



Heiress  
*Billionaire*

MAFIA BILLIONAIRES 5

SOPHIA MARCH

# HEIRESS BILLIONAIRE

---

SOPHIA MARCH

# CONTENTS

1. Espie
  2. Adrik
  3. Espie
  4. Adrik
  5. Espie
  6. Adrik
  7. Espie
  8. Adrik
  9. Espie
  10. Adrik
  11. Espie
  12. Espie
  13. Adrik
  14. Espie
  15. Adrik
  16. Espie
  17. Adrik
  18. Espie
  19. Adrik
  20. Espie
  21. Espie
- Epilogue: Espie

## ESPIE



**Y**ou know that moment when you're slowly ticking up to the top of a rollercoaster? The anticipation, like the pulling of a rubber band building so intensely that you think you might just snap. There is no way off, no way around it, you're staying for the entire ride, regardless of what you want because somehow you found yourself locked in a seat. Everything in you tenses so as not to feel the sickening drop of your body parting ways with your stomach as you fly down the other side of it.

Do you know what I mean? It's good if you do because then you will know exactly what it's like to be me.

Everything about my life has been chosen for me— where I go, how I talk, who I talk to, and what it's meant to look like being the eldest daughter of the Sicilian mafia. But the one choice that has always been mine, promised to me by my family, is the choice of whom I will marry. Of course, it must be an eligible man— the eldest son of a powerful mafia family.

Everything I do affects our family because I bear the burden of representing the purity and power of our name. I think it was Shakespeare who said, "what's in a name?" And I often find myself asking that question. Often enough that it keeps me up at night, wondering how my life could be so capricious that my family's reputation is seemingly more valid than my own will. Even so, I've done what I've been told as long as I can remember. It's my duty after all, and that one

contingency of choice in exchange for my obedience, is what has made it worth it.

I've taken this one freedom, very seriously. In fact, I've had many suitors. Men who I've been set up with, eligible of course, but never good enough for me. Not that I think I'm better than everyone, don't get me wrong, there. It's just, if I have one chance to choose something for myself, I want to feel more than dutifully bound to someone. It should be something like in the books I read, where nothing can stop the characters from falling for one another and the weight of their love is stronger than gravity itself. That's all I ask for.

I turn over on my side, and check the time. 3 am. If I don't shut my brain off now, I'll be in for a rude awakening when the sun rises and my younger sister Olive is back from college for good. Goodbye sleep, at least for a while when she's around. We usually stay up talking, later than my mind already keeps me up.

I force my eyes shut and drift to sleep rather quickly. I don't know how long I'm out for, but it feels like hours later when I'm jolted by a harsh whisper.

"Espie." A light flashes in my eyes as they fly open. Vince is standing over me, urgency written across his expression. Peculiar.

"What's going on?" I rub my eyes and squint past him to see a group of the boys, dressed in suits.

"We're going somewhere. Get dressed." I blink at him, not moving. "Now." He pushes, tossing me an a-line, palm green, silky mid-length dress. Buttons down the center with slightly puffed long sleeves and a fitted bodice. It's not really me; Looks very posh and delicate, like something a man would pull off the rack. I stiffen my nose at it, and he shakes his head.

"Espie, we have to hurry, or we'll be late." I look over at my clock on the nightstand. I was only asleep for twenty minutes. Where would we need to go in the middle of the night that I haven't been told about? I shift my eyes back to him despondently and wave my hand for everyone to leave.

With a sigh, Vince ushers the boys into the hall and I quickly slip out of my nightgown.

The air in my room is cold, but I know it's only because it's dark. Winters in LA never stay cold when the sun's out, so that means this warm dress is not intended for daylight. At least there's a chance I could be back before Olive gets home. I quickly pull the dress over my head and grab my boots by the door, slipping them on before reaching for my black coat off the couch at the end of my bed.

"Ready." I say as I step into the hall, lifting my long hair outside my jacket. My stomach tenses at just how large the group of nicely dressed security is, waiting for me in a huddle. Vince motions for me to head down the stairs, and we follow the group of security straight out to the car.

I'm barely awake, trying to process the feelings in my body reacting to this odd string of events.

We take three full cars, that's how extensive the protective detail is. And I'm not dumb, that's precisely what this is. I know the worry is setting in, carving out lines in my face that only appear when I'm displeased, but I can't help it. I glance over at Vince, who's too focused on his phone to notice. It's the only light in the car, besides the occasional streetlamp on a road taking us away from the direction of the city.

"Where are we going, Vince?" He doesn't look over at me. I tense my brows and turn my head back to the window as small droplets of water begin to race each other down it, shining in the moonlight as we speed forward. I don't know how long has passed by the time we reach the edge of a small town. Looks like Santa Barbara, and I think it might be.

I'm helped out of the car before I can take in my surroundings, and then a circle of security leads me up to the doors of a tiny wooden building with a unique spiraling roof. It reminds me of a witch's cabin, something sinister yet alluring about it.

Vince's head bobs up the steps, and he pulls the door open. The boys make a gap for me and I step up next to him. Warm

air swirls around us from inside, softening the harshness of the dampness clinging to every inch of my exposed skin.

“What is this?” I ask just as I turn my eyes to the incredible bookshop, answering my own question. It’s bigger looking on the inside than the out, and I figure it must go on for miles in only one direction. What a funny building it is. Magical. I want to go inside, but my stomach tenses again when Vince steps in first.

“I’ve reserved this bookstore for a few hours. You can pick any books you want. Just tell Sanders, and he’ll toss them into the duffle bag we brought.” Sanders steps up beside me with a lip-pressed grin—the kind of grin that you give someone you feel bad for.

My throat tightens. Vince is waiting for me to say something, but I don’t know what to say. It seems a little too good to be true—him supporting my arbitrary hobbies. We never make this big of a journey for these types of things anyhow, especially not at this time of night.

“What are you up to?” I ask and he doesn’t meet my eyes. If this entire situation didn’t make me nervous, that right there, just did. Vince can’t meet my eyes when he lies, he’s never been able to. As long as I can remember, he’s always given it to me straight because not many people would and because he knew what type of future awaited me. This isn’t how we work—him and me—so, I’m confused, shaking my head at him.

“You have twenty minutes to pick some things out.” He steps aside, and I have to ignore this horrible growing feeling like a dark shadow creeping up behind me because I want as many books as I can get. I begin my search, pulling them off the shelves without even reading what they’re about. I’m only in the fiction section. That’s all I’m after right now, anyway—an escape.

We’re fully absorbed in the center of the bookstore within minutes, and I’m knee-deep in the alternate dimension book section when the bell at the front door rings.

I give Sanders a look. “I thought we were the only ones here.” He offers me his hand in response and I hesitantly take



it, walking with him, and the growing group of security boys, down through a maze of bookshelves. As we near the front, there are new voices interrupting the once quiet library. The clicking of a cane and the jingling of chains resounds as the talking continues. It's more like murmurs of deep voices, and they buzz around us softly at first.

“Esperanza!” Vince calls as we get closer. That's when the voices become more clear, and my annoyance is immediate. Not because of the widening pit in my stomach, but because Vince called me by my name.

I hate my name, always have; Hate when anyone calls me Esperanza instead of Espie. It's usually done to pick on me, but Vince isn't using a teasing tone.

This is serious, proper. Like the way he gets when we meet with suitors, all posh sounding and even-toned. But I wasn't told about any suitors coming to visit me. I guess I should have seen something of this nature coming, what with his strange choice of outfit for me when I'm completely capable of dressing myself.

We round the last bookshelf before making it to the front of the store, and I drop the book I was holding, watching it slide across the wood floor in shock. It stops at black leather boots with thick buckles on them. I trail up the long dark figure until I see his piercing eyes— blue as anything, hauntingly sharp. This man, the only man I'm looking at because he has his muddy boot resting on my book, is tattooed just about everywhere I can see except his face; Pale skin, strong jaw, jet black hair, and matching leather attire.

He looks like he just stepped off the stage at a rock concert where women were throwing themselves and their panties at him— looks like he knows it too.

I glance back down at his boot, and he lifts it, picking the muddied book up and walking over to me. The chains on his clothes jingle as his large hand lifts the book to me, boots knocking across the floor. I look at the book and then to Vince, who is standing next to a bald man with a sinister look on his face. He reminds me of a snake, or something so dangerous

and unpredictable that you'd plan to avoid it if you sensed where it was coming from.

When I look back at *rockstar*, I have to tilt my chin to meet his eyes. He smirks, thick rosy lips smugly lowered towards me.

"You dropped this." He edges the book closer to my chest, and I snatch it out of his hand before he can touch me with it.

"You stepped on it."

He cocks his head. "I think the phrase you were looking for was *thank you*."

I scoff at him and give Vince a look to let him know that whatever suitor this is, I'm deeply uninterested. He's clearly an ass-hole. But Vince doesn't give me a knowing look like he usually does when I want to end an interaction with a suitor. Instead, he licks his lips nervously and takes a step towards us.

"Esperanza—"

"Espie." I correct him because I can't stand him saying it a second time, especially not in front of these people, and I'm already on the defense.

"Espie, this is Nikolai Mikhailov," He motions to the man slightly behind him. "And this is—"

*Muddy-boots* steps even closer to me, hand extended. "Adrik Mikhailov, next in line to take over the Bratva."

I shake his cold hand, but I wish I wouldn't have because he seems all too pleased that I didn't hesitate to do it. An odd wave rolls through me as our skin touches, and I pull my hand away quickly, looking over at Vince.

"What's this about?" I ask, rather boldly, all things considered.

"This is a little complicated—"

"I'm a quick study." I fold my arms over my chest.

"Right." He clicks his tongue. "You will have the honor of marrying into the Bratva."

“I- I what?” My heart is dropping from a high tower, and Vince is the one who’s ripped it out of my chest and threw it over the edge. I’m dizzy, stumbling over my words before continuing. “I don’t understand. I—“

“Thought you said you were a quick study.” Adrik mumbles under his breath that smells like cigarettes and pure ethanol. I stab him with my glare, but he only offers a smug grin.

“This isn’t easy to explain, but a necessary deal was made a few years ago. A deal that involved you and the eldest Mikhailov son. Your marriage is meant to end any wars between our families. Unite our strength as one.” Nikolai slaps Vince on the back like they’re best friends, like they haven’t been fighting since before Vince took over for Pops.

“Look, sweetheart,” he begins, and I hate the way he says it. So patronizing. “My son is the best choice you have for making your family untouchable. And you want that, don’t you? Surely, you don’t want to lose another sibling by having weak points.”

“We lost Carlito because of your family.” I bite my tongue on that one. It’s not often I let my bitterness slip out of my mouth. I try to control my temper; Always be pleasant and mild, but the convoluted disrespect of mentioning the very brother he caused to die, is too much for me to keep quiet.

“She’s feisty.” His brows raise as he talks about me like I’m not in the room.

“Not usually.” Vince weakly laughs while simultaneously grimacing. Good. I want him to be uncomfortable. Because this isn’t happening. This man will not become my husband. He doesn’t even look remotely capable of being in a committed relationship, let alone a contractually binding one.

“Well, my boy will like that. He’s tough, needs someone to keep up. They’ll make a fine pair. Don’t you think so?” His words sound scary, like he’s using them to taunt Vince, who only nods along.

“We’ll let you two have your first date here while Nikolai and I discuss the courting length of your arrangement.” I want to scream, throw a fit, make a scene, I don’t know. Anything to give me some semblance of control. I have no interest in this man standing before me, licking his lips like a lion watching his prey. Sanders elbows me, and I realize Adrik has turned down one of the isles of the bookstore.

“Go talk to him, Espie.” He whispers as Vince and Nikolai begin chatting in hushed tones. I grimace and force myself towards Adrik, rounding the corner to see he’s pulled down a history book off the shelf.

“Try not to look so thrilled about being engaged to me.” He snarks, not looking up from the book as he flips through the pages. I tense my brows, shifting my jaw as I take a step forward.

“Sorry.” I force out through my teeth, and now he’s looking up, brows rising from his smug expression.

“You’re sorry?”

I look around as if he’s seriously asking me why I’ve apologized. “Clearly, I’m trying to make this shitty situation a little more tolerable. But now I think that would require you to be someone who’s tolerable to be around, not just nice to look at.”

“So, you think I’m attractive?”

I bite my tongue as he takes a step closer.

“No.” I stiffen my nose, standing my ground.

“That’s what you just said— that I’m nice to look at.”

“I just meant—“ I look down at the book in his hands. “Why are you reading that?”

“This?” He lifts it up to me, and I squint my eyes at his stupid question. “Because it’s fun to read.”

“You like history?”

“You don’t?”

“I prefer fiction.”

“I thought you were smart?”

“Excuse me?”

“Well, shouldn’t smart people like scholastic shit?”

“There’s so much wrong with that question.”

“What?”

“*Scholastic*. Do you even know what that means?”

“Do you?”

I huff and turn around, but he grabs my wrist with a chuckle, pulling me back to him.

“Lighten up, I’m just teasing you.”

“Oh, insulting people is your way of teasing?”

“No.” He breathes. “It’s my way of flirting.” The look in his eyes, and the soft tone he’s shifted his voice to, throws me off for a second. The center of me is dizzy, and I’ve forgotten how to speak. What is happening to me? I force myself to take a step back from him, and he chuckles, like he knows how my body reacted to him.

“This’ll be fun.” He smirks and opens the book up again, leaning against a bookshelf.

“You and I have extremely diverse ideas of what’s fun.” I cross my arms over my chest, and he breathes a laugh through his nose. It’s like nothing bothers him. He seems to get pleasure out of making me squirm, and I hate it. Hate him more than I did moments ago, and fear this hate will soon become unmanageable.

This is much worse than being dutifully affectionate towards a suitor. This is pure abhorrence, and I refuse to marry a man I can’t even stand to be in the same room as, let alone breathe the same air.

That’s the problem, though— this is a ride I cannot get off. I’m stuck in the front row, tipping over the edge and falling away from myself. From the last bit of control I had left in my life. This is it, this is who I’m stuck with, Adrik the asshole Mikhailov.

I can't imagine it getting much worse than this.

**ADRIK**

A FEW HOURS EARLIER

“**T**hat is it, Adrik. We are not doing this anymore. I’m not bailing your ass out again. Either you step up to your responsibilities, or you will be exiled.”

There are many things about life I find amusing. My father yelling at me in the middle of the night while I’m drunk, is not one of those things. He’s got that purple flush to his skin from screeching so loudly— veins popping, eyes bulging, fists raised to teach me a lesson.

I just smile. Calm through it all because I won a bar fight tonight— killed two guys fucking with me just an hour ago. Old *Otets* isn’t too fond of the way I spend my days and nights. Ever since my older brother Kias died, I’ve been traveling the world. Taking risky missions, cutting throats, burning through women because there really is an endless supply of them, and why the fuck not when I feel so fucking empty inside? Being the one everyone looks to after being overlooked your whole life will do that to you.

“I won.” I shrug, looking down at my knuckles glistening with blood. Not mine, of course. The following blow to my stomach knocks the wind out of me, and I buckle over, coughing to catch my breath.

“That’s all you have to say for yourself?” He bends down to my ear. “This isn’t how we destroy the San Giovanni’s! You’re getting sloppy, and I won’t have my next in-line acting like a fool.” He spits out his words like slaps.

“I understand.” I grunt.



“You don’t.” He stands back up, crossing to his desk, as I lean against the wall to steady myself. “That’s why we’re collecting on this little contract I made with their family.”

“*Contract?*”

“Yes.” He waves it in the air and I stumble forward, grabbing it from his hand. I squint at the words that are jumbled on the page for a moment. When my eyes finally focus, I read the bold letters.

*Marriage arrangement contract.*

I glance up at my father, and he snatches the paper back.

“Marriage?” That word doesn’t feel like my own as it slips through my lips.

“Yes,” he sighs with annoyance. “To Esperanza San Giovanni.” That’s a name I haven’t heard in a while, but it’s a name I know well.

“You’re bluffing.” I scoff.

“Try me.” He raises a brow.

“I can’t marry someone.”

“You can, and you will.”

“I’m not Kias.” I blurt before regretting it instantly.

“Cleary.” He spits back ferociously.

“*Pakhan*, I didn’t mean—“

“I know what you meant.” He curls his upper lip, looking as disgusted with me as he has since knowing I’d be the one to take his place. “Go sober up and be downstairs in half an hour.”

“To...?”

“To meet with the Sicilian scum. Are you daft? Have you processed anything I just said to you?” He’s standing again, fist balled, and I think if I take another hit to the stomach I might puke. So, I jump back towards the door, finding the handle behind me and swiftly exiting.

I head down the hall and up the elevator to the top floor, where my suite is hauntingly quiet. All my brothers are in their rooms right now, everyone except Kias, who we've established is passed. Yeah, I know, it fucking sucks. It's strange walking past his empty bedroom on the way to mine. Makes me want to open another bottle and keep it with me, so I can wash away the image of his head being shot into a million pieces every time I think of it. My stomach quivers at the thought as I lumber up the glass spiral staircase, up to my room—second on the right.

I shiver in the draft from Kias' before stepping into mine and closing the door behind me. My bathroom light is still on, so thankfully my room isn't pitch black. Stumbling over something in the dark would blow, and it's definitely a possibility considering the spinning from the alcohol is beginning. It's about now that I usually regret drinking, and am thankful for my codependent relationship with nicotine. I reach in the top right pocket of my leather jacket and pull out a pack of American Spirits.

I could burn through two packs of these in a day if I'm edgy enough—have done it a few times in the past few years. Today might be one of those days.

I light it up and take my first puff, letting the soothing feeling rush over me like a warm comfort. The cloud of smoke collects around me as I breathe out, and I step into the bathroom, turning on the sink. The blood from my hands washes down the drain, revealing slight bruising on the very edges of my knuckles. Nothing to get too fussed about, especially not after winning.

I scoop up some water and splash it on my face before taking another drag and turning the bathroom fan on. My brothers hate when I smoke in my room, so this is what I usually do to keep their hostility at bay. They say it stinks everything up when I smoke, but I disagree. The smell of cigarettes is a reminder that I have an escape always accessible to me. That I never have to fully suffer as long as I have them with me, and fuck them for not getting that.

After blotting my wet skin, I shove a hand through my choppy black hair, trying to tame it a bit before dowsing on some cologne and heading back to the elevator.

I hear Esperanza is hot, like immeasurably hot. Every leading man of the prominent mafia families is pining for her. Last I heard, she was being courted by that Yakuza guy. I fucking hate thinking that I'm about to be one of those suckers. The ones that get all wrapped up in impressing the girl, only to be rejected because she's got a superiority complex. That's what I hear about her anyway— that she's easily deterred and extremely choosy.

Whatever, though, I'm fucked either way. If she likes me or doesn't, it's not really my problem. My predicament is that I have to marry her. I feel my face contorting at the thought as I step out of the elevator and into the foyer, where a group of our guys is waiting for me, my father in the center of them.

They look over at me as I near them, and I wave, blowing out a puff of smoke through the side of my mouth.

“Adrik.” My father scolds me in front of everyone, and I suck another puff to prove a point. I can take another punch now that I have this between my teeth, and he does look as if he's gearing up to do it, but his phone rings before he has a chance.

“Nikolai.” He answers and steps through the front doors. The boys follow him, and I do the same. We walk to the cars parked in front of The Magdalin, loading in as the boss quietly speaks on the phone. After twenty minutes of driving, he hangs up and looks over at me, slapping the back of my head with his hand.

“What the fuck?” I grit.

“Sit up straight and stop fucking smoking this in the hotel.” He rips the cigarette out of my hand and tosses it out the window before I have a chance to fight back. I bite my bottom lip so as not to punch the pleased look off his face and fix my eyes out the window for the rest of the drive.

When we arrive, I'm wondering why we're parking in front of some bookstore in the middle of nowhere until I see the classic black SUVs that the San Giovanni's drive. With a sigh, I jump out of the car and walk with a few of the boys up the steps to the front door.

"Ah, Adrik." One of the guys guarding the door chides.

"Sup, Lancaster." I know his face well, gotten into a few scuffles with him here and there. Mostly we stay out of each other's way, but he's always been a prick.

"Here for Espie?" His tone is mocking, but I hold myself back.

"Seems like it." I look past him as my father catches up to us and taps his cane on the ground.

"Well, are you going to open up?" He asks Lancaster, who nudges his buddy, and they part ways, opening the door for us to step inside.

"Welcome!" Vincenzo San Giovanni greets us at the door, kissing both of my cheeks and my father's like our families are suddenly long-time friends. I clear my throat and step inside the rest of the way as they begin to chat, looking around at the space. It's a wild looking bookstore, completely chaotic. A place like this has got to have some incredible history books just waiting to be cracked open.

I'm a bit of a history buff. Well, I used to be anyway. Before I became the eldest by default, I intended to go into Archeology. Study abroad, meet someone easy to talk to, and settle down somewhere far away from my family. But, now that I'm next in line, I haven't had much time for lofty ideals such as those. Now my life belongs to the Bratva, my miserable life.

"Esperanza!" Vincenzo calls, and it's quiet for a moment until the faint sound of footsteps grows louder. Out from between the bookshelves she eventually steps, and I have to say, I'm taken off guard by her beauty. She's just as astounding visually as anyone has ever said, probably more so— definitely more so. Long dark hair, slightly warm skin,

freckles across her small, sloped nose, and bright-green eyes that look like they know something I never will.

She drops her book upon seeing me, and it tumbles across the floor, colliding with my boot. I stop it with my foot, pressing it to the ground with my sole. Her glowing eyes flicker between me and her brother, and I think this is as much of a surprise to her as it was to me a few hours ago.

I smirk at her, and she looks down at my foot in response, clearly perturbed by my boot on her book. I bend down and pick it up, making my way to her. She's just gawking at me like I'm the worst thing she's ever laid eyes on, and I'm not trying to come off as a dick, but I know I'm better looking than anyone she's ever been courted by. So, there really isn't a reason for her glaring. In fact, it's kinda pissing me off a little.

"You dropped this." I smile, practically oozing with charm that she doesn't seem remotely affected by.

"You stepped on it." She shoots back, and I'm taken off guard by her lack of returned affection.

"I think the phrase you were looking for was *thank you*." She scoffs at me. Actually scoffs, like I'm some creep flirting with her at a grocery store or something. Her eyes shift focus to Vince, and he introduces my father. Before he can do the same to me, I do it for him, sticking out my hand.

"Adrik Mikhailov, next in line to take over the Bratva." She shakes my hand immediately, so I think maybe I've impressed her a little. But then she whips her hand out of mine, and I second guess myself.

We run through my newest woes again, catching her up to speed, but this time Vince explains what's going on, and I mostly zone it out, except for getting in a dig at Espie. That's what she likes to be called. I'll remember that, but only so I can call her Esperanza instead. I like the look in her eyes when I tease her, possibly a little too much for someone who is so clearly fucked, having to marry the woman.

The rest of the chat I zone out until I hear that our date is starting, and I make a beeline for the history section. Might as

well at this point. I find this impressive one, massive, looks about a hundred years old. I crack it open and take in the scent of the stale pages as I flip through.

Espie's eyes are on me after a minute, and I can tell the look in them is not at all impressed by me. *Well, Espie, I'm not too impressed by you either. Considering you seem to hate me, and we've barely spoken to one another.* I don't say that, though.

"Try not to look so thrilled about being engaged to me." I say sarcastically, flipping to the next page with an old map of South America.

"Sorry." She mumbles and it surprises me.

"You're sorry?" Is she really this much of a mafia firstborn daughter that she apologizes to people for no reason at all?

"Clearly, I'm trying to make this shitty situation a little more tolerable. But now I think that would require you to be someone who's tolerable to be around, not just nice to look at." I try not to let my eyes bug out at her demeaning tone, but mostly I catch her weirdly placed compliment and get a surge of accomplishment.

"So, you think I'm attractive?"

"No." She lifts her chin, cheeks growing a bit pink.

"That's what you just said— that I'm nice to look at." I assert, nearing her.

"I just meant—" I'm inches from her now, looking down at her flustered expression, and then she notices my book. "Why are you reading that?"

I try not to smirk at her quick change of subject, clearly growing nervous with my proximity.

"This?" I show the cover of it to her. "Because it's fun to read."

"You like history?"

"You don't?"

"I prefer fiction." Interesting. Didn't peg her as the type.

“I thought you were smart?” That was stupid of me to say.

Her eyes go wide. “Excuse me?”

“Well, shouldn’t smart people like scholastic shit?” I try to correct myself, but at this point it’s too late, and she’s clearly not having any of my banter.

“There’s so much wrong with that question.”

“What?”

“Scholastic.” She exaggerates. “Do you even know what that means?”

“Do you?” I quip back with a grin, but she turns around all huffy and puffy. I catch her wrist in time and pull her back to me, laughing it off because she’s too fun to mess with, and I’m still too buzzed to filter my thoughts.

“Lighten up, I’m just teasing you.” I insist with a chuckle.

“Oh, insulting people is your way of teasing?”

I look to her pink lips and back to her eyes, leaning in ever so slightly. “No. It’s my way of flirting.”

Her whole body goes rigid, and she looks as if she might pass out. She must really hate me. She’s fucking frustrating, don’t get me wrong, but I’m having fun messing with her at least.

“This’ll be fun.” I grin, thinking about all the ways I can mess with her royal prissiness.

“You and I have extremely diverse ideas of what’s fun.” She snaps back, and I breathe a laugh because she really is supremely entertaining to fuck with.

Clearly we are not friends, and I don’t really want to be. Sure, she’s hot, but every word we exchange is like we’re aiming guns at each other and open-firing. I don’t want to marry someone like that— don’t want to marry at all. It may have been a dream long ago, but that version of me is dead, along with my old life goals.

I have to accept what is because there is nothing left for me except this life of serving and leading the Bratva. Espie

and I are no exception to the rule. We're both stuck on this train with only our disdain for one another in common.

"Espie, Vince is ready to leave." One of her security guards pokes his head around the corner and whispers to her after our many moments of silence reading books, five feet apart. I close my book and stick it under my arm because I've decided it's mine now.

She glances over at me, eyes look a little bleary, but I ignore it because I won't be the reason for someone crying. She doesn't get to be sad about this. I'm not the fucking villain here. We're both trapped and fucked, and you don't see me crying about it. It's a waste of time, and it doesn't change what is and will be.

We follow the security to the front of the bookstore, where my father seems far too pleased, and Vincenzo less so as he glances between us both. My father nudges me when I reach his side, and I know why.

"It was a pleasure meeting you, Esperanza." I grin sarcastically, and she doesn't even try to smile back. She just looks up at me with a fire that almost burns me before Vince clears his throat implicitly.

She plasters on the fakest smile I've ever seen in response before rasping, "Wish I could say the same," and brushes past us out the door.

*Well, fuck you too, Esperanza San Giovanni.*



## ESPIE

Tears are shed on the way home from the worst date I've ever been on. Clearly, my husband-to-be and I are absolutely incompatible. I think he hates me just as much as I hate him, and that somehow makes him even less tolerable. A part of me hopes Vince will look over and see the steady stream down my cheeks, but another part of me knows he's too invested in his phone, dealing with business as usual.

We're at the house before the sun has risen, so I know Olive won't be here yet. As much as I love Olive, I'm relieved that I can cry alone for a while before she arrives. At least that way, our time won't be tainted by my drama. She'll have countless stories from taking a trip to Italy with my brother Tito, my sister-in-law Scout, and their adopted daughter Sailor. Antoni, Stella, Romeo and Kira went along too, just after she graduated. It was a gift to her, to celebrate her accomplishments.

I begged Vince to let me go with her, but he told me it was too dangerous. That was the only reasoning, like I'm incapable of being cared for by security and making safe choices. He didn't go either because he said he had some business to attend to. Guess that makes sense, given what just transpired.

Anyway, I want to hear all about her time there. Especially now. I'll imagine I was there, embed myself in every story so her memories become mine. It's something I've done for a while now because it's all I can do to stay sane these days.

We exit the car and head up to the front door as Vince answers the phone. He's speaking quietly while we enter the house, and then long arms wrap around me and I feel myself sink into the all-too-familiar warmth of Olive.

"How are you here so early?!" I melt into her, partly to hide my tears and mostly because I missed her more than anything.

"Well, Tito had a free week, so we were able to take an earlier flight!"

"Tito?" I pull my head back and her deer-like, sage eyes flick with her chin. I whip around and Tito is standing, arms wide open with a grin just as spread, and I leap into him. He grunts at the impact, picking me up and spinning me around.

"Hi!" He chuckles enthusiastically. With him living in Italy permanently, running the entire tech division of the mafia, it's a miracle when we do get to see him. He sets me down gently, but I don't let go yet, not until my tears are wiped across his white flow shirt.

"You look like a pirate." I sniff before pulling away, and one of his thumbs catches a tear that's more about my horrible situation than it is from the joy of seeing him.

"Thanks, Esperanza." He ruffles my hair and I swat him away, trying to disassociate my name from the way Adrik says it so mockingly.

"What's been goin' on?" He grins, looking healthy and happy—the way all my brothers have looked since falling in love. It's a good look for him, and I'm ecstatic that he's settled. But it makes me even more resentful that I'll never have the same. I hold back my tears at that thought as Vince steps over to us before I can answer Tito.

"He's here." He nods to Tito, who quickly turns the switch to business mode.

"Who's here?" Olive asks, never too diffident to be brazen. Tito tightens his brows as if to ask why she needs to know before grabbing my arm and pulling me along to Vince's office.

“Cool.” Olive sarcastically remarks, with an eye roll when I glance back and give her sorry eyes just before the doors close behind us. When I turn my head, I notice Antonio sitting on the window ledge, looking very solemn.

“Hey.” He nods to me when he sees me staring, and I nod back, looking down at my hands in my lap. We’re seated in front of Vince— me and Tito, and Antonio turns towards us, like he knows what this will be about.

Vince clears his throat. “Espie, I speak for all of us when I say, I’m so sorry for what you’ve had to endure, being the eldest of anything in our family doesn’t have a great track record.”

I lift my brows and drop them, agreeing with his understatement.

Tito grabs my arm to interrupt, and his eyes shift to me. “And, it’s not fair. None of this is.”

“No.” Vince agrees. Antonio looks the worst of them all, guilty and frail. He’s never like this, never this quiet. So, I know he’s the reason I’m in this. I don’t understand why I’ve deduced this, but I have. Can read it all over his face.

“So, that’s all? I get an apology and a, ‘*good luck*?’” It pains me to snap like this, goes against the grain of who I’ve been taught to be, but I can tell by the air in the room that it’s appropriate for me to say. Vince looks to Antonio, who sighs and steps forward. He doesn’t really like this, never had liked doing mafia family things. It’s why he’s taken over the real-estate side of our family, and why out of all my brothers, he’s the one I talk to least.

I always thought it was because when he met Stella, they made their own life and were too busy in it to call me anymore. But perhaps that’s not true at all. Perhaps he was too guilty to pick up the phone, or talk to me at family dinners, or ask me about my life instead of fading into the crowd when I turned to him.

“Stella was in danger. The Russians were holding her at gunpoint, holding her family hostage, and they weren’t

stopping with them. They were going to come after us all unless Stella married Kias.” He blurts and the room gains a new silence, quiet enough that my ears begin to ring as he looks towards his shoes.

“So,” he clicks his tongue, eyes glistening somewhere far off, a terror in them as he recounts it. “We made a deal. It was the only thing that he wanted. The only thing that would stop it.” He licks his lips and I cut him off.

“*We?*”

“Me and Antonio.” Tito pipes up, and I slowly turn my head to him, eyes already hot with tears of shock.

“You?” Is all that comes out of my quivering lips at the betrayal of my closest brother. His eyes do the same—brimming, apologetic— but I force myself to look away because he deserves zero sympathy from me. I pull my arm away from his hand, and he doesn’t fight me on it as I wipe a tear away. None of them deserve to see me cry. Vince grimaces and hands me the contract that they signed me away in. Took the liberty of choice right out of my hands and put it right into the hands of powerful men who care nothing of my life or what it’s worth.

I sniff, shifting my jaw as I take it, wanting nothing more than to rip it up, but I know that won’t change a thing. This contract is binding. Probably has many copies by now, and I’m only holding one of them.

The only reason I’m looking down at it, is, so I don’t have to look at them as my body begins to shake with more emotion than I can tolerate— fury, bitterness, lament. Everything I am is cracking at the foundation, becoming someone I don’t recognize, someone who does not take no for an answer anymore.

“Espie, we are so, so, immeasurably sorry.” Tito whispers, and I think it’s necessary because I might break into a million pieces if someone speaks to me harshly now.

“This meeting isn’t just to explain why and how... it’s to promise you something.” I lift my eyes just slightly, only

looking at Vince because it turns out he's easiest to forgive when he wasn't the direct cause of this mess.

"I've invited the Mikhailov's to dinner tonight, and I'm going to bring up something that might be dangerous, but I'll do it, if it means we can get you out of this."

"What?" I barely get out through a tight throat.

"There's been stirrings—whisperings, really."

"Of?"

"Of a divide forming in the Bratva. One that allows us leverage to get you out of this mess." I won't get my hopes up, but because I'm so disparaged, a part of me is already clinging to the idea of this possible escape.

"There have been reports of certain Bratva members who are dissatisfied by the leadership choices. Angry about Kias' passing. He had plenty of guys on his side who have apparently formed some sort of secret rebellion. We think that Nikolai wants to secure this union now because there's a chance the fighting could stop if he marries into our family. The Bratva have wanted us as allies since—" Vince shakes his head, searching for the words.

Tito helps finish the thought, "Since before Pops took over for Elder San Giovanni." And Vince nods in agreement.

"So, what does that mean?" I ask Vince.

"It means that there will likely be turmoil over this. Many people will want your union to dissipate before it ever becomes maritally binding."

"That's not going to stop someone like Nikolai." I cross my arms over my chest, trying to pull at the hems of this plan, so I won't be disappointed when they inevitably fray.

"Well, we think it might if this plan endangers his position of power. You and Adrik will be in danger. You really already are. If I—" he motions to the boys before correcting himself. "If *we* can bring this up, it could convince him to dissolve the contract."

“*Could.*” I reiterate. “Could, might, possibly. You have no idea if anything will work. He’s a snake. And he’s already got his teeth in me. If you think for a second, he’ll so easily let me go—“

Antonio cuts me off. “Espie, please, trust us.”

“That’s a presumptuous thing to ask of me now!” I bite back, and he lowers his shoulders like a dog being scolded, shaking his head to disagree but not so stupid as to push me with actual words.

“Look, Espie, this is just going to have to be something we work out for you. If you don’t trust us, I don’t blame you. It’s shitty— what we’ve done to you.” Vince is looking right into my eyes, and I know he’s being sincere when he concludes. “But, we will do everything in our power and then some to get you out of this mess. You have my word.” I hold his gaze for a moment, and I feel everyone waiting for my response, leaning in until I take a breath.

“Fine.” I swallow. “Can I go now?” I’m cold, distant with all of them, and he nods, gesturing for one of the boys to escort me out. I stand and walk out of the room, opening the doors a little harder than necessary. Olive is waiting right at them, and she jumps back upon their abrupt parting. I grab her arm and pull her towards the stairs before she can ask me what’s going on.

When we reach our room, I push the security guy back after Olive is inside.

“I want alone time with Olive.”

“Given the circumstances—“ I don’t let him finish, instead I slam the door in his face and just before it closes, he rolls his eyes in relent.

“What the fuck is going on?” Olive bursts out, hands on her hips, brown hair swaying with the shaking of her head, eyes wild with confusion.

“Bullshit. That’s what.” I laugh to keep from crying and flop backwards onto my bed. She cuddles up next to me,

brushing the hair out of my face in long strokes as hot tears spill onto my comforter without my consent.

“They’re forcing me to marry Adrik Mikhailov.”

“No.” She gasps and I nod, uselessly wiping a tear from my eye as my face contorts with a whimper that escapes from my throat. “They can’t. They literally promised you that you could choose an eligible man for yourself, Espie.”

“I know.” I weakly agree.

“What the fuck are we going to do?”

“*You’re* going to live your life to the fullest, like you’ve always been able to. And I will live vicariously through you. That’s it.”

“Espie. There has to be something I can do.”

“That’s all you can do.”

“No.” She shakes her head, more adamant now. “Why did they call you in there? What did they say?”

“It’s not relevant.” I sniff, turning on my side, despondently.

“Why would Vince do this?” She breathes and I consider not telling her the truth because it’s even worse than thinking Vince is on a power trip. But I shouldn’t protect my brothers, not when they’ve failed so miserably at protecting me, so I tell her everything. Right down to Vince’s feeble plans to free me from the Bratva’s binds.

“I swear, when I see Tito and Antonio next, I’m going to punch them so fucking hard—“

“Olive.” I shake my head and she growls under breath.

“I’m just so fucking pissed. How could they do that to you?”

“I don’t know.” I whisper.

“But Vince’s plan... it could work, you know. The Bratva are famously fickle.”

“Yeah, which is why I doubt it will work.”

“Espie, you have to have hope.” Her ignorance causes me to fly into a rage. I sit up, nearly smacking my head with hers, and her round eyes go even rounder.

“Olive, it’s far too easy for you to give me a speech about being hopeful. You’ve had every reason in your life to hope because you have nothing to lose if you live how you want.”

“That’s not fair.” Her bottom lip pouts as I slide off the bed and cross to the bathroom, unsure how to carry on the conversation because I’m not even mad at her anymore. It’s not her fault that she was born last, not even her fault that she can’t comprehend what all of this means for me.

There’s a knock on my door as I enter the bathroom, and Olive’s feet tell me she’s getting it. I want to avoid looking at myself in the mirror, knowing it will be tragic. The entire bathroom is covered with reflective surfaces, so I go into my closet and flop on the floor, about to scream, before Olive comes in with a furious look.

“What?” I ask, and she shakes her short hair angrily.

“We’re expected to be at dinner tonight with the Mikhailov’s.”

“Oh.” I shrug.

“You knew.”

“Yep.”

“Why didn’t you mention it?”

“I don’t know, Olive. Maybe because I was too busy worrying about my entire life imploding before my eyes.” She blinks like I’ve hit her and sits on the edge of our gold bathtub.

“You know, I get it.” She whispers and I look up, about to fight her again, but she raises a hand as she continues. “I get that I don’t understand.” She looks up at me, eyes narrowing with sincerity. “But, I want to be here for you. Whatever happens, I’m in this with you.”

“Olive—“



“Don’t fight me on this, Espie. I intend to make sure you get your happy ending. If that means going to stupid dinners and dressing fancy and acting like a living doll, I’ll do it. You’re not going through this alone. Not a fucking chance, *mimmo*.” She sticks out her pinky to me, something we only do when we really mean it. When we’ll do anything and everything to keep our promises to one another.

I shake her pinky with mine, and we kiss our fists to seal the deal before she pulls me into a tight hug.

“I won’t let them get away with this.” She whispers. “Not a fucking chance.”

## ADRIK

I don't put on a nice ass suit for just anyone— not even my father demanding me to wear one to dinner tonight at the San Giovanni's. So, a leather jacket, black skinny jeans with a tear in the knee, matching Prada boots, and a silver chain is what I go for. My father's look of extreme displeasure is already greeting me before I've gotten into the car.

He looks as if he might just strangle me, and it would be nothing new if he did. But he won't. Not tonight. Not when I'm the token to get him everything he's ever wanted.

Doesn't mean it won't stop him from hitting me everywhere but my face.

"You turn the fuck around right now and put on that AMIRI suit of Kias' before I shoot you in the fucking skull."

"Woah." I say through tight lips as I light a cigarette, walking around the car. My heart quickens as I reach for the handle because I'm far too sober to deal with my father's rage tonight.

"Adrik!" He growls with warning through the window, but I don't stop attempting to get in the car until I hear the click of his gun.

"Fuck." I grit and spin around, jogging past the last of our security loading into the car.

"You have five minutes!" He yells after me and I take a long drag, waiting to puff it out until I get inside the hotel. I continue to smoke it all the way up to my room, right past my

brothers watching tv on the couch, and up to Kias' room for the first time since he died. I take as many drags of my cigarette as I can before I'm dizzy, walking into the starchy, cold room and straight to his closet. The suit is hanging right on the back of the door, and I pull it out, reviewing it for a second. Black and emerald silk-stitched, shining underneath the clear plastic cover. He bought it to wear when he would inevitably court Espie.

It's been mine since he's passed, but I haven't been able to bring myself to retrieve it.

I blow out a thick cloud. "Fuck you, Kias." I wince after saying his name because it brings the memory of his death back, then high tail it out of his room and right to mine. Quickly, I change into this ridiculous costume. That's really what it is. By the time I've changed, I've worked the cigarette down to nothing. I smudge it out in the ashtray on my bookshelf before lighting another and sprint downstairs, gunning for the elevator.

"A! What the hell, bro?" My littlest brother Alek bares his teeth in disgust at the cloud around me and then eyes trails to my shiny kiss-ass of a suit.

"Ooo," I bite my cigarette, snapping my finger. "Would love to catch up, but I've gotta be somewhere..." I look down at my empty wrist. "Like, five minutes ago." I twist around again.

"Adrik!" Another one of my brothers growls as my boots squeak over the marble floors and I continue my jog without a care, right to the car where I gladly bring my half-finished cigarette inside.

At the click of my belt, something cold and sharp presses under my chin, threatening to slice open my throat if I move another inch.

"Toss that out. Now." My father warns, his 8-inch blade making its way to my carotid artery. I slowly turn my eyes towards his rage and offer a smile that's only made possible by my nicotine buzz, and flick the bud out the window. He pulls his blade away, and I try not to make it obvious— my gasping

for air— as we pull out of our spot and head to the San Giovanni's.

There's something solid in the front right pocket of this suit, and it's not my cigarette pack. I didn't notice it for the entire drive here, but just as we arrive at the gates, I've discovered it.

I inconspicuously press on it with my open palm and realize it's a fucking metal hip flask. God, I fucking hope it's filled with alcohol— brimming with it. I'm going to need everything to be completely out of focus than it is right now. There's no way I'll make it through this wretched night with something as useless as sobriety. The last thing I want, after being forced to marry the San Giovanni spawn, is to socialize with them.

I've killed some of them, you know? Yep. Shot em, broke their skulls, stabbed a few through the heart. The Sicilian mafia has been a long-time enemy of my family's. If it wasn't abundantly clear. So, yeah, not really bursting at the seams with excitement having to walk into a home that doesn't want me there.

If anything, the guys in this mansion would like nothing more than to shoot me right on the spot. And I'd deserve it, too — I've got way more deaths on them than they do on us. But their code of ethics allows such brutality as ours to throw a knife through the cracks of their pompous morality.

So, I've killed and continue to. And somehow I sleep at night. Just fine, I might add.

I slide out of the car and walk to the front doors, my father clicking after me and the rest of our security trying to keep up. I snark a laugh at the ridiculousness of this entire event, and it earns me a punch to my already bruised rib as we step up to the front door.

“Good evening.” My father plasters on a grin for the boys guarding the entrance, and they nod to us before opening the front door.

“Not conversationalists, lads?” I raise my brows to them and neither meet my eyes as we step inside.

Vince is first to greet us again, and I’m almost too distracted by his overly kind welcome to notice the grandiosity of their home. It could easily be mistaken for a castle. Victorian looking with sweeping steps, marble and gold accents, and rich cherry wood cascading around the over-decorated space.

It’s all glossy and bright and pure. Nothing like my home in the Magdalin. We’re like gothic vampires, and they’re the annoying cherubs floating around with knowing grins and expensive tech that we’ll never touch without this stupid marriage contract.

“Welcome to our home.” An older man who looks like an elder Vincenzo with an Italian accent greets us.

“Giuseppe San Giovanni.” He shakes my hand, and a flicker in his eyes tells me he’s not impressed by my presence. I’m not here to impress anyone, *grandpa*. No need to get your perfectly tied bow-tie in a knot. After pleasantries that I am barely paying attention to, we’re guided through the home. A long hall where pictures of past leaders are hanging in one consecutive line down the length of it. All the way up to Vincenzo at the end.

I try not to laugh at how seriously they take themselves as they lead us to a dining room that even I can’t pick apart because it’s like the Sistine chapel meets Balmoral castle. I take a seat close to the end of the table and my father sits in his, beginning a conversation with Giuseppe at the head of it. That’s far too pleasant considering his off-putting aggression only minutes ago.

“And what about you, boy?” A hoard of eyes trail to me as the room begins to fill up with the rest of the San Giovanni’s.

“What?” I take a sip of champagne that I wish was a dirty martini and square up to Giuseppe, who chuckles knowingly at my question. My father joins in, and they continue to discuss something I really can’t give two shits about. I watch the bubbles in my glass rise instead, trying to forget where I am.

Before I can get too pissed that this champagne is doing nothing for me, I realize I still have that hip-flask. And I don't normally pray, but tonight I will if it means I can be drunk off whatever concoction Kias has whipped up. When no one is looking, I pull it out and turn it over in my hands, trying to gauge if it has anything in it at all.

"Please." I grit, twisting the cap off, still not sure of its contents until the burning glory of vodka reaches my nostrils. Hastily, I bring my champagne glass to it, tipping the flask into my cup. The room falls silent after a moment, but I continue to pour under the table.

"Oh my God." Espie's voice whispers, saturated with annoyance, and I know I'm the reason. I look up to see her, standing over me, staring at her pushed-in chair. Quickly, I place my glass on the table and screw the flask shut, slipping it into my pocket before standing to pull out her chair for her.

I will say, she looks incredible. This gold dress, billowing out at her hips and showing off her taut waist. Her breasts are practically spilling out of the bust portion, where a soft square neckline and two-inch straps hold her in like a second skin. Her long hair is pulled off her neck, showing where the dips of her delicate shoulders and glowing collar bones meet. She's brushed something on there, some kind of makeup that makes her glow in the candlelight—or maybe it's just her.

I'm a little gobsmacked, but I won't admit just how much of an understatement that is because I still hate this entire shit-show. She's not looking at me in any way that would tell me she feels remotely different about our situation, either.

I pull out her chair and watch her sit, pushing it in as she adjusts, then sitting back down next to her. Her scent carries to my nose, a sweetness and subtle woody undertone that is unfairly alluring. I tilt my head to her accidentally, and she notices far too quickly.

"What are you doing?" She whispers, glancing at my drink but not my eyes. Never my eyes.

"What do you mean?"

“You’re looking at me like...” The food comes out, and I lean in to her, watching the vein in her neck plus faster.

With a satisfied grin, I whisper, “Like what?” She crinkles her nose, not looking at me as she takes a sip of her wine, so I repeat the question.

“Would you just be quiet?” She bites back, louder than she should have because her brothers eye us both, and I look to the ceiling, licking my bottom lip in annoyance as I straighten my back. Thankfully, my next sip of champagne-vodka is strong, and I finish the rest of the glass rather quickly, just in time for the entire dinner to be served.

Espie mostly whispers with her sister, who I’ve gathered from chatter is named Olive. I don’t try to talk to anyone, don’t have any interest in it. Just want this alcohol to enter my bloodstream and give me everything I need to get through the night.

“Shall we let the two of them walk around the gardens?” My father’s voice brings me out of my daydream about being in bed by now, and I shift my eyes to Vince, who shakes his head stiffly.

“Vincenzo, let the children wander a little. After all, it’s good for them to get more acquainted.”

“That’s actually what I wanted to speak with you about, Nikolai.” My father cocks his head.

“We’ve heard of the rebellion you’re dealing with—“

*Otets* waves his hand dismissively. “Vincenzo, that is being dealt with, I can assure you.”

“And while I’m certain that’s the case, Nikolai, I can’t help but wonder if that’s a good reason for us to put a pause on this entire arrangement.” Hope bubbles in my chest at the thought of this being true, but my father shakes his head and I grit my teeth.

“Vince, this isn’t something we’re unfamiliar with. We are well-equipped to deal with imbecile *predateli* such as these.”

“Nikolai,” Vince is obviously forcing politeness. “I implore you to look at the contract that you signed, stating this union will provide safety for both families.”

“I know very well what the contract states. Or have you forgotten I wrote it? I’m telling this to you, it will not be a problem. They will be safe.”

“Unfortunately, there’s no guarantee of this and Espie’s safety is as important to me as peace and allegiance in your family is to you. Certainly, that’s reason enough to nullify this contract.” Vince narrows his eyes at my father who does the same and I feel as though I’m losing a fight. I never lose fights, and this won’t be an exception.

Vince getting off this easy means he’s planning something, and breaking the alliance with his family now, will only mean they get what they want. Just like they always do. Not a fucking chance.

Maybe that’s why I speak up, and I might be a fucking half-wit for doing it, but I proceed anyway.

“Actually, we *can* guarantee absolute safety for both Esperanza and I, as well as give my father a chance to work out the current familial drama.” Espie stiffens next to me, and this only eggs me on. I’m definitely drunk, so that’s probably why I like that she’s finally paying attention to me. Everyone is waiting for me to continue, and I press my hand on the table, catching my father’s warning glare.

“The safe-house.” He lowers his brows, but I continue. “We have a safe-house, a mansion, in Sortavala, Russia.” My father presses his hand to his mouth, elbow resting on the table as all eyes pan to him, and then he claps with a grin.

“My boy, that is precisely what we will do. It is the safest, most remote location. I have men guarding the grounds, and we’ll even send some extra along as well. They’ll hide out there for a few months and be married by the time this small family strife is a distant memory.”

“I don’t—“ Espie begins, but Vince cuts her off.



“That seems like a reasonable solution.” This is clearly not the answer Espie wanted because she pushes herself away from the table.

“Esperanza.” Vince warns and she stops.

“May I be excused?” She quickly asks her father, and he pauses for a moment before nodding. Subsequently, she shifts her fury to Vince, eyes blazing with rebellion as she stands and storms out of the dining room. I’m turned on by that look in her eyes, the sheer “fuck you” of her dramatic exit. A little shocked by it, too because I didn’t peg her as being the type to storm off. Thought she always did the polite thing.

Olive asks the same, excusing herself to follow her, giving me a death-glare on her way out. I snark a laugh that thankfully my father doesn’t notice, and excuse myself to smoke outside.

It doesn’t hit me until the brisk evening air does, that I have just fucked myself over. Sure, I may have prevented a classic San Giovanni scheme from ever happening, but in return, I’ve sealed my fate with Espie. I’ve never won a fight while losing another before, and it’s a sick sort of feeling that I’ve gained because of it.

As I light up my cigarette and take my first drag, I close my eyes, holding it in a little longer than usual to get just enough of a buzz. It doesn’t stop that confusing fury twisting in my gut, though, and when I breathe out, I shake my head disparagingly.

“Fuck me.” I snarl bitterly, and before I can take another puff, a voice startles me from behind.

“Funny, I was about to say the same.”

**ESPIE**

**W**alking outside to talk to Adrik was a shitty idea. Probably my daftest one yet, but here I am, watching him brood and smoke. The pockets in his cheeks caving in as he sucks polluted air into his lungs. His dagger blue eyes search the night sky, and he's angry. I can tell by the way he's holding himself.

He can get in line.

Olive didn't want me getting anywhere near him, but we were sitting at the top of the stairs when I saw him step outside, and I couldn't stop myself from following. God, he really is a horrible guy. And I do hate him, almost as much as I hate being forced to marry him.

Why the hell did he suggest we stay somewhere together? Vince was so close to getting me out of this, and now I'm sucked right back into it. Fucked. Completely and totally.

"Fuck me." Adrik breathes out a thick cloud of smoke and I take a step forward into the evening winter air.

"Funny, I was about to say the same." I chide, and he whips around with a shocked look before flashing me a smirk that I want to smack off his horribly gorgeous face.

"You were about to ask me to fuck you?" He raises a brow and I catch my breath.

"That's not at all what I meant, and you know it."

His lips shrug along with his shoulder, and he takes another puff before offering me it.

“No.” I pull my brows together, curling my upper lip in disgust. “I have a little more self-respect for my body than to put that in it.”

“Your loss... ” He takes another hit, not breaking eye-contact and though I want to, I don’t. “Self-respect is for boring people.” He breathes out, glancing at me from the corner of his eyes.

“You’re despicable.” I continue to hold his gaze and his lips twitch up.

“Oh, don’t flatter me.” He licks his grin and I scoff.

“You really are insufferable to be around. You know that?”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Then why the fuck did you come out here?”

“I—“

“Exactly. So, you can either run along and go read one of your little fantasy books, or shut the fuck up and let me live.”

I know my mouth parts in utter shock at his harsh words and their cutting delivery. He’s impressed by himself, smug. But I won’t let him have the satisfaction of knowing just how deeply he cut me. He doesn’t deserve a reaction.

“You’re an asshole.” I bite back, turning around on my heel and stepping back inside, but not before catching his rebuttal.

“And you’re a prude.”

I pause in shock before slamming the door shut and locking it behind me. Olive is on her phone, but she looks up when she hears my heels clicking up the marble steps.

“What did he say?” She doesn’t need to look at me longer than a second to ask this— to determine he’s done something offensive. Though, it doesn’t take a genius to guess that every interaction with that despicable human being is unpleasant at best. I don’t answer her, just grab her arm and pull her to our

room before slamming the door behind us. She sits on the bed, watching as I struggle to rip off this itchy, tight dress.

“I can help.” She weakly offers, and I ignore it, going into the bathroom and grabbing a hanger from the closet. I hook the end of it to the zipper after a few attempts and pull it down, unzipping the dress to my hips. Olive is in the doorway now, eyes lowered and curved with an expression of concern and sympathy.

“I’m fine.” I answer before she asks, slipping out of the gown and grabbing my white cotton nightgown off the sink.

“Espie, this isn’t fair. I just got you back.” I pull my night gown over my head and braid my hair back, ignoring her for as long as I can until she’s behind me, hand on my shoulder.

“This isn’t fair for more reasons than being separated.” I say to her through the mirror as I begin taking my makeup off.

“I know.” She whispers.

“It’s only for a couple of months. And until I leave, we can spend every second together.” I’m going into older sister mode. The protective one that sets my emotions aside to make sure Olive doesn’t see the worst of everything. To make sure she is safe and happy. She watches me in silence as I pat my face dry, and then I turn to her. She’s taller than me, only by about an inch, but she still seems so small as I pull her into a hug.

“Girls.” Vince’s voice startles us both, and we shift our focus to him hovering in the doorway.

“Whaddaya want?” Olive squares up, and I place a hand on her arm, but she doesn’t back down. Vince only looks at her for a moment, an expression I can’t decipher across his face, and then he looks back at me.

“I’m sorry about all of this. But we still have a plan to end this.” I say nothing, letting him squirm under mine and Olive’s glares.

Realizing I have nothing to chide back, he continues. “You leave in the morning.”

“What?” Olive and I practically yell at the same time.

“Girls, this is necessary. This is how the real world works. I’m sorry. I’ve told you I’m sorry a million times, haven’t I?” I blink at him, and he lets out a heavy breath.

“So, what, she’s just supposed to live in some random shack with him in the middle of nowhere?” Olive is speaking with her hands. She only does that when she’s furious.

“I highly doubt one of the most prominent mafia families in the world would own a shack as a safe-house.” He shakes his head at her.

“Hm.” Olive crosses her arms over her chest and Vince rolls his eyes.

“Look, this is only for a little while until we work everything out the way we’ve been planning.”

“Which is...?” I arch a brow.

“I think it’s safest if I don’t tell you.”

“For real?” Olive pushes and Vince flicks warning eyes to her before looking back at me.

“I need you both to be ready before dawn.”

“Both?” I ask, confused for a moment before I realize he means Olive and I.

“You girls will need each other.”

“I get to go?” Olive softens a littler, her voice going a bit higher with hope. Vince gently nods.

“The only thing I ask is that you play the role of chaperone very seriously.”

“Olive is my chaperone?”

“Yes.”

“For why?”

“Because that man is not going to stop until he seduces you.”

I burst out into a bitter laugh.

“She hates Adrik! Why the hell would she sleep with him?” Olive snorts, narrowing her eyes.

“Because he is a notorious assassin and playboy and he doubtless will try to seduce her. If she gives up her virginity, we can’t help her get out of the marriage.”

“Why’s that?” Olive tenses, but I know the answer— know far too well the consequences of sleeping with someone in my position. Vince looks over at me again, and I shake my head.

“I’m to be pure, untouched by any man, if I hope to be given away to a mafia heir. Being a virgin is the only way to ensure I am still able to marry into another prominent family.”

“That’s ridiculous.” Olive objects.

“Welcome to my world.” I give her a look, and she shifts her jaw.

“Regardless of your opinions about it, Olive, I implore you to look after Espie. She must not, under any circumstance, give her virginity to Adrik Mikhailov.”

“Fine. I got it.”

Vince pauses, looking between us both like he’s a little concerned about the logistics of this all, which gives me no hope of his ability to dissolve the contract.

“Is that all?” I finally ask.

He slowly nods. “Pack warm things. I hear the snow in Russia at this time is brutal.” He turns around sadly and we watch him leave. The second my door closes, Olive turns to me excitedly.

“We’re getting that vacation we’ve always wanted to take!” I raise my brows in a sarcastic enthusiasm.

“Yeah, us and Adrik-the-asshole, locked in a home together. It’ll be just like how I dreamed our vacations would go!” I flutter my lashes, but she’s already on the move, pulling out our suitcases and packing for us both.

“You could be a little more excited, Espie.”

“And you could be a little less so, Olive.” I mock her tone, exiting the bathroom and crossing to my dresser. Slowly I sift through my sweaters and wide leg sweats, pulling them out by the dozens because I don’t plan to dress for anyone but myself. Olive lugs out my stuffed suitcase to the bed, and my eyes go wide.

“What the hell did you pack for me?”

“Just the basics.”

“*Basics*? That looks like half of my closet.”

“Precisely. You have to have cute clothes.”

“No.” I protest. “I should have nothing cute.” She furrows her brows, picking up a sweater I’ve folded on the bed.

“I don’t think wearing clothes that make you look like a marshmallow will mean you’re any less desirable to Adrik.”

I snark a laugh. “Olive, if the man wanted to fuck me, he wouldn’t be such horrible company. He’s been nothing but an antagonistic asshole towards me.”

“He wants you.” She shoves my choice of clothes on top of hers with a dismissive grin.

“You’re wrong.” I toss her some socks, and she catches them, searching for a spot in my suitcase to appoint them to.

“I’m not usually. Not about these things, anyway.”

“Well, I don’t know what men you’ve been around, but usually when someone insults you and tells you to shut the fuck up, they aren’t interested.”

“Depends on the context.” She sing-songs through tight lips, and I toss a pillow from the couch at her.

“Hey!” She pretends to be offended, and I shake my head with a grin as I close my drawers.

“That’s far more information than I need to know about your love life, Olive Leonora.”

“Noted.” She laughs, and I roll my eyes, trying to forget what she’s just said and ignore the images of Adrik popping up

in my mind like an assault on my sanity.

He may be utterly detestable, but I cannot deny how attractive he is— how attractive I find him.

Does that make me sound a little insane? Shit, I think I am.



OLIVE AND I barely slept a wink, which, I think, is good because that means I can sleep on the plane and not be forced to talk to— or look at— Adrik.

Tito and Antonio help us bring down our luggage at exactly dawn. It's the least they can do after they fucked me over so royally. There's about thirty of our boys waiting in the foyer to say goodbye. Ten of which will be traveling with us. Vince is last to give me a hug, making sure to remind me of my job in this entire plan.

“Don't sleep with him. And look after Olive.” He whispers, even though she's meant to be looking after me. But I know exactly what he means. It's my duty to our family to keep my younger sister out of harm's way, and I won't let him or anyone else down. I nod as he takes one last look at me before Olive, and I disappear into the crowd of security who walk us to our car.

The drive is quiet and Olive falls asleep on my shoulder. I'm a little jealous of this because my body is in no way preparing for sleep. I'm wide awake, in fact. Not in any way prepared to shut my eyes with the things swirling around my mind. Those *things* being Adrik and his insufferable and equally alluring draw.

Maybe I only like him because no one else has ever given me the feeling he does when I look at him. There's malice between us no doubt, but his chiseled face, fiery blue eyes and tattooed body are unlike any of the other men I've looked at. No one has attracted me as intensely as he does and I hate myself for feeling so turned on by him.



Of course, I would be the cliché— the good-girl being drawn to a bad-boy.

I blow out air through a bubble in my cheeks as we pull up to the runway. The plane is already positioned, stairs attached and cars parked beside it, which means that Adrik has already arrived.

“We’re here.” I whisper to Olive as I wiggle my shoulder and she stirs.

“I had a dream.” She whispers as the car comes to a stop.

“Oh?” I laugh quietly at her groggy state.

With eyes half-open as she turns her head to mine, anticlimactically nodding, “Mhm.”

“Great chat.” I sarcastically grin and reach across her lap to open the door.

“It was a scary dream.”

I pause, brows pulling together. “Well, it was just a dream, Olive.”

“I know.” She doesn’t seem convinced as we step away from the car.

“What happened in it?” I ask after a few moments of silence because she still seems haunted by it as we walk to the plane inside a circle of security.

Her eyes grow a little rounder with fear before she glances over, breath clouding around us as she whispers, “You died.” She swallows nervously. “You died in my dream.”

## ADRIK

**F**rom the moment Espie arrived in her white tank top and wide-legged beige sweats that wrap around her small waist at the perfect spot, I've been watching her and Olive chat quietly to one another. Olive is definitely upset about something, and I've determined it's the fact that she's come along for this trip.

I know I'm upset about it.

It was a shock seeing her step into the jet. Neither of them greeted me or even looked my way, who fucking cares. I guess I kinda do. But only because my drunk ass got us stuck in this mess of living together for fuck knows how long.

We're approximately 41,000 feet in the air, and the distance between us is no less than it was at liftoff. By us, I mean me and Espie. It's ridiculous that I even want to be near her. After she locked me out of her house last night, I would think the knee-jerk reaction would be to flip her off and avoid her like the plague.

Guess being hot has its draw, even if she is barely tolerable. The only thing I do for fun when I'm with her is intentionally offend her. And even that might not be possible if she hides from me for our entire stay at the safe-house. Damn, I could go for a cigarette right about now. That's something that Pops made sure to take from me before I left this morning.

Of course, he didn't take it from me— didn't even say goodbye. Not that I thought he would. He had one of the boys

confiscate every pack of cigarettes I packed on me and in my suitcase, so I know the first place I'll be going when we arrive.

I close my eyes and try to ignore the burning feeling in my throat like I'm forgetting to breathe. Only a few more hours. I can make it.

Fuck. I don't know if I actually can.

"Anything else, Miss?" The flight attendant's voice makes me peak across the plane at Espie, who shakes her head in response, and the flight attendant walks off. Olive is asleep. I can see her through the crack in the seats, completely wiped out.

"Finally." I exaggerate, but Espie doesn't look at me. "I thought we'd never get another moment alone."

"Must've been a horrible realization for you." She cuts back without moving an inch. I stand up and cross to the seat facing her, sitting down before she can stop me. Her eyes find a spot away from me, but I still look her up and down because I know she can feel me doing it. And I like the way she's already pissed at me.

"It was horrible. Not seeing you get all worked up when I say three words," I shake my head dramatically. "It's just unbearable to imagine."

Her face drops slightly, eyes flit to me so quick I would have missed it if I wasn't watching her as intently as I am.

"Go away." She orders, and I toggle my head like I'm considering her words before ignoring them completely.

"You locked me out last night."

"You were being a dick." She shakes her head as if to correct herself. "Sorry, I meant to say, you *are* a dick." Those green eyes of hers, the ones that know more than me, finally look back into mine.

"You know, I think you're pretty insufferable yourself, Esperanza."

"Funny, I don't remember asking your opinion of me."

“Funny how you think I care.” I mock back with a grin, and she scoffs, rolling her eyes with disgust.

“Please, just go.” She whispers, less bothered and more like I’ve really upset her. For some reason, that feels shitty.

“I like the view here.” I push, despite reading the room—or jet, rather—all too clearly.

“I don’t. So, you know what? I’ll move.” She grabs her bag, intent on getting up. And she does. Stands right when I decide to, and now we’re an inch from each other. What’s odd is that her disdain for me, and mine for her, doesn’t repel us like magnets. We’re actually frozen, breathing in a rhythm that suggests something odd about our hate for one another.

I lean in, not away, pulled towards her by something neither of us understand. I can tell by the look in her eyes that she’s confused and just as she raises a hand to no doubt smack me away, we hit turbulence. It throws me off-balance, and before I can process it, she’s toppled over, knocking us both down to my seat.

I cough a laugh as she shoves herself off me, throwing a weak punch to my chest, face beat red.

“That wasn’t my fault!” I toss hands in the air at her as she stomps off to the bathroom. Watching her walk away all pissed is irritatingly hot. Like fuck me. Can’t I just fucking live without being attracted to the likes of someone so ill-fit for me?

The pilot informs us to fasten our seatbelts just as she closes the bathroom door, and I want to go after her for some fucked up reason. Guess I need round two in the ring with her or some shit. It’s probably my severe depletion of nicotine, spurring me to the point of insanity. To the point of caring whether Espie gets thrown around on the toilet or not.

Nah. Fuck her. She’s a bitch most days, and this day is no exception. If she wants to bounce around in the bathroom until we arrive, that’s her fucking choice. I buckle my seatbelt and force myself to fall asleep so that the nightmare of withdrawal dampens at least a little until we arrive.



THE HUSHED VOICES of Olive and Espie going back and forth wake me up after we land. But I don't open my eyes as I listen.

"What the fuck is he sitting here for?"

"I tried to shoo him away."

"Oh? Clearly, you didn't try hard enough."

"Watch it. It's not my fault he can't take no for an answer."

"You better hope you don't get yourself in a situation with him, or numbskull might just ignore all of your no's until—"

"Numbskull can hear you." I interrupt with a raspy voice and a crooked grin, squinting my eyes open to see Olive looking at me like I'm already a dead man for existing in her presence.

"I don't think we've properly met." She narrows her eyes at me. "Olive." She sticks her hand out, and I reach for it.

"Numbskull." I shake her hand and she pulls hers away. "But you can call me Adrik."

"You're not funny." She looks out the window as we pull up to another part of the runway, closer to our private airport.

"Dammit. I'm really gonna take that to heart." I sarcastically warn her, glancing over at Espie, who looks away from me quickly, cheeks slightly pink because she knows I've caught her staring.

"Alright, everybody off." One of their guys announces as a group of them head to the luggage, pulling it out of the closet and down the center of the jet.

Olive glances over at Espie and whispers something.

"Shit." Espie whispers back.

"What?" I ask and they both stab me with their eyes. "What?" I repeat, more exaggerated.

“Espie packed her jacket.”

“And?”

“And, it’s below freezing outside.”

“Well, good news, Esperanza Jr., we only have to walk a couple of feet to the car.”

“You know you—“ Espie grabs Olive’s fist, wagging at me before she can continue.

“I’ll be fine then.” She assures her and I lick my bottom lip, brows twitching up in Olive’s direction before I stand and make my way off the plane.

It is fucking cold outside. I won’t deny that. I haven’t been here since I was a boy, and it wasn’t winter here when we visited. My body has grown far too accustomed to the very mild winters of LA. And this is certainly not LA.

As soon as I get in the heat of the car, I have no other distractions because Espie and Olive take the car behind me. Now I can feel the excruciating pain of needing nicotine, worse than I’ve ever needed anything in my life.

“Hey!” I reach for the driver, who turns his head, shocked. “Take me to the nearest gas station.”

His expression tells me he does not speak English, and I ball my fists at him in fury.

“*Mne nuzhna sigareta!*” He pulls his dimpled chin into his neck, and some of my boys load in the car as I yell. “*nemedlenno*, right now!” Finally, he nods and steps on the gas, peeling out of the airport in record timing.

Everyone knows not to mess with my family, and knows not to question our arrivals to the private airport just an hour away from the safe-home. We never fuck with customs, I can’t remember the last time I carried a passport on me to travel. The perks of being so feared throughout the world.

We are at the nearest gas station within a few minutes, and I send one of the boys in to buy every pack of Belomorkanal cigarettes that they have. They are incredible, usually my favorite when I visit any post-soviet republics.

He comes back with a cardboard box the size of his torso, and tosses it into the car before handing me a pack and a lighter.

“You’re a hero.” I nod, and he slides into the car as we take off again. For the rest of the drive, I smoke. Get through half a pack by the time we reach the electric gates of the infamous Mikhailov safe-house. Well, infamous to my family who knows about it.

The gates part for us, and we begin up the winding hill, leading up to the main entrance. Our driver pulls around the back, and we roll down a slippery driveway into a garage that used to be dungeons. The safe-house is an old castle that we acquired by force in the early 1800s. We’ve done plenty of renovations since then, though. None of which have solved the problem that happens when it snows. And we’re a little fucked because it is starting to snow.

“How much is expected?” I ask one of the guys guarding the door to the lower level of the safe-house.

“It’s hard to tell.” His thick Russian accent responds, and I nod solemnly as the rest of the boys meet me with my suitcases and box of cigarettes.

“Adrik.” I shove my cigarette in my mouth and reach for his hand.

“Barth.” He shakes it, and I motion for the boys to follow me inside. We head up a long set of black wood stairs, lit with torches all the way up the wall. When we make it to the top, the foyer instantly takes me back to running around and playing hide and seek with my brothers when we were younger.

The entire room is round— black wood floors that extend to cabinets, otherwise known as perfect hiding spots for kids with nothing to do but play. The walls are painted with images of nature in a blue glowing moonlight, all done by my mother. I’m surprised *Otets* has kept the paintings, considering his rage for her cheating on him with our uncle.

Both of them are dead now, for obvious reasons. It wasn't obvious when I was younger. But knowing what my father does and his capacity for crimes driven by raging rampages, the math worked out rather quickly at a certain age when things tend to make a little more sense.

"That's ridiculous. There has to be another floor for us to stay on." Olive's anger ricochets off the walls from above, and I look up at her standing by a railing with one of my guys.

"What seems to be the trouble, Olive?" I call up, and she looks down at me, hands on her hips.

"Your goons are saying we have to stay in the room next to yours." I look over at Barth who seems rather terrified of Olive and I don't blame him. She's quite the firecracker. Not in any way that's good— if anything, it's highly inconvenient. I guess her presence here is in general.

"Well," I begin towards the wide staircase at the center of the foyer. "Unfortunately, we have to do what they say—"

"Is that why you're smoking a cigarette right now?"

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"The boys told me that your father confiscated your cigarettes. You know, so you wouldn't be smoking around this thousand-year-old castle?"

"Great, you made friends with my boys." I shoot Barth a glare, and he doesn't meet my eyes. "What's your point?" I'm nearly a few feet away from her and I notice Espie, crossing her arms over her chest near the doorway of a room down the dark hall.

"My point is that you clearly bend the rules. Why can't we?"

"Because the rule of us being near each other is so that they can protect us if we have any intruders."

"I thought this was a safe-house?" Olive makes exaggerate quotations around the word "safe."

"Yes, it is."



“So, why would we need extra protection from people who supposedly have no idea we’re here?”

“Because, Olive, we can’t ever be too careful. I want my future wife to be safe. We all do. So, why don’t you scurry on over to her and stop making such a scene all the time?” She raises her brows and fists to me, but Espie jogs back down the hall, grabbing her shoulders and dragging her away from me. I click my tongue and take another puff of my cigarette before looking at Barth.

“We’ll talk about this later.” I warn and head down the hall to my room. Just before I reach the door, Espie pops her head out of hers.

“We’re hungry,” is all she says.

“You should try smoking. