



Cold-Hearted

MOSCOW

Horsemen Novella #4

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

TERRY TOWERS

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Description:

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The money and power I gained by taking over the Bratva are just icing on the cake.

Years of servitude coming to fruition.

One thing is for sure.

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But then he came along...

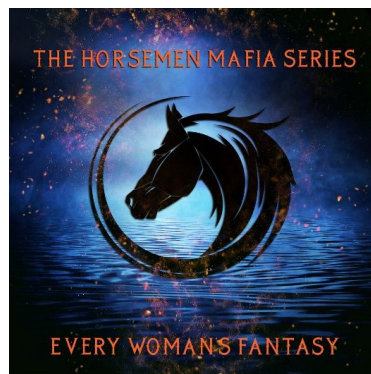
My newest assassin.

He's beautiful, with a heart as cold as mine.

He has me intrigued.

Admittedly captivated.

If I'm not careful, he could be my undoing.



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Cold-Hearted
(Horsemen Novella, Jacob
Prequel)

By

Terry Towers

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Prologue

Milaslava

Why couldn't he just die already?

Even when in the process of dying, Dimitri Stepanov was exasperating. Nothing with that man was easy. But it would be over soon, I'd waited a long time for this moment, I could wait a few more minutes.

"Milaslava," he gasped from the floor next to the table. He'd fallen from his chair at the other end of the table several feet away close to ten minutes ago now.

Groaning, I leaned around the table and craned my head to look at him, a hint of a smile on my lips unable to feign sympathy for his turmoil. "Yes, my love."

"You need to call someone. Get help," his voice was more of a wheezing sound now as he struggled to get to his feet, but just fell again. "I think someone did something to the food."

I shrugged. "I would- "

He looked up, his glassy eyes looking up at me.

"-But since I'm the one who poisoned you it would be rather counterproductive to save you. Just relax and let nature take its course. It'll be over soon."

At least I hoped. I wanted this over and done with. There was lots to do once I took over the Bratva. I had so

many plans for the future. Big plans.

“You bitch.” Anger flashed in his eyes, his voice remarkably clear again. “After everything that I’ve done for you! I got your whore ass off the streets.”

Cocking a brow at him, I laughed. “All that you’ve done? Does that include the beatings and the affairs? Treating me like property, as if I didn’t have a brain and ambitions of my own?”

Another groan as he slumped back down onto the floor again, his eyes closing as he coughed. “Fuck you. You were a - a pussy of co-convenience.”

He hadn’t fucked me in a very long time, not that I wanted his shriveled sixty-five-year-old cock anyhow. He had a slew of whores at his beck and call. He no longer had use for a fifty-two-year-old woman. He wanted them barely legal and fresh out of school when their tits were perky and they had an ass that you could bounce quarters off of. I’d aged extremely well, but I couldn’t compete with the naive young women with dollar signs in their eyes when they looked at him.

I had been one of those women when I met him at the tender age of eighteen, with a three-year-old son to care for. It had been me and my son, Jacob, with no money, praying I could scrape enough money together to feed my child and pay for a place to live.

He’d changed that. In return, he required obedience. I was to be seen, but not have an opinion. It hadn’t always been like that. It changed quickly when we’d gotten married. The true monster in him came out. I didn’t know at the time that by accepting his offer I was also selling my soul.

“Alina!” The name was barely more than a whisper.

Did he seriously think that our chef was going to save him?

“Who do you think prepared the meal with the poison in it, jackass?” I never cooked. He felt I was a horrible chef so if I were to prepare the meal, he’d immediately know something was amiss. I’d taken a chance on asking her to help me, but it’s amazing how persuasive money can be, especially when the amount offered would take care of her, her grandkids and great-grandkids for the rest of their lives.

His eyes didn’t open this time. His breaths became more labored as his body began trembling.

I looked over at the steak knife next to my plate, my fingers wrapping around the knife. I could just slit his throat and end it, but that would cause questions. At his age and with the amount of stress he endured being one of the most powerful men in Russia no one would second guess a heart attack.

A slit throat – that would get a look or two.

Would it matter in the grand scheme of things? Probably not. But I didn’t like loose ends.

“Is it done?” Dropping the knife back onto the table, I looked towards the entrance to the kitchen to the Alina peering inside, her gaze focused on my soon-to-be late husband.

“Almost. You don’t need to be here.” I waved a dismissive hand at Dimitri, “As you can see, I’m fine.”

“I felt that I needed to see this through. To see what I’m responsible for.” She looked scared and regretful, like at

any moment she'd pull out her mobile phone and call for help. I could see the anguish in her blue eyes. If she did there was only one thing I could do... I looked back down at the knife. I didn't want to hurt her. She was innocent and loyal to my family, and this couldn't have happened without her. But I would do what was necessary. I only hoped she didn't end up being another loose end in need of tying up.

“You know the type of man that he is, Alina. You know how many people he's hurt and killed over the years – families destroyed.”

“I know.” She didn't look convinced.

Pushing the chair back, I stood and crossed the room, walking towards her, the sound of my heels making an echoing click-clack sound on the black and gold marble floor. Seeing me approach I didn't miss the fact that she flinched or the tiny shuffle of her feet backward.

Standing before her, I grasped her upper arms in my hands. She was a tiny woman, nearly eight inches shorter than my 5'10 with a petite frame. Her body trembled under my touch as she avoided eye contact.

She'd never look at me the same way again. Not after this.

I really didn't want to kill her. I hate to say my regret for killing her was simply because I was a good person – because I knew I wasn't. My life been so fucked up for too long for me to have any type of conscience or morality anymore. Dimitri had seen to that. But she was an excellent cook and a confidant in many ways, for many years now. Losing her would be unfortunate.

“Things are going to be so much better now, for so many people.” I looked over my shoulder at him. There were no sounds coming from him and his body was motionless. The sporadic up-and-down motion of his body with each breath had stopped.

Her gaze followed mine and eyes widened. “Is he dead?”

“Probably. But that doesn’t matter for you.” Slipping an arm over her shoulders, I led her from the room and into the wine cooler attached to the dining room. After some consideration, I chose one of Dimitri’s prized bottles of wine and passed it to her. “As a thank you and for you to use to celebrate.”

She accepted it with trembling hands as she looked up at me again. “Celebrate?”

“Yes, of course.” I led her back through the dining room and into the den blocking her view of my husband with my body as we passed by him. “You’re going to go home, crack this open and forget this nastiness ever happened. When you come in tomorrow to work, you’ll be coming to work knowing that you’ll never have to worry about money ever again. I’ll forever be in your debt and will do what it takes to ensure what you’ve done for me – for us – will be compensated.”

I didn’t have to remind her that if she opened her fucking mouth about this to anyone, I’d kill her and everyone she ever loved. She’d worked for our family for over two decades. She knew the score. She knew the Stephano Bratva was not one to be messed with, regardless of who was at the

helm of the organization. Not that it would matter either way. There wasn't a single person who could touch me now, not even the authorities. But for simplicity sake, I'd rather people think his death was of natural causes.

From this day forward I'd be an unstoppable force and God help anyone who attempted to stand in my way.

Chapter 1

Milaslava

“Well, that’s a problem isn’t it.” I wanted to strangle the man in front of me. I didn’t care for bad news and the bad news that he was delivering was really packing a wallop.

“Umm... No, it’s not ideal, Boss.”

Leaning forward, I rested my elbows on the top of the desk and steeped my fingers in front of me, my gray eyes staring into his dark ones. “Ten of my men are dead and my shipment of weapons has just disappeared. I heard that correctly?”

“Yes ma’am.” Nikolay, my second in command squirmed in his chair. After I’d taken over there had been a little unrest. It wasn’t overly problematic but had to be dealt with. Loyalists to my deceased husband were executed. It only took a few deaths for all of the others to realize that I wasn’t fucking around and they began to fall into place.

Most fell into place.

“And you have no idea who is behind it?”

His face blanched. “We’re working on it.”

“You’re working on it. Forgive me for not feeling optimistic.”

He gulped. “There’s more ma’am.”

Lifting a brow I sat back into the chair, attempting to keep my cool when all I really wanted to do was grab the crystal lion paperweight on my desk and chuck it at his head. “What more could you have to tell me?”

“One of the men who was killed was Yury.”

I nodded, keeping my expression blank as I processed the fact that my best assassin was now dead. It’s not like they grew on trees. It wasn’t easy to find men of Yury’s skillset. How in the hell someone managed to kill him was a shock in itself.

“If I can speak frankly for a moment.”

“Of course.”

“The other organizations, they’re testing you, boss. They’re looking for weakness.”

I knew this and it wasn’t surprising. It was expected really. Pushing my chair back, I stood and made my way over to the bar at the back of my office, pulled a bottle of vodka from the fridge and poured myself a cocktail.

Nikolay watched me as I sipped on my drink.

“We need to replace Yury. That’s imperative,” I finally said.

“Of course.”

“Do you have any suggestions?”

He rubbed his chin a moment, before speaking. “I do. He’s a freelancer. I suspect that he’s going to be expensive and might take a little persuasion to be brought into the fold. From what I’ve heard he doesn’t play well with others.”

Guzzling the remainder of my drink, I poured myself a shot. “Good, then let’s set up a meeting. We can’t fuck around. I’ll leave it up to you and your best judgment to replace the remaining men. Also, send the families of our men a little token of our appreciation for the years of service along with my deepest condolences.” Money made the world go round. While it may not be a substitute for what the families lost, aside from vengeance, it was all I had to offer them.

“Okay, make it happen. Set up a meeting for tomorrow.” Putting the crystal shot glass to my lips, I drank the shot down.

“Tomorrow? With all due respect, I don’t know if- ”

Anger welled up in me. Pushing the annoyance down, I shot him a smile. “Just make it happen.” although the smile didn’t carry through to my eyes. “My patience is wearing thin with this bullshit. I want everyone involved in the attack on our shipment dead.”



Andrei

I’d heard the rumors about Milaslava Stepano, or the Ice Queen, as many liked to refer to her as. Most in my line of business had. The rumor was that she murdered her husband Dimitri in order to take over operations. They had one son, Jacob who was in charge of operations on an island called Helka Island. With him in charge overseas, she was the logical successor.

When it came right down to it, I really didn't care either way. I wasn't really interested in working for the Stepano family, or anyone for that matter, I preferred to keep low-key and not have to answer to anyone. Having no official affiliations helped keep a target off my back. The thing was that I'm very interested in meeting the infamous Ice Queen. She was cold and calculating, a force to be reckoned with or was all the talk hype? My curiosity was getting the better of me, so against my better judgement, I agreed to a meeting.

The black SUV approached what could only be described as a castle surrounded by a massive wall with guard towers at strategic points long the estate. The car pulled up to the guard house and after a moment of discussion the gates were opened and we proceeded onto the estate.

I was always one for simplicity and couldn't imagine navigating the hallways of such a home. Massive estates like this didn't normally impress me, but everything about this estate screamed old-world money and power. It wasn't trying to be impressive; it was impressive.

As the car pulled up to the front doors, the oversized, wooden double doors opened wide and several armed guards poured out.

Grabbing the doorhandle, I pulled it open and got out, immediately surrounded by several guards, two of which has their rifles pointed directly at me.

A smile spread across my lips as I put my hands up and laced my fingers behind my head, spreading my feet. "I was hoping the boss would be doing this personally," I couldn't help but joke.

The guard directly in front of me didn't so much as crack a smile as he waved a metal detection wand up and down my body and then proceeded with a pat down, removing the gun I had in the holster strapped to my side and the knife that I had strapped under my pant leg, to my calve.

"I have a weapon in my pants if you want to search there as well."

The guard pulled a bag from his jacket pocket and placed the gun and knife inside. "You'll get these back once you leave the property." Without another word he and the other guards disappeared into the house.

Nikolay came to my side and motioned towards the open front doors. "I'll lead the way to the boss. Follow me," When I didn't move straight away, he added, "Please."

Giving him a smirk and a nod, I proceeded after him into the house. "How do you find your way around this place, this is insane." My eyes drank in my surroundings. The interior mimicked the outside with sculptures and paintings that were easily centuries old. It was almost as though I'd stepped into a museum. You could see that while they attempted to keep the original feel of the castle, there were definite upgrades to modernize it.

Did Milaslava decorate it herself or did someone do it for her? I didn't know her, but I had a feeling that there wasn't much in the home that she didn't have a hand in.

Our excursion through the house ended up with Nikolay leading me to glass doors that led to what at first glance appeared to be a greenhouse, but as we walked through

the doors and into the room, I discovered that it was in fact a massive dome of glass.

Looking overhead, I noticed that the snow was falling onto the glass, melting and sliding down the sides of the dome. This was impressive and certainly didn't come with the original build. Bright and colorful birds chirped in the trees off in the distance while classical music played softly in the background.

Straight ahead of me was a pool with waterfall and just to the left of the pool was a tiki style bar and that's where I spotted her sitting on a stool, one long-toned leg crossed over the other. I paused in my tracks for a moment as I allowed my eyes to drink in the sight of her.

