rolls his eyes at me, but I can tell he's fighting a grin. Jack's stitched all of us up at one time or another, so he's used to us being disobedient, infuriating patients. He gets a needle and shoots me up with something that has me giggling like a goddamn schoolgirl. I lay back in the bed and barely notice the pain as he gets to work. Time starts to blur, and I can't tell if minutes or hours have passed when Jack finally sits up and stretches his back before grabbing more disinfectant and gauze. He's just finished wrapping me up when I hear Gia's voice outside the door.

"Is he okay? Is he in here? Can I go in?"

She sounds terrified, but even with all the pain meds running through my system, my heart still picks up when I hear her voice.

"Gia," I yell, and then laugh again, even though I'm not sure why. "I got your pickles, baby."

Chapter 18

Gia

Artyom opens the door for me, and I step in, terrified of what I'm about to see. Riley had come and got me, telling me over and over again that Yuri was fine, but a part of me hadn't believed her. I've never been so scared in my life, so I'm expecting all kinds of worst case scenarios, but when the door opens what I'm not at all expecting is to see Yuri stretched out on a hospital bed with a big, loopy grin on his face, a bandaged arm, and a bloody jar of pickles clutched against his chest.

He laughs an adorable, infectious laugh and holds up the jar. "I got your pickles, baby."

"Yuri," I cry, running over to him. Being careful of his injury, I wrap my arms around him and press my face against his neck, breathing in his scent and proving to myself that he's okay and alive.

"I missed you, *ptichka*," he slurs in my ear.

I pull back to get a better look at him. "You were shot? And you went and bought pickles? I don't understand."

"Yes, I was shot, and, yes, I got what you asked me for." He tries to give me a wink, but he doesn't exactly land it, and I try very hard to not laugh.

"You bought me pickles with a bullet in your arm?"

"Technically, the bullet went straight through me, but don't worry, baby, the motherfucker who shot me is definitely dead." He runs the fingers of his good hand over my cheek. I notice

they're bloodstained and try not to think about how much blood he's lost. "You said you wanted pickles just in case. I've never heard anyone say that before. Brenda, the nice lady who works at the minimart, she's never heard anyone say that before either, but she said, and I agree, that's it's better to have one and not need it."

I can't help but laugh at how ridiculous he sounds. I cup his face and give him a kiss. When I pull back, he whispers loud enough for everyone in the room to hear. "I really want to fuck you, sweetheart, but I don't think I can get hard with all this pain medicine. Holy shit, I'm high as hell right now."

I laugh and pat his chest. I'm just about to tell him it's okay when my stomach seizes up and I groan as pain squeeze me like a damn vice. Fear pushes through his drug-fogged brain and for a second his eyes clear and he reaches for me.

"What's wrong?"

I groan and hunch over my big belly while the man I just met a few seconds ago rushes over to help me. He'd said his name was Jack and that he was a doctor, and from the looks of this one-room hospital, he works exclusively for the Bratva. His eyes are kind, though, and when he starts to feel my stomach, I move my hands to give him better access.

"When are you due?" he asks.

"In two weeks," I tell him and then grit my teeth when another contraction hits.

He meets my eyes and gives me a *please don't freak out* smile when he says, "That date's been pushed up to right now. You've gone into labor, Gia."

Yuri tries to jump up but then falls back and shakes his head to try and clear it. "She's in labor?" he asks. "Fuck, Jack, give me something to get this shit out of my system."

Jack turns back to Mikhail. "Can you get him a very strong cup of coffee?"

Mikhail nods and gives me a reassuring smile before running to get the coffee. Riley and Charlie help keep me steady while Jack helps Yuri to a chair in the corner. He gives

another giggle when he almost falls, letting me know that the drugs are still running strongly through his system. Jack quickly puts fresh, unbloodied sheets on the hospital bed and carefully helps me up into it. Mikhail rushes back with the coffee.

“Drink all of this,” he tells Yuri.

Yuri smiles. “Did you add sugar like I like it?”

Mikhail can’t help but laugh at the loopy grin on Yuri’s face. “I did, now drink the damn thing.”

“You got it, boss,” Yuri slurs before taking a drink.

Riley and Charlie pat my shoulder and hold my hands when another contraction hits and I almost scream from the pain.

“I need to examine her,” Jack says, and everyone takes the hint and starts to leave.

“Holler if you need anything, Jack,” Mikhail says before shutting the door.

