



FILTHY
BRATVA

A DARK MAFIA ROMANCE

BELLA KING

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AFTER MIDNIGHT

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Epilogue

Preview of Knocked Up with Twins

BLURB

Savva is a filthy bratva beast,
As cruel as he is charming,
As brutal as he is gorgeous.

When I took over my late father's biker bar, I also took over the payments he was making to Savva, the leader of a powerful mafia family operating on the edge of Las Vegas.

But Savva couldn't be satisfied with money alone.

He wanted more.

He spilled into my life like a dark, inescapable shadow, stealing my dignity and drowning me in his sin.

But his twisted promises and dark desires aren't enough to convince me to fall for him.

Neither are his whiskey kisses and his iron abs.

But there is something else, something that I've been hiding from him.

Something that could finally push me over the edge and into his eternal possession.

I'm pregnant, and the baby is his.

Oakley

I'm tempted to stick my head out the window and slam it as hard as I can, just so that I don't have to answer any more questions. Twenty-one years, a bachelor's degree in psychology, and I'm still stuck in the one place I never wanted to be, answering questions I've answered a million times before.

"Oakley, you're still down here? I thought you'd at least come up for breakfast," my mom says, coming down the stairs and swinging into my bedroom without knocking.

I finish typing my job history into an application to be a school counselor before I look up at her. "I'm applying for jobs. You have to keep sending applications until you get something. It's not as easy as it used to be."

She gives me a doubtful look, her hands clasped behind her back. "You know, if you got out of your room occasionally and went down to some of the places you're applying to, I'm sure they'd take you into consideration."

I struggle not to roll my eyes. "Mom, that's not the way it works now. Some of these places are private offices. You can't just walk in there and hand in your resume. You have to apply online."

She sighs. "You could try. There's no harm in that."

I purse my lips, attempting a smile that probably looks more like I bit into a lemon. "I'll come up for a coffee or something in a minute. I'm just wrapping up this last application. It's easier to get through them in the morning."

She gives me a pitying look. "You could always go back to school. I hear computer science pays well."

Now I know she's just trying to annoy me. I'm not going back to school for another four years to get a degree in something that doesn't even interest me. I'm not going to sell my soul for money. Besides, I have enough student debt to pay already.

"I'll be upstairs in a minute," I grumble, opening another tab on my browser and turning away from her.

"Oh, I was going to give you this," she says, holding out a thick white envelope. "It came in the mail this morning, and it has your name on it. Maybe it's a job offer," she says, her eyes lighting up.

I frown, getting up from my chair to take it. "Could be," I mutter, turning over the envelope.

It's from the state of Nevada, and it's addressed to me. I don't remember applying for a job in Nevada, much less a government job, but any work is better than nothing. It might just keep me from slamming my head in the window.

"Let me know what it says. I have eggs on the stove," my mom says, dipping out of my room.

Finally. I wasn't going to open it in here with her staring at me like that, and if it was a job offer, I wouldn't want to hear her opinion on it. I already know that she thinks psychology isn't a real science, and there's no job a person could get as a psychologist except for an underpaid position as a social worker.

I hope that's not what this letter is about, but I'd take a job as one of those people that flips signs on the side of the road in a chicken suit at this point. Anything to get me out of the house and put some money in my pocket would satisfy me.

I shut my bedroom door and walk over to my bed, holding the white envelope in my hand so hard that it bends. My sweat has

already soaked through the paper, and my fingers stick when I try to let go of it.

“Come on, Oakley, don’t make this into some big drama,” I say to myself.

I take a deep breath and tear down the side of the envelope, going slowly so that I don’t damage any of the papers inside. It feels like there are quite a few crammed in there. It can’t just be junk mail.

I pull out the folded papers and place the envelope down beside me, smoothing it out on the bed as though I’ll need it later. I’m almost too nervous to look at the letter. I’m afraid that I’ll be disappointed, and I’ll need to go upstairs and tell my mom that it was just an advertisement for a theme park or resort in Nevada.

But I can be brave. I have to be, so I unfold the stack of papers, reading the first few lines and immediately realizing that this isn’t some silly ad.

It isn’t a job offer, either.

It’s even more interesting, something I would’ve never expected to receive.

I reread the first page to make sure I’m not going crazy before I move to the next few, combing through them as my heart rate increases and pumps so much blood into my ears that when my mom calls me up for food, I can barely hear her.

“Oakley, your eggs are going to get cold,” she whines.

I scramble to fold the papers up, shoving them back into their envelope and hiding the letter under a stack of books on my dresser. I slam my laptop shut and take the stairs up to the kitchen by threes.

My mom is sitting down with a cup of coffee, eyeing me with a suspicious frown as I slide into the kitchen in my socks. “You’re awfully excited about something,” she notes as I jump into my chair and bury my face into my plate to hide my expression from her.

“Um, yeah, I got an offer for an interview,” I lie, shoveling lukewarm scrambled eggs into my mouth.

“All the way in Nevada? You couldn’t have applied somewhere closer to home?”

I shrug. “It’s better than nothing.”

She sighs. “I guess we’ll see about that, but Nevada is hot, and I heard it was expensive.”

I knew she would have a problem with it. I could’ve told her I just landed a job as president of the United States, and she would still find a million reasons why I should do something else. Nothing is good enough for her, which means there’s no point in telling her what the letter really was about.

Because it wasn’t a job interview.

I keep my head down, eating my eggs as quickly as possible to avoid having to dish out further lies. I’ve done it enough in my life where I can make up stuff on the spot, but I hate having to lie to my mom. Eventually, holes start to show, and then the entire story collapses as though it were made of sand.

But my mom doesn’t give up easily once she has her claws in. “You’re going to choke on those eggs. Slow down and tell me more about the job. Does it pay well? They better give you benefits. You know, if they don’t do a 401K match, you’re not ever going to be able to retire off of it. You might as well keep looking.”

I finish off the eggs and slide my plate away. “You know, I think you’re right. Probably not worth even going down there to check it out, right? Even if they paid for my flight.”

“They paid for your flight?” she asks in a higher tone, pulling her head back and raising her eyebrows.

I’m satisfied by her reaction, even if my words are nothing more than a big, fat lie. It still feels good to see her roll back her constant criticism.

I get up from my chair, letting her marinate in my words for a moment as I pour myself a cup of coffee. I have to drink it

black even though I hate it that way. I can't stand the artificial creamer she buys.

"So, you're getting flown out to the desert for what, exactly?" she asks, immediately diving back into her doubtful line of questioning. "They have legal brothels out there. Make sure they're not trying to round up unsuspecting young women for something like that. Maybe I should take a look at the offer."

"No," I blurt, turning around so fast that I splash coffee across the tile floor.

She jumps to her feet to clean it up, but I beat her to it, grabbing a few paper towels and sliding them across the floor with my foot. "Let me do it," I say as she attempts to take over.

"Just, here – ugh, just don't get it all in the grout. It stains," she complains.

I sigh, relenting to her control-freak tendencies. If she's occupied with the floor, maybe she'll stop asking questions long enough for me to sneak back down to my room. It's only been a few minutes, but I'm dying to read the letter again. I'm so excited!

I grab my coffee and slip out of the kitchen, rushing down the stairs back to my bedroom and closing the door behind me.

Peace at last. If I had to lie about one more thing, I think I would've had a brain aneurysm.

I grab the letter from under the stack of books on my desk, leafing through the pages and shuffling them around until I find the page that got me so excited before breakfast. There it is, in plain English, but if my mom knew, she'd freak out.

Ms. Oakley Turner, daughter of Mr. Angus Dredd, and heir to Smoke, Steel, & Whiskey.

At first, the surname Dredd trips me up, but that's only for a moment. Angus is my father, but my mom divorced him when I was only two years old. I don't remember a thing about him, but I do recall my last name used to be Dredd. My mom changed it to Turner, her maiden name, not long after the divorce.

Oakley Dredd. I don't know, I kind of like it, even if Angus was a complete piece of shit. According to my mom, he went to prison for murder, and that was the last we ever saw of him. He didn't want anything to do with my mom when he got out, and he *hated* kids.

My mom never got remarried, but I'm not all that surprised. She has always been overbearing, and I can't imagine the kind of hell she'd give a man who didn't agree with everything she said. She's highly opinionated.

I read through the details of the letter yet again. The state of Nevada has pinpointed me as the heir to Angus's bar, along with a few other things, such as a motorcycle that I would never dare to try riding, and a couple of storage lots that I assume are part of the bar because of their address.

I'm surprised about inheriting the bar, but even more so that my mother isn't the one to get it. Either she's not legally entitled to it, or he specifically wanted me to have it. I can't be sure until I call the number at the end of the letter. There's been a lawyer assigned to this case, and I'll be able to ask my burning questions to her.

How did my father die?

And why did he leave all this to me?

I know I can't call now, or my mom will hear me and come snooping. I have to leave the house.

I shove the letter into my purse, tactically covering it with a cheap romance paperback and the couple tubes of lip balm. I only have to lie once more to get out of the house, and then, I'll be on a plane across the country.

My mom is still in the kitchen as I come up the stairs, and she cranes her neck into the hallway as I hurry toward the door. "Where are you going?"

"I have to go buy a suitcase," I reply, which is true. I'm not going to fly all the way across the country with just my purse.

"We have your grandmother's suitcase in the attic. You can use that one," she says, the whining in her voice making my grit my teeth.

“Mothballs,” I reply, and then I’m out the door.

Savva

It's not the heat, it's the dust that gets you out here, and after spending the weekend in Las Vegas with my boys, the long sprawl of the desert feels like the Dust Bowl during the Great Depression.

I'm looking forward to a drink. I don't normally take my whiskey on the rocks, but I've lost so much sweat from the sun beating down on my leather jacket that I'd drink mud if it had a few ice cubes in it. I know Angus restocks his ice daily, so it shouldn't be an issue.

It's just getting there that's the problem. Out here, the only place to stop for gas is owned by the Triple Six Angels, and while I'm not normally bothered by biker gangs, they jack their prices up so high that I'd rather fill my motorcycle up with my dehydrated piss than support their extortion.

Thankfully, I filled my tank before we left Vegas. I think Pasha even has an extra canister of gasoline in his saddle bag, and Angus should have a supply in one of his storage units out back. I'll always find a way to avoid the Triple Six Angels' station.

I roll back the throttle as we approach Smoke, Steel, & Whiskey, pulling a cigarette from my pack and slipping it between my parched lips. I'm itching for a fix, and since I know I'm getting a drink soon, I'll allow the smoke to

aggravate my throat. Out here, you get used to rough conditions.

The wind takes the effort out of smoking, burning down my cigarette so fast that I barely get a few puffs from it before it's rolling down the asphalt behind me.

Greg pulls up beside me and points to the horizon. Normally, I'd be able to tell we've arrived at the bar before I can even see the building. There's usually a cloud of dust around it at all hours from traffic, but today, there's nothing. It's just the lonely brown rectangle in the distance.

As we get closer, I notice there isn't a single motorcycle or car parked out front. I check my watch. It's four in the afternoon, prime time for people to start coming in. I wanted to have a chat with Angus before rush hour, but there doesn't appear to be anyone here.

Odd.

The hairs on the back of my neck stands up when Greg, Pasha, and I roll into the parking lot. It's a ghost town. There isn't a single person in sight, and the lights inside the bar are off. What's going on?

I park directly in front of the building, signaling for Greg and Pasha to hold back while I check the front entrance.

CLOSED.

The red sign on the door hangs by a thin metal chain, swaying in the breeze. I touch it, pulling back my hand as I find the metal to be scalding hot. It must've been hanging up all day.

Angus didn't come in this morning, and if he did, he never opened the bar for business.

I knock on the door and then try to peer inside, cupping my hand over the glass and searching the inside for movement.

Nothing.

"What the fuck, Angus," I growl, lighting up a cigarette and turning to Greg and Pasha. "Nobody's here."

“Well, I could’ve told you that,” Pasha says, stepping off his lime-green Harley and crossing his arms. “The sign says that they’re closed.”

I’m tempted to ash my cigarette in his eyes. “Today is payday. He’s not weaseling out of this one. We’re going to have to go find the bastard.”

“Maybe he’s sick,” Greg says.

“I don’t give a fuck what he is. Money owed is money owed. You pay what you’re supposed to, and if there’s an issue, send a goddamn text or something.” I pull out my phone and check it, but there’s nothing from Angus. The last message I got from him was a month ago.

“Shit,” I grumble, dialing him up.

I hold my hand up to Greg and Pasha and turn around, putting the phone to my ear. If Angus knows what’s good for him, he’ll pick up.

But before I even have a chance to think about what I’m going to say to him, I hear a cheerful female voice on the line. “We’re sorry, but the number you’re trying to reach has been disconnected.”

Seriously? If he was late on the payment, I’d give him more time, but trying to make a run for it will get him killed. If you borrow money from the Russian Bratva, you pay it back in cash...

Or with your life.

I pocket my phone and turn around. “Looks like we got a runner.”

“Angus? I didn’t take him for that kind of guy. Always seemed like an honest man,” Pasha says, sounding disappointed.

I shrug. “I don’t see what else it could be, but we’ll give him some time. Let’s grab some drinks, cool down, and then we’ll hit the road. We can come back in a couple of days.”

“But they’re closed,” Greg innocently points out.

I toss my cigarette on the ground and fling my elbow back into the glass window on the door, shattering it into the building. Reaching through the shards, I find the lock and turn it. Easy.

The door swings open and I gesture inside. "It's self-serve tonight, boys."

Pasha joins me as Greg climbs off his bike. Nobody is going to tolerate another two hours riding through the desert without a couple drinks in their blood. At the very least, we need to cool down. I know Angus has a shower in the back. He practically lives here.

Plus, I'd like to take a look around. I doubt Angus would be hiding out here, but it's worth taking a look to see if he left any evidence as to where he could be. You can tell a lot about a man's intentions by searching his belongings.

Stepping inside, the first thing I notice is the heat. Normally, Angus would have the A/C blasting, even when he wasn't open. If you leave it off, you're surrendering to the desert heat, and that will spoil your booze within just a few short days.

I make my way behind the bar and notice the condensation in some of the bottles. That's not good.

I flip open the ice box behind the bar and frown when I see that it's been reduced to water. Dipping my pinky in, I find it to be warm. Someone cut the power, and they haven't been here for at least a week. An insulated ice box wouldn't melt that fast.

"Check the office before you drink anything," I bark at Pasha as he pops open a bottle of whiskey. "Something's not right here."

Pasha takes a swig before trudging away to the back where Angus's office is located. Angus likes to sleep back there, and if there's any evidence to be gathered, it'll most likely be in the office.

I sweep the rest of the bar while Greg joins Pasha in the back, opening the register and finding receipts from two weeks ago inside. There's a bit of cash, as though Angus stopped working midday and just vanished.

“What are you up to?” I mumble.

The fridge below the bar is off just like the ice box, and inside, the fruit inside is fuzzy with mold. There’s no hum of electricity coming from it, no light inside, and no indication that anyone has been here in a long time.

But why? Did something happen to Smoke, Steel, & Whiskey that would cause it to fail, striking fear in Angus and causing him to flee before I could confront him about missing payments? He’s wrong if he thinks he can run from me.

“Hey, boss,” Pasha says, coming out from the back and pointing over his shoulder. “You’re going to want to see this.”

I close the fridge and move out from behind the bar, following Pasha down the hallway to the back office where Angus hangs out when the bar is closed. The lights are off, but enough light streams through the splotchy yellow windows to illuminate the hallway.

It smells like mold, and not the kind that was growing on the lemons in the fridge. It’s black mold, which is rare out here due to the lack of humidity. I used to see it when I first moved to the United States from Russia, and I was living with a group of immigrants in a basement that we rented with what little cash we could pool together.

Pasha was there with me, but not Greg. He came along later when our criminal organization took hold in Nevada, and we needed more people to keep things running smoothly.

They say crime doesn’t pay, but it’s made me a rich man.

When we arrive at the office, I stop, wrinkling my nose at the smell. It’s all too familiar, bringing me back to the nights when we would huddle around the fan in the basement, trying to trick ourselves into thinking it could make the air taste better. I’m pretty sure the mold was worse for me than smoking.

“It’s like a swamp in here,” Greg says, shaking his head.

I look around, and I’m inclined to agree. There’s a window in the office with the blinds up, hot desert sunlight streaming in with a rich yellow glow. It cascades across a desk with wilted

blue plastic bags on it, once filled with ice, but now melted down and soaked into the carpet.

The door must have been closed this entire time, because it locked the moisture in, causing black mold to make its home on the lower part of the walls. Angus just dropped everything he was doing and left without explanation.

The carpet squishes when I take a step into the room. I start pulling open drawers, searching through Angus's belongings for nothing in particular. I already know that he's gone. There's not much left to see here. He didn't leave a note, not even a message on my phone.

He's just gone.

Oakley

I pay no attention to the speedometer as I travel down a single-lane road toward Smoke, Steel, & Whiskey, holding the steering wheel loosely with one hand and dangling the other out the window, riding the air waves with my hand. When you rent a screaming red Mustang convertible, you'd be compelled to enjoy it to the fullest.

There's nobody else out here. The lawyer in charge of managing Angus's estate, a stout tan woman with a thick southern drawl, didn't care to join me. She just handed off the keys, made me sign a few papers, and told me the bar was mine as she chewed loudly on a stick of Juicy Fruit gum.

Goodbye, and good luck.

The only thing I learned from her was that Angus died in a motorcycle accident just a mile down the road from his bar. Apparently, he was drunk.

Still, I wonder how a person could die on a road like this. There's nobody else here, and not a single sign to run into. You'd have to be trying to kill yourself to get into an accident out here, but I suppose that's irrelevant. Angus is gone, and I've inherited his bar.

I'm not quite sure what to do with it. I wasn't prepared to come out here in the first place, having only packed a few things in a bag and told my mom I'd be back in a couple of

days. I know it'll take longer than that to sell the bar. I just didn't want her to know that I have gotten something from her ex-husband. She'd be livid, and I'd never hear the end of her toxic criticisms of him.

Sometimes I wonder if she secretly resents me because I'm his daughter. Sure, I also belong to her, but just the thought of Angus seems to drive her into a bitter fury.

Murderer, abuser, drunkard. I've heard those words enough times already. I'm not interested in hearing them again.

I swerve the car as a few motorcycles growl past me in the opposite lane. I was so deep in thought that I was barely looking at the pale grey road ahead, oblivious to the fact that anyone else existed out here.

I slow down when I realize I'm traveling at over a hundred miles per hour. That probably constitutes reckless driving, and the last thing I want to be doing is spending the night in jail in the middle of nowhere. I can't even get a phone signal out here.

When I learned that Angus had a bar near Las Vegas, I imagined it just outside the strip, flooding with colorful lights and a diverse collection of patrons from all over the country. Instead, I was instructed by the lawyer to drive down this road in one direction for three hours and warned not to stop at any gas stations until I'm back in Vegas. Apparently, they're run by biker gangs.

I wonder if Angus was part of one.

The sun is getting low now, but the heat hasn't let up yet. I roll up the top of my convertible, turning up the A/C as I search the horizon for some sign that I'm close to the bar. I passed a gas station a few miles back, but other than that, I haven't seen so much as a road sign for half an hour.

Despite keeping a lookout, I almost pass the bar when I finally come up to it. I slow down aggressively, pushing my body into the steering wheel as I pump the brakes so that I don't miss the turn into the parking lot.

I come to a stop in the middle of it, not bothering to park within the faintly marked separators before turning off the car and fishing around in the glovebox for the keys to the front door of the bar. I own the place now, after all. I can do whatever I want out here.

It feels weird going from eating ramen noodles in a small college dorm room, to living with my nagging mother, to owning a business in under six months. I could've never predicted that something like this would fall into my lap, especially not that it would come from my father.

It seems more like a freak accident in the universe, a misplacement of resources that will soon be corrected by some sort of cosmic karma. Maybe the bar will burn to the ground before I can get the key into the door.

But there's no hint of smoke, nor any clouds that God might be riding in on to strike me down with a bolt of lightning as I walk up to the front entrance of Smoke, Steel, & Whiskey.

The bar is mine, which is exciting in and of itself, but what makes my heart beat the fastest is the prospect of learning more about my father. I'm about to get my first glimpse into how he lived.

I notice the glass on the front door is broken, but otherwise, the place appears to be undisturbed since it closed down following the accident. The red CLOSED sign is still hanging from the door, and I can still smell the thin scent of alcohol as I open the door and step inside.

From the outside, I must admit that Smoke, Steel, & Whiskey is nothing special. The building is covered in dirt, caked on from years of sandstorms and the very occasional rain. Most of the windows are so dirty that it's impossible to see inside, and the tin roof looks like it hasn't been cleaned or replaced since this place was built.

But, despite its outward appearance, Smoke, Steel, & Whiskey welcomes me in with a rich, eclectic, lived-in aesthetic, and I immediately feel as though I've stepped into a significant gathering place. I was doubtful that I'd get much for selling

the place, but now, I think I might have stumbled upon something quite valuable.

My eyes sweep over the bar first, taking delight at the wide selection of drinks that remain on the towering shelves behind it. I imagine you could ask for anything here, and you'd get it without so much as a questioning raise of an eyebrow.

I instantly feel as though my mom never gave Angus enough credit. Surely, this can't be the business of such a troubled individual. There had to be something in his soul that made him stand out from other men, though I do entertain the thought that he could've developed that after his prison sentence. My mom would not have known his accomplishments to be able to tell me about them.

I run my hand over the edge of a pool table as I meander deeper into the building, the deep grooves in the wood telling me stories of bearded bikers knocking ivory balls together with drunken vigor. I can still smell the splash of beer on the green velvet, and I can practically hear the muffled growl of motorcycle engines outside.

For several minutes, I'm lost in the memories this place contains, and I wish the walls could speak to give me further insight into what it was like when it was open and running at full capacity.

I want to know everything.

But eventually, I remember why I came here, and I make my way back through the sea of tables, chairs, and couches to a doorway beside the bar. I wasn't told much about the layout, but I was informed that Angus basically lived here in one of the back rooms. All his belongings would be found there.

As I move down the hallway, I notice that a door in the hallway is open, and I can smell a thick, sour, bitter smell wafting out from the room.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up, and my skin prickles in fear. For a moment, I fear that I'll find Angus inside, slumped over his desk, his skin decayed to the point that it's become glued to the wood.

Not possible. He died in a motorcycle accident.

But what if he had a dog in there, or some small animal locked in a cage, starved to death when he never came home?

I prepare myself for the worst, looking over my shoulder for a breath of fresh air before entering Angus's office. Whatever I find there, it'll be worth uncovering. I need to know more about my father. I must discover what kind of man he was.

I step inside, my shoe sinking into damp carpet.

As it all comes into focus, I gasp.

Oakley

Growing up, my mother told me a few things about Angus, all quite dreadful. I swore that I would never marry a man like him, much less have children who would have to grow up with only one parent because he got his ass tossed in prison for murder.

As a child, I often wondered why my father didn't love me or my mother enough to stick around. As I got older, I realized he must've been a very troubled man to end up in prison, and as I got even older, I accepted that it was better that he never reached out, even after he was released.

Now, all that I know about my father has come into question as I spot a framed picture on the bookshelf in his office. I recognize the face staring back at me immediately – the bright, curious eyes, the dimple on her left cheek, the stray hair hanging down in front of her face that will never stay in place, no matter how many hair products she uses.

I push that hair behind my ear and walk toward the picture of myself as a child. I'm no older than two, pushing around a miniature shopping cart filled with my favorite toys in the old apartment we were living in when Angus was still around.

I've seen the picture a million times. My mom has the same one stuck to the fridge with a Christmas tree shaped magnet. She says I'm a gift, so she has Christmas year-round. The way

she talks to me proves otherwise, but I never question her when she says it. Maybe it makes her feel better about the way she behaves at home.

The ill feelings I've always had toward her grows into a ripe suspicion of just about everything she's ever told me about my father as I study the picture on his bookshelf. There are no other pictures or decorations in the office, so he must've considered my portrait to be important enough to put there.

Nineteen years later, and he still has it.

I suppose it's possible for something like that to disappear into the scenery and become forgotten, like the buildings you see every day as you drive home, but that doesn't explain how it got here in the first place.

According to my mom, Angus was in prison for close to a decade before they released him, a surprisingly short stint for a murder charge, though she never explained what the exact details of the case were. Being young and naive, I took her word to be the truth.

Now, I'm not so sure that she was honest with me.

If he ever was in prison, how did he manage to keep a picture of me for so long, and why? If he really didn't love me, why would he bother?

As though my mother has heard my questions sent out to the universe and feels guilty, I get a call from her. I'm tempted not to answer it and continue combing the office for more pieces of his life that Angus left behind, but I know how she worries. I know she cares, even if she shows it in the worst ways.

I answer the phone, speaking in a cheerful tone to give her the impression that I'm excited for an interview instead of carefully snooping through a defunct bar. "Hey mom, what's up?"

Her voice comes through after a brief pause. "Hey, Oakley. I just wanted to call to see how you were getting along. You didn't send me a single text about your hotel was, or anything. I hope you haven't forgotten about me."

"Mom, I sent you a text when I landed."

“Just one,” she replies, as though I owe her a detailed summary of everything that’s happened since I landed in Nevada. “You were so short with me when you left. I was certain you were angry about something. Is everything alright?”

I roll my eyes. She always has to make it about how I’ve been so cruel to her, gaslighting me into believing that she wasn’t the one bringing the negative energy. I’ve grown resistant to it, but it still bothers me.

“Everything is fine,” I assure her. “I just got to my hotel and was about to text you.”

“Just now? I thought your plane landed a few hours ago?”

I cringe at my obvious mistake. “Ah, yes, I was eating lunch. I didn’t like the food they had on the plane.”

She laughs, cutting through some of the tension. “They had the gall to serve me fish when I flew to Hawaii last summer. Can you believe that? Fish, on such a crowded plane. You could smell it for the rest of the flight.”

I laugh along with her story, more from relief that she bought my lie than genuine humor. I don’t, in fact, think it’s weird to eat fish on a plane. She always finds problems with the most mundane things.

“So, tell me about the hotel,” she chirps. “Is it right in the center of the city? You know, scammers are making a killing out there. You stand to lose more money on the street than in any of the casinos.”

“It’s a little ways out of the city. Nothing special,” I reply, trying to keep things as vague as possible. I haven’t even booked a hotel yet. My luggage is in the back of the rental car.

“Just make sure you’re not too far away from anything. The heat out there will roast a girl as pale as you are. You won’t get far before blisters form on the back of your neck. Remember that time you went to the beach without sunscreen?”

“I brought sunscreen this time,” I assure her, which is just another lie. I figure I’ll just keep this going for as long as I

can, so long as it keeps her happy. What's one more lie when I've already lied about so much already?

"Okay, well, just make sure you're checking in regularly. And I'll want to hear about the interview. When is that?"

"In a couple of days," I say, making things up on the spot as I realize it's going to take me more time than I thought to break down what I'm doing with this bar. It won't be as easy as selling it and flying back home with the money. I need to know more about my father, and I seriously doubt my mom is going to divulge that information in an honest way.

The only solution is to meet lies with lies.

"A couple of days? Why did they fly you out there so early?" my mom says, her voice pitching up into her usual characteristic whine. "I hope they're paying for your hotel."

"Yes, all expenses paid," I say with a laugh. "Isn't that wonderful?"

"Sounds fishy. Are you sure this isn't some kind of scam?"

"A scam in which they pay hundreds of dollars for a flight to Nevada, a hotel, and all you can eat shrimp and lobster?" I ask, playing up the extravagance of it all. I'm starting to have fun with this, now that I've accepted that I'm a horrible person for weaving such a ridiculous story.

There's a long silence on her end, not unusual for her when she doesn't get her way. I'm sure she wants something to go wrong for me so that she can be proven right about my career choice.

And maybe she *is* right, but I won't let her know that.

"Okay, so I'll let you know how it goes. I need to take a shower. It's so hot here in Nevada," I say, finally allowing a ray of truth to peak through the cloud of lies I've created.

"Okay, just be safe. You know, you're always welcome to come back home if things don't work out," she says, sounding defeated. "And wear your sunscreen."

"Got it. Thanks, mom," I reply, hanging up the phone immediately and tucking it into the back pocket of my jeans.

I continue my sweep of Angus's office, pulling open drawers and flipping through books until I find something that piques my interest. Some people keep their business records on their computer, but according to the book in the top drawer of his desk, my father kept his on paper.

Old-fashioned, just like my mom.

I lay the book down on the desk, pushing aside a few blue wrinkled bags that probably had ice in them before they melted and soaked into the carpet. It's a big soggy in here, and the mold is gross, but I think if I ran a dehumidifier and replaced the carpet it would be fine again.

I sit down in the leather chair at the desk, feeling myself sink deep into the pocket Angus's large body made from years of brooding over his finances. He was obviously a large man, and I think I remember him being tall. I have some faint recollections of being held very high up as a baby.

I settle in and begin flipping through the book, forgetting entirely about the sour smell in the room and becoming engrossed in the finances of Smoke, Steel, & Whiskey. The neatly written numbers in blue ink tell me that this place gets plenty of traffic through the week but is absolutely packed on the weekend. I'm shocked by how money it brings in.

I flip to the last page that has writing in it and trace my finger down to the last line of the page. It was written the day before my father died, probably the last time he wrote anything down before the accident. It was a Thursday night, and the total cash received was \$738.09.

I have to read the number a few times before I'm really able to process it. If he made that much on a Thursday, how much was he pulling in on a Saturday night?

My finger moves up the page and finds the previous week's earnings.

Saturday - \$1,589.84.

My jaw drops as I do the math in my head. If my estimates are correct, Smoke, Steel, & Whiskey was doing close to \$300,000 annually before it closed down!

Okay, well, how much of that is profit? The books don't say much other than revenue, but I'm inclined to believe it had to be significant for Angus to own the building. He wasn't renting it from someone. It was passed down fully to me, and now I own every glass, chair, and table inside.

I lean back in my chair, pulling my fingers through sweaty strands of hair and digging my nails into my scalp.

\$300,000.

And how much does a psychologist make?

Never mind that. How does a psychologist without a job make?

Nothing.

I shake my head, leaning forward again and studying the pages that my father carefully wrote in every night after work. What do I have to lose by staying here just a little bit longer and figuring this place out? I'm sure my mother would be pissed to high hell if she knew how involved I was getting in my father's business, but I don't have to tell her yet. I don't have to say a goddamn thing.

I close the book and slide it forward on the desk, standing up and walking toward the door. I glance over my shoulder at the picture of me on the bookshelf. Angus cared enough to keep that picture, even after he got divorced.

Is it wrong for me to care too?

Usually, I'm slow to make decisions, preferring to think things through until the end so that I don't miss some tragic detail that will derail everything and obliterate my efforts. However, as I walk out the door and return to the front of the bar, my mind is already made up. I'm going to reopen Smoke, Steel, & Whiskey, despite my only experience in the industry being when I waited tables until 3 AM at the diner down the road from my college campus.

And maybe in the process, I'll find out who Angus Dredd really was.

Savva

I shake the last drop of piss off the tip of my cock and tuck it back into my pants just as there's a knock on the front door. It must be Pasha. That motherfucker always seems to come when I'm in the bathroom.

There's another knock after only a second, and I grit my teeth so hard they squeak as I charge toward the door.

Another knock.

"I'm coming, you stupid fuck," I growl, throwing open the door and staring down Pasha as he pulls back his hand to knock again. "What the fuck do you want?"

He takes a step back, seeming to be startled by my anger even though the reason should be obvious. "Um, I came to deliver the cash, and I have some other news for you."

I turn around and walk back into the house. "Come in and take off your shoes. I just have the rugs cleaned."

Pasha follows me in, shutting the door and unzipping his dusty leather boots. While he's taking them off, I fish around in my back pocket for a cigarette from the squished pack.

"Hot day today, but the money is coming in strong," Pasha says, placing his shoes neatly on the mat in front of the door. He stands up straight as I light my cigarette. "I thought you said something about quitting those."

I glare at him. “I would if you didn’t piss me off so often.”

He chuckles, shrugging off his leather jacket and hanging it on one of the hooks on the wall. “You do that all by yourself.”

“Maybe so,” I grumble, leading him down the hall to the living room.

I might be a grump, but I know better than to give Pasha too hard of a time. He’s always been diligent about bringing me payments from the businesses we finance, and never once has he shown up empty handed. He does what needs to be done to collect, even if bones get broken in the process.

“Coffee?”

He shakes his head, swinging a black shoulder bag from his back to his front. He unzips it. “I don’t think either of us have time for that tonight.” He pulls out stacks of ruffled bills bound in thick tan rubber bands, and begins piling them on the glass table next to me.

“What do you mean by that?” I ask, narrowing my eyes. “You said you had news.”

He finishes the pile and nods, looking up at me with his lips pursed. “Angus is back. A couple of the guys said they passed Smoke, Steel, & Whiskey a few hours ago, and it was open.”

I frown. I had thought for sure that Angus made a run for it. I tried calling him just yesterday, and his phone was still disconnected. If he’s back open again, why hasn’t he reached out to continue his payments? From what I understand, business is good for him.

“We need to head down there,” I say, rubbing the stubble on my chin. “He’s got some questions to answer.”