She was stunning, wearing a pair of white leggings that landed low on her hips and a white, long-sleeved crop top, that dipped low into her cleavage. Hearing my approach, she turned her head to look in my direction with knowing grey eyes, as she ran a hand through her long silver hair.

I'd heard she was roughly fifty, but fuck... Had I seen her in a nightclub, I'd never have pegged her for more than thirty.

"Damn," I breathed the word under my breath.

Sliding from the stool, she walked barefoot towards me, each step graceful and cat-like, her hips swaying seductively with each step, her gaze never wavering from mine as she approached. Funnily enough, the raw sexual energy that she gave off wasn't forced, it was just something she radiated. There were rumors that her old man had been running around on her. The man must have been insane, either

that or her pussy was as ice cold as what her reputation lent her to be.

“Mister Markoff, it’s a pleasure. I’ve been anxious to meet you.” She extended her hand to me. There was no wedding band on her finger although I could see a faint line tan line where it had once been. There were however several massive diamond rings that glistened as the sunlight hit them.

Taking her hand, I brought it to my lips and gently kissed the back as my dick jerked alive in my pants. It was an impulsive thing to do and could possibly get me a bullet in the head, but I was doing it before I even realized it. There was an instant pull to her.

This woman was trouble.

“Well, aren’t you the gentleman,” she practically purred as she pulled her hand from mine, her fingertips trailing their way down my wrist and across my palm ever so lightly making my dick swell. A lesser man would have fallen to his knees begging for a taste of her pussy. I’d have a bastard of a time saying no if it was offered that’s for sure. I reminded myself that this was a business arrangement, not a damned nightclub or afternoon cocktail.

Dmitri must have been a fool because only a fool would want to lay with another woman when they had someone who radiated sexuality like the woman before me at home. Some men never appreciated a good thing.

“Just giving you the respect you deserve.”

One thing I could say, considering her husband died just a little over two weeks ago, she hardly looked like a

grieving widow. She killed him. I'd had my suspicions, but there was no doubt in my mind now.

“I appreciate that. Although, from what I've heard you are deserving of a fair amount of respect yourself. I hear you're the best at what you do.”

“I'm good at a lot of things. Although killing people would be at the top of my abilities.”

She nodded. “Come, have a drink.” She gestured at the stool in front of the bar and then proceeded behind it. “What will it be?”

“I'm fine. Really.”

An eyebrow raised at me. No wasn't an answer she was going to accept.

Clearing my throat, I nodded. “You know what. I'll take whatever you're having.”

“Good choice,” a smile spread across her red-painted lips as she poured me a drink and slid it across the bar to me.

“This really is a stunning home. I've never been anything quite like it.”

“I had this room specially built. I can have the tropics while also having the beauty of winter. Isn't it spectacular? I spend a fair amount of time here.”

“It's incredible. It must feel lonely now that you're on your own.”

Tilting her head to the side, she eyed me a moment before a smile crept onto her lips. “I'm quite good at keeping my own company. Besides, with all the guards and staff

around I'm hardly alone. I've got a lot to keep myself occupied. Loneliness is the least of my problems."

"I suppose you have a point." Looking over my shoulder there were two armed guards just outside the doors of the dome watching us while trying not to appear conspicuous.

"But if you're talking about having close personal company. I can easily fly to Helka and see Jacob, if I want. It's not that much of an issue. I almost prefer the solitude. It gives me the time to think and run the organization without distractions. Which leads us to why you were asked here."

Chapter 2

Milaslava

He was devilishly handsome. I'd give him that. A little younger than I expected. If I were to take a guess I'd assume mid-thirties, barely much older than my son. Not that it mattered. When both parties hit middle age, age became merely a number.

Not that I was interested in anything besides business with the man across from me. But it didn't hurt anything to appreciate a man who was pleasing to the eye.

"I'd like you to come work for me."

He looked at me a moment and took a drink, slowly nodding his head. "With all due respect, I'm not looking for a home base. I keep my business on a case-by-case basis, I prefer not to keep myself tied down."

That's not what I wanted to hear. No wasn't an acceptable answer. I wanted him, perhaps in more ways than one.

"What do I need to do for you to change your mind?"

"I really don't think you can. I'm still alive because I don't have alignments with any organization. I do a job and I finish a job. Nothing personal and no strings attached."

He was going to be tough, but I could see how he was looking at me and the feeling was mutual. Maybe it was a bad idea to bring him on board. I didn't need the distraction or

temptation when there was work to be done. But he was also the best and I needed the best. My ambitions were stronger than my need for dick.

“Okay. I completely understand that and respect that. However, I feel that you’d fit in well here. You don’t need to be visible, it would be a need-to-know basis on who even knows you’re on the payroll. I just need you to deal with some issues for me and I’m willing to pay top dollar to get that. I’m willing to top the best of offers.”

I didn’t want to come off desperate, but playing games with the man before me was futile.

“Again, I don’t work like that. I have a number of very specific rules that I adhere to.”

“Rules are meant to be broken.”

He chuckled and took another sip his dark eyes piercing into mine. “You want me to break my code – the way I live my life and conduct business – for you?”

I was on shaky ground. If I said the wrong thing, then that would be game over and I’d never be able to convince him to join us. People should be falling at my feet to be brought into the fold, but not him and I knew he wasn’t playing a game. He genuinely didn’t want to be involved with any organization. However, it only made me see his value and made me want him to work for me more than ever.

“I’m not asking you to compromise yourself. But I’m suggesting that you give the benefits of working for me some consideration. I’m not like the others who use your service. I appreciate what you have to offer and am willing to

compensate. Name your price.” I spread my hands out, “Name your terms.”

He sighed. “It’s not about the money.”

“How about this... Stay with me here for the week. I’ll pay you for the week, let’s call it bodyguard duty and due diligence.”

“I’m not a bodyguard.”

Flashing him a smile I leaned over the desk again. “I know. Your abilities are far beyond that. But I have to come up with some excuse to keep you here long enough for you to realize that this is where you’re meant to be. You do contract work. I’m offering a week-long temporary contract. And easy one at that.”

He chuckled, the sound deep and throaty. There was a heat in his eyes as he looked at me that made my insides quiver. “I’m not going to take the job.”

“I’m not even remotely interested in offering again. By the end of the week, you’ll be the one coming to me and asking me to stay.” Running my tongue along my lower lip, I eyed him a moment. “So what do you say? Will you stay? Let me show you what I’m all about. What do you have to lose?”



Andrei

This was a bad idea. I should have just told her that I wasn’t interested and been on my way. I shouldn’t have come

in the first place. I knew the wars that were going on between the cartels and mafias all over the world. And her family was smack dab in the middle of it; It was evident when she'd had an attack on her men. The brativa had a war they were in the middle of in addition to unrest in their ranks because of the loss of Dimitri. I valued my life more than to be simply a casualty in a war that I had nothing to do with.

Yet here I was sitting in a massive bedroom which was down the hallway from hers, after running back home for a week's worth of clothing and contemplating my life choices. I could still leave. Make an excuse – fuck – just tell her straight out I wasn't interested in getting involved with the arms trade. Arms production and exportation were what her family was known for throughout Europe. It was hardly a secret.

And with her old man out of the way and her son on Helka Island her competitors were considering her a mark. They only knew her as the wife of Dimitri. The quiet arm-candy of a brativa who did and said what she was told and when. She was a strong woman now that she was out of the shadows of Dimitri, but the other organizations didn't know that. They'd test her many more times before they backed off and accepted her as the new head of the brativa. I didn't know enough about her organization to know if she'd be able to withhold repeated attacks.

Which was all the more reason for me to get the fuck out of here.

I looked down at the suitcase that I hadn't unpacked. Staying a week would do no good aside from swaying me towards her cause.

I'd just stay for supper. I'd thank her for her audience and then I'd be on my way. It was nothing personal, but we both knew that I was a freelancer. That wasn't going to change.

Walking into the washroom, I looked at my reflection in the mirror. Cold, dark eyes stared back at me. Shedding my suit jacket, I tossed it onto the chair just outside the bathroom door and then looked into my reflection again.

“Thank you Milaslava, dinner was amazing, but I do feel I need to leave,” I said the words to myself as I loosened my tie and undid the top two buttons of my black dress shirt. “I appreciate the hospitality and wish you well.”

Admittedly, I knew the real reason I'd agreed to stay. My dick. Meeting her face to face she wasn't what I expected. She radiated sexuality and determination and there was a savageness behind her eyes that made me want to dig deeper. How could a woman like her ever become a puppet for someone like Dimitri for so long? It was a mystery that I wanted to uncover.

I didn't like the wishy-washy feelings I was getting over this situation.

Perhaps a few days wouldn't be such a bad idea. It would give me an inside look at her operations and how she was as a leader and knowledge was power. Not many people were given an opportunity like this.

I'd be stupid not to stay – wouldn't I?

There was a war still going on in my head when a knock came at the door.

“Andrei, Sir.”

Opening the door, I revealed Nikolay. “Yes.”

“Madam is downstairs waiting for you. Dinner has been prepared.”

“Thank you. Lead the way.”

Closing the bedroom door, I fell into step next to Nikolay. “How do you feel about the transition since Dimitri’s death?”

Nikolay looked at me briefly. I could see his mind working, trying to choose the correct words to answer my question. I almost thought he wouldn’t respond, but he did. “She is a strong woman and extremely smart. She lived in Dimitri’s shadow for many years. Since his unfortunate passing, she’s done an excellent job of taking over.”

“Right...”

“Whatever questions you have I highly suggest you direct them to her yourself.”

“Right.”

I could smell the dining room before I could see. The smell of steak drifted to my nose making my stomach grumble and I was suddenly grateful I stayed. Entering the dining room through a large archway with beautifully sculpted molding framing it, I immediately spotted her.

Hearing our arrival, she looked up, met my stare, and then rose from her place at the end of a twelve-seat dining table. She’d changed from earlier today into a red bandage dress that fell mid-thigh and tipped extremely low into her

cleavage. If she made one wrong move her tits would be bursting from their questionable constraints.

And just like that, my dick came alive. I'd been walking with a fucking hard-on all afternoon because of her. It was going to be a nightmare trying to remain professional when I was battling my dick and the seductress who was stalking me barefoot, her grey eyes fixated on mine. Even barefoot she was tall, the dress emphasizing how long and lean her legs were.

“I appreciate you staying Andrei.”

She motioned to the place to her right which had been set as she lowered herself back into the high-backed, red-stained wooden chair. “Please. Sit. Your plate has already been served.”

“I appreciate this.” Taking a seat, my eyes scanned the plate of food. Rumors had it that her late husband had had a heart attack during dinner. Had it really been a heart attack or did she have a hand in it. Perhaps a little pinch of something in the food?

“Don't worry, it's not poisoned if that's what you're concerned about.”

“Of course not. It would be hard to recruit me if I were dead.” Lifting my gaze from the food, I looked over at her again. The red of her lips matched her dress to perfection. Her make-up was applied so expertly that her skin was so flawless you could mistake her for a porcelain doll.

“Indeed, it would. And I do want you and I'm willing to do whatever it takes to make that happen.” Picking up her

wine glass she brought it to her lips as her gaze locked onto mine while she took a long sip.

“Be careful with your wording, Milaslava. Some men – unhonourable men – would take that as an invitation.”

“Please. It’s Mila.” Lowering her glass she picked up her steak knife and began to cut off a piece of steak. “No need for the formalities. And as for the other thing... Well, I can handle myself.”

I watched her eat for a few minutes, watching her chew and swallow each piece as my mind began to battle whether I should stay or leave. But I had so many questions. Would she even humor me with the answers?

“What’s on your mind, Andrei?”

“To be truthful, I find you fascinating. I’d like to hear your story.”

“Then does that mean you’ve given up on the idea of trying to make an excuse to leave and you’re going to hang around a bit?”

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask her how she knew I was going to excuse myself after dinner, but I resisted. Of course she knew. I doubted there was much that got past her. I needed to know about her. I wanted the truth, not the rumors and I wanted to hear it from her.

Once my curiosity was sated – then – then I’d take my leave.

Chapter 3

Andrei

Something didn't feel right. Being here in general felt strange. I didn't belong here and I knew it. Agreeing to stay served no purpose aside from jeopardizing my career and life. Yet, I couldn't seem to leave – not yet. I needed to know her story from her own lips and she promised it to me.

I slid from the bed, pulled on a pair of pajama bottoms, and then made my way from my room and towards where I thought the kitchen would be. Despite having a huge meal, I had a grumbling in my stomach that required nourishment. My metabolism was extremely quick due to the amount of time I spent in the gym and active lifestyle I led.

But it was more than just wanting food.

Something was off. I felt it in my gut and it was a much stronger feeling than the hunger, but it was the hunger that had me making my way in the direction of the kitchen, however, my eyes scanned every darkened nook and cranny as I proceeded towards it. Maybe it was because I didn't have my gun. Nothing made me feel more vulnerable than not having a pistol strapped to my side. Hell, even access to a knife would suffice.