As soon as it’s just the three of us, Jack helps me undress and then covers me in a blanket. By the time Yuri’s finished his coffee and managed to get himself up on somewhat wobbly legs, mine are in stirrups and Jack is getting an eyeful.

“Dude, not cool,” Yuri says, coming up behind him.

“I can’t close my eyes and examine her,” he calmly explains like he’s talking to a toddler. “You’re fully dilated, Gia.” He reaches up to press on my stomach again. “The baby is in the perfect position. I don’t see any issues, so the choice is yours. We can call an ambulance, but I doubt they’ll get here in time.” He eyes Yuri who’s swaying slightly but looking a little bit better. “There will be a few questions with him in this condition.” Jack looks back at me and squeezes my knee. “Or I can deliver your baby right here. If there is the slightest sign of any problem, I’ll call for an ambulance myself.”

“What’s the downside to having you do it here?”

Another contraction hits before he can answer. Yuri rests his hand on my stomach and kisses my forehead.

“I’m here, baby. I’m so sorry. I’m still a little out of it, but I’m here, *ptichka*.”

I grip his hand and try not to scream from the pain that’s ripping through me. When I can breathe again, Jack says, “I don’t have anything to give you for pain. I’m so sorry. I keep a lot of things stocked here, but I’ve never needed an epidural, and the stuff I gave Yuri isn’t safe for pregnant women.”

I look at Yuri, at the outfitted room that would raise a lot of question and at the doctor who just saved my husband’s life, knowing I can’t do anything that would put the Bratva at risk. Even with my choice already made, another contraction hits me, letting me know this is happening here whether I want it to or not. I nod my head at Jack, who quickly starts getting things ready.

“I love you so much, baby,” Yuri says, cupping my face and holding me as a fresh wave of pain hits me.

“I love you, too,” I cry. His green eyes are clearer now, and it makes me feel so much better, because I can’t do this without him.

“Okay, Gia,” Jack says, pulling the blanket back so he can see me better. “Yuri told me you’re having a girl, and she is more than ready to meet her parents.”

I smile and squeeze Yuri’s hand. His grin lights up his face, but it’s from excitement and happiness and not because he’s high as a kite. He uses his free hand to brush a sweaty strand of hair off my forehead before kissing me.

“We’re about to become parents, sweetheart.”

“Okay, Gia, the next contraction, I want you to give me a big push, okay?”

“Okay,” I tell him, scared and excited and hoping like hell everything goes okay. When my stomach tightens again, I grit my teeth and push hard, groaning and clutching Yuri’s good hand so hard I’m surprised I don’t break it.

“You’re doing so good, baby,” he says, cupping the back of my head and keeping his face close to mine. “I’m so damn proud of you, sweetheart.”

I keep pushing with each contraction until I'm sweaty and more exhausted than I've ever been. Finally, I hear Jack say from between my legs, "Give me one more good push, Gia."

"You can do this, baby," Yuri encourages, kissing my hand and giving me a huge smile. "It's time to meet our daughter, *ptichka*."

I nod and give another hard push until Jack says, "Okay, stop, Gia. Just hang on and breathe for me."

My whole body aches and my vagina feels like it's on fire, but I do my best to relax and breathe deeply. Jack looks up at Yuri. "Do you want to see your daughter?"

Yuri squeezes my hand and kisses my forehead before walking to stand beside where Jack is kneeling between my legs. I watch Yuri's green eyes widen before he whispers something in Russian and then turns to me with a look of absolute awe on his face.

"Her head is out, baby," he whispers. He reaches forward, and I know he must be stroking her face when he lets out an amazed laugh. "She's so beautiful, Gia."

"One more push," Jack says. "I just need one more push, Gia. You can do this."

I nod and grab Yuri's hand when he comes back to me. The next push I give pulls a scream from me as I feel our daughter leaving my body. I struggle to lift up, wanting to see her, but Yuri keeps me in place. He kisses my face and says, "Easy, baby. Don't try to get up."

When I hear our baby start to scream, I laugh and feel the tears start to fall. Seconds later, Jack is putting our daughter in my arms, and I'm crying so hard I can barely see her. She stops crying and immediately starts rooting around to nurse. Instinct takes over as I help her latch on, and when she's got it, she gives a big sigh and looks up at us.

"She's so perfect," I whisper, stroking her little chubby cheek.

"She is," Yuri agrees, leaning down to kiss her head.

When his green eyes meet mine, they're glassy and threatening to overflow. "I love you so much, baby. I'm so sorry I ruined the delivery."

