

Forbidden

TEMPTATION

M. JAMES

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CONTENTS

1. Sasha
2. Max
3. Sasha
4. Max
5. Sasha
6. Sasha
7. Max
8. Sasha
9. Max
10. Sasha
11. Sasha
12. Sasha
13. Max
14. Sasha
15. Max
16. Sasha
17. Max
18. Max
19. Sasha
20. Max
21. Sasha
22. Max
23. Sasha

SASHA



The world around me is a blur.

I'd started to feel strange on the way back from lunch. Tired, foggy, my head heavy and my limbs oddly numb, with bursts of pins-and-needles. I'd chalked it up to stress, exhaustion, and jet lag. God knows I'd had enough of all of those. Even the nausea I'd felt as I got out of the car could have been explained away by that.

But not the way my legs buckled out from under me, sending me collapsing to the ground as darkness rushed in.

I *felt* Max catch me. I heard his voice calling my name. But I couldn't see him.

Couldn't respond back to him.

I couldn't do *anything* except fall deeper into the blackness swallowing me whole, and I was terrified.

I didn't want to die.

I've already survived so much. My kidnapping in Russia and being shipped to the States like human cargo. My abuse and violation in the warehouse by a man meant to guard me, not take me for his own. Being taken back to Russia, a place I thought I'd never see again, for my own safety—only to end up captured once again in the hands of a man so evil, I thought I might die in his cold safe-house in the mountains.

I endured being abused yet again. Put up for sale yet again. Until I was saved yet again—by a man with blood-stained

hands and a guilty heart who I fell in love with...and who says he can't love me in return.

Now I'm in his arms. And I can't even enjoy it.

I flicker in and out of consciousness, *feeling* more than seeing. The jolt of him carrying me up the stairs to the house, clutching me to his chest as if he can save me just by holding me close. I hear the sounds of doors opening, his frantic voice as if I'm hearing it down a long tunnel, the words lost but the feeling of his fear remaining. *He's afraid for me.*

I'm afraid, too. I've never felt like this before. I've been drugged in the past, but this feels different. I feel sick to my stomach, feverish, as if the world is spinning over and over and all around me.

What if the hands carrying me aren't Max's? What if all that was a dream, and I'm still in the warehouse?

Terror floods me at that memory. The hands holding me are hard and insistent, and I remember other hands that held me down over a stack of crates, a rough and sweaty hand over my mouth, muffling my cries and pleas. Another on my flesh, pushing my legs apart, the heavy weight of a body. But he stank of sweat and body odor, and all I smell now is salt and lemon, a warmth that tells me I'm safe.

Sasha. Sasha! Please, if you can hear me—

I can. It's Max. Relief washes over me, knowing it's him. He'll keep me safe. He always has.

But I can't answer. I can't let him know that I'm still here, trapped in the darkness. I can feel it sucking at me, pulling me, trying to drag me further down.

Is this what it feels like to die?

I've thought I was going to die before. When the cargo plane carrying us to the States—my first ever flight—hit turbulence and rocked from side to side, leaving the women inside of it puking and clinging to each other. Most of us had never been on a plane before. All of us were waking up from being drugged.

All of us were terrified.

A flash of memory comes back to me, brilliantly vivid in the darkness, of the men transporting us walking down the aisle, drugging us again to keep us quiet and calm. The fear I'd felt, thinking that the plane would go down while I was drugged, helpless to do anything about it. That I would go to sleep and never wake up again.

That's how I feel now, as unconsciousness pulls at me. As if this is it. I try to focus on Max's hands and voice, to pull myself up towards the sliver of light that I see. But it's no use.

I'm not strong enough.

Maybe I never have been.

I try to call out his name, to beg for him. To keep him here with me. But I can't seem to make a sound.

I feel cold, and it takes me back to Alexei's safe house. I feel helpless, my body aching down to my bones, and all I feel is nausea and pain, the fear that maybe I never escaped at all. I feel the ache in my arms, dangling from his hook, the burning strike of his belt on my naked flesh. I feel the tears on my cheeks, taste the salt on my lips, the guilt and shame as I begged Caterina to give in so that the pain would stop.

I couldn't take anymore.

I try to beg, now. For the aching, the burning, the sickness to stop. For someone to let me out of this cage I'm trapped in, dark and alone and feeling as if I'm dying. But I can't make the words come. I can't move.

I'm paralyzed. Held captive not just *somewhere*, but in my own body. I can't move, speak, or see.

I feel a bed beneath me, hear the sounds of rustling blankets, and feel the cool sensation of clean, soft sheets. I feel hands on me, tucking the blankets around me, touching my face and hair. Max's voice again, begging for me to wake up.

Begging for *me*.

I'm safe, I think, as I sink into the warmth of the soft bed. *I might be dying, but I'm with Max. He'll keep me safe. If I can*

be saved, he'll do it. He'll protect me.

Somewhere in the delirium of my illness, that's what comes through. That's what enables me to let go, to sink down into the swirling darkness, even if I never come back up.

I know if there's any way to save me, Max will find it.

And if not?

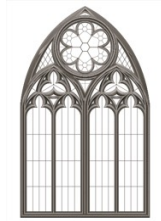
I cling to the last good memory I have as I lose consciousness, of Max's hands on my body, his lips on mine, of him inside of me as I made him mine, on the one night I had with him.

That's what I want to remember as I go.

Me—and the man I love.

Together.

MAX



“Sasha!”

I cry out her name as she falls, managing to catch her in my arms before she hits the ground. Her eyes have rolled back, showing only the whites, and when her skin touches mine, I almost recoil against how hot it is.

She’s limp in my arms, heavy, feverish. I can feel her shaking, and I’m terrified that she might have a seizure. I don’t know what’s happened to her—what changed between getting off the plane and now, and it’s hard to think past the fear clouding my mind.

I’d agreed to bring her here to keep her safe. *If something happens to her because of this, I’ll never forgive myself.*

Clutching her against my chest, I slowly make my way up the wide stone steps to the mansion. I’m halfway up when the ornately carved, wooden double doors that sit at the front of it open wide. A round woman half as tall as I am in a black dress belted at the waist bustles out, her forehead creased in concern.

“Maximilian?” She pushes a lock of iron-grey hair at her face, looking between me and Sasha, held in my arms. “*Mi tesoro*, I know you said you were bringing a girl with you, but I expected her to be on her own two feet.”

“Something’s wrong, Giana.” I look down at the estate housekeeper, a woman who used to be like an aunt or second mother to me, and who I haven’t seen in years. “She just—

collapsed. Call a doctor, quickly. I'm going to get her upstairs."

She casts a worried look at Sasha, who is so pale that her skin looks almost sickly, a greenish white. "There is a new doctor who makes house calls. I will see if he can come."

"Tell him he *will* come," I grit out. "The Agosti house doesn't ask."

Giana presses her lips together, but she nods. "Of course, *tesoro*. The second room on the right, on the guest floor, is made up for her. Take her up there while I call."

It's the first time I've ever traded on my family name. The first time I've ever used it as a command. It feels strange and wrong—the first step in a direction that I'd sworn to myself I wouldn't take. But for Sasha, I would do anything.

Anything to keep her safe.

Giana hurries ahead of me, calling out for her husband, Tommas, as she does so. She disappears into a room, and I head for the stairs, clutching Sasha against my chest. She feels hot to the touch, her skin dry and burning, and my heart pounds in my chest as I try to think of the reasons that she might have collapsed.

If more time had passed since our night together, I might have been afraid that she was pregnant, but I know that can't be the case. As foolish as I'd been in forgetting to use protection or pull out—too caught up in the moment to stop and think about it, too driven by my body's needs, it hasn't been long enough. And she hadn't shown any other signs of illness.

It doesn't make sense.

I make my way up to the third floor of the mansion, where the guest rooms are located, above the floor that houses the master's suite and library. The room that Giana mentioned is indeed ready for Sasha, freshly cleaned and smelling of citrus and spice. The curtains are thrown open to let in the Italian sunshine. I drag back the blankets with one hand, hearing Sasha's low, miserable moan and something that sounds almost like mumbled words as I lay her down gently, tucking

the blankets around her. I have no idea if that's wise, with the fever she's running, but I want her to be comfortable.

Her eyes are closed now, her breathing slow and labored, and my heart catches in my chest as I sit down slowly on the edge of the bed, reaching for her hand. It feels small and delicate in mine, hot and fragile to the touch, and I can envision the fever burning her up, devouring her from the inside.

I can't help but think that this is my fault. That this is a punishment, somehow, for what I've done. For letting myself break my vow with her. For giving in to temptation.

"Stay with me," I whisper, clutching her hand in mine. "You *begged* me not to leave you, Sasha. To bring you here. You can't leave me now. Not after you've been through so much. Whatever this is—it isn't strong enough to take you. It *can't* be."

There's nothing. Not a word or a sound from her lips, and it makes me feel almost feral with desperation. This isn't how I wanted things to end between us.

We'd barely spoken at lunch. It feels as if the last real conversation we had was an argument—that it was me telling her that I can't love her, that she *shouldn't* be in love with me. A conversation that ended with her going off to the bedroom alone.

What could I have done differently? I can't make promises to her that I know I can't keep. I can't let myself be the one to hurt her, to break her heart. I never should have touched her to begin with.

It had felt so good, all of it. Her lips on mine, on *me*. Tasting her for the first time, touching her. The exquisite pleasure as she became the first woman I ever slept with. I did it to show her how much I care for her. That I wanted to give her *something*, even if I couldn't give her forever.

I've crossed so many lines for her, and maybe that's where I've gone wrong. I let myself make excuses for my own lusts, justified them in any way I could, and now this is the result.

If she dies, it will be my fault.

In the very depths of the rational part of my brain, the part that hasn't been conditioned to believe that this sort of punishment is the result of sin, I know that makes no sense. But that part isn't loud enough to drown the rest out, and so I sit next to Sasha as I wait for the doctor to come, holding her hand, that same phrase repeating over and over again in my head.

If she dies, it will be my fault.

I stand up when I finally hear footsteps on the stairs and a hesitant knock at the door.

"Maximilian?" Giana's voice comes through the heavy wood. "The doctor is here. Shall I let him in?"

"Go ahead." My voice sticks in my throat, and I clear it roughly. "Send him in."

The new doctor is nothing like the family physician that I remember from my childhood. The formal-looking man who used to come around whenever any of us were ill was older than Giana is now, stern and no-nonsense, with an air of confident authority that made anyone, even my mother who tended towards hypochondriasis, feel assured that he would heal whatever ailed them.

The doctor who walks in, a friendly smile on his face, looks younger than me. He's wearing tan chinos and a plaid shirt with the sleeves rolled up, his brown hair messy, and his youthful appearance lacking the severe confidence that I'd come to associate with doctors. *Bedside manner* wasn't something my father looked for when entrusting the health of his family to someone. And this man, while he looks as if he has it in spades, also looks as if he's young enough to still be in residency.

"Mr. Agosti." He tips his chin down respectfully. "I'm Dr. Guerera. Ms. Giana called me and said there was an emergency?"

"Indeed." I step back, so he can see Sasha. "But I think there might be a mix-up—"

“Not at all.” Dr. Guerera flashes me another smile, pearly-white teeth and all. “I know I might not be who you expected. My father passed on a few years ago—not long after your own father died. God rest their souls. I took over the practice—and, naturally, came to visit the estate. Not that I’ve been out here much—Giana and Tommas are remarkably healthy, despite how they’re getting on in years.”

“All that Italian sunshine, I suppose,” I manage through gritted teeth, moving closer to Sasha’s bedside. “If you’re what we’ve got, then get on with it.”

I’m aware that my own manner leaves a great deal to be desired, but Dr. Guerera, if he’s off-put by it at all, doesn’t show it. “Can you tell me what happened?” he asks, stepping close to Sasha and gently touching her forehead. “Giana said that she collapsed, but she didn’t have much for me beyond that.”

Something in me bristles at the sight of the young man touching Sasha’s forehead, his fingers brushing over her skin. I shove the feeling aside as harshly as I can. Jealousy won’t help Sasha.

“Unfortunately, I don’t have much more knowledge of it, either. She seemed fine—a little tired or jet-lagged, maybe, after we left lunch, but otherwise, fine. And then—she collapsed.”

Dr. Guerera frowns. “Walk me through the order of events?”

“We got on a plane in New York—a private jet from a trusted friend. We flew straight here—she spent a good portion of the flight sleeping, or at least in a separate room. When we arrived in Italy, we drove to town here, had a light lunch at the cafe, and then came here.”

“And you say she started seeming unwell after lunch?”

I nod. “This seems a bit extreme for food poisoning, doesn’t it?”

“It does.” He touches her forehead again, fishing out his stethoscope. “I’m going to take some blood and run tests immediately. I can’t determine a course of treatment until I

know what's wrong, or we risk harming her more. But this seems very strange. She's running a dangerously high fever."

I feel helpless, standing there watching as Dr. Guerera takes her vitals and blood samples. Each minute that ticks by feeling like one closer to losing Sasha forever. This isn't something I can fight off or defend her from. It isn't even a danger that I recognize.

When the doctor finally leaves, with promises to call me as soon as he has results, I sit back down at Sasha's side, her heated hand in mine. Her beautiful face is pale except for the hotly flushed spots on her cheeks, more red flushing creeping down her neck and chest, made all the more startling by the greyish-white cast of the rest of her skin. "Whatever happens," I murmur, stroking the back of her hand gently with my thumb, "I won't leave you."

"I promise you that."

—

When Dr. Guerera finally calls, I take it on the phone upstairs, not wanting to be far from Sasha. I feel as if I'm hovering in some kind of dream-state as I wait to hear what he has to say, terrified of the worst—that he still won't know, or that it will be something that is hopeless without treatment.

"She's been poisoned." His voice is slow and careful as he speaks. "I haven't been able to identify the toxin yet. Without that, it's difficult to proceed, but I'm on my way now with a more generalized treatment for her, until we can hopefully identify it." He pauses, letting the words hang there for a moment. "If her symptoms started after she ate, that's likely the link—that the food was tampered with somehow. I'll leave you to think about how that might have occurred."

He clears his throat. "I'll be there shortly with the treatments I can give her."

As the line goes dead, I stand there, frozen as my heart sinks into my gut. *We've been followed.* Our trip to Italy was meant to keep Sasha safe, to throw the hounds off the scent, but it seems that it's done the exact opposite.

It's led them straight to her.

I hang up the phone roughly, striding back into her room. She's as still and silent and pale as before, and I fall to my knees next to the bed, pressing my clasped hands to my forehead as my thoughts tangle themselves up inside my head.

Someone knows that we're here—and it has something to do with the person who wants me dead.

I'd been right after all. This *is* my fault.

"I shouldn't have given in," I whisper, my voice thick and tormented. "I should have let Viktor take you to his safe house, as far from me as you could possibly get. I should never—"

I should never have given you more of a reason to want to be close to me.

It would have been better if I'd made Sasha hate me. As much as that would have torn me to pieces and broken her heart, it would have been better for her than what's happened now—lying poisoned and possibly dying in a strange bed.

A broken heart would have healed. Whatever is happening to her now—I'm not confident that it will. And *that* I can't live with.

"You can't die," I murmur, my throat choked with emotion. "Whoever did this, I'll make him pay. But I want it to be for the attempt, not for his success."

Swallowing hard, I close my eyes tight, reaching out for a faith that I'd thought I might be in danger of losing. "If You're there," I murmur, every ounce of myself poised to beg, to offer, to give anything, "don't let her die. If You'll save her, I swear, I'll keep my vows. I'll never touch her again."

Until this very moment, at the prospect of making that promise, I hadn't realized just how hard it would be. I'd told her on the plane that we couldn't be together again, that we had to stay as nothing more than friends. Still, the reality of that hadn't sunk in as deeply as now, when I'm on the precipice of making another vow that I'll have to do my best not to break. A vow that I need to *mean*.

“I won’t make the same mistake again. I’ll protect her, keep her safe, and take her home when it’s time. But I won’t break my vow with her again. I *swear*.”

My eyes burn with tears, desperate and unshed. I’ve fought to save the ones I love before—my brother, her, my friends’ wives—but there’s nothing here for me to fight but myself. My own selfish wants, needs, and desires.

They should be nothing in comparison with the possibility of making up for what I’ve done. “Don’t punish her for my broken vow,” I whisper into the darkness as I kneel by her bedside. “Don’t take it out on her. I’ll suffer every day for the rest of my life if I must—as long as she lives.”

And it *will* be suffering. I have no doubt about that. I’d been right when I’d told myself all those years ago to walk away from the girl offering to take my virginity before I left for seminary—that it would be a thousand times harder to keep my vow of celibacy knowing what I’d lost. It’s not just the thought of never feeling that pleasure again that makes me feel as if a rock has settled in my gut, but the thought of never feeling it with *her*. The thought of never touching Sasha again, of never hearing her small gasps or moans of pleasure, feels like an unquantifiable sacrifice.

But I know I’m wrong for her. And I won’t let her be the one to suffer for it.

Hours into the night, I’m so exhausted that I can’t keep my eyes open any longer, but I don’t want to leave her side. I stand slowly, sore and wrung dry, and slide into the bed next to her, my hand still wrapped around hers.

I have no idea what the morning will bring.

But whatever it does, I won’t leave her side.

SASHA



I wake up feeling like death warmed over.

At least, I hope it's that and not that I'm actually dead. I feel weak as a kitten, every part of my body hurting. My muscles and bones ache, and my skin feels sensitive to the touch—like I have the flu, except I'm not sure I've ever had the flu this bad. Honestly, it feels as if I've been beaten, and I have to repress a shudder at the memories of exactly why I know what that feels like.

If this is the afterlife, I'm not at all happy with the outcome.

It takes me a moment to open my eyes. I'm not sure if I'll want to see what's beyond them. My memories feel jumbled—everything after getting off the plane is foggy. Then I have vague recollections of Max, of his scent and his voice and his hands, but I can't be sure that it wasn't all just dreams or delusions. I don't feel as if I can be sure of anything.

Sunlight. I think I feel sunlight on my skin, and that's what finally convinces me to pry open my eyes. Wherever I am, I feel as if I'm *craving* sunlight, as if I'm starved for it. And when I finally do manage to get them open, I'm shocked at what I see.

I'm in a bed—a *room* that I've never seen before. It reminds me of Caterina's family home, the Rossi mansion that she took me to once. It still belongs to her, even though she lives with Viktor now, being cared for by a skeleton staff to keep it pristine for her future children to inherit. Whereas her home

with Viktor is decorated to her taste, in warm earthy tones and soft textiles that make it feel homier than a Bratva *pakhan's* home should. The Rossi mansion felt like something from the old world, stately and forbidding in its elegance and grandeur.

That's what this room makes me think of. The floor is gleaming reddish-brown hardwood, overlaid with a thick antique rug in a red and gold and cream woven pattern. The curtains are a heavy, deep red fabric, pulled back along with the gauzy underlayer to let the sun in. The bed is a mahogany four-poster, tall and heavy, matching the other furniture in the room—all of it heavy wood with brass handles, from the wardrobe to the dresser and the side tables. There's a stone fireplace at the far end of the room, with another thick rug in front of it, and a deep red velvet wing chair.

Beyond the window to my left is the most beautiful view I've ever seen—acres upon acres of rolling estate land dotted with vineyards and what looks like a stable further off in the distance. But it doesn't compare with what I see next to me that makes my heart leap in my chest.

Max is sleeping beside me, his long dark lashes against his high cheekbones, his face calm and composed in sleep, his dark hair tousled. He's still in his usual black chinos and button-down clothes, both rumpled as if he hasn't bothered to change in some time. I stare at him, a flicker of hope pushing away all my other worries and fears as I remember where I am and why I'm here.

We're in Italy, at Max's family home. His estate. And the fact that he's asleep next to me makes me wonder if he's rethought everything about that last conversation we had on the plane before we landed in Italy.

You can't love me, Sasha. I'm not right for you, and I never will be.

I'm a failed brother. A failed priest. A failed man.

I've broken every vow except for one.

It'll be all I can do not to be convinced to break the last.

Looking down at him, I can't help wondering if he's changed his mind. What other reason could there be for him sleeping next to me?

I'm hesitant to wake him. I don't want him to leave. I want to stay like this, nestled in the blankets next to him, feeling his warmth, smelling the citrus-and-salt scent of his skin. But I reach out slowly, running my fingers through the loose waves of his dark hair, feeling it run silkily through my fingers. They drift down over his sharp jaw, his stubble thicker than he usually lets it get.

Has he just been here the entire time I've been sick? Guilt grips me at the thought that he might have stayed by my bedside, although I'm not entirely sure why. Whatever happened to me wasn't intentional on my part—but I don't want to be a burden to him. I don't want him to see me that way.

I slowly trace his jawline, resisting the urge to brush my fingers over his full lower lip. He's so incredibly handsome, even with his face softened in sleep like this—maybe even more so. My chest aches as I look down at him, wishing for this every day.

We could wake up like this every morning. My mind runs away with the idea so quickly that it startles me as I reach up to run my fingers through his hair again. I can picture him opening his eyes to look up at me sleepily, smiling the same way I would at the sight of his face first thing in the morning, snuggling closer together under warm blankets as we struggle with the idea of facing the day instead of hiding in bed together.

It's easy to imagine all of it—too easy. Morning sex, with Max spooned behind me, already hard when we wake up, slipping into me from behind or rolling me onto my back to slide between my legs. Just the thought of it sends a tingling shiver through me, my thighs squeezing together as the momentary spike of pleasure from the idea chases away my aches and pains for a second.

Breakfast in bed. Watching movies together. Making love in front of the fireplace. A hundred romantic ideas run through

my mind as I trail my fingers through his hair, down to the soft bits at the nape of his neck, my heart racing in my chest at the thought of what we could have together.

This is a temporary exile from our home, but it could be more. If he's changed his mind, it could be the place where this really begins—where our relationship deepens without interference from others, or even just the interruptions of our normal day-to-day lives. I remember Max telling me at lunch that we're not supposed to leave the estate unless necessary. It had felt awful then, being forced to be in the same house constantly with someone who, just a few hours before, had told me he couldn't love me, no matter how much we wanted each other. It had felt like torture. But now—

As my hands drift down the back of his neck, Max lets out a low groan in his sleep. I do it again, feeling my heart leap into my throat at the sound, and he twitches, his hips jerking a little as he groans again, a low sound of pleasure.

My breath quickens, my pulse speeding up, beating like a butterfly in my throat. The chemistry between us has always felt electric to me, palpable, and right now, more so than ever, as I feel him react to my touch in this quiet, intimate closeness between us.

His eyes flicker open, and I smile faintly down at him.

Max is up in an instant, sitting up quickly and dislodging my hand as he rubs at his face. "Sasha?" His voice sounds almost disbelieving. "You're awake. Oh God, you're awake. I thought—"

"Was it that bad?" I definitely *feel* as if it was that bad. My memories of it all feel foggy, vague recollections that I can't be sure if they were dreams or not. "I feel like I've been beaten. Or run over by a truck."

"We weren't sure if you would live." Max looks down at me tiredly as my eyes widen with shock. "You were poisoned, Sasha."

"What?" I blink at him, wondering if I heard him wrong. "Poisoned? That doesn't make sense—who would do that?"

How?”

“We don’t know.” He rubs one hand over his mouth, as if his stubble irritates him. “Your symptoms started after the lunch we had in town, so our best guess is that someone followed us here, or got information that we’d be here, and poisoned your food. The only other possibility is that someone got to one of the staff members on the plane and tampered with your food or drink there. Viktor is questioning his staff closely to find out.”

I wince. I can only imagine what kind of “questioning” they are or have been enduring.

I just hope Viktor believes them if they say they didn’t do it. I can imagine Viktor’s rage at the thought of a member of his staff betraying him again, after what happened with Alexei, and it wouldn’t be a pretty thing.

“And you’re—you’re sure it was that?”

Max nods. “We had a doctor come to the house. He examined you and ran tests. He couldn’t identify the toxin, which made it all worse. He couldn’t do anything other than give you the most standard treatments or risk making you sicker. And then you just had to ride it out. We thought you were going to die for certain, a few days ago.”

“A few *days*?” I stare at him. “How long have I been out?”

“A week.” Max gives me another of those faint, tired smiles. “I’m sorry for sleeping next to you, but I haven’t wanted to leave you. I haven’t gotten much sleep at all, actually.”

Despite my body’s complaints, I push myself up against the pillows, wincing at the aches that ripple through me and the feeling of the blankets rubbing against my sensitive skin. It feels almost raw, abraded, even though I’m outwardly fine.

“You’ve been here the whole time? With me?” I feel that flare of guilt again, even though I know it’s not my fault. “I should be the one who’s sorry—and why would you be sorry for sleeping next to me? You know I—”

I break off at the look on his face, so sympathetic that it cuts me to the bone.

“That’s exactly why,” Max says gently. “I didn’t want to lead you on or give you the wrong idea.” He slides off the bed, out of reach, and I feel a pang in my chest that has nothing to do with my illness but an aching sense of loss. “Nothing has changed between us, Sasha.”

Tears rise up so sharply in my eyes, hot and burning, that I barely manage to blink them back before they fall. “O-oh,” I whisper, unable to think of anything else to say.

He moves to the foot of the bed, gripping it in his hands. All I can think of is the way those hands felt on me, sliding over my skin, squeezing my breasts the way he’s squeezing the footboard now, those long fingers slipping inside of me. It’s not just the pleasure that he gave me that I want, but *him*. I can’t imagine anyone else ever making me feel the way he did. I don’t *want* anyone else to. “I meant what I said on the plane, Sasha. We’re friends, as we always have been, so long as that’s what you want. And I will protect you with my life if need be. I will find out who did this, and I will make them pay.”

His hands clench the footboard harder, his knuckles whitening. “I stayed by your bed for a week, Sasha. You *know* how I feel about you. You know that I—”

Max breaks off, swallowing hard, and I sink my teeth into my lower lip, fighting back the tears with everything I have in me. It feels too hard, like I don’t have the strength to hold them back. “You *what?*” I whisper, my voice cracking, and he looks at me with those sad hazel eyes that make me feel as if my heart is being torn in two.

“It doesn’t make it any better to say it aloud, Sasha. It will only make this harder. And *it* is hard for me, whether you believe me or not. I *want*—” He swallows again, as if he’s fighting back the things he wants to say, choosing his words carefully, and *I* want him to say them all, to let them all spill out in a torrent of desire.

But that’s not Max. It never has been.

“I want you safe,” he says finally. “You’re not truly safe with me. It was a mistake not to leave you with Viktor and have him take you to the safe house. I shouldn’t have let my own feelings, my desire to make you happy, get in the way of my better judgment. But I did, and now we’re here.”

“It wasn’t a mistake—”

“The fact that you nearly died means it was.” Max’s voice hardens slightly, taking on a sterner edge. “But we can’t change what happened, only what happens next. You have to listen to me, Sasha, if we’re going to make it out of this. You have to obey me. Do you understand?”

He’s never spoken to me quite so sharply before. But it doesn’t dampen my desire for him. If anything, it fans the flames even more, making the sensation deep in my belly tighter, my thighs squeezing together in response to his authoritative tone.

“Yes,” I whisper, and Max nods.

“The estate should be safe. While you were sick, I gave Tommas—one-half of the couple who manages the house here—instructions to triple the security. No one should be able to make it onto the estate without my knowing about it, unless they’re allowed to be here—which is only you and me. Once you’re well enough, you should be able to enjoy any part of the estate without worry, although if you want to go riding, I expect you to go with me or take at least two members of security with you—”

“Riding?” I interrupt him, my eyes going wide. “There are *horses* here?”

Max’s stern expression falters for a moment, a smile flickering at the corners of his lips. “Yes,” he says, his tone a touch more humorous for a split second. “A whole stable of them. When you’re well enough, I’ll give you a tour of the estate, including the stables.”

He pauses, glancing at the door. “I’m going to go get you some food. When I come back, we can talk more.”

I manage to hold onto the tears until he leaves, and then they fall, hot and fast, as I wipe at my face, spilling down my cheeks faster than I can dash them away.

What were you thinking? I berate myself inwardly, feeling like an idiot. *That just because he was sleeping next to you, on top of the blankets, no less, that meant he wanted to be with you? With no other information to go on?*

That was exactly what I'd thought, my heart and my hopes running away with my head before I'd stopped to think, and now I feel like the world's biggest fucking idiot.

You know how I feel about you. You know that I—

I clench my fists, wishing he'd finished the sentence so I didn't have to sit here and wonder what he meant, if he was going to say *you know that I love you*.

What does it matter, anyway? A fresh wave of tears spills down my cheeks. Even if he'd said it, he was right that it wouldn't change things—it would only make them harder for us both.

I love him. My therapist had made me doubt it, had almost convinced me that if I dated other men, I'd come to see that I only wanted Max because he was the only option I'd given myself. But every moment I'd spent with Nick had just shown me that all of the qualities I love in Max are because of who Max *is*.

He's selfless, devoted, loyal, and cares about me for who *I* am, not for what I could be, or for the perks of my job. He's a good man, down to his very core.

But all of those things are also the reasons he's holding me at arm's length—because he feels like allowing himself to love me, to be with me, means betraying who he is.

I don't know how to reconcile that. How to make him see that clinging to old vows won't make him happy. That it's not wrong to love me—or anyone, or to enjoy the pleasure that we both felt together.

I hate that anyone ever made him feel like it was, like he needs to cling to a past that isn't his any longer.

Footsteps sound on the stairs, and I wipe at my face again, trying to clear away any lingering signs that I've been crying. The door creaks open, and Max steps in, carrying a tray of food.

It almost makes me laugh aloud at the irony.

Breakfast in bed. He'd brought it to me, just not in the romantic way I'd imagined.

"What's so funny?" Max asks as he carries the tray to me, and I quickly shake my head.

"Nothing. You just look very domestic with that." I nod at the tray, which he arranges in front of me atop the blankets. The smell of the food—eggs cooked with cheese, tiny fruit pastries, smoked salmon, and a bowl of freshly cut fruit alongside glasses of water and orange juice that looks freshly squeezed—makes my stomach rumble and clench painfully, and my mouth water. I haven't eaten since that lunch, and I feel as if I'm starving. I *am* starving, technically.

"Eat slowly," Max cautions, as if he can hear my thoughts. "You'll hurt yourself if you eat too fast. I told Giana that plain eggs and toast might be better, right off the bat, but she's apparently been dying to cook for someone other than her and her husband, so she gave me this." He gestures at the tray.

"What about you?" I glance at him. "Shouldn't you eat?"

He points at the second fork, and I feel myself flush. "I did tell her to add a little extra for me."

"Oh." I wince, feeling embarrassed, and Max laughs.

"Don't worry. I'll let you eat first. Surprisingly, I'm not all that hungry. Just don't bite me when I try to get a forkful."

"I'm not a rabid dog!" I exclaim, laughing, but at the moment, I'm so hungry I almost feel like I *would* bite anyone who got between me and the food. I poke at the eggs, forking up a small bite and putting it in my mouth, and I nearly moan aloud at the taste of it. They're buttery and rich like the ones Caterina's cook makes, made with cream instead of milk, and the herbs and soft goat cheese mixed in is heaven. I close my

eyes, savoring it, and when I open them again, I can see Max's mouth twitching with humor.

"What?" I ask, a touch defensively, and he laughs.

"I've seen people have religious experiences that looked less ecstatic than you with that bite of egg." He smirks. "Is it that good? Maybe I'll—" He pokes his fork out teasingly towards the eggs, and I swat it away with mine.

"I'll tell you when I'm done," I snip teasingly at him, and Max laughs.

"Well, go ahead. I wouldn't want to be accused of starving you."

I'm so hungry that it takes a moment for it to sink in how easily we went back to our usual, friendly banter. It's not that I'm not glad that things aren't strained between us—they so easily could have been, after sleeping together, followed by my declaration of love and Max's rejection of it—but it's just another reminder of how *good* we are together, how good it all is. Our relationship, our chemistry, the sex—it's all easy and good and mindblowing, and it feels so wrong for it to be thrown away with both hands...for what?

A promise that's already been broken?/

"Tell me about your family." I glance at him, scooting the plate of food closer to his side of the tray as I cut off a sliver of smoked salmon, so that he can get to it more easily, too. "This is where you grew up, right?"

Max nods, taking a bite of eggs. "This is my family home, yes. I haven't been back here since my parents died."

"They're both gone?" I look at him sympathetically. "I'm so sorry."

"It's been a long time now." Max waves a hand as if to brush it away. "My father wasn't the warmest man, and my mother had plenty of issues of her own, but she tried to be a good wife and mother. My father broke her heart on a regular basis with his string of mistresses, and she poured all of that love into us—but it was a bit stifling at times. There was some

friction growing up, especially between her and my older brother, and my father accusing her of coddling us.”

“So you have two siblings?” I take another bite of egg, looking at one of the fruit pastries and trying to decide if eating it would be too taxing on my shriveled stomach. “One brother and a—”

“Another brother,” Max says, taking a sip of water. “My mother probably would have been a lot happier if she’d had a daughter, to be honest. At least one. But she ended up with three boys, which means she had no end of our father telling her she was ruining us by being too ‘soft.’”

“Your other brother was younger or older?”

Max’s mouth twists slightly and he sets down the pastry he’d picked up, his expression suddenly strained. “Younger,” he says finally. “I’m the middle child. Which is the issue with everything.”

“What do you mean?” I look at him curiously.

“The older was meant to inherit, of course. And in the Agosti family, the tradition has always been, for as long as the family name has existed, for the youngest son to enter the priesthood. That’s the way of things. The eldest inherits, the middle son—if there is one—remains to take up the eldest’s place if there are no heirs, and the youngest goes to the Church.”

“But that didn’t happen?”

Max shakes his head. “It didn’t.”

“And it went to you?”

He nods. “My younger brother, Arturo, and I were estranged for many years. Viktor helped me find where he was, at least a couple of years ago, and that he was alive. But I haven’t been in contact with him. I tried, but—” Max shrugs. “Those efforts went unanswered. He was working as a model in Europe, just as he wanted. I’m sure he has no desire to come back to the family that wanted to make sure his dreams were never realized.”

I blink at him, my appetite suddenly gone as the reality of Max's situation dawns on me. "So you were never meant to be a priest. It should have been your brother. Weren't you ever—"

"Angry?" Max presses his lips together. "What good would that have done? Art chose his path, and I chose mine. I chose my family. I chose duty over my own happiness. *That* has always been my life, Sasha. My path."

And it's not going to change. I can hear what he's not saying. That he's lived a lifetime of duty, and it won't stop now. That this is who he is—who he's always been.