My eyes scanned the hallways as I walked barefoot down them. Not a weapon in sight, unless I wanted to grab one of the paintings off the walls and try to brain someone with a canvas. Not exactly the most effective weapon.

But the place was a fortress. Dozens of guards roaming the complex and grounds. Fuck, she had guard towers and flood lights. It would be enough to satisfy anyone else. Except there was one problem. I wasn't just anyone and if I was tasked with the job to kill the new head or the Stepanov brativa then the guards wouldn't be able to stop me. They never have before. And there could be people within her organization who were in on it.

Maybe I was being paranoid. I'd only spent a day with the woman and perhaps I was starting to take a liking to her. Maybe not so much a liking as she interested me, there were so many hidden secrets that I wanted to reveal. The feeling in my gut that something was off could certainly just be my subconscious telling me that it was time to get out of there before I compromised myself. I never took chances, and this was an unnecessary chance.

It was decided.

In the morning I'd leave. Satisfying my curiosity and potentially my dick wasn't worth the risk that came with it.

For now, I'd get some food.

Reaching the kitchen, I entered the room and headed straight for the stainless steel double fridge. What were the chances that she'd have something in there I could make a sandwich out of?

My hand grasped the handle, and I was about to pull it open when I saw a shadow. It was fast and slight, but it had happened. I didn't have imaginary visions of boogie men and never second-guessed what I saw – ever.

It could be anything. A maid. A guard.

But... What if it wasn't?

The feeling of something not right rang strong and loud within me.

Opening the fridge, I took a moment to select some meats and then put them on the counter, attempting to look casual. Grasping the handle of a knife from the block, I slowly pulled it out watching the entryway out of my peripheral vision while listening intently.

If I were the one on the job, I'd avoid everything and everyone. I'd go straight to the mark and kill her silently and leave with ghostlike efficiency. I'd know the layout of the estate and I'd know exactly where to find the mark – Mila.

With the knife in hand, I crept across the room, grateful to be barefooted to keep the noise down as I moved, making my way through the house and back up the stairs.

Could my mind have imagined it?

The house was old – a fucking castle. There could be lots of reasons why I saw a shadow. If it wasn't for my gut feeling, I'd have doubled back.

Making my way up the stairs, I was breaching the floor when something hit me square at the temple sending me spiraling backward, tumbling down several stairs before gasping the handrail and catching myself from falling further. Pulling myself back up, my hip and shoulder ached from the impact of the cement stairs while my temple throbbed, and I could feel warm blood trickling down the side of my face.

At some point during the fall, the knife went flying from my grasp and had made its way halfway down the flight of stairs. Looking up, I braced myself as the moonlight streaming in from the window at the top of the landing gleamed off the razor-sharp blade in my assailant's hand as he lunged for me.



Milaslava

The night was a restless one for me. It had been a while since I'd been fucked properly and my body ached for the man down the hallway. I'd masturbated twice and it still only slightly took off the edge. There was a temptation in me to simply walk down the hallway, burst into his room and then ride him until morning. I had the feeling that he wouldn't object.

But I wouldn't. That would come off as too desperate for my liking.

He needed to come to me. I wanted him on his knees begging for a taste of my pussy before giving in. He would. I was confident in that, my status was probably the only reason why he wasn't between my legs at this very moment. I saw the way he looked at me, the way his eyes drank in every curve of my body. And I certainly hadn't missed the bulge that he had in his pants earlier in the evening.

I just had to give it a little more time.

The head of the brativa didn't beg for cock. End of story.

Closing my eyes, I sighed as my head sank down into the pillow. But dick sure would help give me a good night's sleep. Admittedly, I'd slept better since Dimitri's death than I had for a long time. But tonight, something just didn't seem right.

Sleep was just beginning to pull me into its warm embrace when I heard a noise. Slowly, I opened my eyes partway as my hand slipped under my pillow and unsheathed the knife I kept there. The door slowly opened, creaking ever-so-softly and a shadowed figure stepped inside dressed all in black practically cloaked by the darkness. I could just barely make out the outline of the figure due to the moonlight that shone in through the slight part in the drapes covering the window.

Was he there to kill me or kidnap me? There'd be arguments for either. But I was prepared – I knew there was always a chance someone would come for me eventually. Hell, the man I was trying to hire may be the one stalking toward me, cloaked in the shadows. My inviting him into my home may have been an easy in and access to me.

The figure crept closer. My hand gripped the handle of the knife tighter, my entire naked body bracing to fend off the assailant.

As he approached the edge of the bed, I closed my eyes partway. If he planned on killing me he'd have done it by now. I'd have heard him ready the gun. I was going to be taken. If that was the plan, it wasn't going to happen without a fight.

Suddenly he pounced, making it from the end of the bed and on top of me before I could even get a scream out of me. But where my vocal cords failed me, my reflexes were in top form. My hand gripped the hilt of the knife and I pulled it out from under the pillow as his hand gripped my throat.

With all of the power I had in me, I thrust the blade up and into the jugular of my assailant.

A low groan escaped past his lips, as his hand tightened on my throat while a gush of warm blood sprayed my face and naked chest.

Retracting the knife I plunged it in a second and third time turning his neck into a chopping board.

His hand around my neck loosened as he struggled to get away, rolling and crawling along the bed until he fell off onto the floor with a loud thump.

Dammit. Sitting up, I wiped the blood from my face although I imagine all I managed to do was smear it.

“Don’t move,” a man’s voice boomed as the bedroom door flew open, slamming against the wall.

Immediately I froze, one hand grabbing at my bruised neck while my other hand still gripped the knife. After a moment of fumbling, the light in the room was flicked on illuminating the room with a soft glow from the chandelier hanging from the center of the room.

Standing in the doorway wearing a pair of pajama bottoms and covered in blood was Andrei. His chest was heaving and there was a gun in his hand. Despite everything that had just transpired there was something oddly sexy about

the way he was standing there, bloodied, muscles tense and ready to take on anyone who came his way. Just seeing him before me like this made my pussy clench.

I tried to speak, but that caused a small coughing fit before I could clear my voice to speak. “They sent more than one?”

“Yeah, I killed one at the top of the staircase. There might be more. Watch yourself. He might have had a knife or needle. Hard to say, but be careful when getting out of bed in case he dropped something.”

Looking at the black satin comforter over me, I spotted the needle immediately. Picking it up, I brought it to eye level and examined it a moment before sliding from the bed and setting it on the nightstand table. “I guess kidnapping was their plan.”

He shrugged as he went to the body on the floor on the other side of the bed and then crouched down beside it.

“He’s dead, I promise you that. There’s no way the man is alive when half of his blood is covering me.” Grabbing my phone, I called Nikolay and told him to bring in every man we had and to scout the grounds. I wanted every inch of the grounds and estate searched with a fine-toothed comb.

“Yeah,” he chuckled as he stood giving his head a shake, “Yeah, you’re right, he’s dead.”

Lifting a brow at him, I placed the phone back on the nightstand table and rounded the bed, with him following suit and meeting me halfway at the foot. His eyes slowly drank in the sight of me, naked with my torso covered in blood and I

didn't miss the fact that his dick was slowly beginning to rise under the flannel bottoms covering his cock.

“I'm having Nikolay come up and clean up this mess.” Scanning his body my eyes landed on a large gash on his shoulder where a knife had pierced the skin and the thick trail of blood that seeped from the wound. “Looks like the other guy didn't go down without a fight.”

He followed my gaze to his shoulder and chuckled. “That's nothing. I've had worse.”

I could see that, his body was littered with scars of varying sizes from bullet wounds to stab wounds. “You may have seen worse, but that needs to be cleaned up. Follow me.” Not waiting for him to respond, knowing he'd follow, I led him from the bedroom to the ensuite bath.

“I should really deal with the body.”

“Nikolay will. I pay people for that. Close the door behind you.”

Chapter 4

Milaslava

He did as told and then took a seat at the edge of the black and grey marble tub that could easily handle four people. Having a nice, relaxing bath, with classical music and wine was one of my guilty pleasures. It gave me a chance to break free from the world and just exist free from worry. It was the one place I could go to escape Dmitri and set my mind straight whenever we'd have a confrontation.

Searching the tall, dark wooden cabinet, I pulled out a first aid kit and brought it over to him, setting it next to the bathtub on the floor. The kit was much more fully equipped than what you'd find in an average household. It could almost be considered a traveling surgeons kit.

Grabbing some sanitized wipes, I quickly cleaned the wound not missing the fact that he winced ever-so slightly when the cloth wiped over the wound itself. Once clean, I grimaced. "This is going to need stitches."

"It's fine. I should really help with the search of the grounds." He attempted to get up only to have me grab his good shoulder and push him back down.

"You'll be fine once I stitch you up. Don't move." Straightening, I exited the bathroom and entered the bedroom. There was a bottle of half drank vodka in the liquor cabinet in the bedroom. He'd need it.

A couple of my men were already in the bedroom wrapping up the body of my assailant. They paused their work for a moment their eyes drinking in the sight of my naked, bloodied body.

“Are you okay boss? Should- ” One of the two finally spoke up and asked.

“No.” I nodded to the dead man on the floor. “Just get rid of him. I want everything on him to be gathered and looked over. I’ll check up on things in a little bit.”

“Yes ma’am.” His eyes immediately shifted from me and back to the task at hand, although I could see he was watching me as I strode past him. Let him look, I had nothing to hide or be ashamed about. Society made women feel ashamed of their bodies, if they weren’t perfect, they needed to be covered. And those who did show their bodies were considered whores who were seeking approval from wherever they could get it. That shouldn’t be the case and now that I was free and had the power to control the lives of others in the palm of my hand I’d be damned if I allowed men or society to dictate anything to me ever again.

Entering the bathroom, I closed and locked the door behind me.

“Not quite the best time for a cocktail is it?” he joked, but the grin quickly turned to a grimace when I passed him the bottle.

“I figured that the alcohol would take the edge off.”

Unscrewing the top, he took a drink and grimaced. “Damn, this stuff is vile,” he gasped looking down at the

bottle.

“It’s my late husband’s personal mix. It never made it to market.”

“I can understand why.”

Quickly, I found the needle and surgical thread. “If you’d like I could call for a doctor.” Looking up at him, I gave him a wicked grin. “If you feel you need it frozen to stitch up.”

He motioned to his blood-covered torso. “You think I’d pussy out on a few stitches.”

“Just giving you options. And just so you know, I’ve done this before.”

“I wouldn’t doubt it. I think it comes with the line of work.”

The cut was clean and easy to stitch up. There was a couple of sharp inhales coming from him, but he remained still as I worked. Tying off the knot, I leaned back and examined my handiwork finally giving it a satisfied nod.

Gathering the supplies and closing the case, I caught sight of myself in the mirror. I looked like I belonged on the set of a horror movie, every part of my body coated in the dark red substance.

“You look fucking sexy.”

Laughing, I turned to face him as he stood. “Blood-covered women turn you on? Almost sounds like you’ve got a bit of the ripper in you.”

“You think. I’m complimenting a woman who saved my life.” There was such an intense gleam in his eyes as he

scanned my body once more that send shivers through me.

“Well, right now we’re getting blood over my bathroom.” There were streams and smears of blood covering the white surfaces. It was starting to appear as though the man I murdered died in here instead of the other room. The sounds of my men moving the body had died off and all that remained between us was the sound of our breaths as we stared at each other.

“Good thing there’s a shower in here.” He nodded towards the large, state-of-the-art shower across the room.

Stepping forward and closing the distance between us, I ran my fingers along the side of the wound I’d just sewn up. He winced but didn’t move away. Looking up from his shoulder, our gazes locked as I began to run my fingers along the lines of hard muscle in his pecks and then lower to his stomach. His body was perfection in every way, the scars littering his flesh only increasing the sexiness within him by giving him an even more dangerous edge.

This was one of the finest killers in Russia. And I wanted him – in more ways than one.

I knew what he was suggesting, I caught sight of the rise of his dick beneath the pajama bottoms. The fact that he could be turned on after we’d just killed two men was sick and demented, but I was feeling the same thing. Regardless of how sick and twisted, there was a high that I was riding after plunging the knife into my attacker that refused to go away and demanded to be sated in other primitive endeavors.

Catching my bottom lip between my teeth, I looked into his eyes. “That sounds rather intimate considering I may

be your employer.”

“I thought we’d already established that isn’t going to happen.”

Laughing softly, I moved past him and turned on the shower, and once the temperature was to my liking, I stepped under the stream of water that rained down from the ceiling. The unit was all digital and had my personal temperature saved so the water was always perfection as it slithered down my body.

Despite it being his idea, he hesitated a moment before hooking his thumbs into the waistband of his pants and pushing the bottoms down his hips and allowing them to puddle on the floor at his feet. “It does look inviting.”

As did his dick. It was rapidly rising as he stepped into the shower. By the time he was standing before me, it stood strong and proud. Just like the rest of him, his dick was perfection. It had been to many years to count since I’ve had a dick in my that would fully satisfy my cravings. But his would more than do it. I suspected he had the skills to back it up.