"I love you, too, and you didn't ruin anything." I cup his face and pull him closer so I can kiss him. "You're safe, and Mila is perfect and healthy. That's all I care about."

He looks down at our daughter, pulling the blanket up over her so she won't be cold. We both run our eyes over her, staring at the tiny miracle we created. Her eyes are the same green as Yuri's, and her small head is covered in dark blonde hair.

I barely notice when another contraction hits, ridding my body of the afterbirth. "Everything looks great, Gia," Jack says after he's finished examining me. "You still need to go to the hospital, but you don't need to do it right this second."

"Isn't she beautiful?" Yuri asks, smiling over at Jack, already looking like a proud daddy.

Jack laughs and gently situates me so I'm no longer splayed open. "She is. I haven't delivered a baby in a long time. It's so much more fun than sewing up bullet wounds."

I smile and reach out to squeeze his hand. "Thank you so much." I look at Yuri's bandaged arm and Mila, who's quickly falling asleep. "For everything."

He pats my hand. "I'm glad I was here to help, and I'm really glad you didn't go into labor while I was sewing Yuri up. I'm good, but I'm not so sure I'm that good."

Yuri shakes his head and sighs. "It's definitely one hell of a birthing story."

I kiss Mila's head and then look at Yuri. "We're never telling her that she came into this world right after her dad got shot."

He smiles and bops the tip of my nose. "We can leave out a few key details if you insist."

Jack finishes cleaning everything up and then leaves so we can have a few minutes alone. We watch Mila sleep, and then

Yuri very gently helps me get my shirt back on and then begins the slow process of getting me back into my yoga pants. His brow furrows when I wince from the pain of moving around.

“I’m sorry, baby. I know it hurts. That was the bravest thing I’ve ever seen.”

“I didn’t have much of a choice,” I remind him. “She was coming no matter how I felt about it.”

He kisses my sore stomach and shakes his head. “You’re wrong about that. You handled it like a goddamn queen.”

Sitting on the bed next to me, he holds our daughter, unable to stop smiling.

“You’ve made me happier than I ever thought possible, *ptichka*. I’m a husband, and now I’m a father because of you.” He reaches out to grab my hand. “I don’t feel like I’ve given you near enough in return.” He sighs and shakes his head. “A husband who continually breaks the law and then manages to get shot on the night you need me most.”

“Hey.” I lift up and interlace my fingers behind his neck, pulling him closer so he has no choice but to meet my eyes. “You’re the best kind of husband, Yuri, and you’d walk through hell if it meant keeping me or Mila safe. Even with a bullet wound, you were everything I needed you to be tonight. I love you. I love every damn thing about you, and I wouldn’t change anything about our lives because it’s so perfect it makes my chest ache. Every morning I wake up thankful that you’re the man lying next to me.”

“I’m really glad I kidnapped you,” he says, making me laugh. “I love you, baby.”

“I love you, too.” I give him a kiss and then lay back, exhausted. “You should bring them in. I know they’re dying to meet her.”

He smiles and puts Mila back in my arms before snapping a quick photo. “For Uncle Dominic,” he explains and then opens the door, letting the others in. Charlie and Mikhail step in first followed by Riley and Artyom. They’re all smiling,

clearly relieved that everything went well. Charlie hands a stack of baby clothes, diapers, and blankets to Yuri.

“This should work for now. Alina’s diapers are going to be a bit big, but it should work until you get to the hospital.”

We thank her, and then they all step closer to look at Mila when I put her on the bed between my legs and start getting her ready. I smile at their reactions while Yuri beams down at us. Mila opens her eyes and looks around but then yawns and goes back to sleep, clearly tuckered out from all that’s happened. I’m right there with her.

“You ready to go, baby?” Yuri asks. His eyes run over me, noticing every detail of how tired and sore I am.

“Yeah. I don’t know how I’m going to walk, but I’m ready.”

He looks at me like I’m crazy. “You’re not walking, *ptichka*.” Leaning down, he kisses Mila’s head and then carefully picks her up like a pro and puts her in Mikhail’s waiting arms, who smiles down at her as Charlie steps closer to stroke one of her hands.

I watch as Yuri peels off his bloody, torn shirt and grabs the wet rag Artyom hands him. He wipes off the dried blood, and then pulls on a clean, long-sleeve tee. Satisfied that it’s not obvious he was just shot a few hours earlier, he comes over to me and slides an arm under my legs.

“What are you doing?”

He smiles and kisses me. “I’m carrying you to the car, sweetheart.”