It breaks my heart more than ever, because it didn't *have* to be this way.

What does it matter? I tell myself fiercely as I stab another bite of food. *If he'd lived the life he was meant to as the middle son, you'd never have met him. He'd be married to someone else now, and he would never have come into your life. So which is better?*

I don't have an answer for that.

"You need to rest," Max says finally, when it's clear I won't be able to eat anymore for now. "Get some sleep, Sasha. You're still recovering. I'll come and check on you."

He leans over, and for one breathless moment, I almost think he's going to kiss me. He does, in a way, his lips brushing over my forehead. I feel my breath catch at the touch, my heart beating wildly, but I know it's going to stop there.

And it does. He takes the tray, smiling at me reassuringly. "You're safe here, Sasha. I won't let anything else happen."

I believe him. But as he leaves, I know he can't keep me from being hurt, not entirely. He can do his best to stop anyone else from hurting me—but he can't stop the hurt that comes from seeing him every day, being so close to him, and knowing what we're missing.

The hurt that comes from loving someone I can never have.

MAX

The relief I felt when I woke to see that Sasha was awake, too, was palpable.

The last week has been one of the hardest of my life. I'd wondered every day, up until yesterday when she seemed to take a turn for the better, if that day would be the one where I would lose her. She'd suffered through days of fever, an inability to keep anything down other than a little water and bone broth, and full-body shakes that bordered on seizures. I'd been terrified for her, and my reticence about Dr. Guerera had turned rapidly into my relying on him to save her. He'd proved to be knowledgeable and competent, but he hadn't been sure if she'd make it, either.

"Giana?" As I reach the bottom of the stairs, I call out, and she appears instantly, as if my voice summoned her by magic. "Can you call Dr. Guerera and let him know that Sasha is awake? She's resting again now, but I'm sure he'll want to come by later and check on her." I hand her the tray, feeling my exhaustion suddenly down to my bones. "I need to shower."

I haven't showered or changed my clothes in days. I'm honestly amazed that Sasha even wanted to be near me, let alone touch me. Even when Giana or Tommas offered to take up my spot at her bedside, I hadn't been able to pull myself away.

This is my fault. So I'd kept to my vigil. I'd stayed with her, praying, begging, promising—and she'd woken up. She's

far from a hundred percent, but she'll live. And now comes the time for me to keep the vows I made all over again.

I know she won't understand. I saw the hope in her eyes when I woke up, and the devastation there when I reiterated that nothing had changed. I know what she wanted me to say.

I wish you understood how hard it is for me to walk away, every time. It had taken everything in me not to tell her plainly how I feel—that I *love* her in a way that I've never experienced before and never expected to.

I love her down to my bones, to the depths of my soul. And it's for that reason that I can't let her know. I can't keep her here with me, bind her tighter to this deadly, dangerous world that I inhabit. Whether I take up the Agosti name or not, it will always follow me.

Sighing, I strip off the dirty clothes, tossing them into a hamper as I turn on the hot water in the cream stone-tiled shower. I don't feel at home here, regardless of the fact that this estate is where I grew up. It feels too formal, too cold, a place with no warmth or love in it. It feels like a museum of art and books and rugs and materials, a monolith of an old way of doing things and an old way of living. I find myself longing for my small guest house on Viktor's property, sparsely comfortable, but far more to my taste.

I might bear the name of an old-world mafia family, but they made sure to send me out of it, and when they tried to call me back, I no longer felt as if I belonged here. I feel the same way now.

I step into the shower, groaning as the heat hits my tight muscles. Giana made sure the master suite was stocked with anything I might need. There's a plethora of products in the shower for me. Still, I stand there for a long time before I actually wash anything, wallowing in the heat and steam. It feels as if it's washing away a week's worth of stress and tension, all of the built-up fear. By the time I actually wash and step out of the shower to dry off, I feel slightly more human again—as well as better able to take on what's ahead of me.

It's not going to go unnoticed that I've come home. Having to reach out for extra security means that other members of the Family will know that I'm here. Then they'll wonder if that means I've finally decided I'm ready to claim my inheritance.

If I'm going to be an Agosti in more than just name.

I have absolutely no intention of that, of course. But I know I need to tread carefully. Not only with the other members of the Family, if they reach out or try to make overtures, but with Viktor as well. Neither he nor Levin understands my reasoning for avoiding my inheritance. After the attack on Sasha, they will understand it even less.

I hadn't expected Giana and Tommas to be waiting expectantly for me. However, when I came back downstairs freshly showered and dressed.

"So, does this mean you'll be staying?" Giana asks without preamble.

"Giana!" Her husband glowers at her, his white-grey eyebrows drawing together, but she ignores him.

"I didn't want to bother you with it while the *bambina* was in such danger. But you should let us know what you're thinking, *tesoro*. We haven't seen you in years, nor heard from you—not a thing! And then you just appear, like that!" She snaps her fingers, and I jump a little.

"With a girl in tow, no less. A girl that you say you're not betrothed or married to." Her lips purse. "So, are you staying? Is she—"

I take a deep breath, fixing Giana with my sternest expression—which is difficult, since she's known me since I was in diapers. "First, as I've said before, Sasha is here for her own protection. We're not together. She works for someone who has, until now, ensured my protection while I was in the States. The danger I'm in has put her in danger too, and that's why we're both here. Not because of anything—between us."

Giana raises an eyebrow, but her husband touches her arm, and she lets out a huffing sigh. "That doesn't answer my other question, *tesoro*."

“We’re staying until the danger is past. When Viktor lets me know that it’s safe for Sasha and me to return to New York, that’s what we’ll be doing. I’m not taking up residence here or anything else to do with the Agosti name or fortune or family business, if that’s what you’re asking.”

I try to say it as kindly as I can, while remaining firm, but it’s clear that my answer isn’t what Giana was hoping to hear. Her face falls slightly, sadness entering her slightly milky blue eyes.

“We’re not always going to be here to take care of the estate, *tesoro*, Tommas and me. What will you do then, when we are gone? What will happen to this beautiful old house and all of your family’s legacy?”

“I hope that’s not something I have to figure out for a very long time,” I tell her gently. “But when the time comes, I will address it. In the meantime, I hope that I won’t need to be in your hair for very long.”

“Oh, *tesoro*.” Giana’s sadness seems to spread across her features, aging her and making them look heavier than before. “You have never been a burden. But we missed you.”

“And I missed you.” I step forward, giving her the hug that I know she’s been longing to give me. As my mother endured all my father’s badgering all those years ago, Giana was always on her side. She supported my mother, kept her sane, and I owe Giana a great deal. Without her and Tommas’ loving care, this house, the grounds, and the vineyards would be a mausoleum instead of a mostly functioning estate.

“I need to make a call, however,” I add, extricating myself from her embrace at last. “Let me know when Dr. Guerera gets here.”

“I will,” Giana promises, and I make my way away from them both, towards the quiet and privacy of the study.

It still feels like my father’s domain in here, like I’m a little boy sneaking in instead of the man to whom all this should belong now. The decor is all him. Heavy leather and wood and dark rugs stretch over the hardwood floors. In front

of the fireplace, a gilded bar cart with heavy crystal glasses atop it is next to the leather chairs facing it. If I breathe in, to me, it still even smells like him, although I know that's a memory and not reality.

I've never felt as if I belonged in the huge leather chair behind his desk, as if any of this was *mine*. It feels like playacting as I now sink into one of the chairs in front of the fireplace, eyeing the whiskey despite the early hour as I reach for my phone.

"Max," Viktor answers on the first ring. "Let me conference Levin in—give me one second."

I hear the sound of papers shuffling and doors closing, a murmured request for privacy before Viktor comes back to the phone. "I haven't heard from you in a week, Max," he says grimly, and there's a touch of remonstrance to his tone. "What's going on?"

"Quite a bit." My voice is equally as grim as I fill him in on the past week—our arrival in Italy, Sasha's poisoning, and the touch-and-go week that followed. "It's clear that bringing her here was a mistake."

"I'm not going to argue with that," Viktor says dryly. "But the decision has been made. What steps have you made to make sure that you're safe on the estate?"

"I've tripled security. I reached out to the D'Agnacio family and requested some men from their security service."

"And you think they can be trusted?"

"They were close with my father. I think the Agosti name still carries some weight."

"But not a weight you intend to leverage." Viktor's tone implies that he already knows the answer, but it doesn't lessen the disappointment I hear behind it.

"No. I have no intention of picking up where my father left off—only laying low until Sasha and I can come home."

"This threat has to be dealt with first—and thoroughly." Viktor pauses. "You know that you mean a great deal to me,

Max. You've become a part of the family, just as Sasha has. But I have a wife and children to think about, who have already been through too much. We agreed that if danger came too close to my doorstep—if someone threatened you who didn't respect the rules of protection—that you would have to put distance between us."

"And I have."

"Indeed. But that distance won't end until I can be sure that the threat near my family has. Is that understood?"

"Of course." I let out a long breath. "Viktor, I don't want to see any harm come to Caterina or the children either. I would never want to endanger them. I don't want to endanger Sasha either, which is why—" I swallow hard. "I should never have let her talk me into this."

"No, you shouldn't." Viktor pauses. "I assume it was because of—what happened the night before you left? That things have changed between the two of you?"

"We did—" I hesitate. "We did spend the night together. And I did let it cloud my judgment. But no, things haven't changed. I told Sasha as much. It—it was also a mistake. I've made too many of them recently."

"Christ, man," Levin cuts in, his voice rough. "I hope you didn't fucking say that to her. A *mistake*? Has no one taught you how to talk to women?"

"I was a priest, so no," I tell him dryly. "But of course, I didn't tell her it was a mistake—just that it can't happen again. It was one night. You should know how those go—you've had plenty of them."

Viktor coughs on the other end, and I can hear him turning away, muffling laughter.

"Funny," Levin grunts. "I had a wife, too, once. A wife I can't see myself ever replacing with another woman or finding anyone else who could hold a candle to her. A wife I still miss to this day. So I take care of my needs and my woman for the nights—and move on. I'm not the one throwing away a future with both hands."

The line goes silent for a moment, and then Viktor cuts in.

“Alright. Max, I need you to stay in touch with me. I know you’ve been busy worrying over Sasha, but a week without an update is too long.” He pauses. “I’ve talked with Luca about all of this. I know you don’t like that—us talking about you without you present, but it was necessary. His territory borders mine, and it’s likely this fuck looking for you is going to move through it. That being said—understand me here, Max. Luca agrees that what you’re doing is foolish.”

“Why am I not surprised?”

“And I’m not laughing,” Viktor says sharply. “I’ve given you my protection for a long time now, Max. I’ve had your back. Now Luca thinks—and I’m not entirely not of this mind myself—that it’s time you gave as good as you’ve gotten. The Agosti fortune and influence are at your fingertips. I have connections to the old world through Caterina, but Luca’s family is newer and not as established as hers. He thinks another old family name allied with us would be a great boon for all of us—and again...I agree with him. The Agosti name holds weight in all of Europe and beyond. The three of us together could do great things.”

I can feel my patience fraying. “I don’t want to do great things,” I snap, my voice low and harsh. “I want to make up for the wrong I’ve already done. I want to serve others in whatever capacity I can. I want to help, not destroy. All wealth and power does is eat the men who hold it alive, from the inside out.”

“Is that so?” Viktor’s voice darkens. “Wouldn’t you say I’ve gotten better since you’ve known me, Max? Not worse? That was Caterina’s goal, after all. I’m sure she’d be disappointed to hear you think otherwise.”

“You’re the exception.”

“And Luca? Liam? Connor? Are they men rotting from the inside out from their wealth and power?” The sarcasm drips from Viktor’s voice. “You don’t want to speak so rashly about the men who are still your friends, Max.”

“Luca sells party drugs,” I say tightly. “Addiction on demand. Liam and Connor traffick weapons—sure, some of them are in support of the Irish Cause, or what’s left of it. Still, the rest go to cartels and warlords terrorizing their countries. None of you are left without blood on your hands. And I want no part of it.”

“Yours are plenty bloody too, *kanka*,” Levin growls. “That’s how you got into this *blya* mess.”

“There is blood on my hands, sure. And I don’t plan to add to it. I want to spend the time I have trying to fucking wash it clean.” I can hear the anger seeping into my own voice, an anger that I don’t usually allow free.

“With the Agosti name and connections at your command, you could better protect Sasha with that influence,” Viktor says smoothly. “You’re cutting yourself off at the feet, Max. Relying on nothing but your own capabilities to protect what you love most. And where has that gotten you in the past?”

“Careful.” I can feel my other hand curling into a fist, my muscles tensing with rising anger. “You’re close to crossing a line.”

“Priests abjure violence.” Levin’s voice is equally smooth. “You broke that vow already, Max. You broke your vow of chastity. Now you cling to the vow of poverty—for what? To prove a point?”

“Because I don’t want the future that my family name holds for me!” I snap angrily. “They demanded I enter the priesthood, so I did. I put on the collar for my family, and I took it off for them. Now they want to hassle me even from the grave? No. They chose my path for me, and all I can do is follow it to the end.”

“It’s not all you can do. And you’d be a better man if you forged your own.” Levin’s voice holds a thick, heavy disappointment that hurts to hear, even through my anger. “Viktor, I’m getting off now. You can fill me in later.”

There’s a click, and I hate that I can feel what that means, that Levin’s abrupt departure holds so much weight.

“You could be a man worthy of her,” Viktor says quietly. “A man who could truly protect her, give her the life she deserves.”

“That has nothing to do with money or prestige.” My voice is tight, and harsh. “I won’t keep breaking my vows, no matter the temptation. And Sasha deserves better than the life you forced her into.”

“Be that as it may.” Viktor goes quiet for a moment, and I think that maybe I’ve gone too far—spoken too rashly.

“We’ll continue looking for the man and his cohorts here,” Viktor continues. “And I’ll keep you updated. Do the same for me, please. Any changes, any information—anything at all, call me. We’ll put an end to this.”

There’s silence for a moment, and I’m not unaware of the trust he’s placing in me—the gift that this is. I’ve said enough on this call out of frustration and anger at how he and the others are pushing me to make him break ties with me altogether, and I know it. But he’s not doing that, and I’m grateful.

“I’ll tell you if anything at all happens of interest,” I assure him finally. “For now, I’ll just focus on keeping Sasha safe here.”

“You do that.”

When I’m finished with the call, I stay in the study for a long while, looking around. I try to imagine myself here for longer than just the amount of time it will take to eliminate the danger—of making a home here. I try to imagine a future where this was mine, not just in theory, but in reality.

I imagine stripping away the lingering echoes of my father in this room and making it my own. I imagine taking this house and turning it into a place I would *want* to live, the way Caterina did with Viktor’s home—and it’s incredibly hard. I leave the study, walking down the long hall to the huge room used for galas and parties, and I see the portraits of my family hanging on the walls, looking down at me.

This place didn't feel like a home when I lived here. For all that the priesthood wasn't my choice, I'd been glad that it gave me an excuse to leave that didn't involve making a choice to divulge from what my family wanted. It was, to me, better than the life that would have awaited me here—marrying into another family and performing the role of the spare. I would have had children in case the line had to pass to me and taken a lower position in the family business, and I would have been bored out of my mind.

The priesthood, by and large, hadn't been all that much more stimulating day to day—but I'd felt I was helping. Every person whose life I'd touched, I'd felt I'd made a difference. I'd done something real, tangible, that wasn't lining my family or some other family's pockets with more money than they could spend in four generations, that wasn't giving the Families more power than they already had. I'd felt as if I had a purpose.

The need to serve my family once again—to avenge my brother—had taken that from me. And that's what Levin and Viktor can't seem to understand—that the vows I've taken, and broken, and taken again, are all that I have left of the life that made me feel as if I had a reason for existing in it, beyond the selfish gratification of others.

I wasn't made for the world that the dons and *pakhans* and Kings of these families live in. I can't ever fully escape.

But Sasha can—and I want that for her.

I'll do everything I can to make sure she has that.

SASHA



It's a week before I feel well enough to get out of bed, but it feels much longer than that. With the worst of the danger past, Max puts distance between us—and as much as I want to pretend I don't know the reason for that, of course I do. He brings me food at regular intervals, makes sure I have water and that I take my medicine, and leaves me stacks of books to read, none of which I can concentrate on.

The days that I'm stuck convalescing drag on, endless and interminable. It makes me prickly and irritable, and I try not to take it out on Max, even though I'm often upset that he won't stay and talk with me. I know he's avoiding the intimacy that long afternoons talking in bed would create between us, something that might turn into a different kind of intimacy. Still, I also know that he has as little to do here as I do. We're both trapped in a strange sort of purgatory, floating along until we can go back home.

I'd hoped this would be the place where our relationship would flourish. I'd hoped the solitude *would* foster an unbreakable intimacy between us, turning our friendship with one night of benefits into much, much more.

The opposite has happened instead.

The day that I finally feel well enough to get out of bed, the morning after a visit from Dr. Guerera, during which he assured me I was showing all the signs of good health again, feels like being set free. I wake up to the sun shining through the window and the sound of birdsong outside. I stretch like

Cinderella waking up in the old cartoon, feeling as if the morning is a new beginning. The aches and pains of my illness have mostly faded, leaving only an echo where they throbbed through me before, and Max promised me a tour of the estate once I was feeling better. I'll get to spend time with him, and that means a perfect day.

Over the last week, the housekeeper Giana has helped me to the shower any number of times—meaning we're on far more personal terms than I would have liked this early on—but I hadn't really gotten to appreciate it until today, when I'm able to get there on my own. It's one of those things I'd always taken for granted until now. I stand there for a moment, curling my toes against the sandy-colored heated tiles until I finally walk to the glassed-in shower and turn on the hot water.

The entire room is luxurious beyond belief, even for someone who already lives in a mansion. The countertops are marble, the walls more of the sandy-colored tile edged in gold, and there's a jacuzzi tub that looks as if it could fit six people. The towels are thick and fluffy, the soaps and toiletries in sleek containers, and it all looks like the most elegant hotel I could ever imagine staying in.

The shower itself is heavenly, with triple showerheads and a steady fall of hot water that I could stay under forever—and I do for a long time. It's not that much different from the one at home, but after so many quick, dizzy showers before I stumbled back to bed to keep convalescing, this one feels like a religious experience.

That thought drags mine back to Max, and I bite my lip. I don't want to push him. He's made it clear that he wants to keep our friendship just that, and I don't want to ruin it—to lose him altogether. He means too much to me, even if keeping me at arm's length feels like torture after what happened between us.

I'll be good. I won't flirt. I won't push. I won't try to take things further, even if there's tension.

I know the first domino that started all of this was that afternoon in Max's house, when I'd kissed him. The second

domino had been me going down on my knees to suck his cock. And then they'd all tumbled from there.

Max had been just as willing, just as complicit. But I'd started it—and he'd been the one to end it.

So I have to leave it there, or risk losing one of my best friends.

I linger in the shower until the water starts to cool, taking my time drying off. I find a flowy sundress in my suitcase, cream colored and made of light material with a teal paisley pattern, with a halter neck and a long skirt. I pile my wet hair atop my head and peer in the mirror, deciding I look a little pale still but not as sickly as before, and then make my way towards the stairs.

I'm unsure of where anyone will be or what anyone is doing, the house already seeming far too large for four people and the security staff that always seems to be invisible—on purpose, I'm sure. But halfway down the stairs, I smell the scent of breakfast cooking, and my stomach rumbles.

I expect to find Giana in the kitchen cooking, but I stop in the doorway, startled, when I see that it's Max at the stove instead.

He doesn't see me at first. The stove is a flat-top range built into a long black granite countertop with gleaming dark wood cabinets above it. There are very few appliances on the expansive counter, but there are a number of ingredients scattered to Max's right, between him and the huge stainless steel refrigerator. Even more are on the huge island, around which there are several mahogany wood stools with velvet cushions. I step forward tentatively, clearing my throat as I walk toward the island.

Max turns sharply, and a giggle escapes me before I can stop myself. He's wearing an apron over his standard black pants and shirt, nothing particularly funny, but something about the sight startles me so thoroughly that I can't help laughing anyway.

“What’s so funny?” he demands, but his mouth is twitching too, and I dissolve into further giggles as I lean against the island.

“I’ve never seen a man cook before.” It’s true. I haven’t. Food was served cafeteria buffet-style in the orphanage, such as it was, and none of the fathers in my foster families would have deigned to cook a meal themselves. The idea of Viktor cooking is laughable. I’ve never seen a man cook for himself, and while I’m as startled by my reaction to it as Max is, it also warms me toward him that much more.

“Well, I had to learn how to take care of myself,” he says with a smirk, turning back to whatever it is that he’s cooking that smells so incredible. “I don’t live the life of a pampered mafia son or a priest any longer, with food always being made for me.” He winks at me, and I feel myself flush. “I suppose I can always come up to the main house for a meal when I’m home, but I don’t like feeling like a burden.” He shrugs. “It turns out that it’s a good feeling, knowing I can do for myself. Makes me feel less helpless to my circumstances.”

“I can’t cook at all,” I admit, pushing myself up onto one of the chairs and leaning my elbows on the island. “I never learned as a foster child, of course—my foster parents always wanted me ‘out of the kitchen and out from underfoot’ or else had me doing too many other chores. And then, of course, living with Viktor and Caterina—there’s no need. I think Hannah would shoo me out too, if I ever tried to learn.” I flush deeper, a little embarrassed by the admission. “I suppose if I ever do date, I’ll have to learn how.”

“Why?” Max glances back at me, frowning. “Sasha, any man worthy of you will be able to cook a meal for you both.” He picks up a spatula, flipping the contents of the pan onto a waiting plate. “Learn if you want to—I’d be happy to show you, actually—but only if you want to, not because you feel like you need to in order to get a date. A man who demands you do the cooking and cleaning isn’t worth your time.” He walks over to the island, setting a plate down in front of me. “Here you go.”

I stare down at the plate. There’s a fragrant omelet, several strips of medium-cooked bacon, and a pile of chopped fruit

next to it. “Those definitely don’t sound like the words of a pampered mafia son,” I tease him as he returns to the stove. “Makes it hard to believe you were born into this kind of family at all.”

“Good,” Max says, cracking more eggs into the pan. “Nothing about my childhood here made me want to be like my father, or my brothers. If anything, I just felt sorry for my mother and what she endured.”

I glance curiously up at him, taking a bite of bacon. He pushes the eggs around his pan and then pours a glass of juice from a pitcher, bringing it over to me. “You work for Viktor, though,” I say carefully, as he sets the glass down. “Is that better?”

“I work for Viktor because I owe him.” Max walks back to the stove, his voice flat. “Not because I want to be a part of any mafia, Bratva, or another mob—as an heir or a lackey.”

I consider that for a moment, chewing my food thoughtfully. Most men who grew up the heirs to a powerful family name, even as a second son, wouldn’t deign to work under another man like Max works for Viktor, running his errands to the other families and negotiating for him at times, smoothing ruffled feathers at others. It says something about Max’s humility that not only does he recognize what he owes Viktor for the protection he’s offered, but that he doesn’t resent having to follow through on it.

Max fills his own plate with food, coming to sit across from me at the island, the pitcher of juice between us for refills.

“What do you want your life to be, then?” I ask softly, wondering if it’s too personal a question—but how could it be, when the man sitting across from me has been literally *inside* of me? “If you don’t want your family name, or to work for another family, and you weren’t actually meant to be a priest—”

“I liked the priesthood,” Max says quietly, taking a bite of his food, not quite meeting my eyes. “I can admit I wasn’t altogether pleased with the idea at first, when my brother

absconded to Milan and then to Paris, well away from my father's influence and reach. It sounded like another cage—more ritual and rules and being beholden to men older than me who thought that meant they had power over me. I grew up in the Church, of course, and I never felt any calling to it or even any strong belief that would make me want to serve it.”

He pauses, taking another bite. I wish he would look at me as he speaks, but he seems unable to do so, as if he's afraid to see the look on my face—the disappointment at hearing that he wasn't glad to leave. But of course, I already knew that about him.

“It was different once I went to seminary,” Max continues. “Almost immediately, really. I always loved learning and studying, so the classes were no hardship. The faith aspect took longer for me to come around to, to feel any real pull beyond going through the motions, but in time, I felt that too. Whether it was a product of my surroundings or something real—” he shrugs. “I can't say. But what I found in the priesthood, aside from any notions of faith in divinity or theology, was a faith in humanity that I hadn't known I could believe in.”

He clears his throat, finally looking up to meet my eyes. “I grew up with a father who cheated on my mother, a broken marriage held together by the glue of family alliances, surrounded by criminals who would kill and torture and manipulate for more money and power. I saw nothing in humanity to believe in. After I left, I saw a different side of people. I saw the opportunity to help and heal instead—and I saw good in others that I had never seen before. It showed me the possibilities for forgiveness, for happiness.” Max presses his lips together, his thoughts clearly somewhere far away. “I found peace away from the violence and wealth and power. And then—I was thrust back into it.”

“So if you could go back, you would.” My heart aches at the thought, the knowledge that there's nothing here, not even me, that would hold Max back from returning to his service as a priest if he had the opportunity. Why, I don't know. He's

made it amply clear that whatever desire he has for me, he doesn't intend to give in to it again.

Max looks at me, and I see him hesitate. "Yes," he says finally, and drops his gaze to his plate.

Don't let it hurt you, I tell myself fiercely, but I can't help it. It burns through my chest as I blink back tears, returning to my own food. "This is delicious," I manage, forcing my words to be even and calm, without the emotion I feel churning inside of me. "So, how did *you* learn to cook?"

Max laughs, a little self-consciously. "I got a meal-delivery service for a while," he admits. "One of those things where they send you pre-cut ingredients in bags and a very thorough recipe. After a while, I picked up enough to branch out on my own. Now, I just cook for myself when I can. Of course, I still have to indulge myself in Hannah's cooking now and then. It far exceeds my capabilities."

"She really is amazing," I agree, taking a final bite of my cheese-stuffed omelet. "But this is a good substitute until we can get back home."

"Speaking of home—" Max pushes out his chair, reaching for my plate and his and carrying them to the sink. "Let me wash up, and I'll take you on that tour I promised you."

"I can help." I get up quickly, joining him next to the sink. I reach for a dish, and he promptly snatches it out of my hand, his fingers warmly brushing mine as he does so. He turns towards me a little, the close proximity meaning we brush against one another, and I jump back as if he burned me, feeling my breath catch in my throat.

"Just sit," Max admonishes. "You're still recovering, and all I'm doing is loading the dishwasher—"

He steps forward to open it just as I try to go past him, and we bump directly into one another. For a brief moment, all of each of us is touching the other—my breasts brushing against his hard chest, hips to hips, and as if he does it without thinking, his hands drop to my hips, holding me there for the briefest second.

I have a moment's wild hope that he's going to pull me closer. My heart is hammering in my chest, my blood spiked and rushing hotly under my skin as I look up into his hazel eyes, knowing my own are wide. I want to touch him, to kiss him, the desire in me like a wildfire. I have a sudden vivid image of him lifting me onto the counter and repeating our desperate kisses in his bathroom that day—the first time he kissed me.

He moves me aside gently, stepping past me to the dishwasher, and the disappointment that lances through me is as icy as the desire had been heated. I press my hand to my mouth, turning away so that he can't see me, blinking back tears.

I can't keep letting him affect me this way. There's no telling how long we'll be here or what damage could be done to our relationship. But I can't seem to stop.

I'm in love with Maximilian Agosti—and I know it's going to be the downfall of us both.

SASHA



I end up going back upstairs to change and collect myself while Max finishes cleaning up the kitchen, changing into jeans and a t-shirt, and boots to walk around the estate. I splash cold water over my face, chasing away the redness left over, and pull my hair back into a loose ponytail, hoping to look as casual and unconcerned as I want to feel.

I'm curious about the estate, but mostly, I just want more time with him. This is the first day I've been fully conscious and felt well since arriving here, and it feels strange to be divorced from my usual routine. There are no babies to help distract and play with, no children to help dress or feed or get off to school, no sticky hands or small laughing voices or crying to soothe. It's just me—and it hasn't been just me since I left Russia and ended up in Viktor's household. Max is the only familiar thing here, and even aside from my feelings for him, I can feel myself clinging to that familiarity.

I find him in the living room when I come down, thumbing titles on a bookshelf by the fireplace. I clear my throat as I walk in, and he turns instantly, smiling at the sight of me.

“That looks more comfortable for walking around the estate in, for sure.” He slides the book he was looking at back onto the shelf and strides toward me. “Shall we?”

We go out through the kitchen and the backdoor onto a large stone deck. To the right of it, there's a huge pool, surrounded by stone and lounge chairs and cabanas, complete

with a fire pit and a bar at the far end. There's a small villa-like structure next to it, and I nod toward it. "What's that?"

"The indoor heated pool," Max says with a smirk, and I cover my mouth with one hand, laughing.

"That seems a little excessive, doesn't it?"

"Very," he agrees. "The Agosti family was well known for their wealth, and you can see it here, plain as day."

We head down off of the deck, out towards the sprawling estate beyond the house. Max leads me to an older model Range Rover that's parked on the road leading past the mansion, and I frown.

"I thought we were going to walk?"

"We will," he promises. "But it's a lot of ground to cover, and you're not well enough to walk *that* much yet. I'm not sure either of us would be up to walking it normally. It's *acres*."

I give in, climbing up into the grey-green vehicle and buckling in as Max slides in behind the wheel. He starts it up and nods towards the far distance, where I can see the dotting of the vineyards over the field. "We'll drive out there first, and then I'll show you the stables."

We pass a large stone house with a small garden next to it on our way out to the vineyards, and I look curiously at it. "What's that for?"

"The groundskeepers' house," Max says. "Like what the house I live in on Viktor's property used to be. It's not used now; Giana and Tommas have rooms in the main house. It was the least I could do. It's kept up like everything else here, but no one lives there."

"Can we go in?"

Max's lips press together. "There's really nothing to see; it's empty."

I have a feeling that I know what he's thinking, and I don't press him. It wasn't my intention to remind him of the day I was in his house with him, at Viktor's. Still, now all I can

think of is going inside that small old groundskeeper's cottage, of standing in the close, warm darkness with Max and feeling him take me in his arms again.

Will I ever want anyone or anything as badly as I want him? I can't imagine it. Everything in me feels drawn to him, as if it's begging for him, calling to him, and it's all I can do to keep the desire on a leash. It's the first time I've ever *wanted*, the first time I've felt desire, the first time my body has been my own to give instead of being used against me like a weapon. I wasn't a virgin that night with Max, but I was in the ways that mattered.

I was his first, and he was the first that I chose.

I can't come to terms with the idea of it being over so soon—or being over at all.

“The vineyards are beautiful this time of year,” Max says, entirely oblivious to the thoughts running through my head. “It's getting close to the harvest in August—if we're still here, we'll be able to help. It's something I always wanted to do—to get out there and really experience it, but of course, back then, growing up here, I wasn't allowed.”

August? I try to imagine being here with him that long, alone, hiding out with nothing and no one but each other for company. *We'll either give in again or implode.*

The images that come with Max's description of the grape harvest that he's always wanted to take part in only make things more complicated. My romantic mind takes the description of picking grapes down long rows into buckets and later squashing them underfoot—not all of them, just a ceremonial amount before the rest are sent off to a more effective method—and turns it into a montage of Max and I doing just that together, my hand holding a straw hat atop my head to block out the Italian sun as he feeds me a grape, kissing me with juice on both of our lips. I saw a movie once with a grape harvest as a part of the plot, and in my head, it's me that Max picks up out of the wine-crushing barrel, carrying me into the nearest bedroom as our desire spills over beyond containing, his hands pushing up my thin sundress, the sheets

stained with grape juice as he slides into me, fingers laced with mine, lips pressed against mine.

“—and over there, there’s the stables. We’ll go after we’re done walking around the vineyards—Sasha?”

I break out of my reverie, cheeks flushed to see Max looking at me concernedly, the car idling. We’re stopped at the end of the vineyard rows, and he’s waiting for me. “Are you alright?” he asks, and I let out a breath, feeling embarrassment creep up my neck.

“Yes—of course. Let’s go.”

Max turns off the car, and we step out into the sunlight and fresh air. It’s invigorating, and I suck in lungfuls of it as we walk down the rows of vines, Max gesturing and explaining as we go. I always preferred the more country setting of Viktor’s estate to the city, but this is another level, an openness and freedom that makes me almost wish we could stay here forever, if that didn’t mean being so far away from the people that I’ve come to see as my family.

“It’s beautiful.” I glance over at Max as we walk. He’s unbuttoned his shirt a little more, two buttons down from the collar, his shirtsleeves rolled up, and what I want to say is that *he’s* beautiful, handsome in a way that defies explanation. That seeing him out here like this, alone with me, makes my heart race in a way it never has before. His hair is messy from the light wind, his olive skin ruddy from the sun, his hands shoved in his pockets, and as much as he’s said he doesn’t feel at home here, he looks it. He looks like a country gentleman, like he belongs in this place. I have a sudden rush of wishing that I could show him that he could have all this in a different way, that it doesn’t have to mean becoming his father or his brothers.

But what do I know? I’m not really a part of this world, and I don’t really know what any of that means. I’m a poverty-born girl from Russia. I fell into this world by accident, through events out of my control. I’m the fucking nanny. Who am I to tell him any of this?

“Are you alright?” Max glances at me, asking me that same question, I realize, in far too short a span of time. “You seem far away.”

I hesitate, not sure what to say. I know if I blame it on being tired, we’ll be headed back to the house in no time at all, and I’m not ready to leave the sunshine and open air behind just yet. “I’m just taking it all in,” I say quickly, nodding out over the expansive vineyard. “I’ve never seen anything like this before. I could stay out here forever, I feel like.”

“This was always one of my favorite parts of the estate,” Max agrees. “If I hadn’t been pushed into the priesthood, I would have asked my father to have me oversee the wine business. I always had an interest in it.”

“So your family has a wine label, as well as producing grapes?”

Max nods. “We have quite a few bottles in the wine cellar. One of these nights, we’ll do a tasting. How does that sound?”

“That sounds like fun.” It *does*, but I wonder just how good of an idea it is to get tipsy on wine with Max, late at night alone in some part of the huge old house. “We can play the same game we did at the bar that night.”

Max chuckles. “Pick your poison, just with wine instead of liquor.”

“Exactly.” I resist the urge to loop my arm through his as we walk back to the Rover, and a small twinge of regret pings through me. I wouldn’t change what happened between us, but a few weeks ago, I wouldn’t have hesitated to do so. It would have been casual, between friends—but now any touch, any closeness, feels laced with meaning and danger that it didn’t have before. We created a *before* and *after* when we slept together, and we can’t ever go back to how things were before we crossed that line. I can’t touch Max casually any longer. It feels like a loss—like all that’s happened recently is that I’ve lost more and more of what we had, a careful wall erected between us.

Max points out other features of the property as we drive towards the stables—a large pond that could almost be a lake, a greenhouse surrounded with manicured gardens, and a trail leading away from the stables to more of the property beyond, more untamed but suitable for riding through.

“Have you ever ridden before?” he asks casually as he parks the Rover in front of the barn, and I shake my head, laughing.

“Absolutely not,” I tell him between giggles. Just the idea that I would have ever had an opportunity like that is hilarious to me somehow. “I’ve never even *touched* a horse.”

“Well, we’ll start with that,” Max says with a smirk. “And then, when you’re a bit better and feeling stronger, we’ll go out on a ride together. Maybe in the arena at first, and then out on the trails.”

“I bet I could pick it up quickly.” I slip out of the Rover as he opens the door, landing on the dirt a few inches in front of him, and for one brief second, I hear him suck in a hiss of a breath, and his eyes land on mine. I *feel* the tension in him, and it takes me a moment to understand it, but when I do, I can feel the heat flare between us, everything grinding to a halt for a moment.

Max on his back in my bed, head sinking into the pillows, black hair tousled around his face—

His hands reaching up to cup mine as I looked down at him, his expression taut and needy with desire as my thighs tightened around his hips, sinking down onto him—

The sound of my name on his lips as I felt him fill me up, as I moved atop him, my fingers tangling with his and holding his hands above his head, pleasure dragging through us both, over and under, until it consumed us—

Max clears his throat, turning away as he gestures to the barn. I can see a flush at his collar, a quick pulse beating at the edge of his throat, but I pretend not to. I pretend not to know what we were both just thinking about, what a simple comment had reminded him of so easily.

Inside, the barn smells earthy, like hay and warm fur and sweet grain, and I breathe in, feeling an odd sort of comfort in the cool, dimmer light of the aisle. I hear the sounds of the horses whickering as several of them come to the edges of the stalls, curious as to whether or not anyone is bringing them something.

“Hang on a second,” Max says, and he opens a door to our right, slipping inside before returning with a handful of small, wheat-colored squares.

“You can give them treats if you like.” He hands one of them to me. “Watch me first. Most of them are fine to approach, just be careful, and stop if I tell you to. I’m sure there’s some here now that I don’t know as well.”

There’s a pretty horse in one of the first stalls, light-reddish with a white stripe down its face, and it stomps a hoof as I step closer. “Is this one fine?” I ask, and Max nods, grinning.

“Basil is a good boy. Here, watch how I give him a treat.” He palms one of the squares, holding his hand out palm-up with his fingers curved slightly backward, giving the horse a flat surface to eat off of. “You just want to be careful of your fingers. They get too excited sometimes, and you might lose one.”

“Really?” I blanch, watching as Basil mouths the treat off of Max’s hand, and he chuckles.

“Probably not. But it’s better to be safe. Here, you try.”

He moves out of the way as I approach Basil, but I can still feel his presence hovering at my back, warm and solid. “Just hold out your hand gently,” he encourages from behind me. “He’s the least likely to grab it too fast and accidentally bite you.”

A shiver of nerves goes through me as the horse shakes his head, clearly eager for the treat in my fingers, but I’m not about to turn tail and run from something as easy as this should be. I try to mimic what Max did, flattening out my hand and curving my fingers backward as Basil snorts and

stretches out his nose, velvety lips skimming over my palm as he mouths the treat up, crunching it as he backs away.

Stupid as it seems for such a small thing, I feel a flush of victory as I turn to face Max with a grin plastered across my face, and I see that he's smiling too.

"See? Not so scary," he says, handing me more of the small squares. "We'll have you out on the trails in no time."

We make our way down the aisle, Max pointing out the horses that he knows are safe for me to feed a treat to, and by the time we reach the other side of the barn, I can't remember what I was so afraid of.

"Can we really go for a ride?" I ask, and Max nods, chuckling.

"When you've had a little more time to recover, sure. It's been a while since I've ridden, too, but I've no doubt it will all come back to me." He lets a tall, rangy-looking black horse lip up the last treat off his palm and then dusts his hands off onto his pant legs, leaving a bit of grainy residue behind. "Should we go back up? I'm sure you need some rest, and Giana will be thinking about lunch before too much longer."

I nod, although the last thing I want is to go back and rest. I'm sure Max has other things to do, though, besides squire me around, and I don't want to be a burden to him.

We're quiet as we drive back up to the house. I follow Max to the back door, and he holds it open for me, and we walk together to the stairs. Both of us hesitate at the same moment, and Max glances toward one of the doors on the lower floor.

"Well, I—"

"Sure. I'll just go upstairs and—"

We speak at the same time and stop at the same time, both of us staring at each other. I can feel the tension shimmering in the air, and I catch a glimpse of Max's hands flexing, the small muscle in his jaw leaping, as if he's holding himself back.

I feel rooted to the spot, but I force my feet to move up the stairs to my room, resisting with every step the urge to rush

back down to him and tell him how I'm feeling.

But he already knows, and saying it aloud won't change anything.

MAX



Sasha is on my mind for the rest of the day.

I know that following up on my promise of a wine-tasting after dinner is a bad idea. The tension between us was palpable all day, and I knew without a doubt where her mind was going every time she drifted off as I'd shown her around the estate.

I'd known because mine was going to a similar place. Being near her, spending a day with her again, felt like what I imagined a drug must feel like. It felt intoxicating.

I hadn't known the meaning of desire before I knew Sasha. Not just physical desire, though, that feels almost unbearable—but the desire to be *with* her. To talk to her and spend time with her. Every moment, every laugh, and every conversation felt like the best one of my life.

She feels *right*. Like my best friend and the woman I want more than I want to breathe all rolled into one—and in my most difficult moments, I can't help wondering if Levin is right. If I'm throwing away the chance at happiness with both hands over vows that should mean nothing to me any longer.

Just being with her makes me happy. But how could *I* make *her* happy? Not just now, but over the years? My past will always follow me. My life will always be tied to my wrongdoings, to my name, and to the possibility that it will haunt me. And all I want is for Sasha to leave this behind. I've selfishly enjoyed her position in Viktor's house because it meant that I've gotten to see her more often, causing our

friendship to deepen. Still, I know it would be best for her to leave that behind, too. The further she can get from our world of crime and power, the better.

I don't want to see it devour her as it's devoured so many others.

It's hard to shake the thoughts, especially as I don't have much to *do* here. Once upon a time, I would have been thrilled to have so much leisure, but now it feels as if I have no way out of my own head, and no timeline as to when we'll be able to go back.

This problem, this *danger* is mine, and yet I'm here while others handle it for me. *I should have left her with Viktor, I think over and over again. I should have gone after him myself.* But Viktor had ordered me here, and like the second son that I am, I followed orders—just as I always have.

I know the rest of it, too, deep down—I hadn't wanted more blood on my hands. I can hear Levin's voice in my head at that silent admission, chastising me. *Your devotion to the past makes you weak. You've taken one life already, and helped with another. Do you think you can change that by not doing what needs to be done to protect those around you?*

I know what he thinks of me, what Viktor thinks of me. As for Sasha—

She might be the only one in the world who loves me exactly as I am, despite my failings, and yet—those same vows keep me away from her. That same devotion to myself and my promise to protect her, prevents what we both want.

I grit my teeth, slamming my hand down on the nearest surface—which happens to be the bar cart. The crystal glasses shudder, one tipping over the side and crashing onto the smooth wooden floor, glass shattering and spraying across the hardwood.

“Shit!” I growl under my breath, looking around for something to clean it up with. I don't want to bother Giana with it, and truthfully, I'm in no mood to talk to anyone else right now.

I end up make shifting a couple of pieces of paper into a means by which to sweep it up and scoop it into the trash. That doesn't stop a few fragments from skating over my hand, sending small thin rivulets of blood trickling down my skin.

Ironic. In my old life, it might have been called a sign. In this present moment, all I can do is stare down at the red stains, feeling suddenly exhausted.

I'm going in circles.

I half expect to run into Sasha as I head upstairs to clean my hand, but thankfully she's nowhere to be seen, which saves me from having to explain myself. I clean and bandage the cuts to staunch the bleeding and flop down onto the wide empty bed in the adjoining bedroom, staring up at the ceiling.

I never knew time could move so slowly and so quickly all at once. My afternoon with Sasha had gone by in a flash, but the days ahead seem to stretch out in front of me, a never-ending circle of uncertainty and temptation.

I hadn't meant to fall asleep, but I wake with a start after the sun has already gone down to a soft knocking at my door. "Max?"

Sasha's voice comes softly through, and I push myself up, blinking away sleep. "Max, Giana said dinner will be ready soon."

I clear my throat, rubbing my hands over my face in an effort to rub away that odd, unsteady feeling that often comes with an unexpected nap. "I'll be right down."

When I come down, Sasha is already in the smaller dining room, but even there, it feels awkward to sit at a ten-person dinner table with just the two of us. "I offered for Giana and her husband to eat with us," she says with a small frown as I walk in. "But she said it wasn't 'proper.' So it's just the two of us, it looks like."

"Giana would never," I tell her with a laugh, running my hand through my still sleep-tousled hair, which refuses to fall back into place despite my best efforts before coming down.

“She’s very steeped in the old ways of doing things. There’s no chance she’d eat at the table with us.”

“I eat meals with Viktor and Caterina, and so do you,” Sasha protests. “It’s ridiculous.”

“I agree. But they do things differently—and I’m sure you know we’re more than just staff to them. You can’t pretend you don’t.”

“I guess so.” She purses her lips, leaning back in her chair. “It’s weird, eating in here like this.”

“I also agree with that.” I pause, tapping my fingers against the edge of the other side of the table. “Should we take dinner elsewhere?”

Sasha’s eyes brighten a little. “Where?”

“We could go to the theater room. That would be really scandalous,” I add with a smirk, and I see Sasha’s cheeks flush the tiniest bit, which in turn makes my heart thud in my chest. I hadn’t meant to create an innuendo of any kind—but lately, ever since we spent the night together, it feels like everything I say holds some weight or double meaning that I hadn’t meant for it to.

“Let’s do it,” she says decisively, standing and picking up the plate. I hadn’t even looked to see what Gianna had opted to serve tonight, but now I see sliced filet and a scoop of soft, creamy potatoes with some sort of rich, shallot-filled sauce poured over it and a medley of roasted vegetables next to it, along with several scallops in a small pool of butter. My stomach grumbles and Sasha laughs.

“I’m hungry, too,” she says, smirking at me. “Lead the way; I don’t know where we’re going.”

It feels almost like being a kid again, sneaking through the big house with our plates, watching out for any sign of Giana and her certain disapproval. I lead Sasha down a hall to one of the rooms, pushing the door open and letting her walk in first.

“This is the smaller theater room,” I explain to her. “Kind of like a den. The actual theater room is more like a movie

theater–stadium seating, a huge screen, tables, and reclining seats. This one is a little cozier.”

As I flip on the lights, Sasha looks around the room, shaking her head as she takes it in. There’s a huge sectional couch with extra pieces that can be pushed into the center to turn it into more of a sofa bed, a massive screen on one wall with various consoles stacked around it, shelves full of games and movies, and a retro-styled bar along one wall. “It’s the most modern room in the house, designed for my younger brother and me when we were kids. The consoles are probably pretty outdated, but there should be plenty of movies to pick from.”

She’s shaking her head, her other hand over her mouth as if she’s trying to stifle laughter, and I glare playfully at her. “What?”

“You do realize this is absolutely ridiculous, right?” Sasha presses her lips together, her eyes sparkling with humor. “Your entire house and everything around it is absolutely as obnoxious as it is gorgeous.”

“I do,” I assure her. “My parents were experts on how to both be extravagant and elegant at the same time. They would never have shown anyone this room, though. It was very embarrassing—and caused quite a fight between them, since my father thought it was frivolous. It really drove home for me, at least, that my mother did love us. She tried to give us some normalcy where she could.”

“Put like that, it’s sweet.” Sasha sets down her plate on the coffee table, walking to the shelf filled with movies. “What do you want to watch?”

I shrug. “Pick anything. I’ve probably seen most of them.”

She bends down, and I have to look away to avoid staring at her ass. She’s wearing a pair of yoga pants that cling to her in a way that I know is completely normal, but makes me feel obscene just looking at her. My mouth feels dry as I struggle to push the memory of how her perfect ass felt in my hands out of my head, and it takes everything in me not to go to her, to touch her again just like that.

The hardest thing is that I know if I did, she'd want it. She'd encourage it.

The only one stopping us is me.

“What about this one?” Sasha turns around, holding up a copy of *A Knight's Tale*. “I've never seen this.”

“We should *definitely* watch that, then.” I sink down onto the couch, pulling the wide, heavy wooden coffee table closer. “And when we're done with dinner, I'll go get some of those bottles of wine I was telling you about.”

Sasha picks up her glass, sniffing it delicately. “Is this not from the estate?”

“Honestly? I don't know what Giana picked to pair with dinner. It probably is. But you'll want my curated selection, I'm sure.” I wink at her before I have a chance to think about what I'm doing and stop myself, and her cheeks flush a soft, rosy pink.

“That sounds perfect.” Sasha perches on the edge of the couch. “This is almost like a—”

She stops short, but I already know what she was close to saying. *A date*. And it is. It feels like the most natural segue into a second date for two people who knew each other prior—from a date at a ramen shop to a fancy dinner in front of an at-home movie screen. If I'd actually *been* planning a date with Sasha, I couldn't have done better.

But of course, both of us know that this isn't that. This is just us trying to get through our hiding out here the best we can, without banishing ourselves to lonely, opposite ends of the house.

For me, personally, it's about trying to continue to protect Sasha, to be her friend and her confidant. It's about being there for her, even if it's not exactly in the way that either of us wants.

Sasha bites her lower lip, leaning forward to take a bite of her food as I get up to put the movie in and start it. For the next half-hour or so, we work our way through our meal in companionable silence, enjoying the movie.

“Are you sure you don’t mind watching something you’ve seen so many times before?” Sasha asks, the third time that I mouth along to a well-known line or laugh at a joke before it’s even fully out of the character’s mouth.

“No, definitely not,” I assure her, finishing my glass of wine. “I love watching movies that I know and someone else doesn’t. It’s like getting to experience it for the first time all over again. It’s thrilling, really. As long as you’re enjoying it.”

“I love it! I think it’s hilarious. I just wanted to make sure you were too—” Sasha trails off, her teeth sinking into her lower lip again just before she finishes the last of her food. “You don’t have to—”

She breaks off again, and I think I know what she was going to say. I always feel that way with her, as if I could finish her sentences, as if I know what she’s thinking just by looking at her.

“I’m not here, in this room with you, because I feel like I *have* to be,” I tell her gently. “I’m here because I want to be here. My day is brighter when you’re a part of it, Sasha. It’s always been that way.”

I hear the slight catch of her breath in her throat.

“Then why—” she swallows hard. “Never mind, I already know the answer to that.”

The movie is still playing in the background, but neither of us is listening to it any longer. All I can see is her.

Her beautiful, delicate face that I never get tired of looking at.

Her rose-petal lips that I can so easily remember what they felt like pressed against mine—against every part of me.

Her soft hair that trailed through my hands, over my face, and my chest, just as it had in my dreams.

I ache, looking at her. I ache *for* her, and I want to kiss her so badly at that moment that it feels like a physical pain. I can feel myself on the verge of reaching for her, and if I do, I know I won’t stop. We’ll end up in a tangle of bodies on this

couch, like teenagers in the world's most luxurious den, and I won't be able to hold back.

"I'm going to—" I clear my throat, standing up to take our plates. "I'll go get the wine."

"Okay," Sasha says softly. I can hear the note of disappointment in her voice, and it lets me know all over again that she can read me as easily as I can her, that she knew what I was thinking.

There's never a moment that I don't feel as if she and I are two parts of the same whole.

Knowing that I can't have her makes that feel like the cruelest joke.

SASHA



Except for the fact that it's not a date, that there's no chance of Max kissing me at the end of the night, and that every other day like today and night like this one will be another not-date, tonight is perfect. From the sneaking to the movie room like guilty children, to the movie and dinner, to the bottles of wine that Max brings back shortly after the tense moment between us and smoothly uncorks, it feels like a dream.

The only difference is that if it were a dream, Max would have kissed me before he left. He might still be kissing me now, instead of decanting bottles of wine. Every moment between us feels charged with that need, and I have to breathe in deeply, reminding myself of what he'd said on the plane.

Those words had hurt, but I couldn't accuse him of not having been clear.

Max holds out a glass to me, the movie forgotten in the background, just noise now. "Try this one first," he says. "We'll start with dry and go to sweeter."

I sniff it, breathing in the scent. I actually really like wine, and I feel a flutter of excitement at the idea of trying something made from the same grapes that I went out to see today, the same vineyard that I might get to help Max harvest in a couple of months. It feels intimate and cozy, and I try not to let my imagination run away with me as I take the first sip—try not to think of Max and me here together, running the vineyard and the wine business together.

“Oh—that’s very dry.” I cough a little, blinking. “Probably too dry for me.”

Max laughs, taking a sip of his own and nodding in agreement with a wry twist of his mouth. “I actually prefer a dry wine, but that—that’s too much.” He sets it aside, reaching for another glass. “How about this?”

I breathe in the scent of it again and take a small sip, and then another. “Much better.”

I’m not sure how long we sit there like that, tasting wines, laughing as we compare what we like and don’t like, trading glasses back and forth. Neither of us notices when the movie ends or gets up to change it to something else. There’s never an awkward moment of silence, never a time when we look at each other and wonder what to say or do next.

With Max, as always, it feels effortlessly easy.

—

The next morning, I wake up with a slight hangover and a determination to find something to do around the estate myself that doesn’t involve Max—for my own sanity. I eat breakfast quickly, excusing myself back upstairs to unpack my things. The suitcase has been lying half-open, the clothes I’ve fished out of it tumbling out onto the chair it’s perched on, and I feel guilty for leaving it that way in the otherwise pristine room.

As I hang up, fold, and put away my clothes, a scrap of blue fabric falls to the floor. I reach for it, thinking it’s my underwear, but instead, I pick up the top of one of my bikinis—which I don’t remember packing. I think of the pool outside—and then of Max seeing me in the swimsuit, and a flush starts to creep up my neck, my skin heating.

A knock comes at the door, and I nearly jump out of my skin.

“Sasha?” Max’s voice is on the other side, and I scurry to answer it, forgetting that I’m still holding the bikini top.

“Hey!” I open the door, and his eyes immediately flick down to my hand.

“Hey—what is that?” He glances at it curiously, and I can *feel* myself blushing as my hand tightens around the fabric.

“I—it’s my swimsuit. I didn’t pack it. Did you grab it before we left?” I can feel my blush deepening at the idea that Max might have put a bikini in my luggage—which, now that I think about it, seems entirely improbable. But I’ve already said it out loud.

He laughs, although the sound seems to stick in his throat. “No, I didn’t. Maybe Caterina? She probably was hoping you could get some rest and relaxation out by the pool while you’re here. Which is a good idea.”

“I was thinking that, too.”

“There’s plenty of places you could use it here, actually.” Max clears his throat, and I think I see him shift his weight back and forth briefly. “There’s the pool and hot tub out back, obviously—and the indoor gym and yoga room has a sauna. Of course, some people like to be unclothed in the sauna, but—”

“I’ll start with the pool, I think,” I say quickly, deciding to have mercy on him—and me—before his mind goes any further down the path of me naked and sweating in a sauna. “It looks like a nice day out. Bright and sunny.”

“It is.” Max scratches the back of his neck, and I think I see a soft, ruddy flush on the olive skin at the base of his collar. “I’ll let you get to it, then.”

“I’ll be down in a few minutes. You’re welcome to join me if you want,” I offer, and he nods, starting back down the stairs as I close the door behind me.

I feel more than a little self-conscious as I change into the bikini. I’ve always been slender, but my illness left me on the thin side of that. My chest looks a bit smaller than before, my arms and thighs thinner, and my hips and butt lacking some of the curves I had before. *Time to make use of that yoga room, too*, I think to myself as I tie the bikini string behind my neck, scooping my strawberry blonde hair atop my head and securing it with a clip.

A part of me hopes that Max isn't downstairs when I head down—both because of my own self-consciousness and because I don't want to tease him. Or rather—I *do*, but I know I shouldn't, not when he's so clearly trying to resist anything happening between the two of us again. But, it turns out, as luck would have it, he's walking through the hall as I reach the foot of the stairs, and I stop dead, my heart hammering in my chest.

He pauses, still looking away from me, as if he's unsure whether he should look back or not. And then he turns, slowly, almost as if he can't help himself.

We both freeze in place for a moment. We've seen each other naked, and yet this particular moment, looking at each other from a few feet away, Max struggling not to let his gaze slide over my half-clothed body feels more erotically charged than even that did.

“Do you—do you want to come to the pool with me?” The words sound idiotic even to my own ears, but I can't think of anything else to say. I can *feel* him staring at my face, trying not to devour me with his eyes, and every part of me wants to beg him to anyway.

Max swallows hard. “I can't.”

The next word comes out before I can stop it. “Why?”

His eyes narrow, a hint of frustration flashing in them suddenly. “You know why.”

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. I'd meant to tell him I was heading out then, to turn and walk away, but I feel frozen to the spot. The pain throbs through me again—not physical, but emotional, a tearing, longing ache for something that I should never have had at all and now want desperately.

“Tell me again,” I whisper softly, feeling my heart in my throat. “Remind me why, because I can't remember.”

He hesitates, and I think I see a shudder go through him, his eyes still fixed on my face.

“You look beautiful,” Max says softly. “You are the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, Sasha. I want—” That shudder

goes through him again, and I see his hands clench at his sides. “God knows I don’t want to disappoint you or tell you no, or spend a single second of the day not laughing with you. But every time I’m near you, I want to touch you—and so much more than that.”

“More?” The word comes out a squeak, my hand gripping the banister of the stairs as if my knees might give out. “Max—”

He steps forward as if he can’t help himself. “I want to taste you—*devour* you. I can’t get you out of my head, Sasha, and every moment I keep doing this to us is torturing us both. Neither of us can leave, so I need to just—”

“I want that, too,” I whisper softly. I shouldn’t say it, I know that, but the words slip out anyway. “I haven’t stopped thinking about that night, Max—I—I want more. I told you—and I still mean it. I—”

“We can’t.” His voice is sharp, clipped suddenly. “I meant it too, Sasha. We can’t.”

He turns quickly, shoes clacking on the hard floor as he walks away, and for a moment, I feel as if my knees *will* give out, it was so sudden. I know why—it wasn’t meant to hurt me, but to tear himself away before he said or did something he felt he shouldn’t. But it *does* hurt, and for a moment, I want nothing more than to turn and flee back upstairs, hiding away.

But that won’t solve anything. I bite my lip, forcing the welling emotions down, and keep walking out towards the back doors and the waiting pool beyond.

It *is* a gorgeous day. The sun is bright and shining, and it lifts my spirits a little, even if I still feel the heavy weight of disappointment from my conversation with Max. It’s quiet and peaceful—one of the perks of staying on an estate with almost no one else here—and I stretch out on one of the lounge chairs after rubbing sunscreen over my pale skin, eyeing the closest umbrella-covered lounge in case the sun gets to be too much.

I’m able to keep my thoughts on more innocuous things for a little while—the movie last night, walking through the

vineyards, the possibility of a horseback ride soon—but my thoughts always circle back to Max. I squirm on the lounge chair, that ache that I felt standing on the stairs spreading through me.

If I thought there was really any hope for us, it would be a sweet kind of torture, that building, pressing desire that eventually breaks through the dam of resistance and floods over us both—but that's not what this is.

That makes it just—torture.

The memory of the heat in his eyes as we'd stood at the foot of the stairs, the way he'd been so clearly trying to hold himself back, sends a flood of heat through me as I press my thighs together, trying to alleviate a little of the ache. It does nothing, of course, the slight friction only making me feel even more aroused, a wet heat between my legs that only makes my thoughts turn even more lustful, drifting back to that night that we spent together.

I open one eye, blowing out a frustrated breath as I look around. There's no one to be seen, as expected, and the tall fence and hedges around the pool keep anyone from the house or walking past from seeing what's going on inside. I could skinny-dip if I wanted, although just the thought makes me turn red.

I could do it. No one will see.

My hand slides down my stomach, the taut flesh slick with sunscreen and sweat, and I tense, my heart racing as much from the forbidden idea of what I'm considering as the desire itself. I should go back up to the house if I need this that badly—but I want to stay here, under the sun, flushed with heat in more ways than one.

And a part of me—a bigger part than I'd be willing to admit—wants Max to come out here and catch me.

My fingers slip under the edge of my bikini bottoms, lifting up the fabric just enough to slide over the soft flesh beneath. My breath hitches as my fingers slide lower, and I know if I'm going to stop, now is the time to do it.

But I don't *want* to stop.

I gasp softly when my fingers slide between my folds, the sensation rippling over me. I'm wetter than I'd realized, the slick liquid clinging to my fingertips as I trail them to my swollen, aching clit, making slow circles as I sink my teeth into my lower lip to keep quiet.

It feels *so* good—better than before. I hadn't been able to do this before Max without my thoughts taking a darker turn, but now all I think about is him, tanned and handsome, his muscled body leaning over mine as his lips captured my mouth and his cock pressed against me, thick and long and hard for *me*—

“*Oh—*” I whisper from behind pressed lips, my hips arching up a little as I let my fingers move faster, slipping in the arousal that I'm drenched with. The memory has me closer already than I should be, the memory of Max filling me up, his hard body rocking against mine, his soft dark hair running through my fingers as he groaned with pleasure.

His first. I'd never thought I'd be so turned on by the idea. Still, the sight of Max struggling to hold back, turned on to the point of losing control of his desire for me and *only me*, only ever *me*, had driven me wild.

It still does now.

I suck in another sharp breath as I feel my thigh muscles quiver, my body poised on the edge of a nearing climax—and then I hear the sound of gate hinges. I snatch my hand back, my heart racing in my chest.

I'd thought I wanted Max to catch me, but presented with the actual possibility, I can feel myself turning tomato-red with embarrassment. Besides, I have no way of knowing that it *is* Max, and the idea of anyone else catching me is a million times worse.

I press my thighs together, hoping that he won't be able to see the damp spot between them if it is him coming through the gate, and a moment later—

The footsteps come closer, and I shade my flushed face with my hand, looking up to see the handsome face of the one person I want to see most and least of all at this moment.

MAX

Every time I see Sasha in some new way, she looks more beautiful to me than she ever has before. I wonder, each time, if I'll ever run out of moments where I'm struck anew by how lovely she is to me—and then I remember, each time, that those moments should be finite.

No matter how much I care for her.

She looks up at me, her hand shading her eyes. “Did you change your mind about coming out to the pool?”

“Yes, I—” I rub a hand across the back of my neck, wondering how it can be that she always so easily makes me feel tongue-tied. I've always prided myself on being an eloquent man, good at conversation and diplomacy—it's a large part of what I've done for Viktor. And yet, looking at Sasha, I often feel as if the words I want to say turn into a jumble on my tongue.

“I'm sorry,” I say finally, looking down at her. “I shouldn't let my—feelings—get in the way of our friendship. We have an opportunity to spend time together here, and I was the one who agreed to bring you along. It's my home—I'm being a terrible host by leaving you on your own like this.”

Sasha's face softens. “It's okay,” she says, and her voice sounds as if it catches a little, like she's breathing faster than usual. “I understand. Things are—different now. Neither of us can help that.”

I sink down onto the edge of the lounge chair next to her, leaning forward with my hands pressed between my knees. “I

should be able to, though,” I say quietly. “That’s the issue, Sasha. Viktor trusted me to protect you, to take care of you, as your friend and someone he trusts. I should be able to control myself better—to not let how much I—”

I break off, unable to finish the sentence, as if speaking my desires aloud would break down the shallow defenses I have left. All I can see is her, lying there in front of me, her pale skin slick with sunscreen and sweat, flushed, her chest rising and falling quickly—

“Are you alright?” I frown, my eyes flicking back up to hers. “You look flushed, and—”

Oddly, Sasha flushes deeper. “It’s the heat,” she says quickly. “It’s warmer than I thought today.” She glances quickly towards the pool, swinging her legs off the lounge chair away from me as she stands up gracefully, giving me a perfect view of her slim legs and ass framed by the small blue bikini bottoms.

My cock throbs at the sight, half-hard instantly, and I grit my teeth in an effort to ignore it. I’m not sure *I* can stand up now, and I surreptitiously press down on my cock with the heel of my hand in an effort to get my erection to subside before it gets any more obvious.

“The water does look nice. I’ll just go change—there are trunks in the pool house.” I get up too, on the opposite side of the chair from Sasha, turning away from her so that there’s no chance of her glimpsing the ridge of my cock pressing against my fly before I can do something about it.

“Hurry up, then.” Sasha tosses a grin over her shoulder, walking towards the water with a sway in her hips that makes my mouth go dry.

By the time I change in the pool house and manage to wrestle my cock into submission, Sasha is already in the water. I step out to see her standing waist-deep, her reddish-blond hair plastered to her shoulders, making her eyes look even larger than usual in her delicate face. Her bikini is clinging to her skin, showing me the shape of her in a way that seems even more erotic than if she’d simply been naked. I feel the

dangerous throb in my groin that warns me I'm one wrong thought away from being rock-hard again.

Looking at her from across the deck, it's more clear to me than ever that what I feel for her is more than just wanting, more than the fact that I desire her more than I've ever wanted anything in all my life. I *crave* her, down to my bones, down to my *soul*. Not touching her feels like starving, like drowning with no way to rise.

Not being near her at all feels worse.

Fortunately, the water is so cold that when I get in, the problem of my arousal is briefly solved. I shiver, and Sasha laughs, close enough to see.

"It's freezing in here." She runs her hands through the water, walking a little closer. "But it feels *so* good."

Fuck. The sound of those last words, playfully moaned aloud, makes my cock struggle valiantly to rise despite the temperature of the water. Sasha moves closer, her full mouth twitching upwards humorously as she runs her fingers through the water. I'm so distracted that I don't realize until too late what she's about to do.

She splashes me, full-on, the freezing water spraying over my face and chest and momentarily making my breath freeze. She splashes me again, moving closer still. I react before I can think about it, splashing her in return and reaching out, grabbing her around the waist.

I hear her gasp as I pull Sasha close, and everything seems to narrow down to the two of us for a moment, her taut, wet flesh under my hands, the closeness of her lips, the water streaming down us both. The thin strings of her bikini bottom brush against my fingers, and it would be so easy to tug them loose, to feel her naked under my hands—

My cock lurches again, and I suck in a breath, realizing that Sasha has gone very still in front of me. I look up to see her eyes fixed on mine, her breath coming quick and short again, and it feels impossible to walk away again. It feels impossible to stop.

“What are you thinking about?” Her voice comes out soft and breathy, her body swaying towards mine in the cold clear water.

“I saw you.” The words come out before I can stop them. “When I came out here—I saw you. What you were doing while you were alone.”

Sasha’s cheeks go violently pink, her eyes widening as she tenses under my hands. “I’m sorry,” she mumbles, looking away. “I shouldn’t have—out here—”

“Don’t apologize.” I breathe in, and I can smell the scent of her—warm skin, coconut sunscreen, the sharp tang of chlorine. “But right now, Sasha, it’s taking every last shred of self-control that I have not to finish what you started.”

A small, almost imperceptible shudder goes through her. I feel her hand pass through the water as it reaches for mine, and her fingers wrap around my hand, moving it from her hip to the warmth between her thighs.

“The only one stopping you is yourself,” she says softly, looking up at me with a gaze that seems all the more devious for its innocence. “I definitely won’t stop you.”

Her hand lets go of mine, her fingers brushing over the back of it, and I can’t make myself move it of my own volition. Her wet bikini bottom feels silky underneath my fingertips, and even though the fabric is cold, I can feel the heat of her radiating through it.

“I’m all yours, if you want me,” she whispers. “I always will be.”

I can feel my pulse throbbing through my veins, what blood remains in my head beating in my temples. I want to kiss her, devour her, fuck her, *ruin* her, and it’s taking everything in me not to do exactly what she’s begging me to do.

“It’s not a question of wanting,” I murmur, but my fingers are already slipping to one side as if my hand has taken on a mind of its own, underneath the smooth fabric. Her skin is bare and soft, a slick wetness coating my fingertips that has

nothing to do with the water we're standing in. I can't resist parting her folds with my fingers, slipping them between her swollen flesh, and Sasha moans when I drag them upwards, grazing her clit as she rocks towards me.

"Yes," she moans, her hands coming up to grab my waist as her thighs part for me. "Please, Max."

No sound has ever been sweeter than Sasha begging me to make her come. I tell myself that every touch is the last one, just a little more, and then when I can't justify that excuse any longer, I tell myself it would be cruel to leave her hanging like this. The same excuse I used at first—that it's her pleasure, not mine, and that makes all the difference—even as I know that's not true.

She rocks against my hand, hers pressed against my chest, then grabbing my shoulders as I push her closer to the edge. I can feel her wet heat on my fingers as I stroke her clit, circling, rubbing, and without stopping to think, I push two of my fingers inside of her, curling them forward as my thumb keeps up the steady pressure on her clit.

"Max!" Sasha gasps my name, her head falling back as her nails dig into the bare skin of my shoulders. I want to make her come, want to feel her clench around my fingers the way she did around my cock that night, to give me some small reminder of the pleasure we shared. This isn't enough for either of us, but we've been fighting it too long to have nothing at all.

She presses against me, riding my fingers, her hips rolling in a steady, urgent rhythm as I bring her closer to the edge. I press my lips against her ear, feeling her shudder at the brush of them over the shell, and drag them down her throat. She tastes like salt and the warm musk of her skin, and my cock stiffens in my trunks, my desire overcoming the chill of the water. "Come for me, *cuore mia*—"

I feel her stiffen and hear the tiny cry that she muffles as she presses her mouth against my neck, clinging to my shoulders with a grip that could be painful if it weren't for the intense arousal coursing through me. I feel her clench around

my fingers, rippling, squeezing, her whole body shuddering with the force of her climax as she comes hard on my hand.

God help me. I want her. I want her to come again and again, on my fingers, my tongue, my cock. I want her in every way, and it feels like my own special circle of hell to come so close, again and again, and have to force myself to stop. To deny myself.

“Max—” Sasha moans my name breathily, her lips still brushing my throat, and I shudder with need. Her hand drops, gliding through the water to cup between my legs, her palm pressing against the weight of my aching cock as she moans. “Let me take care of you now—”

I don’t know how I find the strength to pull away. All I know is that if I let her keep touching me, if I let her get my cock out, I’ll have her legs around my waist and be deep inside of her before I can stop myself. I’m already on the brink of snapping that last thread of control again. It takes everything in me to back away, pulling my hand away from her as I break the contact between us.

“No.” I shake my head, gritting my teeth against the wave of frustrated agony that sweeps through me. “As long as I don’t—this was about you, not me. I can’t allow myself my own pleasure from this.”

Sasha lets out a frustrated breath through her own teeth. “Max, you’re splitting hairs.” She splashes her hands ineffectively against the water, and I have another moment to look at her and think how beautiful she is, the sun glinting off of her wet hair and the droplets of water clinging to her pale skin, before I force myself to climb up the ladder and out of the pool.

“Max!” Sasha turns to walk up the steps, her bathing suit clinging to her even more lewdly than before. “This is ridiculous.”

I turn sharply towards her, my frustration mounting rapidly. “So I’m ridiculous? Is that what you think of me?”

She blows out a sharp breath, pushing a strand of wet hair away that's clinging to her face. "No, of course not. I—you know how I feel about you. But *this*—this push and pull and telling me that we can't until you finally break, and then pretending as if leaving yourself out of the equation somehow makes it better...."

Sasha presses her lips tightly together, shaking her head. "It doesn't make it better, Max. It just tortures us both more. I don't just want pleasure or orgasms. I want *you*."

"I know." The words come out sharper than I intended. "Sasha, I—"

"It's fine." She says it quickly, on a rushed breath, telling me clearly enough that it's *not* fine. "We can just—go back to pretending it didn't happen. That's what we're good at, right?"

"Sasha—" My chest contracts at the barely veiled hurt in her voice.

"No. It's fine. Really. I just—I'm getting a little warm. Tired. I'll see you at dinner?"

She doesn't bother to wait for my answer, striding past me towards the gate.

SASHA



Max doesn't come to dinner. I end up eating alone at the big table, not entirely sure where else to go other than my room in the impossibly large house, without him there to make a suggestion—and eating alone in my room somehow feels worse.

I pick at my food, sip at my wine, and nurture the steadily growing frustration balled up in the center of my chest.

It's not that I'm not trying to be respectful of his vows. It's not. But this dancing around what is and isn't keeping them—

I know why Max is splitting hairs over it. He wants this as badly as I do, and he's trying to find ways to give me—and himself—something while still feeling that he's sticking to the heart of his promises. But all it's doing is tearing us apart in a myriad of different ways.

Max doesn't make an appearance, even though I linger for a long time, hoping he might change his mind the way he did this afternoon. I finally abandon all hope of finishing dinner and start towards the stairs. I don't feel like watching a movie in a room full of memories of mine and Max's not-date-night from last night, and the day has worn me out in more ways than one.

But as I pass what I'm pretty sure is Max's study, I hear something that sounds like the snapping of leather, and a low groan, as if through gritted teeth.

What the hell? I frown, walking towards the door. I haven't been in the room, but I've seen Max disappear into it

more than once. I hear the sound again, that sharp snap, and this time a hissing intake of breath.

Whatever is going on in there, I have a feeling Max wouldn't want me to see it. I hover there with my hand over the doorknob, wondering if I should just go upstairs and deal with wondering what it is.

Then I hear it again, and a sound that I know to be Max, grunting through gritted teeth.

Fuck it.

I push open the door.

As it opens, I see Max hunched over a broad mahogany desk—shirtless. That brings me up short with the unexpectedness of it, but what startles me more is the sight of him swinging a leather belt over his shoulder. It strikes him across the back, leaving a reddish welt on his skin crisscrossed with other fresh welts. I'm reminded suddenly of how he was reluctant to let me see him with his shirt off at his house back in New York. I'd thought it was modesty, but now—

“What the fuck?”

The words burst out of me as I step in, fists bunching at my sides as the door shuts behind me, and I stand there indignantly, staring at Max's welted back.

If anyone else were doing this to him, I wouldn't have hesitated to defend him. But I can't defend him against himself.

I see him stiffen, the belt falling to his side.

“You aren't supposed to be in here.” His voice is rough, threaded with pain.

“You didn't lock the door.” Part of me wants to run away from this, from whatever tortured thing Max is facing here, this new secret about him that I hadn't been privy to.

But I won't leave him here to face it alone. No matter how frightening I find this side of him, or how ill-equipped I feel to deal with it, I won't leave him.

“A closed door should be enough.”

“Max.” I step forward, my fists still at my sides. “What are you doing? *Why* are you doing this?”

“It’s none of your business.” He still hasn’t turned to face me, but the hand not holding the belt is clutching the side of the desk. “This isn’t about you, Sasha.”

“Isn’t it?” I demand, taking another step forward. “You’re telling me that it’s just a coincidence that after what happened in the pool today, you’re in here...hurting yourself? I’m supposed to believe that? You got upset when you thought I said you were being ridiculous—well, now you’re treating me like a fool.”

“You weren’t supposed to see this.” Every muscle in Max’s body is tensed, his back bunched with it. “Sasha—”

The pleading in his voice is for me to leave—I know it is. To pretend like I never saw any of this. But I *can’t*. Maybe there isn’t a future for Max and me—maybe we’ll never spend another night together again like the one before we left New York—but I can’t stand by and pretend I didn’t just walk in on something awful.

“Max, please tell me what’s going on. As—as your friend, if nothing else. It goes both ways.” I take a deep breath, forcing my voice to come out evenly, not to break and crack with the fear and confusion I’m feeling. “I want to be there for you too. *I want to protect you.*”

“I know.” His voice is ragged, breathless. He drops the belt to the floor, both of his hands squeezing the desk suddenly as if he would crush the side of it, his back and biceps flexing in a way I’ve never seen before—a way that would be intensely arousing if not for the seriousness of the moment.

Max turns suddenly to face me, his expression dark. “I lost control of myself today.” There’s a ripple of disgust in his words, but I know it has nothing to do with me and everything to do with how *he* feels. I can’t make this about myself if I want to help him, no matter how quickly my mind jumps to react, to say *how the fuck is it supposed to make me feel, that*

you fingering me in the pool makes you feel like you need to beat yourself afterward?

“What I did to you today—” The words tear out of him, sharp and jagged, as if he’s forcing every single one out. “It’s a sin, Sasha. All of it is—touching you, touching myself, the urges and needs that I’ve kept buried for years that sprang up when I met you. I hadn’t so much as jerked off since I left for seminary, and I didn’t miss it all that much, to be honest. I just pushed all that out of my head. When the desires did spring up, when I had wet dreams, when I found myself lusting—this is how I took care of it. I punished myself for it, tried to teach my body with pain to forget about pleasure.”

I feel my eyes go wide as I stare at him. “That’s some fucked-up medieval shit,” I whisper, feeling vaguely sick at the idea of Max hurting himself, punishing himself for something as natural as desire. “I’m not judging you. I just—”

“It’s fine if you are.” Max shakes his head, his hands still gripping the desk as he leans back against it. It’s hard not to think about how gorgeous I find him even now, his muscled, dark-haired chest on display for my hungry eyes, that same dark hair running down to his carved abs, trailing into the top of his black pants. His arms are still flexed, and I want to run my hands over every inch of him, to fall to my knees and take him in my mouth and soothe away all the pain. “I want you to understand, Sasha—when I say that the desire hit me hardest after I met you, that the need to do this to chase it away became more necessary—I’m not blaming you. These are my failings, my inability to control my lust, to face temptation, and my weakness. I’ve broken my vows, again and again, fallen to my own desires, and I know it’s wrong of me—”

“No!” I shake my head, interrupting him with one sharp, snapped word that makes him jerk his head up, staring at me as if he’s never seen me before. I take another step closer and then another, until I could touch him if I reached out, although I don’t. I stare up at him fiercely, hands still bunched at my sides, the sudden anger radiating off of me in waves. “Stop it, Max. Stop saying you’re wrong for wanting, that you deserve to be punished, that you’ve done *anything* wrong.”

“I—”

“No!” I shake my head. “What was done to me in that warehouse, in Alexei’s safe house? *That* was a sin. The men who hurt me, who raped me and beat me and violated me? *They* were wrong. The men and women at that party who would have bought me and Sofia and Caterina and the children? *They* were evil.”

I can feel tears welling up in my eyes as I stare up at him, breathless and almost shaking with the force of the emotion rising in me. “What we have together, Max—what we want from each other, that’s not a sin. It’s something good and beautiful. I don’t care what you were brainwashed into believing about sex, but if *I* can believe it after having it warped into something so horrible for me, then you can too. Us wanting each other isn’t wrong. The way you touch me isn’t a sin. And if it is—”

Slowly, I step forward again, until I’m very close to him, close enough to feel the heat radiating off of his body. I look up at his hazel eyes, his handsome, chiseled face, and I feel the ache of so much love in my chest, so much need to make Max see himself as I do, even if nothing between us ever changes.

“If this is a sin,” I whisper softly, placing my hands gently on his chest as I go up on my toes. “Then I’d happily burn for it.”

I feel him stiffen when my mouth brushes over his, feel the flex of his muscles as he holds himself back from reaching for me. He groans, a painful sound as his lips graze against mine, and then he twists his head away, refusing to look at me.

“You weren’t there.” The words come out so low that I’m not sure I heard him correctly, and I frown, pulling back a little.

“What?”

His head swings back to face me, his brows knitted together in an angry expression as he pushes himself away from the desk, dislodging me from my spot nearly pressed

against him and making me stumble back. “You weren’t there!”

Max is looking at me now, a darkness in his hazel eyes that I’ve never seen before. “It’s good that you weren’t. But you didn’t see what I did to Alexei, what I helped Viktor and Niall and Liam do. You didn’t know that I *enjoyed it*.”

The word comes out like a vicious hiss, his eyes narrowed. “I fucking enjoyed it, Sasha. I thought of his hand hitting you, hurting you, and I cut his fingers off and enjoyed his screams. I *believed*, more fiercely than I’ve ever believed anything in my whole life, that he deserved what we did to him. It wasn’t a hardship to cut him to pieces, not after what he did.”

Max shudders, his hands clenching at his sides. “You don’t understand, Sasha—the things I want sometimes, the things I would do to you if I could. I look at you sometimes, and I want to grab you, fucking *devour* you, fuck you hard and rough until you scream. And how can I want that, after what was done to you? After the way others have handled you? How can I be the kind of man who wants to make you beg for me and scream for me?”

The rush of heat that washes over me makes my knees weak. “What if I said I wanted that?” The words come out in a whisper, and I see the faint shudder that washes over Max. “What if I said that the idea of you doing those things to me turns me on?”

“Stop.” He shakes his head, turning away. “You don’t know what you’re saying, Sasha. And even if you did, I made vows, promises—I do this to myself to try to stop the wanting. To stop myself from hurting you with my own failings, over and over again—”

“You’re not hurting me. Or if you are, it’s only because you keep giving in and then pulling back—because you’re doing this to yourself.” I shake my head, feeling tears well up, my gut twisting. “If I’m the reason you’re doing this, then take it out on me instead.”

His face goes very still. “Sasha, no.”

“I mean it!” I swallow hard, trying to force down the welling emotions, but it doesn’t help. “Tell me the worst, then, if you want me to stop loving you, but I promise it won’t matter! It won’t change anything, because I don’t think you were wrong. I don’t think it was wrong to want to hurt Alexei after what he did to me and the others. Don’t you think I wanted to hurt him? Don’t you think I would have done the same, if I’d been down there in that room? I don’t think we’re wrong to want each other when every day we spend together is just more and more proof that we have everything the other person needs. So don’t keep hurting yourself.” I reach down, snatching the belt up from the floor, and thrust it out towards him, my hand shaking.

“Take your anger out on me if you have to. Punish me. But don’t hurt yourself because of me—because you’re hurting me anyway if you do. So you might as well go straight to the source.”

A look of absolute horror spreads over Max’s face. “Sasha—how could you think I would ever do something like that to you? You’ve been hurt like that before; how could you believe I could ever lay a hand on you in anger? Ever punish you for what isn’t your fault?”

“It’s not your fault, either,” I say quietly. “And you’ve done nothing wrong. So if you can do it to yourself, why not me?”

“Because I can’t!” Max snatches the belt out of my hand, throwing it to the floor. His chest is heaving, his eyes full of wild emotion as he looks at me fiercely, taking a step closer to me as he towers over me, his fists bunching.

He takes a deep, shuddering breath. “I can’t hurt someone that I love.”

SASHA



It feels as if the room shudders to a stop around us as I look at him, stunned.

He loves me.

Max loves me.

For the first few seconds, that's all I can think. The elated feeling that sweeps over me is all-consuming, sending a flush of warmth through me, a tingling, champagne-bubble kind of happiness that overwhelms me—until I remember the circumstances under which he said it and what we're arguing about here in this room, and I come sharply back down to earth.

“If you love me, and I love you,” I say quietly, a tremor running through my voice, “then I truly don't understand why we can't be together.” I look at Max's handsome, tortured face, tears welling in my eyes all over again. “Your past is just that. The *past*. We can move forward—we can make something new together—”

Max shakes his head, swallowing hard. “You don't understand.”

“Then make me!” My voice rises, high and pleading. “Max, you're right. I *don't*. Please, help me understand.”

He rubs a hand over his mouth, his expression is pained. “It's not just the vows I'm trying to keep, Sasha. I'm trying so desperately—trying, again and again, every time I fail—and I promised again, if you lived through that illness, that I

wouldn't touch you anymore. That I'd keep the vows I made. And then I—"

"I don't believe that matters, Max," I tell him quietly. "I'm sorry to say that, if you do, but I don't think you promising to stay out of my bed, to deny us both, to keep putting us through this, is why I survived. And if it is—"

"I don't know if I believe it anymore, either." Max shakes his head, looking suddenly very tired. "But if I'm being honest, Sasha—I don't know who I am without those vows. My whole life has been dedicated to being one kind of man. I have lived being him with a steadfast devotion—and I was *good* at it, happy with it...until circumstances changed. I can't even say they were beyond my control. To a certain extent, that's true, but I still made choices, and then I made choices again. All of them have led me here—to stand in front of you and say that I was a man who devoted himself to loving and serving a monolith, and I don't know how to be the man who loves you."

He sucks in a breath, looking at me with a sudden, deep sorrow in his eyes. "I can't trust the man that I would be in order to keep you safe forever, Sasha—if you were mine. I've done terrible, bloody things to get revenge for my brother and for you." Max reaches out suddenly, his broad hands wrapping around mine, and I gasp at the heat of them against my skin. "I would kill anyone who hurt you, Sasha, tear apart anyone who touched you. Do you understand? What I feel for you—the emotions I feel, they're so strong that it feels as if they can't be allowed. I can't let myself feel that much. I can't do that to you."

"What do you mean, do that *to* me?" I ask, swallowing hard. "You're not doing anything to me, Max. Loving me isn't—"

"I would consume you," he says softly, and when he reaches up to touch my cheek gently, I feel a shiver rush through me. "I would want all of you, forever. And you should have a chance to be free, Sasha. You've experienced so little of your life. You should have the chance to explore the world if you want, date and experience other men. You should get to

live, to discover who you are, make new friends, and go wherever you please, without danger or fear. You've never known what that means. There will always be danger around me. You can't give yourself—commit yourself to a man like me. It's not right—and I can't ask that of you." Max's hand cups against my cheek, his thumb brushing lightly over my cheekbone. "I can't ask you to take on my demons, Sasha."

My heart is pounding in my chest. "None of this changes how I feel about you," I whisper softly. "And I have demons too, Max. I have things I don't talk about. I feel so much guilt—"

"What happened to you wasn't your fault—"

"I know." I reach up, covering his hand with mine. "But with Alexei, in the safe house—when he took me into that room and beat me in front of Caterina to make her submit to him—I didn't fight the way I should have. I was so afraid of what he would do if I did. And when he beat me, it hurt so badly—"

A shudder runs through me at the memory, and Max's arms go around me suddenly, pulling me close to him as his hand runs over my hair. "Sasha, you don't have to—"

But the words are already spilling out, tumbling over one another as tears well up in my eyes and spill down my cheeks. "It hurt so much, what he did. I begged Caterina to give in, to let him have her, so the pain would stop. I couldn't take it—I couldn't bear it."

I lean back, tilting my head up to look at Max through tear-filled eyes. "You keep saying you're weak, but *I'm* the one who's weak. I begged another woman to let a man violate her, something that I *knew* the horror of, to stop my own pain. To make him stop hurting me. I broke, and I can't forgive myself—"

"Caterina forgave you." He reaches down, brushing away the tears with his fingers. "And it doesn't matter, because there's nothing to forgive. The one who did wrong was Alexei, to do what he did. To hurt you so badly in the first place that you would even be put in a position to break that way. It's not

your fault that you couldn't bear a torture designed to make you fail. That could never, never be your fault."

He leans down, brushing his lips over where his fingers were, kissing away the tears. "You should never feel guilty for what others have done to you, Sasha."

The ache that washes through me is more than desire. It's something deeper, a need for him beyond the physical, a need for closeness, for intimacy. When his lips brush lower, finding mine, I moan as I clutch his shoulders, arching against him with a desperation that might have embarrassed me in some other circumstance, but in this one, simply feels *right*. I need him, to feel him sink into my skin and my bones and down to my very soul, and I can't resist it—can't resist pleading for it.

"Don't stop," I breathe against his lips, arching into him. "Please don't stop—"

Max groans, a low, deep sound in his throat as his hands drop to my waist, pulling me hard against him as he deepens the kiss. "I love when you beg for me, Sasha. It makes me so fucking hard that it hurts. Does that upset you?" His hand reaches up, raking through my hair, fisting at the back of my head as his lips drag across mine again—not enough to hurt, but enough to remind me of what he'd said earlier. "This is what I'm talking about. It fucking turns me on to hear you beg."

He claims my mouth again, a hard and furious kiss that leaves me shaking and wet, my limbs going soft under the onslaught of arousal. "No," I whisper when I can think again, when I can *speak*, my hands curling against his hard chest, furred with soft hair, before I drop to my knees in front of him. "I like hearing you beg, too."

I undo his belt in quick, hurried movements, my palm rubbing against the hard ridge of his cock, desperate for him not to stop me. I have him out in a matter of seconds, my hand wrapping around the thick shaft, and I lean forward, my lips brushing lightly over the tip of Max's cock. He's sticky with pre-cum already, salty against my tongue as I flick it out, and I roll my gaze upwards, looking at him dangerously.

“Don’t you want to beg me to suck your cock?” I whisper, my voice as low and sultry as I can make it, and Max’s jaw tightens as his hand runs through my hair again. “Or do you want me to beg for it instead?”

“Sasha—” A tortured expression passes over his face. “*Fuck, Sasha—*”

My tongue flicks over his cockhead again, tasting him, and I moan softly. “Pick one, Max, if you want your cock in my mouth.”

“Oh god.” His hips jerk and I can feel him harden in my fist. “*Fuck, I need your mouth, Sasha—*”

I swirl my tongue around him, just a little more than before, teasing the soft flesh beneath the tip. “You have to say please,” I whisper, and Max’s cock jerks in my fist, pre-cum dripping onto my lips.

“Please,” he groans breathlessly, his hand tightening in my hair. “Please suck my cock, Sasha. *Fuck—*”

I’ve never heard him curse so many times in quick succession, a clear sign that I’ve pushed him to the brink and past it. He shudders as I wrap my lips around his cockhead, pressing my tongue underneath it, swirling and licking as I slide down. I’m still no expert, struggling to keep my lips over my teeth and still fit his thick shaft into my mouth, but from the sounds Max is making above me, it doesn’t matter.

I slip my hand underneath, between his legs, cupping his taut balls in my hand. I look up, watching the pleased expressions playing over his face as he grips my hair, the lust in his eyes as his cock slips deeper into my mouth.

“Oh *god*, I—”

He swallows hard, his hips shuddering, and for a moment, I think he’s going to lose control and come down my throat. I feel his balls contract in my hand, feel the way he goes hard all over, and then Max is suddenly dragging me to my feet, turning me, and pushing me back against the desk.

“Your turn.” He looks down at me with a dangerous edge in his gaze. “Beg me to fuck you, Sasha. If you want this, beg

for it. Is that what you want?"

I hold his gaze, not faltering for even a second as I reach down to grab the fabric of my sundress's skirt, bunching it in my hand as I drag it upwards.

"Please," I whisper, my tongue lightly drifting over my lower lip, tasting the trace of Max that still lingers there. "*Please*, please fuck me. Please give me your cock."

Before he can lift me, I push myself up on the edge of the desk, yanking my dress higher and opening my legs for him. "Come find out how wet I am for you."

"God, Sasha—" Max growls the last word, my name rasping over his lips as he steps between my legs, his cock hard as iron, jutting out eagerly. "You're going to be the death of me—"

"That's how I feel, too."

I reach out, wrapping one hand around the back of his head and the other around his cock, and drag him towards me.

Max's mouth crashes down onto mine, hard and hot, his tongue tangling with mine as I stroke his cock between my legs, feeling like I'm on fire. I feel hot, feverish, and desperate for him. When his fingers slide underneath my panties and slip inside of me, I moan into the kiss, pulling him closer.

"You're fucking soaked." Max's fingers slip deeper, curling forward, and I cry out, my hips arching into his touch. "God, Sasha, the way you want me—" He presses his forehead against mine, breathing hard. "It makes me feel insane. It makes me feel—"

His body shudders as my fingers press into the back of his neck, both of us stroking the other, pleasure rippling through us both. "We should stop. We should—"

"No. No, please." I arch up desperately, kissing him again. "I need you, Max. Please don't stop. Please—"

"*Fuck!*" Max nearly snarls the word, and suddenly he reaches out, sweeping books and papers off of the desk in one swift motion. His hand presses into my chest, and I find

myself flat on my back, my grip on his cock lost as he reaches under my skirt, ripping my panties down roughly as he holds me down against the desk, his eyes wild above me.

“This is what you want?” He pants the words, his cockhead nudging against my soaked entrance, his entire body shuddering with the force of holding back. “You want me to fuck you like this, Sasha? Pinned down on my desk, feeling like I can’t fucking stop, like my fucking cock is going to explode if I’m not inside of you in the next five seconds?”

I feel as if I could come on the spot, just from the things he’s saying. My legs go around his hips, pulling him closer, feeling the tip of his cock press into me, and I nod breathlessly.

“Yes,” I whisper, relishing the feeling of his hand pressing between my breasts, the forcefulness of it. With any other man, this would have sent me into a spiral of panic and flashbacks, but with Max, it feels almost healing in a way. I trust him, absolutely. If I say no, I know he’ll stop. I know, down to my soul, that it doesn’t matter how much he wants me, how aroused he is, even if he were on the brink of coming, he’d stop. And so I let myself enjoy the feeling of being under Max’s power, of being swept up in the force of his desire.

“I like this,” I whisper, tugging him closer with my legs around his hips. “And I want you to fuck me just like this, Max. *Please.*”

He groans, and his hands plant on either side of my head, his forehead pressed against mine again as his hips jerk forward in a hard thrust that leaves him sheathed inside of me to the hilt, his cock sinking into me in one long, hot slide. Pleasure sweeps over me, tightening my body with a wave of sensation that feels almost like a small orgasm. As Max starts to thrust, I cry out, wrapping my arms around his neck and dragging him down to me for another kiss.

This isn’t like the first night in my bed. It’s not sweet and slow, but it feels intimate all the same. *I’m the only one he’s done this with*, I think as he kisses me, his cock filling me, his body surrounding me. *I’m the only one he wants.*

It makes all of it feel so much better, so much more intense, to know that I'm Max's first and only, to know that he's experiencing all of this with me for the first time. To know that just as he's the only man I've ever wanted to be with, I'm the same for him. It turns the rough, frantic sex, his cock pounding into me as he kisses me deeply, his teeth grazing over my lower lip, into something different, something that feels as if it could overwhelm me with the pleasure of it, the *passion*.

"Come for me," he whispers breathlessly against my mouth, his fingers finding their way between us, rubbing over my clit as he thrusts into me harder than before. "I need to come, Sasha, come for me first—"

The urgent, frantic whisper is like a spark to a fuse, and I feel myself detonate, my hands clawing into his shoulders as I come apart at the seams, screaming his name. My head arches back against the hard wood of the desk, my back curving upwards as Max drives his thick, hard cock into me. I feel myself squeezing around him, pulling him deeper as his arm slides underneath me. He holds me there, arched upwards and clinging to him as he buries his face against my breasts in the v of my sundress, and I feel his cock throb inside of me.

"*Fuck!*" Max jerks out of me, shuddering, his entire body convulsing as I hear the sound of his cum splashing against the hardwood floor. "Oh *god—*"

He groans, his other hand flat against the desk as his hips jerk, and I whimper at the sudden loss of him inside of me, my body clenching uselessly for his cock. Max moans again, slumping against me, and I run my fingers through his hair.

"I didn't think to ask how you'd feel about me coming on you," he murmurs, his face still pressed against my breasts. "And we already made the mistake of me coming *in* you once. It's not like I carry condoms—"

I flush, realizing I hadn't even thought about the possible consequences of Max coming inside of me. All I'd thought about was the pleasure, the way it felt for him to let go inside of me, hot and throbbing, the rush of it as he filled me. I'd

wanted it again, and I hadn't thought about what might come after.

Would I mind? Truthfully, I don't think I would. I love caring for Caterina's children, and I'm equally certain I would love caring for one of my own. But I know that's not a conversation to have with Max tonight—and probably not ever.

My heart sinks at the realization as Max pulls away from me, rearranging himself as he looks for something to clean up with. I wait for the moment that he's going to tell me that it's time to go back to the way things were before, and I know, deep down, that I can't keep pushing him like this.

If he truly doesn't know who he is without the man he used to be, without the vows he made, then I can't force him into it. I can't make him decide who he wants to be—just because I want *him*.

I open my mouth to say just that as I fix my dress, but Max is turning towards me as I do, the mess cleaned up. He walks towards me, his eyes still filled with that hungry light, and I forget everything I was about to say.

His arm goes around my waist, pulling me close to him as his mouth comes down onto mine again, and there's nothing I could do to stop where this goes next.

There's nothing I *want* to do—other than this, with Max.

SASHA



I wake up the next morning in Max's bed.

For one blissful moment, that's all I register—that and the memory of how I ended up there.

After he'd kissed me in the office, we'd stumbled upstairs into a room I'd never been in before—the master suite that Max occupies on the floor below mine. I hadn't had a chance to take in the scenery before he'd tossed me onto the bed, following me onto the soft, fluffy duvet as we'd stripped each other's clothes away in a flurry of hands and mouths, as desperate for each other as we'd been before I'd gotten on the desk.

It was as if he'd decided that, after doing it once, the rest of the night was a sunk cost. He'd made me come twice more with his mouth, spreading me wide and eating me out until I'd drenched his face with my arousal, until I was lax and loose-limbed in the bed. Then Max had leaned over me and kissed me with the taste of my pussy still on his lips, covered my body with his, and thrust into me.

That had been more like the first time, back in New York. He'd pinned my hands over my head, sinking into me again and again in long, slow strokes that left me trembling and moaning, begging him to make me come again.

And he had.

Max is all I've ever experienced, but I'm convinced that no one else could make me come like he does, that nothing could ever feel as good as him inside of me, a perfect fit that touches

every secret, sensitive spot that I never knew I possessed. I'd clung to him throughout the night as he made me come over and over again, drawing it out as long as he possibly could.

It had been more than sex, more than pleasure, more than fucking—although it was plenty of that. It had been *everything*, and it had only made me believe that much more that what happened between us in New York wasn't a fluke or an accident of scarcity or a need for me to go out and experience more men to know I'm not making this all up in my head.

Which makes what I know I have to say this morning that much harder.

Sometime in the middle of the night, we'd gotten up and showered; Max's cum streaked across my breasts and belly at that point. I'd gone down on him in the shower, getting him hard and ready again, and he'd fucked me against the wall and then on the bathroom counter, finally finishing in my mouth as I knelt on the bedroom floor and swallowed his cum. He'd groaned with a sound that I knew I'd never stop hearing. His hand fisted in my hair as his cock throbbed and pulsed between my lips, and I'd wanted to keep going forever.

He'd been *very*, very careful not to come inside of me again, and I hadn't had to ask why. He knows as well as I do that there's a risk, no matter what, if we're not using protection. Still, there's not a single condom to be had in the house. I know very well that Max isn't willing to take the step of asking security to bring some, an act that would be tantamount to admitting that he's forsaking his vow of chastity, rather than waiting for his walls to be broken down again and again when he can't resist the temptation any longer.

I'm not sure either of us could bear to make the switch, either, after feeling the heated pleasure of bare skin, Max filling me without anything between us.

Besides, it doesn't matter, I think as I lie there, Max curled against my side as I look up at the ceiling. I won't spend another night in this bed, or him in mine, most likely. This won't happen again—or if it does, it will come after weeks of

torment and pushing and pulling and Max doing his best to resist.

And I have to stop trying to supplant that.

Max's arm is slung over my waist, holding me close to him as I sleep, and I have to look around the room, taking in all the small details to keep the tears filling my eyes from spilling over. I look at the shining wood floor covered in expensive rugs, the bare fireplace along the far wall, the intricately carved four-poster bed we're lying in, and the soft light blue duvet covering us. I take in as much as I can, trying to think about anything but the inevitable moment when Max wakes up and the dream of last night ends.

I love you, I think as I look at him, resisting the urge to touch him, to run my fingers through his hair. Any touch might wake him up, and I don't want that. I want to lay like this as long as possible, with his warmth sinking into my skin, imagining that this could be every morning instead of just this one.

All too soon, he stirs next to me, his eyes opening slowly, bright hazel in the glow of the morning light. In all of my fantasies, this would be the moment when he rolls over atop me, kissing me slowly, his morning-hard cock slipping into me, filling me up sweet and slow.

But that's impossible, and I know it. Our conversation last night has been coming back to me in gut-wrenching bits and pieces since I woke up, and I'm determined to be the one to say something this morning, and not Max.

Which is why when he opens his mouth to speak, I push myself up, dislodging him a little as I speak first.

"I'm sorry," I say quietly, tugging the sheet up over my bare breasts and crossing my arms over it. "I pushed last night, even though I know I should have walked away. I did the things that I knew would make it impossible for you to turn me away. I know you well enough now to know those buttons, and I shouldn't have—I feel like I manipulated you."

My eyes burn with tears, but I stubbornly refuse to let them fall. I know Max was as much a part of last night as I was, that he could have said no as easily as I could have, that *he'd* been the one who had come back and kissed me again after cleaning up the evidence of the first round—but I can't help feeling that I'd played on *his* feelings, on his admission of what I did that made him feel so desperate with need.

"I know I crossed a line again," I say softly. "I just wanted to stop you from hurting yourself—I hadn't meant for us to sleep together again. I wanted it—but I didn't mean for it to go in that direction. But once we started—"

Another wave of memory from last night comes back to me, of my fingers brushing against the welts on Max's back as he'd thrust into me, his flinch of pain, and the way I'd kissed him then, trying to swallow his pain. When I'd knelt in front of him after the shower and swallowed something else, I'd kissed the welts on his sides and hips after, my hands stroking down his thighs.

I would have done anything to make him stop hurting.

"I've been pushing you, teasing you, even when I don't mean to—and I know I need to make an effort to step back. I—" I suck in a breath, looking into Max's deep hazel eyes, filled with an emotion I can't quite read. "I love you, Max. Nothing about that has changed. But I love your friendship, too—I love having you in my life. And I realized this morning that maybe loving you means accepting that we can't be together. I haven't been listening to what you're saying to me—and that's not how you love someone."

Silence hangs between us, thick and heavy, and a strange expression crosses Max's face.

"I appreciate that," he says finally, but something in the words sounds more hollow than I'd expected. I tell myself not to read into it as he sits up, the sheets pooling around his lean hips, and I force myself not to look down, not to stare at his muscled chest or the faint marks of my lips on his throat and my nails on his shoulders, the ridge under the sheets that tells me he's at least half-hard from just having woken up.

Max runs a hand through his hair, breathing in deeply, as if he's trying to center himself. "How are you feeling?" he asks abruptly, glancing at me. "Physically, I mean. Not that I'm not worried about how you're feeling emotionally, but—"

"Sore," I admit with a blush. "A little sore. But otherwise—fine. I think I've bounced back from being sick, if that's what you're asking."

He nods. "It was. So—what do you think of breakfast and that horseback ride that I promised you?"

My breath catches in my throat at the idea of another whole day with Max, another day spent in the same happiness and laughter and fun that we always share when we're together. *This is why you said that to him, I remind myself. This is why you put a stop to it, this time, before he could say anything about how he's fucked up again. So that you don't lose everything.*

"That sounds fun," I say softly, smiling at him, and Max returns it, but there's a tension in his face that I can read, even if I don't think he means for me to. "Let's do it."

"Breakfast first," Max says, reaching for my dress and handing it to me. "I'll meet you downstairs in fifteen minutes or so."

He turns his back to me, and that's when it really sinks in—when it really hits me what I've done, that *this* part of our relationship has come to a shuddering stop again. *He would have said it if you didn't*, I tell myself, but that doesn't make it hurt less that I know Max is looking away so that he won't see me naked, that he's asking me to leave so that he can get dressed.

If we were a normal couple, that wouldn't matter. But we aren't, so it does.

"I'll see you downstairs," I say, as brightly as I can manage, throwing my sundress on and escaping to the stairs to head up to my own room.

I dress for horseback riding—jeans, a loose cotton t-shirt, and boots, pulling my hair up in a high ponytail—and try not to

think about Max the next floor down, naked in his room, or wonder if he's thinking the same thing about me.

It occurs to me, suddenly, that one day I might meet someone else. As far-fetched as that seems now, and as impossible as it seems that I could ever want or love anyone who isn't Maximilian Agosti, the truth is that one day I very well could meet someone who, at the very least, makes me feel safe and happy enough to have the partnership and family I dream of.

How will I be friends with Max then?

I won't ever have to face seeing him with another woman. If he won't break his vows and try to start down the path of becoming a different sort of man with me, I don't for a moment believe he'll do it with someone else. But one day, Max might have to see me do just that. In fact, it's what he's been pushing me towards, despite the fact that I'm sure it's tearing him apart.

I can't imagine the man I make that future with wanting me to stay so close with a man I was once in love with. I can't imagine making Max watch that future unfold, after what we shared, no matter how much he might encourage it.

I'm going to lose him, no matter what.

It sucks the breath right out of me to imagine that. But the truth is, I have no idea what life will look like when we finally get back to New York. Max might decide to go to Boston, for all I know, to put some distance between us—a thought that feels like a second punch to the gut.

He's already in the kitchen when I come down, handing me a muffin and a banana, his already half gone. "Giana wanted an explanation for why neither of us was at breakfast," Max says with an amused glint in his eyes. "I said you had a headache, and I was waiting on you."

I take the food out of his hand, laughter catching in my throat. "Usually, that's an excuse to get *out* of sex, not because of it."

My eyes meet Max's, and I feel that flicker of tension between us again, entirely caused by acknowledging out loud what happened between us. *It shouldn't feel like this*, I think with a quiet, frustrated despondence. *I shouldn't have to feel bad for saying out loud what both of us did last night*. It isn't that Max is *trying* to make me feel bad, either. It's just that by treating every time this happens as a mistake, it always feels like the elephant in the room, like a dirty secret that we can't admit to aloud.

But there's no way around it.

"We can eat and walk," Max says, heading to the back door. "Or eat and drive, rather. It's nice out right now, but there's a definite possibility that it might rain later today."

"That would be a first since I've been here." I take a bite out of the cinnamon muffin, following Max out to the Rover that's parked in the same spot it had been last time.

"It doesn't happen often this time of year." Max starts the car up, glancing over at me as we pull out onto the narrow, winding road that leads through the estate to the stables. "It's actually quite nice when it does, I think. I like thunderstorms."

"I don't really know if I do or not." I frown, taking another bite of my muffin. "I never really stopped to think about it."

"Well, maybe you'll get a chance to decide today." Max gives me an offhand grin, finishing the last few bites of his own muffin as we get closer to the stables.

"You have to make sure I have a calm one," I tell him nervously as we walk in, breathing in the scent of hay and fur. "Don't forget, I've never done this before."

"Don't worry." Max smiles reassuringly at me. "I'm going to put you on Basil. There isn't a quieter horse, but one who can still keep up—or at least he could when I was here last."

I can feel fear starting to coil in the pit of my belly as Max gets the horses out of their stalls, realizing that I'm about to, very shortly, be much higher in the air than I've been previously, atop a capricious animal with very little concern for my personal safety. But I'm not about to chicken out now,

and I focus on Max instead, watching his quick, certain movements as he puts the horses in what he calls cross-ties, brushing them down swiftly.

“Here,” he says, handing me a soft round brush. “Use this gently on Basil. Let him get used to you a little while I tack up Chime. The two of you can get to know each other.”

I’m not entirely sure I’m prepared to know the big, reddish-colored horse that stands there, eyeing me with what I’m sure is equal uncertainty. Still, my determination not to show weakness wins out. I approach Basil slowly as Max returns to his own horse, a tall, stocky silver-dappled one with a white star on his face, and gently pat his neck.

“Good boy?” I test out hesitantly, and Basil makes a low whickering noise, craning his neck to nudge at me with his nose. For some reason, the gesture relaxes me rather than scaring me more. I feel a small boost of confidence, running the soft-bristled brush over Basil’s gleaming coat as I wait on Max to come and help me with the next steps.

“Looks like the two of you are getting along,” Max says with a grin as he carries over the saddle. “Here, I’m going to get you tacked up now. You might be able to do it yourself with plenty of practice, but I don’t want to risk it today. Especially since we need to go straight out on the trail if we’re going to get a full ride in.”

“Fine with me,” I tell Max with a laugh, backing off as he begins to saddle up Basil. Horseback riding, or a man acquainted with it, had never been on my radar—but the confidence that Max moves with is a turn-on that I would never have expected. I can’t stop watching his long-fingered, broad hands expertly buckling up the saddle, and at the same time, remembering those hands moving over my body with a similar confidence despite his inexperience, the gentle way they’d touched me.

I hadn’t known it was possible to miss someone while they were still standing right next to me.

Before I know it, Max is gesturing to me to join him next to Basil, a small block in front of him. “You can use this to

mount up,” he says, nodding towards the block. “I’ll be right here to help steady you. Just throw one leg over—like getting on a bike.”

“I’ve never ridden a bike,” I confess, and Max pauses, looking briefly stunned.

“You’ve never—oh, I suppose that makes sense.” He pauses again, awkwardly, and then shrugs. “Well, you know the concept of it, right?”

I’ve never felt the difference in our backgrounds as acutely as I do right then. I nod slowly, and Max smiles.

“Well, put that into action. And I’ll be right here to help you if you need it. Basil is a good boy; he won’t startle or anything like that, if you’re a little clumsy about it.”

‘Clumsy’ is a good word to describe my inelegant attempt to clamber atop Basil. It’s technically successful, in that I do end up atop the horse, my hand curled under the front of the saddle to steady myself, but I can only imagine how it looked from Max’s vantage point.

“Well, you’re up there, and that’s what matters,” he says with a smirk, and I glare at him.

“This was your idea.”

“You’re going to love it,” he says confidently. “Just sit there while I mount up on Chime, and we’ll head out.”

I crane my neck to watch as Max swings his leg over the saddle, mounting up with an effortless grace that my efforts had definitely lacked. He looks like a natural as he gathers up the reins, tapping Chime’s sides lightly with his heels as he rides up alongside Basil and me.

He gives me a few quick instructions on the basics as he sits there, looking as if he’s spent half his life on horseback—and who knows, maybe he did, back when he lived here. *There’s a lot you still don’t know about him*, I remind myself, but right now, it doesn’t feel like it matters. It’s a bright and sunny day, the sky still mostly clear except for a few incoming clouds, and as we ride out of the barn with my heart in my throat, I know I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else.

My heart feels as if it broke all over again this morning—but I also feel as if I made the right choice. Whatever happens in the future, I want as much time with Max as I can have, however I can have it. If that means putting aside my feelings for him so that he doesn't pull away—then that's what I'll have to do.

“How are you holding up?” Max slows down Chime, letting me catch up as Basil plods his way forward toward the trail entrance. “You can tap him a little with your heels, remember, and he'll pick up the pace.”

“I think this is okay for now.” I laugh nervously, glancing down again. I don't think Basil is actually that tall for a horse—probably pretty mid-sized, compared to Max's mount—but *I* feel as if I'm impossibly high up. “We'll just take it slow.”

“Fine by me.” Max keeps the slow pace next to me despite Chime's snorts and prancing, the silvery horse clearly eager to take off on his own. “Whatever you're comfortable with.”

Just that on its own makes me feel better, and I relax a tiny bit into the saddle, following Max's suggestions on how to thread the reins through my fingers. The trail that we're on circles above the vineyards as we head towards the less-manicured part of the estate. If I'd thought the view was beautiful when we'd walked through it before, it's even more so now.

“This place is like paradise,” I say softly, both of us coming to a halt as we look down at the rows and rows of vines. “If I could stay here, I'd never want to leave. If there wasn't something to go back to in New York, of course,” I add quickly, glancing at Max. That strange expression is on his face again, flitting over his features for a moment, and then they smooth carefully again.

“It might be different if you'd grown up with my family,” Max says, following my gaze out over the vineyards. “Even paradise can feel like a prison when someone else makes all your choices for you.”

Isn't that what happened even after you left? I want to ask, but I bite back the words. It's not for me to say, not after I'd

just promised this morning to stop pushing and prodding. If Max isn't ready to see that even the vows he's clinging to have just been the continuation of someone else choosing his path for him, then I can't make him—and I know I shouldn't.

You just have to accept that part of your relationship is over—not that it ever really started. But it's hard to believe that, to accept it, when I can still feel the ghost of Max's hands and lips on my skin, the faint soreness between my thighs that reminds me of what we did just last night.

"It *is* beautiful," Max says softly, interrupting my thoughts. "But it's not my home anymore."

He turns Chime to head up the trail, and I follow, finding enough nerve to tap Basil lightly with my heels and catch up. Max glances over at me, a smile at the corners of his lips. "There you go," he says encouragingly. "Not so scary, right?"

I push my heels down as he'd suggested, trying to find my balance as Basil picks up the pace. "Definitely scary," I tell him breathlessly. "But fun."

And it *is* fun. The further we go down the winding trail, the better I find my seat and get more comfortable, increasing the pace little by little as we ride through the scenic back half of the estate. We slow down again as we pass several pastures filled with sheep and goats, and Max points them out, grinning when I squeal with delight.

"I've never been in this much nature before," I tell him with a laugh. "I grew up in Moscow, and then was shipped to New York."

"Well, how do you like it?" Max asks teasingly, tapping Chime with his heels again to pick up the pace. "Ready to get back to the big city?"

I shake my head, urging Basil on, too, a little more comfortable now. "I think I might be more of a countryside girl, actually. I feel so much more relaxed here—like I can *breathe*."

"Maybe I'll just leave you in charge of the place," Max says teasingly, and I feel my chest constrict a little.

I wouldn't want to stay here without you.

“If it wasn't for Caterina and the children, I might actually consider it.” I keep an equally light, teasing tone, but deep down, a part of me wishes we *could* stay—but only if Max stayed here with me.

Which seems impossible.

The clouds are starting to gather more by the time we reach a huge lake towards the back of the property. Max urges Chime forward, letting the tall horse splash through the water. “Come on,” he encourages. “They love it.”

I nudge Basil, and the horse does, in fact, eagerly splash into the water, kicking his hooves. Max and I circle each other for a moment, letting the horses drink and wade through the water. I watch Max out of the corner of my eye, enjoying the sight of him maneuvering Chime through the water.

Every time I look at him, he seems more handsome to me than before, but today especially, with the sun glinting off his dark hair and his chiseled, olive face, I can't quite believe how beautiful he is. Watching him astride Chime is almost erotic, seeing his long-fingered hands taut on the reins, his muscled thighs gripping the saddle, his body moving with the rhythm of the animal underneath him.

It makes my heart speed up in my chest, the beat fluttering in my throat as I look at Max, and I wish more than anything in the entire world that I could be in his arms again.

“We should probably head back,” Max says finally, sounding a little reluctant as he looks up at the sky, where the clouds are coming in closer. “I don't think you want to get caught out in a rainstorm.”

I think, privately, that I'd be fine with being caught in a rainstorm, as long as it was with Max. But I nudge Basil in the direction he's heading with Chime, brave enough to pick up the pace a little as we ride back toward the stables.

It's a decently far distance, and we ride in companionable silence, a little of the tension between us dispelled. I'm reminded all over again of how much I simply enjoy Max's

company, how much I want to keep him in my life, in whatever capacity that's possible—what I would be willing to sacrifice, in order to make him feel safe enough to do so.

Why would I want to go elsewhere, when I have so much that I love here? Max seems bent on the idea that I deserve freedom, adventure, and a future free of the dangers unique to the world that men like he and Viktor inhabit—but everyone I love is a part of it. I don't *want* to start over, and deep down, I feel a flicker of resentment at the idea that I should have to choose anything other than what *I* want for myself...even if that's something other than what others believe I should do.

The clouds are heavy and dark by the time we make it back to the stables, and as we dismount and Max starts to help me untack, raindrops are starting to fall.

“We’re going to have to make a run for the Rover,” he says grimly, once we have the horses brushed and returned to their stalls. The rain is coming down in a sheet now, and he stands at the doorway of the stable, clicking the keys to unlock the car so we can jump in. “Ready?”

I nod, and together we bolt out of the doorway. A giggle bubbles from my lips as we duck and run through the rain, Max's face screwed up in obvious distaste. We're both soaked by the time we fling ourselves into the car, and he shakes his head like a wet dog, sending droplets flying from his now slicked-down dark hair, all the curl flattened out of it.

He drives carefully back to the house, the wipers flying back and forth, the road slick and slippery by now. When he pulls up to the house and kills the engine, he hops out, coming around to get my door before I can open it.

“I’m fine. I don’t need help—ah!” I yelp as my boot hits a patch of mud and I slip, nearly falling straight down on my ass. In the last moments, I feel Max's hands grip my arms, pulling me upwards, and I topple forward, almost falling *into* his arms as we stand there in the rain, more and more drenched by the second.

He looks down at me, blinking away the water streaming into his face, his hands still clutching my upper arms. I'm

suddenly, intensely aware of how my t-shirt is clinging to me, glued to my skin, my hair plastered to my face, both of us soaked. Max is looking down at me with that inscrutable expression again, his eyes flicking down to my lips. For one wild moment, everything I'd resolved this morning flies away as my heart leaps into my throat.

And then he pulls back, looping my arm through his elbow as he turns us towards the house. "Come on, I'll make sure you don't fall!" he calls out over a peal of thunder. We run together towards the back door, kicking off our muddy shoes in the mudroom as we both break into laughter, soaked to the bone.

"I was wondering when you two would show back up."

Max and I both turn, still breathless and giggling, to see Giana standing in the doorway, her lips twitching with humor disguised as disapproval. "There's someone waiting to see you in the formal living room," she adds.

I swallow back the last of my laughter, glancing at Max in confusion as I see him straighten, his brows drawing together. "Let me just get changed, and I'll see him in my study."

Giana presses her lips together, her face carefully blank as she shakes her head. "He was very insistent that he see you the moment you walk in, and he's been here for some time already." She hesitates. "You should go now, *tesoro*."

Max's frown deepens. "I can't change into dry clothes first?"

Giana gives him a pointed look, and Max lets out a sigh, looking at her with a narrowed curiosity that gives me a sudden, anxious pit in my stomach. I have a feeling that whoever is waiting for Max, it has nothing to do with me. I'm free to go upstairs and change out of my drenched clothes, but I find myself following Max as he strides irritably toward the formal living room.

If he notices I'm trailing along, he doesn't say anything.

"In here," Giana says, opening the door. "Maximilian, *tesoro*—"

Whatever she was about to say, it trails off as we step inside, and I see Max's back stiffen. He stops in his tracks on the other side of the room, from the masculine figure standing facing the windows, with me hovering nervously behind him.

"Arturo?" Max's voice is rasping, hollow with shock, and I feel as if I'm suspended in some kind of animation, on the outside looking in, as the man at the window turns slowly to face us.

He's extraordinarily handsome, model-handsome, with a smooth, chiseled face, stylishly cut black hair, and sparkling green eyes flecked with gold that could make any woman stop in her tracks if they were turned towards her. He stands there, hands shoved casually in his pockets, his leanly muscled body filling out the tight distressed jeans and a black t-shirt that he's wearing, his gaze fixed squarely on Max.

"Well then," the stranger says in a rich Italian accent. "It's good to see you after so long, brother."

MAX



It takes a moment for me to even be able to speak, a cacophony of thoughts crashing through my mind.

How is he here?

Why is he here?

I've never been a paranoid man, but it rips through me at that moment, as my little brother, now grown-up and standing in the house that is technically mine, turns to face me with a glint in his eyes that I recognize all too well.

Growing up, Arturo was the troublemaker, the cause of mischief, the one who seemed to delight in angering our father and made our mother swing wildly between despair and coddling. The theater room I'd shown Sasha was made for him, the brother whose only job was to go into the priesthood at eighteen and satisfy the family tradition, while our older brother took on the mantle of an heir, and I took over some facet of the family business.

Of course, he hadn't done so. And I haven't seen him since he ran away to Milan, more years ago than I care to count now.

I hadn't imagined he would appear out of the blue when my attempts to contact him had gone entirely unanswered. Combined with the reasoning for Sasha and me hiding away here in the first place, an instant, paranoid suspicion rises within me, and I narrow my eyes at him. "You could have called first."

Art's eyes widen, and he dramatically claps a hand to his chest. "You wound me, brother. Really? Can't I surprise the only family I have left?"

"Even a phone call would have been a surprise." I grit my teeth, frustrated with this newest development. "You've been gone for a long time, Art. You weren't even at the funeral. *Either* of them."

Art's expression sags a little. "I know. But you see my side of things, don't you, Max? If I'd come to our mother's funeral, I'd have been locked in the basement before our father let me run off again."

"Unlikely." I feel my jaw clench tighter. "I'd already done your duty for you. Most likely, you would have been tossed back out. What's your excuse for our father's funeral, then?"

Art snorts. "You think I wanted to pretend to be sad that old goat died? He was a pain in my ass when he was alive, and I doubt he left me enough to cover my trip here and back."

"So that's it, then. You're here for money."

"Max!" Sasha's voice cuts into the conversation, and a sharp burst of guilt hits me. I'd been so focused on who our unexpected visitor was that I hadn't even noticed she'd followed Giana and me.

If I had noticed, I'd have asked her to go upstairs. The last thing I want is for my brother to get an eyeful of her, before I find out why he's really here.

"You're being rude," she continues in a hushed stage whisper that Art can definitely hear. "Your brother is here. Isn't that a good thing?"

"I'm not sure," I say tightly, and I catch a glimpse of Sasha's startled expression out of the corner of my eye.

Art sighs. "I'm hurt, brother. I heard you were here, back home at last, and I wanted to see you. To *surprise* you. And I'm being treated as if you found me razing the place to the ground on your arrival."

“I’m more surprised that you weren’t. I tried to get in touch with you. You didn’t answer a single call or bit of correspondence—no matter how I tried to reach out.”

Art presses his lips together, still looking wounded. “You might have had the wrong number. I didn’t get a call from you, Max. Not a voicemail or a text. I assumed you’d forgotten about me like the rest of our family.”

“I also sent an email. A few of them, in fact.”

Art smiles ruefully. “I have assistants now, Max. Maybe they thought it was spam.”

I’d forgotten, in the years between when I knew my brother as a rebellious teenager and now, how quickly he could come up with an answer for everything, a reasoning to get him out of any scrape. It had driven our father insane, and me as well—especially since if there was a situation that needed pinning on someone else, it usually happened to be me. Our older brother was too responsible.

Until he wasn’t, and I ended up in a back-alley street, gun pointed at a man with revenge chilling through my veins.

A flash of neon-lit rain and the slap of wet stone beneath my shoes, the sound of pleading, and the report of a bullet fills my thoughts for one brief, startling second, until Art’s voice cuts through it again.

“Is this your wife?” He gestures to Sasha, who is still standing next to me. “I heard you left the priesthood,” he adds, a teasing note in his voice, light as if we’re children again. “For her? If so, I can certainly see why. I’d have her on her knees for communion every night.”

I move so quickly that I don’t have time to think about what I’m doing, or why. I feel a hot, possessive flush run through me, a quick burst of anger that’s entirely foreign. I have never in my entire life been a rash or angry man, but as Art makes the lewd comment. I hear Sasha’s startled intake of breath, I cross the space between him and me, my hand fisting in his undoubtedly expensive black t-shirt.

“Don’t *fucking* talk about her like that, or you’ll be missing so many teeth that you’ll never book so much as an Old Navy catalog again.”

Art jerks backward, out of my grip, running his hands over the wrinkles in his shirt where I’d grabbed him. “Christ, Max, calm down. Sorry if I seemed rude, *Mrs. Agosti*,” he says a bit sarcastically, looking around me toward Sasha. “I just like giving my brother a bit of shit, that’s all.”

“She’s not my wife, you fucking idiot,” I seethe, stepping backward and putting some distance between us again. “Sasha and I are just friends, only that. She’s here visiting, and that’s all.”

I catch, in my periphery, the quick flash of hurt that crosses Sasha’s face. *I should have noticed her following and asked her to go upstairs. All this could have been avoided.*

“Exactly,” Sasha cuts in, her voice so flat and careful that I know with cold certainty that she’s trying to hide just how much the exchange bothered her. *And why wouldn’t it? Last night you spent the entire evening with fingers, tongue, and balls deep in her. You forgot every single promise you made just a week ago to keep your hands off of her. She might have said it was a mistake this morning, but neither of you was singing that tune last night.*

“I can see why you might think that, though,” Sasha continues, stepping forward a little with a smile plastered on her face. Art might buy it, not knowing her, but I’m well aware of the fact that it’s a forced smile, and I know it’s my fault. “We’re very close friends. It’s good to meet you—Arturo? Max has talked a little about his family, but there’s nothing like getting to meet you face to face.”

My brother’s demeanor instantly changes as he steps forwards, offering a hand to Sasha. “You can call me Art. I hope any friend of my brother’s can be a friend of mine—I’m sorry if I came off as crass just now.”

Sasha takes his hand, shaking it, and a smile spreads across Art’s face. “Honestly,” he says, in a conspiratorially lowered voice. “My brother is a fool *not* to have married you. Unless

you're otherwise spoken for? You must be—no one this beautiful could possibly be unattached.”

I see red as Sasha flushes, her cheeks stained a pink that I've previously only ever seen cast in my direction. That possessive burn in my gut rises up again, acid burning the back of my throat as I watch my brother flirt with Sasha. She's not flirting back—but I can tell she's buying his act, and why wouldn't she? Sasha is innocent, inexperienced with men—and she trusts me. I've only been as forthcoming about my family as I've felt I needed to be, so there's no reason for her to think that she shouldn't trust my brother as well.

“Back off, Art.” My voice is low and irritable, and Art at least pulls his hand back, although he doesn't look in the slightest bit chagrined. “Sasha is here as my guest. She doesn't need you fawning over her.”

“It's not fawning to simply speak the truth,” Art says smoothly, and Sasha casts a confused glance at me—which she has every right to. I've told her again and again that there can be nothing between us but friendship, that every time I've given in to my desire for her has been a betrayal of my vows and myself.

Of course, my sudden jealousy is confusing to her.

Sasha backs up, tension on her face as she forces a smile again. “I'm still soaked from getting caught out in the rain,” she says quickly. “I'll talk to Giana about dinner—I'm sure you're staying for dinner, right, Art? And I'm sure the two of you have a lot to catch up on. I'll just—go—”

She turns quickly, her voice trailing off awkwardly as she escapes the room, and I can't blame her. The tension in the room has ratcheted up sharply, and I turn to face Art, not bothering to hide my annoyance.

“Of course, I'm staying for dinner,” Art says, either ignoring or failing to notice the expression on my face. “In fact, I'd hoped to stay here for a little while, once I found out you were home. It's been too long since I've seen my brother.”

“Don’t you have a runway to walk or a photoshoot to be at?” I can hear the anger in my words, the clipped resentment, and I know I’m being harsh. But in the face of all that’s happening, I see no reason not to be. The rational part of me knows that everything that’s happened to me, to our family, the choices I’ve been forced to make, aren’t entirely Art’s fault—and sometimes not even really his fault at all. But that doesn’t help at this moment, when all I can see is the brother who should have entered the seminary and the memory of how I had to take his place.

My life as it would have been—*could* have been—gone. Any dreams I might have had for myself were crushed before I had a chance to see them really develop. My choices were stripped away—unless I wanted to follow in my little brother’s footsteps.

I used to find peace in my choices and reasons to be grateful for how things turned out. Now—since our older brother’s death and more and more often since then—I wonder if it was cowardice that kept me from forging my own path, too. I don’t like to think of myself like that, but it’s something that’s come up more and more often over time.

“Actually, I don’t,” Art says smoothly, without the slightest hint that he’s affected at all by my anger. “I don’t have anything booked for a few months. Not that I want to stay here that long,” he adds. “But I cleared my calendar when I heard my older brother was home. I thought you’d be happy to see me.”

“And that’s the only reason you’re here?” I narrow my eyes at him, arms crossed over my chest. “Just to catch up? For old times’ sake?”

Art is wearing that wounded expression again, the one I don’t trust in the slightest. “What other reason would I have to come?”

“I don’t know. That’s why I’m asking.”

He steps closer, his face earnest. If I didn’t know him so well, I’d almost believe him. “You’re the only family I have left, Max. I told you, I didn’t get any of your attempts to reach

out. So I came here to do it myself. I wanted to see you. That's all it is—I promise. I wanted to see you—and I want to know more about what happened to our brother.”

SASHA



The first thing I do is go and find Giana.

It's the only way I can think of to cope with the sudden turn of events—find a task and focus on it. It's part of how I've dealt with what happened to me over the past year. At home in New York, I have my tasks—get up, help with breakfast, get Anika and Yelena off to school, and help Caterina with the babies. An order to the day, every day—and here I don't have that. I'm cut adrift, all of my hours my own, and I've found myself wanting to spend every single one of them with Max, as ill-advised as that is. And now—

His brother. I don't know what I'd been expecting, especially after Max had said his younger brother left to go and pursue his dream of modeling, but it hadn't been that. Even with what I know of their past, too—how Art bailed on his responsibilities and left Max to pick them up, how he hadn't responded to any of Max's efforts to reach out—I hadn't expected the open hostility that Max had shown him.

I also hadn't expected to be so hurt by Max's insistence that we're only friends.

That's what we are, I remind myself as I look for Giana, clothes changed into dry leggings and a long, loose t-shirt that drapes just past my hips, my hair wound up into a clip. It's not the sexiest outfit, but something about Art makes me want to look as unappealing as possible around him. *If I were you, I'd have her on her knees every night for communion.*

It had been a rude, inappropriate thing to say, especially when he'd thought I was Max's wife. It had been exactly the kind of thing that puts me off of the idea of dating altogether, especially when I know and love Max, who would never say such a thing.

Who had, in fact, actively defended me.

Something thrills deep inside of me at the memory of Max jumping at his brother, arm flexing as he'd grabbed the front of Art's t-shirt, anger and jealousy flaring in his face.

He'd been jealous. Jealous of his brother talking to me, flirting with me. I'd seen it again when Art had tried to make his careless comment up to me, and it had both thrilled and frustrated me.

If you're so jealous of anyone else wanting me, then make me yours. I know it's not so simple, but I can't help the frustration I feel over it.

I find Giana on the guest floor, down the hall from my own room, fixing it up—ostensibly for Art. I poke my head in, and she looks up just in time to see me step inside.

“Need help?” I ask, and Giana purses her lips, that humorous disapproval in her eyes again.

“Now, what kind of housekeeper would I be if I let the guests do that?”

“I'm going to be here for long enough that I'm not really a guest, Giana,” I tell her, crossing over to the other side of the bed and helping her fit a fresh sheet over the mattress. “And besides, I'm used to this. I mean—I don't really do these kinds of chores normally at home, but I'm the nanny, so there's plenty of times when I do step in and handle it.”

Giana looks at me curiously. “The nanny, hm? So you like children?”

I nod. “I love them. My employer—she's really more like a friend, honestly, but she has four of them. It's a lot to keep up with—but honestly, sometimes I would rather be there helping her than having a day off.”

“We should all be so lucky.” Giana smiles, tossing the top sheet over the bed and not complaining when I grab it and start helping her tuck it in. “I’ve felt that way about keeping house for the Agostis. The boys’ father was a bit of a hard-nosed man back in the days he was alive, that’s for sure, but all I really had to do was keep out of his way and his business, nod when he gave orders, and then do things the way I knew they should be done best. And when it all came out fine in the wash, he never complained.”

She half-smiles at me. “It’s a shame Maximilian can’t see what’s right in front of him. His brother passed on before he could marry and have children, and I doubt Arturo will ever pick a girl and settle down. Maximilian wasn’t meant to have children, of course, and I’d given up hope of ever hearing any little feet in these halls before I pass on too. But now that he’s left the Church—” Giana gives me a piercing look, and I can feel my cheeks flush.

“I wouldn’t pin too many hopes on that,” I say quietly. “Max seems pretty determined to stick to the path that was picked for him, as best as he can now. And as for me—”

I take a long breath, thinking of the vineyards and the stables and the estate that I’ve so quickly grown fond of, and my chest aches as I finish. “I’ll be going back to New York as soon as I’m able to. What Max does after that—that probably won’t have anything to do with me.”

Giana nods, a pensive expression on her face. “Well, it’s like I said. It’s a shame he can’t see what’s right in front of him.”

She shakes out a heavy duvet over the bed between us, giving me enough time to school my expression before I catch it, helping her smooth it out.

“I imagine Art is staying for dinner,” I say slowly, reaching to help her stack the pillows onto the bed. “Do you need any help with that?”

Giana waves a hand. “If I can’t manage dinner for three, I ought to give up now and go out to pasture.” She looks at me

assessingly, setting the last of the pillows on the bed. “What did you think of Max’s brother?”

“Me?” I glance at her, surprised at the question. “I—I don’t know. I didn’t talk to him for long. He was handsome? Charming, I suppose, once he tried to make up for a very inappropriate comment.”

Giana frowns. “He is that, when he wants to be. But he’s also smarter than he looks and not always to his benefit. Remember that, Sasha.”

I pat the duvet absently, leaning against the footboard. “Max was so hostile to him. And you don’t seem thrilled that he’s here either—what am I missing? Surely he just wanted to see his brother again, like he said.”

“Maybe.” Giana reaches for the empty basket next to her. “I’m just saying—Art has always been a devious, mischievous one. It’s worth being careful of his motives. I haven’t heard a peep from him all these years, and neither has Tommas.” She shrugs. “Maybe he just doesn’t think it worth his time to keep up with the help, but I raised those boys as much as their mother did. Max certainly made sure to send me a message here and there over the years.”

She reaches out with a free hand, patting my arm in a motherly way. “You get some rest, girl. You look a little pale around the edges. I can handle our unexpected company, don’t you worry.”

I watch her leave, a sudden, unsettled feeling in my stomach that’s stronger than before.

—

I stay in my room for the rest of the day, not wanting to encounter either of the brothers in another awkward conversation, changing into a silky blue wrap dress for dinner. When I come downstairs, the floor level of the house is full of the rich smells of whatever Giana has cooked up for dinner, and I can see the light coming from the smaller dining room.

When I walk in, Max and Art are already at the table, and the silence in the room speaks volumes. There’s wine already

decanted in the middle of the three places set for us. I head immediately to the open seat at Max's right, murmuring apologies as I sit down under the glowing chandelier above us that gleams down onto the smooth dark wood of the table.

"Nothing to apologize for," Max says calmly. "We've only just sat down."

"I took a nap," I admit, reaching for the decanter of wine. "That ride really took it out of me. The-trail ride. With the horses."

I feel myself flushing, but if Max notices, Art doesn't—as he's too busy slipping the decanter out of my reach. Before I can protest, he smoothly pours a glass for me, flashing me a charming, toothy smile.

"You shouldn't have to pour your own glass," Art chides teasingly, sliding the wine towards me. "Someone as beautiful as you should be waited on hand and foot, every moment of your life."

"I think I'd be very uncomfortable with that," I tell him dryly, swirling the wine around my glass before taking a sip.

"Is this strange for you?" Art asks, nodding towards Giana as she brings in our soup course, a chilled tomato gazpacho. "Having staff, I mean."

"No," I admit, smiling at Giana as she sets down my bowl. "There's staff at the house where I normally live. And I do get to take advantage of it, even though I'm technically one of them. But I've never really felt comfortable with it—I didn't grow up like this, and it always feels a little wrong to me, like I should be helping or doing for myself."

"I have to say, I've gotten quite used to that myself," Art says, flashing me another of those smiles before dipping his spoon in his soup. "I don't have staff in Milan. Well—I do have a cleaning lady who comes once a week, but I don't really see that as staff. It's not as if she's around all the time."

"I suppose you've learned to cook for yourself?" Max asks dryly, and Art grins mischievously.

"Of course not. I order in."

Max rolls his eyes. “Just because you don’t have a traditional household staff doesn’t mean you’ve learned to take care of yourself, if you’re getting meals delivered and someone is cleaning up after you.”

“And I suppose you don’t take advantage of this staff that Miss—” Art trails off, glancing at me. “You said your name was Sasha, right?”

“Yes.” I take another sip of the soup, feeling my heart flutter in my chest for some indecipherable reason. “Sasha Federova.”

“Can I call you Sasha?”

Another flutter in my chest, and that unsettled feeling in my stomach again. “I don’t see why not,” I say carefully, and I can *feel* Max tense on the other side of me.

And why is that? It’s not as if I’m doing anything wrong. I’m having a casual conversation, and Max has made it very clear that we’re not together. If he’s jealous over that, it’s his problem.

“Well?” Art glances over at Max. “What’s the situation like for you, *back home*?”

Max presses his lips together, letting the question hang while he takes another sip of his wine. “I don’t live in the main house. I keep my space as clean as I can in between visits from, yes, the cleaning lady who comes to help with it. I cook for myself usually when I’m home, except for when I’m invited up to the main house for dinner.”

“Well.” Art looks almost mildly annoyed by the answer. “Congratulations then, brother. You’ve become the most independent one of us.”

He tilts his wine glass towards Max, and I catch a hint of mockery in his smile before it smooths away, and Art turns his attention back towards me.

“So you said you’re practically part of the staff at home, Sasha? What is it that you do?”

“She’s not—” Max starts to say, but I glance at him sharply, suddenly irritated.

“I can answer him myself,” I say coolly, and Art grins.

“Of course, you can. So?”

Giana appears then to sweep our soup dishes away, replacing them with a green salad scattered with almond silvers, tangerine pieces, and shallots, and the conversation freezes for a moment.

“I’m the nanny to four children,” I tell Art, stabbing the salad with my fork.

Art makes a slight face. “That sounds like a huge responsibility. Not one I’d want, that’s for sure. Do you actually like it?”

“I do.” I manage to grab the decanter myself this time, refilling my wine glass. “I love kids—or at least I discovered that I do, and they’re wonderful, as is their mother. We’re very close; I don’t even like to say she’s my employer. She’s my friend—my family, really, and I’m happy to be there.”

“So why are you here with my brother?” Art looks at me keenly, and I feel my cheeks pinken. I think he sees it, too, because he quickly gives me an affable smile. “I’m sorry if that was too abrupt. I’m just very curious by nature. Max can vouch for that.”

“He is.” Max stabs at his salad with more force than I’ve ever seen him attack anything, especially spinach leaves. “He was always getting into trouble when we were children, talking his way out of it, and then finding a way to blame someone else.”

“You make me sound like a horror to live with.”

“You were,” Max says, without a trace of humor in his voice, and I glance at him.

“Max—” I start to say, but Giana is coming through the door again with the night’s main course, what looks like roasted lamb, and an assortment of vegetables along with it, along with a huge dish of fluffy mashed potatoes.

I can feel Art's eyes on me as I finish my salad, handing the dish to Giana after she serves up the plates with our main course on it. He refills my wine glass before I can stop him, and I catch his gaze as I look up.

"Was that what you always wanted, then?" Art asks. "To take care of someone else's children?"

I try to pick out some edge, some sarcasm to his voice, but he sounds genuinely curious. "Of course not," I tell him, poking at my lamb with my fork. "It just happened to be what was right for me at the time, and it turns out that it makes me happy. So I have no desire to change things, right now."

"What if you met someone?" Art pauses, then laughs sheepishly. "I'm sorry. I'm being too forward again. It's just—I thought for certain that you and my brother were together. I don't know how he stands it, honestly. A priest for so long, and then to have you around—"

"Enough!" Max's voice comes out through gritted teeth. "I can throw you out any time I feel like it, *brother*. Behave yourself."

Art shrugs. "I'm just curious as to what Sasha wants, that's all. I'm trying to get to know your friend better. Isn't that what brothers ought to do?" He glances back at me. "You can't be that old, right? Early twenties?"

"Twenty," I admit. "So I'm in no rush." *And I'm in love with your brother*, I think ruefully to myself, but I don't dare let that slip out.

"You should have a different man in your bed every night at that age—or at least one who can keep you too busy to worry about other people's children," Art says with a grin. I can feel the tension rolling off of Max in waves. When his knife stabs down into the lamb—which is tender enough that he doesn't even technically need it—both of us jump.

"I'm happy with my life as it is," I say smoothly, forking up a bite of vegetables. "And I don't need to change anything about it just now."

“But eventually.” Art keeps pressing, and I can feel a flicker of my own irritation at his pushiness. *He’s the youngest, I remind myself. Probably the most spoiled as a child. He is used to getting what he wants—including the attention he wants.*

“Who knows what’s in the future?” I give him a small, tense smile. “But I’m not worried about it right now.”

Art smirks lightly. “I wonder why?”

By the time dessert is served, I can feel the tension vibrating across the table. There’s a hint of red that I can glimpse at the edge of Max’s collar, and I can see the clear aggravation on his face. When the table is cleared, Giana comes back in a moment later, clearing her throat lightly in the doorway.

“I’m sure you have things to talk about with your brother, Arturo,” she says calmly. “But in case that goes late, I’d like to show you which room I’ve made up for you.”

Even for all his stubbornness, Arturo gets the clear hint. He stands up, a flicker of irritation on his face now, and follows Giana out.

For a moment, neither Max nor I speak. Max swallows hard, his hands on the table on either side of where his place setting was, and he finally looks up at me, his gaze dark. “I’d rather you gave him a wide berth, Sasha,” he says quietly. “Art isn’t to be trusted. You should watch out in your interactions with him—and keep them to a minimum, if you can.”

“Why are you acting like this?” The words come out before I can stop them, my hands twisted together in my lap.

“Like what?” Max’s voice is flat. “My brother and I have a lot of history, Sasha, and the good parts of it were very long ago. It’s not something you need to worry about—”

“And you don’t need to worry about me!” I shake my head, frustrated. “You’re ready to jump on Art every time he speaks to me—it’s like you’re jealous or something, and that doesn’t make any sense—”

“I’m not jealous.” Max arches an eyebrow. “I have no reason to be jealous, Sasha. We’re—”

“Friends. Yes, you made that abundantly clear.”

“Sasha—”

“If you’re worried about me being hypnotized by a pair of green eyes and a charming smile, then I’d say that I thought you knew me better than that.” I can hear the sharpness in my words, flung towards Max like knives, but it’s hard to hold it back. “You know what I want, Max, and we both know that I can’t have it. That doesn’t mean I’m going to fall for the next handsome man who walks past, and—” I break off, suddenly very aware that I’m on the verge of tears, and the last thing that I want to do is to break down crying.

“So you do think he’s handsome.”

“For fuck’s sake, Max!” I glare at him, hoping that he thinks the shine in my eyes is from anger and not threatening tears. “I think you’re the most gorgeous man I’ve ever seen, and he’s your brother, so of course he’s good-looking. That doesn’t *mean* anything—and this is what I mean when I say you’re acting jealous. Why would it matter?”

Max lets out a breath. “It’s been a long day,” he says finally. “And I have more talking to do with Art—alone.”

It’s a clear dismissal, and that stings more than anything else so far. “Fine,” I snap, tossing my napkin onto the table. “I’ll leave you to it, then.”

Max says nothing as I stalk out, and that hurts, too. I’m halfway up the stairs when I see Art coming down, his green eyes immediately landing on me with a wicked gleam in them that makes me feel unsettled all over again.

“Max is waiting to talk to you,” I tell him coolly as I pass him on the stairs.

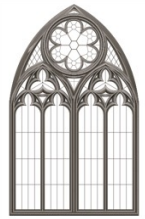
“I expected as much.” Art pauses just below me on the staircase. “And where are you off to for the rest of the evening, Sasha?”

Something about how he says my name is like a hand rubbing over velvet, smooth and catlike. I don't dare say I'm going to my room; I can only imagine how he'd respond to that.

"I don't think that's any of your business," I tell him instead, forcing myself not to look back. However, I can't help but wonder what expression he has on his face as I stalk the rest of the way upstairs, putting Arturo Agosti behind me.

If only I could do the same with how much I desire his brother, so easily.

MAX



I'm waiting in the study, glasses of port poured, when Art walks in. He didn't bother to knock, which doesn't surprise me, and a grin curls his lips as he sees me sink down into one of the chairs by the fireplace.

"Father's study suits you," he says, looking around the room. "You haven't made any changes, though."

"I haven't been here long. And I don't see any need to, frankly."

Art glances at me. "Aren't you staying?" He crosses to the chair that I gesture at, again, and takes the glass of port, wrinkling his nose at it. "You really drink this stuff?"

I shrug. "I like it."

"You would." He takes a sip, pursing his lips with distaste, and sets the glass down. "You didn't answer my question."

I eye my brother as I take a sip of my own wine, wondering whether or not to tell him the truth. I don't believe for a moment that Art decided to come here out of a burning desire to spend time with his remaining brother. There's something else going on here, and it's just a matter of what I think it is—whether it's just more scheming mischief on his part or something more sinister.

The truth, as unkind as it is, is that I don't think my little brother has it in him to do something truly malicious. His escape from our family was borne from a desire for adventure and fame that belongs to him alone—and, as he would tell it, a

real passion for modeling in front of a camera, which is something beyond my understanding.

“There’s some danger that I’m trying to stay out of the way of until it passes,” I say carefully. “It’s targeted Sasha as well, which is why she’s here.”

Art raises an eyebrow. “Wouldn’t it have been smarter to split the two of you up, then?”

Of course, it would have. But I can’t tell him—or rather, I refuse to tell him—why Sasha is here. I’m not going to look my little brother in the eye and admit that I was foolish enough to agree to bring her along because I’d felt guilty, because I’d slipped up and spent the night in her bed, or that it’s happened again since then. Not only because I don’t want to show weakness, but because the warning alarm in my head tells me that I shouldn’t let him know that *Sasha* is my weakness.

“She’s been through a lot.” I pause, taking another sip of the thick, rich wine. “She trusts me, and so I’m keeping watch over her. It’s a complicated situation and not one I feel compelled to explain right now.”

Art shrugs. “Fine by me. So you’ve got someone else handling your problems for you? Taking this dangerous person out while you stay here? That fits with the image of you I have in my head, actually. It’s good to know that some things don’t change.”

At least he’s speaking more plainly now. I lean back in the chair, assessing my brother’s shifting expression in the warm, low light of the room. “It was this person’s wish—the one currently handling the situation—that I remove myself as far away as possible, for the safety of others we care about. And although I would have liked very much to have handled the issue myself,” I add pointedly, “This person has done a great deal for me. I wanted to adhere to his wishes, for as long as it’s possible to do so.”

“You’re saying all this very carefully.” Art’s eyes narrow. “You’re dancing around what’s really happening. I know our brother is dead, Max. I know that we’re all that’s left of our family. All of this can’t stay like it is, moldering away like a

body in a grave.” He waves his hand around at the room, towards the view outside of the windows. “The house and the wealth and the business have to go to someone.”

“No, it doesn’t,” I say flatly, reaching to refill my glass. “The business can rot, for all I care, but it can be turned into something with a board to run it. The house and the wealth can be donated. The money could go to running whatever the house is turned into, even—some kind of school or home for those in need—”

Art snorts, shaking his head as he starts to laugh. “Who do you think you are, exactly? Professor Xavier? Max, I have to admit, there have been times when I felt some guilt at leaving you to pick up my responsibilities, the fact that you’d be pressed into taking my place in the priesthood. But my god, man, I’m not sure there’s anyone better suited to it than you.”

He stands up, circling behind the chair as he leans forward on it, looking at me keenly. “All this, and you want to give it away? Not keep any of it for yourself? No power as one of the first Families, no wealth, no grand house, and a staff to tend to your every need? You might be a bigger fool than I realized, Max.”

“What do you suggest I do with it?” I glare at him, not bothering to hide my irritation. “You’ve been gone all this time, and now you’ve appeared on my doorstep to give me advice?”

Art smirks, leaning towards the bar cart to inspect it. “Ah! There we go. I think gin is probably a better option than that wine.” He unscrews the lid, beginning to fix himself a gin and tonic in a crystal glass without bothering to ask. He lets the question hang in the air until he’s finished, turning to face me again, and taking a deep sip of his drink.

“Mm. Much better.” He gives me that toothy smile that he gave Sasha earlier, his eyes catching the low light. “Well, there were three brothers, and now there’s two, and one doesn’t want what their father left behind. But I do.”

There it is. I laugh, a short, sharp bark of a sound. “I should have known you’d come begging for scraps.”

I shove myself out of my chair, too, stalking to the other side of the room so that I don't give in to my sudden urge to throttle my brother. "There's a reason you were written out of the will. Give me one single reason why I should write you back in." I turn around, crossing my arms. "I'm waiting."

Art shrugs carelessly. "I'm your brother?"

"Not good enough." I glare at him. "I haven't seen you since you were fifteen, Art. You left and didn't look back. You didn't care what happened to me or anyone else as long as you got to live your dreams."

"And now you hate me for it?"

"No." I rub a hand over my mouth, shaking my head. "But you're not going to walk back in here and start slinging demands, brother. You got what you wanted. You don't need more."

"It's not about needing. It's about what's left of our family—"

"Oh, don't even fucking start." I press my lips together, forcing back the choked, bitter laughter. "You never gave a shit about family or legacy or anything else here but yourself, and even if you'd suddenly decided to start, that doesn't mean that you should get what you want. Our father didn't want you to have any of this, and I have to say, I feel the same."

"They really turned you high-and-mighty in seminary, didn't they?" Art gives a dramatic shudder. "I'm lucky I didn't go, then. They might have gotten their claws in me, and then who would I be now?"

"Probably a better man." I look at him evenly. "I know what you'd do with this place, Art. You'd squander the business, spend all the money, and fuck models all over every surface of this house, after you drove Giana and Tommas to an early grave. I might not care much about our family's legacy either, and I might not want to take it over myself, but that doesn't mean I want to hand it over to you to piss on."

Art scoffs, tossing back another gulp of his drink. "Frankly, other than the last part, I'm not sure what's wrong

with that scenario. Maybe if you'd spent more money and fucked more models, you'd be a happier man, Max. And I'm insulted that you think I wouldn't send Giana and Tommas off with a healthy retirement before I turned it into a whorehouse. I'm not a monster."

"I took vows of poverty and chastity," I tell Art flatly. "So neither of those things were in the cards for me. Thanks to you, if you remember correctly—although truthfully, I do think I'm better for it."

"Did you also take a vow to have an insufferable stick up your ass?"

"You're a child," I inform him. "You were a child when you left, and I've seen nothing to make me think that you've grown up since. You left this house and this family, and you didn't look back. I don't know what vulturous urge has you circling back to take a second look, but I haven't forgotten. *You got what you wanted.* I picked up the pieces, and I continue to do so. Be grateful that I didn't throw you out the moment you spoke that way to Sasha."

I stride towards the door, holding it open wide. "You can stay here for a few days. A couple of weeks, at most. But I don't want to hear anything more about an inheritance that was never yours to claim."

Art hesitates, and I nod toward the door. "It's getting late."

It's not hard to see the pissed-off look in his eyes as he finally gives in and walks towards the exit that I'm holding open for him, but he walks out, heading towards the stairs. As he reaches them, I call out once more, making sure my words carry straight to him.

"And Art?"

My brother turns to look at me, raising his eyebrows. "Yes?"

"Leave Sasha alone."

SASHA



I run into Art so many times over the next few days that I know it can't be a coincidence. I see him coming out of the gym as I'm doing yoga, appearing out by the pool as I'm lying in the sun, mysteriously coming up to the stables when I've decided to go up there and get better acquainted with Basil, choosing to use the library at the same time as me. He tries to engage me in conversation every time—sometimes with compliments and sometimes with small talk. I manage to swerve it every time, finding some other place to quickly be before he can push it any further.

Conversely, Max seems to disappear. He spends long hours in the study—doing what, I can't imagine. The only time I really see him is at mealtimes, which we all eat together at the formal dining room table like dysfunctional aristocrats. Those meals are tense and mostly silent, except for when Art tries to make conversation, which Max quickly shuts down.

It makes me realize, in a painful and very abrupt way, how much I can miss Max and his presence in my life. Gone are tours of the estate and swims in the pool, dinners and wine tastings in the movie room, and horseback rides on the trails. Max withdraws almost completely with his brother's arrival, and when I see him, he's not the Max I know. He's curt, cross, and nearly rude—not to me, but to Art, and the careful space between us rapidly grows to what feels like a yawning distance.

Truthfully, I don't know what to think. Max is clearly upset at his brother's presence here, mistrustful and even

angry, and I can't say I entirely blame him. It was Art's defection that put Max on the path that led him here, and I can't begin to imagine the feelings and resentments that must bring up for Max. But at the same time, other than that one inappropriate comment and a generally salacious-seeming nature, I can't find a reason to dislike Art. He's charming, and his interest in getting to know me, as the days pass, seems to be genuine.

I'm not interested in anyone other than Max romantically. Over the course of my life so far, though, not many people have shown an interest in getting to know *me*. It's a heady thing, and Art does it so well that it's hard to know if there's any ulterior motive to it or not.

It bothers me to feel naive, and my uncertainty about him makes me feel exactly that. Max's reaction to Art's presence is beyond anything I've ever seen from him, but Art truly doesn't seem as bad as Max is making him out to be.

"Have you been into town?" he asks me one morning, two days after his arrival, catching me halfway on my way to the yoga room. I can feel his eyes on me, skating over my fitted stretchy top and my tight leggings. It makes me feel suddenly lewd, as if I'd worn something intentionally sexual instead of normal clothes for a yoga session.

I swallow hard, shifting my mat under one arm. "We stopped there for lunch when we first arrived," I say carefully. I don't know how much Max has told him about why we're here or what's happened since we left New York, but considering how Max feels about Art, I'm willing to bet it's not much. "But Max has made it really clear that we're supposed to stay on the estate. So I don't expect to go back."

Art grins, his green eyes glinting with a charming mischief. "Well, I have a car that I rented—so what if we took a little trek into town one of these days on our own? Max wouldn't have to know."

"Max has a car, too," I remind him. "A few of them, I think. And I'm not going to sneak off without telling him. If he wants us to stay on the estate, then I'm sure he's right."

Art rolls his eyes playfully. “You *are* two of a kind. Well, I don’t want to push you to do anything you’re not comfortable with.”

After that, he starts bringing me small treats. Two weeks pass by, and I keep expecting Max to throw him out, but Max seems almost resigned to his brother’s presence. But I can feel the tension building, too. The fancy chocolates that he brings a couple of days after our conversation, telling me that he saw them and thought I’d like them, doesn’t provoke much of a response from Max when he hears about it. The flowers that Art brings a few days later, however, send Max heading straight for his study with an angry look on his face. A few days after that, when he brings me a book he found in a used bookstore, Max looks as if he might pop a vein in his forehead.

Of course, all of the gifts are handed over when we see each other at mealtimes, which makes me think that Art is purposefully trying to needle Max. But on the other hand, he seems genuinely excited and pleased when I admit that I like them. And I *do*. It’s rare in my life that I’ve been given gifts, or paid attention to, that anyone has tried to get to know me, and Art’s persistence makes me *want* to like him.

It’s also impossible not to notice how handsome he is. He’s a younger, more stylish version of Max, cockier and more seductive. While I can’t imagine ever letting him get as far as I know he wants to, the attention does feel good. It doesn’t help, either, that Max has all but vanished.

Until Art brings me the book, some historical romance novel similar to one he saw me reading a week prior, and Max gets up abruptly from the table mid-meal and leaves without a word.

I follow him. It feels instinctive. “I’m sorry,” I say quickly to Art, following Max out to the back of the house, where he’s standing on the expansive deck with his arms crossed over his chest, back to me, staring out angrily over the estate. I don’t have to see his face to know he’s angry—I can see it in the set of his shoulders, the tension running through every inch of him.

I *know* Max, and the distance between us that's grown feels that much worse with the fresh realization. The horseback ride and rush back to the house in the rain feels like a million years ago, not a couple of weeks. If there were one thing I'd have to pinpoint for certain about why I can never feel the interest in Art, that he's so clearly trying to cultivate, it's the fact that his presence has driven Max and me apart.

I'm not even entirely sure how it happened, but it had, and I want desperately to close that space.

"Max?" I say his name tentatively, taking another step forward, and I see him tense all over again. "Max, please talk to me."

"Art's inside," he says snappishly, his voice low and angry. "I'm sure he's in more of a mood to talk."

"Max." I shake my head, walking quickly forward until I'm standing next to him at the iron railing, the stone chilly against my bare feet even in the warm summer night. "This is ridiculous. You know I don't want to talk to Art. I want to talk to *you*—I miss you. I—"

"Oh?" He swings towards me suddenly, his eyes sharply narrowed, his jaw set in a hard line. "You must have been talking to him quite a bit, for him to think of bringing you those things. Chocolates, flowers, a book—I'm not an idiot, Sasha. I see what my brother is doing, and I see you falling for it."

Anger spikes in me suddenly, a hot, burning dart in my chest. "I'm not *falling* for anything!" I say tightly, crossing my own arms. "I'm trying to be polite. I know you've warned me away from him, told me not to trust him—and believe me, I'm taking that under advisement. I trust you, Max, and anything you tell me, I take to heart. But I think there's more to how you feel about Art than what you've said, and from what I see, he's not that bad—"

"That's what he's trying to get you to think!" Max shakes his head, letting out an angry breath. "I've been doing my best to make it look like you don't matter all that much to me, but

he seems to have picked up on it anyway, and he's trying to get between us—"

"Well, he's fucking succeeding!"

Max blinks at me, swallowing hard. "You know you mean everything to me, Sasha," he says after a few seconds, slowly and quietly. "But Art—"

"Is succeeding at doing exactly what you're afraid of. You've put distance between us. I've hardly seen you since Art got here. We've barely talked. When you are present, you're not the same person. You're someone I hardly recognize, and I want—" I suck in a breath, feeling my chest constrict airlessly with hurt. "I want my friend back, Max. At the very least, I want that."

"I can't sit around and watch my brother flirt with you, and you allow it—"

"I'm just trying not to be rude!"

"Are you sure?" Max glares at me. "You seem happy enough with the things he's been bringing you. I've seen you talking to him, and you don't look upset about it. You look like you're enjoying his company."

"Because I don't think he's that bad!" I exclaim. "He's a little overbearing and definitely thinks too highly of himself, but I haven't met many men who aren't and don't! He seems to be trying to get to know me."

Max is looking at me as if I've lost my mind, and I let out a long breath. "I'm not interested in your brother that way, Max. No matter how much you keep insisting that you're not jealous, I can see that you are. But it's not going to happen. Art is never going to get that from me, but Max—*someone* might, one day. You keep saying you want me to go out and explore the world, my options, that that's part of why you won't give in to the idea of us being together—but when that happens, what then? If you don't want me—"

His face contorts at that, and he turns away, but I plunge forward, everything that's been building up in me for days spilling out at once. "If you don't want me, then eventually,

I'll probably find someone else to date, even if that's not what I really want. I'm practical enough to know that I'm not going to be a dried-up old maid at twenty. So you can't have it both ways, Max!"

"That's not what I'm trying to do!" Max whirls back around, his eyes dark in the dim light. "I'm trying to protect you!" Max's brows draw together, and he shakes his head. "Art only has ulterior motives for being here, things that he wants for himself. It's not for any *good* reason. I'm trying to protect you from him, and Art is *definitely* someone that you need to be protected from."

I stare at him for a long, heavy moment, feeling my heart ache in my chest. I'd never doubted that Art isn't what I want, no matter how nice it is to feel desired and paid attention to, but being so close to Max is just confirmation of how I feel all over again. My pulse races in my throat, my breath catching there, as we stand there, close enough to touch. I can smell the lemon and salt scent of him, can remember how it feels to tangle my hands in his softly curling dark hair, and I want him with a force that takes my breath away. "I don't need a protector, Max," I say softly, the exasperation in my voice bleeding out as I speak. "I *want* a lover."

Max's face hardens, and he glares at me. "Of course, you need a protector," he spits out, stepping towards me. I back up instinctively, startled by the anger on his face, and I bump against the railing, my back pressed against it as I grip the edge, looking up into Max's taut, chiseled face.

"How many times have you been kidnapped now? You've been bought and sold, hurt and violated, nearly killed more than once. Of *course*, you need a protector. If anyone has ever needed protecting, Sasha, it's you."

He's very close to me now, our bodies almost touching, and I can see his chest heaving as he looks down at me. He reaches out, his hands clasping over mine on the railing, and Max looks down at me with a dark expression on his face that startles me with its intensity.

“I’ve never wanted anything more than to protect you, Sasha,” he says, his voice low and rough. “But you can’t deny that all those reasons are good ones.”

“You forgot one,” I whisper, forcing myself not to look away from his face, even as the expression there sends twinned shudders of desire and fear through me. I’m not afraid of Max, but at that moment, I am so scared of how much I want him. I’m fearful of how I’ll feel if he walks away from me now.

“What?” Max’s hands tighten over mine, and he leans towards me, so close that I can almost feel the pressure of his body, the beating of his heart. “What did I forget, Sasha?”

“You think you need to protect me from yourself,” I whisper breathlessly. “But you don’t need to, Max. You never have.”

The crush of his mouth on mine is sudden, hot, and desperate. He surges against me, hard and fierce, his fingers curling into my hands as his mouth pries mine open with an almost violent force.

I’m helpless under his onslaught—as if I ever wanted to fight back at all. My lips part for his thrusting tongue, my hands clutching to grasp his, my body arching for him. I want him fiercely, passionately, desperately. I’m on the verge of begging him to take me right here out on the deck, to remind me of what it feels like to have his hands all over me, his cock inside of me, his body pressed against mine and filling me up.

“I need you,” I whisper, the words lost in the kiss, in the moan that Max drags from me as his teeth graze over my lower lip, his hips leaning into mine as I feel the hard ridge of his cock pressing against me.

Max groans, sucking in a sharp intake of breath as I arch up into him, my mouth seeking out his again before he can think to break the kiss. I want more of him, I want everything, and I don’t want to let him go.

Neither of us hears the door opening, too caught up in the fevered heat of each other. Neither of us hears anything at all

until someone clears their throat, and we hear Art's voice carry across the deck, full of sarcastic humor.

“Well, well, well. Seems like I'm not as much of an idiot as my brother thinks I am.”

MAX

I'm lost in Sasha.

No matter how many times I tell myself it's the last time, no matter how hard I try to stay away, it feels impossible. It feels like a battle that I fight again and again, and I feel as if I'm forgetting *why*.

Seeing my brother talking to Sasha, flirting with her, and her slowly falling for his act—whether in a romantic way or not—has felt like a dagger in my heart every day that I've watched it. All I could think of to do was to act as if it didn't bother me, so that Art didn't see how much Sasha meant to me.

I don't trust him. I know now that he wants the inheritance he forfeited, and I'm not sure it ends with that. I don't want to give him something else to use against me, to know how much it would hurt me to lose Sasha, or for something to happen to her.

I don't want him to know what it is that I love most.

And yet—for all my efforts, for all the days of forcing myself to stay away from Sasha, to bite my tongue, to pretend as if the distance between us isn't tearing me to pieces, it seems as if he figured it out anyway.

I hear his voice coming across the deck towards us, and I know the game is over and I've lost.

Sasha stiffens against me, her hands going very still underneath mine. My entire body feels as if it's throbbing with

need, desire coursing through me with a force that makes it hard to pull away.

“Max?” She breathes my name, her lips still a fraction away from mine, and it takes everything in me to tear myself away from her and turn towards my brother.

“This has nothing to do with you, Art.” I can hear the low, dangerous edge in my voice, and I try to keep a grip on my fragile control, to not cross the deck and pummel my brother’s face in with my fist. It’s rare that I feel such anger, but at this moment, I don’t care that he’s blood. I care that he’s come in and disrupted my life as thoroughly as he did when he left it, and I want him gone.

“Max!” Sasha’s hand touches my arm, her fingers wrapping around it, but I pull away. I can feel a lifetime of repressed emotions and repressed desires throbbing just below the surface of my skin, and I’m one moment away from the final thread snapping loose.

“Go inside, Sasha.”

“But—”

“Go inside!” I turn sharply towards her, teeth clenched as I grind out the words between them. “Now.”

She flinches back, a look of stunned hurt on it, but she turns on her heel, fleeing past Art and back into the house, leaving the two of us facing each other in the dimly lit darkness.

“I don’t know what game you’re playing at here.” I take a step towards him, fists clenched, my voice pitched very low. “But it stops now, Art. Sasha is not for you. I wish I could say I don’t know why you’ve decided to toy with her, but I do. And I’m not going to stand by and watch it.”

Art smirks at me in the darkness. “You know, brother—you have so much here. An inheritance for the taking, power to claim, wealth to use as you like, a beautiful woman who wants you. And yet you behave as if you want absolutely none of it. I wondered what there was between the two of you, really. I saw the look on her face the afternoon I came here, when you

called her your friend. I knew there was *something*, but I didn't know how much—the nature of it. Now I do.”

“Why does it fucking matter?” I stalk closer to him, gritting out every word. “Why do you care if I want her or not, if we're together or not, or something in between? I haven't mattered to you for the better part of two fucking decades, Art, so why now?”

Art lifts one shoulder casually, the smirk still clinging to his lips. “Maybe I just want to come home, brother.”

“Well, you're fucking here, aren't you?”

“Filthy mouth for a priest who wants so badly to cling to the past.” Art steps back, leaning against the wall behind him. “She deserves better than you.”

“You don't know anything about her.”

“I know enough.” He shrugs. “She's very beautiful. Very innocent. You shouldn't lie to the ones you love, Max—her...or *me*.”

“I didn't lie to you.” I glare at him. “Sasha and I aren't together.”

Art smirks. “That looked very...*together* to me. I've fucked plenty of women, Max, but I'll be damned if I've ever had a single one want me so very obviously—so *purely*. Not because of fame or money or connections, but out of pure, primal *lust*.” A delicate shiver goes through him. “If you really think you aren't lying to me, brother, then I can assure you that you're lying to yourself.”

“Fuck off.” I try to shove past him, to go back inside, but Art grabs my arm, gripping it with surprising strength.

“You can't have it all, throw it away, and then tell others that they aren't allowed to even scavenge from your scraps, Max. Remember that.”

“Get your fucking hands off me.” I twist, wrenching away from him. “You're staying here on my grace, Art. You can go back to Milan if you're so unhappy with watching my choices. But stay the fuck away from Sasha.”

I pull away then, stalking back into the house and leaving him there, feeling as if my world is spinning out of control, with no way to stop it.

As if he can fucking sense that tonight is the *last* night I want to talk, I'm barely sequestered away in the study when a call comes in from Viktor. I grit my teeth, resisting the urge to hit *decline* on the call as I sink into the deep leather chair behind the desk, propping up my tablet and accepting the video chat.

Viktor's office fills the screen, and I catch a glimpse of Luca sitting on the other side of it, his face so grave that a ripple of uncertainty runs through me.

"How are things, Max?" Viktor's voice sounds equally serious. I try to pull my thoughts away from Sasha and Art and the conflict of a few moments ago, so I can focus on whatever problem is about to be at hand.

"They've been better," I say carefully. "Did you just call to check in, or did you find something?"

"Oh, we found something," Luca says darkly, and Viktor casts him a look that makes a ball of ice start to form in my stomach.

"Remember what we talked about, Max," Viktor says quietly. "I need to know what's happening on your end as much as you need to know about mine. I can tell from your face that something's going on—I've known you long enough. So out with it, and then I'll let you know what we've found."

"My brother is here." I lean back, spitting the words out without preamble. "My younger brother, Arturo. He appeared out of nowhere from Milan. I haven't seen him since he left or heard from him, despite trying to get in touch with him several times."

Viktor's brow creases, and I see Luca raise an eyebrow. "Did he give you a reason why?" Viktor asks, frowning.

"We talked about it, yes. He's interested in what's going to happen to the estate. Our father wrote him out of the will, of

course, and now he's sniffing around to see if I plan to take up the space left for an heir. Since I have no plans to, he's decided to throw his hat into the ring, so to speak."

"And what did you tell him?" Luca asks from across the desk, his lips thinning with displeasure.

"I told him no, of course. I have ideas about what to do with the estate after Sasha and I are able to leave, but none of those ideas involve leaving any of it to Art. He'd turn the place into a caricature of new money and a rotating door of models, with no accounting for taste. I might not have any interest in carrying on our family's name, but I'm not leaving it to him."

"I can't say I disagree with you." Viktor steeples his fingers in front of him. "You're sure that's all he's interested in?"

"I'm never sure of anything with Art. He's taken an interest in Sasha, although she hasn't been reciprocating it, so far as I can tell. But as far as I know, yes, that's why he's here. And I can't say I'm surprised—if he smelled free money and influence, without any of the responsibility, I don't doubt he'd come to flush it out."

"Since you mention Sasha—" Luca glances at Viktor, who gives him another narrow look before returning his attention to me.

"We've found out the identity of the man responsible for the car bomb, and the ones who tried to abduct Sasha." Viktor lets out a long breath. "They're different men, Max. And some of them don't give a shit about you."

I stare at him. "What do you mean?"

"The man who has been tracking you is Ivan Golubev. Beth found out his identity with some digging. He's the brother of the man who killed yours—the one that you hunted down. It's as simple as that—he wants the same revenge you took. All we have to do is get to him first, and it should close the loop. So far as we can tell, there's no other family members, or anyone connected to him, who might decide to pick up after him."

“I can come back.” I think of what Art had said in the office, that I’ve left others to clean up messes that belong to me. It had stung, because it’s something I’ve thought about again and again. “This is my problem, my fault, Viktor.”

“No.” Viktor’s voice is flat and certain, brooking no argument. “You need to stay there with Sasha.”

A cold chill sweeps over me at the gravity in his voice. “What about Sasha?”

“Beth uncovered something else while she was digging,” Luca says. “We thought that Sasha was being targeted as a means to hurt you. And it’s possible that’s one of Golubev’s motivations—there’s no way to really know for sure. He might be hoping to cause you as much pain as possible before he tracks you down, and that’s why he chose the night you were out with Sasha to plant the bomb. But the men who attacked her in the city—”

“Are working for a man named Konstantin Obelensky,” Viktor continues, as Luca lapses into a grim silence. “As far as we’re aware, Sasha knows none of this—and I think it’s better that it stays that way, for now.”

“Knows *what*?” I can hear the impatience in my voice, but if Viktor does, he doesn’t let on.

“Sasha was an orphan,” Viktor says slowly. “Or at least that’s what we thought.”

“What do you mean, what you *thought*?” I glare at him from the other side of the tablet screen. “She was a foster kid—aged out. That’s why Mikhail picked her up. Right?”

“Of course, that’s what we thought. That’s what Mikhail was meant to look for. But apparently, Sasha is Obelensky’s daughter.”

There’s a heavy silence that falls over the room for a moment. “You’re going to need to explain that more clearly,” I say quietly, and Viktor nods.

“Obelensky is a former KBG operative, who now heads up one of the Bratva factions in Russia. He’s known for being violent and power-hungry, and he’s been increasing his

influence for some time now. We've had Beth keeping tabs on him—which is how she managed to uncover this information at all.”

I rub a hand over my face. “So if Sasha is Obelensky’s daughter, then how did she end up in a foster home? That’s not typical for a daughter of a powerful man.”

“Of course not. Obelensky had an affair with a married woman, the daughter of a brigadier who works for another well-known Bratva leader. She got pregnant, and he tried to cover it up and pay for her to rid herself of the pregnancy. Instead, she ran and tried to have the baby in secret. Likely, she was aware that she wouldn’t be able to hide forever—that she’d be tracked down, and they’d both be killed. So our best guess is that she hid away long enough to have the baby and give her up to an orphanage, under an assumed name—we have Sasha’s mother listed as Mariana Federova, which is *not* this woman’s name—hoping that would keep the baby safe.”

“And it hasn’t.” I sag back in the chair, feeling the weight of the new information settle over me. “I’m guessing her father has found out she’s alive?”

“Yes,” Viktor says bluntly. “And he’s much more powerful now than he was when she was born. He wants her dead—he doesn’t want anything about the affair to tie back to him. It’s clear he’s sent men to handle the job.”

“And her mother?”

“She died of a mysterious illness earlier this year.”

I nod, rubbing a hand over my mouth. “So she’s in need of protection from an entirely different threat.”

Viktor nods. “Max, we’ve talked about this time and again. Dealing with your threat should be simple enough—Golubev is a man with some connections, but not enough to make him too difficult, and he’s on his own mission without backing. I can make short work of him, with any luck. But Sasha—” He shakes his head. “This is more complicated. She has my protection, but I have to tread carefully. Obelensky is below me in terms of influence here, but in Russia, he is my

equivalent. Luca will stand behind her as well, but she needs friends *there*, Max. She needs powerful friends on more than just this continent. And that's where you come in."

I know what he's going to say before he even finishes the sentence. "You want me to pick up the Agosti mantle, and use that influence to make sure that Sasha is surrounded on all sides."

"Exactly." Viktor nods. "Obelensky will be made aware that if he touches her, he will be cut off from business with the Andreyev, Romano, and McGregor names. But that's not enough to deter him altogether, and we can't start a war over this. *I* can't. She can't come back here until the threat is handled, Max. I need you to understand that. And where she is now—she needs to be surrounded by protection. Without the influence you can wield, without the other Families to stand behind you, you're all but useless to her."

"We all know how you feel about her," Luca cuts in. "Max—no one knows better than I do what it means to do something that you don't wish to in order to protect someone else. I am grateful for Sofia and everything that she's given me beyond words. Still, there was a time when I felt nothing but anger that I was forced to marry her to keep her alive and my father's promise. Whether you've chosen to act on your feelings for Sasha or not, we all know that you love her. This, now, is the greatest service you could do for her."

"You were born to this name, to this family," Viktor says firmly. "You have lived a life of service to it, Max, whether you wanted to or not. You say that your brother doesn't deserve the family legacy because he chose to walk away from it. If *you* walk away from it now, it will be Sasha that you don't deserve."

"I've never deserved her, and I never will," I say quietly. "But I take your point, Viktor."

"I've given you my protection. I know you want to do the same for her." Viktor folds his hands together, looking at me intently through the screen. "Do what you have to in order to keep her safe, Max. *Whatever* that is. I will do the same, and

hope that it can make up a little bit more for what I did to her in the past.”

When the call is ended, I sit there, feeling half-stunned.

What do I do?

The answer is there in front of me. I know what it is, but after a lifetime of trying to leave it behind me, it’s not easy to accept.

But if I mean everything I’ve ever said to Sasha, I know I have to.

Slowly, I pry myself up from the chair, heading upstairs to her room. I pause in front of the door and then knock softly, feeling my heart clench in my chest.

When she opens the door, I can see that she’s been crying. Her eyes are red-rimmed, her face paler than usual, with splotches of red on her cheekbones. She looks at me, swallowing hard, and I let out a long breath.

“Can I come in, Sasha?”

She nods, and I step inside.

I think of what Viktor told me, that it might be better if she doesn’t know. I look at her sweet face as I step into the room, looking at me with the same trust she’s always given me, even as I’ve broken her heart again and again, no matter how I try otherwise.

I can’t hide something like this from her.

If I’m going to take up the position that everyone seems to want me to, it means that it will be time for me to start making decisions for myself. To start trusting my own judgment.

So that begins tonight.

“I need to tell you something,” I say quietly, reaching for her hand. I lead her over to the chair by the window, sitting down on the edge of the bed facing her, and I see Sasha’s face go very still.

“Is this about what happened outside—”

“No.” I shake my head. “Viktor called me. He gave me some information, and he thought it would be better if you didn’t know, but I—I disagree. I think you deserve to know.”

“I—what?” Sasha looks at me in utter confusion, and slowly, I begin to explain.

I hadn’t thought it was possible for her to grow paler, but as I tell her what Viktor told me, I see the rest of the blood drain from her face.

“My—you’re telling me my father is alive? That he’s—that he—he wants me dead? And my mother—”

“She passed away earlier this year,” I confirm. “There’s no concrete proof, but Viktor suspects it’s related. These are cruel men, cruel families, and they won’t care about one girl. If you threaten his power structure somehow by existing—and you must—then he won’t hesitate to eliminate you. And he’s trying already.”

“So what—what am I supposed to do?” Sasha’s voice cracks with fear, and I get up instantly, crossing to her and kneeling next to her chair, taking her hand in mine.

“I will keep you safe. I swear—I know I was angry outside, earlier, but I meant what I said about protecting you. I’ll do whatever I have to—even if—” I trail off, and I look up to see that Sasha’s eyes have glassed over again with tears.

“I guess I was wrong,” she says ruefully, her voice cracking a little. “Maybe I do need a protector after all.”

“As long as I’m alive, I’ll be that for you,” I tell her quietly, my hands wrapped around hers. “I swear, Sasha. I won’t leave you to fend for yourself. You’ll never have to do that again.”

“I believe you.” She tries to force a smile, but it falls apart, and she lets out a sudden small, shuddering gasp, slipping from the chair and into my arms.

I catch her, holding her on my lap as I lean against the chair, cradling her to my chest. “I’ve got you,” I say softly, brushing her hair away from her face. “I know this hasn’t been

easy for you, Sasha—any of it. I know I’ve hurt you. But that’s never what I’ve wanted.”

I run my fingers through her hair, and Sasha looks up at me, her face soft as her lashes glitter with tears. “I meant it when I said that I love you, Sasha. I’ve broken every vow I made but one, and I’ll break the last one to keep you safe.”

“What do you mean?” She looks at me, blinking with confusion as she leans against my chest, and I let out a sigh.

“I’m going to do what needs to be done to take up my family name again. There’s an influence in it still, and powerful men that I can get help from, as the leader of the Agosti family. Viktor and I talked—and this is the best way.”

Sasha sits up a little straighter, her eyes widening. “Max—but—”

I shake my head, gently touching her lips with my fingertip. “I told you that I would stop anyone who tried to harm you, Sasha. I told you that I would protect you with *everything* I have, and I meant it. There’s no argument here.”

She tilts her head back, her eyes searching mine. “Does that mean—”

I hadn’t known my heart could hurt in the way it does at that moment, clenching so tightly in my chest that it takes my breath away. I can see the hope in her eyes, the thought clearly written there, and it takes everything in me not to tell her yes, yes to anything.

But I can’t lead her on, even if it hurts her now in order to not hurt her later.

“More than anything, Sasha, this means that we *can’t*.”

I see the hope die in her eyes in that instant, and it cracks my heart in two, but I keep pushing forward with what needs to be said. “All that would do is put you even more in danger. Right now, no one knows you’re here that shouldn’t, except possibly Art. There’s nothing I can do about that now, but we can keep it under wraps as much as possible until this is handled. All that would do is point a glowing arrow to exactly where you are, for anyone who wants to hurt you.”

“Why would anyone have to know?” There’s a thin thread of desperation in her voice, as if she saw that thread of hope, and is desperate to grab onto it again. “We don’t have to tell anyone—”

“Sasha, I—” I swallow hard, unable to figure out how to explain this to her in a way that won’t crush her entirely. “If I’m going to take my place among the Families, there are things that might be—expected of me. That I might have to play along with for a while, at the very least. I can’t be attached to anyone, even in secret. Deception doesn’t play well in this world, if you’re asking for favors—and I will be asking for a great many.” I gently touch her cheek, and I see her eyes flutter closed, her breath hitching at the touch. “Please tell me you understand. This isn’t—this isn’t what I want. But I can’t leave you unprotected. This is what Viktor has asked me to do and what I know I *need* to do. If I don’t, we’ll be on our own, and if something happens to you because of that—”

I cup her face in my hand, leaning down to press my forehead against hers. “I have found a way to live with everything that has happened in my life so far, Sasha. But that, I couldn’t live with. Please don’t ask me to. Let me do what needs to be done to protect you.”

She takes a deep, shuddering breath, her hands coming up to clutch the front of my shirt, as if she can’t bear to let me go. Her chin tilts up, her lips brushing against mine, so sweet and soft that the pain of losing this forever tears through me like a hot knife, ripping me to shreds.

Once more. Just once. I hold her face in my hands, crushing her lips to mine, the salt on them, her tears and mine mingled together as I commit them to memory. I breathe her in, wanting to memorize her scent, her touch, her soft skin against mine, everything that I crave, everything that I need, everything that I love.

“I love you,” she whispers against my lips. “And I’m grateful for you, Max. And I—understand.”

She breaks away from the kiss, her hand coming up to touch her lips, her cheeks streaked with tears. “I just—I need

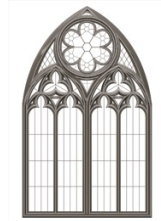
some time. Please. Thank you—thank you—for telling me.”

I nod slowly, brushing my lips across her forehead as I stand, helping her up at the same time. The loss of her skin against mine makes me go cold, but I know what I have to do.

Every part of me wants to pick her up and tumble her into the bed, to strip her down to her skin and bury myself inside of her, but instead, I turn away.

I walk out of the room and leave her there.

MAX



It's a matter of a few days to reach out and make the contacts that I need to. All of the information is at my fingertips, names and files and documents in my father's office, and it's quick work to make myself known to the men who matter. Within twenty-four hours, I have an invitation to a gala being thrown by Edo Casciani, one of the three head Families, and once a close personal friend of my father's.

When I inform them, the satisfaction on Viktor's face—and Levin's and Luca's—makes me seethe more than a little. The only balm is knowing why I'm truly doing this, that it's for Sasha.

To keep her safe.

"I'll be away this evening," I tell Sasha over breakfast, giving Art a narrowed, pointed look. "Agosti business."

Art's eyebrows rise sharply. "Giving up that vow of poverty, hm? Good to see you come to your senses about one thing at least, brother." The expression on his face clearly suggests that he's disappointed to hear it, given his designs on the inheritance.

The look I give him is withering. "I suggest you start thinking about going back to Milan," I tell him flatly. "I can't say there isn't a place for you here, since you *are* my brother, but not a permanent one."

Art shrugs. "I've already been looking into it. Don't worry, I'll be out of your hair before long." He throws me a flippant

wink and pushes his chair back, picking up a muffin off of his plate and striding out of the room with it in hand.

“I wish I could go with you,” Sasha says softly. “I want to help, Max—”

“You can help by staying out of danger,” I tell her firmly. “I’ll be able to focus on what I need to do better if I know you’re here, safe. That’s what matters more than anything, Sasha. It’s why I’m doing this at all.”

“I know.” She bites her lip, shredding a piece of toast on her plate. “I do understand. Really, I do.”

“Good.”

The rest of the day is tense. Art leaves the house at some point, saying he’s going into town, and Sasha drifts off to the pool. I bury myself in the study, intent on remembering as much as I can about the ins and outs of the influential men that I’ll be speaking with tonight, to make up for a decade away from it all.

I’ve spent years trying to escape all of this, to ignore it, and to put it out of my head. Now I’m thrown into a crash course on it, trying to remember how to be the kind of man who can walk up to someone like Edo Casciani and ask for doors to be opened for me.

Doors that, I’m confident, will come with favors of their own.

I press my face into my hands, trying to remain calm. All this time, I’d been thinking that Sasha had been thrown into this world by an accident of fate, but she was born into it as certainly as I or Viktor or Luca, or anyone else in my circle was. She just didn’t know.

None of us did. And now all I can do is try to get her out.

The biggest question is how to do that—and what’s harder still, how to do it in a way that Sasha will agree to.

When I come downstairs that evening, Art is nowhere to be seen. Sasha is in the informal living room, curled up on the chaise-style couch and reading a book. She looks up the

instant I hover in the doorway, as if she knew I was standing there without my saying a word. I see her eyes widen a little at the sight of me dressed up for the evening.

She swings her legs over the edge of the couch gracefully, striding towards me as I stand there, stunned by how beautiful she looks even like this—in loose black sweatpants bunched up around her knees, a thin white tank top, and her strawberry blonde hair bunched up atop her head. Her pale face is bare and smooth, her green eyes shining out of it as she walks towards me. I feel my chest clench with a wave of unrestrained *want* as Sasha stops a few inches away from me, her gaze sliding up and down.

“You always look so handsome like this.” Her teeth graze her lower lip as she steps a little closer, reaching up to touch the knot of my tie. “It’s a little crooked, though.”

I can feel the heavy thump of my heart in my chest as she adjusts it, looking up at me under lowered lashes as she smiles with a hint of sadness, stepping back with her lips pressed together.

“Good luck tonight,” she says softly.

“Thank you.” I don’t know what else to say, looking across the space between us. “I’ll see you when I get back.”

I drive myself to the Casciani estate, since I don’t currently have a driver employed. It makes me cringe a little to think of a future where I need to fully staff the Agosti estate again, after so long of mostly doing for myself. I have no desire to go back to being waited on hand and foot again, and I don’t like to think of a future where I’m required to stay in Italy most of my time, either. New York is my home now, Boston a close second after that, and all of the memories I have here are ones that I’d rather tuck into a dusty old box in the attic of my mind.

But whatever I have to do in order to keep Sasha safe, I will.

The courtyard of the Casciana estate is already filled with cars, couples in elegant evening wear stepping out and heading

up the steps to the mansion as valets take their vehicles. Sparkling, buttery light streams out from the open doors into the darkness, the sound of a string quartet spilling out along with it, and I feel an automatic knot of unease in my gut as I hand over the keys to my Ferrari to the valet.

A uniformed usher is at the door, guiding the guests toward the formal ballroom at the back of the mansion. The room is awash with that same light and music as I step in, the glass doors at the rear of it thrown open to let in the warm summer air and sounds of trickling fountains from the gardens beyond. Tables and a dance floor are set up, and I stand a bit awkwardly in the doorway for a moment, trying to recall how to do this.

I went to an event like this exactly once, just before leaving for seminary, so that my father could show off his dutiful sons—one the heir, the other the priest—and remind the Families that his was more than just one errant child. The memory is a haze now, and I feel an intense desire to be anywhere but in this room.

“No date tonight?” A soft, feminine voice comes from my elbow, and I turn to see a tall, slender brunette standing next to me. She’s stunningly beautiful, dressed in a forest-green evening gown made of some slippery material, her hair twisted into an elaborate updo secured with emerald and silver pins that match the emerald and diamond jewelry dripping from her ears and neck. Her eyes are a deep, dark brown, and they sweep over me assessingly, a light smirk on her rose-tinted lips. “You’re far too handsome to be without one.”

She extends a slim, manicured hand. “Adriana Casciani.”

I tense, taking her hand and giving it a light brush of my lips across the back of it. I know the name after all of the research I did—she’s Edo’s eldest daughter, and as of yet, not engaged to anyone. I sense a trap or a plot, and I keep my expression carefully smooth as I look at her.

“Maximilian Agosti. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Miss Casciani.”

“*Agosti*. Well, that’s a name none of us have heard in a while.” She smiles prettily, letting her hand linger in my grasp for a moment before tugging it free. “My father is so pleased you’re here tonight. And now that I’ve met you, *I* am too. You have to promise me a dance tonight, the music is lovely, and I want to hear more about how the Agosti family has a new heir.”

“Of course.” I incline my head lightly in her direction. “I’d be honored.”

“My father wants to meet you, as well.” She casts that pretty smile in my direction again. “He asked me to bring you to him, if I saw you. And here you are! It was very easy, actually. Will you come with me?”

As if I actually have a choice. “Of course,” I repeat, in that same lightly neutral tone, and follow Adriana through the sparkling room to a door on the far left.

It opens into a dimly lit hallway, and she gestures. “Just down the hall and to the right. His security is outside, give them your name, and they’ll let you in.”

It seems the Casciani patriarch has a flair for the dramatic.

As I recall, however, they all do. Men like Luca and Viktor and Connor and Liam, all second-generation born heirs, having grown up in the States with more modern ideas and business practices and homes, are, in my experience, satisfied with offices that reflect an urban billionaire’s taste instead of this old world posturing. But I remember my father having been the same, a man who thrilled at receiving guests in his grand office, presiding over matters of business from behind the formidable desk with the views of his verdant estate behind him.

Casciani seems to prefer a more threatening aesthetic. The hallway is dark, wainscoted with heavy wood and deep-toned wallpaper. At the end of the right-hand turn, just as Adriana had said, three black-garbed security guards are waiting.

They snap to attention the moment they see me, hands twitching to where I know their weapons are hidden. “The gala is back that way,” one of them growls, gesturing the way I came, and I nod carefully, making sure to keep my hands in plain sight.

“I’m here to see Don Casciani,” I say carefully, raising my voice enough for it to carry. “His daughter directed me this way. Tell him that Maximilian Agosti is here to see him, please.”

I’m rewarded with narrowed eyes and suspicious looks, but one of the black-garbed men nods to one of the others.

“Go tell the don,” he grunts and holds out a hand toward me. “You. Wait there.”

The door opens a fraction, enough for the guard to step inside, and I hover there in the hallway, careful not to make any movement that might spook the over-cautious guards. It’s clear they take their jobs *very* seriously, and I have no interest in ending tonight with a bullet in one of the soft parts of me.

After a few minutes, the guard reappears. “Go on in,” he says, jerking his head towards me and then the door, which he pushes open a little wider. “The don is expecting you.”

I could have guessed as much, I think to myself, but I don’t say it. “Thank you,” I tell him instead, offering a cool smile as I step past him and into the office.

It’s well-lit, revealing a study much like my father’s, all heavy woods and thick textiles, old books and art covering most of the surfaces, with the centerpiece an imposing wooden desk and behind it a man who appears equally imposing. His iron-grey hair is combed carefully back, his thick beard trimmed short, and he’s wearing a deep charcoal suit that fits him expertly despite his considerable size.

“Maximilian Agosti.” Don Casciani gestures to one of the leather chairs in front of his desk. “Please, sit. It’s a surprise to find you here—and it was equally a surprise to hear your request for an invitation tonight.”

“I’m sure you’re aware of what the past several years have held for my family,” I say evenly, sinking into the chair. “So it shouldn’t have come as so much of a surprise.”

“You mean your brother’s death and you leaving the priesthood?” Casciani shrugs. “Last I heard, you were hiding out in some Russian’s household with no intent of coming back into *our* fold. I’m curious to hear what would have changed your mind. Is it that upstart brother of yours, sniffing around to claim what’s left of the Agosti scraps?”

“There’s a great deal more left of our family than scraps,” I say tersely. “There are many reasons why I’ve decided to do as my father would have wished, and step into the vacancy left by Antoni’s death. You’re correct in that I have existed for some time under the protection of Viktor Andreyev. Now there is someone in need of *my* protection, and I intend to do what’s necessary to make that happen.”

“Andreyev.” Casciani considers. “A powerful friend. But not one of us. And not here, in the old country. So you need allies *here*, is what I’m hearing from you, Agosti. For the protection of someone?” He frowns, steepling his fingers. “It’s interesting that after being gone for so long, you come in asking for favors already.

I sit up straighter in my seat, keeping my posture squared as I look evenly at him across the desk. “I come in here expecting that you will remember the long history and loyalty between our families. If my father had chosen to extend his protection to someone, the Casciani family would have stood with him without question. I am expecting that you will recognize me as the heir to my father’s name and alliances and consider what I am suggesting accordingly.”

“Who is it that you are protecting?” Casciani purses his lips. “What family am I choosing to stand against, if I remember my friendship with your father, as you are suggesting?”

“The daughter of Konstantin Obelensky,” I tell him bluntly. I remember one thing at least about my father’s dealings with men like this, and I know very well that beating

around the bush will earn me nothing. “His illegitimate daughter. Her existence threatens his power structure and alliances, and he wants her dead.”

Casciani narrows his eyes. “And this woman is—”

“Someone that Andreyev owes a debt to. I have chosen to assist him in that.”

“Hm.” Don Casciani leans back in his seat. “You know, Agosti, I heard that you had come back. I chose to wait to see if you would reach out to me, and you did—to see if you would choose your father’s path, and you have. I have yet to see if you are the same sort of man that your father and brother were, but I have hopes for you. But you must know that if you wish to step into the role that Antoni left open, there are certain—methods of re-establishing our alliance that you may wish to consider.”

“Such as?”

“Such as the fact that I’ve been waiting for the right time to choose a fiancée for my daughter, Adriana.” He smiles thinly. “You’ve met her, since you’re here sitting in front of me. Very lovely, isn’t she?”

“She is.” I raise an eyebrow. “Are you suggesting—”

“An arrangement between the two of you? It would be prudent, don’t you think? The great Agosti house rises again. You regain the influence and power that your father enjoyed, the rest of the Families behind you once I assert that the Casciani house stands with you, and my daughter shares in that and your considerable wealth.”

Casciani frowns when I don’t immediately respond. “I would hope that suggestion meets with more than silent disapproval, Agosti. This is my daughter’s hand that I’m offering you.”

“I’m aware of the honor, Don Casciani.”

“Then why the hesitation?”

“You’re aware, of course, that my father expected me to take up my brother’s duty to enter the priesthood when Arturo

ran away?”

Casciani nods, snorting a little. “He was the shame of the Agosti household. Of course, I am aware.” He raises a thick grey eyebrow. “I am also aware of the loyalty you displayed to your family, Maximilian, when you accepted your place and stepped up for your brother—and the sacrifice that must have been.” A smile spreads across his face. “But now, there’s no reason for you not to marry. My daughter is very beautiful. An excellent reward for your years of service to your family, now that they have taken a different turn.”

“Of course. I would never suggest otherwise. It’s only that—” I hesitate, and Casciani’s face hardens.

“Spit it out, Agosti, before I lose my good mood.”

“Poverty, pacifism, and celibacy.” I hold Casciani’s gaze across the table, hoping that my one card to play will work in my favor. “I’ve broken one of those vows in revenge for my brother and a second in order to sit here in his stead. I hope to keep the third.”

Visions of Sasha beneath me, atop me, spread open for me, fill my head as I speak, reminding me that lying is a sin and that, at this moment, I’m doing exactly that. From the moment that she kissed me in the small bathroom of my New York house, I’ve been anything but celibate, no matter how hard I’ve tried again and again. But claiming my vow of chastity is the only way I might be able to avoid an arranged marriage without insulting Casciani’s dignity, and still secure his backing.

“Celibacy.” Casciani seems to consider for one tense, breath-holding moment, and then his shoulders start to shake with laughter that starts out silent and turns to guffaws of startling humor.

“That’s a good one, Agosti,” he says, when he can breathe again, shaking his head at me. “You almost had me going there, yes? It’s a good joke.”

“It’s—”

He interrupts me before I can speak, fixing me with a piercing, pointed gaze. “An excellent joke,” he repeats, enunciating the words so that there’s no missing his meaning.

He’s aware that I’m serious, but *he* has no intention of taking it seriously. If I know what’s good for me, as far as he’s concerned, I’ll pretend I’d been joking all along.

“I’m glad you appreciate my humor.” I fix a thin smile on my face, forcing it to look as natural as I can manage. “I would appreciate some time to consider the offer, however, Don Casciani. I’m sure you can understand that I had no intentions towards a wife or a family before this. Your offer honors me, and I would not want to answer hastily.”

For a moment, I’m not sure if it was enough to mollify him. Casciani goes still, his eyes narrowing, and I steel myself for whatever reaction he’s about to have, violent or otherwise. And then he nods, slowly, and I feel some of the tension leak out of me.

“Very well,” he says finally. “But you will appreciate, Maximilian, that I can’t give you an answer either, until you give me yours. We will go from there, once that matter is decided.”

I feel faintly ill when I leave Casciani’s office, but the night is far from over. I’m surprised that he offered me Adriana so quickly, but by the time I return to the glowing party, I realize that I shouldn’t be. My family had, for a long time, a large portion of the wealth and power within the Families. The best way for Casciani to ensure that he benefits from that is to make sure that his family name is firmly entrenched within mine.

Most of the dinner is a blur. I barely taste my food or the wine, despite how excellent I’m sure it all is. It’s not until the music changes and I see a swish of forest green fabric approaching that I pull myself out of my daze in time to see Adriana approaching me, glittering under the chandelier lights, a satisfied smile on her face.

“I’ve come to claim that dance, Mr. Agosti,” she says breezily, holding out a hand. “You wouldn’t turn me down,

now, would you?”

That question feels far more loaded than it might have before, but I stand up, forcing a pleasant smile onto my own face. “Of course not, Miss Casciani. It would be my pleasure to dance with you.”

“You should really call me Adriana,” she murmurs conspiratorially. “I know what my father is up to, after all. Unless you plan on calling your wife by such a formal title?”

I feel a sharp chill as we move onto the dance floor, my hand resting on the silky fabric at her waist. She’s very slender, and if I closed my eyes, I could almost imagine that it’s Sasha I hold in my hands, instead of a woman I have no desire for.

Even if I were to do such a thing, though, it’s impossible to mistake one for the other in the end. Standing so close to Adriana, I can smell the thick floral scent of her perfume, candy-sweet and not at all to my liking. I’ve only ever known Sasha to wear perfume a few times, at formal events, and it’s always a light and clean scent that doesn’t hide the soft smell of her skin beneath it. Adriana feels cloying, and the victorious expression on her face only adds to my instantaneous desire to slip away from the dance.

It’s not her fault, I remind myself. She might be much more pleasant than you’re giving her credit for. Under other circumstances, you might even like her.

It’s been a long time since I’ve been in the middle of the manipulations and machinations of the Families, and it’s a stark reminder as to why I had no desire to return. Adriana is a pawn in all of this, the eldest daughter good for bargaining with, a tool for her father to use. I have the urge to rescue her, not to marry her, but it’s entirely possible that those two things might be one and the same.

She dances perfectly, with all the elegance I would expect from someone who has grown up the way she has. We spin around the dance floor, the music and conversation around us rising to a pitch that makes easily conversing difficult, and I’m relieved by it. I don’t know what to say to her, but it’s clear

from the expression on her face that she's thrilled to be here with me. I know I should be equally as pleased to have her in my arms. She's everything that a man in power could wish for in a wife—but I never wanted to be one of those men, and the only woman that I've ever wanted is Sasha.

I can't help but wonder how Sasha would feel, seeing me dance with another woman in an effort to save her. I think I know the answer.

I just can't accept the consequences of it.

"I hope you tell my father yes," she says softly when we leave the dance floor. "I remember you from when we were younger, Maximilian. I'm sure you don't remember me. But I quite liked you, and I was sad to see you leave. We never could have been together before—not with you being your father's second son. But it seems as if fate might have other ideas, and I, for one, am very pleased that I might have that chance." She looks up at me, a thread of heat in her formal phrasing that tells me that she's more than just *pleased* at the idea of marrying me.

"I would very much like to honor my father's wishes and be your wife," Adriana adds, just before she lets go of my hand.

The words themselves are much more forward than a woman of her standing and family would normally allow. I'm almost certain that they weren't fed to her by her father. From where I'm standing, it seems as if she does, in fact, very much want to marry me.

Which, ironically, makes it that much harder to tell her father yes. I have no desire to be a disappointment to anyone—and I have no doubt that I would, in the end, disappoint Adriana Casciani.

I incline my head, giving her the best smile I can manage before we part. "I look forward to speaking with your father again," I say carefully.

From the expression on her face, she took it as I had hoped. And I can't help but wonder, as I walk away, if turning

Edo down might not be the wrong move. I won't be the husband that Adriana hopes for. Still, a woman like her has been raised to expect disappointment in marriage. From the perspective of what I'm here to do, it *is* the right choice, one I'd already warned Sasha I might be forced to make.

It will break her heart, but it will also, irrevocably, keep us apart.

In the end, that might be the way to keep her safest.

SASHA



I t's hard not to let on to Max how much it hurts, watching him walk out of the door without me. I understand his reasoning—it's impossible not to, and it's even sound. I can't deny that—but I also know enough about this world to know what he's walking into.

He'd warned me that there might be stipulations that come with his re-entry into the world of these old mafia families. I'm aware of what those might be, and it makes me want to beg him to stay, to find some other way.

I'm also aware of what he's sacrificing in order to keep me safe from something that, before a short time ago, I didn't even know I was in danger from.

I'd believed I was an orphan. That my parents had died of some common cause, without other family, leaving me to the whims of the Moscow foster system. I'd never dreamed that my parents might still be alive—but this is somehow worse than if they hadn't been at all.

My father is a powerful man who wants me dead. My mother *is* dead now. I don't know if she wanted me and felt forced to give me up or if she wanted nothing to do with me, and now I never will. I don't know why my father hates me enough to want me dead. I don't know what I *did*.

How can a child do something so wrong that they should be abandoned or killed? How can I possibly be a threat to him now? I don't understand any of it, and it makes me feel as if I'm losing my mind every time I go over it, again and again.

I spend so long thinking about it that my book drops to my lap, forgotten there. I stay that way, lost in thought, until the sound of footsteps over the hardwood floor suddenly jolts me out of it. I look up sharply, thinking Max is home, and it's hard to hide my disappointment at seeing that it's Art.

"All alone?" He stands a few feet away, in front of the unlit fireplace, looking down at me. "Max didn't take you with him to his gala?"

"No." I shake my head. "He thought it was better if I stayed out of their line of sight."

"Hm." Art raises one manicured eyebrow. "Interesting. It always seems like such a struggle for him to stay away from you."

"We're good friends." I don't mean to sound as curt as I do, but I'm not really in the mood to chat. I still don't entirely understand the coldness between Max and his brother. Art has been friendly with me—maybe even too much so—but I don't feel like being flirted with or dealing with Art's particular brand of conversation, which often makes me feel as if I need to think carefully about what I'm saying before I respond.

I've always kept it in the back of my mind that if Max doesn't trust Art, there's likely something to it. Even if I think Max is overreacting because of old family history—and I do—that doesn't mean I shouldn't be careful around Art. And I simply don't have the energy for it tonight.

"It's too nice of a night for you to sit in this old house being lonely," Art says, his tone cheerful as he glances at the book in my lap. "There's an art gallery opening tonight. Why don't we go? It could be good for you—get you dressed up and out of the house, just like Max." He grins conspiratorially at me. "Why should he get to have all the fun?"

"I doubt he's having fun," I say wryly, picking up my book and setting it on the side-table next to me. "And he was very clear that I needed to stay here, where it's safe."

"You'd be safe with me." Art winks at me, his handsome face alight with eagerness. "I'll make sure to take good care of

you.”

I shake my head. “I really don’t want to upset Max.”

“He doesn’t need to know. Those parties go surprisingly late—the heads of the families are always dried-up and boring, but the younger set keeps it going well into the night. I’ll get you back before Max comes home. A little secret between us?”

“I don’t keep secrets from Max.” I tuck my legs under me, curling further back into the couch. “I appreciate it, Art. Really. But I’m fine with what I’m doing right here.”

“Suit yourself.” He shrugs, looking more than a little disappointed, and wanders off, leaving me alone again.

I pick up my book, but it’s hard to focus. I keep reading the same paragraph over and over, struggling to retain it, and eventually, I give up. The house feels bigger and emptier than usual, knowing Max isn’t here, so I wander outside instead, sucking in deep breaths of the cool night air.

I wish I could stay. I have no idea how long I’ll be here for, especially with this newest development, but beyond that, I wish I could simply stay here for as long as I want to—with Max.

The idea of leaving Caterina and the children behind hurts. I’ve missed them every day, wished I could talk to them. We’d agreed it was better if I didn’t speak to Anika and Yelena, since they’re meant to think that I’m on vacation. We don’t want to risk my slipping up and giving something away that might make them afraid or make them worry. As for Caterina, I don’t doubt that she’s been kept so busy that she hasn’t had time to check in with me, aside from doing it through Viktor, who is likely relaying anything to her that she wants to know.

I’ve been told, over and over again, that I need to think about what I want for my own life—that I can’t tie it all up in being a nanny for another family. Being here, in the wide-open space of this estate, with so much room and freedom to explore and be outside, away from the tight, confining feeling

of New York, has been the first time I've really wanted something else.

And yet, even now, I'm being told this isn't right for me. That I should want *more*. More than Max, more than this. More freedom, more experiences. But as I walk across the soft grass towards the gardens and greenhouse, all I can think is that I don't want to leave.

The moon is almost full, illuminating the garden, and there's soft light coming from the greenhouse. I wander down the path, letting my fingers drift over leaves and petals, wishing away the minutes until Max comes home. I know it won't be what I wish for, that he won't come back saying he should have taken me with him, that he won't pull me into his arms and tell me that he's changed his mind about us being together.

It's time you stopped dreaming about a fairytale ending for this, I chide myself, brushing my fingers over the wide leaves of another plant. There isn't going to be one. Max isn't going to change his mind. You're not going to live here together. It doesn't matter how perfect you are for each other if he loves his past more than he loves you.

It's not entirely fair to think that, either, and I know it. Max doesn't love his past more than me—he's actively set it aside to go in search of the means to keep me safe. But the fact remains that I'd rather be with him and on the run, than apart.

He'll never accept that, though, and I know it.

"I wondered where you went."

I spin around to see the dim shape of Art moving towards me, something in his hands. I feel myself stiffen with irritation without meaning to. *This huge estate and I can't find even a moment to be alone tonight?* I know he didn't happen upon me by accident this time—he came looking for me.

"I'm not going to the gallery opening," I tell him flatly. "I told you—"

"Yes, I know." Closer to me now, the lanterns along the pathway illuminate him, giving me a clear view of his

handsomely chiseled face and carefully tended stubble, his green eyes flashing in the darkness. He grins, and I can see now that what's in his hands are two wine glasses. "We wouldn't make it now, anyway."

"Oh?" I frown. "How late is it?"

"Late," Art confirms. "But not too late for a drink or two?" He holds up the glasses, and I let out a small sigh.

"Why not?" *The time must have gotten away from me*, I realize as Art crosses the last steps between him and me, setting a wine bottle that was tucked under his arm onto the stone bench on the other side of the path.

"Here," he says affably, handing me one of the glasses, and I take it, swirling the rich red liquid around as Art sniffs his own glass. "My favorite of the family vintages," he adds as he tips the glass up to take a swallow.

It is remarkably good. The Agosti wine is the best I've ever had, and it makes me wonder how much more the business might thrive under Max, who clearly has a passion for it. I take another sip, and another, wondering if I could just simply drown my sorrows tonight in the bottle of wine that Art was so kind as to have brought me. I giggle at the thought, and he lowers his glass, looking at me curiously.

"What's so funny, *bella*?" he asks, and I flinch a little at the familiarity of the endearment.

"You should just call me Sasha," I tell him, a touch reprovingly as I take another long sip of the wine.

"Why is that?" Art grins at me again, a disarming expression on his handsome face. "You are very beautiful. I've thought so since the first day I met you."

"You said something very rude the first day you met me," I tell him, raising an eyebrow. "I haven't forgotten."

"What can I do to make you forget?" He cocks his head, taking another sip. "I've tried very hard to make up for it, *bella*."

"There it is again. What's wrong with my name?"

“Nothing. It’s as beautiful as you are,” Art adds smoothly. “It’s just meant to be friendly, that’s all.”

“Maybe I don’t need a friend other than Max. Have you considered that?” I finish the glass, scooping up the bottle before Art can try to pour it for me and refill it myself.

“I think you and Max are more than friends,” Art says with a smirk, reaching for the bottle to refill his own glass. “In fact, after that kiss I walked in on, I’d say I’m certain of it.”

“That’s none of your business,” I tell him sharply. “That’s between Max and me.”

“Sure.” Art shrugs. “All I’m trying to do is warn you. I could see your face, when he had you pinned up against that railing.” His eyes skim over me quickly, as if he’s thinking of what it might be like to be in Max’s place, and it sends a shiver of unease over me. “You wanted it—*him*—so badly. But Max wants something much more than he wants you, and it’s going to break your heart in the end.”

“What’s that?” I can hear a bite of acid on my tongue, but I don’t bother trying to hold it back. Art is overstepping his boundaries, and I’m very close to telling him so.

“His convictions,” Art says simply, taking another drink of his wine. “His feelings of righteousness, of being *better* because he denies himself what everyone else simply admits they want. He wants that more than he wants you. If he didn’t, you’d already be together by now. I wouldn’t have a shot in hell.”

Something uncomfortable twists in my belly at Art’s words. I can’t deny that there’s a ring of truth to them or that I haven’t thought similar things, feeling guilty for it, in the late hours of the night when Max’s rejections have hurt the worst. “What makes you think you do?” I ask sharply, narrowing my eyes at him.

Art laughs, taking a step too closer, and I realize too late that my words and expression might be taken as flirtation, in the dim light and close quiet of the garden. “If I didn’t, wouldn’t you have told me to fuck off already?”

I take another swallow of wine, feeling nerves creep over my skin. I'm naive when it comes to these things, I know that, but I can feel the direction that this is headed in. I wish suddenly that I were inside, in my room, that Max was here—anything other than being alone with Art in the garden. I can feel the gut-clenching, cold fear of the memories of being alone with a man who wanted something from me before, and I swallow hard, trying not to panic.

“Maybe I'm just being polite,” I manage, trying to keep my voice from catching. “You're Max's brother, after all.”

“Or maybe you realize that Max isn't ever going to want you more than he wants to feel the sweet pain of devotion to something that will never keep him warm at night—but that he's not the only man here that wants you.” Art's smile fades, his green eyes locking onto mine with something more heated than before. “Maybe you realize that someone else *could* be right for you. I have as much money as Max, but I, unlike him, know how to have fun with it. I could show you *so* many things, Sasha. I could take you all over Europe—”

“You don't know me.” I shake my head, setting down my wine glass. “You have no idea of anything about me that means anything. You don't know my past, what I've been through, or even why I'm here. Those are all things that *Max* knows about me.”

“What if you told me?” Art raises a shoulder, still watching me. “I've been trying to get to know you, Sasha. I've been taking this slow.”

“Taking *what* slow? There's never been anything here.” I stare at him, wide-eyed. “I've said time and again that I think Max is overreacting with how he treats you, but that doesn't mean *I* trust you completely, either. I don't know you any more than you know me.”

“Then ask me anything you want.” Art steps forward again, his wine glass abandoned now too, and before I can stop him or move out of the way on the close garden path, his hand snakes around my waist. “But before we spend more time talking—”

His other hand grips the side of my waist, too, pulling me into him, and I slap my hands against his chest as he pulls me close, but it's as if he doesn't feel it—or doesn't care. His mouth crashes down on mine, firm and hot and insistent, and my hands fist in his shirt as I try to jerk my head away.

I turn my face to one side, but Art's hand comes up, tangling in my hair as he drags my mouth back to his, his tongue an onslaught against my lips as I hear him groan, and I cry out, trying to get free.

“Sasha?”

I freeze in place in Art's arms, my blood turning to ice as I hear Max's voice coming from the garden path behind him.

MAX



I can't quite believe what I'm seeing at first.

I'd left the party as soon as I'd spoken and mingled with the men I needed to meet with the most, and as soon as I could without giving offense. I wanted to be back home—not because I craved being at the estate, but because I wanted to see Sasha, to tell her how things had gone, to reassure her.

She hadn't been in the house when I'd returned. I'd walked all over, looking in all the usual rooms, only to remember how pleasant of a night it is, and head out towards the gardens to see if she'd walked out there.

As it turns out, she had.

I just hadn't expected to find Art with her.

It takes me a moment to understand what I'm seeing—Sasha clasped in his arms, her hands clutching his shirt, his hand tangled in her hair as she lets out a low, whimpering cry, her body arched against his. She's kissed me just that way so many times that I can *feel* the echo of it against my skin, the way her slender body feels in my arms, the silkiness of her hair trailing through my fingers, the sound of her small cries of pleasure and the way she squirms against me, wanting more.

I feel cold and hot with rage and hurt all at once, my hands curling into fists at my sides as I stare at them for a split second, feeling something within me turn black with fury. I'd known Sasha would move on one day. It's an inevitability, and I'd only just been at a party with a woman who could very well become my fiancée. Just as I might have to seek someone

else as my partner for what I need, Sasha very well might do the same—a pain I tell myself every day that I can accept.

But with *Art*?

All I can think in that brief instant is that she's trying to hurt me—and that it's worked.

“Sasha?” I can hear the surprise and anger in my voice, and I see her stiffen, twisting out of Art's arms and breaking away from him as she whirls to face me. I see him grab for her, but she's already rushing towards me, her face moonlight-pale.

“All it took was one night where I'm not here?” The words come out of my mouth like a whip crack, before she can speak, and she flinches back as if I'd actually hit her.

“Max—”

“You know what?” I look between the two of them, at the twin wine glasses on the bench, and the anger burns through me with a ferocity to match anything I'd felt before. “I don't fucking care. But if you don't want to watch me put my hands on your new lover, then you should get up to the house before I change my mind and beat the shit out of my own brother.”

The voice speaking doesn't even sound like my own; the words don't sound as if they belong to me. I can hear it as if it's someone else, low and harsh and rasping, vicious, and Sasha recoils, tears springing to her eyes.

“He's not—”

“Go!” I shout at her, and she jerks back, spinning on her heel and fleeing towards the mansion. I turn towards Art, and he backs up, raising his hands.

“Look, it's not what you think—”

“Did she want you to kiss her?” I advance towards him, feeling every muscle in my body tensing and bunching, anger rippling through me. “Did she want this?”

“You're not going to believe me no matter what I say—”

Even after all these years, I can tell when my brother is trying to hide something. And I can tell, in that instant, that there's more to this than what I first thought.

I act without stopping to think whether it's wise or not. Neither Art nor I were ever fighters, but I'm bigger than he is, stronger, and when I swing for his jaw, he doesn't clock it in time to dodge. He goes down onto the garden path, hard, and I turn away and leave him there in a heap, striding quickly after Sasha as I see her fleeing up the hill into the house.

"Sasha!" I call after her again as I enter the house, following her to the stairs. She glances back, her eyes red and her face tear-streaked.

"You told me to leave, so I did. Now you're following me?" Her voice cracks and breaks, and I feel a sick flood of guilt.

"If Art forced you—"

"You wouldn't listen long enough for me to tell you! You were just too pissed!" She whirls, her voice angrier than I've ever heard it, going up the stairs as I follow her.

"I'm listening now." I make it to her door, my hand on it as she starts to slam it behind her. "Sasha—"

She moves away from the door without shutting it, and I follow her into the room, feeling as if the night is coming apart at the seams. "You have to understand, Sasha—the way it looked when I walked out there—"

"No!" She spins to face me, her cheeks flushed. She looks angrier than I've ever seen her, angry at *me*, and I feel a flood of emotion that I can't begin to untangle. "I don't have to understand anything, Max! What I *understand* is that you jumped to the conclusion that I would kiss your brother, after everything I've said to you, after how much I've begged you to see how good we could be together, that the *moment* you left, you thought I'd jump into Art's arms?"

"He's good at manipulation. He's good at making you feel—"

“No.” Sasha shakes her head violently. “*You’re* good at making me feel, Max. *You’re* the one I want. And *nothing* has ever hurt as badly as hearing you say that you think I’d throw myself into your brother’s arms because you rejected me.”

“I didn’t–”

“Yes, you did.” Her chest heaves as she crosses her arms under her breasts, fixing me with an angry glare. “You can’t pretend it’s anything else, Max. And you can’t pretend that this whole misunderstanding could have been avoided. If you hadn’t left me here, if you’d taken me to that gala as your date, this wouldn’t have happened!”

“I’m trying to protect you!” The words come out as a shout, louder than I’d intended, but I feel as if my entire world is spinning out of control. “I’m not just going to take you directly into the fucking lion’s den, Sasha!”

“I’m not as weak as you think I am!” Her voice is raised too, her eyes sparking with fury I’ve never seen in them before, and she steps towards me, her hands bunching under her arms. “I’ve been through fucking hell, Max, but it hasn’t broken me yet.”

She strides towards me, quick and angry, until she’s almost touching me, her chin thrust upwards defiantly as she stares up at me. “I didn’t want Art,” she hisses through her teeth, trembling with anger. “He forced that kiss on me because I guess no one has ever fucking told him no until now, and he doesn’t understand the meaning of the word. I *don’t want him.*”

Sasha enunciates every word, glaring up at me. “I want *you*, Max. You’re *all* I want. And no matter how many times you tell me not to, no matter how many times you tell me that this won’t work, I’m not going to stop wanting you. I’m not going to stop loving you. It’s not something I can just turn off—and even if you leave me and one day I meet someone else, it’s always going to be you that I want more than anything else.”

She’s shaking as she looks up at me, her voice trembling, and something in the way she’s looking at me, the way the words tear loose from her lips, breaks something inside of me.

I reach for her without thinking about it, my hands hard on her waist, and the cry she lets out pierces me down to my soul.

“Max—” She breathes out my name, and I feel myself go tense, my cock thickening as her hips arch against mine.

“I’ve held back with you,” I growl, my mouth very close to hers. “I’ve been gentle, denied everything I want—” I spin her around, her back suddenly against the wall as I surge against her, my hand reaching up to fist in her hair as she cries out under the onslaught of my mouth—the way I thought she had for Art. Now I realize how wrong I was, the difference between what I saw and what I feel now, her body arching against mine, craving me, needing me as desperately as I need her.

“I never asked you to—” Sasha gasps against my mouth before I kiss her again, hard and violent, my hand fisting in the waistband of her joggers as I yank them down roughly along with the soft panties beneath. “This is what I want, Max—”

“Do you still want it?”

The words disappear in her mouth crushing against mine, her hands fumbling for the zipper of my suit trousers as she drags it down, her palm rubbing against the ridge of my hard cock. It takes only a second for me to pick her up, lifting her against me as her legs go around my waist, her slick entrance rubbing against my cockhead as my thick shaft springs up between her legs, aching for her tight heat wrapped around me.

“I’m going to fuck you now,” I growl against her mouth, my hips arching forward, the swollen tip of my cock stretching her tight entrance. “Tell me, no, and I’ll stop, Sasha. But if you don’t—”

Her hands come up, fisting in my hair as her legs tighten around me, and that’s all I can take. I feel feverish with need, the rage and betrayal I’d felt at seeing Art kiss her, the adrenaline of our argument, the lust that I fight a daily battle with all coalescing into a volcano of desire that sends my hips lurching forwards, thrusting into her in a hot, hard slide that

tears the breath from my lungs with the exquisite pleasure of it.

I pin her to the wall as I slide my cock into her, feeling her heat clenching around me, and then her tongue is sliding into my mouth. My world dissolves into nothing more than her and I.

SASHA

I'M GOING TO FUCK YOU NOW.



The words, tumbling roughly from Max's mouth, set me on fire. It feels as if the world is exploding around me, as if I have emotional whiplash from the sudden change from fighting to this—me pressed against the wall, his hard body leaning into mine, my legs wrapped around him. I know that this is a bad idea, that it won't change anything, and that this is just us erupting again the way we always do, but I can't stop it. I want him too badly, like an obsession, a drug, his temptation, and mine, and I know in the deepest parts of my soul that I'll never be able to tell him no.

“Tell me, no, and I'll stop,” he pants against my mouth. “But if you don't—”

There's no part of me that could, or wants to, tell him no. I feel his cock pressing against me, pushing into me with that tight, burning stretch that feels as good as it hurts at first, always a little too big for me before I adjust. I reach up, my hands tangling in his hair as my legs tighten around him. I want him inside of me, hard and hot, fast and angry, and I can feel the emotion swelling inside of him, ready to give me exactly what it is that I need.

His hips jerk forwards suddenly, thrusting into me with a sudden force that makes me gasp and cry out, his cock filling me up in a way that I know no one else ever could. I feel him go rigid with the pleasure of it as he pins me to the wall, my body tightening around him, wanting to keep him as deep inside of me as I can.

I want to hold onto him, to never let him go, with a force that steals my breath away. All I can feel is liquid heat running through my veins, a hot and fervent desire that makes me feel as if I'm losing my mind. I'm afraid of this, of what he makes me feel, of the fact that every time we do this, I feel like I'll die if I ever lose it for good.

But I can't stop.

Max breaks the kiss, his hazel eyes fixing on mine, wild with lust. He looks feverish with need, fierce and dangerous in a way that I've never seen before, and it sets me on fire more than ever.

I want him more than I've ever wanted anything in my life.

My hands reach for the front of his shirt as his hand slides up under mine, fisting in the material, tearing buttons loose so I can touch his skin as he cups my breast. I yank his shirt open, my fingers trailing over the soft dark hair on his chest, tracing his muscles, the solid, steady thrust of his cock punctuating every touch. I arch my hips against him, pulling his straining cock deeper into me. I scratch at his chest with my nails as he thrusts harder, fierce and wild, as if I finally broke past the final layer of control that Max has held onto for so long.

It's too much, and it's everything I want, all at once.

His other hand comes up, wrapping in my hair and pulling my head back as his cock pounds into me, my nails digging into his flesh as his gaze holds mine. "Tell me you want this," he snarls, a furious lust in his voice beyond anything I've heard before. "Tell me, Sasha. Tell me you want *me*."

I shake my head, tears of frustration and pleasure welling up in my eyes as his pelvis grinds against my clit with every thrust, bringing me closer and closer to the edge. "Of course I want you," I cry out, a low moan slipping from my lips. "All I ever want is you—"

I barely have time to finish speaking before his mouth comes crashing down on mine, his cock thrusting into me with a force that tears the breath from my lungs. I cry out, the sound lost in the kiss, my legs holding him tightly to me as I claw at

his chest, his cock driving into me to the hilt again and again. It's pain and pleasure all at once, violence and love, hurt and need and desire, and the wild, frothing knowledge of how much we're both losing with every step away from each other.

Max grabs my wrists suddenly, pinning my hands above my head as he fucks into me hard, his cock filling me, stretching me with every forceful thrust as he pins me hard to the wall, his mouth devouring mine. He kisses me hard and deep and wild. Then one broad hand clasps both of my wrists above me as the other sinks into my hair again, a deep groan vibrating against my mouth as his hand fists in my hair almost too roughly for pleasure.

"I-need-" His words are lost in the kiss as he slides out of me, just the tip of his cock held within my clenching, aching pussy before he thrusts back into me, hard, as deeply as he can go.

"Oh *god*, I fucking need you so much."

I feel the words vibrating down to my very core, down to my soul, as Max holds me there, his hips grinding against me, his breath nothing but short, tortured gasps as he fills me. "I can't lose you-"

The words cut me down to my soul as his hand drags down my body, cupping and squeezing my breast, pinching at my nipple before his hand slides between us, teasing the slick hard nub of my clit as he groans against my lips.

"Come for me, Sasha-"

I'm so very close, on the brink, and as Max thrusts into me hard, I can't breathe. I can't think of anything but how fucking good he feels, how much I want this, how much I want *him*. It feels glorious and devastating all at once, exchanging pleasure now for the pain I know I'll feel later, but right now, I can't bring myself to care.

"Come for me-"

I feel myself crash over the edge, his mouth swallowing my cries as I arch and convulse against him, his hand in my hair and his cock buried so deeply inside of me that I feel

impaled on him, driving into me again and again as I tighten, my pussy spasming down the length of him as I cry out his name against his lips.

I twist my hands free of his grasp, burying them in his hair, tilting my head back so that I can look into his heated, lust-filled gaze.

“Your turn,” I whisper, and I arch against him, grinding my hips with every thrust as a groan of pure pleasure tears from Max’s lips.

“If I ever see another man touch you—” Max’s forehead presses against mine, his breaths coming harder, faster. “I can’t fucking stand it, Sasha. No matter how hard I try—”

I feel him hardening, throbbing, his cock sinking into me in rough, quick thrusts that leave me panting on the brink again, very close to a second orgasm. I feel overwhelmed with pleasure, bursting at the seams with it, and Max lets out another pleased groan as he thrusts into me hard, his body shuddering.

“I want to come so fucking deep in you that you can taste it—” His hand tangles in my hair again, his lips crushed against mine, and I *feel* him coming, feel him pouring into me, a hot rush that fills me up. Neither of us remembers that he should pull out, that he shouldn’t come in me like this, and neither of us could have stopped if he did. I *need* to feel him like this, buried inside of me, filling me with his cum until I can feel it between us, sticky against my thighs as he fills me with more than I can take.

Max shudders against me, his body convulsing with the last spasms of his orgasm as I tremble with the final aftershocks of mine, and as he holds me there against the wall, I feel tears start to prick at the corners of my eyes.

Slowly, very slowly, he sets me down. I feel his cock slip from my body, and the resulting hollowness makes my eyes fill with hot tears. I grab for my pants, watching out of my periphery as Max tucks himself away and zips himself up, and pain lances through my chest.

“It doesn’t need to be like this,” I whisper, wrapping my arms around myself as I lean back against the wall, still trembling. I can feel the heat of him between my thighs, and I want him all over again, *more* of him, more and more, as if I could ever get enough. “We don’t have to keep doing this—trying and trying not to touch until we break and give in.”

“Sasha—”

“You’re breaking my heart!” The words rip free, filling the space between us with all the pain and hurt that I’ve been holding in. “I don’t *want* anyone else, Max! I don’t care what danger it causes me to be in, what I have to live with, what *world* it makes me live in! I want to be in *your* world. That’s all I want.”

“I can’t live with putting you in danger—” Max stands there, staring at me, his hair a tousled mess from my hands and his clothes rumpled, his face still flushed. “I know how you feel, but—”

“I love you!” I almost shriek the words, pain clawing at my throat and forcing them free. “I love you, and I always will, but this is tearing me apart.” I tighten my arms around myself, feeling a wave of grief well up in me so profoundly that I let out a sudden, shuddering sob, turning my head away. “I want to go home.”

“You can’t,” Max says helplessly. “I won’t touch you again, Sasha, I swear—if this—”

I laugh, unable to help myself, turning my wild, pain-filled gaze back to him. “I don’t fucking believe you. *This* will happen again, just like it always does, and we’ll both want it so badly that we can’t stop ourselves. But that’s not what I want, anyway—I don’t *want* us to stop. I want you to stop trying *not* to. Why is that so hard to understand?”

I look at him, tears sliding down my cheeks. “Why, Max?”

He shakes his head, a glimmer of the same pain echoing in his eyes. “I promised, when you were sick, that I’d keep my vow again if you lived—and I broke it again anyway. I’ve

broken all my vows now, every single one, and I break them again and again. I—”

“Maybe it’s best if you don’t make any promises to me, then.” I turn away from him sharply, but not before I see the sudden hurt in his face, as if I’d slapped him. “Not about my safety, or anything else—if you’re only going to break them.”

I yank open the door, only to see Art walking down the hall. He stops, as if to say something, and I feel my face contort into something ugly and angry.

“Fuck off,” I snap at him, and he recoils, his eyes narrowing before he keeps walking, stalking down to his own room.

I stand aside, trying to hold back my tears until Max leaves. He hesitates in the doorway, but I look away, and I *feel* the loss of his presence as he steps out, the hollowness left behind.

It only takes until I shut the door for me to break out into heavy, wracking sobs. I sink down to the floor, my back against it as I bury my face against my knees, crying harder than I’ve ever cried in my life.

I want to go home, I’d said—and it’s true.

But more than anything else, I want Max. And I’m not sure now if I’ll ever have either of those things, ever again.

MAX



One of the hardest things I've ever had to do, after what transpired the night before with Sasha, is going to the Casciani estate to tell Edo that I intend to accept his offer. But it had, in a way, made things even clearer.

I have to choose. And no matter how much it breaks my heart and Sasha's, I will choose the path that keeps her safest.

I have to.

I'd called Viktor and Luca and run it past them. Both of them agreed wholeheartedly that a marriage alliance with the Casciani family would be best for everyone. Though I know it's largely rooted in what's best for *them*, I also know that they're right.

By stepping into my father's shoes, I'm also putting myself in a position to need to make the choices he would have made. Marrying me to Adriana Casciani is exactly one of those choices.

When I arrive at Edo's office, the mood is entirely different from the last time, as if he knows that my second visit means I'm going to accept his offer. I'm escorted in easily into his usual office, a much more brightly lit and pleasant room than before, even if it is still heavily decorated in dark woods and textures.

"It's good to see you again, Agosti," he booms from the other side of the desk, gesturing for me to take a seat as he had before. "I hope you have good news for me?"

“I do.” I settle into the seat, keeping my expression carefully even. “I appreciate you giving me time to consider, and I hope it didn’t give any offense. I wanted to discuss with others who back me, and I, them, before making a final decision.”

“Andreyev.” Don Casciani says it flatly, and I nod.

“And others with whom I’m allied, who have my best interests in mind.”

“Are you suggesting that I don’t?”

I shake my head. “Not at all. Just that it’s been many years since we knew each other, and I thought it was wise to get counsel of my own.”

“I agree,” Casciani says, to my surprise. “And the conclusion that you and they have come to is that the alliance I have proposed is a wise one?”

I nod. “I will accept your offer of an engagement to your daughter, Adriana. My one stipulation is that the wedding be delayed until the danger to the woman under my protection has been dealt with, and she can be returned home. After that, the marriage will take place, and I will make my home base here in Italy, at my family estate. I will go back and forth between here and New York, but my primary work will be done here, with the old Families that my father respected.”

“I like the sound of that.” Casciani smiles at me, the best humor that I’ve seen from him so far. “How do you suggest that we announce your engagement? I want it to be done soon, so that the betrothal can be signed and witnessed in front of a priest—as good as a marriage, until your terms are met.”

My chest clenches at the finality of that thought, of that ultimate loss of what I love and want most. *It’s the right thing to do*, I tell myself, despite the burning pain in my gut. *You have to stop the back and forth with you and Sasha. This will do it—irrevocably.*

“A gala at the Agosti estate,” I say decisively. “A week from now—my housekeeper will be thrilled to have that to organize in such a short time. All of the Families there to

witness it. I will ask your daughter to be my bride, and then the next day, we will have it witnessed at the church. An alliance made and set.”

Casciani nods, his smile widening. “Made and set,” he echoes. “I’m glad you’ve come to see things this way, son. Your father would be proud of you.”

Even as he says it, standing to shake my hand as I stand as well, I’m not sure that I believe him. In the deepest parts of myself, I want to believe that I’ve made my father proud. But a tiny, small voice in my mind whispers that this is the path of cowardice, yet again—the easiest way. That he would see that and say it to me, if he were alive.

But he’s not, and this is my choice—the way I see forward is to save the woman I love...by losing her forever.

—

I’m dreading breaking the news to Sasha, but I know I can’t leave it until the night of the party and spring it on her. It would be cruel, and the last thing in the world that I want is to be cruel to her.

I find her in the library, curled up in the window seat. She doesn’t look up at first, and I clear my throat softly, waiting for her to acknowledge me. It hurts to see the look on her face when she does, carefully shuttered as if she doesn’t want me to see what she’s thinking.

“I need to talk to you,” I say gently. Sasha sets the book that she’s holding down slowly, pressing her lips together as she swings her legs off of the side and sits facing me, holding onto the edge of the seat with both hands as she leans forward.

“Okay,” she says hesitantly, making no move to get up or come towards me—and in the end, I know that’s probably for the best, even as it twists the knife in my chest. *Distance is what you need. What is best. You know that.*

“I went to the Casciani estate this morning,” I say slowly, thinking of how best to say what needs to be said. “He’s agreed to give me his backing, along with encouraging the

other families to do so, considering the long respect he and my father held for each other.”

Sasha nods, her lips still a thin line on her pale face. “That’s good, right?”

“It is, but—it comes with a price.”

I see the tremor that goes through her, but she says nothing, letting me finish.

“I’m to be engaged to his daughter, Adriana. At a gala, here, in a week’s time.”

I see Sasha jerk back, as if the words physically struck her. She swallows hard, reeling, and then her eyes flick up to mine, glassy with hurt.

“Do you love her?” she asks quietly, and it’s my turn to recoil at that.

“Of course not,” I snort, shaking my head. “I barely know her, or like her. I don’t remember her from when we were children, and I’ve met her once since then. It has nothing to do with love.”

“So lust, then,” Sasha says tonelessly, and I let out a long sigh.

“No,” I tell her firmly. “It’s not love or lust.”

Against my better judgment, I step forward, walking towards her until there are only a few inches between her and me. As I kneel down in front of her, reaching out to gently tip up her chin until her eyes meet mine.

“The only woman I have ever lusted after is you, Sasha,” I say quietly. “Not just for the way your skin feels under my hands, soft and warm, or the way you kiss me, how your lips feel against mine. Not just for the way it feels when I slip inside of you, or how beautiful you are, or the way you sound when you moan for me in bed. I lust after you because of who *you* are, because of your beauty, yes, but also your strength and your fire and your bravery and sweetness—all the same things that make me love you, and will make me love you until the day that I die.”

I pull back, my hands dropping in front of me, seeing the tears gather in her blue eyes as they stare back at me. “All we do now is hurt each other, Sasha. As long as I’m free, you’re always going to want me, and I’ll never be able to stop wanting you. You’ll never move on, and neither will I. We’ll be trapped in this loop forever, wanting and hurting, until we tear each other apart—or until I give in and put you in danger because of it.”

I take a deep, unsteady breath. “So what I’m doing, Sasha, is taking myself out of the equation. You can live your life then, the way you should be able to. When the danger to you from your father is handled, you can move on, and I’ll use my influence to make sure that no one can ever hurt you, ever again.”

Sasha jerks back, her eyes wide with grief. “That’s not true,” she whispers harshly. “You’re hurting me right now, by doing this.”

“As good of a reason as any to walk away,” I say quietly, hearing my voice crack at the edges. I push myself to my feet, stepping back as I look down at her. “You’ll see that this was the right choice eventually, I promise. I’m giving you a way out of this world you were dragged into against your will.”

“I don’t want you to do this,” Sasha whispers, but I’m already backing away, forcing myself to stand on my decision.

“I’m marrying Adriana,” I tell her quietly. “But I need you to understand, Sasha—this is a marriage of convenience, to make alliances and heirs, and nothing else. I will never love her or want her—and when I don’t need to give her children, I won’t touch her. I will keep my vows as best as I am able, while still keeping the one that means the most to me.”

There’s a hint of bitterness in Sasha’s voice when she speaks, finally. “And which one is that?”

“The vow to protect you.” I swallow hard, forcing myself to continue. “This would have been my brother’s duty, to marry for the family, and now it’s mine.”

Sasha tips her chin up, her eyes glittering with tears. “Are you going to spend your whole life filling your brothers’ shoes? Or are you ever going to walk in your own?”

I’m not sure if she will ever know how deeply those words cut at that moment. But I force myself to breathe, to ignore it, as tears start to stream down her face.

“Once the danger is past,” I say softly, “you can go home.”

“And you? Where will you go?” Her voice breaks, and she wraps her arms around herself.

“I will stay here.” The words, as they come out, sound as final as the grave. I see her shoulders start to shake with sobs, and more than almost anything in all the world, I want to go to her.

I want to tell her that I didn’t mean any of it. But instead, I turn and walk out of the room, shutting the door behind me, blocking out the sound of her tears.

I want, most of all, to keep her safe.

This is the best way.

I have to believe that—or I don’t know where either of us will go from here.

SASHA



For a week, Max and I barely speak. He tells me to stay upstairs during the gala, that it's best for me to stay out of sight, and I think he expects me to listen to him as I always do.

I have absolutely no intention of that.

I know I'm being bitter and petty. I know that he's trying to help and *save* me, and that this is tearing him apart as much as it is me. Deep down, I know all of that. But it doesn't stop the feeling of betrayal.

It doesn't matter if he doesn't love her. It doesn't matter if he doesn't want her. It doesn't matter if he doesn't plan to fuck her except for when they need to make a baby, cold and clinical.

He's going to marry another woman. Go to bed with another woman. Be inside of another woman. It doesn't matter that it will be emotionless, passionless, a cold echo of what Max and I had together.

I want to see her and for her to see me. I want her to always wonder if I'm the one Max is thinking of when he's with her, the one he's wishing for. I want to always be a ghost in this house, in their lives, long after I'm gone.

I don't need to bother with getting a dress for the gala. I have a dark blue silk evening gown with a low swooping neckline, thin straps, and a slit up the side, along with my earrings and the heels that Caterina gifted me. The night of the

gala, I hide up in my room as he asked, but instead of staying there, I spend the hours beforehand getting ready.

It's been a long time since I took so much care with my appearance. I curl my hair, leaving it in loose reddish-blond waves down my back, pinned on one side to show the earring dangling. I use a light hand with my makeup, shadowing my eyes in the same rose gold as my jewelry, and lightly tinting my lips with rose, knowing what Max likes best. As I get dressed, I feel my chest tighten, knowing that I'm doing this to make him hurt.

I don't *want* him to hurt—but I want him to know what he's losing. What he's sacrificing.

I'd rather both of us run forever, together, than do this. But I can't make him agree.

I wait until the sounds of the party in the formal ballroom begin to grow louder, hovering in the hallway until I hear Max's voice. A soft woman's voice says something in return, and my breath catches.

As quickly as I can in the heels, I hurry down the stairs, arriving almost the moment I intend to. I step onto the floor as Max nearly runs into me, a brunette woman on his arm, and both of them freeze in place.

"Sasha." The disapproval in his voice is thick, and it hurts to hear. "You're supposed to be upstairs."

"Is she Cinderella?" The beautiful woman next to him laughs, shaking her head. Her dark hair is in a complicated updo, setting off her fine features, and she's wearing a deep red dress that matches the ruby jewelry flashing off of her neck and ears. "Why can't she come to the party, Max?"

"Don't worry about it, Adriana." His voice is sharp, and I see the stunned look on her face. It turns towards me, taking me in, and I see a hint of suspicion in her eyes.

This was a mistake. "I'm—I'll—" I swallow hard, spinning on my heel and heading for the one place where I can usually find refuge. *I shouldn't have done this*, I think wildly as I hurry towards the library, my heart in my throat. I'd wanted Max to

understand what he was doing to me, to feel it, for her to see what he would be missing, but I'd only cut myself deeper.

I throw the door open, my hand pressed to my throat as I try to catch my breath, and I hear footsteps behind me a moment later. I turn, thinking that Max followed me, only to see Art standing there in a bespoke suit, a hint of a bruise still on his jaw and a wry smile on his face.

“Now, do you see what I meant about my brother, and what he would do?”

The room feels as if it's tilting around me. “I don't know what you mean,” I say quietly, my hand still pressed against my chest. “He's not—he's only—”

“After all his crowing about poverty and celibacy, he's claiming the family name and marrying the Casciani girl.” Art shakes his head, stepping towards me. “He says he's doing it to protect you, Sasha—but is he? Or is he taking the path he was told to, again, because it stops him from having to choose for himself and risk choosing wrongly?”

Art closes the gap between us smoothly, before I even realize it's happening, a shelf behind me that I nearly collide into. “I've taken risks, Sasha. Some of them have paid off, and some haven't, but they were *mine*. My risks. My choices. I'm taking one again, on the chance that you see now why you should look at me and see something other than what my brother has told you to see.”

He reaches out, his knuckles skimming down the side of my cheek. “Let me show you what it feels like to really be free, Sasha.”

“Get your *fucking* hands off of her.”

I barely have time to register Max's growl before a hand on Art's shoulder jerks him backward. Max's fingers close into the expensive fabric of Art's suit jacket, tearing at the seam as he throws him towards the door, releasing only to advance on him again.

“Get—the *fuck*—out!”

Max throws the door open, delivering a punch to his brother's gut and another to his still bruised jaw as he throws Art bodily out of the library, slamming the door behind him. He whirls towards me, flipping the lock with one hand, and I gasp, my hand pressed flat against my chest as Max strides towards me.

"I didn't—"

"I know." Max's voice is low and rough, skimming over me like stroking velvet the wrong way. "Did he hurt you?"

"What? No—he was just talking." I swallow hard. "I'm fine."

I look up at Max and then at his taut jaw and angry face, and I bite my lip. "Why do you care?" I ask softly. "You're just going to marry *her*, anyway."

Max's mouth tightens. "I told you that she doesn't matter to me."

"Let me see the ring." The words spill out before I can stop them, hurt and angry.

"Why?" He looks at me in confusion, but I plunge forward anyway.

"Let me see it." It feels almost like the urge to dig at a wound, to hurt so badly that I won't *want* anymore. "Let me see!"

"Fine!" Max digs in his pocket, yanking out a black velvet box. He flips it open, and there in the light of the room, I see a huge oval diamond glittering back at me, on a delicately diamond-crusted band.

I stare at it for several long moments, blinking back tears, though I know when I look up at him that my eyes are shiny with them.

"I wouldn't care about that, you know," I whisper softly. "I wouldn't care about a huge ring, or money, or a family name. I never cared about any of it—only you."

Slowly, with a shaking hand, I reach out to touch the side of his face. I feel the shiver that goes through him at the touch,

and I can see the pain in his eyes.

“Sasha—”

“It meant something that I was your first—your only. You know that, right?” I bite my lower lip, hard. “You know it hurts, to think of—”

“Sasha, *please* don’t—”

“I loved you when you were nothing but a poor priest who had broken your vows,” I whisper, my gaze still holding his, tears beginning to drip down my cheeks. “And I love you now—and I always will. I love you for *you*. Not even this can change that, Max.”

His hazel eyes are glassy, too, as he looks down at me, and I hear the low groan, deep in his throat as he reaches up to take my face in his hands.

“I love you too, Sasha,” he whispers. “I *need* you to believe that this is for you. To keep you safe. That this is what I *have* to do, not what I want—”

I should fight it, when his mouth comes crashing down onto mine, but I don’t. I want it once more—the hot press of his lips, the slide of his tongue, the salt of our tears gathering in the cracks of my lips. I want it forever—and I can only have it once more, now.

When he pulls away, his hands lingering for a breath on my hips, I can see that this is tearing his heart out as surely as it is mine. But he still backs away, one step and then another, and another, until he’s at the door.

“I’m sorry,” he says softly. And then, without another word, he steps out of the library, the door closing with a final *thud* behind him.

I sink down in front of the shelf, my hands pressed to my face. I don’t know how long I sit there like that, crying, tears dripping down my cheeks, my makeup streaked, and mascara everywhere. All thoughts of going to the party are gone—I couldn’t face watching Max go through with it. I’d thought I wanted him to have to look me in the eye, to know I was

watching as he asked another woman to marry him, but now that the moment is here, I can't bear it.

I try to think of my future, what lies ahead of me, and what I could do when I'm free of all of this and on my own again. But no matter how hard I try, I can't picture it.

I can't picture anything other than Max, and the look on his face when he pulled away from the kiss.

All I feel is heartbreak and hopelessness in ways that I never have before, and part of me never wants to leave this room.

I sit there until I hear, very faintly, cheers from the ballroom echoing through the house. A fresh sob bubbles from my lips, and I picture Max sliding the ring onto her finger, a question forming on his lips, and I slump against the shelves, ready to start crying in earnest all over again.

Until I hear the cheering turn to screaming—and a second later, a cracking noise that I don't recognize for a moment... until I do.

Gunshots.

Get the final installment in Max and Sasha's trilogy [here](#). Want a hot bonus scene? Grab it [here](#)!