“Me or the water?” I asked giving him a devilish grin before closing my eyes and then tilting my head back allowing the water to wash the blood from my hair and face. I could feel his presence without having to open my eyes. The warmth and electricity coming from me seemed to radiated the couple inches separating us and pulled me closer until our bodies were flush and his hands slipped around my waist, grasping my ass and pulling me tight to him.

His rigid dick pressed against my stomach as I reopened my eyes and looked up at him, moment before his

lips came down onto mine. His hands slipped down to my ass and pulled me tight against his nakedness as our lips pressed tight together.

I moaned softly, my lips parting, inviting him in.

With an urgency I wasn't expecting, a shiver of anticipation rolled over me, his tongue thrust past my lips and into my mouth searching out mine. As our tongues caressed each other another wave of anticipation washed over me, more intense than before beginning at the top of my head to explode between my legs.

Sliding my hands up over his chest, I laced my fingers behind his neck as I pressed tighter against him. The fire between my legs intensified as I found myself wantonly gyrating against his rigid body.

His lips left mine, leaving me panting as he leaned back and began to nibble and bite his way down the side of my neck, sending jolts of pleasure and pain through me. I moaned loudly, my fingers digging into the flesh of his shoulders, taking care to avoid the wound I'd just sewn shut.

“You're the sexiest boss I've ever come across.” He growled lifting his head and looking down into my eyes.

I was one of the most powerful women in Russia, yet the way his body seemed to eclipse mine made me feel like it would be okay to give in and allow someone else to take control. Dmitri demanded obedience and submission. It hadn't been a choice. It had been one of the many things I had to bear in order to get to where I was today.

But right now – in this moment, I wasn't being forced to give in. I wanted to let go of the control and experience pleasures I hadn't felt in a very long time.

“You're just trying to butter me up.”

“There's so many things I want to do to you, Mila.” His hand slipped to the back of my head, his fingers tangling into my wet locks and fisting them in his hand. The tug on my hair felt divine. Closing my eyes, I moaned as he urged me backward until my back was against the cool metal side of the shower. “So many things.”

A grin spread across my lips as his head dipped and nipped at my neck again. “It might take longer than a week to show me everything.” Wrapping my leg around his waist, I urged his groin tighter to mine, craving the feel of his cock between my moist folds.

“Oh, how you tempt me,” he growled, slipping a hand between my legs, his fingers spread my pussy lips and he stroked my entrance. Slowly, excruciatingly slow. My pussy clenched as I bit down on my lower lip to keep from crying out.

I rocked my hips against him, needing more than the tease he was offering me.

“I took you as a man of action, Andrei. Take what you want.”

Opening my eyes, I looked back up at him as he thrust a finger into me. I cried out as he thrust in a second and began to stroke my inner core. “I will. When you beg.”

A laugh escaped my lips followed by another moan. Beg him? A part of me wanted to revolt Milaslava Stepanov begged no one. Yet, the part of me that wanted him to dominate me. That part wanted to find out how high he could take me won out.

“Please, Andrei,” I gasped as his lips brushed against my neck once more.

His fingers immediately slipped from me. Grasping my thigh, he hoisted me up a little higher, pinning me tightly against the wall and thrusting up and into me.

I screamed out, my head falling back against the shower wall as his dick stretched me, unlike anything I’d ever felt before. Pulling back until the head of his dick barely breached my entrance he thrust back in, harder this time – balls deep. My fingernails clawed at his back as my head fell forward resting against his neck.

The water continued to beat down on our bodies as our bodies began to move as one in fast frenzied motions. The loud slaps of our wet bodies slamming together seemed to echo throughout the shower creating a melody with the moans and sounds of satisfaction we both uttered.

My entire body began to tense as the tension built within me at a rapid pace. This wasn’t about love or affection. It was about quenching an itch. Satisfying something primal within us – within me.

Lifting my head, I looked down at him as I began to crest the summit. Sensing my eyes on him, he looked up, his eyes burning with hunger about to be satisfied, and slammed

into me one more time, with so much force it left me breathless and sent a jolt of pain across my back.

I cried out as I hit the peak, my pussy milking his dick and came crashing down with such intensity that it left me feeling light-headed. My entire body vibrated uncontrollably as I held tight to him as he slammed into me one final time and groaned loudly, his dick filling me with his offering.

“Fuck,” he sighed, resting his head on my shoulder.

Fuck indeed.

Chapter 5

Milaslava

Reaching up and over my head, I stretched, the pull moving all the way down my body from my head to the tip of my toes. I ached, but in the way that I'd missed aching. I hadn't been fucked so good in years – if ever.

There had been way too many years wasted on Dimitri and I don't just mean in the sex department, in every aspect of my life. But it was over now, I'd paid the price I had to for this life and I had everything I could have ever dreamed of. More than I'd ever dreamed.

I was untouchable.

“Your men were quite efficient getting him out of here last night.” He rolled over and looked down at the spot on the carpet where my assailant had bled out.

Sitting up I leaned over Andrei's body to see the massive red stain on my carpet and a smile tugged at the corners of my lips. God, it had felt good to kill the piece of shit who dared to enter my house and attempt to kill me. Not as good as watching Dimitri take his last breath, but pretty damned close.

“I do need to have that carpet dealt with.” Rolling back over to the other side of the bed, I grabbed my phone and called Nikolay giving him instructions to send a cleaning crew up to the bedroom. Sliding from the bed, I placed the phone back on the nightstand table. “Besides, I think we need to clean

up.” I looked down at myself and then the sheets. “And that asshole ruined my new sheets.” We’d been so caught up in fucking ourselves into exhaustion after our first round in the shower we hadn’t given thought to the mess of blood that had remained on the bed. It wasn’t terribly bad, my body had gotten the worst of it, but there was no doubt the sheets were ruined.

“They were nice sheets.”

Looking up I laughed, seeing his wide grin.

Two men appeared in the open doorway and stopped, both looking uncomfortable as their eyes shifted from us to the bloody carpet and then back to us. Their gazes tried to remain on my face, but I didn’t miss the fact that they kept dipping to my tits.

Well, let them look. I was done hiding and living in the shadows.

“I’m going to go get myself cleaned up.” Giving Andrei’s naked body a slow up and down look, my gaze paused on his dick before moving back up to his face. “Are you available to give me a hand with that?”

“Yeah, I think I can.”

“Then follow me.” Walking past him, I allowed my hand to graze his ass as I walked past him, past my men standing awkwardly in the doorway and into the bathroom that was as large as some people’s apartment. “Close the door,” I instructed to him, as I went to the shower and turned it on.

“Close the door? Now you’re shy?” He chuckled, closing the door and coming to join me at the shower.

“Cowering and attempting to cover my body when around my men is simply weakness. It gives them power over me and says that I have something to be ashamed of. But I don’t. Just because they got to see me, doesn’t mean they ever have the privilege of fucking me.”

His dark eyes flashed with a feral need as he stepped closer, his dick rapidly beginning its ascent. “Yet, you gave me that privilege.”

“Exactly, I gave you.” Reaching out, I grasped his dick in my hand and was rewarded by his sharp inhale. “I could easily have slit your throat as I had the fool in the bedroom. But you assisted me, so I gave you a piece of something rarely given to anyone.”

He chuckled. “I’m honored.”

“As you should be.”

Releasing his dick yet maintaining eye contact, I stepped back and under the stream of water. The water felt soothing beating over my sore body.

I was playing with fire with this man. There was no one stopping him from killing me right here and now and turning my newfound empire into turmoil. For all I knew he was secretly working for one of my enemies and biding his time to take me out. The very fact that he could destroy me was a very real danger, yet it only intensified the rush I was getting from this experience.

As if reading my mind, he stepped forward and into the shower, his stare glued to mine and asked, “What if I was hired to kill you? What if this whole thing is a ruse?”

Reaching out, his hand grasped my throat and he pushed me backward until my body was flush against the cool silver and white tile. I didn't squirm or attempt to get away, in fact, him towering over me menacing only made my pussy clench demanding his dick again. Smiling, I refused to be intimidated by the massive man before me.

“Then do it.” A smirk spread across my lips, “If you have the balls.”

His lips came crashing down onto mine as his hand tightened around my neck. Moaning against his lips, I slipped a leg around his waist and pulled his torso tight to mine, his erect dick pressing against my stomach.

“As you wish.”



Milaslava

“Boss, do you mind if I share my opinion on something?” Nikolay shifted uncomfortably in the chair across the desk from me.

Leaning back in the black leather padded office chair, I crossed my arms over my chest and eyed him a moment. I

knew what his issue was going to be, but I was going to make him say it. “What might the issue be, Nikolay?”

He cleared his throat leaning forward and then sunk back into the chair. “With all due respect.”

I cocked a brow at him, but didn’t say anything – waiting.

“Well, I have heard that you’ve been intimate with Andrei.”

“You’ve heard, have you? Who pray tell, has told you that?”

“One of the men mentioned it.”

“And what if I was?”

“He’s a potential employee. It just concerns me that perhaps you haven’t thought of the hazards that something like this could have.”

My eyes widened as if I hadn’t considered that the sewing circle would be set abuzz with rumors. I knew it, I just didn’t care. “What kind of hazards?”

“Just know I’m loyal and will always be loyal. I want you to succeed. So when you- ”

The amusement I was feeling initially, quickly faded. “I’m going to ask you a serious question. I want you to answer honestly.”

“O-okay.”

“Would you be giving my husband this same talking to?” My eyes narrowed as I stared at him. If he tried to lie I’d

see straight through it, but I already knew the answer to the question.

“Boss...”

Cocking my head to the side, I continued to eye him.

He released a loud sigh and bowed his head. “No, boss. I wouldn’t.”

“Why? He wasn’t shy in flaunting his affairs.”

Would he say what was on his mind? I doubted it. As pissed as I would be, I would have to appreciate that he had the balls to say it out loud.

“Boss, I feel like many of the men are going to hold you to a higher standard because you’re a woman. Dmitri ran this organization for decades. You’re not just a big change by stepping into his shoes, but many men are expecting you to fail. I don’t think you will, but I felt that I needed to share with you what was being said.”

Anger rose up within me as my hands tightened into fists. Forcing a smile to my lips, I nodded. “I understand what you are saying. But hear me now. I will not be a dancing monkey for a bunch of hired goons. They will fall in line and get accustomed to how I do things, otherwise, they and everyone they hold dear will die. Women, children, and their pet dog. I don’t fucking care. Cross me and there will be dire consequences. Feel free to relay that message to each and every one of them who might dislike my way of doing things.”

“Yes, Boss.”

“Good.” Tilting my head from side to side, I stretched out the muscles and sighed. I needed a massage, I was getting

tense and didn't like feeling tense. "Now tell me about our little captive."

"We've tried a few things to make him talk. So far he's pretty tight-lipped."

"Find out who he is. If he's married, find his wife and bring her here. Kids too, if they have them. He will talk and he will sing like a canary – one way or another."

Nikolay nodded. "Consider it done, Boss."

Chapter 6

Andrei

Well, last night and again this morning had been fucked up. In the best possible way.

When I came here to speak to the new head of the most powerful brativa in the country it never occurred to me that I'd be fucking the Ice Queen's brains out. It was definitely an interesting turn of events.

Giving my appearance a quick inspection in the mirror, I made a quick adjustment to the collar of my black button-down shirt and nodded my satisfaction. I'd be lying if I said I didn't want to impress her. I may still be adamant about remaining a freelancer, but now that I'd had a taste of her pussy, I wasn't anxious to walk away from it yet. There was a fire in her that I want to explore further. No, it was beyond want – I needed to.

Who was she really? How did she come to be with someone like Dmitri? I'd heard countless rumors, but I wanted the truth – at least her version of the truth.

Leaving my bedroom, I made my way through the house until I found her in the backyard in her domed paradise, reclined on a wicker chaise. The snow had stopped coming down sometime throughout the night and the morning sun was now brightly beating down on us. Immediately, I felt overdressed seeing her in a white bikini covered up with a crocheted dress cover that came to mid-thigh on her and a pair

of oversized gold-rimmed Versace sunglasses concealing her eyes.

“Are you going to stand there and stare all day or join me? Maybe we can have a dip?”

Fuck, she was a bitch and I fucking loved it. Women tended to bend to my will and were easily gotten. It had become quite a bore, but not Milaslava. It made me want her more. It made me wonder if the whole attempt on her life was a set-up. It certainly would have been an extreme way of gaining my interest and convincing me to come on board, but could I put it past her to play such games? I didn't know for sure. It would certainly be extreme, but she was the type of woman who didn't do things half-assed.

It seemed rather convenient that she had a knife within reach when she was attacked.

Or maybe she was just prepared, a group of her people had just been murdered.

The need to know was like an itch that had to be scratched.

“Did your room get cleaned up?”

“They're still working on it. I placed an order for new bedding, but we have tons of it already so it's not a huge loss. I will need to replace the rug, it was brought in from overseas and I did really like that rug. That'll be a pain in the ass to replace, but nothing is impossible and very few things are irreplaceable.”

“I suppose your right.”