“Your arm,” I argue, but he ignores me and slides his other arm behind my back before lifting me up.

“Nothing but a scratch, *ptichka*. Don’t worry about me, baby.”

I don’t bother arguing. I recognize the look on his face too well for that. Instead of wasting what little strength I have, I rest my head against his chest, ignoring the triumphant little grin he gives.

“She’s beautiful, Gia,” Riley says. “I’m so glad everything went okay.” She gives my shoulder a soft squeeze and Artyom pats my head and smiles before they walk to the living room to keep the kids distracted while we slip out the front door.

Mikhail and Charlie are waiting by a black SUV. Mila is already strapped in a car seat in the back, and after Yuri gets me buckled in next to her, he walks around and takes the empty seat on the other side of her.

Even though the pain meds seem to be out of Yuri’s system, he didn’t want to risk it, so Mikhail kisses Charlie bye and gets in to drive us to the hospital. She waves as we leave, and once we’re on the main road, I rest the side of my face against the seat and watch our daughter sleep.

“The doctors are going to be so impressed when I tell them I delivered our baby, *ptichka*.”

I laugh and look up at him. “Is that the story we’re going with?”

“Yep. You went into labor at home and I, awesome husband that I am, delivered our beautiful daughter.”

“You are pretty awesome,” I tell him, making him laugh.

He gives me a wink. “Mikhail just happened to stop by for a visit and then drove us to the hospital.”

“It’s the least I could do,” Mikhail says from the front. “Especially since your husband did get shot while working for me tonight. We’ll just leave that little detail out, though.”

“Probably for the best,” Yuri agrees.

I smile and reach for Yuri’s hand, holding it as I watch Mila and try to stay awake. Our life together as a family is just starting, and it’s already off to an exciting start. I knew when I married Yuri that he would give me many things, but a boring life isn’t one of them. He definitely proved me right tonight.

He leans down and kisses my forehead, and I lean into his touch, craving it like I always do. I know there will always be a little chaos in our lives, but he’s worth it. He’s worth everything. I told him earlier that I knew he’d walk through

hell for us, and I'd do the same for him in a second. With my husband beside me and our beautiful daughter between us, I have everything I need, and I can't wait to see what the future holds for us.

Epilogue

Gia

One Year Later

Mila's happy squeals drift in through the open windows, making me laugh as I grab her sippy cup from the fridge and race back outside so I don't miss anything. When I sit back down at the edge of the pool, she laughs and splashes her hands back in the water. Yuri's hands are wrapped around her, keeping her afloat as he pulls her through the water.

"Dada," she squeals again, making his whole face light up at the sound of it. The first time he heard her say it, I swear he got a little teary eyed. He spins her around again and tells her in Russian that he loves her. She smiles up at him like he's her whole world. I know exactly how she feels.

"Come here, *ptichka*," he says, holding Mila to his chest and waving me over.

I give an appreciative sigh. There's nothing sexier on earth than seeing a wet, bare-chested Yuri holding our baby.

He laughs and gives me a wink. "It's almost naptime, baby. Hang in there."

I blush at being so easy to read, but he's always known the effect he has on me, right from the very first night when he showed up in my room wearing a ski mask and a sexy, cocky grin.

Stepping into the water, I make my way to them, laughing when he wraps an arm around my waist as soon as I'm close enough and pulls me against him. His lips are on mine in the

next second, but the kiss is cut short when Mila starts splashing us and yelling, “Mama! Dada!”

We laugh and turn our attention to her. She gives us a big smile, showing off her new baby teeth, and grabs Yuri’s face, pulling him closer. Her green eyes, the exact same shade as her daddy’s, sparkle with mischief. After we brought her home, she was a very easygoing baby, but over the last month or two, her personality has really started to shine. She likes to make us laugh, and she never gets tired of having her daddy’s full attention. He’s more than happy to give it to her. She throws back her head and laughs when he makes a funny face at her.

While he’s joking around with her, he keeps his hand firmly on my ass, holding me close to him. I kiss his wet shoulder and wrap my arms around my family, grateful for the days when we can just spend time together. He still has work to do at the Peach, although he doesn’t go in during business hours anymore, and he will occasionally get called out for Bratva business that I never hear the details of, but it’s not as often as I feared it would be, and I’d be lying if I said I didn’t enjoy the wild sex we always have as soon as he returns.

“Are Dom and Sam still coming in next week?”