“And money to pay,” Pasha adds. “I assume you want to get going now.”

“Yes,” I answer definitively. “I’ll go get my stuff. My bike is already gassed up and ready. I assume you have enough to get there and back.”

He nods. “I stopped by the station before coming here. I figured you’d want to pay him a visit when you heard the

news.”

I smirk. “Good man. You can wait for me outside. I’ll only be a moment.”

As Pasha leaves, I walk calmly toward the stairs, only quickening my pace when he’s out of view. I take the stairs by two, arriving in my bedroom in seconds.

The gun I need is already on my bed, cradled in a polishing cloth on my silk sheets. I don’t have to use it on people often, but I do take it out to the range in my backyard as often as I can. It’s better to know how to kill a man and not need to, than to be caught off-guard and hit everyone but your target.

I check my phone one last time before I get in the mood to talk shit to Angus. I’ve given him enough chances to come clean with me. Ignoring the man who loaned you the money to buy your bar is a poor choice when that same man is willing to reverse someone’s kneecaps to send a message. You fuck with me just once, and there’s no guarantee you’re ever going to be able to walk again.

I tuck the gun into the holster on my waist, clearly visible to anyone who passes by. I have a few more on me in more hidden places, but this one sends a message to everyone who sees me. Don’t fuck with the Russian Mafia.

I change into a pair of thicker jeans and throw on a jacket before heading out the door and joining Pasha.

The air is cooler at night, but it never seems to get colder than 70 degrees in the summer. So, despite the breeze, I’m sweating under my jacket by the time I arrive at Smoke, Steel, & Whiskey with Pasha. He’d better be right about it being open again. I need a drink.

As we park, it becomes obvious that the business is in full swing. It’s Friday night, and there’s a group of bikers smoking weed outside the front door. I walk through the skunky haze into the golden light of the bar, immediately met with the sound of clinking glass and the deep, slurred voices of men who smoke like chimneys and drink like fish.

“Stay close,” I warn Pasha as we walk up to the bar. It’s just the two of us today, and things can go sour quickly if Angus decides to act cute.

I slide up to the bar, ordering a couple of waters for Pasha and me. There’s no time for booze. Maybe after we collect the money.

When the bartender looks at me, I feel a sudden rush of interest, my skin prickling as her bright, curious eyes meet mine. “Would you like to open a tab?” she asks sweetly.

I shake my head. “My drinks are always on the house. You must be new here.”

Her bottom lip comes out in a slight pout, and she tilts her head to the side.

So innocent, so naive.

“I don’t believe I know who you are. It’s a dollar for the water,” she says.

I sense Pasha tense up beside me, and I put my hand on his arm to calm him. I can take care of this. I doubt this sweet young woman has any idea who she’s dealing with. If Angus had any sense at all, he would’ve told her that I’d be coming.

“My name is Savva. I’m here to collect what is owed to me, and the least you can do is give me a water. Be grateful I haven’t ordered a blowjob instead,” I say, watching her sweet expression melt into confusion and disgust.

“You are not entitled to anything, sir,” she snaps, turning away from me. “Go home.”

She tries to step away, but I move faster, reaching over the bar and grabbing her arm, pulling her back toward me until her face is inches from mine. The entire room goes quiet, but nobody challenges me. Everyone already knows who I am, and they value their lives too much to interrupt me while I’m working.

“What the fuck?!” the bartender squeals, jerking back and freeing herself from my grip. “Get out. Now!” She points to the door, looking around at the other patrons in disbelief as

they bury themselves back into their drinks and ignore her plight.

“Seriously? Nobody is going to do anything about him?” she asks, her voice growing airy and desperate. In any other circumstance, these men would pay out the ass to beat the shit out of someone who was harassing a pretty young woman, but nobody is willing to lift a finger if it means going against me.

I smirk, crossing my arms and leaning over the bar. “How about you go grab Angus and tell him to stop hiding in the back. We need to talk. Oh, and grab a couple of waters for me and my boy,” I say, nodding to Pasha. “We’re thirsty.”

She frowns, but it’s not the disgusted snarl she gave me just moments earlier. She looks confused this time. “Angus?” she asks.

I sigh, my patience wearing thinner than the bartender’s blouse. “Yes, Angus, you airheaded slut. Get him before I go back there and beat his head against his desk for being a pussy bitch.”

She swallows hard, pulling her shoulders back in what can only be interpreted as an act of defiance. “I’m sorry, but you can’t see Angus. He died a few weeks ago in a motorcycle accident.”

I’m struck back by her words, shocked that I never even considered the possibility that Angus could be dead. I never heard a word about it, not so much as an obituary in his name.

Doubt creeps in quickly, and I feel inclined to challenge her. “Perhaps Angus would like me to think that he’s dead, but then who is running the bar?”

She plants her hands on her hips and purses her lips at me. “I am, and if you don’t leave immediately, I’m going to call the police.”

I roll my eyes. “Right, a girl like you could run a place like this. Did Angus put you up to this? I’m not really in the mood for jokes.”

She shakes her head, stepping away again to pour a beer for another customer and speaking over her shoulder. “No, it’s not

a joke. I have inherited the business from Angus because I'm his daughter. I hope that's not too much for you to wrap your underdeveloped brain around."

I'm not put off by the edge in her tone. On the contrary, I find the fight in her attractive, even if it will prove futile against a man of my status. She'll find that out just as soon as I take her from the bar to somewhere a little more... private.

"I'm saddened that Angus never told you about the full extent of his business, but perhaps I can enlighten you," I say, turning my aggressive tone upside-down and smiling at her. "But I'd like to know exactly who I'm talking with. What's your name?"

"Oakley," she says, filling two glasses up with water and sliding them across the bar.

Pasha takes one and starts drinking, but I don't touch mine. I'm more interested in getting my hands on sweet little Oakley. She seems like a fun, if not a bit too easy, challenge. I love a woman who knows how to talk back just as much as I love putting them in their place.

"Alright, Oakley. Let's talk," I say, weaving my fingers together on the bar and leaning in.

Oakley

Savva's cruel smile strikes me as being just as dangerous as the gun gleaming from the holster on his hip. His eyes are the color of copper, and they feel hotter the longer I look at them. I risk erupting into flames if I can't escape his wicked gaze.

But how can I escape from Savva when nobody is willing to help me. There's at least two dozen men in the bar, and not a single one of them has stood up to Savva. Do I have to be the one to fight him off by myself? Retrospectively, it would've been a good idea to buy a gun and carry it with me when I decided to run a bar that primarily caters to large, imposing bikers.

Now, it's too late.

"I think we'd better go somewhere a bit more private," Savva says, his words slow and deliberate, like they have a double meaning.

Even though my stomach feels like there's a lead weight pulling it down, I do my best to sound confident. "We can talk right here in front of everyone, but if you cause any trouble, I will have to call the police."

I already know that won't be good enough for him. He hasn't so much as flinched at the mention of police, and something tells me I wouldn't even be able to press the first number

before he grabbed me and shook the phone out of my hand. After that, I don't even want to know what he'll do to me.

"I'll give you one chance to turn around and walk that tight ass down to the office," he says, his eyes searing my skin as he looks me over. "If I have to tell you again, it won't be with words."

He can't be bluffing, but what's the chance of me getting out of this in one piece once he takes me back where nobody can see us? I can't go willingly. I'm no pushover, and no amount of bullying is going to convince me that it's better to let him have his way with me instead of standing up for myself.

I take a step back, searching the avoidant faces at the bar for anyone who will help me. I get nothing from the crowd, and before I'm able to speak up, Savva jumps over the bar and grabs me by the waist.

"Get away from me!" I scream as he picks me up.

I pound my fists into his broad back as he hoists me over his shoulder, but he acts like he's carrying a bag of feathers, easily gliding around the bar and out the door toward the office. Not a single person comes to my aid, despite my cries for help, and the terror of being alone in a room with Savva grows so big that I lose the ability to fight. I go limp as he carries me into the office and shuts the door behind us.

I'm in a daze as he tosses me into the leather chair behind the desk, but I quickly snap back into a state of high-alert once he slams both of his hands into the armrests and brings his face so close to mine that our noses touch. "It's time you learned about the Bratva," he growls.

I'm too petrified by fear to ask him what that means.

He stares at me, positioning himself to take up as much space as possible, until I look away, searching my lap for safety. I find none there. I have nowhere to go, and nobody to help me. I hate to admit that my mother may have been right.

God, what would she think if her daughter wound up dead in the godforsaken Nevada desert, all because she was foolish enough to think she could run her late father's bar on her own?

“Listen to me, and listen to me good,” Savva says, his voice so low and deep that I feel it more than I hear it. “Angus Dredd, your father, took out a loan with the Bratva – that’s the Russian Mafia, in case you weren’t aware. Anyway, he borrowed a hefty sum, and was being good and making his payments until *you* showed up and thought it’d be cute to cross me. Well, let me make this clear for you, slut. *Nobody* crosses the Bratva. Ever.”

For some reason, the word *slut* pulls me out of my fear, emboldening me to defy him once again. “Don’t call me that. My name is Oakley,” I say, looking up at him again.

He pulls his head back, a grin of disbelief on his admittedly sharp jaw. “Don’t call you what? Slut? I’m only calling you that because you are one. I know a bitch when I see one,” he says, reaching down into the waistband of my jeans and finding the ribbon-thin band of my thong. He pulls it up toward my bellybutton until I can feel my panties dig in between my labia.

I bite my lip to suppress a whimper that would prove his point immediately.

He laughs, letting go and snapping my panties against my skin. “Don’t ever tell me I’m wrong, Oakley. Don’t you dare. I know more than you could ever hope to learn in your lifetime. I’ve seen every angle of humanity, inside and out, and let me tell you, not all of it is as pretty as you are.”

My heart pounds in my throat, but despite my overwhelming fear, something else stirs inside of me, some glimmer of awe at his masculine power. Never in my life have I met a man who made me feel so terrified and viciously aroused at the same time.

Savva tilts his head to the side, his expression softening just the slightest bit as he studies my face. “I don’t think your intentions are ill, so I will forgive you for your ignorance. Now that I’ve enlightened you, however, I expect you to either continue what your father started, or step away from the bar and allow me to reclaim the money that’s been invested in it. The choice is yours.”

The smell of smoke, dust, and spicy cologne on his body waft toward me as I turn over the options he's given me in my head. I'm distracted by his presence, unable to think clearly. His eyes keep wandering over me, studying me in a cold, objectifying way, like I'm a nude statue at an art exhibit.

I take a careful breath, mentally grasping for the right words. "How much did he owe you?"

"The initial amount he borrowed was half a million dollars. You can't get that kind of loan from a traditional bank when you're a felon with no credit history, so naturally, he came to me. I'm a fair man, so I gave him a fair rate to make his dreams come true," Savva explains.

My stomach sinks. "I don't have that kind of money," I say, feeling tears just behind my eyes.

Please, Oakley, don't cry now. Don't let this horrible man win.

"I'm not asking for the lump sum, but I will be happy to take it if you sell the bar. Angus still owed about \$200,000 out of the half million when he died, so that's about..." He narrows his eyes and counts the numbers in his head. "A hundred more weeks of payments, or about two years to pay down the principal. I expect an extra year of payments to go to interest, so three years in total."

"Three years," I repeat after him, genuinely considering what that would mean for my future. I was in school longer than that, and then I would just own the bar and could do anything I wanted.

Of course, I thought I already did own it. Why should I just take Savva's word that he'll leave me alone after I'm done making the payments? How do I know there were supposed to be any payments in the first place?

"I don't expect you to make a decision today, but you will need to come up with an answer by next Friday. Payments are made weekly," Savva says, finally backing away from my chair and crossing his arms over his broad chest. "Think it over."

“How much are the payments?” I ask. I can barely concentrate on getting my words out without jumbling them into a nonsensical mess, much less do the math required to figure out what his numbers come out to.

“Two-thousand dollars a week, paid on Friday. Pasha, the one I came with, collects from a few places around town. I, however, usually handled Angus, so I will be in charge of collecting from you. Don’t give money to anyone else, especially not the Triple Six Angels.”

“Who are they?” I ask, but I hardly want to hear the answer.

He wrinkles his nose. “Pests.”

I straighten up in my chair. “Well, don’t expect me to come up with the money so quickly. I just started running this place, and I’m still getting the hang of it.”

He smirks, shifting his weight and leaning against the desk. “I can tell, but that doesn’t change what you’ll owe me. If you don’t pay, bad things start happening.”

“Like what?”

“Like I burn this fucking place to the ground with you inside of it,” he says, jumping back into an aggressive stance.

I put my hands up defensively. “Alright, I was just asking. I don’t think there’s any sense in making a big deal out of this. If Angus owed money on the bar, I suppose it’s my responsibility to pay it,” I reply, trying to satiate him before he starts getting wild again.

It works, and I notice his pupils shrink a bit. “Don’t try anything funny, like going to the police, either. They don’t operate around here, and they won’t come to help you if you need it. The Triple Six Angels are the closest things to cops out here in the sense that they’ll pull you over and rob you blind the first chance they get.”

“It sounds like you’re trying to scare me,” I reply incredulously.

He shakes his head. “Just a warning. I’d hate to see what kind of trouble an innocent girl like you could get into in a

depraved town like this. I suggest you buy yourself a gun, at the very least. A shotgun would probably equal the playing field nicely.”

I’m tempted to ask how he thinks he’d be able to collect money from me if I had a shotgun pointed at his gut, but I decide to keep my mouth shut. It’s better to say less with Savva. I’ve already discovered that he enjoys twisting my words and overreacting to whatever he thinks I’ve said.

“I will keep that in mind,” I say.

“Right,” he replies, rubbing the stubble on his cleft chin as he turns to the door. “Then I will let you get back to business at the bar all by yourself. You really should have someone else out there, unless you’re determined to distract your customers from the slow service by flashing those pretty little panties every time you bend over. Don’t think I don’t know how you make your money here.”

“I’m not that easy,” I reply quickly, unwilling to let him get the last word in before he leaves.

He laughs, crow’s feet appearing in the corners of his eyes. “We’ll see about that.”

We’ll see about that? The only thing that motherfucker will be seeing is the barrel of a shotgun if he tries anything with me.

I wait several long minutes before I get out of the chair and head back to the bar. My legs are wobbly, but eventually, I’m able to return to work.

As I start taking orders again, nobody looks me in the eyes, and nobody mentions Savva. An overwhelming feeling of loneliness enters me, and for the first time since landing in Nevada, I want to go home.

Savva

“Cute girl,” Pasha says, elbowing me as I take a bite of my eggs.

“What girl?” Greg asks, leaning across the table. “I thought you guys were visiting Angus last night.”

I roll my eyes, putting down my fork and reaching for the Bloody Mary I ordered. “We ran into some complications. Apparently, Angus is dead. Pasha verified it last night after we left the bar. The cause of death was listed as a motorcycle accident, but it’s the accident part I’m not really buying. Not sure why, but it doesn’t really sit right with me. Anyway, guess who the old man put in charge of the bar after he passed?”

“Who?” Greg asks, totally engrossed in my story already.

“His daughter, a woman named Oakley. I swear she can’t be older than twenty-five.”

“Twenty-one,” Pasha corrects. “I looked her up last night, too.”

Greg chuckles. “He was probably jerking off to pictures of her. Weren’t you, you old pervert?”

“Let me deal with the girl,” I say, holding up my hand, and the table falls silent. “As long as she makes her payments and doesn’t start screaming for someone to come save her, we’re in the clear. It’ll be business as usual.”

“But do you think a woman that young can handle a biker’s bar?” Greg asks. “I’ve heard of some old wenches running joints out here, but they’re mostly brothels. I don’t think Oakley will last long trying to run a bar.”

I shrug, taking a sip of my drink. “Probably not, but that’s not my business. I’m only interested in collecting what she now owes us by running that place. She seemed okay the last time I was there, but she’ll probably want to hire a few people to help soon or she’ll be overwhelmed. I’m sure the traffic is picking up again, especially since there’s a pretty girl behind the bar.”

“Very pretty,” Pasha says, grinning at Greg. “You should’ve seen her. Small tits, but perky.”

I tear off a piece of bread with my teeth, the crust scraping against my gums. “Nobody is touching Oakley, you got that?”

“Nobody but you, maybe,” Pasha says with a laugh. “You’ve ever seen a woman that scared and turned on at the same time? It was wild.”

Greg shakes his head. “Damn, I wish I had been there. You have to bring me around next time.”

I pretend to ignore them, trying to give off the impression that I couldn’t care less about Oakley, but inside my head, I’m going over every detail of her perfect body. I’m already obsessed with the way her auburn hair bounces across her shoulders, the red of her cheeks and the breathless way her mouth falls open when I say something daring to her.

If I were a less honorable man, I would’ve bent her over the desk and left her dripping. As it stands, I would benefit more from leaving her alone and allowing her to continue her payments. There are plenty of other women who would happily drop their panties for me.

The problem is, I don’t want that.

I want Oakley.

I dig into my eggs, trying to ignore the erection that’s pulsing against my left thigh. It’s embarrassing to be this turned on at a table full of men. I need to get it together.

I take another sip of my Bloody Mary, tabasco stinging my lips. “So, everything else is running smoothly, I assume?” I ask, looking expectantly at Greg and Pasha. They’re both midbite, but they freeze at the same time.

Greg puts his fork down. “There’s a...”

The waitress comes around at the worst time, as is their policy here, it seems. “Is everything alright?” she asks, her voice rising and falling in a well-rehearsed manner.

Pasha raises the bread basket. “I think we could do with a refill, please.”

She takes it and disappears back into the moderately busy restaurant. I like to have brunch here, but I’m starting to think we’re going to have to change spots soon. What used to be an open secret has turned into the local hotspot for tourists.

Greg clears his throat. “As I was saying, there’s a bit of an issue we’re having with a few of the spots further out from the city. It seems like the Triple Six Angels have become more emboldened to collect tolls on the main road, and they’re really cranking up the prices. It’s threatening the customer bases of several bars and strip clubs down there.”

“Don’t they know they’re shooting themselves in the foot by doing that?” I ask, shaking my head. “That’s just basic economics.”

“A bunch of boneheaded Neanderthals, that lot,” Pasha says.

“Right, but I suppose we can’t just let them put themselves and everyone else out of business. The money they’re taking should be going to us,” I say.

The waitress comes back with a basket of fresh bread, and silence falls until she leaves again.

“So, we’re going to have to bust some heads if we see them buzzing around. I think we should send a message, but nothing that would warrant retaliation. I know they’re just a biker gang, but their leader, Stone, has a few homicides under his belt. We shouldn’t stir the pot.”

“What a stupid fucking name, Stone,” Pasha says with a laugh, grabbing a piece of bread and piling eggs on top of it. “Motherfucker really is a caveman.”

Greg laughs, but I’m not amused. These two get paid a steady salary. Mine is dictated by how much money we’re able to bring in from our businesses, and if the Triple Six Angels cause too much trouble, my little money machine will turn into a ghost town. I need to make sure that doesn’t happen.

I finish off my Bloody Mary and crunch on the celery stick from my glass, the fibers peeling off and wedging themselves between my teeth. As much as I hate having to deal with a biker gang getting in the way of business, it’s almost a welcome relief from the topic of Oakley.

I can’t get her face out of my head, and that’s dangerous in my line of work. No man should be that distracted by a woman.

Still, despite the pressure of finding a solution to Stone and his posse of braindead followers, Oakley’s face floats across my vision.

Then her neck.

Then her breasts.

Then her hips and her ass in those tight blue jeans.

My cock is pulsing again, and I’m ready to go home and spill my seed just to free myself from her mind-numbing grip. Whatever works.

“How do we send a signal?” Greg finally asks, breaking me out of my spell. “Should we shoot one of them?”

“No,” I say with a slight laugh. “That would be a bit drastic. I’ll have to think about it. Perhaps if we simply sent someone to talk to them, they’d relent.”

Greg raises his hands. “I’m not going.”

“Pussy,” Pasha says.

“Oh, you’d like to go?”

Pasha looks toward me for some kind of support, but I rather like Greg’s idea. “Right, well, if you think Greg can’t do it,

then you're the better one to go. Just speak like you're talking to a couple of wild boars and you should be alright. Explain it to them in terms they can understand."

"Take many dollars, no money left. Take few dollars, always have money," Greg says, imitating the stereotype of a caveman.

Pasha gives him an annoyed look. "Thanks a lot," he says sarcastically.

"No problem."

I sigh. "Alright, let's get out of here. This place is getting too busy. Any suggestions where we should meet next week?"

"Your house, maybe. Don't you have a private chef?" Pasha suggests.

"He doesn't work on weekends," I reply, already hating the idea of having to entertain these two at my house. Once they discovered the hot tub in the backyard, they'd never leave.

"What good is a chef that doesn't cook on weekends? Is that when you'd want one?"

"I have time on the weekends. Occasionally, a man likes to cook for himself," I reply.

"Sounds like you need a wife," Greg says.

"I don't have time for that," I snap, but I immediately picture Oakley in my kitchen, wearing nothing but an apron, her bare ass exposed as she bends over to open the oven. I'd kill to have her walking around my house, cleaning things, feeding me, and falling to her knees to suck me off at the snap of my fingers.

Is that worth giving up two-thousand dollars a week?

Probably not.

Probably not.

Oakley

Sunday comes like a breath of fresh air. I never really appreciated such a slow day before, but now that I'm running a bar, Sunday is the only day that I can take off and not have customers trying to break my doors down for a drink.

Sunlight streams in from the window behind me as I scribble new numbers into the book, trying to keep up Angus's tradition of tracking his cashflow on paper. The carpet hasn't been replaced yet, but with the A/C up and running again, it doesn't smell bad in here anymore. I can almost ignore the mold in the corners of the room as I move the book aside and pull out my laptop.

As much as I detest Savva, he's right about a few things, the first of which is that I need to hire people to help me. I'm not going to be able to run a place this busy by myself. I can barely keep up with things as is, and since I opened and people have discovered that Smoke, Steel, & Whiskey is operating again, traffic has doubled.

I need help.

Most businesses are hiring in the city, paying competitive rates for dancers, bartenders, and bouncers. I'll have to somehow convince people to drive all the way out here to work at a biker bar. I imagine that won't come cheap.

Unfortunately, my father never kept track of how much he was paying people, so I have no clue what his operating costs really were. I can calculate the price of alcohol and electricity, but I fall short when I'm trying to figure out wages.

More and more, I realize that I have no fucking clue what I'm doing. Every action feels like a shot in the dark, and eventually, I feel like I'm going to be aiming at myself by accident.

But I suck it up and put out a few different variations of what I feel like are good job offers. I'm sure to get at least a few applicants, and I only need to hire one or two people to start with. It just has to be enough to take some of the load off my back.

And that leads me to my next issue with the bar, and that's the danger of it all. Sure, Savva is a beast with absolutely no moral compass, but even he seemed to think it was a good idea to arm myself. He was serious when he said that. It wasn't a playful tease like when he called me a slut.

I shiver just thinking about the way the sides of his mouth curled up when he uttered that word. He took pleasure in degrading me, and I was pathetic enough to fall for it. I actually got wet from what he said to me.

But perhaps the gun will stop him from pushing it any further. It's a good idea, and I trust what he said about the police. I tried to find the closest police station on the map, and the only one that existed was three hours away.

Three hours of helplessness at the hands of the first crook who wanders into my bar. I can't let that happen. Savva is already bad enough, and he barely even touched me.

Thankfully, while police stations are in short supply, gun stores aren't. There's one just a few miles down the road, and once I'm certain my job listings are officially up and running, I hop into my Mustang and blaze a trail down to buy my first shotgun.

It's an odd thrill, knowing you're going out to buy something that can kill even the largest man with the twitch of a finger.

I've never really thought about it until now, but the invention of the gun may have directly led to the rights women have in America.

My mom would probably kill me for saying that, but I feel empowered by the possibility.

I pull up to the gun store and park, stepping out onto the scalding pavement. I swear my shoes will melt if I stay out longer than a minute. The heat just keeps increasing as the days grow longer. I bet we're on the verge of a new record in Nevada, or maybe that's just how hot the summers always are. In Georgia, it's hot, but not *this* hot.

As I step into the gun store, I feel eyes on me immediately, and I meander around for a moment, trying to think what I'm going to say before walking up to the glass desk and smiling at the burly man behind it. "Hello, I'm looking to buy a gun."

The words feel strange coming out of my mouth, so blunt and unforgiving. I feel like I'm committing a crime, but it's my right to own a gun. I'm not a felon, and I've never broken a law in my life.

"What exactly are you looking for?" the man behind the counter asks in a flat tone, and I realize this is probably boring for him. I may be anxious and shaky, but he sells guns to strangers every day. This is totally normal.

I puff out my chest, trying to exude confidence I simply don't have. "A shotgun."

"What kind?"

I'm stumped at this point. I just want something that can take down a grown man, but I wouldn't say that. I feel like I have to say it's for target practice or hunting, even though it's obviously not.

"Just something that can shoot. I'm not picky," I say with a thin smile, hoping he'll give me whatever is easiest to operate and send me on my way.

"For general purposes, you're looking at either a pump action or a double barrel. I can show you a couple of models that we just got in last week."

“Whatever’s cheapest,” I say, glancing at the tag for a rifle that’s nearly \$5,000. How can a gun be so expensive? I thought they were supposed to be a hundred bucks or something.

“Wait a second,” the man says, disappearing into the back.

For a moment, I think he’s gone to report me to the cops, but he comes back carrying a gun that looks like something a farmer would sit with on his porch. “This here will probably do you good. It’s simple – you load it, you pump it, you pull the trigger. Nothing else to it.”

“Great,” I say as he lays it down on the glass display case. “And how much is it?”

“Three-ninety-nine.”

I sigh in relief. That’s much better than a few thousand. I have that much and quite a bit extra from yesterday’s shift.

While I’m fishing around in my purse for the cash, he pulls out a clipboard and slides it over to me. “Fill this out, show some ID, and you’ll be good to go. I’m assuming you want ammunition as well.”

I look up at him and nod. I hadn’t even considered it.

“What kind? Birdshot, buckshot, slugs...?”

“Which one is better?”

“You’ll be taking buckshot,” he replies, grabbing a jingling brown box off the shelf behind me and putting it down on the counter.

I thank him, paying for the two purchases and putting everything in my trunk. I have no idea what to do with the gun, where to keep it, and how to use it, but I guess having one is better than not having one, right?

On the way back, my phone rings. It’s my mom, but I don’t want to answer it. Even though I’m running the bar, I haven’t fully committed to staying here with it, and I don’t have a good enough story to tell her that will convince her I’m not up to something else.

I mute my phone, allowing it to go to voicemail as I arrive at the bar. I want to be honest with my mom, I really do, but I know she'll freak out if I tell her that I'm running Angus's bar. She would become hysterical, crying and screaming at me that I've betrayed the family.

I'm not sure I have the mental capacity to deal with that right now without freaking out on her and making it even worse. I have to sort myself out before I can talk to her.

I take the shotgun into the office and lay it down across the desk. It feels so large and threatening there that I feel like it's going to go off and spray the entire room with little grey pellets. It's not loaded, but that doesn't change how I feel.

I move it to the corner, propping it against the wall where I can keep an eye on it from the desk. I'm treating it like a sentient being, but that's better than mishandling it and causing a tragic accident.

I have to be smart about all this. One wrong move and I could fuck everything up irreversibly. The room for error doesn't exist.

After eyeing the shotgun suspiciously for almost a full minute, I open my laptop to check on the job listing I put up. I find it funny that just a week and a half ago, I was the one applying for jobs. Now, I'm on the other side of the fence, and I finally realize how stressful it is to try to hire someone. The entire system is rotten through and through.

When I open my inbox, I'm met with a flood of new applications. How did this many people manage to apply in the time it took me to drive to the store and back?

My mind immediately arrives at the worst conclusions. Did I put an extra zero on the end of the hourly wage, and now I'll have to walk it back during the interviews? Did I forget to tell them that this place is in the middle of nowhere? Are these even real people, or have bots gotten ahold of my listing and spammed my inbox?

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly. I can take this one application at a time, and I don't have to stress out about

hiring them. I'm in charge. I'm the boss now.

I look over to the picture of me as a baby on the bookshelf, and I find strength and courage to continue. Other people have been through much worse and came out okay. This doesn't have to be what ends me.

I open the first application and start working.

Savva

I'm going in solo tonight. I tell myself it's because I should be able to handle Oakley by myself, but really, it's because I *want* her all to myself. I haven't been able to stop thinking about her since the first time I terrorized her, even after I emptied my balls to the thought of tearing off her panties and getting inside of her.

I idle in the parking lot for a minute, smoking a cigarette and looking in through the freshly cleaned window. She's obviously hired a few people. I can see more activity inside, and it looks much better from the outside than it ever did under Angus's ownership. Perhaps she'll be able to pull this off after all.

My stomach feels weird as I step off my Harley, and it's not from the nicotine.

No, it's something else, the tight swirl of anxiety mixed with excitement. It's like I popped a pill and it's just now starting to hit me. I almost feel like turning around and going home.

But I've faced much greater challenges than a twenty-one-year-old running around a bar in a tight pair of blue jeans. I can handle her. Whatever she throws my way, I can catch it and twist it in my favor. I've always been able to do that.

The door swings open silently on its oiled hinges, and I'm met with the scent of beer, chips, and body odor. Despite Oakley's

renovations, some things will never change. Her customers will always be bikers, and the energy they bring will always be toeing the line between a good time and complete chaos.

There's a new person working the bar, an older woman with hawkish eyes and long fingers. I don't know her, but she knows me, and immediately heads into the back after she spots me. She arrives a moment later with Oakley in tow.

So, my little Oakley has a team now. That's cute.

I slide up to the bar, giving her a wink and smile. "I'd like a drink."

Without hesitation she turns to the hawkish woman. "Pale ale on the house." She turns back to me with a cheeky smile. "That's the cheapest one we have."

I'm impressed by her banter, but the real test is how easily she'll hand over the money. None of this matters if she's not forking over a cool two grand every week. I'll only work with her if she can work with me. No compromises.

Oakley receives a beer from the hawkish woman and slides it over to me, propping herself up on the bar with her elbows and speaking to me like an old friend. "How was the drive?"

I shrug, taking a sip of my beer and wondering if she's poisoned it. "Same shit, different day. Isn't that what you Americans say?"

"I thought the Bratva was more glamorous than that," she teases.

"Oh, it's glamorous, just not when you're riding around collecting money from people. Once you get home and jump into a bathtub full of it, things start to get fun."

She tilts her head to the side curiously. "I bet you make a lot from this."

"Enough to pay the bills," I reply, taking another sip. The cool foam on my lips is the only thing that's keeping me from overheating in her presence. Being around her is like standing next to the sun.

“That’s very humble of you, but I’m sure you make more than that. You’re milking me for eight thousand dollars a month. I can’t imagine what you’re doing to everyone else.”

“Eight grand is nothing compared to the hundreds of thousands that your father borrowed. Don’t forget that,” I warn.

She nods, letting out a thoughtful sigh. “Yes, I suppose you’re right. If you want, we can go back to the office now and I’ll pay you, or you can wait until you finish your drink.”

I’m not sure which one she prefers, but whichever one it is, I’d like to do the opposite. I’m not a fan of how cheerful she is. It feels fake, and I know she’s just doing it to irritate me. She wants to act like she has everything figured out, and that I don’t bother her at all, but I’ll be sure to show her who’s really in charge once I finish my drink.

I nod to her, taking another sip of my beer. “I think you can wait.”

She shrugs in that same scripted way as before, prancing off to serve the next customer as I follow her with my eyes. The way she moves is effortless, like she’s floating around in her white sneakers instead of walking.

Occasionally, she’ll look over her shoulder at me, tossing me a smile that I can only interpret as flirtatious. As to why she’s suddenly decided to behave this way, I don’t know, and I’m not sure that I like it. The challenge is gone, and in its place is a path that’s just a little too smooth.

So smooth, in fact, that I’m afraid I’ll slip and fall. Perhaps that’s her plan.

I finish my drink and wait for her to return to me, pouting her lips and looking at my empty glass as though she’s sorry for me that my drink is finished. “Another one?” she asks. “It’s on the house.”

“Unless it comes with a pair of your panties wrapped around the glass, I’ll pass,” I say, searching her face for the reaction I want. Disgust? I like it when she’s disgusted with me. There’s

something satisfying about the way she wrinkles her button nose.

Instead, she raises her eyebrow at me. “That costs extra.”

“How much?” I ask, pretending to reach into my back pocket for my wallet.

She laughs. “Let’s say... \$200,000.”

“How about we start with two thousand,” I say, leaning back from the bar.

“Fair enough, but you’re not getting any panties out of that.”

“We’ll see about that,” I reply.

She doesn’t answer, instead waving for me to follow her into the back, where she leads me into the office. It’s the only place that feels like it hasn’t been cleaned or refurnished. The rest of the bar is polished, but for some reason, she’s kept this room exactly how it was when she found it.

Is it because it’s not customer facing? Or is there something more intentional about the way she’s refused its upkeep?

I get a hint at the reason as she turns to me and folds her arms over her chest. “You knew my father,” she states, the pleasant smile wiped clean off her face and replaced with a serious scowl.

“I saw him every week,” I reply, leaning against the desk.

“And you guys talked?”