Pushing her glasses up to the top of her head, she looked me up and down. “You’re looking good.”

“Not nearly as good as you.” I didn’t even attempt to hide my appreciation for her body.

She grinned. “Even bloodied, huh?”

“Especially when you’re bloodied.”

Undoing the buttons on my cuffs, I rolled my sleeves up and undid a couple of the shirt buttons as I made my way over to her bar and helped myself to a drink from the massive selection of alcohol she had on hand. It was sick and perverted, but just the remembering of her with blood covering her after doing that idiot in was a massive turn-on. It wasn’t the murder that did it for me. It was the power she exerted. How she killed him and instead of crying in a corner, she simply brushed it off and got down to business. He was nothing to her and she’d do it to me in an instant if I crossed her. I was a sick bastard for that fact getting me hard, but it did.

I had a twisted sexual mind. Pleasure and pain tended to blend together for me and I suspected that it did for her as well. The pleasures we could explore together if we had the time.

“You know this doesn’t change a thing. I’m still not changing my mind about working for you,” I reminded her. I doubted she would associate what we’d done together several times already, with me staying, but I felt it needed to be said.

“Did I ask? If after this week you still don’t want to come into the fold, then I would have to assume that you were

incapable of making good decisions.”

I huffed, a grin spreading across my lips. Grabbing my drink, I walked around to the front of the bar and perched myself on the edge of a stool. “Would you say last night was a good or bad decision?”

“I think last night was a very good decision. It’s been a while since I’ve had a good bout of stress relief.”

“I imagine it must be a lot of stress taking over your husband’s business endeavors.”

“I’d been with him for many, many years, even though I hadn’t been privy to most of the dealings I’m not a stupid woman. I caught onto what he was doing and how he was doing it. I took notice of everything. It really hasn’t been a huge adjustment. I will admit that I’ve come against more resistance than I was hoping to experience.”

“You should have known that it wasn’t going to be a smooth transition.”

“I didn’t expect it to be, no. I was hoping for the best, but preparing for the worst. However, I did lose someone that I wasn’t expecting in the attack against my men – which is where you would come in and fill that void. I’ve heard you are the best and I want only the best.”

I cracked a smile. “If only I was interested.”

Picking up her wine glass, she brought it to her lips watching me over the rim of the glass. “If only.”

“Were there any more men? Aside from the two we dealt with that is?”

A grin spread across her lips as she put the glass back down. “In fact, there was one. Found him just inside the walls on the property. The dogs sniffed him out quickly, despite the cold.”

My interest peaked. “Where is he now?”

“He’s in a secure place. I’m giving him some time to consider his life decisions.” There was a gleam in her eyes that told me she was making plans for him.

“And what do you plan on doing with him?”

“Get the information I need. Once I know exactly who put a hit on me and my men, I’ll take care of them. There is no mercy. People will learn that. They were scared of my late husband, but once I’m done, I’ll ensure they’re terrified of me.”

“It sounds like you have some definite plans.”

“My late husband lacked vision. He was stuck in the old ways of doing things. I know the world is moving forward and we need to move along with it.”

“Sometimes the old ways are the old ways for a reason – they’re effective.”

“There’s always room for improvement.”

Clucking my tongue off the roof of my mouth, I nodded. “That’s fair.” Taking a drink, I stared at her not sure how to broach the questions I had for her.

“Spit it out.”

“Excuse me.”

“I can see it in your eyes. There’s something on your mind and I’d like to know what it is.”

Chuckling, I sat back on the stool and took a moment to gather my thoughts. “I do actually. Not about operations currently. That doesn’t interest me.”

“Then what does?”

“You.”

She seemed to brighten at that answer. How many people actually took the time to really get to know her. She was always second to Dmitri, his trophy wife. But did anyone ever care to dig deeper and find out who she as a woman was? I suspected not.

“What about me?” I had her undivided attention now, her ice blue eyes piercing into mine.

“How did you meet Dmitri? Why did you stay with him so long?”

She laughed, catching her lower lip between her teeth and nodded. “Okay. I’ll bite. It’s not like I’m keeping my past a secret.”

Just no one ever cared to ask the details.

“Dmitri was a regular at the strip club I was a dancer at. He was a big deal back then, but not to the extent that he was when he died. Dmitri was the kind of man who would focus on one thing and do whatever it took to own it. I was one of those things. At first, I wasn’t interested, I’d heard rumors about him and just didn’t feel comfortable with the kind of person he was...”

“But...”

“But I had a son – Jacob. And we were struggling financially. Not many people know this, but Dmitri couldn’t have kids. Me having a young fatherless son, a boy who could grow up admiring Dmitri, was also something that drew him to me. He offered me everything I could have dreamed for. I would have been stupid not to take him up on it.”

“He treated you well.”

She finished off her drink, stood and made her way to the bar, to pour herself another.

I watched her prepare the drink, my eyes focusing on her long, graceful fingers. Everything about this woman screamed class, power and raw sexuality. Would it be so bad if I stayed on and worked for her, just for a little while? I’d been moving all of my life, maybe sticking to one place wouldn’t be such a bad thing?

After taking a sip from her drink, she rounded the bar and came to sit on the stool next to the one I was perched on. Her expression took on a far-away look and a hint of a smile touched her lips for a moment before her eyes came to focus on me again.

“At first things were good. He treated Jacob as if he were his own and I was lavished with attention and gifts. All I had to do was ask and it would be mine. He showed me off as if I were a precious gem.”

“Must have felt good to have one of the most powerful men in the country doing that?”

She laughed. “Considering I grew up poor and spent several years as a stripper fending off the advances of drunk idiots, it did. It felt great.”

“So, what happened?”

“I stopped being the bright and shiny new thing. I got old.”

“You’re stunning.” And I meant it.

“It didn’t take long, a few years and then the cheating began. It was hidden at first but then he became more brazen about it. A couple years after the cheating the physical abuse started. I went from being his prized possession to being something he used and tossed away. I was something he used to take his anger and frustration on.”

“Then why stay?”

She huffed. “For Jacob. Despite it all, he never laid a hand on Jacob. So I stayed and waited...”

“For the perfect opportunity to kill him.” The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them. I silently cursed myself for letting down my guard and feeling comfortable enough to not filter what I said.

There was a sadistic sparkle in her eyes as she nodded. “I needed Jacob to be in a strong position within the crime families that we’d merged. All the while I spent years behind the scenes learning the business. Dmitri thought I was stupid. But I’m hardly stupid, although I allowed him to think it. People let down their guard around people they feel are intellectually inferior to them.”

“I’d never underestimate you.”

“Good. You’re smart. That’s why I need you.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell her yes. Hell, she’d spent years manipulating her late husband. This could be just one more of her games.

This could be a set-up, the back of my mind chimed in. The heart-to-heart. The assailants. It could all be a set-up to convince me to work for her. It seemed like an extreme amount of work just to bring an assassin into the fold, but she needed men with my expertise.

She broke the silence between us with a clap of her hands. “How about we have a swim? The water is perfection, I promise.”

Standing, I began to undress, my dick beginning to swell. “How could I turn that offer down?”

Chapter 7

Milaslava

After knocking on Andrei's bedroom door, I took a step back and waited for him to open it. There was a sense of sadistic anticipation that raced through my veins over what I had planned for us today. The assholes came into my home and tried to take me, the one I had locked up would regret that decision for the remaining hours he had left on this earth.

The door opened and he stood before me, bare-chested in a pair of jeans that hung low on his hips. My eyes drank in the sight of him, the broad, toned chest and the thin line of dark hair that trailed from his belly button and then disappeared under the waistband of his jeans.

I snapped my head back up to look him in the eyes. We had things we had to get done and standing here like a schoolgirl with a crush wasn't going to get them done. I should have kept things professional all along, but what was the point of having the power I had if I couldn't do what and who I wanted when I wanted it?

"To what do I owe the pleasure, and so soon." He smiled down at me, his eyes drinking me in. Hunger almost immediately began to simmer within those dark orbs.

"Well, you were asking about our prisoner and after giving it some thought, I figured that you might want to accompany me to speak with him."

"Hmm. Are you trying to entice me with a good time?"

“Depends on what you consider a good time. A little interrogation followed by brunch and a dip in the pool sounds like a good start to me.”

He stepped forward and then leaned a shoulder against the door jamb. “A person would have to be all sorts of fucked up to feel that a good time consists of interrogating a man.”

Giving him a devilish grin, I shrugged. “Should I take that to mean that you’re not interested?” I knew he was, he was as curious as I was to get to the bottom of who tried to abduct me. I turned to leave, only to have his hand fly out and grasp my upper arm and spin me back around.

There was a gleam in his eyes that told me he wanted to get to the bottom of this as much as I did and there was an element of sick satisfaction that would come with making the prisoner spill every little detail. And if he didn’t spill his guts, then he’d be in a hell, unlike anything he’d ever experienced before.

“Hold up a moment. I’m interested.”

“Good.”

Releasing my arm, he left the bedroom door open as he walked back into the room. “Just let me grab a shirt.” He tossed his suitcase onto the bed, grabbed a black t-shirt, and pulled it over his head. “Now let’s get to it.”

“Then follow me.”

I led him down a series of hallways and down a flight of concrete stairs that led to the basement. The basement floor of the castle remained unrenovated. It was cold and drab, exactly as it had been when the castle was built.

“I don’t think you have to bother interrogating him, the dampness and cold down here would be enough to make him talk,” he joked.

“No one comes down here. At least not often. It’s where the dungeons are and the former servant’s quarters. We’ve since built a separate home for the servants on the grounds so they have their own privacy when not working. At least those who choose to live on the property. Many choose to live in town.”

He released a low whistle. “Your own personal dungeon and everything, this place is mind-blowing. However, as grand as this home is, I think I prefer my living quarters small. Easy to pack up and leave.”

“You move around a lot?”

He nodded. “Yeah, a fair amount. I prefer to keep moving. It’s easier to keep myself hidden from the world that way.”

“You’re going to need to settle eventually, won’t you? Ever think of having kids, getting married all those things people normally long for?”

He laughed, the sound echoing down the barren cement hallways. “Fuck no! At least not the kid part. Why would I want to bring someone into this fucked up world? Besides, I know I’m not normal. I enjoy hurting people and get a thrill out of doing unspeakable things and not getting caught. I don’t want a child who has to struggle with that urge.”

“I understand that.” I slowed my step to nearly a halt. “You know, I never used to be like this. I’d like to think my

mindset was somewhat normal when I first had my son, Jacob. This life – Dmitri. It changed me. It turned me into someone my former self wouldn't be able to recognize.”

“Changed it or unleashed what was always there?”

Stopping completely, I turned to look up at him mulling over the question. “You know, when I gave birth to Jacob I felt a protectiveness that I'd never felt in my entire lifetime. I'd kill anyone who tried to hurt him.” I laughed thinking of the man my son was now. Heading one of the largest crime syndicates in the world, he hardly needed my protection. “I've never felt that way for anyone before him and I doubt I ever will again.”

“And what about him? Does he have the humanity that I lack and you've lost?”

Wow, he was really hitting me with the hard questions. My eyes narrowed at the man I'd only known for a few days yet was feeling a draw to unlike anyone before him. “Jacob does what needs to be done. But... I think he's capable of having a mate and children and even genuinely loving them.” I chuckled uneasily. “Maybe that piece of shit of a father who left us had one redeeming quality. He had just enough goodness in him to keep him from being like us?”

Andrei took on a thoughtful look for a moment as he rubbed at the day-old scruff on his chin, “Maybe...”

Yeah, maybe. As proud of him as I was to have risen to his position in life, I didn't want him to be alone forever. He was building an empire on Helka Island, but what would all that be for if he didn't have someone to share it with and a offspring to pass the legacy down to?



Andrei

Mila was a fascinating woman. There was such coldness within her, but there was also a glimmer of something I had never got to experience – love for another human being. I'd never had that. I didn't need a child to know that there was no affection or love for me to offer to a child. I was an empty shell in that regard.

However, I was drawn to Mila. I certainly wouldn't say love, or anything of that sort, but more like a comradery that was as close to love as I think I'm capable of feeling. I achieved that feeling in just two short days and I wanted to explore that further despite what was in my best interests. Very unlike me.

She cleared her throat she tore her gaze from mine. "Yes, well. Let's carry on and see what our prisoner has to say... Shall we?" And just like that the glimmer of humanity I saw in her was gone replaced by the mask of coldness she always wore.

After what felt like an endless walk down cold, emotionless hallways we came to a large oak door with metal bars reinforcing it and a large padlock hanging from the bracket. The door was ajar and just as she pushed the door open there was a stomach-curdling scream.

Inside was a man hanging by his wrists from the rafters, blood coating his body. He was hoisted up just high

enough that his toes dangled along the dirty, bloodied floor. Before him was an older, short, thin, dark-haired man wearing a black butcher's apron wielding a long, thin, bloodied knife.

“That’s enough Krill, we can take it from here.”

The torturer stepped back from his charge and peered over at us. “Boss, I think we’re almost there. I just need a little more time.”