“Yeah, they’ll be here on Friday.” I smile when I think about the upcoming visit. Dominic proposed a few months ago, and Samantha said yes, but they want a long engagement and are in no rush to walk down the aisle. They come as often as they can, and last time they were here, they hinted that they’d like to settle around here after they graduate. I’m beyond excited. We already consider Artyom and Mikhail as Mila’s uncles, but I want my brother close by, too, and I know he wants to watch his niece grow up.

When Mila starts to yawn, Yuri laughs and kisses her cheek. “Someone’s getting sleepy,” he teases her in Russian. She seems to understand it because she quickly shakes her head no, making him laugh again. He gives my ass one more squeeze before we get out and dry off. Once Mila is in comfy, dry clothes, her eyes start to drift shut. She fights it, but when Yuri sits with her in the rocking chair in her nursery, we all

know it's a losing battle. He pats her back, rocking her until she's in a deep sleep.

Putting her in her crib, he pulls her favorite pink blanket over her so she won't be cold and positions her stuffed unicorn in easy reach in case she wants it. He brushes aside a few strands of baby-soft, blonde hair and sighs.

“She looks so much like you, *ptichka*.”

I smile and wrap my arms around his tight waist. “Really? I think she looks just like you.”

He smiles because he loves that she looks like him and kisses my forehead. “I see so much of you in her, especially that little attitude she's starting to get.”

He lets out a soft laugh at the look I give him before picking me up. I wrap my arms and legs around him, loving that he still picks me up as if I weigh nothing, even though I still haven't lost all my pregnancy weight. Leaning closer, he runs his tongue along the crook of my neck.

“I believe I promised you something at naptime,” he whispers against my skin, sending tiny flutters of pleasure straight to my core.

“Something big, I hope.”

He lets out a soft laugh and nips at my neck. “Something very big, *ptichka*.”

Keeping his mouth on my neck, he teases me with his tongue and teeth while carrying me to our bed. He gives a soft laugh when I tug on his shirt, eager to feel his skin against mine. Laying me down, he pulls back and quickly strips down to nothing. No matter how many times I see him naked, it still takes my damn breath away. He winks when he hears the appreciative sigh I give.

With all his peaks and grooves and defined muscle, I sometimes feel reluctant to shed my own clothes in front of him, especially after giving birth. Things aren't as tight as they once were, and on top of that, the pregnancy left me with some stretch marks. I once suggested keeping my shirt on during sex, and he'd looked at me like I'd lost my mind.

“I know that face.” He hovers his body over mine and brushes my cheek with his fingers, knowing I’m feeling self-conscious. “You’re absolutely perfect, *ptichka*, and you drive me fucking crazy.”

He grabs my hand and brings it to his cock, letting me feel how hard and ready he is. Sliding my fingers up to his head, I groan when I feel the wet proof of his own arousal. He’s soaked in it, dripping and eager for me.

“This is what you do to me, baby. Every inch of you is perfect and sexy as fuck, and if I had my way, I’d always be buried inside you.”

Lifting up, he slowly undresses me, eye-fucking me the entire time so that when I’m finally naked before him, I’m fully convinced that he likes what he sees. He cups my breasts, running his thumbs over my hard nipples.

“So beautiful,” he whispers before latching on and filling his mouth as my back arches off the bed and my fingers run through his hair. His tongue flicks my sensitive skin before he gives me another hard suck. I clutch at his head, moaning when he gives me a soft bite before kissing his way to my other breast. He teases me until I’m panting and begging for his cock.

Smiling, he lifts his head and brings his lips to mine while he presses his hard length against my pussy. My hips immediately rock up, grinding against him as his tongue brushes against mine.

“Is this what you want?” he murmurs against my lips while he slides over my clit.

“Yes,” I moan, digging my fingers into his shoulders and trying like hell to rock my hips up even more.

“I don’t know if I should let you come just yet.” He circles his hips, hitting me right where I need. One perfect stroke across my sensitive nerve endings gives a brief rush of pleasure, but then he stops, cutting it off before it can fully take hold.

“Don’t stop,” I beg, digging my fingers even harder into the hard flesh of his back.

“You don’t want to be edged, *ptichka*?” he teases, rocking against me again, making me gasp at how fucking good it feels. “But you always come so hard for me when I do it.”

He’s not wrong. He loves to tease me, and the orgasms I have after he’s repeatedly denied me release are unlike anything on earth, but the process is a sweet torture that always leaves me completely and utterly exhausted. Still, it’s tempting as hell.