“Sometimes.”

“So, you could tell me more about him,” she says.

“I was under the impression that you knew plenty about him,” I reply, thinking it odd that he would leave her the bar if they didn’t know each other.

“Not really,” she says, walking over to the bookshelf and opening a small jewelry box. Inside, there’s a stack of bills. She removes it and brings it to me, laying it down on the desk. “Here’s the money, but I’d also like you to tell me about Angus.”

I take the money off the desk, tucking it into my back pocket without counting it. If there's anything missing, I'll come back for it. In fact, I kind of hope there is something missing. I'd do anything for the opportunity to punish Oakley. Her ass is begging to be spanked in those jeans.

"I'm not sure what you want to know, but I'm not in the mood to tell you bedtime stories. I'm sure you could get plenty of the guys at the bar to tell you about their wild adventures," I say.

She narrows her eyes at me, looking me over like she's trying to figure out how hard she'd have to hit me to knock me out. "I just want to know what kind of man he was. I was told he went to prison. I assume that much is true."

"Sure, he was in jail, but I'd estimate half of your customers have also done their time in the slammer as well. It's not uncommon out here," I reply.

She nods slowly. "For murder. That's what I was told."

I scrunch up one side of my face. "Not really murder. He went in for involuntary manslaughter after a drunken barfight with a friend of his. He always expressed regret about it, but that didn't change the judge's mind. He did nearly a decade in prison."

"And then he went and started a bar?" she asks skeptically.

"That was all he knew, and I don't blame him one bit. I've seen plenty of guys go to prison and go right back to what got them locked up in the first place. At least he was selling the booze instead of drinking it. Well, I take that back. He drank a lot too," I reply, thinking back to how many nights I'd show up to Angus passed out at his desk. He always had the money out on the table for me to take, but he was a wreck often enough to mention.

"Maybe my mom was right," she says, though she seems reluctant to admit it to herself.

"I doubt it," I reply. "You know, he talked about you sometimes. I honestly thought you knew him."

She jumps at my words, her pupils tripling in size. "He did? He really talked about me?"

I frown, pulling my head back. “Uh, yes. You’re his daughter.”

“And yet, I never heard a word from him. Not a call, not a text, not even a letter in the mail. My mom said he wanted nothing to do with us.”

“Honestly, that’s not the impression I got,” I reply.

“What impression did you get?” she asks, looking at me as though I’m the answer to her prayers. It’s funny how that works. Once you have something a woman wants, she won’t leave you the fuck alone, but once she gets it, she’ll act like she doesn’t know you.

I turn away from her and head toward the door. “Sorry, but I think that’s all the time I have tonight.”

“Wait!” She jumps toward me, grabbing my arm and attempting to pull me back into the office.

It’s cute, but I don’t have time for this. I continue out the door and down the hallway.

“Don’t do that. Please, I want to know more,” she says, walking so close behind me that I can feel her breath on my back.

I spin around on my heels just before reaching the bar, causing her to bounce off my chest. “If you’re going to beg, you might as well do it on your knees like a good little whore,” I growl.

Finally, I get the reaction I was looking for. She wrinkles her nose at me, pulling her head back like I just spit in her face. “You’re a fucking creep,” she says.

I smirk. “Yeah, and I like it that way.”

I turn around, walking out the door and through the bar to the exit.

Oakley

The only thing keeping me from taking the shotgun I bought and blowing Savva's stupid brains out in the parking lot is the fact that he knows so much about my father. I hate him, but I need to know more about Angus. It's not enough to accept my mother's one-sided arguments as gospel.

I can't just stand here in the doorway like a halfway deflated balloon until Savva graciously explains the fine details of my father's existence to me. I need to seek out the answers, and the only way to do that is to force them out of Savva.

One last moment of hesitation befalls me before I run out after him. I can already hear the growl of his motorcycle in the parking lot, seconds away from taking him down the road and out of sight.

"Wait! Savva, wait!" I wave my hands over my head as I jump out in front of him.

"What the fuck," he grumbles, shaking his head. "You're not getting your money back."

"I don't want the money," I reply, placing my hands on the front of his bike to keep him from turning the handlebars. "Just wait for a second, okay?"

"It takes hours for the police to arrive. They're not coming to save you," he replies, twisting the handlebars and jerking me to the side.

"I'm a bit insulted that you think I'm some kind of crybaby," I say, stepping back but keeping myself in front of him so that he can't leave. "Just turn off the bike and talk to me for a second."

He must think I'm the biggest nuisance in the world with the way he shakes his head as he turns off the ignition and steps off his Harley. "What do you want?" he asks through gritted teeth, the muscles in his jaw popping as he glares at me.

I shrink in his shadow, but I won't let him scare me into running back inside. I've already committed to annoying him. I might as well get something out of it.

"I want to know about Angus. You need to tell me more if you're going to be coming here and harassing me all the time," I say, trying to make it sound more like a demand than a request.

He doesn't seem to buy it. "Maybe next time. I'm busy tonight."

"Please," I say, regretting my word choice the second I hear how pathetic and desperate it sounds coming out of my mouth.

Savva's wide shoulders slant to one side as he leans forward, his eyes dancing across my breasts as though he's about to ask for them in exchange for what he knows. "You're a needy little slut, aren't you? I guess I was right the first time."

His words don't shock me in the same way as they did before. I'm sure he gets most of his power and satisfaction from belittling women, but I'm not going to fall for it this time. I'm stronger than that.

"Call me what you want, but you can't say I don't deserve to know the truth. I've been fair with you. I could've blown your stupid head off when you walked into my bar, and I didn't. You're lucky I'm not more impulsive, by the way. I did consider it," I say, planting my hands on my hips and attempting to stare him down.

"You're kind of cute when you're angry," he replies, once again brushing me off like I'm a little bug on his shoulder.

"You're not getting it."

"No, *you're* not getting it," he growls, suddenly lurching toward me and grabbing my arm. "And I think it's about time someone teaches you a lesson." He pulls me away from his motorcycle and down toward the side of the building, away from the public eye.

Someone from the bar seems to notice us, but they ignore what's happening, going back to smoking their cigarette.

Savva really does have some kind of power over everyone here.

“Since daddy wasn’t there to punish you when you started acting up, I guess that’s my job now, right? That’s what you want from me?” he asks , pushing me up against the side of the building and grabbing my ass. “Fuck, that’s nice.”

“Oh my god,” I gasp, the grit from the wall biting into my cheek as he presses me into it. “What are you doing?”

“Teaching you a lesson,” he says. “Or will you admit that you’re an annoying little slut and go back inside?”

“I’m not going anywhere,” I reply, doubling down for god only knows what reason. I shouldn’t be doing this, but the way his hand feels on my ass makes me want to know how good it would feel if he used both hands to hold me down and –

The sting of his hand on my ass pulls me out of my fantasy immediately.

Is he spanking me?

What kind of a man does that to a woman he barely knows?

“More, or have you learned your lesson?” he asks, grinning at me as he pulls his hand back again.

I can’t let him win. He needs to know that I’ll stand my ground no matter what.

I shake my head. “I told you, I’m not going anywhere.”

He spans me again, harder this time, and I whimper.

“What was that?” he asks, leaning in until I can smell the beer on his breath. “Use your words, bitch.”

My hold body is trembling, and I bite my lip, unable to express the whirlwind of emotions that have overcome me. My ass is throbbing, blood rushing down between my thighs and confusing me into thinking that I’m horny.

But I can’t be horny.

Not for this monster.

Savva's hand on my ass is replaced with a large, tight bulge. He presses it into me, pinning me against the wall until the skin on my hips aches from the texture of the brick. He pushes up and in, rubbing his cock into my ass so deep that I feel like he's almost inside me.

When he talks, he speaks into my cheek, his hot lips brushing against my skin and sending a surge of electric pleasure through the side of my neck and down my arm. My skin erupts into goosebumps.

"You will learn who's in charge, one way or another, Oakley," he whispers. "I can promise you that."

He pulls away suddenly, causing me to slide down the wall as my legs give way. I collapse into the dirt, panting and scrambling to stand up.

He dusts off his hands, wearing a smug smile on his face. "I think you've learned your lesson, but I'm warning you, I won't be so nice next time."

I cough, placing my hand on the side of the building for support. "I doubt it," I mutter.

His eyes grow, popping out as the vein in his forehead throbs. "What was that?!" he shouts, charging toward me. "What the fuck did you say to me? Turn around and pull down your pants. Do it now."

"Make me," I reply with a smirk, feeling my heart jump as the words escape my mouth. It's so wrong to be doing this, so reckless and dangerous, but I need to win. I can't let him have this kind of power over me.

Savva grabs my pants by the belt loops, yanking them down to my knees. He squats down, eyelevel with the butterfly graphic on the front of my panties. He chuckles. "Nice twat."

I frown, trying to reconcile the frustration and arousal that I feel, but he doesn't give me time to think. He spins me around by my hips, bending me over and laying a firm slap against my bare ass.

"I want them to hear you from inside the bar," he says, spanking me again.

With every sting of his flesh against mine, my pussy pulses harder. If he were to pull my panties down now, he'd find me hopelessly wet, strings of sticky fluid stretching from my labia to the fabric of my panties as he took them off. What would he say then?

Would he still call me a slut, or would he call me *his* slut?

Savva is relentless in spanking me, grabbing my cheeks periodically and squeezing them in his hands like dough. He laughs as he does this, deep throaty chuckles that make the little hairs on my arms stand on end. I never knew that a man's cruelty could feel this good.

Finally, he relents, stepping back and allowing me to pull up my pants. "Don't let me catch you misbehaving like that again," he says. "Unless you want to go back to work with a load in your panties."

I avoid looking at him as he walks away, fumbling with my pants and smoothing out my shirt until I feel presentable enough to go back inside. The sound of Savva's motorcycle fading down the road gives me permission to return to my duties at the bar, but I need a moment to collect myself.

I touch the back of my hand against my cheek, feeling how flushed it is from the embarrassing mixture of thrill and arousal. I want to touch my pussy, to find relief in the pleasure, but I'm too ashamed to do it out here. I'll have to wait.

I take a deep breath of the warm night air and let it out slowly.

Nobody can know. Even I want to forget, but it will be impossible. The most I can do is to make sure it never happens again.

But even that, I feel will be impossible.

Savva

With every mile back toward home, I'm tempted to turn around and claim Oakley once and for all. I've already lost control of myself. I crossed a line that shouldn't have been crossed, and now I'm angry.

I let her get the better of me again, and what's more, I know she enjoyed it.

I can't get the look in her eyes out of my head, the way she pouted when I spanked her, biting her lip and whimpering like she was just a helpless little bitch waiting for me to stretch her out and put a baby in her.

Fuck, I hate this.

I light a cigarette as I ride through the night. I've been smoking more lately, unable to satiate my hunger for Oakley any other way. It's nowhere close to the buzz I'd get from cumming inside her tight little pussy, but it does take the edge off. That's all I can ask for right now.

I flick the cigarette behind me and light another, so lost in my thoughts that I barely notice the growl of a pack of bikers closing in behind me. It's only once they have me surrounded on the road that I realize I've been picked out as a target.

I toss my lit cigarette behind me, hoping someone will catch it in their mouth and choke on it. I don't have time for this shit.

"Hey, pull over, motherfucker," barks a man from beside me. He's wearing a long blonde beard that's braided at the end, and his face is so red that I'd be surprised if he was sober.

I hate having to deal with these punks. There's nothing worse than someone attempting to take money from me because they don't know who I am. Not only do they waste my time, but they get nothing out of it. Not a single dollar is going in anyone's pockets but mine tonight.

"Bratva," I shout back at him, nodding and giving him a cheeky grin.

“Get the fuck off your bike before I have my guys run you off the goddamn road,” he shouts in return.

I guess he didn't hear me the first time, but there's too many of them for me to risk driving any further. Suddenly, Angus's motorcycle accident doesn't feel like it was much of an accident at all.

I slow down, and the gang of bikers slow down with me until we're stopping in a cluster on the open road. There aren't that many of them, maybe half a dozen, and I'm not even sure they're affiliated with the Triple Six Angels. If they were, they'd know who I was and leave me alone.

I step off my Harley as the bearded leader comes up to me, tucking his hands in his front pocket and hurling a ball of spit on the ground in front of my boots. He cocks his head to the side, looking me over as I stand in front of him in silence.

“This is a toll road. Pay the toll,” he grumbles.

I look at him, then at his gang, then back at him again. “My name is Savva,” I state flatly. “Ring a bell?”

“As that a fucking Russian accent I hear?” he asks, leaning in and frowning. He looks over his shoulder at his gang. “This clown is pretty far from home, ain't he?”

They all laugh with their leader, oblivious to the tragic consequences that will befall them if they don't let me go. I don't particularly like biker gangs, especially not when they think they own the streets that belong to me.

“I don't think you understand,” I say, maintaining a calm voice that betrays the rage that's bubbling up inside of me. “I said my name was Savva.”

“I heard you the first time,” the bearded man snarls. “So shut your fucking mouth and pay up, and no, we don't accept rubles.”

I roll my eyes, which makes him turn a deeper shade of red.

“Alright, motherfucker. I don't have all day. Fork over the money or I'm going to gut your ass,” he says, pulling a switchblade from his back pocket and pointing it at me.

“Not interested,” I reply flatly.

He narrows his eyes at me, then motions toward one of his gang members with the knife. “Johnny, go search his shit since he wants to act cute. I’ll keep him here.”

Johnny, a shorter man with a missing eye, climbs off his motorcycle, walking over to mine as his leader keeps me at knifepoint. He brandishes a knife of his own, and while he could just as easily use the zipper on the saddle bag, he stabs it with his knife, slicing it open lengthwise. The leather rips with a deep purr.

Money falls out onto the road, the same money given to me by Oakley as payment. Not only is that far too much to let a biker gang steal, but I also feel a connection to it, as though the sexual tension between Oakley and me is stored within the bills themselves. I’m not going to let these morons walk away with it, even if they outnumber me six to one.

“Jackpot,” Johnny says, his one eye nearly popping out of his head as he scoops the money into his arms.

The bearded leader grins at me, shaking his head. “Now, where does a pathetic little gremlin like you come up with a sum of money this large.”

Gremlin? I’m twice his size, and considerably more put-together. I don’t need some grizzly old man telling me who the gremlin is.

“It’s none of your fucking business where my money comes from. I’m the leader of the Savva Bratva Family, and if you don’t return the money you’ve taken immediately, I’m going to make sure you pay the ultimate price,” I announce, my voice so deep and commanding that a few of the gang members nearly fall off their motorcycles.

Even the bearded leader pulls his head back, his wrist going limp for a moment before he’s able to compose himself and thrust his switchblade back out toward me. “You’re playing a dangerous game, you fucking freak.”

“As are you,” I reply, crossing my arms to hide my intentions and catch him off-guard. “But only one of us will walk away

from this in one piece.”

The bearded leader turns his head to Johnny to say something, which is my sign to act. I reach down to my holster, pulling out my gun and shooting from the hip, hitting the bearded man in his stomach a few times before taking aim at Johnny.

Johnny throws his hands up, dropping the money on the ground and jumping toward his motorcycle. I expect someone to pull a gun and shoot back, but nobody has the balls to face me after I killed their leader. They race away from the scene like cockroaches exposed to light.

My ears are still ringing as I gather the money off the pavement, counting every dollar before putting it into the other saddle bag that hasn't been cut open.

The bearded man bleeding out on the asphalt hasn't moved since he collapsed there, but to be certain that he's dead, I tap my boot into his ribcage a few times. I don't get so much as a grunt or groan.

I wonder how many times I'm going to have to show the world that I'm the boss until everyone accepts it as truth. I've already been challenged many times today, and if I have to do this one more time, I'm going to shoot first and exchange pleasantries never. I've had enough needless contests to my authority to last a lifetime.

I move the spare motorcycle to the side of the road, dragging the bearded man there with it so that nobody will notice him if they happen to pass by. I stand blocking the view with my arms crossed and my gun holstered.

After a moment of thought, I figure it's best to call Greg to take the body away. I'm not going to be able to move him on my own, and doing so would leave the motorcycle behind. I can't risk someone seeing it and grabbing it before I have a chance to dispose of the evidence.

My phone rings twice before Greg answers. “Hey, I just got wrapped up with the last club for tonight. What's up?”

“Good, I have something for you to clean up.”

“Clean up? You mean like a broom clean up, or a black plastic bag and an unassuming white van clean up?”

“The latter,” I reply, looking at the crimson stain on the road. “And bring something you’ll be able to carry a motorcycle in. I don’t want to leave that here.”

There’s a short pause before he speaks. “And where exactly are you?”

“A few miles down from Smoke, Steel, & Whiskey. I didn’t get far before a bunch of punks tried to rob me. Had to put a hole in the leader to get them to scam.”

“Shit, I’m assuming you’re alright.”

“Never been better,” I reply, slipping a cigarette between my dry lips.

“Was it the Triple Six Angels, you think? I would be careful about stirring up trouble with them. You know, Pasha already talked to one of their guys and he wasn’t very receptive.”

“Are you coming, or are you just going to keep running your mouth?” I ask, feeling the heat of annoyance in my chest.

“No, no, I’m on my way already. I just wanted to know who we’re dealing with,” he replies hurriedly.

“I’m not really sure,” I admit, looking down at the body as I light my cigarette. “A couple of idiots on motorcycles surrounded me and made me stop in the middle of the road. One of them held me at knifepoint while the other one sliced open one of my bags and tried to steal my cash. They didn’t seem to know who I was, nor did they care when I informed them. Anyway, I shot one of them and the rest scattered.”

“Jesus, I hope it wasn’t the Triple Six Angels,” Greg says, and I hear his car starting in the background. “We’re already not on good terms with them.”

I take a deep drag before responding, holding the smoke in my lungs until there’s barely any when I breathe out. “Part of me hopes it is, just so we can deal with them once and for all. It’s not like they have more resources than us. We can hire half the

damn state to fight them off, but there will be bloodshed. That's the only thing I'm concerned about."

"Oh, and that would put your girlfriend in danger, too."

"Oakley?"

"You went to see her tonight, didn't you?"

I sigh. "Yes, but we're not a thing. Don't get that idea, alright? She's paying her fair share just like everyone else, so this is just a business deal. She's actually running Smoke, Steel, & Whiskey pretty well from what I've seen."

"Sounds like you're in love," Greg replies with a laugh.

"Just get your ass down here," I grumble before hanging up the phone.

The night feels a bit warmer at the mention of Oakley, and I chain-smoke for half an hour until Greg arrives to take the body. By the time I'm home, I'm coughing up a storm, but the pain is a welcome distraction from Oakley.

Anything to get my mind off her perfect body.

I'll go insane if I can't stop thinking about her.

Oakley

I avoid the concerned looks from my employees as I hurry back into the bar, heading straight down the hall to my office. I sink into the big leather chair in front of my desk, burying my face into the palms of my hands and trying not to scream.

I shouldn't have let Savva spank me, but it felt so good to see how far he'd go, and with every touch, I sunk deeper into his twisted passion. I don't know what's wrong with him – or myself, for that matter – but I do know that this can't continue.

This is a business, not a Las Vegas vacation.

My phone buzzes on the desk as I sit contemplating whether I want to drink tonight or dwell on my thoughts sober. I'm tempted to throw back shots, but that's probably how Angus developed such a bad relationship with alcohol.

I pick up the phone, answering it just so that I have something else to do than to sit with my thoughts. I already know it's my mom, but even she's better than being alone right now.

“Oakley, finally! I thought something had happened to you! You weren't answering any of my messages or calls, and I was this close to calling in a missing person.”

“A little dramatic,” I reply.

She scoffs. “I'm your mother. I reserve the right to be dramatic when my daughter disappears across the country and doesn't pick up the phone.”

“I told you I'm here for a job interview,” I reply, tracing my finger anxiously across the desk.

“Oakley, it's been almost two weeks now. What's going on? Are you in some kind of trouble?”

Oh, if only she knew the type of trouble I'm in.

“No, no, don't worry about me, please. It's just a really good job, and they require a couple of interviews before they can

hire you. I made it through the first one, and I have my second one on Saturday,” I reply, trying to sound cheerful as my lies unravel.

“Saturday? Most people don’t work on Saturday, sweetie,” she replies, sounding more doubtful than ever.

“Um, yeah, that’s why it’s a good day for an interview, right?” I say, following up with a nervous chuckle.

“Oakley, tell me what’s going on,” she says flatly. “You can be honest with me. I’m not going to get mad at you if you’ve run off with some man you met on the internet. Well, maybe I would be a little angry, but that’s only because I care.”

I squeeze the bridge of my nose. “Jesus, mom, no. Where would you even get an idea like that?”

“I don’t know, but you’re acting very strange. Are you sure everything is okay?”

“Totally fine,” I reply, failing to hide the sarcasm that’s crept into my voice. “Never felt fucking better.”

“Oakley!”

I groan. “Mom, seriously. I’m sorry I didn’t call before, but I was busy and stressed, and this whole thing is a lot for me. I’ll try to text you more often.”

There’s a long pause before she replies. “I’m not buying it. I’m just not buying it. I don’t believe that they flew you all the way out to Nevada for a two-week-long series of job interviews. They’re not hiring you as their new CEO. You’re just a psychologist.”

Her demeaning tone is too much to handle after being belittled by Savva outside my own bar, and all the lies that I built up into a neat tower come toppling down when the damn bursts and my anger is released.

“You have no fucking clue what you’re talking about, mom. Excuse my language, but you’re always acting like my credentials aren’t the least bit useful or important. I’ll tell you what, though, it doesn’t even matter. No, it doesn’t matter in the least. You know why? Because I’m not even interviewing

for a job as a psychologist. Dad left me his bar when he died, and I've decided to run it," I gush, the truth giving me more power than I thought words ever could. I feel better already.

"You what?!" my mom screams through the phone, and I hang up immediately.

I don't want to talk anymore. She can sort out what I said in her own time. I don't need to tolerate someone who is going to scream at me like I'm still a child.

My phone rings again, and I pick it up. "I don't want to fucking talk to you!" I yell.

"Oakley, I swear to god, if you don't come back home right this instant..."

"Or what? What will you do? Don't you realize that I'm an adult. Why would I come back home to someone who has been feeding me lies since I learned how to walk? Tell me that, and maybe I won't hang up on you again," I say, feeling the full swell of righteous anger embolden me to finally confront her about Angus.

"What are you talking about?" she asks, but her voice is small and weak. She knows she can't continue to hide the truth.

"About dad," I say, my words short and sharp. "You told me he was an abusive alcoholic who murdered someone and wanted nothing to do with me."

"That's exactly true."

"It's not. Or, at least, it's not the full truth, and you know that," I reply. "I found a picture of me in his office, the same one you have on the fridge. Now, tell me he didn't care about me again. I dare you."

"Wouldn't he have reached out?" she asks, sounding smug now that she thinks she can twist this in her favor again. "If he really cared about you, Oakley, he would've let you know."

"What if he couldn't?" I ask, losing a bit of my steam but trying to retain my edge. "What if you never let him?"

"And how would I do that?" she asks.

“I don’t know. You tell me,” I reply.

She laughs. “Now you’re being ridiculous. Why don’t you come home and we can talk about this like adults. There’s no use running around Nevada searching for answers. The only thing you’re going to find there is a whole lot of dust and sin.”

It’s not the words that bug me, it’s her tone. I know she’s lying because she gives it away by how she says things. When she’s telling the truth, she’s not this haughty.

“You know what, mom? I think I’m done with this conversation. If you want to hear from me again, like ever, you’re going to tell me the truth. Until then, bye.” I hang up the phone and put it in the desk drawer, standing up and walking out of the room as it starts to buzz again.

Nope, I’m not answering her this time. She’ll have to come clean before I waste another second talking to her on the phone.

I walk out to the front, slipping behind the bar and shaking up a cocktail for myself. As I pour the frothy strawberry booze into a tall glass, Kimberly, one of the people I hired for the bar, comes up beside me. “Hey, is everything alright?”

I look up at her, trying to play off the traumatic evening I’ve had as just another wild night in the string of many. After all, I’m a Vegas woman now. “Oh, I’m totally fine. I just need a damn drink.”

I laugh, and she offers a sympathetic smile. “Just let me know if you need anything. I’ve dealt with men like *him* before. You just have to put your foot down enough times, and they let up.”

I flash a disingenuous smile. “Oh, I can handle Savva. Don’t worry. It’s my mother that bothers me the most.”

She laughs, patting me on the arm. “Ain’t that the truth.”

I nod, taking a sip of my drink and grimacing at how strong I made it. I don’t think I could handle more than one of these before I’d be dancing on the pool tables, doing a show to make up for the money Savva took.

The idea is tempting, but I pace myself, allowing the liquor to warm my veins slowly, loosening me up until I'm laughing and joking with the others into the small hours of the morning. I could get used to this, but I probably shouldn't.

Oakley

The nights move quickly as I string them together with drinks, hangovers, and late lunches with Kimberly. It's nice to have a woman to talk to who isn't my mother, but I doubt she comprehends the full extent of my plight. I don't think anyone really understands except for me and the bottle I've been drinking from to reduce my anxiety about Savva.

If it wasn't for him, I probably wouldn't be such a hopeless wreck. Sure, the money is good, and the arrangement is as fair as it gets with the Bratva, but having to see Savva every week is going to drive me insane.

Not only can he not keep his hands off me, but I don't *want* him to keep his hands off me. I crave his touch, and that's eventually going to lead me to disaster.

And despite this knowledge, I find myself searching the figures who walk in every night for a chance to spot him. I know he's only coming in on Fridays, but the idea that he's out there existing in the world, and he *could* come in any time he wanted is unnerving. I'm afraid just as much as I am hopeful.

Tonight, the bar is busy, but not so busy that I'm not still watching the door. Savva is supposed to come tonight, but it's already an hour past when he usually arrives, and my stomach is starting to twist up in worry.

Why am I worried about him? He's a criminal and a horrible person, and I should be happy if he ended up behind bars.

But what if he was in a coffin instead? Would I still feel that he deserved it?

Of course, not. I wouldn't wish that on Savva, even if he seems capable of doing it to someone else. I wouldn't sink to that level.

That's what I tell myself to justify my worry as the minutes slide past me, and we creep deeper into the night. Kimberly is taking orders with the same sharp prose as usual, totally unphased by the absence of Savva.

He means nothing to her, but everything to me.

An hour and a half passes, and my worry fades into annoyance. I'm supposed to pay him tonight, and he hasn't even shown up. If he doesn't come through that door, I might be the one charging *him* interest.

But just as I smirk at the thought of shaving a few dollars of the money I'm going to give Savva, he steps through the door with another man behind him, locking eyes with me and walking up to the bar as though he's exactly on time.

"Two drinks for Maxim and me," he says, flicking his fingers toward the other man as he leans on the bar.

I nod toward Kimberly, who gets to work, then turn my attention back to him. "Brought a friend?"

"Your new protection," he replies.

I'm surprised that he thinks I need protection when the only person who has ever given me a problem is him, and I hardly think one of his own crooks is going to protect me from his inappropriate advances. This must be a joke.

I raise an eyebrow, looking first at Maxim, then to Savva again. "If I wanted protection, I'd have shot you already."

Savva laughs, but his partner is stone-faced. "Listen, Oakley, I know you think you can run a bar like this without any issue, but there are people out there who wouldn't think twice about hurting you for a few bucks. Normally, I charge for this kind of protection, so you should thank me for bringing Maxim to you for free."

"Why?" I ask, crossing my arms as Kimberly slides them two beers.

He shrugs. "You can't keep making payments if you're dead."

I cackle dryly. "Come on, that's it? You're not going to admit that you're concerned about me?"

"In the sense that I wouldn't get paid if you were in the hospital, yes."

I roll my eyes. "You're a real charmer, you know that?"

He smirks. “I know.”

“That was supposed to be sarcastic.”

“Really? I hadn’t picked up on that,” he replies, his smirk widening into a cocky grin. I hate how attractive it makes him look. His flirtatious eyes are dancing all over me again, and his posture implies that he’s the one who owns the bar.

I nod to Maxim. “So, what’s he going to do? Stand there and scare off all my customers?”

Savva nudges Maxim, who takes his beer and heads to a table near the back of the room. There, he blends in with the crowd, watchful but unassuming.

“I suppose you want to get your money, then,” I say, lacing my fingers together and leaning across the bar. I raise both eyebrows at him, almost as a challenge.

He shrugs. “I have time.”

“Oh? I thought you were Mr. Busy with how late you came in tonight. I was about to start charging you interest on the payment.”

He laughs, and it’s the first one that seems like genuine amusement, rather than his usual cold, mocking chuckle. “You can’t charge interest when you’re the one who owes, unless you’d like to pay me even more, in which case, be my guest.”

The energy shifts between us, and it feels like the entire bar disappears. It’s just us now, under the colored string lights, and Savva looks more like an old friend than a new enemy. I’ve already let my guard down, but it almost seems as though he has too.

“If you have some time, let’s talk,” I say, coming around the bar and pointing to a table that’s removed from the others.

“About what?” he asks, taking his beer and pulling out a chair for me.

I sit down, and wait for him to do the same before replying. “I want to know more about Angus.”

He nods, and this time, his intentions feel better, like he might actually be willing to tell me more about him instead of pulling down my pants and spanking me in front of everyone. Though, I must admit that I've been thinking about it constantly since it happened. Nobody has ever dared take control of me like that before.

Savva takes a sip of his drink, froth lingering on his upper lip for a moment before he moves his tongue over it and pulls it into his mouth. I watch him closely, studying his sharp features and intense eyes. Everything about him is so exotic, so different than what I'm used to.

He's a real man, and everyone I've ever dated would be instantly emasculated in his presence. They'd leave the room with their tail tucked between their legs.

"So," he says, the vocal fry in his throat amplified by the beer. "What is it that you'd like to know about Angus?"

I sit up straighter, diving right into the questions that have been plaguing me since I realized that my mom wasn't being completely honest with me. "You said he mentioned me. Did he ever say why he never reached out?"

Savva rubs his chin, narrowing his eyes in thought. "We didn't talk that much, but when he did talk, it was almost always about you. He'd say something about how curious and full of life you were, but he was always talking in the past tense. Honestly, I thought you two were in contact, but now I can see how he was just pulling up memories from the past. You certainly seemed to be important to him, though. Very important."

My heart feels warm at his affirmation that my father cared. I knew he did. There's no way he was just a raging asshole with zero consideration for his own daughter. Most men really aren't that way, even if they seem distant and cold.

"The weird thing is, I never heard from him. My mom said it was because he didn't reach out, but now I think she might have been hiding something. Maybe he did try to reach out and she stopped him," I explain, searching Savva's face for answers. I know he doesn't know *that* much, but maybe

there's a piece of this puzzle that he holds, something that would make things clearer.

He takes a deep breath, filling his lungs with air and blowing it across the table. I can smell the smoke on him, the rich scent of a busy man, and I close my eyes for a moment to bask in it.

"Angus cared, that's about all I know. He would've reached out to you if he could. I'm sure of that. Perhaps your mother had some kind of restraining order against him. It wouldn't be hard to get one, being the ex-wife of what the state would call a violent convict," Savva says.

"I didn't think about that," I reply, pushing my hair back behind my ear and leaning forward. "And he did leave me the bar, so he must've felt something for me."

He smiles, his eyes studying me just as intensely as I'm studying him. "I can't imagine him not feeling something."

His words feel like they could apply to Angus, or himself just as easily.

"I think you're going to want to ask your mother, if she's up for it," he says.

I laugh. "Not so easy. I pissed her off pretty bad the last time she called. I had told her that I was coming to Nevada for a job interview, and she freaked out when I told her about Angus and the bar. I doubt she wants to talk right now."

He nods slowly. "I suppose dealing with bars, bikers, and criminals is a pretty good way to get disowned."

"You think she would do that?" I ask, not even having considered the possibility. Perhaps I need to call her back and make sure she's not ripping my photos out of their frames and setting my room on fire back home.

Savva shakes his head, taking another sip. "I doubt it. If she cares about you, she won't do that. Even my mother – God rest her soul – didn't have the heart to disown me, and that was after she found out that I had taken on my father's legacy when I moved to the United States. She was angry, but a mother's love is strong, especially a Russian mother."

I almost laugh when I imagine Savva getting yelled at by an old Russian woman. I can picture her grabbing him by the ear and dragging him up to his bedroom just for using profanity within earshot of her. I bet he wouldn't dare talk to me the way he does if she were here now.

I prop my head in my hands, allowing myself to sink deeper into Savva's features, appreciating the subtle things, like the way his lips move up slightly higher on the left side when he speaks, or the slight bend in his prominent nose. I bet he's been in plenty of fights to warrant much more damage to the face, but despite that, he's flawless in my eyes. I've never met a man more alluring.

"Do you smoke?" he asks, pulling a squished pack of cigarettes from his back pocket and tapping it against the table.

"You want to die early or something?" I ask. "Don't you have more to live for than that?"

He's obviously offended, putting the cigarettes back into his pocket and shrugging in such an exaggerated manner that he nearly knocks his drink off the table. "Everyone has their vices," he says.

"True," I reply, thinking back to how much alcohol I drank this week. It's not a good habit, but the stress of all this new information and drama is probably worse. I wonder if that's the same reason why he smokes. Maybe the stress is too much for him to handle without the cigarettes.

He finishes off his drink and leans back in his chair, looking around the bar and nodding in approval. "You've done a good job with this place. I think Angus would be proud."

I blush, rubbing the back of my neck and turning away from him. One second, he's a monster, and the next, he's prince charming. I'm getting whiplash from all this.

Savva winks at me, standing up after a moment and looking at me expectantly. "Well, I think there's something you owe me, right?"

I stand up, returning to the serious business mask I've been wearing all night to cover up my anticipation. "Right, I have

the money in the office.”

He smiles, and the light from the bar glitters in his eyes like snowflakes. He looks me up and down, and once again, the prince charming character he plays so well transforms into a primal beast. “I wasn’t referring to the money...”

Oakley

My chest is tight and my breathing shallow as I walk past Kimberly at the bar. We make eye contact, and I smile to her like it's just business as usual, but she seems to know. She glares at Savva before we both disappear through the doorway.

I know she doesn't like him, but she has no idea the way he makes me feel. How could she possibly understand. Has she ever fallen prey to a Bratva boss before? Has she ever experienced the heat of flesh on hers, or the pressure of his cock pressing into her from behind.

Needful. Lustful. Greedy.

I doubt it. If she had, she would've warned me about him sooner. She would've told me not to try to put my foot down, but to run far away because there would be no way to resist him.

And it's not because he would have to force anything. He would just get it because that's what he asked for. And I would give it because I would feel compelled to obey his every word.

To please him. To serve him.

"Sit up on the desk," Savva says, his voice deep and raspy. There's a pressure to it, a need that cannot be put into words, but can be felt throughout the entire room as I climb up onto the desk and sit there with my feet dangling over the side.

"Take your pants off."

I obey him, lifting my hips and slipping my jeans off into a crumpled heap on the floor. I still have my shoes on, but somehow, that feels sexier. It's impulsive and illogical, revealing the most sensitive part of my body to him but leaving everything else covered.

"The panties, too," he says, waving his finger in a downward motion. He's straight to business without a single consideration for the consequences of what we're doing. I

know it's wrong, and he probably knows it's wrong too, but the tension between us cannot continue to coil tighter and tighter with no release.

Eventually, something must snap.

I pull down my panties, kicking them off onto the floor near my pants. I keep my legs crossed, abashed by my nudity. I feel so raw in the bright light, so ugly and exposed.

“Open your legs,” he says, his eyes glued to my pale thighs.

“Maybe you could turn the light off first?” I say softly.

He shakes his head. “No, my dear Oakley. I want to see you play with yourself. Open your legs.”

I'm afraid to move because he'll see how badly I'm trembling, but I manage to uncross my legs and part them slightly, just enough to show my pussy, but not enough to get a hand between my thighs to touch it.

He steps forward, grabbing my knees and pulling my legs apart. He presses my knees into the desk, stretching me out in a butterfly pose like I'm in gym class all over again. I lean back, avoiding having to look at myself as he exposes me.

My cheeks are burning hot, so much so that I feel like I have to breathe with my mouth open to get enough air to keep me from overheating. I probably look ridiculous, and that's just one more reason why the light should be off.

But Savva doesn't seem to see things the same as I do. He's reveling in my nudity, eating up the details of my pussy in the all-exposing overhead light. I can feel his eyes on me, burning into my skin like lasers, engraving his name into me as he consumes my figure.

“Play with yourself. I want to see how you do it,” he says, backing away and grabbing his bulge. He squeezes it, pleasuring himself while he waits for me.

His unapologetic boldness gives me a boost of confidence, enough to lay my hand down on my pussy, avoiding his eyes but allowing myself to become engrossed in the large mound that he's squeezing in his jeans. I'm so wet already that my

fingers slip off my clit a few times. I have to take a sharp breath and hold it to steady myself enough to continue.

“Good girl,” he purrs. “See how nice things can be when you’re behaving yourself? Don’t you like being a good girl for me?”

I nod against my better judgment, his words doubling the heat in my lower belly. It’s like a fire, tightening my muscles and scorching me with desire so strong that I forget about the type of man Savva is. All I know is that I want him inside of me.

My fingers move quickly, rubbing tight circles on my clit as his face becomes more visceral and serious. Pleasure rises up into my body, and I arch my back, staring up at the ceiling as everything goes white.

Color pops in front of me, splashes of red, pink, and blue on the ceiling like drops of ink in water. An explosion of warmth and shuddering waves of bliss course through me, filling me up with the divine and temporarily releasing me from doubt and concern.

When I come down to reality and look at Savva again, his pants are already at his feet and his shirt on the floor, his cock pulsing in his tight fist like an angry python. He comes toward me, no hesitation, no warning, no doubt in his mind about what he’s about to do, and he presses the head of his cock into my pussy.

It slides past my swollen labia easily, stretching my slit out as he enters. His eyes are locked on mine, keeping me in a magnetic hold as his flesh becomes synonymous with my own. His hands find my waist, holding me in place as he thrusts deep inside of me.

“You’re so fucking tight,” he groans, lifting his chin and exposing his powerful neck as he revels in the pleasure I’m giving him.

For the first time since we met, I feel like I have more control than he does, wrapped around his cock, forcing him to surrender his seed inside of me, milking him for his precious lifeforce.

The veins in his thick forearms bulge as he tightens his grip, squeezing my waist as his rhythm quickens. “Good girl,” he chants, thrusting deep, pushing hard to get to some deeper place inside of me.

I feel him against my cervix, bumping the head of his cock there in a way that would be painful if I weren’t so completely aroused and lost in the pleasure. There’s no such thing as pain here. He could bite me until he left permanent imprints in my skin and it would feel like a kiss.

His movements become less controlled and more desperate, my ass slipping across the desk from sweat. He pulls me close to him, pressing his body against mine, standing with me in a close embrace as he grinds his hips into me.

I can smell the musk and cologne on his chest, his rough hair scratching against my shirt. I wish I were fully naked so that I could feel the heat of him on my breasts, but there’s no time.

Impulse. Energy. Release.

We were made for this.

He grabs the old phone from the desk, pulling it hard and stretching the cord out. He wraps it around my neck as he fucks me, pulling just tight enough to tease me without actually choking me.

“What are you doing?” I ask as he begins dialing a number.

“Leaving myself a voicemail,” he replies as the phone in his pants rings.

After a moment, it goes to voicemail, and he holds it up to my mouth. “Tell me what a fucking good whore you are. I want to hear it.”

He digs in deeper and I moan. “Fuck, I’m your whore!”

“Good girl,” he coos. “Now, you’re going to cum for me. Make sure you moan nice and loud. I’m going to jerk off to it later.”

As he says this, neither of us are able to hold back any longer. He releases inside of me, spilling himself into my depths, pumping me full. I can feel the swell of his cock challenging

me to stretch just a bit further, the dull, aching pleasure returning in my core and causing me to ride up to a second climax as he digs in all the way to the hilt.

He holds me tightly as I cum, pressing my face into his thick, muscular chest along with the phone. I can hear his heart beating fast, but it slows as we remain still in this position long after we've both finished.

He's first to pull away, slamming the phone down and grabbing his pants. He pulls them up, belt jingling as he quickly reclaims his authoritative poise. He has his shirt on faster than I can find my pants on the floor, and he watches me as I gather up my belongings, cum running down the inside of my thigh.

He opens his mouth to speak, and I hold up a finger to stop him. "I don't want to hear it. Whatever you're going to say, I'm not interested."

He closes his mouth, but smirks. I knew it was going to be something stupid and self-serving.

Once dressed, I pull my hair back in a ponytail and make my way around the desk to retrieve the money I owe him. I pull it out, counting each bill before handing it to him. "You're lucky I didn't charge you for that."

"So, it's on the house?" he asks, raising a thick eyebrow as he takes the money.

"Don't get used to it," I reply, trying hard not to smile but failing miserably.

Savva

Fuck, I'm your whore!

I could listen to Oakley's sweet American voice a million times over and I'd never grow tired of it. She sounds so pure, so delicious and submissive that I'm tempted to go back to Smoke, Steel, & Whiskey to fuck her again.

I always want to go back for more, and it's going to get me in trouble eventually. I won't be able to work if all I can do is fuck Oakley over and over again. I wonder what Angus would say if he knew what I was doing to his daughter...

I recline on my couch, watching the smoke rise in the air as I take slow, sweet drags of the last cigarette in my pack. Maybe it'll be the last pack I buy.

Probably not.

I listen to the voicemail six more times before I'm interrupted by a knock on the door. At this hour, I know that it can only be one person, but I don't want to answer him. If Pasha wants to be let in, I know it's because he has bad news.

"Fuck," I grumble, getting up from the couch and dousing my cigarette in the cold tea that's been sitting out on my coffee table since this morning. I feel like knocking the damn thing onto the floor, but I remain in control of myself. I've been reckless enough already.

Besides, maybe it's not bad news.

I throw open the door as Pasha knocks again. He never waits long enough for me to come. He must think I'm sleeping or something, but there's no way I'll be able to sleep tonight when I can listen to Oakley orgasm on repeat through my phone.

"What do you want now?" I ask, blinking at the unexpected light from behind him.

Is it morning already?

“Can I come inside?” he asks.

“Yes, yes, come on,” I reply, impatiently beckoning him in and slamming the door shut. “I’m assuming that since you’ve thought it appropriate to come around so late at night that the entire world is burning to the ground or something.”

We walk into the living room and he laughs a bit. “I mean, it’s not really night anymore. It’s almost seven. I figured you might be awake by now, but it appears as though you may not have ever went to sleep.”

“I was out late last night.”

“With Oakley?”

“It doesn’t matter who I was with,” I growl. “Just get to the point. Something is wrong. What is it?”

He sits down and purses his lips, struggling to find the words to explain the situation to me. That’s how I know it’s something bad. He usually doesn’t have to think for this long.

“Fuck, just spit it out already,” I bark, unable to stand being in such elevated suspense for so long.

He pushes the hair from his forehead and pulls his lips into his mouth. “Ah, well, you remember the guy you shot?”

“Can’t forget a face that ugly,” I reply.

“Yeah, so he’s not just some random biker.”

“He was the gang’s leader, from what I gathered. Usually, when you get the leader the gang either votes in a new one or dissolves entirely.”

Pasha nods. “Right, but this guy wasn’t just a gang leader. He was Stone’s brother.”

My stomach twists. “Triple Six Angels Stone?”

“That’s the guy.”

“Well, fuck, tell those clowns to find a new area to build their shitty little empire on because I’m done with their bullshit. Honestly, it’s probably a good thing that I shot that asshole. I’m sure he deserved it. They’ve been pissing me off for long

enough already,” I say, pacing around in front of him like a madman.

I’m not sure what else to do with my feet. I have way too much energy for this hour.

Pasha watches me for a moment, his eyes pleading for a better answer, but I’m not keen on giving him anything but my bitter disdain for the Triple Six Angels. If they didn’t put their fingers so deep in our hive, they wouldn’t have gotten stung. If a war breaks out, it’s their fault. I refuse to take responsibility for that.

“Do you have any cigarettes?” I ask, stopping so suddenly that my feet burn against the Persian wool.

“I thought you were quitting.”

I feel like punching his face in. “Would you stop saying that? I’m not quitting. I’m not ever fucking quitting, okay? Just give me a goddamn cigarette if you have one or fuck off.”

“You’re obviously irked by the news, as I knew you would be. We should talk about what we’re going to do about all this. Stone being on your case puts everyone in danger, and that includes Oakley.”

His words strike me in my core, and I begin pacing again, as though I’ve been electrified by the realization that Oakley could be in trouble because of my actions. “Don’t let her know about Stone,” I warn. “I already put Maxim there to watch over the place. Maybe I need more than one person, though.”

“It would take an army to stop Stone if he wanted to stir up trouble, but I doubt he would be interested in Oakley. He probably doesn’t even know who she is, but knows you, so he’ll be looking for you. I think you should increase security at your house instead,” he explains.

I wave my hand at him in a dismissive manner. “I don’t need protection. I could chuck a grenade down the stairs and clear an entire room of Stone’s boys. Oakley is the one who needs to be kept safe.”

“You don’t think you’re putting too much importance on her?”

I clench my fist and look at him, staring daggers until he walks back his unfortunate statement. “Um, I meant that perhaps you could do both, like have a few guys here and a few guys there.”

“I can handle myself, unless you came here to have a sleepover. I’m not going to stop you from staying, I suppose.”

“I already slept, but I can stay here and watch the place while you get some rest,” he replies, sitting down on the couch. “I’m sure you need it after last night.”

I squint at him, but I don’t press him further. I figure everyone already knows that I’m fucking Oakley. It’s a small town, and word travels quickly, so I wouldn’t be surprised if every single customer at Smoke, Steel, & Whiskey knows about it.

“I need a drink before I do anything,” I grumble, trudging toward the minibar next to the fireplace and grabbing the first bottle of scotch off the top. As I’m pouring myself a glass, I look over my shoulder at Pasha. “Want one?”

“For breakfast?”

I shrug.

“Sure,” he relents with a chuckle.

That’s what I thought. This business is stressful enough already without trying to stay sober all the time. Sometimes, even in the earliest hours of the morning, you need a goddamn drink. A nice scotch in a thick crystal glass usually puts me at ease.

I pour a double for both of us, handing one to Pasha and taking mine up to my bedroom. I undress before drinking any, leaving my dirty clothes in a pile near the closet and sitting on the bed with my glass.

I swirl the golden liquid as I think about what Pasha has revealed to me, but all I can consider is the fact that Oakley is now in danger. Pasha might not think that Stone would go after her, but I know how evil men think.

I am one.

Stone would go after the only person who I care about the moment he found out about her, and he'd make sure whatever time she had left on this planet was as painful and humiliating as possible.

I drink my entire double shot in one gulp, breathing out loudly from the bite of alcohol. It splashes into my stomach, burning hot in my gut.

I've rarely felt fear, but the idea that something horrible could happen to Oakley makes me want to throw myself off my balcony in a selfish effort to spare myself from witnessing her fate.

I know I will have brought it on her. If it wasn't for me, she'd never have to fear for her life. I could've let her walk away, but instead, I pulled her into my world, and there's no going back. She won't be able to escape.

The only way out is through death.

I get up to turn off the light. The room is cold, but I barely feel it. The warmth inside me is growing, and I feel sleepy for the first time in twenty-four hours. Maybe I will be able to sleep, but I know it'll be far from peaceful. My dreams are always nightmares.

I lie down in bed, lacing my fingers together on my solar plexus and staring up at the ceiling. I reach for my phone after a few seconds, unable to put my mind at rest and refusing to give myself the chance to fall asleep.

The voicemail plays again, and my heart feels like it's dangling by a string in my chest as I hear Oakley's high, syrupy voice moaning again.

Fuck, I'm your whore!

Yes. Yes, you are, my darling Oakley.

The only thing that finally puts me to sleep is the repeated recording, playing over and over again until my brain sinks into the sound of her voice, the divine nature of a woman's pleasure.

Finally, I can rest.

Oakley

The soreness is a welcome sensation, an aching reminder of the intimacy Savva and I shared last night. It almost feels like a dream, but I'm glad I have a sign that it wasn't.

This Saturday is the first day in a while that I didn't wake up with a hangover. I slide off the couch in the office, brushing my teeth in the small bathroom across the hall and wandering into the main area of the bar for breakfast.

I keep most of my food on the bottom shelf in the fridge, and I've instructed Kimberly to make sure nobody touches it. In a way, it's nice to have my business and personal abode mixed together. It feels like having guests over every night, and there's no commute. I can see why Angus preferred to live this way.

I cook something for myself quickly, not wanting to waste the time that I've saved by not sleeping in. I have a mission today. I'm going to search through Angus's belongings more closely and try to find out as much as I can about him. If my mom isn't going to be much help, and Savva only knows a few things, then it's up to me to uncover the rest.

Angus had a couple of storage units around the back of the building that I haven't been in yet for fear of scorpions and snakes. I hear they get pretty big out here, and I'm honestly more afraid of them than I am of spiders, and that's saying something. Spiders terrify me. What gives them the right to have so many eyes and eight legs?

Eight! Why on earth would any creature need more than four?

And snakes don't have any, but they're still able to move quickly and sink their little fangs into your ankles while you're sorting through boxes in a storage unit. Out here, an ambulance would take longer than attempting to bicycle my way into town.

But, with all the risks I've taken and the dangers I've managed to sidestep, I'm willing to take on a challenge today. The bar won't be open until four, and that means I have all morning and afternoon to look through the things Angus left behind.

Perhaps I'll find the missing pieces I've been searching for.

I have to break the lock off the door of the first unit, smacking the rusty mechanism a few times with a shovel until it breaks into pieces and falls to the ground with a metallic jingle. I feel like I'm busting into a box of buried treasure.

Maybe there will be money in here. I heard Angus never kept any in the bank, and I didn't receive anything other than the bar when he died.

The door creaks open as I pull it, hinges groaning as the rust flakes off, then falls like ashes to my feet. Angus must not have opened these containers often.

As I pull open the first one enough to allow sunlight inside, I catch the glint of a motorcycle, and then another. It seems that he had a collection, but I have no clue how to operate one. I'm sure I'd give myself the biggest road rash imaginable if I even attempted to take one of these out onto the road.

Still, they're pretty to look at, and are probably worth something to the right person.

First mystery solved. Angus loved motorcycles.

I move to the next storage container, feeling hopeful that it will be full of something different. The lock is more difficult to break off, and I almost give up and get something bigger to hit it with when it breaks suddenly, falling with a heavy thud onto the dirt.

Hesitation washes over me, causing me to stop just as I begin to pull on the door. This is the last part of the bar that has gone unexplored, the final mystery. If I don't find something here, I may never know the full story.

I consider going back inside and leaving it for another day, maybe when Savva is here so that he can look with me, but something inside me needs to know now. I can't wait, not when I've already committed to running the bar.

I take a deep breath and tighten my grip around the handle of the storage container, pulling it open and peering inside.

My heart jumps into my throat when I realize that there aren't any motorcycles inside, but stacks of boxes instead. They're filled with shoes that have seen better days, books without spines, and stacks of paper.

I take the first box down off the only towering stack that I can reach the top of. I waddle out with it, setting it down on the ground and squinting at the papers on top. Many of them are handwritten, and as I look at them closer, I realize they're little bits of wisdom and information that Angus wrote down from the book he was reading.

One line in particular stands out to me:

The truth knocks on the door and you say, "Go away, I'm looking for the truth," and so it goes away.

I look at it for a long time, trying to figure out if this is a sign that I've somehow rejected the obvious truth standing in front of me. Sweat drips from my nose onto the paper, and I finally place it back in the box. I should take this box inside and come back for the rest later.

I hoist the box up to my chest, leaning back to carry it and using my foot to close the heavy storage door.

I'm almost around to the front of the building when I hear engines crackling and growling in the parking lot. I slow my walk, listening closely. Something doesn't feel right, but I can't say what it is yet.

I stop walking, placing the box down at my feet and tuning my ear in to the conversation that's being had outside.

"It's the only goddamn bar within twenty miles of here," a voice grumbles.

"And Savva comes here?"

"Sure, he was seen here last week talking up Angus's daughter. Probably sticking his dick in her guts now that Angus is dead."

I want to scream. These men know me, they know Savva, and they know Angus. What the fuck is going on?

“Closed. I say we come back when we know Savva might be around and bust some heads.”

“One head. Savva’s fucking head.”

“Right.”

“Hey, and maybe we show Angus’s daughter how her daddy went out,” the original speaker says with a hoarse laugh.

“Look ma, no breaks!”

There’s a bout of laughter followed by the roar of engines starting up again. I don’t dare to peek around the corner, but I’m dying to know who those men are and what they want with Savva.

And me. I’m just as much at risk here now as Savva is. They mentioned my father too, and I’m pretty sure that confirms that his death wasn’t much of an accident. It goes much deeper than that.

My heart takes a long time to return to a normal pace. My legs are glued to the scorching ground until I become too hot to continue waiting outside for nothing to happen. The men are long gone.

I creep around the corner, taking the box of papers with me and scrambling back inside the second I’m in the parking lot. Only once the door is locked and I’m sitting in the office with the shotgun on my lap do I feel like I can continue looking through Angus’s belongings.

I go through the papers, barely reading them as the voices of my unexpected visitors echo through my head like unwelcome sirens in the night.

Look ma, no breaks!

Did they cut his breaks? Is that even possible on a motorcycle?

I mindlessly pick papers out of the box on the desk, laying them in a pile beside me until I arrive on one that pulls me out of my hellish imagination and reminds me why I took these papers in the first place. This one has my name on it.

Oakley Dredd.

There are a few comments written neatly beside my name, but nothing that's familiar to me. Some addresses I've never lived at, a couple of phone numbers I've never used. Is this even the same Oakley, or is it a coincidence?

My surname *used* to be Dredd, but it's Turner now, my mom's maiden name. I wonder if Angus got confused and was looking for the wrong person this whole time, unaware that my name had been changed back. It couldn't be that simple, could it?

The papers look old, so I assume they might even be from before the internet had information about every person, living or dead, on it. It's possible that he did search me up with both of my names, and got nothing.

Maybe he gave up...

Or maybe he didn't. If he found me, what would he have done? Would he have called the house, only to be answered by my mom telling him to stay far away from us. Would she have threatened to have him sent back to jail for violating some restraining order against her, putting so much fear in him that he never attempted to reach out again?

Anger rises in my body at the thought of her doing something like that. She seems capable, especially once I realized she had been lying to me already.

Fuck, this just keeps going around in circles. I need answers from her, not from Angus's forgotten notes.

I keep telling myself that it's enough to know that he cared, but I can't just live my life in ignorance, never knowing the full story. I know that my mom is keeping it from me, and I'll have to go through her as my last resort.

But it is my *last* resort. I don't have to do it now. There's plenty more to look through in his storage unit.

I glance at the clock on the table. There isn't enough time now to go through everything. I have to start preparing the bar for when Kimberly arrives. I'm not sure whether to tell her about the bikers who were talking outside, but I will tell Savva.

He deserves to know.

Savva

Oakley won't be expecting me tonight, but I can't wait any longer. I need to see her again, if only to warn her that Stone might come looking for me.

I ride in on my Harley, parking at the end of the chain of motorcycles outside of Smoke, Steel & Whiskey. It's Saturday night, and the place is packed. I wish it was Sunday so I could get her alone, but I didn't want to wait. This is urgent.

Maxim is at the door when I walk in, fulfilling his duty as the bar's new bouncer. He's the silent type, and I'm sure that Oakley appreciates having him here, even if she acts like that shotgun she stores in the office is enough to keep order.

Large men respect other large men more than they do guns. Nobody believes they're about to be shot until the bullet is already in them. The threat isn't sufficient, and certainly not when it's backed up by a cute girl who has clearly never fired a shotgun in her life.

I slide up to the bar, nodding at the woman with the long fingers so that she'll go fetch Oakley for me. She grabs a beer before I even ask for it and slides it to me. "Oakley's around back outside."

"Thank you," I reply, taking the beer and carrying it out to the parking lot.

It's unusual for Oakley to be anywhere but at the bar or in her office. I wonder what she's doing around back, especially when it's so busy tonight.

I spot her by a storage container, leafing through a box of what appear to be vinyl records. I know Angus was a big fan of his collection, and even had a record player hooked up to the sound system at one point. Someone finally convinced him to unplug it after he had Elvis on rotation for a week straight.

"I doubt he had any Taylor Swift records," I say, causing Oakley to jump.

She turns around and gives me a playfully annoyed look. “Very funny, but I’m not much into pop.”

“What do you like?” I ask, cocking my head to the side.

“Rock and roll,” she replies, throwing up a set of horns with her fingers.

I roll my eyes. “No fucking way you listen to that stuff. I think you’ve been around these bikers too long.”

She shrugs. “I like some of it, like Kiss.”

“More glam rock than rock and roll.”

She laughs, stepping toward me and pressing her finger into my chest. “Oh, so you’re a music snob, huh? Why don’t you name a couple of real rock albums, then.”

“Well, for one, there’s—”

“Wrong!” she yells, erupting into laughter and returning to the box of records. “You don’t know shit about music.”

“Very funny,” I reply, feeling a creeping playfulness enter me. I put my beer down on the ground and watch her closely. She’s back in her own world again, ignoring me completely.

I sneak up behind her as she bends over, and before she can react, I grab her, picking her up and spinning her around as she kicks and squeals. “You’re the music snob,” I say, burying my face into her neck as I spin her. “Admit it.”

She laughs, then elbows me in the stomach much harder than I would’ve expected her to. I wheeze, letting go and buckling over.

“Weak,” she says with mock disappointment. “You need to eat your vegetables and quit smoking.”

I shake my head, straightening myself up despite the pain. “I’ve been hit much harder than that. You hit like a girl.”

“Because I am one, idiot,” she replies, finally grabbing a record from the box. “Come on, let’s go play this.” She skips past me around to the front, not a goddamn care in the world.

What the hell has gotten into her?

I sigh, picking up my beer from the ground and following her back around to the parking lot and into the building, rubbing my stomach to ease the sharp pain from her elbow. Jesus, that girl can hit when she wants to.

I take a swig of my drink as I enter, returning to the bright, bustling environment and hating every second of it. I just want to be alone with Oakley. I would pay to close this place down early and have the chance to talk with her in silence, but I know this is one of the most profitable nights of the week. She'll be open late.

Oakley moves quickly, going to the far edge of the bar where I spot a record player hooked up to the sound system.

Oh no.

She pulls out the record, lays it on, and the needle comes down.

Elvis.

I laugh. "You know, Angus just about went out of business one time from playing too much Elvis."

She raises an eyebrow. "Funny, maybe I'll do the same and you won't get any more money from me. What a shame."

I give her a serious look. "What's up? Something is wrong?"

"You tell me," she replies. "I feel like you're in some kind of trouble. A couple of bikers came by here this morning looking for you."

I grab her arm, pulling her toward me and speaking in a hushed voice. "What bikers? What did they look like?"

She yanks her arm away, walking out from behind the bar and toward one of the tables near the door. I join her, and she takes her time answering me. I'm not sure I like this shift in attitude from her. It's frustrating.

"Tell me about them," I demand, leaning so far forward that I almost pull the table over onto myself.

She slaps her palms down to steady it. "Take it easy, Savva. I didn't see them, actually. I was around back looking through

some of my father's belongings and I heard them pull up. There were probably quite a few of them, but at least three, because I heard them talking."

"About what?" I ask, my eyes focusing on her mouth as though I might miss a precious word if I don't watch it come out.

"I guess this is pretty important to you, then," she says, giving me a fake smile. "I guess that means it's important to me, too, and perhaps there's something you should be telling me."

"I was going to," I grumble, leaning back when I realize what she's doing. She thinks this is my fault, and of course, it is, but now she wants to act pissy at me about it, like I planned for people to come after her.

"Who were those guys, Savva?" she asks, her voice turning shrill. "There were talking about hurting you, and they knew Angus, too. Who were they?"

"Couldn't have been anyone but the Triple Six Angels. They're a biker gang that specializes in ripping people off at their little gas station down the road. They sometimes like to drive around here and collect tolls from anyone they come across. I'm sure Angus had an issue with them just the same as I do," I explain. "But that's not a reason to get mad at me. They weren't even on my radar until..."

"Until what?" she asks, her eyes wide as she teeters between anger and fear.

She's not going to like my answer. I have to rely on the liquid courage in my fist for this one, gulping down the rest of my beer before daring to respond. She stares at me with eyes wide open the entire time.

Unrelenting.

I put the empty glass on the table, adjusting my posture until I feel like I'm back in my old Russian private school, risking a slap on my knuckles if my back wasn't perfectly straight. My parents paid a lot to make sure I didn't slouch, so now I do it every chance I get.

But not now. The grave nature of my confession makes me feel the need to sit so straight that my shoulder blades ache.

I open my mouth, close it, then open it again, rewriting the words in my head several times over before I actually say them.

“I shot a man,” I finally admit, watching the expression on Oakley’s face turn into befuddled disgust.

“You did what?!”

I hold my finger to my lips. “Quiet down. I don’t want the entire universe to know about it.”

She leans forward, lowering her voice. “What the actual fuck, Savva? Tell me you’re joking.”

I shake my head. “I was held at knifepoint by a couple of clowns on the road, so I shot one of them. He had it coming. It’s not like I killed an innocent person or anything. One could even call it self-defense.”

“Jesus, do the police know about this?”

I laugh, placing my hand on hers. “What do you think, darling?”

She pulls her hand back and frowns. “Are you crazy? You can’t just go around shooting people.”

“Maybe you missed the part about me being held at knifepoint,” I reply calmly.

She scoffs. “Yeah, *knife* point. Not gunpoint. Were they actually going to attack you, or was it just a robbery you decided to escalate because your ego was too big to let you be a victim.”

Her words cut deep because they’re true, but I reject them anyway. “They were trying to take thousands of dollars from me. That’s too much to let go.”

“Like you do to me every week?! I mean, for fuck’s sake, Savva, do you expect me to shoot you the next time you come in here demanding money from me? You see how crazy that sounds?”

I'm starting to get annoyed. I knew she wasn't going to take it well, but this is getting out of control. She's not my mother, and she certainly has no authority to tell me how to be a good person.

News flash – I'm evil. I thought we had already established that.

“Listen, this is serious shit, Oakley, and you're part of it. You can either accept that right now, or maybe you should give up on this dream of running your father's bar and go home. There are no other options. You can't ignore what's staring at you in the face. As for me, I did what I had to do, and I don't care for your judgments on the matter. I'm only telling you so that you know why the Triple Six Angels are looking for me.”

She looks away from me, her eyes becoming unfocused as she looks toward the other tables. “I think I'm going to be sick.”

“I know it's a lot to take in, but there's a way out for you if you want it.”

“No, I really am going to be sick,” she says, cupping her hand over her mouth and running from the table.

Heads turn as she leaves, and I wish I could disappear into my seat. It was never my intention to bring her into this mess, but now that she is, it's my responsibility to protect her. I don't care what Pasha, Greg, or anyone else says about the reasons why. I'm a man of honor, and guarding Oakley is what I'm compelled to do.

Though it doesn't seem like I'm doing an especially good job of that right now. She's out of my sight already, puking her guts up in the bathroom while I sit lamely at an empty table, trying to decide whether I should check on her or give her privacy until she returns.

Thankfully, I don't have to dwell on the decision for long, because Oakley emerges a moment later, walking briskly back to our table.

“Sorry, I'm usually not this dramatic,” she says with a nervous laugh, sitting down across from me and offering up a smile. “As you were saying?”

“We can take a break from this if you need to. Maybe you want some water?”

“No, no, I’m fine,” she insists. “I think I’ve just been overdoing it this week, and my body has finally come to collect.”

“You and me both,” I reply, thinking back to the sleepless nights and obsessive repetitions of the voicemail I made her send me. What would she think if she knew how many times I’ve listened to her climax?

Oakley looks at me expectantly, and I straighten up. “Okay, so there’s a way out of this for you.”

“I don’t want it,” she snaps.

I’m taken aback by the quickness of her response. “What? You haven’t even heard my offer.”

She sighs, shaking her head. “You don’t get it, Savva. This is all I have. Angus wanted me to be here, running his bar. Why else would he have left it to me?”

“To... sell?”

“I’m not fucking selling it,” she says, her expression souring. “That’s not what my father wanted, and I have nothing to go back to if I did sell it. You said yourself that my mom might disown me, and she hasn’t called or texted at all since the last time we argued. It’s just not worth it.”

I hate that I’m trying to convince the most beautiful woman I’ve ever met to leave me and never look back, but her safety is more important than my growing need to keep her.

I was already a broken man before she came into my life. What’s a few more cracks in my heart going to do?

But as I search her eyes for a reason to push her away again, I find nothing but my own desire in them, the lust that I’ve felt since the first time I undressed her, when my passion spilled over into the real world and our flesh became one.

“You can always leave. I want you to know that,” I say, praying she’ll reject the option just as strongly as she did the

first time, because I'm not just talking about the bar. I'm talking about us.

"Never," she replies, her voice unwavering.

Oakley

There's a certain kind of power in reckless certainty, the kind that allows people to overcome obstacles that, at first, appear impossible. Savva feels it to, but reacts differently than I expect him to. I was anticipating an angry outburst at the possibility of his own power and authority falling into question, but instead, I see relief on his face.

He never wanted me to leave.

The realization hits me harder than the clench of my stomach muscles as I was hurling my lunch into the toilet minutes earlier.

Savva wants me to stay.

I lean toward him, studying his expression – his sharp eyes, his furrowed brow, the stubble on his jaw, the loose sweep of hair on his forehead. I've always thought he was handsome, but now, he looks like the only man I could ever desire.

That alone gives me power that I shouldn't have. Nothing he could do to me now would break me. It's what he could deny me of that would shatter my soul into fragments too small to ever hope to piece back together.

"I'm sorry, but I really need a fucking cigarette," Savva says, looking around the room as though one might come floating toward him from the bar.

"You shouldn't smoke," I reply. "Even Angus didn't smoke."

"That motherfucker smoked like a chimney," Savva growls. "You have no idea."

I frown. "I never found any evidence of that."

"He was just as embarrassed as I am, but there comes a point when you have to swallow your pride and light one up to stay sane. I bet he even has a pack hidden somewhere in his office. We should go look."

“Seriously?” I ask, not believing that he could be so addicted to something so foul that he couldn’t go the night without it. “You would quit if you knew what was good for you.”

He stands up, scraping his chair across the floor loudly. “If I knew what was good for me, I would burn this miserable place to the ground and send you home where you can’t try to tell a grown man what to do,” he grumbles.

I watch him walk toward the bar, then duck down into the back, moving toward the office. I thought he was just going to ask someone here for a cigarette, but it seems he actually believes that Angus had a pack hidden somewhere in his office.

Unbelievable.

I get up, hurrying after him and trying to quell the nausea that’s come over me again. I hope it’s just the anxiety, because I can’t stand to fall sick when I have so much to do. Kimberly can handle drinks on the weekdays by herself, but she needs me on the weekend.

Arriving in the office, I find Savva standing on a chair, his head tucked into the small closet that Angus used for his jackets and shoes.

I sigh. “I swear to God, if you break something, I’m going to kick you out.”

He pulls his head out of the closet, grinning at me and stepping down from the chair. In his hand, there’s a sealed pack of cigarettes. “I told you he had something here.”

I cross my arms, annoyed that he would climb all over Angus’s office just for a chance to give himself lung cancer. Men confuse me sometimes.

Okay, *all the time*.

“You’re not smoking those in here,” I say as he peels the little gold tab on the plastic.

“Says who?” he asks, tossing the plastic into the trash bin beside the desk, still grinning like he just won a round of blackjack.

“Says me, asshole,” I reply, charging up to him and grabbing at the pack as he tries to open it.

He holds it up out of reach, chuckling like I’m a little dog trying to jump for a treat. “If you ask nicely, I might open a window before I smoke.”

He must think that he knows me inside and out, that I’m actually going to beg him to compromise so that he can continue to take charge of *my* business that *I* own. Well, he has another thing coming if he thinks I’m that easy. My head can get cloudy when it comes to sex, but the only thing his bad habit will leave me with is a headache.

He holds his arms up high, laughing and dangling the pack of cigarettes over me. “Say please. I love it when you say please,” he teases.

I pull back my fist and punch him in the gut as hard as I can, causing him to buckle over and drop the pack on the carpet. I pick it up as he coughs, opening the window and throwing it out into the parking lot.

“You fucking bitch,” he mutters, but I catch a smile on his face as he rubs his stomach.

I smirk. “It takes one to know one.”

“Well, if I have to go outside, I don’t want to go alone. We have more to talk about, so come on,” he says, placing his hand on my shoulder and squeezing it lightly.

I shudder at his touch, no longer fearful of what he could do. It’s crazy how such a frightening and dangerous man can turn from your worst enemy to your greatest ally in just a few short weeks. I wonder if he’d still act this way if we never had sex.

He leads me outside, searching the parking lot for Angus’s old cigarettes while muttering something about a crazy woman. I assume that woman to be me.

“I’m not crazy,” I tell him, leaning against the gritty brick wall and folding my arms over my chest.

I’m sure he’s so used to getting his way that the moment he encounters defiance he thinks the person defying him must be

crazy. Maybe I am for challenging a Bratva boss, but I'm not one to submit without a fight.

Savva walks back to me with a cigarette between his lips, producing an orange lighter and pulling fire into the tobacco with a few puffs. Smoke seeps out through his teeth as he smiles and winks at me.

Never in my life did I think smoking was attractive, but it feels like anything Savva does makes something stir deep in my belly. I look away from him for fear that I will want a cigarette too after seeing his lips wrapped around the paper.

The moon is full tonight, and it's almost bright enough to be a cloudy day outside. The silver light casts dramatic shadows across the parking lot, a tangled mess of shapes from the wiry outlines of a few dozen motorcycles.

"You wanted to talk about something," I say as Savva leans against the wall next to me.

"Sure," he says, his voice pulled out across time as the nicotine starts to calm him. "I need you to know the gravity of your decision to stay here. Stone, the leader of the Triple Six Angels, is looking for me. I think you already know that, but what you don't seem to realize is that he will try to kill me if he does find me. I guess the keyword here is *try*. I'm not going to let him."

I laugh. "You're so fucking full of yourself, you know that?"

He shrugs. "I've never met a man who was able to kill me. Why should I believe that Stone can just because I shot his brother?"

My stomach drops as I realize once again that I'm talking to a cold-blooded killer. Not only that, but I had sex with him. The same hands that were spanking my ass were used to kill someone. Is it wrong that I feel excited to know that?

"I imagine killing someone's brother would make them pretty angry," I say, attempting to bring myself back into the seriousness of what he's telling me.

"Super angry, but he's a bitch, you know? Stone gets his money by harassing defenseless people and ripping tourists off

at their stupid little gas station down the road. That's child's play. None of those people know what it is to do business with killers or defy someone truly powerful. I believe they've overstepped, and for that, they will all pay dearly. Stone's days are numbered."

"If you're so confident about that, why do you seem so concerned?"

"I'm not concerned about myself, Oakley. I'm concerned about you. It's not like I can keep you with me all the time. You seem intent on working at your business, and I can't blame you for that. I just need to know that you'll be safe."

His admittance is like a drug, making me feel warm and light, like I'm floating in a lazy river on a late summer evening. I want more of it. I want him to spill his secrets, all the little thoughts he has about me, into the open where I can arrange them how I like and wear them like a blanket.

I try not to show my desperation, but it leaks out in the form of a question. "Why do you care so much about me?"

He takes a long drag and holds the smoke in, letting it out when he's arrived at an answer. "I've just never met anyone like you, Oakley. I guess it's because you're an outsider. You're not tainted by this mess, by this horrible lifestyle. And yes, I'm aware that it's horrible."

"That could be anyone, though," I reply. "There are billions of people on this planet, and I would assume that most of them are pretty wholesome."

"Not like you."

"And that's it?" I ask, looking at him earnestly. "That doesn't really explain much."

He lowers his voice, leaning toward me and holding his cigarette away so that the smoke cannot reach me. "Words can't describe feelings, as much as they try to, darling. They can only imitate, and that imitation is as pale and dim as the way the moon copies the sun. I would never tarnish my feelings by putting them into words, but perhaps I can express them in a different language."

He leans toward me, his eyelids drooping and his lips parting. My heart and mind race, but my body takes over, pulling me toward him like two opposing magnets until we click together.

I always thought cigarette smoke was stale and sour, but on his mouth, it's sweet and deep. His tongue dances across my teeth, and I taste him fully, surging electrical impulses hijacking my brain and causing me to crumple into his broad chest.

The kiss turns into a frantic search for more as he flicks his cigarette away, putting his hands on my hips and pulling them into his. His cock is hard already, pulsing in his jeans, hot and eager to experience me, as though it was our first time again.

I'm sure that it will always feel like the first time with Savva. He just has that energy about him, that freshness that feeds my soul like a downpour after a long drought.

My legs are weak, but he's holding me up, my rock in the overwhelming chaos, the unmoving lighthouse that stands still no matter how vicious the waves become. It's both concerning and comforting how much he means to me now.

When he finally pulls away, I'm trembling, nervous despite our experience together. Somehow, this time feels different. His intentions aren't just physical, they carry through as such but they stem from his soul. I can feel that in the way my blood pumps as he holds me.

For a long time, neither of us speak. He wraps his arms around me and holds me, both of us staring out into the parking lot as people wander in and out of the bar. I wish this peace could last forever, but by the very nature in which we've come together, the peace will be broken.

We're in the eye of the storm now, and the moment the winds change direction, all hell is set to break loose.

But until then.

Here we are.

Together.

Savva

I wish I could say that my intentions were just to protect her, but the truth is, I want to do more than that. I want to own her.

It's selfish, but I never claimed to be an altruist. I've always gone through life taking what I wanted without so much as a kind word or an apology. Surely, karma will catch up with me eventually, but until then, I'll continue to have what I want.

And what I want is Oakley.

She has a sparkle in her big blue eyes as I take her around the back of Smoke, Steel, & Whiskey. Tonight, her payment is my pleasure. Tomorrow, nothing can be guaranteed.

"Remember when I spanked you out here?" I ask as we come around the corner.

"It was on the other side, wasn't it?" she asks, as though every detail wasn't burned into her memory.

I know that I'll never forget her whimpers and moans as I punished her for being a little brat. Tonight can be no different. She deserves it for making me feel like this about her. If she wasn't so fucking perfect, maybe I'd be able to leave her alone.

But I can't, and so I won't.

As soon as I've confirmed that we're out of sight of any wandering eyes, I grab Oakley by the back of her neck and walk her to one of the storage units, pushing her into it hard enough for the metal door to rattle.

"You think you can act cute with me without punishment, huh?" I growl, dying to release the confusing emotions bottled inside of me in the form of sexual aggression. I know no other way to get them to go away.

Oakley pushes her ass out, rubbing it against my erection and moaning softly. "Oh, I think I'd like to be punished."

Her willingness is almost frustrating. I wish she would hate me again so that I could stop caring about her so damn much. Her playfulness is crueler than any punishment I could make her endure.

I pull her pants down and grab one of her cheeks with my free hand, keeping her firmly pinned against the storage container as I play with her. I want her to submit to me fully before I'll allow her to feel even the slightest pleasure at my hands.

“Beg me for it,” I growl, spanking her hard.

She bites her bottom lip, writhing in my grip. “Give it to me harder,” she purrs.

I spank her again, really putting some force into it. I want her to beg me through gritted teeth. I want to hear her inner struggle before I'll believe that she's doing this for me and not herself.

“Thank you,” she says, so I spank her three times in quick succession.

“That's all?” she asks, but her voice is already faltering.

“Does that still feel good to you?” I ask, rubbing her flushed bottom and smirking as she winces at even my lightest touch. She's close to breaking, so near to the edge that it would only take a few more spankings to make her mine.

And she'd enjoy it not because it felt good, but because she knew that she belonged to me now.

I pivot as my cock pushes against her ass, unable to stop myself from giving into temptations of the flesh. I could draw out her punishment longer, but I need to feel her insides, and I'm going to do it in a way that won't give her any hope of an orgasm.

“Get on your knees,” I command, spinning her around and pushing her shoulders until she falls before me. “That's right, take it out. I bet you can't take the entire thing down your throat, but we're certainly going to try.”

“Yes, daddy,” she says, looking up at me with big eyes as she undoes my belt.

“Did I tell you to call me that?” I snap.

She shakes her head, pouting as she fumbles with my cock.

“You are to call me sir, and tonight, you’re serving me. I don’t care who you have coming to that bar, you’re focus tonight is me. You got that?”

“Yes, sir,” she replies, tugging on my cock and pressing her lips against the tip.

She’s so good that I want to call it quits already just to save myself the embarrassment of cumming in her mouth too soon. I wouldn’t last a minute with the way she’s rubbing her puffy red lips over my cock. Precum is already leaking from the tip, and she’s licking it up like she’s tasted nothing sweeter.

God, I need her. She can’t know it, but I need her so fucking badly.

“Suck,” I say, losing my voice for a moment and breathing out the final words. “Right now.”

She opens her mouth and takes my cock into it, swirling her tongue around until I can’t take it anymore and press myself into her, pushing my cock into her mouth so far that she gags. I grab her hair, thrusting as she gives into my frantic energy and drops her arms to her sides, looking up at me with the most innocent eyes as I fuck her mouth.

And I almost feel guilty for it. I’m certain she’s never been corrupted in this way before, treated like a whore by a man as filthy as me. I take just as much pride as I do shame in showing her the shadows, the grey area that most are too bashful to experience, but that I walk into boldly.

I grab her hands and hold them above her head, thrusting in and out of her mouth until I can barely stand the pleasure anymore.

I pull out, jerking myself over her face. “Stick your tongue out.”

“Yes, sir,” she replies, opening her mouth and smiling slightly as I pump thick strings of my seed all over her perfect face.

“Oh god,” I groan, leaning back and shaking every last drop out of my cock.

With my cum plastered across her face and some dangling from her chin, I grab her and lift her up, lifting her leg, pushing aside her panties, and putting my cock inside her before I’m able to turn soft.

I kiss her lips as I fuck her standing, tasting my own cum as she moans into my mouth. I love every nasty, taboo second of what we’re doing out here, and I know she does too. Nobody has fucked her like this, and nobody else ever will.

I feel her pussy gripping my cock as she climaxes, and I cover her mouth so that nobody can hear her but me. I’m selfish for the sound of her voice. If I had my way, I’d steal it and put it in a little music box to listen to every night, hiding it from the rest of the world.

I cum again inside of her as she shudders and moans, pumping what I have left into her pussy, claiming her once again. When I pull out, I keep her leg held up so that I can watch the cum drip from her swollen pussy.

She gets shy quickly, putting her leg down and trying to make herself decent. She seems intent on returning to the bar, but I haven’t finished with her. I’m not sure that I could ever be finished with a woman like Oakley. I want to have her again and again.

“Come inside and we’ll get you cleaned up,” I say, taking her hand as she tries to wipe the cum off her face.

“Someone will see me,” she says with hushed worry.

“Good. I want everyone to know that you belong to me,” I reply, pulling her along.

She covers her face with her hand as we walk into the bar together, and I lead her through the doorway going to the office.

She laughs the moment we step back into privacy, pulling away from me and punching me in the arm. “Everyone saw me! What the fuck!” she says through a fit of giggles.

“Let them look. I think you look more beautiful with your face drenched like that. Don’t women love going out for facials?”

She groans at my joke. “God, not like that.”

“What about like this?” I ask, grabbing her and bending her over the desk. “Or this?” I ask as I yank down her panties again. They’re still sticky with my cum, but her pussy looks just as delicious as it did the first time.

“Again?” she asks, pretending to be surprised. “You’re a beast.”

“Just addicted to cumming inside you, darling,” I reply, pulling out my cock and squeezing my erection.

I could do this all night, and I probably will. There’s no way for me to get enough of Oakley. I just have to keep fucking her until neither of us have the energy to go any longer.

Oakley

I wouldn't believe that last night happened if Savva wasn't snoring on the floor beside me. I guess he let me take the couch, but I honestly don't remember how I got here. I think he carried me to it.

I remain completely still, save for slight movements of my head to make sure Savva is still sleeping. He looks so sweet and innocent there that I don't want to wake him. This is the only time I'll get to see him this way.

The moment his eyes open, he'll become the serious, slightly grumpy man he always is. I've gotten used to it to the point where I understand why he's that way and even enjoy it, but it's still nice to see him looking so peaceful.

Light streams into the office from the window, and by the color I can assume it's already quite late in the morning. We were up so long that I was certain we wouldn't wake up until the afternoon, but it seems that I don't have the calmness to stay asleep for that long.

Savva, on the other hand...

Finally, he stirs, and then his eyes open and he sits upright so quick and stiff that he reminds me of Frankenstein's monster. The only thing he's lacking is the bolts on the sides of his neck.

He turns toward me, blinking rapidly, his eyebrows drawn together in a confused scowl. "What's going on?" he asks.

I giggle at his sleep-lagged brain. "I guess you wanted to sleep over last night to protect me. What a hero."

He shakes his head, grabbing the arm of the couch and pulling himself to his feet. "No, I should've gone home. What time is it?"

God, he's such a beautiful mess. No wonder he's upset he slept over. Now I get to see how out of his element he is upon waking.

“My guess is eleven,” I say, taking my time getting up. “But there’s a red clock on the desk that will tell you.”

He stumbles over to the clock, leaning on the desk like a crutch and picking up the clock. He holds it so close to his eyes that I imagine it would be harder to see than if he held it at arm’s length. I wonder if he needs glasses. He seems like the type to refuse getting his eyes checked because he’d look less threatening wearing a smart pair of frames.

I, for one, think he’d look dashing.

Savva sighs, putting the clock down and running his fingers through his hair. “It’s only ten. I have plans to meet with Pasha at three.”

“I guess we have a bit more time together, then,” I reply with a satisfied smile. “Would you like me to make you breakfast?”

He raises an eyebrow. “Careful, or I might steal you and make you do that every morning.”

I’m not sure I’d mind, but I don’t reveal that to him. I walk out of the room instead, putting an extra swing to my hips to lure him out with me. Maybe I can convince him to tidy up the bar while I make us something to eat.

As I gather up some eggs and a few other things to make us a hot meal, I realize that we’re missing a couple of things from the fridge that we’ll need tonight for the bar. I consider sending Savva to the store to grab them, but I don’t want to be alone. I haven’t forgotten that there’s an angry gang leader named Stone who could turn up here at any moment.

Maybe we can go to the store together after we eat. I believe we’ll have enough time.

Savva walks out with the pack of cigarettes he took from the closet last night, pulling one out and winking at me.

“Oh no, don’t think you’re going to smoke that shit first thing in the morning. I have something else for you to do,” I scold, grabbing a rag from the bar and carrying it out to him. “Here, take this and make sure the tables are clean. Kimberly always leaves them a bit sticky.”

He sighs, putting the cigarettes into his back pocket and taking the rag, lazily meandering around the room and wiping tables down while I go back to making breakfast for us. I wonder if his mother ever made him do any chores, or if she did everything herself. With his attitude, there's no way he wasn't catered to every second of his childhood.

Well, someone has to teach him how to be an adult, and it might as well be me.

But I don't torture him for too long with the cleaning before inviting him to a table with two plates of scrambled eggs and sausage. I would throw a fruit in there somewhere to pretend we're being healthy, but we need to go to the store for those.

"How do you like your coffee?" I ask as I pull out a chair for him.

"Black, but let me get it. I feel like you already do enough around here," he says, refusing to take his seat.

"Now you want to be a gentleman?" I ask with a laugh.

He looks offended. "When haven't I been?"

"You want me to list a few instances off to you now, or would you prefer a full written collection in the mail?"

"Very funny," he replies. "Just let me get the coffee."

I smirk. "I take it with cream."

"Of course, you do," he replies with suggestive eyes.

I sit down, allowing him to play the gentleman as I wait at the table. I must admit, it's nice to have someone doing things for you, even if it's just getting a cup of coffee. My mom never did anything for me. Since the age of ten, I was doing my own laundry, and if I didn't do hers with it, she would throw the biggest fit.

The more I think about it, the more relieved I am to be away from her. I don't want to cut her off entirely, but sometimes a girl needs to get out there and live her life by her own terms. If it were up to my mom, she would have me living at home for the rest of my life.

I check my phone quickly as Savva pours us two cups of dark roast, but there's not a single message from my mom. She must really be upset about me taking over Angus's bar, but it's starting to worry me that she's been silent for so long.

If I have time after Savva leaves, I'll try to call her. I just don't know what to say but what got us into an argument last time, and that hardly seems constructive.

Savva slips into the seat across from me and gently slides my coffee to me. "You look like you're thinking about something," he says.

"With everything going on lately, I'm struggling to see how I could spend any waking moment *not* thinking about something," I reply, taking the coffee and sipping it.

It tastes perfect. How did he get this good at literally everything?

Savva begins shoveling eggs into his mouth as though he only has ten seconds to eat before someone swipes his plate. It makes my stomach hurt just looking at him.

"Damn, slow down," I say, putting my hand on his wrist. "You're going to choke."

"Oh," he says, seeming to only now notice that he's inhaling his food like a vacuum.

I suppose he's not good at *everything*, just most things.

"You're a smart man, but you need to take better care of yourself," I tell him.

"I live for the day," he replies as though that's something to be proud of.

"Nonsense. Nobody can live like that and be happy. You have to think about the future, about how to maximize your life instead of wasting it in a few years doing stupid things," I explain, cutting into my eggs and showing him how little I've put on my fork. "Just take it easy."

He shrugs, taking a sip of his coffee. "I guess we see things differently."

“Very differently.”

“But that doesn’t really matter to me. I don’t judge you for being naive, and you shouldn’t judge me for acting like a man. That’s just my nature.”

I laugh. “Alright, now you’ve gone too far. Neither of those statements are true.”

He raises his eyebrows, his copper eyes gleaming with a hint of devious humor. “Am I not a man?”

“You know what I mean. I’m not as naive as you make me out to be, and just because you’re a man doesn’t mean you have to act like some kind of animal.”

“You seemed to enjoy it last night,” he says, the sides of his eyes crinkling as he smiles.

My heart flutters, but I put up my walls again and frown. “There’s a time and a place for behavior like that, but it’s not all the time and everywhere. You have to act appropriately.”

“Not a fucking chance, sweetheart,” he replies, finishing his eggs with the same savagery as he started them.

He washes them down with the rest of his coffee and stands up. “I need a smoke.”

“If you must, do it outside, but don’t leave yet. I want you to come with me to the store and get some things for the bar,” I say, realizing I’m not going to be able to change him so easily.

Perhaps I never will, but can I live with a man like that? I certainly couldn’t bring him home to my mom in his current state. She’d kick both of us out of the house and probably call the police.

Savva thanks me for breakfast and steps outside, leaving me to finish my coffee in silence. I hate to admit that the smoke blowing outside the window is a comforting sight, just as the taste was like pure sex last night when it was on his lips. He could turn my worst nightmare into my greatest guilty pleasure just by virtue of being himself.

I get up after a moment, washing the plates and making myself a second cup of coffee to start the day. I hardly ever used to

drink the stuff, but these days it takes me two to get going. Running a business isn't easy.

I mix in sugar and cream, but it's not as good as the one Savva made me. I'm tempted to call him in and make him prepare another cup for me, but I don't want to disturb his peace. He looks so calm out there standing next to his Harley.

As I finish my second cup, he comes back inside and nods to the door. "Want to learn how to ride?"

Oakley

Savva throws his leg over his Harley, making it look like the most natural thing in the world. It's easy for him since he's so tall and has probably done it a million times, but my legs aren't quite so long, and I've not so much as touched a motorcycle before.

So, when he steps off and tells me to try, I'm naturally hesitant. If I knock the bike over, he'll be angry because I scratched it, but I can't hold up something so heavy. This is an accident waiting to happen.

"I don't know if I should," I say, stepping toward him with crossed arms. "What if it falls over on me and crushes my leg."

He laughs, grabbing the handlebars from the front, legs spread over the front tire. "You're not going to fall over. I'll hold it up for you."

"Knowing me, I'll find a way to knock it over anyway," I reply.

"No, you'll be fine. Just trust me."

Trust him, after everything that's happened? The last time I trusted him, I ended up pressed up against a storage container with his cock inside of me. Savva doesn't strike me as the trustworthy type of man, unless you enjoy getting into trouble.

The problem is, I do.

"Just don't shake it or anything," I say, grabbing the body of the motorcycle and attempting to hoist myself onto it like it's an elephant. At my size, it might as well be.

"Nice and steady," Savva assures me, squeezing the handlebars and grinning.

"Okay, I got this," I say, putting my leg over and sitting down. I adjust myself on the leather seat, feeling the warmth between my legs from where Savva was just sitting. It feels nicer than it

probably should, and I bet it would be even better if this thing was on.

“You’re a natural,” Savva says, letting go of the handlebars.

“Shit, wait, don’t do that!” I squeal, grabbing onto them and rocking over to one side.

He grabs them again, pulling me back into an upright position. “I think you might need a little practice just sitting before you can get out on the road. How about you scoot back, and I’ll take over?”

I move a few inches back before he climbs on in front of me, pushing me back until I fit into the groove of the seat behind him. It’s not a full seat, and I have to lean forward for fear of slipping off, but I actually feel safer now that Savva has taken over.

“You wanted to go to the store for a few things, right?” he asks, flicking up the kickstand.

“On this? I thought we could take my car,” I reply, fear causing me to squeeze his waist so hard that he has to pry me off like a baby monkey.

“You relax and hold on normally. You’re not going to go flying off. Just lean when I lean, and don’t hold your breath.”

The motorcycle starts with a loud growl, and the air smells of exhaust fumes. When I was younger, I loved the smell of gasoline so much that I would sniff the air violently when my mom was filling up the car. I’m pretty sure that’s what made me stupid enough to get onto a motorcycle with a Bratva boss.

Finally, a bit of sense returns to me, and I squeeze Savva. “Don’t we need helmets?”

“Not if I don’t crash,” he replies.

We jerk forward, and I scream, clutching him tighter even though we’re only moving at a few miles per hour. It feels fast when the road is right beneath your feet. I try closing my eyes but that only makes it worse as we speed up.

“Just relax,” Savva shouts over the wind as Smoke, Steel, & Whiskey shrinks behind us.

Relax? How the hell can I relax when we're barreling down the road on two wheels and no protective gear? I'm pretty sure this is exactly how Angus died. Am I not a fool for doing the same? What would my mother think?

But the terror quickly turns into a satisfying sort of thrill as I remember that Savva does this daily, and that he's still in one piece. The likelihood that this is my last day on God's green earth is slim to none. I should enjoy the moment instead of freaking out and closing myself off to the experience.

My fearful grip turns into a hug, and I dare myself to pull my head away from Savva's back and look around at the open road. It's a new experience for me getting to see all around me without anything in the way. I feel like a bird flying low to the ground, cruising through the air without any obstacles.

"You alright back there?" Savva calls over his shoulder.

"Yes," I shout back. "It's not so bad."

He laughs. "You should try to enjoy yourself. Some people live for this."

"Do you?"

"I haven't driven a car in years, so I guess you could say that. Sure. But I live for a lot of things – money, freedom, beautiful women..."

"Just one," I correct him.

"You're right. Just one."

I press my head into his back again as the wind rushes through my hair. It feels good to be this free while not being in control of anything. I was never the type to let a man take command of anything, but maybe I just hadn't found the right man yet.

Now, I'm afraid that I might have found him, for better or worse.

We ride the rest of the way to the store, accompanied only by the fresh morning air and the hot Nevada wind. It wakes me up more than the coffee did, and by the time we arrive, I feel like I have more energy than I did for the entire week.

But that's only until I try to get off with Savva and my knees buckle.

Savva catches me, his eyes gentle and concerned as he looks over my shaky body. "I guess it can be a little overwhelming the first time," he says.

The butterflies that I've been trying so hard to kill off flutter in my stomach, and my legs get even weaker. "Oh, I'm fine. Really," I say, but I still need a moment to compose myself.

He waits patiently for me to be able to walk again, and I try to be quick, I really do, but my legs are so weak that even when we finally walk into the store, my legs are wobbling and I'm clutching his sleeve to keep balance. He probably thinks I'm so dramatic.

Oh well, at least I can say I did it. I was brave enough to ride with him, even if he had to trick me into doing it.

The store we've found is a small one, stocked with an array of fruit from the previous day's market, and plenty of water and canned goods. We're only here for the lemons and limes, but I grab a few other things that I think we'll be able to carry.

Savva tries to pay for me, and I'm tempted to let him, but that would mean a little too much to me. It would be like we were dating, and that's one step too far in a direction I shouldn't even be facing to begin with.

Savva lights another cigarette outside as I pack our purchases into one of his saddlebags. The other is ripped so far down that anything I could place inside would fall out. I wonder what that's from.

I lean against Savva's Harley as he smokes, watching the smoke leak from his lips as he stands squinting in the sun. "Why do you smoke?" I ask, more curious than scolding.

"It's the only thing that keeps me sane," he replies. "Why do you run a bar when you know it's a ticking time bomb?"

I'm not the dramatic one.

He is.

“I run it because my father left it to me. I don’t have anything else because my stupid Psychology degree won’t get me any jobs worth working. I was living at home with my mom before I came out here,” I explain in annoyance.

He takes a long drag of his cigarette before responding. “Well, I smoke because it keeps me sane, and I’m smoking even more since I met you. I guess that tells you a lot about how I feel about you.”

I’m not sure how to take his comment, but I understand he’s a bit rough around the edges. Often, he’ll say something that strikes me as offensive, only for it to be a way for him to show his affection. I’m just not used to communicating with a morally bankrupt individual.

“Am I too much for you to handle?” I ask, cocking my head to the side.

“Oh, I can handle you, it just takes more effort than I would like to admit.” He laughs. “I’m not sure of you already know this, but I’m kind of obsessed with you.”

I wasn’t expecting such a deep admission from him this morning, especially not said so casually.

I smile, cupping my hand over my brow to see him better in the sunlight. “How do you expect me to get any work done if you’re going to admit things like that to me? I’m going to be thinking about you all day.”

“As if you don’t already,” he says, flicking his cigarette into the trash and walking up to me.

“You really think you’re that important to me?” I ask, although I’m sure we both know that he is.

He comes to a stop in front of me, his shadow cooling my face as he looks down into my eyes. “I think you’re just as obsessed with me as I am with you, my darling Oakley. In fact, I think the whole reason you’re refusing to give up the bar and run back home is because you don’t want to lose me.”

As soon as the words leave his wicked mouth, I know that they’re true. I never thought of it that way before, but as much as I make this about Angus, it’s become more about Savva

every day. I can't stop myself from falling for him, and he can't keep his hands off me.

My breathing is shallow, and my voice catches in my throat when I try to speak. I want to deny his claim, to push him back and tell him that he's lost his mind, but I can't. He has me locked in his burning gaze, and I can't move a single atom of my body until he releases me.

He bends down and kisses me on the forehead, then on the nose, and finally, my lips. I taste the burnt tobacco, but even more, I taste his emotions, and they feel like love.

My mind is racing, but words continue to fail me as I sink into his kiss, tasting him, loving him in secret when it's so fucking obvious that I should be screaming it in his face. I want him to know, but I'm terrified of what it means for us.

This was only supposed to be a game, a cruel trick he played to humiliate me. I wasn't actually supposed to fall for him. I was never supposed to feel this way.

I put my hands on his chest, feeling his muscles and moving down to his abs. They're like hot iron beneath his white t-shirt, so raw and unrelenting that I feel dirty touching them in public.

He pulls away too soon, leaving me wanting more. "Come, I'll take you back. I still have a meeting today, remember?"

I do remember but I wish I didn't. I wish both of us could forget our obligations and spend the rest of this beautiful day together in each other's arms. I want him to make love to me over and over again until we're too tired to move, and then I want to fall asleep on top of him, curling up on his broad chest as he whispers his affections in my ear until I drift off.

The ride back to the bar feels like punishment, and when he leaves me there alone, I feel betrayed. I want him back. I want him to be here and to protect me, but he leaves anyway, telling me that Maxim should be here in an hour or so to make sure I'm alright.

But I don't want Maxim.

I want Savva.

I *need* Savva.

Savva

I toss the pack of cigarettes in the trash before I walk into the breakfast joint to speak with Pasha. I need to quit these fucking things, or I need to quit Oakley. I can't have both.

Pasha is already sipping on an iced tea at the table when I arrive, and I take a seat across from him, flagging down the waitress and ordering a tonic espresso before addressing Pasha.

"Well, I'm assuming because you're sipping on that tea like we're on a goddamn cruise that there isn't any bad news," I say.

He nods. "Things are fine for us, but I can't say that for the Triple Six Angels."

"Oh?"

He grins, as though he's been waiting for just the right moment to drop this news. "I heard a couple of Stone's boys got arrested the other night. They pulled over an undercover cop car without realizing it and they managed to snag a couple of them before the rest fled. I don't believe they got Stone, though. That would've been more exciting."

I chuckle. "Yeah, they've really overstepped their boundaries, and that's karma coming back to bite them in their dirty asses. I'm guessing Stone will be keeping a lower profile from now on, but that doesn't mean I'm in the clear. I doubt he's forgotten what I did to his brother."

"No, you're right about that. You need to be careful," Pasha says, his expression dropping. "And the girl, how is she?"

I shrug. "She's fine."

"Just fine?"

"What's it to you?" I ask, raising my voice when I shouldn't. I'm already regretting tossing those cigarettes. I swear I get so damn pissed off without them.

Pasha puts his hand over his heart. “I swear, I’m just checking up on you, boss. You’re the rope that ties us all together, and you’ve been spending an awfully lot of time with that girl. I just want to know that you’re alright.”

“She’s just a woman, Pasha. Don’t be so theatrical. She doesn’t have the power or the intent to bring down our Bratva Family, and I’d suggest you forget about her. I’m just fucking the bitch, not marrying her.”

He looks doubtful but doesn’t press me on it further.

In truth, I’m not sure whether my involvement with Oakley is turning out to be a mistake. She’s taking up so much of my mental energy that I’m starting to let myself slip. Even today, I slept over at the bar when I didn’t intend to. She might find it endearing, but for me, it’s a slippery slope to letting my guard down and giving myself an early funeral.

Theatrical or not, Pasha is right that I need to be aware of what I’m doing. Oakley will need a lot more attention from me if she becomes something more than a fun time and subsequently another jealous ex-girlfriend. I can handle a bitch throwing rocks at my Harley, but I don’t know what I’ll do if she starts professing her love to me.

Or if I say it first.

Fuck, I need something stronger than a tonic.

Pasha proceeds to dive into the details of our operations, elaborating on the money we’ve collected and the deals we’ve made with various club and bar owners. It all seems so boring to me when I have Oakley in my life.

Who cares about money when there’s a beautiful woman with perfect skin and hair like silk waiting for you to visit her again? I could go there tonight, and she’d welcome me with open arms, acting like nothing could ever be the matter and the worries I have exist only in my mind.

It’s as precarious as it is reassuring.

I barely listen to Pasha as he drones on about numbers, people, and the one bottle girl he fucked one time in the VIP section of one of our clubs. The only thing I can hear is the sound of

Oakley's laughter as she climbs onto the back of my Harley and we ride down the open road.

I'd kill to start every day like we did this morning. Just sitting with a cup of coffee and talking about nothing sounds like the perfect life, and I could do that every day with Oakley. I could do anything as long as it was with her.

Pasha orders lobster but I decline to eat anything, instead leaving early and taking a ride down to the Vegas strip to look for a gift to buy for Oakley. I feel like she deserves a little thank you after putting up with me and the way I behave. I know it's not easy.

I find a little stuffed bear that's so soft that it feels like it's made from the hair of some divine creature. The shop stitches Oakley's name into the front, and they add a heart without asking me.

I'm almost hesitant to give it to her after that. Will she confuse this gift with a confession of love? It's only supposed to be a cute little thing, a token of my appreciation.

I hold the bear in my hands for so long after I buy it that the fur gets sweaty. I just can't stop looking at it. I've never bought anything like this before, and it feels weird to carry it around, but at the same time, I can't imagine leaving it in the saddlebag on the side of my motorcycle.

I hold it in my hand for the entire drive home, placing it on the plush velvet chair that I usually sit and read in when I get home. I almost want to keep it, but I know Greg and Pasha would lose their minds if they saw it in my house.

Fuck, maybe I am crazy, but as long as I can blame it on Oakley, I think I'm allowed to be.

Oakley

I feel like when a woman knows, she knows.

I just hate that I know. I wish I was a man sometimes, so I didn't have to be so fucking aware of my body. Savva just slings his dick around without so much as an afterthought, and here I am, running back to the store to grab a pregnancy test because my tits are a little bit sore, and I haven't had my period since we started having sex.

The worst part about it isn't even that I think I might be pregnant, it's that I'm not completely sure until I see the results of the test, and the nearest store that has pregnancy tests is two hours away.

I'm sure they're a dime a dozen in Las Vegas, but out here, there's only dirt and road for miles on end.

I swapped my rental Mustang for a lease of the same car, easily able to pay the monthly premium when I have no other expenses than maintaining the bar and paying Savva. I have no rent, barely any personal expenses, and I've been saving up money to pay off my student loans in one lump sum.

Thanks dad!

In a mere month, my life has changed completely, and I've almost forgotten the struggle it used to be. Now, I'm making huge strides personally and financially, but that's all falling into question with my latest realization.

I might be pregnant, and if I was, it would belong to Savva.

I should've realized the risks I was taking with him, but he had me so caught up in my feelings that it was impossible for me to see the full picture. All the things my mother warned me about pale in comparison to what I'm experiencing now.

Having a baby with a Bratva boss. It sounds impossible, but it could be my new reality.

I loosen my grip on the steering wheel when I realize my fingers have turned white. I need to find a way to relax or I'm

going to have a stroke before I can even figure out whether I should be freaking out at all.

I could call my mom, but that would only lead to more anxiety. I haven't reached out to her in ages and the first thing I tell her is that I think I might be pregnant? And then I'd have to explain who Savva was, and she'd really lose her head.

No, I must keep this a secret. Nobody can know, not even Kimberly. I know us women have to stick together, but this is something that requires the utmost care, and I can't have someone who drinks on the job holding precious information about what's going on inside my body.

Being close to Savva is dangerous enough, but if someone were to find out that I was having his baby, I would never be able to go outside without fearing for my life. Savva might seem to think that he can handle Stone and his Triple Six Angels, but I certainly can't. A shotgun isn't enough to take down an entire biker gang should they come to collect.

I turn on the radio in an attempt to drown out some of my thoughts, but they're playing Elvis again, and every time he says the word *Baby*, I cringe.

I turn it off and roll down the windows, allowing the billowing white noise to replace the fears in my head. I feel like I'm on the back of Savva's Harley again, speeding down the road in the open air, no helmet and not a care in the world.

That man really doesn't care much for protection.

Two hours is a long time to be thinking about nothing, so my mind eventually reverts back to what it would be like if I did have a child with Savva. I'm not even sure he'd want to keep it, but my maternal love would drive me to a different conclusion, and since I'm the one who has to carry it to term, then it's ultimately my decision to do so.

And if Savva didn't want the baby, then there'd really be no reason to tell him about it. I wouldn't force him to stay just because I was pregnant, but the reverse could also be true. I wouldn't push him away if I felt he wanted to raise the child together.

Of course, none of that really matters if he sees me more like a fling than a life-long partner. It feels unrealistic to assume that he intends to stick around forever, especially since he repeatedly gave me the option to sell Smoke, Steel, & Whiskey and get out of the payment plan.

So, I can't rely on Savva. I have to be strong and find it in myself to go through this alone if that's the way the cards are dealt. I don't even want to tell my mother about it, but I can't see myself denying her a grandchild just because we got into an argument about Angus.

Ugh, this is all so fucking confusing.

I park in front of a red and white pharmacy and sit in the car for a moment, enjoying the silence after being berated by wind for two hours. I wish I could sit here longer, but it's going to start getting dark out soon, and that means another night at the bar. I get no breaks until Sunday.

It's still hot outside, and I break into a sweat only to be frozen half to death when I enter the pharmacy. It's so cold in here that I have goosebumps just seconds after walking inside.

I hurry down the aisles until I find the pregnancy tests. Grabbing two, I take them to the register and pay for them with my head down. I mutter my thanks and rush back outside to the car.

I was probably in there for less than a minute, but it felt like forever. I'm sure the drive back to the bar will feel even longer, and then I'm going to have to pretend like I'm not freaking out about possibly being pregnant so that Maxim doesn't say something about it to Savva.

I fear I'll never have a true moment to myself now that I have a bodyguard hanging out around my bar at all hours of the night, but at least there's someone who will make sure I'm not attacked by Stone and his gang. I'm grateful that Savva had the sense and generosity to give his services to me.

I'm able to relax a little on the drive home, my mind wandering in directions other than what I'm going to do if I'm really pregnant. I think about home for the first time since

coming to Nevada, the room I grew up in, and how small everything seems in relation to the journey I'm on now. I guess I never realized how comfortable my life was until I stepped into this new one.

Now, the rules have been pulled from beneath my feet like a rug, and I'm falling with no clue where the ground is, or how hard it will be when I hit it.

I should be terrified, but the impact is what hurts. The fall is akin to freedom.

Arriving back at Smoke, Steel, & Whiskey, I feel a sense of calmness that allows me to mask my intentions as I walk through the front door and nod at Maxim. He's been sitting at one of the tables with his arms crossed since he got here, and I don't believe he's moved a hair in the entire time it took me to go to the store and back.

Part of me wants to jump in front of him and wave my hands in his face to make sure he's real, and not some wax figure Savva dropped off to fool me. However, I have more pressing matters at hand.

I go to the back, locating the rarely used bathroom at the end of the hallway and locking myself inside. There's a little image of Saint Christopher taped to the mirror, but not much else.

I tear open the first pregnancy test and set it down on the toilet lid, taking the second one and hiding it behind a dusty box of plasters in the mirror cabinet. I'll use it in a week if this one comes up negative. Sometimes, it takes a little longer for the results to show up, and I don't want to be wrong about something this important.

It takes about a minute to pee on the stick and watch it turn from a blank white square to double red lines across the front. My heart rate climbs as the colors sharpen, and it takes me a few moments to even register what I'm looking at.

"Oh, shit," I mutter to myself, putting it down and then immediately picking it back up again. "Oh, fuck."

I'm pregnant.

I look at my belly in the mirror, turning at different angles when I know there's no possibility that it will have changed already.

Am I losing my mind over this? It certainly feels like it.

I put the toilet lid down and sit on it, burying my face in my hands and trying not to hyperventilate. I've managed to keep myself from panicking even in the worst situations so far, but it's this one that seems to push me over the edge.

Of course, I love the baby. I want to do my best for it even without knowing who it is or what it will grow up to be like. I'm compelled to care even though it's been presented to me without warning at a time when I have no clue who I'm supposed to be.

The mother of a Bratva's child? Me? A girl who was born in Georgia and raised in a small neighborhood where nothing ever happened?

I place my hand over my belly and rub it gently, trying to sooth myself like I'm the baby inside. We are one and the same right now, and it'll be at least eight months until we're separate people.

"Okay, we can do this," I whisper to the new team I've formed. "We are going to be alright."

I believe it, but that doesn't change the fact that it's going to make this whole mess that much messier. Savva will really have to prove himself as a man if I'm going to let him anywhere near this child. It's not enough for him to be obsessed with me like he says. He needs to love me.

I laugh at myself in the mirror. Love? Not even my mother loves me the way she should. How can I expect a total stranger to extend to me what nobody else ever could?

I'm drawn to the feeling of panic again, but I don't allow myself to succumb to it. I have a job to do out there, and I'm going to need to start setting up the bar in anticipation for the first customers. Kimberly will be here soon to help me.

I open the mirror cabinet and tuck the used pregnancy test and the packaging back behind the plasters with the unused test.

Nobody uses this bathroom, so it should be safe there.

And for now, I have to pretend none of this ever happened.

Savva

Maybe the bear is too much, but it's too late now that Oakley has already spotted me. She's expecting me because it's payment night, which also means it's super busy, but that doesn't stop her from abandoning her place at the bar and running up to me.

She hugs me, burying her head into my chest and taking me by surprise. I hadn't anticipated this kind of reaction. Normally, she tries to be more secretive that we're involved, especially when the bar is so busy.

"What's that?" she asks, looking at the little bear I'm holding.

I turn it so that she can see her name stitched into the front. "I got it for you. It's super soft, which reminded me of your skin."

"A little creepy," she replies, taking the bear from my hands and examining it. "But also, super cute. I didn't realize you were such a romantic."

I laugh, rubbing the back of my neck. "It's, um, just a token of my appreciation. You've been really cool about all this."

She points at the little heart on the front. "Seems pretty romantic."

"They put that on there without me asking."

"I'm sure they could sense your feelings about me," she replies, grinning and pulling the bear to her chest. "I love it. I really do. Thank you, Savva. You're a sweetheart."

Heat rushes to my face at her words, and it gets even worse when I realize half the people in the bar are looking at us. I'm sweating like a sinner in church, and I feel a bit lightheaded. Maybe this was a mistake, a step too far, as I was afraid of.

But Oakley doesn't seem the least bit bothered by it. She gets up on her toes and kisses me in front of everyone, happy with the gift I've given her and not afraid to show it. It makes me

feel like the biggest wimp but also the luckiest man alive at the same time.

“Maybe we should sit,” I say, looking for an excuse to shift focus away from the bear.

Oakley is still beaming, and carries the bear to the table, propping it up in the center as though it’s going to be mediating our conversation. I shuffle over to them and sit down, placing my hands in my lap and smiling awkwardly.

“Really cute. What made you think to buy me a gift?” she asks, tilting her head to the side.

“It just reminded me of you,” I reply.

“Because it’s fat?” she asks, immediately breaking out into a fit of laughter. I’ve never seen her this cheerful, and it makes me want to go out and buy her a thousand teddy bears to see how much I can make her smile.

I laugh with her, feeling some of the pressure come off my shoulders. I always have a good time with Oakley. I can’t remember a time when I didn’t enjoy coming to see her, even if it was only to fuck her brains out.

Now, it feels like each meeting means more than just sex.

“Any word about the bikers?” she asks, her expression falling a bit as the conversation turns serious.

I hate that it’s always like this. One moment we’re laughing and making eyes at each other, and the next, the grey cloud of reality rolls in. Thankfully, I’m not bringing any bad news.

“They seem to be busy at the moment,” I reply, adjusting my posture. “I heard a few of Stone’s guys got arrested, so they’re probably not going to want to make a move until they have their full numbers again. I wouldn’t let that lull us into a false sense of security, but it’s nice to know that if they do make an appearance, there will be less of them. A shotgun could take out a few even before Maxim would have to step in.”

Her eyebrows move up an inch, and she leans in. “You expect me to shoot a bunch of guys on sight? You know how long I’d

go to jail for? I wanted to continue Angus's legacy, but not like that. Jesus, I'd be toast in prison."

I laugh, but it's really nothing funny. She's just so far removed from this lifestyle that she doesn't understand what we have to do. Killing someone isn't the issue. You won't go to jail for it out here as long as you have a proper alibi, no talkative witnesses, and a way to clean up the mess.

The real issue is just staying alive. Most of us don't leave the Bratva through the prison system.

We leave in a casket.

"Shoot first and let me take care of the rest. Anything else will almost guarantee that you don't make it out of here alive. I need you to understand that," I say.

She groans, pressing her hand against her forehead. "This is fucking crazy. I didn't sign up for this."

"Sorry," I reply, but there isn't much sympathy in my voice.

I warned her already, and the fact is that she did sign up for this. She could've walked away but she didn't. Ultimately, that's on her, even if I do my best to protect her from the dire forces she has exposed herself to.

She smiles through the obvious dread, adjusting the bear between us to fill in the awkward silence.

"You can still leave," I say softly.

"Stop saying that!" she shouts, causing me to jump in my seat. "You keep telling me that I can leave, but then you're coming in here and bringing me a teddy bear with my name on it. What do you expect me to do?"

"Hey, calm down," I reply, immediately regretting my choice of words.

Her eyes grow large. "Calm down?! How the fuck can I calm down, Savva? There's a biker gang that wants to tear me to pieces, and you're waltzing in here with teddy bears telling you how much you like me, but then telling me that I should leave. It's confusing, and I don't like it."

“I didn’t say that you *should* leave, only that you could,” I reply in a lame attempt to save myself through semantics. It’s a futile attempt.

“Could, should, would – whatever! It doesn’t change the fact that you’re over here seducing me every night, shooting people in the meantime, and then telling me that I’m in danger because of your recklessness. I can’t live like this, Savva. Please, tell me something that’s not going to make me want to slam my head in a door.”

The joy on her face has changed to the utmost distress, and I wish I could walk back everything I’ve said. I want to tell her that everything is okay, and that I’ll always be here for her, but I just can’t. That would be a lie, and even though I’m a terrible person, I won’t lie to her.

I care too much.

I shake my head, looking down at the table as my eyes blur. I need to be strong. I can’t react like this.

I take a deep breath and focus my attention on business. That’s what I was here for, anyway. All the gifts and niceties don’t cover up that the only reason I’m still showing up here is to collect money. Oakley doesn’t owe me her patience or affection, but she does owe me money.

I look at her, at the tears in her eyes, and something inside me breaks. I can’t go through with this. I can’t be as tough with her as I am with everyone else. She’s different.

“You know, Oakley, I want you to be here. That’s the honest truth, and I’m serious about it. I really like you,” I say, speaking close to a whisper so that she has to focus on my words. It’s a trick I use to get people’s attention and distract them from their feelings when they’re spiraling out of control.

She sniffs, and her perfect lips pouting in a way that makes me want to pull her across the table and kiss her.

Is it wrong to think she’s attractive when she’s crying?

“I’m going to make sure you’re safe. I promise. Nobody is going to hurt you, even if I have to stand watch day and night. I’m going to make sure you’re protected.”

She smiles through her tears. “You mean that?”

I nod. “I promise.”

“But you don’t have to be here all the time,” she says quickly, afraid to ask too much of me, not knowing I would give her the world. “I just need to know that you’re never too far.”

“Maybe you would prefer to sleep at my place,” I suggest, my heart leaping at the idea of waking up in bed with her every morning. It drives me crazy that I can’t have her more often.

“I’ll consider it,” she replies, tracing her fingertips across the tabletop. “But I need to know that you’re really serious about this.”

“This?”

“I mean us,” she says quickly. “Just that you’re not going to leave me for some other woman or anything like that.”

I laugh. “Oh, you want to be official, huh?”

She nods. “Don’t you?”

I wouldn’t tell her, but my feelings extend much further than being girlfriend and boyfriend. That sounds so juvenile, but she probably would freak out if I mentioned wanting her as my wife. I haven’t even had time to think about it, but that seems the obvious conclusion with the way I feel.

I offer up a lighthearted smile. “I would love to be your boyfriend, Oakley.”

Her eyes light up, and she jumps out of her chair, running around the table and throwing her arms around me with even more vigor than she did when I first arrived. She holds me tightly, humming into my chest and rocking back and forth, almost knocking the chair over.

I put my hand on her back and inhale deeply, taking in the intoxicating scent of her hair, the sweet floral aroma that makes me want to pull her on top of me and fall asleep that way in the middle of the bar.

“Thank you, Savva,” she says as she releases me.

“For what?” I ask.

“You just don’t know how much it means to me to hear those words. I don’t want to sound crazy, but I really like you. I just don’t want you to feel like I’m crazy, okay? I can be a little intense, but I haven’t lost my mind.”

“You’re not crazy. If anything, I’m the crazy one,” I reply, and I mean every word. What Bratva boss takes a regular girl and falls in love with her when he could just as easily have a dozen strippers rotating through his bedroom every night?

I guess that man is me.

I get up from the table, remembering the reason I came here but not wanting to spoil the relationship right as it begins. I can’t ask for money this time. I have to leave without it.

“Where are you going?” she asks, frowning deeply as I step away.

“I need to go home and grab a few of my things.”

“Why?”

“You don’t want me to stay the night?” I ask, looking down at her and playfully raising an eyebrow.

“Oh,” she says, narrowing her eyes and smiling up at me. “I guess I could allow that.”

“Great, so I’ll just—”

“But wait a second,” she blurts, grabbing my wrist before I can go. “I still have to give you the payment. It’s better if you take it now so that you don’t forget it.”

I shake my head slowly. “No, Oakley, I think we’re done with that.”

She pulls her head back in confusion, her small hand losing grip and falling away from my wrist. “What? Why?”

“What kind of a boyfriend charges his girlfriend money?” I ask.

“You do,” she replies with a laugh.

“Not anymore.”

“Seriously? Damn, if it was that easy, I would’ve asked you to date me sooner.”

“Always with the jokes,” I reply.

“Oh, you love them,” she says, punching my arm lightly.

I love more than her jokes. I love everything about her. I love the way that her eyes light up when she talks, the way that her hair flows past her shoulders, the sweet sound of her voice in the morning, and the way it croaks when she’s tired. I love the way she laughs, the way she holds me, and most of all, the way that she kisses me like she’s been in love with me since the moment we met.

Oakley

I take the bear into my office after watching Savva ride away on his motorcycle. He says he'll be back in a few hours, but when I'm alone, a few hours might as well be a lifetime. I don't know what I'm going to do here without him.

I put the bear on the bookshelf next to the picture of me as a child. Now there are two Oakleys on the bookshelf. I laugh a little to myself. I wish Savva was here to listen to my dumb jokes.

I sit down in my leather chair and twirl around aimlessly, waving my feet in the air when I'm no longer facing the desk, and tucking them back in when I come around again. I do this until I get bored.

I look at the clock. It's only been four minutes.

Ugh, this is going to take forever. It's almost as bad as having to drive to the pharmacy and back when I knew in the back of my mind that I was pregnant. All I needed then was confirmation, and now, I don't feel too bad about it. At least I know that there's a chance that Savva will stick around when I break the news to him.

But I can't do it just yet. He's shown commitment, but not on the level that I need to reveal my pregnancy to him. I still have time. As far as I'm concerned, neither of us know about the baby yet.

I look toward the shotgun in the corner of the room. I haven't moved it in a while, almost too scared to touch it. It's loaded, and even though I know it's stupid, I'm afraid that if I touch it, it will blow my head off.

But now that Savva has promised that he will protect me from the Triple Six Angels, I feel more empowered to protect myself. After all, it's not just about me anymore. I have a baby to care for, and the stakes have risen to unfathomable heights.

It's no longer acceptable to be afraid. I must be brave.

I get up from the chair and take the shotgun, holding it in my hands and feeling the weight of the deadly instrument. As much as I find it heinous and evil, I must admit that the power is alluring.

I point it at the door, imagining how big the spread would be from this distance. I suppose I could get a pretty solid blast from where I'm standing, blowing back anyone trying to come through.

But then what? Surely, they wouldn't just run for it. They'd all pull out guns and shoot back, right?

Then again, I don't think I have any other viable option. If someone were to come through in an attempt to capture me, their intentions would be that of pure evil. It wouldn't be the firm hand and harsh words of someone like Savva. It would be death.

I nearly pull the trigger when I hear a knock on the door.

"Fuck," I mutter, putting the gun down on the floor in front of me. "Who is it?"

"Kimberly."

Well, Kimberly, I almost blew your head off by accident. How do you feel about that?

I sigh and walk to the door, pulling it open and stepping outside so that she can't see the shotgun lying on the floor. She'd probably assume I was trying to kill myself.

"Hey, what's up?" I ask, smiling at her like I wasn't a twitch away from killing her.

"Um, I just wanted to know if you were doing alright. You've seemed a little distracted these past few days, especially when Savva has been over. I hope he's treating you right."

I nod, my eyes wide as though I'm pleading with her to believe me. "Oh, I'm totally fine. He's actually going to come back and, uh, keep me company."

She smirks. "Alright, so I guess you're not coming back to the bar tonight."

“Oh, I mean, I could probably come out there now. I was just in here collecting myself. Long night.”

“I feel you,” she replies. “Well, if you don’t feel up to it, that’s fine. I have you covered, and there aren’t that many people tonight. It’s kind of winding down.”

“No, no, I’ll be there,” I assure her. “Just give me a minute.”

“Cool,” she replies, turning and walking back to the bar.

I wonder for a moment if she somehow knows about the pregnancy. I haven’t told a soul, and as far as I know, nobody has gone rummaging through the mirror cabinet in the bathroom at the end of the hallway. Maybe women can just feel those kinds of things.

The real reason for her concern probably does have to do with me being off, especially since I found out that I was carrying Savva’s baby. It’s impossible to hide the shift in my mood, from the downswing every time I think about the danger, to the incredible euphoria I get when I think about spending the rest of my life with Savva.

I probably look like I’ve lost my mind.

I go back into the office, propping the shotgun back in the same place in the corner so that Savva doesn’t think I’ve been in here playing around with it. I know I shouldn’t care, but I don’t want to have to answer any question as to why it’s been moved. It’s fine if he doesn’t know.

I return to the bar as I wait for Savva, and serving the customers makes it easier to wait for him. He’ll be coming soon enough.

Savva

The bar is still open when I arrive, and Maxim is still posted at the door, nodding to me as I walk in. Nothing has gone awry in the few hours I've been gone, and Oakley is back at the bar, pouring beers and cutting limes.

Even though I don't live here like Oakley does, I feel a bit like I'm walking back into my own home. There's comfort in knowing that Oakley has been waiting for me. I've never had someone to come back to at the end of a long day.

I drop my stuff off in the office, and before I can come back out, Oakley is behind me, grabbing my ass and acting like I act toward her.

I laugh and turn around, flipping the script and taking control of her. She squeals in delight as I pick her up and toss her onto the couch, climbing on top of her and pressing my cock into her ass. "Let me make this clear, the only thing you're in charge of is the bar. You can leave the rest to me," I tease.

She looks over her shoulder at me, struggling underneath my weight. "So, you admit that you're not clever enough to run a place like this."

I roll my eyes, grabbing her head and pushing it into the cushion. "I'm smart enough to leave it up to you, that's all. I make my money elsewhere."

I get off of her, allowing her to breathe again. She immediately rolls over and hops off the couch, narrowing her eyes at me. "That's right, you do make your money elsewhere since you're not taking money from the bar anymore. Is that permanent, or just until you get bored of me?"

"I'll never get bored of you," I reply, feeling the meaning of my words fully in my soul.

She appears to be surprised. "What turned you into such a romantic?"

"Haven't I always been?"

She laughs. “No. I distinctly remember you calling me a slut on several occasions.”

I cringe because she’s right. My opinion of her has changed since then, but it’s hard to describe without sounding like a total wimp. I want her to know I care, but I don’t want her to think I’m weak.

“Well, I think you’re a very lovely and respectable slut, if that makes it any better,” I reply.

“Not in the least.”

“Well, then I suppose there’s no point in trying to be nice about it. I just love sluts, especially the kind with nice tits and a mouth that can drain a man in seconds.”

She raises her hand. “Oh, that’s me!”

I laugh, grabbing her and lifting her into the air, spinning her around until she’s giggling and screaming to be let down. I put her down gently, leaning in for a kiss and tasting joy on her lips.

Our kiss turns into touching, grinding, and finally, the unspoken need to fuck each other’s brains out. My pants are on the floor in an instant, and I tear her panties off and fling them across the room.

“Hey, those were my good ones,” she protests.

“I’ll buy you a hundred more pairs. The only thing I care about is cumming in your tight little pussy again. I’m not waiting,” I growl, and I feel the goosebumps on her thighs as I push her back onto the couch.

I want to be deep inside her, fucking her like a beast, but something else comes over me as I kneel down in front of her, and I want to taste her. I want to give her pleasure without allowing my own needs to take over.

“What are you doing?” she asks, covering her pussy as I lower my mouth to it.

“Eating your pussy,” I reply matter-of-factly.

“Um, that’s okay. I’m wet enough already,” she replies.

I smirk. “Oh, come on. I know you’re not that shy.”

“I’m not shy, I just don’t need it. I really want to feel you inside of me,” she says, smiling but refusing to take her hand away from her pussy. I feel like she’s worried about something, but I’m not going to dig into it. When a woman says she wants you to fuck her, you fuck her.

I shrug, climbing back up to my feet and grabbing her legs, pulling her toward me until her hips are level with mine. Her breasts fall toward her face at this angle, and her cheeks burn a beautiful shade of pink.

I love the way she looks when she’s horny and desperate. Just knowing that she’s going to be so wet for me makes my cock so hard it aches.

I enter her slowly, easing myself into her so that she’s clawing at me to quicken my movements. She wanted to get fucked, but I’m going to make love to her. I’ve never done it before, but I’m curious to try it. Something tells me it’ll be worth the slow grind.

“Oh, fuck,” she moans. “Fuck me, Savva. Fuck me hard.”

I continue moving slowly, torturing both of our bodies with the pleasure only this level of tension could create. “Just relax, baby. We’re going to take it nice and slow.”

She shudders, her abs tightening as I move even slower. “Fuck, I can’t take it anymore,” she says.

“I’m sure you can. Relax,” I tease moving my hips in a wave-like motion.

“Give. It. To. Me,” she snarls, clawing at my forearms so hard that she leaves red streaks down them.

I quicken my pace, moving at her desired speed and abandoning my attempts to make love to her. Maybe she’s not ready for that yet, still driven by the impulsive obsessive energy that overtook both of us when we met.

I would’ve thought things would change by now, and that her attitude would reflect my declaration of permanence, but that

doesn't seem to be the case. If anything, she's grown even more desperate for me since we made things official.

I lift her hips further, slamming into her and watching her pussy stretch to take my girth. It's amazing to me that something so tight and subtle is capable of accepting my cock. I'm not one to brag about size, but I'm not average.

I find her clit with two of my fingers, rubbing it in tight circles as I fuck her. She moans her approval, and I feel like cumming the moment I hear her sweet, agonized pleasure. I hold back, moving slower again to prevent myself from releasing too early.

But as she climaxes, I feel compelled to do the same, my balls jerking up as I unload inside of her. I tilt my head back, thrusting deep and filling her up.

I feel heaven for a few precious seconds.

Then, I collapse on top of her, allowing myself to sink fully into her softness. Her skin is so soft that I forget to tell Maxim that I'm not planning on leaving before I fall asleep.

Sometime in the night, we end up switching positions, and Oakley sleeps on top of me.

The next morning, I let Pasha and Greg know that I'm coming to breakfast before jumping into my clothes and smoothing my hair back with water from the sink. I don't look perfect, but it's good enough. Our meetings are never that formal.

Rushing out the door, I kiss Oakley goodbye. She asks me to stay, but I decline, promising her I won't be that long. The place we're meeting at isn't that far from the bar, so it won't take me long to come back if she needs me. She has my phone number if she needs anything.

And with that, I'm back on the open road, engine roaring as Smoke, Steel, & Whiskey disappears behind me on the horizon.

Oakley

My mom's call is a relief just as much as it is a burden. I have no clue what she's going to say to me after all this time, but at least she isn't ignoring me anymore. I figured one of us would break the silence eventually, and it had to be her.

I answer the phone as I make myself a cup of coffee. Savva may have rushed out this morning, but I'm not in any hurry.

"Hello?" I say, trying to sound confident when I'm teetering on the edge of panic, not knowing if she's called to yell at me or apologize.

"Hey, Oakley, I just wanted to call to make sure you were doing alright," my mom says, her voice soft and meek. Either this is a front, or she really does feel bad about our prior conflict. I'm betting on the latter.

"I'm alright," I say, stirring sugar into my coffee. "And what about you?"

"It's quiet here. I'm used to you being home," she replies.

"Well, I can always visit."

"You could always just come back," she says, immediately triggering my fight of flight response.

"Mom, you know I already made a decision to stay here and run the bar. It's not that much work, and the money is good. Isn't that what you wanted from me? To get a good job and get out of the house?" I ask, trying not to raise my voice too much.

"Okay, okay, don't get so snippy with me. You know I'm only trying to look out for you, and since you haven't called me in so long, I was getting worried."

I grit my teeth. "You know why I didn't call."

"Let's leave all that behind us, okay? You're still my daughter, and I still care about you. I imagine that you're not determined to push me away forever. I can come visit you, right?" she

says, sounding hopeful. I've never heard this tone from her, like she's terrified I'll curse her out and hang up, never to answer my phone when she calls again.

It's unsettling.

"You could visit," I say tentatively, "but I'm not sure how you're going to like it here. It's hotter and drier than Georgia, and the bar scene isn't for everyone."

"Oh, come now, I was married to your father at one point," she reminds me.

I had honestly forgotten. My mother and Angus seem like people cut from such a different cloth that there would be no way for me to reconcile what I know about their personalities enough to imagine that they could ever end up in the same room, much less get married.

But then I think of how Savva and I began, and it starts to make sense. Even if I don't like it, maybe I'm more like my mom than I initially thought.

"Why didn't you tell me more about Angus," I say, testing her again. Last time, she was totally unwilling to talk about him, but this time might be different.

"You never asked," she replies, but that's a lie.

I take my coffee to one of the tables and sit down, stirring it aggressively. "Okay, well, I'm asking now."

"What is it that you'd like to know?"

I'm stumped for a moment because I hadn't expected to get this far. "Um, I want to know what he was like."

"Difficult," she replies with a laugh. "He was always riding around on that damn Harley. He took me for a ride once or twice, but I was always afraid of dying on that thing. I guess I was right to be afraid."

"So, you knew about his death."

"They sent me a letter just like the one I assume they sent you," she replies. "I'm entitled to know such things just the same as you are."

“Yeah, but you tried to hide it from me.”

“I didn’t. You seem to know all about him already. There’s nothing to hide,” she replies, once again trying to paint herself like a little angel. I’m not going to allow it this time.

“No, you were lying about him constantly,” I say, doubling down. “And it doesn’t matter what I know about him now. I want to hear what you know, and I want it to be the truth. Otherwise, I don’t see any reason to continue this call.”

She gasps, and I take a sip of my coffee with a smug grin. I have her trapped now. The power is back in my hands.

“Oakley, you could be a little nicer about it than that. I’m your mother, after all,” she says, her voice small and desperate.

“And as my mother, I expect you to be honest with me. I’ve told you what I’m doing down here, now it’s your turn. I want to know about Angus. You can start by telling me why I never heard from him. Did you hide me from him?”

There’s a long pause, and for a moment, I think she’s hung up. Finally, she answers. “I wanted to make sure you weren’t exposed to that side of the world. He was a convict. That part was never made up. I was just trying to be a good mother and protect you from him.”

“You thought he would hurt me? From everything I’ve learned, he cared about me quite a bit, and you denied both of us the ability to communicate,” I reply, tears coming to my eyes.

It’s painful to think that I could’ve had a relationship with Angus had it not been for her. I’m not sure if I can forgive that.

“I did what I felt was right. I hope you can understand that,” she says, sounding like she’s about to cry herself.

I’m tempted to hang up, but I find the strength to continue. I want to know more.

“So, how did you do it? I know you changed my name, but was that all?”

“Changed names, moved across the country, and filed a restraining order against him on the basis of domestic abuse,” she replies, her voice turning cold and clinical as she admits her greatest sin.

My stomach drops. “Domestic abuse? Was that even true?”

“Does it matter?”

I knock my coffee onto the floor and jump to my feet, screaming into the phone. “Yes, it fucking matters! Jesus Christ, don’t you think framing someone for abuse is just a step too far? Couldn’t you have asked him not to talk to you? Wouldn’t that have been enough?”

“Watch your language,” she instinctively replies.

I hang up the phone, throwing it across the room so hard that the screen shatters. I let out a guttural scream and kick the coffee cup on the floor. It tumbles into the leg of another table and breaks into large fragments.

“Fuck you!” I shout, turning away and charging toward my phone. I pick it up, trying to turn it back on to no avail. It’s dead.

“Piece of shit,” I growl, throwing it across the room again. It feels good to let my anger out, but now I don’t have Savva’s contact information. He left me alone here, and the only way for me to call him was by using the number I have stored on his phone.

The phone in the office won’t do me any good.

I groan, stomping back behind the bar and making myself another cup of coffee. If anyone from the Triple Six Angels comes knocking, I’m going to the office, getting the shotgun, and shooting them on the spot.

Even then, I doubt it will quell the rage boiling inside of me.

I wish Savva would come back. I need him now more than ever, and he always leaves so suddenly. I was reluctant to accept his offer to stay with him last night, but it might be for the best. I’m too stressed here by myself.

I put my hand on my belly. I need to calm down. I don't know what this level of stress would do to a baby, but I doubt it's healthy. I'm sure Savva will be back soon, and I can forget about my mother for a bit and get lost in his comfortable charm.

Please, just don't take too long, Savva. I need you.

Savva

“It is what it is,” I say, reaching over the table for a roll. “And I don’t want to hear shit about it. The main thing I’m concerned about is Stone and his clowns rolling up one day and trying to use her to get to me.”

“I’m not judging you. I think everyone knew it was coming,” Greg says, and Pasha nods in agreement.

“Well, I just wanted to be clear about it since *some* of you seem to think it’s going to disrupt our operations,” I reply, shooting daggers from my eyes at Pasha.

“Hey, it’s not wrong to be concerned. We have to look after our little family here, okay? That’s part of the job.”

I scrape a thick slab of browned butter over my roll. “Sure.”

Greg straightens up in his seat, and I noticed he hasn’t touched his food yet. My intuition tells me that he has news.

“Speak up,” I say, waving my roll at him before taking a bite.

“So, I think you were right to be worried about the Triple Six Angels because I got word this morning that the police station that they were being held at burned to the ground last night.”

The roll slips from my hand and clatters onto my plate. “What the fuck?”

He nods solemnly. “Yeah, I hate to bring it up now, but it’s a pretty big deal.”

“Those ugly motherfuckers never learn,” Pasha says, shaking his head. “Don’t they know that the fucking FBI is going to come after them for that shit? Fuck, even *we* can’t do shit like that, and we’re the goddamn Bratva.”

“Right, which is why I’m skeptical,” I say, pointing at Greg. “Where did you get this information from?”

“Where *didn’t* I get the information from, you mean. It’s all over the news. I’m surprised you didn’t see it this morning before you got here.”

“Too busy at his girlfriend’s bar,” Pasha says with a snicker.

“Shut your fucking mouth,” I growl, picking up my knife and jabbing it at him. “You’re on thin ice as it is. Don’t test me.”

Pasha throws his hands up defensively, scooting his chair back. “Woah, I was only kidding. I know this is serious. Sorry.”

“Better be,” I grumble, putting my knife down before the waitress has a chance to see it.

I turn to Greg again. “Any other information?”

“The guys who were locked up probably escaped. I think the whole thing was about getting them out and sending a message. I’m sure they probably roasted some cops in the process.”

“Brutal,” Pasha says, but falls silent and tucks his head down when I look at him.

“Brutal indeed,” I mutter. “They’re playing with fire, literally and figuratively. That concerns me even more than the fact that I killed Stone’s pathetic excuse of a brother. They’re not going to be predictable if they’re willing to burn down a police station like that.”

“I suppose their next mission will be to come for you. Honestly, you’re not safe in a public place like this if they’re willing to go to those lengths to get revenge,” Greg says.

“Agreed, which is why I probably need to go back and make sure there’s no trouble at the bar. Oakley has my number, but you never know. I don’t have Maxim posted there right now because he went home to sleep.”

Greg nods. “You could have two people on rotate.”

“Sure, but I think I’d rather have her at my place. It’s safer there. I have a gate,” I reply.

Pasha laughs. “Boss, with all due respect, a gate isn’t going to keep those freaks out. I wouldn’t put it past them to shut down your entire neighborhood just to get to you. You don’t realize how much danger you’re in, and it’s starting to freak me out.”

“Then be freaked out. I don’t care,” I snap. “I have this situation under control. I’ve told you time and time again, but you’re not listening. The Triple Six Angels aren’t some kind of SWAT force with the power of the government on their side. They’re a little ragtag team of alcoholics on motorcycles, shaking down tourists on the side of the road for loose change. They’ve gotten reckless, but that just means they’ll be easier to take down. We might not even have to do anything. The Feds might get them before we do.”

Silence falls over the table, and Greg nods in agreement. Pasha, on the other hand, still doesn’t seem convinced. He has his arms crossed tight over his chest, his shirt wrinkled to an extreme from his defensive posture.

“Let’s hear it,” I say to him.

He shrugs. “You don’t want to hear it. You don’t think they’re capable of doing any real damage, but I don’t agree. They’ve already killed a bunch of people. They’re more than capable of taking you out if they find the opportunity.”

“Let them come. As I said before, I’m more than prepared to gun them all down if need be. I’ve dealt with their kind before, and they scatter like roaches if you hit the leader. My eyes will be on Stone, but my gun will be doing the talking,” I say, standing up. “But you do make a good point about the danger they pose to other, less capable, people, so if you’ll excuse me, I need to return to the bar and watch over Oakley.”

“Always about Oakley,” Pasha grumbles as I leave.

I pretend not to hear him because if I did, I would have half a mind to turn around and shoot him on the spot. I’m tired of the bullshit about Oakley and my role as the boss. Greg accepts it, Maxim accepts it, but Pasha? No, he has to be such a fucking hard-ass about things.

I know he’s capable of being my voice of reason, but he also gets on my goddamn nerves sometimes.

I hop on my Harley and leave the brunch club in a hurry, not wanting to waste precious time when Oakley is waiting for

me. I check my phone again out of pure paranoia, but nobody has called.

Everything is quiet, as it should be.

I stop at the only gas station on the way to Smoke, Steel, & Whiskey that isn't owned by the Triple Six Angels. Part of me is tempted to roll up to one of theirs and gun everyone inside down, but I resist the chaotic urge.

I'm not sloppy like they are. I have class.

As I'm filling up my bike, inserting the nozzle into the tank, it reminds me of pumping Oakley full of my cum out back behind the bar. I've never kissed a woman with cum on her face until then, and I'm still not sure what possessed me to do it. I'm a fool for that woman.

But thankfully, Pasha wasn't there to see it and make some stupid comment about it. I swear that if he crosses a line one more time, I'm cutting him loose. I don't care how valuable he is. He needs to learn his place.

The hose clicks as my tank refuses to take any more fuel, and I pull it out, holstering it and closing the tank. I consider going into the shop to grab another pack of cigarettes to curb my anger, but I can't stop thinking about what Oakley would say.

Disgusting habit. Pointless.

Fuck, but she's right. I shouldn't be destroying my body when it's the only thing that can protect her. She needs me, and if I'm coughing up my lungs every night, how am I going to be the strong leader she expects me to be?

I climb onto my bike and am just about to start it when I witness a group of Harleys race by on the open road. They're traveling much faster than anyone out here needs to be and moving in the same direction of the same place I'm heading.

Smoke, Steel, & Whiskey.

My logic tells me there's no way the Triple Six Angels are going to kick down Oakley's doors in the middle of the day when it's unlikely I'll be there with her, but my gut tells me not to take the risk.

I pull out of the gas station, spinning my tires and leaving thick black marks on the pavement as I launch out onto the main road. Every second I waste is another chance for Stone and his goons to take Oakley from me.

I'm already traveling at over a hundred miles per hour, but I increase my speed until the road is flying past beneath me so fast that the smallest mistake would send me sliding across the asphalt so far that by the time I stopped, my body would be grinded halfway through to my bones.

It's dangerous, but I fear for Oakley. She's the only person that could make me act this way, the only woman who can make me take risks like this to make sure she's safe. I'm certain I would give my life for her at this point, and it terrifies me.

I slow down just a bit to keep myself from becoming unstable. I can't see anyone ahead of me. It's possible that the biker group has turned off the road and gone somewhere else, but there aren't many places to go around here.

"Fuck," I yell into the wind, speeding up again. I'd rather feel like a fool than get there too late and find out that something horrible has happened to Oakley.

I'd never forgive myself.

Oakley

I'm in the office, picking through one of Angus's old books when I hear the hum of an engine outside.

Savva is back.

I skip out of the office, smiling at the prospect of seeing him again. I thought it would take him longer to get here, but I'm glad that he's early. That means I can spend more time with him before I get distracted by work.

The hum of the engine shuts off, but then there's another.

And another.

I stop skipping and slow down, listening to the engines cut off one by one. There's silence after, and I stop in the doorway of the bar, looking toward the front door.

Then, there's a heavy knock, like someone's trying to break the glass instead of getting my attention.

Shit!

I turn around, running back to the office in a panic. I don't have any way of knowing who that is, and I can't call Savva because I broke my goddamn phone.

Thanks, mom.

But it wasn't really her fault. My own anger and lack of self-control caused this, and now I reap what I've sown. It could just be Maxim coming early, but I wouldn't bet on it. That sounded like multiple people, and if it's the Triple Six Angels, I've been told to shoot first and ask questions later.

I grab the shotgun from the corner of the office, checking that it's loaded. It is, but there's no way for me to know that it's going to work until I actually pull the trigger. I've yet to shoot it, even though I've been meaning to give it a test run.

God, how could I have been this shortsighted. I knew this could happen, but I just didn't believe that it would. I'm just a

normal girl caught up in a business that's way over my head. I'm not supposed to be here. This isn't my life.

There's another knock on the door, even harder this time. I hear a man's voice outside, shouting something about being let in.

Yeah, not a fucking chance. I carry the shotgun down the hallway, putting my finger on the trigger and considering pulling it just to scare them off. Nobody has to die over this.

But what if it's the police? What if they've come to question me about my involvement with Savva? Surely, setting off a shotgun, even if it's not aimed at them, is only going to get me killed. I run the risk of putting myself into a needlessly dangerous situation by doing anything but standing here in silence.

Maybe they'll go away.

That hope evaporates like spit in the sun when glass shatters. They're breaking in!

"Don't come in here!" I warn, trying to make my voice sound deeper than it really is. Maybe they'll think I'm a man. Would that even help?

There's a moment of silence before I hear a gruff voice call out to me. "Come out here. We just want to talk to Savva."

Any hope that I once had that this wasn't the Triple Six Angels coming to collect is gone, and in its place, a thick ball of dread clogs my throat. I feel like I'm choking on it, unable to breathe as anxiety turns my waking world into a nightmare.

I open my mouth, but I can't say a word.

I back down the hallway, keeping the shotgun pointed at the door in case someone comes around it. I'm not even sure if I can pull the trigger, but I need to make them believe that I will.

"Come on out, or we're coming in," the voice shouts. I assume it's Stone speaking. He's the leader of the gang, and the one who has such a severe conflict with Savva.

I remain silent, backing down until I'm at the doorway to the office. It's then that more glass breaks, and I hear them coming in.

God, please help me. I'm so fucked.

I clench the shotgun like it's going to take charge and save me, but I know that only I can do that now. I have to commit to using it. I have to kill someone.

I consider running, jumping out the office window and sprinting down the road until my legs give out from underneath me and I collapse. I doubt I would make it very far, though. There's nothing out here but the occasional plant and a snake or two. I'd be spotted no matter how far from the bar I was, and Stone would ride up to me on his motorcycle and grab me.

So, there's no escape. This is my final standoff, and it's not looking good for me.

Now, my mother looks like she was right all along. If Angus's bar is what gets me killed, she'll have been proven right beyond a shadow of a doubt.

But I don't think she would gloat at my funeral.

Imagining her in tears is enough to pull me out of my stupor and close the door to the office, shouting through it the most severe warning I can think of. "If come any further I'm going to fucking kill you."

The deep, throaty sound of laughter makes my stomach sink so far that I nearly shit it out onto the floor. I'm not ready for this. The only way I can prove that I'm actually a threat to them is if I pull the trigger right now.

But just as I begin to squeeze my finger on the cold, metallic hook, glass shatters from behind me, and a hand covers my mouth. I drop the shotgun, throwing both elbows back into my attacker.

Too little, too late.

The door explodes open, men in jean jackets and leather pants streaming in like a parade of angry drunkards on a Friday

night. This time, however, they're not here for the beer.

They've come for me.

"Get off me!" I scream so loud that my voice cracks.

"Shut the fuck up, you skanky little bitch," Stone, the obvious leader of the group, snarls, grabbing me by the hair and pulling me toward him.

His stare is like poison, and his breath smells foul, like rotting meat left out for days. He pulls me so close to his face that I can feel the prickle of his beard on my skin. Then, he tosses me by my hair onto the desk.

"Close the door and lock it," he growls to his men. "I think we got some business to attend to."

The door is closed with a solid thud, the lock sliding into place as I try to get my bearings. The room is spinning around me, but I can see Stone clearly. He's leaning over me, smiling with his blackened teeth, and breathing heavily, like he caught me after a long chase.

The shotgun is still on the floor, but it's far beyond my reach, and I'm outnumbered eight to one. There's no way that I'll be able to defend myself now. I fucked up my only chance to get out of this unscathed.

Now, Stone will decide my fate.

"Listen, girly. We know who you are, and we know your involvement with Savva. Hell, we even knew your dumbass father Angus before he pissed us the fuck off. Point is, we know everything, and if you want to leave here with your life, I suggest you listen to me and you listen fucking closely."

I can barely move, but I manage to nod, which seems to be enough for him.

"First, you're going to tell us where Savva is, and don't play dumb. You don't want to piss me off today," he says, his eyes cutting into me like shards of glass.

I wouldn't sell out Savva, but I don't even know where he is if I wanted to tell Stone. I know he's not going to like hearing that, but I have nothing else to give him.

“I-I honestly don’t know,” I stammer. “He went out.”

“Where?!” Stone shouts, spit flying into my face.

“I don’t know!” My voice is trembling and I’m already in tears. “Please, just let me go. I’m not involved in all this.”

He chuckles, and his voice is so cold and emotionless that it feels like the room has suddenly been submerged in ice water. “You’re just as much a part of this as anyone else, girly. Now, tell me where Savva went, or I’m going to make you wish you could turn back time and blow your own brains out.”

He pulls a knife from his boot, showing me the sharpness of the blade in the light from the broken window. “You see this? I slit a cop’s throat with it just last night. I’m kind of curious what it would do to your sweet little guts. I’ve been needing a new liver after all the booze.” He laughs again, and the entire room erupts into laughter with him.

I take a sharp breath in, thinking how easy it would be for him to harm the baby, even if he didn’t succeed in killing me. I can’t let that happen. Even if I have to make up a story on the spot, I can’t allow him to stick that evil blade inside of me.

“Savva went to the store, the fresh food store. The one down the street,” I blurt, drawing on my memories of the time we spent together. It’s better than trying to fabricate a complete lie.

“Oh, is that so?” Stone asks, turning the knife to me and grinning. “What was he going there to buy?”

I know he’s testing me, but I already have an answer. “Lemons and limes for the bar. We’re low, and tonight is going to be busy.”

He narrows his eyes at me but appears to buy the story. “Well, we’ll just have to wait for him to come back, won’t we? But in the meantime, I think I’d like to let off some steam. It’s been a while since I’ve blown my load in a bitch as fuckable as you.”

I scramble back on the desk, but he grabs my legs, pulling me toward him and slicing my shin my accident with the knife in his hand. Blood oozes onto his hand, and he lets me go, wiping it on the front of his jacket.

I jump off the desk, going for the broken window, but someone else grabs me before I can get there, flinging me toward Stone again.

“Don’t make it harder than it has to be, or I’m going to tear you up so bad you’ll be pissing blood for weeks,” he growls, grabbing my hair and holding me by it as he swipes his blade across my shirt.

It cuts through both the fabric and my skin, blood gushing out as I scream from the white-hot pain. I struggle against him, realizing now that I probably won’t survive whatever he’s about to do to me. If this is the way it starts, I can only imagine how brutally it will end.

And I’m not going down without a fight.

I squirm in his grip, lurching up and sinking my teeth into his wrist. I bite down so hard that the flavor of sweat and dirt is replaced with the warm metallic taste of blood. He howls as he shakes me loose, swiping his knife at me again and just barely missing as I let go and fall back.

“I’m going to fucking kill you, bitch!”

I scramble back, running toward the window again but getting caught in the same way as before. I’m tossed over to Stone again, and he grabs my mouth so hard that my cheeks touch inside my mouth, shaking me and screaming obscenities in my face.

I can’t even make sense of his words anymore. The blood loss is making everything gray and fuzzy.

My consciousness rushes back to me as Stone presses his blade against my neck, my body releasing a flood of adrenaline, one last fighting effort that won’t be enough. Nothing can stop him from slitting my throat and killing me.

Nothing, except for Savva.

“No!” Savva’s voice calls out, cracking with anguish.

Savva

I'm too late. Oakley's pale body is drenched in crimson, her eyes half-closed as Stone pulls her small body against his large torso and presses his blade against her delicate neck. I can't save her from harm, but I also won't let her die like this.

Stone's gang members grab me immediately, their hands digging into my biceps so hard that my eyes water. They hold me in place in the doorway as Stone's grimace turns into a crooked smile.

He looks down at Oakley, then up at me. "Oh, you thought you could be the hero today, didn't you? You really believed that by running in here by yourself, you could somehow stop me from slitting your stupid little bitch's neck?"

"Just... Just stop. We can talk about this," I gasp, feeling like the air has been sucked from the room.

"After what you did to my brother? I don't fucking think so. You owe blood, motherfucker, and I'm here to collect it," Stone growls.

I shake my head. "You want me. I killed your brother, not her. She had nothing to do with this."

He looks down at Oakley again. She looks terrified, her eyes so wide they're threatening to fall out of her head. She's pale as a ghost, her expression begging me to do something, *anything*, to save her.

My heart breaks as I realize how badly I've failed her. If she doesn't make it out of this alive, there's no point in me going on. I would gladly kneel before Stone and wait to be executed just so that I could join her in the afterlife.

But even after making the ultimate sacrifice, I wouldn't deserve her.

Not after what I've done.

I take a shaky breath, trying to collect my thoughts enough to continue reasoning with Stone. Actions aren't going to convince him to set her free. I can't overpower his entire gang. Maybe if I had been here already when they arrived, but not now. The opportunity for brute force has already passed.

"You should kill me," I say, looking away from Oakley so that I don't have to see the tortured agony in her eyes anymore. "Just take me and leave her alone."

"I could kill both of you," he says with a smirk, clearly enjoying the mental torment he's causing me more than the actual kill. Oakley means nothing to him, and he'll get nothing from ending her life.

Me, on the other hand...

"You're not angry that I killed your brother? I barely even thought about it," I say, switching my tone in a last-ditch effort to turn his calculated thoughts into chaos. It's risky, but I have no other option.

"Bring that stupid motherfucker to me!" Stone shrieks at his men, loosening his grip on Oakley in anticipation of receiving me in her place.

Oakley's eyes meet mine, and we both know what we have to do. The moment that they try to adjust their grip on my arms, I jerk my body so hard that my stomach hurts, falling away from them and reaching for the gun tucked deep in my waistband.

Oakley falls to the ground, taking cover with her hands over her head as I shoot without aiming. The room explodes into pandemonium, Stone's gang tripping over each other as some of them reach for weapons while others rush toward the exit.

I empty my entire 16-round magazine in Stone's direction in under two seconds, switching to the smaller gun in my boot as I rush him. He's stunned by my action, unable to do anything but let out a deep grunt as I slam into him, pressing the gun into his chest and pulling the trigger.

We fall against the desk together, rolling across the floor as the remainder of Stone's men flee instead of fighting. Even with

guns, they won't fight a man who just killed their leader. They're nothing without Stone.

Oakley rolls toward her shotgun, grabbing it and aiming at the door. She pulls the trigger, missing the door entirely and blowing a cluster of holes in the wall beside it. Someone screams, and I can hear them hit the floor on the other side.

Maybe she didn't miss after all.

I jump up off Stone, who has become a dead weight on the floor. It'll be difficult to move him without help, but I need to tend to Oakley now. I can't allow her to bleed out after we've managed to secure the area. We're so close to getting out of this alive.

"Fuck, how bad is it?" I ask, rushing toward her and looking over her bloody shirt.

"I don't know," she replies, dropping the shotgun. She's trembling hard as she pushes her fingers through the slashes in the fabric. "He cut me, but he didn't stab me."

I let out a deep sigh. Cuts can be deadly too, and need to be stitched up to heal properly, but nothing is worse than a stab wound. If Stone had stabbed her, he could've collapsed her lung or sliced through another essential organ, causing her to bleed internally.

But despite the blood, the damage appears minimal.

"We need to get you cleaned up," I say, pulling her hands away from her shirt. "Try not to touch it. You could get the wound infected."

"Right," she says, forcing her hands to her sides. She's clearly in shock, but I'd rather that than for her to be dead.

I hear motorcycles starting up in the parking lot, so I move to the door to check that they've all left. I don't need anyone popping out when we have our guard down and finishing us off.

The only person in the hallway is the man Oakley shot, lying on the floor with only half a face left. I kick his head to the

side, trying to hide it from Oakley as she creeps out from behind me.

“Everything is fine,” I say as the sound of motorcycles disappear into the distance outside. “I called Greg, Pasha, and Maxim when I arrived. They’ll be here to help clean things up, but it might take an hour or so. They’re not close.”

She nods, staring at the body on the floor.

“Okay, come on,” I say, pulling her away from the body and down to the bathroom at the end of the hallway. Nobody uses it, but it might have what we need to clean her up.

“Wait!” she exclaims, stopping suddenly as I pull the door open.

“What?” I spin around and sweep the hallway with my gun again.

“No, it’s just that there isn’t anything here. I think I have bandages in the other bathroom in the office,” she blurts.

“Oh, okay,” I say, a bit confused by the alarm in her voice.

I write it off as stress as we walk back to the office. Her mind is probably racing just as fast as mine is, but I doubt she’s thinking about the same thing. She’s probably imagining that we’re still in danger, but I’m thinking about how badly I failed her. Even if she forgives me, I’m not sure that I can forgive myself.

I promised to protect her.

And I failed.

Oakley seems unbothered by any of this, focused solely on her mission to bandage herself up. I help her take off her shirt, and she steps into the small shower beside the toilet to rinse the blood of her body.

“Careful with your chest,” I say as she turns the water on. “We can clean that off separately.”

She nods, and I watch her in silence as she rinses the rest of her body, color returning to her cheeks from the hot water. She

takes longer than she needs to, soaking in the warmth as her wounds clot.

I sit on the toilet, putting my head in my hands and pulling my hair. I was too confident, and this is what happened. I need to be more careful. I can't even let Oakley live at the bar anymore. I need to have her with me at all times.

"Are you okay?" she asks, thinking selflessly as she steps out of the shower and carefully towels herself off.

"I should be asking you that," I reply, lifting my head. "I was just... I was scared I was going to lose you. I feel like an idiot of ever letting you out of my sight."

She smiles, tilting her head to the side. "Hey, it's okay. Don't blame yourself. I was the one who continued running the bar despite all your warnings, and even so, neither of us are dead. We survived."

"Yes, we survived." I stand up, grabbing the bandages we found in the cabinet. "But we need to get you wrapped up. I know the cuts aren't as deep as we thought, but you still need to keep them covered."

She lifts her arms, wincing a bit at the pain but smiling through it. "Wrap me up!"

I chuckle, but I feel guilty about getting any joy out of this at all. Oakley is so pure and sweet, so well-meaning and selfless. I've been nothing but brutal and selfish – the complete opposite of her.

She's an angel, and I'm a demon.

Yet, I can't picture a world in which I don't have her, not as my captive or as my submissive servant, but as my equal.

My partner.

I wrap her wounds carefully, trying to cause the least amount of pain even though she pretends it doesn't hurt at all. I know she's suffering, both mentally and physically.

I take her hand and help her out of the bathroom once we're finished, allowing her to dress herself as I double check the

parking lot. Only two motorcycles are left there, belonging to Stone and one of the Triple Six Angels that Oakley shot.

I'm proud of her for that, but she probably doesn't want to be congratulated for taking a life. I have to keep in mind that she's not part of the Bratva, and all this is new to her.

I'm not even sure she's going to want to stay after what has transpired, but that's a talk for another day. Right now, all I want to do is get her to safety.

"Smoke, Steel, & Whiskey is closed for tonight," I say, adjusting the sign out front. "My guys will be here soon to clean up the mess and make sure nobody comes wandering back in, but I need to take you somewhere safer."

Oakley raises her eyebrows. "I'm fine to run the bar tonight."

I laugh. "No way in hell I'm letting you do that. We don't know if those fuckers are going to come back."

"Not without Stone," she says.

"They're unpredictable. That's the problem. We can't wait here and find out, so I'm taking you to my house and you'll be staying there from now on."

She squints her eyes at me and the sides of her mouth curl up. "Do I get a key?"

I shrug. "If you want one."

She rushes toward me and pulls me into a hug, pressing her face into my sweaty shirt, causing me to stumble back. "Woah, don't hurt yourself," I say.

She laughs, looking up at me and propping her chin up on my chest. "Nothing can hurt me when I have my protector with me."

"Me?" I ask, surprised she would even consider me good protection after what happened.

She nods. "You saved my life."

I don't feel like much of a savior, but I suppose it's true that I prevented her from getting killed. I wouldn't have had to if I

didn't put her in danger in the first place, though, so I'm not sure I feel too great about it.

But I won't press the topic too hard. If she wants to believe I'm her hero, who am I to deny her that belief? It certainly doesn't hurt my chances of convincing her to stay.

I smile down at Oakley feeling the warmth from her body fill me with hope. "Let's get going, shall we?"

"Wait a second, I have to get something from the office first," she says, pulling away.

"You sure you want to go in there?" I ask, thinking how Stone's blood has probably soaked into a wide spread of carpet by now.

"I need my bear. You can come." She takes my hand, leading me down the hall, over the body with half a face, and into the office.

She lets go of my hands as we step inside, running up to the bookshelf and taking down the teddy bear I gave her. She hugs it, rocking back and forth like it's a real, living thing.

She's adorable.

But my smile of appreciation turns into a frown as she comes back toward me. I look past her at the wall near the bookshelf, noticing something there I had never seen before.

"What's wrong?" she asks, looking over her shoulder.

"The wall," I reply, stepping around her. "There's something there."

Oakley

I have no clue what Savva is talking about until I turn around and see it myself. In the chaos, we both missed it, but now that the room has settled again, it's obvious that there's something wrong with the wall where the bookshelf is.

It's... broken.

Savva puts his hand on the flimsy plywood, pushing it until it cracks off and falls into a room that was previously hidden from view. The wall was hollow, and someone must've run into it in the mad scramble to escape, revealing a secret room.

"Angus, what were you up to?" Savva mutters, pulling out his phone and using the flashlight feature to illuminate the hidden space.

I stand behind him, afraid that like in the movies, the place might be boobytrapped. My fingers find the edges of his shirt, and I walk with him into the secret room. Perhaps it's just a relic of a renovation, but something tells me that Angus wouldn't bother putting a wall here unless he was using it to hide something.

"Interesting," Savva mumbles, and I hear the scratch of him rubbing the stubble on his chin.

"What's interesting?" I ask, finally daring to look around him at what's in the room.

I gasp when I see the safe the size of a loveseat sitting in the middle of floor. There's nothing else in here. It's just us and a huge safe.

"What do you think is inside?" I ask, jumping out and placing my hand on the cold steel box.

"Probably valuables," Savva replies. "Angus never kept his money in the bank. I figured he spent most of it on the bar payments and motorcycles, but it's entirely possible he was collecting cash in this safe. If it's hidden like this, maybe there's something good inside."

My heart slams in my chest. This feels like the universe apologizing to me for putting me through so much shit. I passed the test, and this is my reward.

Well, one of my rewards. I still have Savva.

And the baby. He's going to need to know about that eventually, but I want to see what's inside the safe first.

"I'm sure it's locked," I say, squatting down in front of it while Savva holds the light over it. I pull on the handle, and sure enough, it doesn't budge. There's a dial on the front, but I have no clue what the code could be.

I sigh. "Unless Angus left the code somewhere obvious, we're probably going to have to pry this thing open." I look up at Savva. "You think it's something obvious?"

He shrugs. "Try some birthdays, but I think we're going to have to have Greg come down with the van and help us take it back to my house. I have some equipment there that might be able to break it open without destroying the contents."

"That's a good idea," I say, spinning the lock in few directions as though I know how to crack the code just by listening to the clicks. A few tries reveal nothing, and I give up quickly. It's better to break it open at Savva's house.

So, as much as I'm excited about getting the safe open, I step back from it and return to the front of the bar, waiting there with Savva until his men arrive.

When they get here, Savva orders them to carry the safe to the van Greg brought first, before anything else. Once loaded up, he puts me in the passenger seat and has a short talk with Pasha before coming back to the van.

Savva starts the van and pats my leg. "It's a couple hours to my house. Maybe you want to take a nap or something."

"Are you kidding me? I'm probably not going to be able to sleep for a week," I reply with wide eyes. "You're going to have to deal with me for the entire ride."

He chuckles, shifting into drive and pulling out onto the road. "I don't mind."

I lean back in my seat, holding the bear he bought me and thinking for a moment. “What were you talking to Pasha about?” I ask.

He glances at me, then pulls his fingers through his thick hair. “Um, just something I wanted to tell him.”

“Like?”

“I was apologizing,” he says with a nervous laugh. “Just because he was really insistent that the Triple Six Angels posed a severe threat, and I wasn’t really buying it. I mean, I guess we had it covered in the end, but it was a close one. I should’ve taken him more seriously.”

“Listen to Pasha next time, idiot,” I say, pinching his thigh.

“Hey, I’m the boss. I can’t let other people take over. I have to be the one making all the important decisions, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to be right a hundred percent of the time. The best a man can hope for is ninety.”

“Ninety sounds like it’ll eventually get us killed,” I reply with righteous skepticism.

“No, I don’t think so,” he says, but I hear the doubt in his words. After almost losing me to Stone’s wrath, he’s probably rethinking a lot about how he’s been behaving.

“Well, you know best, right?” I say with a teasing tone.

He groans. “I just want to do the right thing. You’re making me want a goddamn cigarette, and I haven’t smoked in... well, in like a day.”

I laugh. “No cigarettes. I’ll get off your case for now, but you need to take care of yourself. That’s all I’m going to say. It’s important for our future together.”

Our future. It sounds so good when I say it.

He nods, seeming to take my words to heart.

“Anyway, I’m glad you resolved things with Pasha. It’s really nice of them to come and clean the place up while we get to go home and crack open a safe,” I say, trying not to come down

too hard on Savva too much after what we've been through. He deserves praise for acting so heroically.

"They're required to help me. It's in their contract."

"I figured, but still."

"Still, yes, they're reliable. All of them are reliable. We've been together for many years, and not once did I doubt they could handle this lifestyle. It's not easy. I'm sure you realize that now."

"Yes," I reply with confidence. "I know that *very* well."

"But you still want to stick around," he says, sounding hopeful.

"Of course. I really care about you, Savva. I know you're a little rough around the edges, and we may have gotten off to a bad start, but that doesn't change how I feel. I feel like I've gotten to know the real you, not that hard shell you show for everyone so they think you're a tough guy."

"Hey, I *am* a tough guy," he replies, feigning offense.

"Sure," I say, patting his leg. "But to me, you're also a big softie. Just accept it."

"Just don't say that in front of any of my men. They'll never let me live it down."

I smile at him, squeezing my bear again. "It's our little secret, Savva. I won't tell a soul."

We spend the rest of the drive to his house telling each other stories about our childhoods. His are considerably darker than mine, but we have some good laughs between us. It feels good to know each other on a deeper level, not just through sex and physical intimacy, but through our thoughts and memories.

We arrive at Savva's house as the sun is just beginning to go down, a golden haze falling over us as we pull through his iron gate onto his property. I'm surprised by how large it is, and maybe even a bit embarrassed when my first thought is how great it would be for a small child to run around on.

I don't even know if he wants kids. I never asked.

“I’m sure some kid would love to run around here. That tree over there would be perfect for a tire swing,” I say, trying to steer the conversation to the topic.

He chuckles, placing his hand on my belly and rubbing it gently. “Getting baby fever already?”

My adrenaline spikes much higher than it did when I was attacked by Stone and his biker gang, my heart slamming in my chest so hard that I fear he will be able to hear it. With his hand on my belly, I feel like he might even be able to tell there’s a baby in there, though I know it’s impossible. Even I can’t feel it yet.

I squirm in my seat, looking out the window so I don’t have to meet Savva’s playful gaze. “You never know what could happen. I don’t know if you bought this house so that you could run around in the yard yourself, or...”

“I think any man of value ends up wanting to raise children. That’s the biggest achievement, in my opinion,” he replies, and my heart swells with joy at his words.

“Really? Wow, I kind of assumed you were too serious about work for something like that.”

“Well, I couldn’t do it on my own,” he says, squeezing my thigh.

I would get pregnant from his words right now if it wasn’t for the baby I’m already carrying. I can’t believe he’s open to the idea. It takes a huge weight off my shoulders, even though I still have to tell him that the child will be coming a little sooner than he thinks.

Savva pulls up to the house, a large brick structure with wide archways and vines crawling up the sides. It’s a modern masterpiece, a beautifully crafted home that instantly makes me feel safe, like the outside world doesn’t exist.

As I step out of the van, I smell the rich, earthy scent of fertile soil, and notice a fresh arrangement of flowers lining either side of the driveway. They look as though they were planted just today.

“These are new?” I ask as Savva walks around to my side of the van.

“Oh, yes. The gardener must’ve put them in when I was away. He’s here pretty often, so don’t get scared if you see him running around with a hose in the morning or anything. He treats this property like it’s his own.” Savva laughs. “If I died, he’d probably just start living here.”

“Don’t say that.”

“What?”

“About dying. You’re not going to die,” I reply, my tone as stern as it can be when he’s looking down at me with those soft copper eyes.

“Not before I’m ready,” he says with a smile. “I have kids to make first, right?”

I feel as though I’m melting into the pavement as he continues to smile at me. Maybe he’s just trying to keep me around after traumatizing me, but I doubt that’s his only intention. He doesn’t say things he doesn’t mean. I’ve learned that about him.

“Come,” he says, waving at me to follow him. “I’ll show you the house.”

Oakley

The inside of Savva's house is even more impressive than the outside. Black and gold accents make the brick look rich and welcoming, and long Persian rugs line the hallway, creating an aged appearance without feeling worn out. I long to stretch out across the floor like a cat, catching the light summer rays that slant through the skylight in the main hallway.

"This is stunning," I say, spinning around like a girl who just discovered a garden full of fairies. "So amazing."

"I'm glad you like it. You'll be living here from now on. The bar is too dangerous," Savva replies, his voice calm and deep like a well of cold, still water.

I accept the offer disguised as a demand without hesitation. To some, it may look like I'm rushing into this, but everything about it feels so right. It was like I was meant to be living here with Savva all along.

I suppose fate always had greater plans for me than an office job in Georgia.

"The bedroom is this way, upstairs," Savva says, motioning to the staircase.

I follow him up, my anticipation climbing as we approach the master bedroom. I feel like I've gained access to some forbidden, sacred place, even more valuable than the secret room we discovered in Angus's office.

When Savva opens the door, I rush past him and dive into his bed, unable to stop myself from bathing in the sheets that he sleeps in every night. The smell of his body, the richness of his skin, and the deep musk of his masculinity fill my nose, and I let out a long, satisfied sigh. He couldn't pull me out of this bed for anything right now. It feels so good.

"I thought you said you weren't going to sleep for a week," he says, laughter appearing in the cracks of his words.

“I changed my mind,” I reply, sinking deeper into his bed and closing my eyes. “This is heaven.”

“Well, we still have to crack that safe open, unless you want to do it tomorrow.”

“I’m in no hurry,” I say, thinking how glorious it would be to fall asleep right here, right now. I’ve already bathed, and my body is exhausted from the events of today.

I feel the weight of Savva’s body beside me, acting like a gravitational force and causing me to slide toward him on his silk sheets. He takes me in his arms, holding me gently for fear of agitating my wounds.

But I barely feel the cuts that Stone put across my chest. The love that radiates from Savva overpowers the pain, and I finally know that I can trust him with our child. I will tell him tomorrow about the baby, but for now, we will sleep.



WE BOTH WAKE up early the next day without need for an alarm, blinking in the pale sunlight that streams through the window. I roll over, wincing at the soreness that’s prevailed through my body overnight. It’s not just the cuts, but also my muscles that ache with the memories of yesterday.

Savva springs off the bed, ready to take on the day, while I sit up slowly, unable to do much of anything until I’ve been awake for at least an hour. I can’t even drink coffee anymore, now that I’m pregnant. I guess tea will do.

“How are you feeling?” Savva asks, looking me over as though I just crawled out of a smoldering wreckage.

I laugh. “I’m fine, just really sore.”

“I can give you some pain medication. I keep oxycodone here for emergencies.”

“Oh no, nothing like that,” I reply, quick to dismiss him. “That’s a bit too strong for me. Maybe just an ibuprofen.”

He nods, turning to the bathroom. “If you need anything else, just let me know. We’ll probably want to swap those bandages after breakfast.”

“Sure,” I reply, looking around the room and really taking it all in for the first time. I was too eager to sleep when I arrived, but now that I feel rested enough, I’d like to have a look around. You can tell a lot about a person by their home.

While Savva is in the bathroom, I’m examining every corner of his bedroom, taking note of how tidy everything is. Surely, a man as busy as he is doesn’t have time to clean. Does he have a maid?

A prickle of jealousy irritates the back of my neck, and I rub it away. I can’t get crazy just because I’m having his baby. Savva has shown no signs that he would ever act unfaithfully. For a criminal, he’s about as rigid and serious about his values as they come.

There are many books on his shelf, and all of them look as though they’ve been read at least once over. That’s another good sign. He’s intelligent and values the power of his mind, something I’ve always found attractive in a man. The only issue that usually comes with a great mind is a lacking personality and appearance, but Savva has all his bases covered.

Savva returns from the bathroom with a glass of water and two blue gel capsules, handing them to me. “Take these and we’ll go down for some breakfast, unless you want to crack open the safe first.”

I throw the pills back and chase them with the entire glass of water. “Safe.”

He chuckles. “Okay, let’s go. I just need to put my shoes on and grab my equipment out of the garage. I have a power saw that can grind through a tank. I’m pretty sure it will get through Angus’s safe.”

“You know, part of me expected you to try to blow it up,” I reply, following him as he leaves the room and heads downstairs.

“I’m not in the business of blowing things up anymore.”

“Anymore?”

We arrive on the ground floor, and he slips into a pair of casual shoes, pointing to some slippers by the door. “You can wear those out. I don’t want the sparks to burn your feet.”

I put on the comically oversized slippers and follow him outside. It’s cooler this early in the morning than it usually is when I wake up. I’m so used to going to sleep at 5 AM that I never get the opportunity to wake up before noon.

The morning dew tickles my ankles as I walk through the grass, looking around at the large expanse of greenery that makes up Savva’s front yard. It’s even bigger than it looked yesterday coming in.

I can picture myself here a year from now, watching our baby take their first steps through wet grass, fully protected from the outside world by the towering brick walls built around the property. Here, a child could grow and learn, developing without judgment into a capable adult.

I feel a sense of pride at the thought, and I smile, placing my hand on my belly.

“Thinking about kids again, huh?” Savva says, grinning as he carries a large saw with an orange cable dragging behind it.

“No,” I blurt, throwing my hand down to my side. “Just thinking about food.”

He laughs. “We can have breakfast first, if you want.”

“No, no. I want to see what’s in the safe,” I reply, faking an excited smile. In truth, I can’t think about anything else aside from how I’m going to break the news that I’m pregnant. The safe is insignificant beside that announcement.

However, I’m still curious to see what’s inside.

Savva puts the saw down and retrieves the safe from the van, kicking it out and pushing it along the pavement until it’s sitting in the grass in front of me. “It can’t be too difficult to cut open. I think most people would go for the door, but it’s

probably best to work from the top down. I'm sure the door is thicker than the body."

I hold my hands up in surrender and step back. "You're the boss."

He picks up the saw, pulling a pair of protective clear plastic glasses from his back pocket and putting them on. I laugh at little because he looks like he works at a hardware store. In another life, he'd be showing people where they can find the right kind of screws for their fixtures.

I have to cover my ears when he starts it up, metal screaming in a grating, high-pitched tone. He cuts into the top of the safe, the metal flying off in thin fragments as he shreds through it.

I would've thought a safe would be harder to tear into, but in under a minute, Savva has already succeeded in cutting a square hole in the top. The metal falls into the safe with a muffled thud, and he steps back.

"What's inside?" I ask, standing on my toes and trying to get a look in from my position nearly two yards away.

"Come look," he says. "I want you to see it first, since it's yours."

Nervous, I walk slowly up to the safe, stepping over the orange power cable to Savva's saw as though it's a poisonous snake. I almost don't want to look inside the safe once I arrive, afraid that I will see something I wasn't meant to see about my father.

My mental image of him is pure. I'd like for it to remain that way.

But curiosity overrides my fear, and I look through the top of the safe at what's inside.

At first, it's difficult to see anything. The sun isn't high to illuminate the interior, so I have to wait for my eyes to adjust to make out the contents.

When they do, I gasp.

"What is it?" Savva asks, putting his saw down in the grass.

"What do you see?"

I take a deep breath. “It’s... cash. Lots of fucking cash.”

Savva pumps his fist. “I was right!”

I laugh quietly through my nose at his reaction. “Yeah, you were right. I wonder how much it is, though. It looks like there’s a lot in there, all stacked up in bundles of hundred-dollar bills. I think there could be a lot.”

He leans in, squinting as he looks into the safe from above. “Oh, yeah, we’re going to have to get all that out and count it.”

“I’ll make us breakfast,” I say with a smile. “You can get to work on finding a way to get all that out of there.”

“Fair enough,” he replies, reaching over and pinching my ass. “But don’t forget that I like my eggs runny.”

“How runny?” I ask, raising a suggestive eyebrow.

“Almost raw.”

Savva

Sometimes, your dreams come true in just the way you want them to. More often, though, they come true in a way that you would never expect, and that's what happening here. I have Oakley in my kitchen, cooking breakfast while I shovel cash from a safe in my front yard.

I'm blessed, but in the weirdest way.

I pile the cash on the sidewalk, estimating its value as I stack it. None of the bundles of money are labeled like they would if they came from the bank, but I know that Angus didn't trust banks. I just didn't realize he had this much money piled away. It almost seems like he could've paid off the bar in cash at some point in the near future if he hadn't died.

Or been killed. More likely, it's the Triple Six Angels that were responsible for his death, so killing Stone is like killing two birds with one... Stone. I managed to save Oakley, prevent the Triple Six Angels from continuing to terrorize our business prospects, and make sure that Angus could rest easy now that his killer has been brought to violent justice.

It's fitting, and I feel good about what happened, despite the wounds and despite the stress that Oakley had to endure. She seems to be handling it well, and I'll make sure she knows that she can be honest with me about her feelings from now on.

We're in this together.

As I finish taking the money out of the safe, Oakley comes outside with a cup of coffee and a plate of eggs and toast. She looks like an angel in the morning sun, her skin radiating pure joy as she hands me my food.

"What about you?" I ask.

"My tea is inside," she replies, nodding to the door. "And I actually just ate. I couldn't wait," she says, laughing a bit. "I was really hungry. I barely ate anything yesterday."

“I’m starving too,” I say, immediately shoveling the food into my mouth the way that I know she doesn’t like. She can stop me from smoking, but she can’t stop me from eating like a pig. It’s how I grew up.

Still, she gives me a look of disapproval. “Don’t choke on that, baby.”

“Baby?” I ask, realizing that it’s the first time she’s ever used a term of endearment while addressing me. I could get used to this.

I take a sip of my coffee and smile. It’s just the way I like it. She always gets it right.

She looks toward the pile of money on the pavement, tilting her head to the side. I can see her trying to calculate the amount in her head, but I have far more experience handling cash than she does. I already know how much it is.

“What’s your guess?” I ask, curious as to what she’ll say.

“Must be at least... a few thousand.”

I give her a look. “Really? Obviously, it’s more than that.”

“I didn’t say how many thousand,” she replies defensively, frowning and crossing her arms. “It could be a million thousand.”

Her frown turns into a cheeky smile, and I smile back at her.

“Okay, I’ll take a gander. I figure there’s at least two-hundred-thousand dollars there,” I say, recounting the money in my head. “Yeah, about that much. Perhaps a bit more.”

Her jaw drops open, and she stares at the pile of money. “Wait, seriously? That’s *way* more than I thought it would be.”

“All hundreds, as far as I can tell, unless he’s hiding a bunch of ones somewhere there, but I didn’t see any. I’d bet he saved every hundred he got from the bar and put it in the safe. I didn’t realize he was so much of a saver, but come to think of it, I remember getting all my payments from him in twenties.”

Oakley nods, the muscles in her face relaxing as she grows serious. She looks up at me. “I guess it’s yours, then.”

“What?” I ask, scratching my head. “I don’t get it.”

“The money. It’s yours. I owe you that much for the bar, so this is me paying you off. You’re welcome, by the way.”

“Oakley, I…” Guilt washes over me, drenching my soul in the type of sorrow a man only feels when he knows that what he’s done is wrong. I can’t keep taking money from Oakley. I can’t even ask her to pay back what Angus owed. It just feels so wrong.

I put my plate down on the grass, kneeling down and taking her hands in mine. “I want you to know that any debt you owe is eclipsed by the feelings I have for you. I don’t want you to pay me anything for the bar. Smoke, Steel, & Whiskey belongs to you, and only you. I will make sure nobody touches it who isn’t welcome. I will have a hundred of my men guard it every night if need be. I want you to feel safe.”

Her eyes tear up, and I want to get up and pull her into my arms, but I remain on my knees. I have more to say. “Oakley, I want you to know something, and it’s not just because you’re rich now.”

She laughs, wiping a tear from her sparkling eyes. “Honestly, Savva, I have something to tell you too, but I want you to go first.”

My heart leaps, and then my throat threatens to close up and ruin the whole thing for me. I swallow hard, trying to get some moisture into my throat so that I can talk without croaking. “I just wanted you to know that I’m madly in love with you, absolutely head over heels.”

She puts her hand over her mouth, blinking rapidly as more tears come to her eyes. “Oh my God, Savva. I wasn’t expecting that.”

“I hope it’s not too soon, but I needed you to know,” I say, finally standing up.

“I love you too,” she replies, testing the words slowly, then repeating them. “I love you!”

She throws her arms around my neck, pulling me in for a kiss and rocking back and forth. I put my arms around her, holding

her gently, still mindful of her injuries, but she seems oblivious to them.

“Wait, but I also have something to say,” she says, pulling back and clasping her hands together. “I need to do it now. I have to be brave.”

My stomach drops, anticipating the worst as she purses her lips and reaches into the back of her mind for the best way to tell me.

What could it be? She just admitted that she loved me, so what else could she possibly have to say?

“All the baby talk wasn’t for no reason,” she begins.

My shoulders relax a bit, but I’m still on the edge. What’s this about?

She squeezes her hands together until her knuckles turn a waxy white color. “God, I don’t know why this is so hard. I’ve been stressing so much about it that I think I’m going to hurt myself if I keep it in any longer. I’m pregnant.” She looks up at me expectantly, her eyebrows drawn together in a worried expression.

I’m surprised even though I know I shouldn’t be. I just thought that she had been on birth control when we started having sex. I didn’t expect it to turn out this way, but I suppose our recklessness could only end in one way.

“Um, wow,” I say, breathless and unsure how I’m supposed to respond. I’m excited, yes, but I don’t want to look like a fool if this isn’t what she wants.

“I hope that’s okay,” she says, putting her hand over her belly. “I know it’s a lot for you, and you never asked for this, but I didn’t want to keep hiding it from you, especially not after you told me that you were in love with me. The universe was just giving me all these signs that I should trust you, and here we are.” She laughs nervously. “You know, I wasn’t expecting it either.”

“No, that’s... That’s incredible. I was thinking maybe you weren’t happy about it, but if you are and you want the baby, then I don’t see why we can’t both be excited to bring it into

the world,” I say, unable to stop myself from grinning ear to ear. I’m smiling so hard that it hurts my cheeks, pure paternal bliss rising up in my chest.

She sighs in relief. “Oh, good. I would’ve tried to raise the baby alone if I had to, but I want to do it with you. I love you so much, Savva. You don’t even understand.”

I pull her into another embrace, squeezing her shoulders and feeling the warmth of her delicate body. I can barely believe that I’m hugging two people now, and one of them is going to be running around the yard in a diaper pretty soon.

“I love you, Oakley. You’re my everything,” I say, closing my eyes and just being present with her.

I get the feeling that everything is going to be okay.

She pulls back after a moment, her eyebrows drawing together in focus. “I broke my phone at the bar yesterday, and I was really mad at my mom. I think I should call her, though. She may have tried to reach out since then.”

I nod at the front door to the house. “There’s a phone in the living room you can use if you know her number.”

Oakley

If I managed to find the courage to break the news of my pregnancy once, I can do it again. I just didn't imagine telling my mom about the baby over the phone. I pictured myself doing it in person, but it doesn't feel right to wait. We have some issues we need to resolve.

The phone rings several times before she finally picks up. I know she's suspicious about unknown numbers, but she'll relax when she hears that it's me.

"Hello?" she asks with a tone of slight annoyance.

"Hey mom, it's Oakley," I say, sounding like a guilty teenager who just got stranded after a party they weren't supposed to be at.

"Oakley, I was trying to reach you, but you didn't answer," she says, sounding worried.

"I'm alright, mom. Don't worry about me. I just called to tell you that I'm sorry about yesterday. I feel like I overreacted."

There's a moment of silence, and I can tell that she's stunned by my apology. It was probably the last thing she expected after the fit I threw yesterday.

After a moment, she's able to speak again. "Well, Oakley, I know it wasn't right for me to have done what I did. I've actually thought about it quite a bit, and I understand if you don't forgive me, but I want you to know that you're still my daughter, and I love you."

I try to hide my tears from Savva, turning away from him and tucking my head down. "I love you too, mom. I didn't mean to freak out. I've just been dealing with a lot lately."

I feel Savva's supportive hand on my back, giving me the strength to continue. "And there's something else I wanted to tell you. Well, two things, really."

"Yes?" she asks, once again sounding worried, but I understand. I've run away from home to take over my late

father's bar without telling her. If she knew what really happened, she would be more than worried. She'd be petrified.

"So, I've met someone," I say, looking toward Savva and smiling. "And he's a really great guy."

"I hope he's not a biker," she replies, but she doesn't sound upset.

I laugh. "I'm not sure if I can convince him to get rid of the Harley, but maybe you can. I'd like you to meet him."

"So soon? Usually, you don't want me anywhere near the men you date. He must be something special."

"Oh, he is," I say, my smile widening as Savva winks. "And I think he'll be sticking around for the long run."

"Am I even talking to the same Oakley? What's going on?" she replies, pleasantly surprised by my change in character. I was never one to commit to a man, but Savva is different.

"Well, you know how I said there were two things I wanted to tell you? They're kind of related."

"What? What is it?"

I look to Savva for support, and he nods.

"I'm pregnant," I say, biting my lip as I await her response.

"Oakley, is this a joke? You know it's not nice to pull my leg like this," she replies, sounding both annoyed and tentatively excited. She probably thought she'd be waiting ages for a grandchild, but they're coming much sooner than she expected.

"It's not a joke. It wasn't exactly planned, but we're going to do our best together to raise the baby. Savva is fully capable of providing for us, and I'm honestly not too bad off myself after dad left me the bar," I explain.

"Savva? Doesn't sound American," she replies carefully.

I look at Savva, at his exotic facial features and thick hair, and I can't imagine an American looking this handsome. "No, he's not, but he's been here for a while. He's a really great guy, and

I'm sure he would be happy to talk to you now if you wanted," I say, putting him on the spot.

"Certainly."

Savva accepts the pressure gracefully, taking the phone and holding it up to his ear. In the smoothest, deepest, sexiest voice he has, he introduces himself. "It's a pleasure to meet you, ma'am."

Oh, I just know that my mom is not going to be able to resist him. I don't think any woman can, but he's all mine.

I can hear her gushing over the phone, stumbling over her words as she tells him that I'm a really nice girl, as though he needs any more convincing that he should stay with me. She's already obsessed with him. I don't know why I was ever worried.

I have to take the phone from Savva to prevent her from talking his ear off. He can barely get a word in. "Mom, mom, relax," I say, shaking my head. "You can come down here and visit us."

I give Savva a guilty smile for assuming he'd be okay with that, but he just shrugs and smiles.

God, what a sweetheart. How the hell did I get so lucky?

"Oakley, you had better not mess this up. He sounds... important," my mom says in a hushed voice.

I laugh. "Yeah, he is. Rich, too, if you think that's important."

"Is he really? That's amazing. I've always said you needed to settle down with someone who made a lot of money. It makes things so much easier."

"Yes, you're right. It really does make things easier, but you can see everything for yourself when you get here. Just try to keep an open mind. He's a bit different from the other guys, but he has a pure heart."

"As long as he's good to you, that's all I care about," she says, and I feel overjoyed.

Finally, everything is coming together.

“Okay, mom, I’ll call you again a bit later. I just wanted to tell you about everything so you’re not in the dark. I hope that’s fine,” I say as Savva gives me eyes like he wants to tear my clothes off.

“Sure, just don’t make me wait too long. I’m excited to hear more!”

I hang up the phone and turn to Savva, who raises his eyebrows and looks me up and down. “I think we should celebrate.”

“How so?” I ask, leaning against the kitchen counter and pushing my tits out in an obvious show of willingness.

He reaches for his belt. “I can think of some ways…”

EPILOGUE

Oakley

Over the past two years, I've learned what unconditional love is from the most ruthless Bratva boss in Nevada.

Sometimes, our blessings come in the form of a curse, and other times, they come in the form of the sexiest man on the planet.

For me, that man is Savva, father of our one-year-old son, Angus.

Today, Savva is out building a tire swing for Angus even though he won't be able to use it until he's at least a few years older. Savva believes it's important to introduce things to Angus long before he can take advantage of them, so that he will feel motivated to grow.

I'd argue that Angus is growing fast enough already, and I wish I could slow down time and keep him this small and innocent forever, but I let Savva take charge of raising our son. He seems to enjoy his role as a father more than I thought a man ever could.

Thankfully, Angus isn't the only one who gets to raise his heir. I'm pregnant with a girl now, and she's coming into this world in six months. Soon, Angus will learn how to treat a lady, something his father learned only later in his life when he met me.

I smile, rubbing my belly as I stand barefoot in the grass, watching Savva toss a rope over the large oak tree that's watched over several generations before us. Angus watches him from the grass, occasionally picking up bugs and trying to eat them. I never knew how many spiders a baby could eat until I had Angus. He seems especially interested in the ones that try to run away.

Honestly, he reminds me of Savva so much.

Savva ties off the rope and begins weaving the other end around the tire, securing it into a swing. I laugh when he sits on it to test it. I can imagine what he'd look like as a boy,

betting his friends that he could swing high enough to touch the moon with his feet.

I have to assume that Angus will be as ambitious as his father is. He was walking at eight months, and now, he runs until he falls, then crawls until he reaches his target. Look away for more than a few seconds, and he's already on the other side of the house.

Right now, however, he's so captivated by what his daddy is doing that he has no urge to jump to his little feet and run across the yard in search of more bugs to introduce to his mouth. He's watching Savva closely, curious as to what he's building.

I guess Savva was right to put up the tire swing long before Angus could use it. He's already obsessed with the thing.

I smile as Angus stands up and waddles over to Savva, getting his attention with an enthusiastic yelp. Savva picks him up, pointing at the tire and explaining something to him that I can't hear.

I smile. Savva always talks to Angus, most of the time in Russian. I'm almost afraid that Angus won't even be able to speak English after the amount of time he's spent with his father, but I know Savva will make sure that Angus has all the skills he needs to navigate the world as a man.

Savva looks my way and beckons me over.

I squint at him, trying to figure out if it's worth it to walk all the way across the yard. I'm sure he just wants to show me the tire swing, but I can see it from here.

But he just keeps waving at me to come over, so I leave my spot in the grass, traversing the neatly trimmed yard to arrive at the big oak tree and the loves of my life.

When Angus sees me, he immediately wants me to hold him, reaching out with his chubby arms and shrieking with delight.

I laugh as Savva hands him off to me. "He might love his daddy, but he loves his mommy even more."

“But it can’t be more than I love her,” Savva replies, shaking his head and grinning.

I blush even though he’s said it a million times since the first *I love you*. I don’t think hearing his words of affection will ever stop causing butterflies in my stomach and a rush of blood to my cheeks.

“You’ve done a good job with the swing. Mind if I try it?” I ask, grabbing the rope and tugging on it to make sure the branch isn’t going to snap off. It’s as sturdy as Savva is, safe and reliable.

“Go for it,” he says, stepping back. “You want me to push you?”

“Oh god, no,” I say with a laugh, climbing onto the tire with Angus in my arms. “I’d probably fall right off. I just want Angus to see how it is.”

“Fair enough,” he replies, standing back and crossing his arms as he admires his creation.

I hold Angus tightly as I get into position, swinging my legs just enough to get us rocking. Angus giggles, and as we start to swing more, he erupts into contagious laughter. I wouldn’t trade the sound of his happiness for all the money in the world.

But thanks to Savva, I don’t have to.

I have everything I’ve ever wanted right here.

The End.

**PREVIEW OF KNOCKED UP WITH
TWINS**

Clementine

There's half a million dollars on the line, and I can't find the damn key!

Rummaging through the glove compartment, I push aside a packet of wet wipes, a small flashlight without batteries, and a bronze four-leaf clover charm my cousin bought me from her trip to Ireland eight months ago. Still no key. I guess clovers can't be all that lucky, then, can they?

I glance down at my watch, groaning as I realize I'm already three minutes late. I'm usually early, and on a sale like this, I can't afford to be killing this much time looking for a key.

With the amount of money Mr. Armando has, I doubt that he'll tolerate me wasting his time. For men like him, time literally is money, and the more I waste, the less likely it is he's going to have any leftover for me.

Living on commissions is fine as long as you actually make sales, but I've been dry for months trying to close the deal to this fifteen-million-dollar brownstone mansion in Brooklyn. I can't go on much longer like this or I'm going to have to go back to flipping crack dens for razor-thin profits.

I check the back seat of my Lincoln again to no avail. Did the key jump out of the window on the way here or what? I clearly remember taking it with me.

I'm five minutes late now and certain that Mr. Armando is getting back into his blacked-out Rolls Royce to glide off into the concrete jungle without a second thought. He probably knows six other mansions just like this one in the city, and real estate agents three times as eager to sell them.

Well, I'm eager too, but all the enthusiasm in the world isn't going to sell a building that I can't even get into. Forget about zeal, I just need the goddamn key!

My phone buzzes in my blazer pocket. I know I have to check it, but I don't want to. I'm certain that it's Mr. Armando asking where the hell I am. That man has a scowl like no other, and

I'd hate to piss him off. There's a rumor that he's involved with the mafia, and part of me believes it.

I pull the phone from my pocket and glance down at it, pushing my hand down into the crack between the seat and the center console for a third time.

Apologies for my tardiness. Traffic is bad today. I should be there in five minutes.

Saved by the chaotic Brooklyn traffic! I smile to myself as I shoot off a quick response. I've been blessed with five extra minutes to find the keys. The universe is giving me a second chance, and I'll be damned if I throw it away.

I take drastic measures this time, pushing back the driver's seat as far as it will go and leaning down into the darkness like an ostrich burying its head in the sand.

Except ostriches don't actually do that. It's a myth, and that means I'm the only one making a fool out of myself on the side of the road with my ass lifted in the air. I hope that Mr. Armando doesn't roll up and witness this outrageous scene, or I'm in for more than just a stern talking to for losing the key.

But as I lean in, further delving into the velvet darkness, I see something glitter near the edge of the seat rails.

The key!

I snatch it and jump out of the car, holding it in the air triumphantly with a grin on my face. Mr. Armando still hasn't arrived, and that means I have time to dash to the door in my high heels and tuck the flyaway hairs behind my ears so that I look like I was actually prepared for him.

My heels click on the gorgeous brick walkway around to the front of the house. It's really something to behold, but I'm sure that Mr. Armando has seen something like this a million times before. He probably even grew up in a place like this, and he might not even want to come here that often. Maybe it's just for when he's in Brooklyn.

I can't say I'm not jealous, but if this deal goes down the way I've planned, I'm not going to be too worried about money anymore. I've sunk tens of thousands of dollars into

impressing clients while at the mansion, and none of it has worked.

This time, I've worn my best silk blouse and tightest pencil skirt, having my hair and makeup done by a professional about an hour before I drove here. I've put more effort into this than I would getting married, and it had better pay off.

Or maybe I'm just not cut out to be in real estate...

I push the negativity aside and replace it with a bright smile as I witness a large black sedan pull up in front of the house. It's the type of car you'd expect the president to ride in, and I'm almost surprised there isn't a police entourage to guide it safely here. The engine produces a deep, expensive hum as though to say, "I could outrun a police car, but I prefer to cruise under the speed limit to turn as many heads as possible."

The door pops open, and there's a theatrical moment of anticipation before a polished leather shoe meets the ground. The rest of the man follows, and he's so much more than I had anticipated.

Mr. Armando towers at what must be almost seven feet tall, and the breadth of his shoulders makes me believe that all his suits must be tailored. He's in fantastic shape for a man with this much money. Most of the men I've encountered in this bracket of wealth tend to be in their fifties or sixties and on the pudgy side. Mr. Armando, on the other hand, looks to be around 40 and capable of lifting a grown woman and pinning her against the wall while he—

"Miss Clementine," he says, extending his hand as he walks up to me.

I smile, but it falters when I look into his eyes. His hand clasps around mine, enveloping it completely and sending an electric jolt through my entire body. My heart pounds in my chest as his stormy blue eyes look into mine, as though he's trying to tear a confession out of my soul.

Physically, we're only shaking hands, but spiritually, he's already inside of me.

I'm relieved when he lets go of my hand, allowing me to breathe again. "Beautiful brownstone," he says, looking over my shoulder at the door.

I snap out of my trance. "Oh, yes, it is. I'm delighted to show it to you." I turn away from him, tucking my chin into my chest as I unlock the door. "I'm sure you'll want to see the lounge in the basement. There's an office down there as well."

"I want to see every inch of it," he replies from behind me.

A chill runs through me.

I push the door open, trying to put some distance between us. Mr. Armando's presence is as intoxicating as it is alarming. It's almost impossible for me to form coherent thoughts when he's gazing at me in such a way.

And his voice; It's so deep and rich that I feel like it should be a musical instrument. I wonder if he's a famous singer, but then again, I heard whisperings that his source of income was a bit more... illicit.

Wherever the money comes from, it needs to be a lot to afford a place like this. As we enter, I'm stunned once again by the opulent decorations printed into the high lobby ceiling. Detailed leaves and flowers seem both ancient in nature and modern with how well they're machined into the plaster. When I first visited this location, I wanted to lie on the cool marble floor and stare up at it until I was lost in the intricacy.

The door closes behind me, reminding me that I'm not alone here this time. All this might seem impressive to me, a regular middleclass girl, but I need Mr. Armando to feel the awe too. I must make him so enamored by this place that he demands to buy it immediately, no questions asked.

That fantasy is quickly squished into a miserable pulp when Mr. Armando rushes in front of me and slaps his hand against the open archway that leads into the stairwell. "I never understood why they couldn't just put doors here instead. There's no way to stop someone from running up these stairs and gunning everyone down."

I blink a few times, taken aback by his improbable scenario. “Is that something that happens to you often?” I ask, wondering if he’s joking. I’m too nervous to say for sure, but he sounds serious.

“Once before,” he says, turning and pointing toward the front door. “You see that glass there?”

I look over my shoulder at the intricate stained glass on either side of the door. It’s complex enough to obscure the view of outside, but not enough to prevent being able to tell there’s someone on the other side.

“It’s very nice,” I reply. “It appears to be handmade.”

He shakes his head. “Nice doesn’t cut it. Someone could smash through that in an instant. Many things here will have to be replaced.”

I nod and smile politely at his concern, but inside I’m wondering who the hell this man is and what he’s done with Mr. Armando. Surely, this can’t be the man who was interested in touring the house before. He’s speaking as though he’s planning on a civil war erupting out in the streets any day now.

“Not too big of a deal. Let’s continue,” he says, perhaps sensing my confusion.

I lead him into the kitchen, hoping that the stainless steel and the endless induction stovetops will spark renewed interest in buying this house. It’s the sort of kitchen you’d expect to see at a Michelin Star restaurant in the heart of Paris.

“This is the *main* kitchen,” I say, stressing the word *main* to spark intrigue.

He rubs his chin, narrowing his eyes as he looks around. “I think my chef will approve.”

Of course, he has a personal chef. I’m sure he also has a personal trainer, a private stylist, and more women than he could possibly hope to bend over his king-sized bed and pound into the fourth dimension.

I wave my hand toward the fridge. “If you’re thirsty, we have a few things stocked already.”

“Tonic would be nice.”

It’s an odd choice but fitting for a man who probably wouldn’t be caught dead drinking a diet coke. I can’t even imagine how the can would fit into his hands. It would be like drinking out of a thimble.

“We might have that,” I say, popping open the fridge and allowing the air inside to cool my flushed cheeks for a moment. I squat down and pull open the bottom drawer, revealing 1-liter bottles of cranberry juice, coke, and tonic.

“Perfect,” I mumble to myself, taking the bottle out, standing up, and turning around.

Mr. Armando’s eyes snap upward, and he shifts his weight to the other foot. He was looking at my ass.

As a woman, I’m used to being looked at, even ogled, when I’m at work, but the fact that it’s a man of such high status makes me feel like I have to put of a performance to keep up with his expectations. It’s all in my head, of course, but that doesn’t stop me from feeling the pressure.

“Could I get a glass, perhaps?” he asks after I’ve been standing in front of him without a word for several seconds.

“Yes, right,” I say, turning around preparing his drink in total silence. I can feel his eyes on me again, sweeping over my body like he’s analyzing every inch of my exposed skin.

I shaved my legs, but what if I missed a spot?

“This house is quite large,” I say as I turn around and hand him the tonic. “Is there any part you’re particularly interested in seeing? We can go there first.”

He takes a slow sip of his drink, his thick eyebrows coming together in thoughtful frown. When he speaks his voice is low and visceral, his intense gaze holding me in a state of heightened anticipation.

“I’d like to see the master bedroom.”

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