“And you can have the time. We need a few minutes with him first.”

He looked like he was about to protest once more, then slowly nodded. “Very well.” Placing the knife on a tray of assorted interrogation devices he strode past us and exited.

She gave me a sheepish smile. “He’s a sick fucker,” Her gaze looked back to the hanging man, “but tends to get the job done.”

The man groaned and slowly raised his head.

A frown creased my brow as I stepped closer. The florescent overhead light in the room left a lot to be desired, but there was something eerily familiar about the man. He picked his head up a little further peering at us with hazy eyes, “She’s crazy. Please man, let me go,” he appealed to me.

That voice...

I knew that voice.

“I only hope that we can get what we need from him before he ends up dying on us.” She stepped closer to him, reaching out and grasping a handful of his shoulder-length auburn hair and roughly forcing his eyes to meet hers. “Who

fucking sent you? I'll warn you now, I'm not nearly as gentle as Krill."

It suddenly struck me who the man was. Even in his deteriorated state it also seemed to click for him as well. "I know you," he managed to rasp. "Get me out of here brother."

Fuck.

Spinning to face me yet still holding the man's head up by the hair, Mila's brow creased as she looked up at me with a million questions in her eyes. "Do you know him?"

Slowly, I nodded. "I do." There was no point in lying.

"How do you know him?" There was suspicion in her tone.

Double fuck. I needed to de-escalate this before things got out of hand and assumptions started to fly. I didn't want to be strung up next to the half-dead man a few feet from me. Lacing my fingers behind my neck, I released a breath of air debating what to say and how to word it.

"You better start talking Andrei."

"I've worked for his boss in the past. Not recently, it's been a while now. And he tried to hire me for a job recently."

Releasing the man's hair, she planted her fists on her hips and gave me a spit-it-out look. "What job, Andrei?"

"Previously, I'd been hired for various hits. Recently, they contacted me with you as their target." I put a hand up stopping her from making assumptions. "I didn't take the job, obviously, since you're still alive." I shot her a grin that went unreciprocated.

“Who tried to hire you? Who’s his boss?”

“It’s Cara Griffin. Cara Griffin wants you dead. She’s beginning to deal heavily in the arms trade and I can only assume that she wants you out of the way. I’d heard rumors that she’s been wanting your family out of the way for several years now so she could be the main arms dealer in Europe. I suspect she saw Dmitri’s death as a way to finish off your brativa once and for all”

The hanging man’s chuckle broke the tension between us.

Fire flashed in Mila’s eyes moments before she grabbed the knife that her interrogator had been using and with one swift and fluid motion sliced it across her captive’s throat. What blood he had left in him sprayed us both as he made incoherent gurgling sounds moments before his body went limp.

Tossing the knife back onto the steel tray she wiped the man’s blood from her face. “Well then, I guess we now know where to dump the dead bodies of her men. They’ll make great fertilizer for her front lawn.”

Damn.

Chapter 8

Milaslava

“What are you thinking?” Andrei asked entering my aviary where I’d been sitting for the past few hours deep in thought. Sitting on a stool at the tiki bar, with several cocktails in me I was starting to feel the beginnings of a buzz and welcomed it.

I looked up from my drink and watched him approach me. He’d changed from the clothing he’d been wearing that afternoon which I’d inadvertently gotten blood on when I’d slit that bastard’s throat.

“I was considering what my next course of action is going to be,” I admitted.

“Would like to talk it out with me?”

“You almost came here to kill me.” I crinkled my nose up at him. “Perhaps you aren’t the best person to talk these things over with?”

He chuckled as he made his way around to the back of the bar and made himself a drink. “If I intended to kill you, I’d have done it already.”

“These others failed. Maybe you can do it now and gather your bounty while my guard is down.”

“I suspect that is the furthest thing from the truth. If anything, I would guess that your guard is up higher than it’s

ever been.” Giving me a playful wink he rounded the bar and came to sit on the stool next to me.

Wasn't that the truth? I was finding myself second-guessing everyone on my payroll. Could one of them have been compromised?

“The thing with people like us is that truth doesn't come easy. Something happening such as this shows us that we can't control everything despite desperately wanting to.”

Sitting a little straighter in the chair I tilted my chin up looking at him defiantly. “I've got shit here under control, don't worry about that.”

“Do you?” He cocked a brow up at me.

I didn't answer. I let silence take over the tension between us becoming suffocating.

He took a drink and then continued. “You've had a kidnapping attempt and your convoy of arms was ambushed. Was Cara involved in the convoy incident, it's hard to say. With any luck it was, otherwise you've got a fight with two organizations on your hands. Not a great position to be in if you ask me.”

“Well, I didn't,” I snapped longing to smack the smug look right off his fucking lips. “As much as I've enjoyed our time together perhaps it's best if we just cut this little visit short and you can leave tomorrow. I've got work to do.”

Leaning an elbow on the countertop, he drummed his fingertips against the cool brown marble. “You're facing your first challenge as head of the brativa and your answer is to

kick out the one man who might be able to help get things under control for you?”

Anger surged with me. Fuck him! He had been clear previously that he wasn't interested in joining my crew, him flaunting the fact pissed me off.

“Okay, perhaps my playing with you isn't warranted at this moment. Let me get down to it.”

“That would be appreciated.”

“I've given it some thought as I was washing another man's blood off myself for the second time in less than a week and I feel you're a strong, independent woman. You've risen to the top, but you need people loyal to you. People with skillsets that don't come along often.”

I was drowning and the bastard was describing the water.

As if sensing where my mind was going he held a hand out to me. “Hear me out. I'm not the kind of man who stays still. I don't like committing myself to any organization. But... His eyes scanned the aviary. “I like it here. At least for now.”

A sprout of hope began to grow within me, but I kept my expression blank. I needed to hear him say it before I'd let him in. “So what are you saying?”

“I'm saying that I'd like to come onto your crew – at least for a while. Help you get on steady ground. I know Cara and I know a bit about how she operates”

He was right, my suspicions were on high alert. My entire staff was subject to my current scrutiny. “How do I know I can trust you?”

“You approached me, for one. Secondly- ” he grasped my chin in his hand and tilted my face up so our gazes locked. “We both feel it Mila. The connection. I don’t know what it is or why it’s nagging at me, but I’d like to see it through. But you need to let me in and take the leap of faith and trust me.”

As I looked into his nearly black eyes, I was conflicted. Trust needed to be earned, could I simply give it away like that? But he was right, I had summoned him. He was offering me what I’d asked for. As much as my ego wanted me to say I didn’t need him, I did. I didn’t want to let myself down, but I also didn’t want my son to find out things were becoming more complicated here in Russia than I could handle on my own. While I cared for my son, the bratva was mine. Helka island was his. I wasn’t willing to play second fiddle to anyone not even Jacob, I’d done that for too long already.

But Andrei...

Andrei could either be my demise or a key component of my success. The fact that my pussy clenched each time I looked at him was simply an added bonus. But it was more than just sexual if I were to be honest with myself, it’s like he could see me – who I truly was. He seemed to understand me and wanted to learn more about me, something I’d never experienced before.

Could I trust him and opened myself up in all ways?

I didn’t know for sure...

But on the other hand, how could I not? Like it or not I did need him.

I just had to remember to keep my heart safely encased in the ice I'd kept it in all of these years. The ice had a slight crack in it, but I wouldn't let him break through all the way. I couldn't.

Slowly a smile spread across my lips. "I told you by the end of this week you'd change your mind."

He looked hard into my eyes a moment before a burst of laughter erupted from him amusement twinkling in his eyes. "Yes, yes you did. You Milaslava Stepanov got exactly what you wanted. So what do you propose we do now?" He leaned forward his lips lightly brushing against mine.

I inhaled sharply, the scent of his cologne pulling me into his spell. "After you fuck me senseless here on the bar, I think we should consider preparing the plane and heading to Helka sooner rather than later. I think you should meet my son."

"Meeting the kiddo so soon. I'm honored."

"What can I say, I move quickly when I decide on what I want."

"Lucky me," he whispered his voice deep and husky as his lips came crashing down on mine.

This man may be my ultimate demise, but if he truly was, then it was going to be one glorious way to go out.

The End

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EXCEPT FROM

The Godfather's Daughter

**(Prequel novella to the novel Isaac, book 3
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by

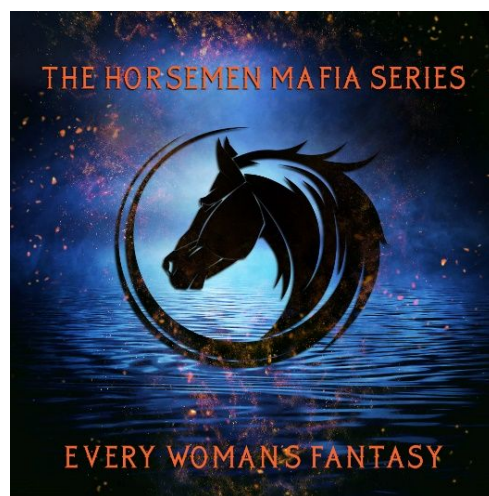
Terry Towers

Description:

Living as the daughter of the most powerful man in Italy comes with a lot of responsibility and restrictions. My life was never my own; my first priority was always what was best for the family. Being accepted to an Ivy League School in the United States was my way to freedom.

I wanted to keep a low profile; I really did. But when my gaze locked onto Professor Von's, I was doomed. Maybe it was the way he looked at me that made my heart skip a beat or maybe I was simply being rebellious. Regardless of the reason, I couldn't stay away from him – potential consequences be damned.

I should have known that there are always consequences when you're the Godfather's daughter, for both myself and the man I should never have gotten involved with...



To hear about Terry’s new releases and upcoming specials and promotions, please sign up for her newsletter. Rest assured we will not spam your inbox.

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Prologue

Sophia

My eyes narrowed at my father. I was not about to be swayed. One way or another I was going to get what I wanted. He may be the most feared man in Italy, but I was his daughter and at twenty-one, I was no longer scared to speak out. I wanted my freedom way too badly to let this go and bow to his will – yet again. If I had to, I’d go without his consent. He couldn’t keep me trapped in this fortress that I’ve called home in the name of my safety any longer.

“It’s too dangerous right now, Sophia,” said my brother, Isaac who was standing to the right of my father. My stare shot over to him. He was such a piece of shit. The oldest child, heir to the organization and the biggest kiss ass I’d ever seen – aside from my other brother to the left of my father – Alonzo, who was only a couple of years older than me. Yet there he was standing at my father’s side attempting to be

some big man with control over what I did. I used to kick Alonzo's ass when we were kids, and I was betting that I could still do it if push came to shove.

“Oh, so what makes your precious island so much more secure? You went to college in the States. I want to too and none of you can stop me.” My gaze shot back at my father, challenging him to say no.

My father sighed and leaned forward bracing his elbows on the massive monstrosity of a desk of his and eyeing me down. “You'll go if and *only* if I say you can. Are you clear?”

The fury swirling inside me begged to be unleashed and it was taking every little ounce of control I had in me to contain it. “No. No, we're not clear. I'm done with being told what I can and can't do. I'm done with this overbearing family. I'm done with being the daughter of the great Pierto Marinotti. And I'm done not being able to leave this house that I'm practically a prisoner in. Isaac lives across the world and Alonzo goes wherever he pleases. But me? Nope, I can't go anywhere. I'm done with this double standard.

The anger surged again.

I tried to control it, but between the bored look on Alonzo's face and the smirk on Isaac's I couldn't contain it any longer. “You know what Papa? You're sexist.”

While my brother's expressions turned to shock, while my father's turned to stone.

“You keep me and mother locked up here. All the time. And if we go out then we need escorts for our own protection!

What is that about? Isaac and Alonzo don't need bullshit guards!" My hands balled up into fists, and I refused to look away. "I've lived this life because I was a child and my mother can make her own decisions, but I'm not a child anymore and I refuse to be treated as lesser than my brothers!"

"Is that so? You feel I'm sexist?"

My resolve momentarily faltered, but the words were already out of my mouth, might as well march forward. "Yes, I think you are. I've been overlooked my entire life, treated like some sort of porcelain doll. I'm not some delicate doll. I'm a human being and want a life outside of this family. I need to experience life! I'd rather be dead than continue living under your rule!"

"So, you feel you're locked away and that you're treated like a possession? Death is a preferable option to all the luxuries I've provided for you?"

I hesitated, but then lifted my chin and continued to meet his stare. "Yes. I think that I haven't been given the opportunities that the boys have been given. Isaac was given an entire island." I hooked my thumb at my other brother, "Faccia di culo there helps run the organization here. I'm smarter than the two of them put together, yet I'm stuck here. What do you plan on doing? Marrying me off in an arranged marriage or something equally as barbaric?"

The silence and tension became so thick in the air that it could be cut with a knife. A part of me feared I'd overstepped, but what I said and how I felt couldn't be taken back.

Finally, a roar of laughter erupted from my father as he fell back in the chair. “I had someone already lined up, but considering you seem to find that distasteful, I’ll just cancel it.”

“That’s not funny Father.” I really didn’t know if he was joking or not. I was ninety percent sure it was a joke.

He swiped a tear from the corner of his eye. “Listen, since you seem to be hellbent on the idea of going to a university in the States, how about you apply and we’ll see when the time comes. Maybe for the winter term or perhaps next year, once I’ve given it some thought.”

I grimaced. “I already applied and was accepted to the school Isaac went to.”

The humor left his eyes again. “You applied?”

“And was accepted,” I confirmed feeling a sense of pride wrap itself around me bolstering my confidence in what I was about to do.

“Behind my back.” His expression turned stony again, making it impossible to tell what he was thinking. That was one of the worst of my father’s traits, I could never tell what he was thinking. I only got to see what he allowed people to see.

“As I just said, I want to be independent, and I plan to go whether you allow it or not. You may have been able to control me as a child but I’m not a child any longer.”

“You forget, I control everything in Italy. I know everything that goes on here.” He cocked a brow at me, his

eyes as dark as mine staring into mine. “Why should you be any different?”

I chewed my inner cheek a moment before responding. “You can’t know that much. You didn’t know that I’d applied to and been accepted to Isaac’s old college. You also didn’t know that I already had a room booked in the dorms and my tuition paid.”

“How? Did your-”

“Mother didn’t pay, I’ve been storing money away for years for this day to come. I planned and was prepared for the worst.”

“The worst being?”

“Being that you’d say no and I’d just do it anyhow. You can’t keep me confined here any longer.”

He cleared his throat, his jaw clenching. “You’ve never been a prisoner here, Sophia.”

I chanced a look up at Isaac, hoping he’d come to bat for me, but like a true soldier to our father he said nothing. He just stood there with a disapproving look on his face.

“Fine.” My father threw up his hands in defeat.

My mouth dropped open as I gawked at him across the desk. Did he just say fine? Did he just agree to let me go?

But there was a look in his eyes that told me he had something up his sleeve. “But there are conditions. You think you can make it on your own? Fine. You’ll not get a single cent from me for the duration of your time there. You want to be independent?”

I nodded.

“Then show me what you’re made of. You have the money you’ve squirreled away – make it last. Maybe even get a job over there. But you must make it work.”

My win was bittersweet. I celebrated that I was going to get to go to college overseas. But at the same time, my brother had had everything handed to him. He didn’t have to skimp and save and make do. He’d had access to our family money and influence, I was going to be completely on my own.

But it was a good thing. It would only prove how self-reliant I can be.

I didn’t need to rely on my father or our family. He was right I wanted to show him and myself what I was truly made of. While I knew he loved me, he always favored the boys when it came to giving them independence and freedom. It would no doubt be tight, but I could make it and when I did, it would prove to him that I was not only stronger, but more capable than my brothers who didn’t have the balls to stand at my side.

“Fine.” I flashed him a smile, before standing. “I can do it myself.” Turning, I marched from the office slamming the door behind me; happy and pissed at the same time.

I was making my way down the hallway of the museum I called home when I heard the door to his office open and footsteps rushing up behind me. I knew the footsteps, it was my brother Isaac. He was larger and more heavy-footed than Alonzo.

“What do you want Isaac?” I snapped, looking up at him as I continued to walk, not slowing my pace.

“That was quite a display you put on there.” His emerald-green eyes, eyes he’d inherited from our mother, locked onto mine.

“Yes, thank you for stepping up and having my back on that.”

“You handled yourself fine. You got what you wanted. You’re going to school in the States. I didn’t feel I needed to fight your battles for you.”

“It would have been nice if you’d at least given me support on the matter. I felt like I was at the inquisition there. And you and Alonzo are such suck-asses. It’s disgusting. Leccaculo.”

“Whoa, whoa.” He threw his hands up in mock dismay, “Let’s not get nasty. I am not a leccaculo.”

“Then what are you?”

“See, by me not taking your side in there, if you ever need me to take your side in the future, Father will hold my opinion in higher regard. You’re welcome.”

“A fanabla.” He could go to hell for all I cared. He was so damned full of shit it was sickening.

“Besides, if you think that he won’t ensure you’re watched at all times you’re quite mistaken.”

“I’ll be in the States.”

“Yes, and what would you rather? Think hard on this. Your brother who doesn’t fucking care what you do over there

and lives on Helka Island in the Caribbean? Or would you prefer one of Father's lackeys who will be stuck to you like glue? We both know he'll send them. Maybe he'll even call the Dean and have one of his spies in all of your classes to watch your every move. I could keep that from happening."

I groaned inwardly. Of course, yet another deal. I stopped in my tracks, turning to face him and crossing my arms over my chest. "What do you want in return? I know by now that nothing you do for me is for free."

"Nothing."

"Non dire cazzate." Bullshit. I didn't believe that for an instant. Isaac didn't do anything unless there was something in it for him.

"I really don't. But there may be a time, somewhere down the road, it could be years from now, or could be days, where I'll need a favor. So, since I'm going to do this for you, you agree that you owe me one."

I didn't doubt that my father would do as he was suggesting. He and the Dean of the school were close friends. My brother hadn't gotten in for his grades, that's for damned sure. Like everywhere in the world, money talked louder than anything else. I should have gone to a different institution, but I had something to prove, and I wanted to prove it where our family had gone for several generations.

"Fine. Deal."

He extended his hand to me. I eyed it with suspicion for a moment before begrudgingly accepting it. "Deal."

“And in the spirit of helping you out. If you need money, I can give you a hand with that. I suspect you plan to outshine me with marks so you’re not going to want to work if you want perfect grades. It’s not an Ivy League School for nothing.”

“I’m fine, thanks.” That being said, it was good to know that the offer stood if I needed it. Even if there were strings attached.

Chapter 1

Sophia

This had to be one of the happiest days of my life – hands down.

Nothing could bring me down today.

As the plane touched down on the runway, I took a peek out of the window and grinned so wide it felt like my mouth was going to split my face in two pieces. Just outside of the plane was my first taste of freedom and I couldn't be more excited. It wasn't going to be easy, this I knew. I was accustomed to living in the lap of luxury in a house full of servants and guards around the clock. All I needed to do was hit a button and I'd have people at my feet to do my bidding within a few minutes.

But it was also a jail. One big, luxurious jail.

My new life was going to be different. I'd even insisted that I fly to the States in a regular airplane, in the economy section instead of using my father's private jet. Despite my father saying he wasn't going to help me, he'd offered the jet. But I refused. I wanted everything about this experience to be authentic. I couldn't prove to him or anyone else that I was strong and could make it on my own if I accepted handouts straight out of the gate.

However, the man beside me reeked of alcohol and beef jerky and was snoring so loudly that even my earphones weren't blocking out the sound, so I was reconsidering my

intelligence in making that decision. But this all came part and parcel with what I was trying to accomplish – freedom and independence from a life of being sheltered and controlled.

Half an hour later I was grabbing my baggage and making my way outside in search of a taxi, which wasn't hard to find. There was a huge line-up and I groaned inwardly, the heels I was wearing were making the long wait a challenge to my feet. Lines and waiting, it was something I'd need to get used to.

Twenty minutes later, I was in a cab, the balls of my feet screaming at me for not wearing sensible shoes. Was I that out of touch with the real world? A part of me felt ashamed despite the fact that I hadn't had a choice in the matter. Pietro Marinotti controlled everything and everyone with an iron fist – including his family. My mother enjoyed being royalty and didn't seem to mind the control being exerted over her in exchange for the perks. But I wasn't my mother, if I were to be honest with myself, I was more like my father than my mother, but I refused to admit it to anyone.

“Here we are, ma'am.” I looked up from my mobile phone and out the window to see the large building before us with the name Carrington Hall posted over the doorway. Looking back down at my phone, I confirmed that Carrington Hall was where I was supposed to go to get my room assignment and class schedule.

“Well, here goes nothing,” I murmured under my breath, opening the door, and stepping out of the vehicle.

Entering the building, I felt a sense of excitement and independence that I hadn't felt once in my entire life. I kept

looking over my shoulders expecting to see one of my father's guards over my shoulder. But they weren't – I was completely alone, well aside from the thousands of other students rushing up and down the hallways.

After a moment of searching, I finally found the office of the register and was confronted by another obscene line, straight out the door of the office and down the hallway. “You've got to be kidding me,” I grumbled under my breath as I got in line behind everyone else.

“You must be new.” The short, thin guy in front of me commented.

Looking straight at him, I frowned. “Why do you say that?”

“Because you seemed surprised the line is long.” He looked down at my aching feet. “And you're wearing heels. Don't get me wrong, your legs look amazing in them, but you'll realize really quickly that heels aren't practical on campus.”

Following his gaze, I grimaced. “Fine, easy enough to fix.” Stepping out of them and onto the cool tiled floor, I grabbed them from the floor, unzipped my carry-on and stuffed them inside. Wiggling my toes on the cool tile, my feet immediately felt better and I released a sigh of relief.

We moved up a few feet.

“You've got a sexy accent. Where are you from?”

Looking up at him again, I briefly gave him a once-over. He was handsome enough with his shaggy blonde hair and blue eyes. I considered lying but changed my mind.

Wouldn't matter. No one would really know who I was. Just because my family was known in Italy, doesn't mean they'd have a clue who I was here.

"I'm from Italy. Just arrived, came straight here from the airport."

"Well," his eyes scanned me, doing a slow up and down that no man would dare to do back home. "It's nice to meet you." He extended his hand to me. "I'm Desmond."

With a moment's hesitation, I accepted his hand. "Sophia."

We moved up a few more feet.

"Sophia. That's a beautiful name... Beautiful name. Sexy accent. For a *very* sexy woman. I'm regretting not visiting Italy yet."

Tilting my head to the side, I eyed him a moment. "Is that some sort of pick-up line here?"

Chuckling, he shrugged. "I guess. I can do better next time."

I wasn't sure if I wanted him to. He seemed just a little too...young. I was sure he was older than me, but where I came from men were smoother and not so cringeworthy when they complimented you. Fuck, maybe I just had unresolved daddy issues, who really knew.

He looked me up and down once more. "Are you pledging the sorority?"

"I don't know. I hadn't really thought about it. Should I?"

“If you want a social life while here you should.”

I did want that. Friends. A community of my peers was exactly what I was longing for.

Chewing at my lower lip, I nodded. “That sounds like it might be something I’d be interested in.”

“If you want to give me your number, I’ll hook you up with the right people.”

No one ever does anything for free and I suspected I knew exactly what he wanted from me in return. But he was hardly a danger to me. Men without conscience and those who lived to kill traveled through the halls of my family home on a daily basis. I’d learned how to tell the ones who had a conscience from the ones who had no soul within them. This man was a guppy compared to them. Hell, he was barely more than a twig, I could probably take him in an arm wrestle if I wanted to.

“Sure. I’d appreciate that.”

“Great.” Pulling his phone from his back pocket, he unlocked it and passed it to me already open on the notes application. Just write your name and number and I’ll give you a call this week when we have our first party. The frat, which is what I’m a part of, hosts a lot of parties with the sorority. The introduction party and pledge party are this weekend.”

“That’s fast.” I quickly jotted down my number along with just my first name, Sophia. I didn’t need him looking me up even though it would be hard to find much about me online, my father made sure of that. I’d never been allowed on social

media. I was a ghost when it came to having an online presence.

“Well, we have to get Hell Week moving quickly.”

“Hell Week...” I muttered. I’d watched movies and some contained Hell Week. From how movies portrayed it, it didn’t sound like fun, but my brother and his buddies who ran Helka Island were all frat boys so if they could do it then I sure as hell could as well.

“Yeah, it’s just some fun hazing. Nothing too serious or to worry about.”

“Right.” I gave him another smile of appreciation.

“Thank you for whatever help you can offer me.”

He turned back around as the line moved forward and before I knew it, I was heading to one of the stations to get my class schedule and ID’s. The first day of the rest of my life.



Sophia

After a little searching, I found my dorm building and then my room up on the second floor. Thank goodness there was an elevator. I’d given up on the shoes in the registration office and hadn’t bothered to put the torture devices back on, despite the funny looks I was getting from other students as I walked around campus in my bare feet.

Opening the door, I stepped inside the dorm room which I was to share with a woman named Tabitha Richards. I

was kind of hoping that I'd be the first to arrive, but that wasn't the case. My new roommate was already settled in, laying on her bed and busy with something on her phone.

Hearing me enter, Tabitha lowered the phone and smiled up at me. "Are you Sophia?"

I nodded. "I am, you're Tabitha?"

"Sure am. I hope you don't mind I already chose this side of the room."

My eyes swept the room. There was no difference between the sides. Each side had a single bed that was against the wall, desk, and closet. The large window was smack dab in the center of the wall in front of me. The floors left much to be desired, they were a grey tile that looked very well worn. For the amount I paid to live here, I'd have expected the dorm room to be more - well, didn't know exactly, but it reminded me of a double jail cell. The bathroom was just as I came in. Peeking inside there was no tub, just a shower and a small pedestal sink. The grey tile that was on the main room floor also covered the bathroom. Did they get a deal on the stuff and just ran with it?

"No, doesn't matter to me." My eyes settled on my roommate again. She was a tall, slender, stunning woman with perfect chocolate brown skin and high cheekbones a model would kill for. She could easily have been a supermodel gracing the runways of Milan. Fashion Week was one of the few events I got to enjoy each year with my mother.

"Oh good, so where are you from, I'm hearing a little accent."

“I’m from Italy. Yourself?” Pulling my luggage into the room, I placed my largest suitcase on the bed and opened it up. Might as well unpack and get it over with.

She grinned, “I’m a Jersey girl.” When I didn’t respond, she continued, “New Jersey. I’m on an athletic scholarship. Couldn’t have afforded this place otherwise.”

“That’s awesome. I’m envious, my athletic abilities are slim. What sport?”

“Volleyball.”

That made sense, she wasn’t standing but I’d guess she was close to six feet tall, almost as tall as my brothers. “I wish I was good with sports. They never were my thing. I’m a bit of a nerd to be honest. Most of my time is spent reading.”

As I was putting my clothes away in the closet, I heard her getting up from her bed and crossing the room to me. “Is this real Louis Vuitton luggage?”

I turned and saw her admiring the suitcases, carry-ons and my handbag. They were all bought on my last trip with my mother and a slew of guards in Milan. I didn’t really know the monetary value of them. Life for me when it came to material things was to point at it, say I wanted it, and it became mine. Money for me wasn’t an issue, but I suspected it was for her and the last thing I wanted to come off as is a spoiled, rich girl. That would just lead to more questions I hadn’t devised answers to yet.

After considering her question a moment, I shook my head pretending to be embarrassed. “Nah, they’re all knock-offs. Really good ones though.”

“Wow, they sure are. My cousin sells knockoffs to tourists in Manhattan.” She fingered the material and stitching of the seams. “The ones my cousin sells are good knock-offs, but not nearly as good as this.”

I shrugged. “It’s Italy, anything less than super fakes would be spotted immediately by people there.” If she knew I was rich then she’d want to know more, like what my family did for a living. I didn’t want anyone to know. I wanted people to like me for me, not for what I might have or what position my family kept. Perhaps it was a good thing my father ensured I didn’t have an online presence, it made it so much easier for me to be whoever I wanted myself to be while here.

While I hated to lie to someone I was going to be spending every day with for the next nine or so months, it was for the best. It’s not like I could tell anyone the truth. I just had to keep certain things about my life back home and how I grew up to myself. Not lie about everything, but just keep out certain details. The bad stuff.

“Those are cool.” She made her way back to her bed and flopped back down onto it. “So you’re first year I’m assuming.”

I nodded.

“Me too. My sister graduated last year and was part of the sorority. She said that I have to join and since she was a member throughout her four years that I won’t have an issue getting in. She was also on a volleyball scholarship although she’s not nearly as good as me.” She grinned and gave me a wink.

“People seem to be really obsessed with the frat and sorority here.” Finished with putting everything in the closet, I sat down on the edge of the bed. “Is it that important to be part of?”

Her dark eyes grew wide and she nodded. “Yeah. It’s extremely important. All the most influential families that have attended the college have been members. Being a part of one of them means you get doors opened for you once you graduate.” She gave me a lopsided grin. “Not to mention they have the best parties. You definitely want in if you can get in. I can have my sister put in a good word for you as well – if you like.”

“Yeah, I’d like that. Thank you.” Might as well make the most of my college years and if the sorority was where the action was at, then so be it.

Chapter 2

Sophia

My eyes scanned the club as the four of us entered. This was my big night. My hazing task. I'd already been to the parties, made some friends, and they'd decided I was a good fit. This was the last step to being a part of them. If I passed this, I would officially be their sorority sister. Tabitha had yet to perform her task. Unlucky me, I was the first of the two of us.

The club was the next city over, an hour and a half drive from campus. Apparently, hazing was frowned upon so during events like this we needed to keep a low profile and that meant keeping away from prying eyes. They didn't clue me in on what my task would be, I was nervous as fuck about it. For all I knew, they planned on having me strip naked and dance on the speakers.

"Don't worry, it'll be fine." My roommate gave me a nudge and an encouraging smile. The other two girls, the head of the sorority, Candace and the vice-president Rebecca, walked ahead scouting out a table as we trailed behind. "My sister went through the hazing when she came here. It was nothing to be worried about."

"What did they make her do?"

She shrugged. "Dunno. It was such a menial thing I can't even remember."

That made me feel slightly better.

Looking ahead of us, I noticed our two potential sorority sisters had found a small booth at the back and were waving us over. We picked up the pace and squeezed in beside them, one of us on either side of the two senior girls.

“What do you guys think?” Rebecca asked, a wide grin on her face and a suspicious gleam in her eyes as she looked to me and then to Tabitha.

“Looks fun.” I scanned the room again. The music was loud, but not so loud as to hinder conversation. The dance floor was already quite crowded with a number of bodies swaying and gyrating to the music. The men were hot and the women were striking. I definitely had my work cut out for me here. Maybe if I just had a few drinks and lost myself in the fun of the night I could stop worrying about what they had planned for me.

A shooter girl, wearing a pair of black shorts that were so high they showed off her ass cheeks arrived with a tray of blue, red and clear shots on it.

“We’ll take one of each for all of us please, Penny,” Candace said, “Put it on the club’s bill.”

The girl nodded and set one of each color in front of us before disappearing into the crowd.

“She’s a former sister. Graduated last year.” Candace grabbed the red shot. “So, everyone grab the red one and let’s make a toast. As we raised our shot glasses she continued. “To our girls Sophia and Tabitha, with luck on their sides this time next week they’ll officially be our sisters.”

Clinking our glasses together, we all downed the shot in unison. I tried not to grimace but couldn't help it. The liquid burned like a bitch and tasted even worse. I was used to wine back home, it was as common as drinking water in our family, but whatever that red shit was, it was nasty stuff.

“You good?” Candace asked giving me a pat on the back.

“Yeah, of course,” I managed to choke out.

“Good. Because now we're about to give you your assignment.”

My heart stopped for a moment. I wasn't sure if I dared to ask, though I didn't need to.

“For you, we're going to pick out a man that you're to sleep with tonight. And once you've done the deed, we want you to take a picture of you in bed with him. He needs to be asleep because this is a covert task and you both must be completely naked though, so we know you're not just pulling a fast one.”

“You want me to take nudes of us? Is that even legal?” There was no fucking way I was doing that; Candace and the sorority could kiss my Italian ass.

The girls laughed. “No silly, not of your naked bodies, but just from the chest up in bed together. Sending us a picture of his dick would be rude.”

Yeah, we don't want to be rude. Just a little – no, a lot – creepy as fuck.

“And I have to sleep with him tonight? What if the guy you choose doesn't want me?”

She looked me up and down. “Have you seen you? We dressed you in that tiny little red dress for a reason. With your long, dark hair and exotic look, men are going to fall over themselves, frothing at the mouth just for a whiff of your pussy. Trust us on this one.”

“I don’t know.” I caught my lower lip between my teeth as I forced myself not to look away and was thankful that my darker skin tone covered much of my blush. What my skin tone didn’t cover, the dark lighting concealed for me.

“Oh Candace!” Rebecca gave her a nudge and leaned into her whispering something into her ear. They both looked out onto the dancefloor and to the bar adjacent to us.

Suddenly, a wide smile spread across Candace’s lips. “That’s brilliant.” They shared one more conspiring look before she turned back to me with a twinkle in her eyes that I didn’t like in the least. She was up to something. “We’ve already found your mystery man.”

She had me concerned. Very concerned. She had a cat that ate the canary look on her face that make me cringe inside. Outside though I forced a smile to my lips. Never let them see your fear.

“Sure, who are you thinking?”

She leaned into me and pointed towards the bar. “See the man at the bar. Mister tall, dark and handsome. He’s wearing a black shirt and with dark hair, cut short with a goatee and glasses? Very dreamy.”

My eyes scanned the area she was pointing to until I spotted him. He looked older than us, but it may just be the

dim lighting. Between that and the distance between us, it was really hard to tell exactly.

“Okay, you mean the guy the bartender is passing a few beers to?”

“Yeah, that one. He’s your man.”

Shit. I watched as he took his drinks and walked back to a group of guys playing billiards in the corner. He wasn’t playing, he just took a seat on a stool near the table, setting his beer on the ledge behind him. From a distance, he looked handsome enough. It seemed juvenile to sleep with someone as part of a hazing ritual. But there could be worse things. I looked from one girl to the other. This was the first time I had friends or potential friends. Being virtually locked into a glamorized fortress wasn’t all it was cracked up to be and not great for the social life.

Besides, I’d seen shit like this before. And it’s not like I was a virgin. My driver, Antonio took care of that several years ago. Father found out and executed him – no questions asked. He then traded my hot driver for a middle-aged, balding man that had a distinct smell of salami. That was the beginning and the end of my sex life.

But... Father wasn’t here and the world was my oyster as the saying goes.

And I could do anything that I put my mind to here in America. The sky was the limit – including screwing some random guy in a bar. A rite of passage you could call it. They sure as hell could have picked a worse tribute.

I finished off my shots and stood, tugging down on the short skirt of my mini-dress before I ended up flashing the whole place. “Fine. Consider it done.”

The girls grinned. “Do this and you’re in.”

“No problem. Don’t wait up.” Grabbing my handbag that they thought was a fake Louis Vuitton, I slung it over my shoulder and made my way across the nightclub. I could feel their eyes on me as I walked, so I did my best to exude the confidence that I wasn’t quite feeling as I approached him and the other men he was with.

I really had no plan on how to proceed. I’d never attempted to pick up a man before. Hopefully, I could successfully wing it.

I could always turn back. Did I really need to be part of their sorority? But I knew I did. I’d longed for the closeness of female friendships that I never had before. I longed to be like normal girls my age and one-night stands were part of that. Who was it really going to hurt anyhow?

As I approached the three men caught sight of me. The one I’d been assigned was the last to look in my direction, due to an elbow to his ribs from one of his buddies who had taken a pause in their billiards game. Taking a deep breath in, I slowly exhaled and smiled as I came to a stop before him. My gaze immediately looked for a wedding ring and to my relief there was none and didn’t seem to be a tan line where the ring may have been before he showed up at the nightclub. It wouldn’t have surprised me if they’d require my conquest regardless of marital status. I know my family played fast and loose with morality in virtually all areas of our lives, but

family and loyalty were sacred and if sleeping with a married man was the only way I could be a part of their group then I guess it wasn't meant to be.

Up close he was much more handsome than expected. His glasses gave him an intelligent, thoughtful look and I adored the brilliant blue eyes behind the lenses. This certainly wouldn't be a problem at all. Although the hard part was about to begin.

But what if he didn't want me?

Then what?

I had no clue.

Feeling the pressure, now that I was standing before him, I was at a loss for words.

Well, nothing like just introducing myself, I suppose. Looking him dead in the eye, I caught my lower lip between my teeth seductively as I extended my hand to him. With my three-inch heels on I was nearly as tall as him, just shy a few inches, making him just over six-feet tall. "Hi there, I'm Sophia."

"I guess that's our cue to get lost," One of his friends said, I didn't know which one, my eyes were firmly in place staring up at the gorgeous man before me. The billiards game was abandoned as his two friends walked away.

He accepted my hand, his large, strong hand wrapping around my dainty one. "I'm Zack." The feel of his soft, yet strong, hand wrapped around mine sent a shiver of anticipation through me.

We stood in silence staring at each other for what felt like an eternity. I didn't have any game – at all – it was pathetic. In my defense, I'd never picked up a man in a nightclub before either, so I had an excuse.

“How about I buy you a drink?” he finally said breaking the tension. “And maybe we can find a seat and talk – if you like?”

The bubble of tension within me deflated and I sighed. “That would be great. A glass of wine would be perfect.” I didn't think more hard liquor would be wise. I didn't know this man and certainly wasn't naïve. I'd baby that wine for the entire night until we left. As it was the three shots had already had me feeling buzzed.

I followed him to the bar and watched him order. When the drink arrived, I was quick to grab it from him and keep it close to me. Papa didn't raise no fool. After some searching, we finally found a two-person table secluded in a corner away from the people and the music.

Perching myself on one of the stools. I took a sip of the wine while he seated himself across from me. Feeling eyes on us, I looked over to where my potential sorority sisters were. As suspected, they were all watching, not even pretending to seem disinterested. Nothing like making me nervous, a little privacy would have been appreciated.

Shutting my mind off to them, I looked back over at Zack whose gaze on me made me feel that warm and fuzzy feeling inside, the one that they try to sell you on in the romantic movies. I'd never felt physically drawn to a man before, so it was a foreign and exciting feeling.

They picked well.

“So, Sophia. Tell me everything about yourself.”

Time to put on the charm. And hell, you never know, maybe it would be a match made in heaven. He did look older than me a solid ten years, so telling him I was a college student off the bat seemed counterproductive. Luckily, there was a lot more to talk about than careers.

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