He laughs when I say, “Maybe just a little.”

“That’s my good girl,” he murmurs against my lips before parting them with his tongue and sliding in while the head of his cock rubs against my clit. He brings me to the brink again and again only to stop at the last second, denying me what my body so desperately needs. When I can’t take a second more of this sweet torture, I pull back from his kiss and tighten my legs around him.

“Please, Yuri,” I beg. “I need you.”

He smiles and kisses me slowly, deepening it until my body tenses and I feel like I’m seconds away from losing my mind. Right when I’m about to cry from wanting him so badly, he gives my bottom lip a soft bite before sitting up. He starts to reach for a condom, but I grab his hand to stop him.

“I’m not ovulating. It should be fine.”

“Are you sure?”

I nod and smile at the groan he gives. Neither one of us likes anything between us, but I’m also not ready to get pregnant again, so condoms are sometimes a necessity. Tonight isn’t one of those nights, though, and we both plan on savoring every damn second of skin on skin. Grabbing my thighs, he spreads me wide and whispers a hoarse “Goddamn” as he positions his head against my soaking wet slit.

“I love you, *ptichka*,” he groans, meeting my eyes before looking down at my pussy so he can watch himself slowly slide in.

“I love you, too,” I moan, fisting the blankets as he spreads me wide, filling me like only he can.

Tightening his grip on my thighs, he starts to fuck me slowly, reminding my body how close to release I just was. When he brings his thumb to my clit, I gasp and moan his name. He rubs me in firm circles, slamming into me harder until I clamp a hand over my mouth to keep from screaming as pleasure hits me full force, darkening my vision and making everything else disappear except for the absolute bliss that only Yuri can give me.

He keeps working me, coaxing another orgasm from my spent body until I’m shaking and squirming beneath him. Smiling, he leans down and kisses me slowly, running his hand up my side to cup one of my breasts.

“I will never get tired of watching you come, sweetheart.”

“I’ll never get tired of you making me come,” I say, making him laugh.

“Turn over, baby, let me see that ass I love so much.”

He gives me one more kiss before sliding out long enough for me to flip over. His hands cup my cheeks while he gives an appreciate groan. The sharp smack that hits my ass shouldn’t surprise me, but it does. I knew it was coming, that he wouldn’t be able to resist, but the sharp sting always seems to catch me off guard. The pain mixes with the pleasure that’s still coursing through me, and when he spreads my thighs even wider before sliding back into me, I let out a gasp and push back against him. He snakes a hand under my chest, cupping a breast as he kisses my neck and starts to fuck me harder.

I reach back, touching his face and hair, anything I can get my hands on, and when he slides his other hand under me, I moan and turn my face to his. He presses his mouth to mine and pinches my clit between his fingers, slamming into me even harder. I know I’m only seconds away, and when he starts to roll my clit between his soaked fingers, I let go with a scream that he quickly swallows, deepening our kiss to muffle the sound. With a deep groan, he lets go, pulsing inside me with his release.

He keeps kissing me even after he's completely empty, running his tongue along mine and stroking my face with featherlight touches that send shivers all through me.

"I love you so much, *ptichka*," he murmurs against my lips before pulling back to look at me.

"I love you, too," I tell him and then smile. "I think I might need a nap."

He laughs and slowly slides out of me so he can pull me into his arms. "Go ahead, baby. I'll keep an ear out for Mila."

I kiss his chest and snuggle in deeper, my eyes already drifting shut. Yuri tightens his arms around me, letting me know I'm completely safe and loved. I fall asleep with a smile on my face, held tightly in my husband's arms.

* * *

Yuri

As soon as I walk in the room, Mila squeals and starts running towards me in her walker. She's a little hellion in that thing, and the sight of it always makes me laugh. Her big, green eyes are lit up, her blonde hair catching wind at the speed she's going. I squat down and reach out to grab the walker before she crashes into my shins, a lesson I learned the hard way, and then reach in to scoop her out of the thing. She'll be running around on her own in no time, but for now, she can only manage a few wobbly steps on her own, so the walker is her favorite mode of transportation.

"Hey, little one," I say in Russian, covering her face in kisses. "Daddy missed you."

"Dada!" she yells, tightening her arms around my neck.

My heart constricts every time I look at her, but it aches even more when she calls me dada and hugs me like I'm her whole world. I carry her into the kitchen, smiling when I see Gia bent over and taking something that smells amazing out of the oven. I walk over and grab the ass that I'll never be able to get enough of.

She laughs and turns to give me a hug. Mila wraps an arm around both of us while I smile and give Gia a kiss. I fall more in love with my wife with each passing day, and I still don't know how that's possible. She never ceases to amaze me, or arouse me, or completely overwhelm me with how amazing she is. Getting assigned babysitting duty was the best damn thing that's ever happened to me. I could never go back to a life without her.

I give her one more kiss before sitting down with Mila while Gia puts the finishing touches on supper. Looking around, I can't help but notice the way Gia has made this house into a home. Now it's filled with baby toys and the walls are covered with photos of our smiling family. Everywhere I look, there's a memory that makes me smile. She's brought so much joy into my life and willingly puts up with the stress of my work and never once makes me feel guilty about it. She loves me completely and absolutely, and I realize what a rare gift that is.

Once supper's ready, I put Mila in her highchair as Gia comes up and wraps her arms around me. She cups my face and studies me for a second. "Everything okay?"

I smile at how well she can read me. I kiss the tip of her nose and say, "Everything's fine, *ptichka*. I was just thinking about how lucky I am."

"I think I'm the lucky one."

"If I was as arrogant as you think I am, I'd let you keep believing that." I give her a wink and reach down to squeeze her ass, pulling her tighter against me.

She feels me start to harden and smacks my chest playfully. "Behave yourself. We still have to eat and then it's bath time."

"I can't help it, *ptichka*. You drive me crazy. There's never a time when I don't want to be inside you."

Her eyes darken at my words, and I'd love nothing more than to carry my beautiful wife upstairs and remind her just how badly I need her, but Mila chooses this exact moment to

scream a “Dada!” that’s so damn cute there’s no way I can be irritated by it.

I laugh and kiss Gia, whispering a “Later, sweetheart” against her slightly parted lips. Turning to Mila, I lean down and kiss her little blonde head before fixing her plate and cutting everything into the tiniest of bites because her appetite is as exuberant as every other part of her, and I know she’s going to dive in as soon as I set the plate down.

We sit down to eat as a family, and I marvel at how much my life has changed. I never wanted this kind of life. I never even thought it was possible for a guy like me to have something like this, but now that I have it, I wouldn’t trade it for anything. I didn’t realize how empty my life was before Gia walked into it and turned everything straight on its ass, and I’m so glad she did.

Every day is better than the last. I look at my beautiful wife and smiling daughter, knowing that after supper, I’ll get to watch her laugh and splash around in her bubble bath before she cuddles her small body against mine as I read her a bedtime story. Soon, she’ll be too big for all that, and it’s going to break my heart when that day comes.

Deciding that’s more than I can handle, I look at Gia and say, “I’m going to need to get you pregnant again soon.”

She nearly chokes on her food and reaches for a glass of water. When she’s done coughing, she gives me a wide-eyed look. “You think so, huh?”

I smile at her tone. “Yes, Mila is growing up really fast, and I’m going to miss bath time and bedtime stories and little chubby arms wrapped around my neck. We need more babies, *ptichka*.”

“She’s barely one, Yuri. Trust me, we have time, and she’s always going to want you to read to her.”

I shrug and give her a wink. “I’m just letting you know that it’s coming.”

“Uh-huh.” She laughs and takes another drink. “Give me another year or two.” She points to Mila who’s happily

stuffing her face and looking like an adorable mess. “I still remember how badly this one hurt coming out.”

“No promises.”

She smiles and shakes her head at me. We finish supper, laughing with Mila, and then I stand up and start the dishes while Gia starts the bath. Life may not be exactly how I envisioned it just a few years ago, but there’s no denying it’s a thousand times better. After the kitchen is cleaned, I help Gia with a splashing Mila and then rest her against my chest while I read her a bedtime story. She’s asleep before I even get to the end, but I finish it anyway because I like the thought of her hearing my voice while she sleeps.

Once she’s snug in her crib, I quickly grab Gia and pull her to me. I’m always amazed at how badly I need her and now is no exception. I kiss her deeply while my hands roam her body, slowly discarding her clothes until she’s naked and softly shaking with need. When I slide into my wife, I let out a sigh and hold her tighter against me. With her arms and legs wrapped around me and her pussy clenching me tightly while she kisses me so damn sweetly it makes my head spin, I know I’m exactly where I should be. She’s my life, and as long as I have her and however many kids we may have, then I have everything I could ever need. With a deep groan, I start to work my hips, losing myself in Gia yet again.

If you haven’t read Mikhail and Charlie’s story, then you can get it here:

[Caught by the Bratva Boss](#)

And here is Artyom and Riley’s story:

[Savage Savior](#)

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Thank You!

Thank you so much for reading! I can't even begin to express how much that means to me. I hope you enjoyed Yuri and Gia's story. I can't wait to hear what you all think of it!

If you have the time, I'd be so grateful if you could leave me a review. Every review helps my books get seen by more people, so even if it's just a star review, it really means the world to me!

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Mikhail & Charlie [Caught by the Bratva Boss](#)

Artyom & Riley [Savage Savior](#)

More stories are on the way!

Savage Savior

A Dark Bratva Romance



Savage Savior
Cover

Savage Savior

**To everyone else he's a killer, the man they run from in
fear,
but to me, he's the only man who's ever made me feel safe.**

Riley:

They call him Death.

He's a scarred, tatted-up wall of muscle,

a highly trained killer that I should be running from,

but I'm lost to Artyom from the first moment I walk into
his club and meet his sexy, grey eyes.

Everything about him is dangerous, raw, primal—a barely
contained savage.

And now all his focus is on me.

He knows I'm in trouble, and he promises to protect me, to
free me from my brother's quick fists and his vicious friend.

To everyone else, he's a monster.

To me, he's my fierce protector, the one who would do
anything to keep me safe.

Artyom:

People call me Death.

It's a nickname earned in blood and one I fully deserve.

Everything I touch turns red, but I can't stay away from
her.

She's a pawn in her brother's game against the Fedorov
Bratva.

Too innocent to be working in my club,

too innocent for me,

but I can't let her go.

She was mine the second I laid eyes on her.

And I'll happily kill anyone who tries to take her from me.

Because no one touches what's mine and lives.

Caught by the Bratva Boss

A Dark Mafia Romance



Caught Cover

Caught by the Bratva Boss!

**Mikhail Fedorov is the most powerful Bratva boss in town,
and I've just broken into his house.**

Charlotte:

This was supposed to be an easy score.

In and out.

No harm, no foul.

But when Mikhail catches me red-handed and wraps those strong arms around me, telling me in his sexy accent that I picked the wrong damn house to rob, I know my goose is cooked.

I expect the police and a future behind bars,

but this Bratva boss has other plans for me.

Locked in his house with no way to escape, the tension between us builds to the breaking point.

He taunts me, pushes all my buttons, and leaves me wanting so much more.

The only question is which one of us is going to break first.

Mikhail:

No one steals from me and lives, but the beautiful thief I've just caught has me rethinking that credo.

She's a scared little rabbit before the wolf, but I can't let my sweet bunny just walk away, not after she realizes who I am and what I've done.

And especially not after I get a taste of just how sweet she really is.

No, I'm keeping her, whether she likes it or not.

Grumpy Bratva Hitman

A Stand-Alone, Spicy, Holiday Read!



Grumpy Cover

Grumpy Bratva Hitman

**Instead of a stocking full of coal,
this year my grumpy ass is getting a wife.**

I hate Christmas.

I hate everything to do with the holiday.

So why am I suddenly obsessed with the Christmas-caroling,
little ball of winter cheer that's found her way into my life?
She likes candy canes and hot mugs of cocoa, and I kill people
for a living.

These two worlds were never meant to collide.

But all that changes when she sees me taking out my latest
target.

I don't leave witnesses—not even cute ones in reindeer-
decorated, knitted caps.

Now, I'm left with a choice: take her out of the equation
permanently or make her my wife and give her the protection
of my name.

The last thing I'm expecting is the raw desire between the two
of us or the fact that I'm falling so hard and so fast for her.

This Christmas just got a whole lot more complicated.

Russian Boxing Club Series

If you'd like more age gap, steamy romances, then please check out the Russian Boxing Club series! It's an interconnected series, but they can be read in any order.



My Russian
Obsession Cover

Forbidden Age Gap!

My Russian Obsession



My Russian Temptation Cover

Enemies-to-Lovers Age Gap!

[My Russian Temptation](#)



My Russian
Salvation Cover

Second Chance Age Gap!

[My Russian Salvation](#)

About the Author

Just like her last name, Sonja loves morally grey characters and alphas with a hidden heart of gold. She loves strong men with mile-wide soft spots for the women they love and who will stop at nothing to keep them safe.

She writes mainly age gap, steamy romances where the lines between good and bad blur into a beautiful, sexy shade of grey.

Zero cheating and HEAs are always guaranteed!

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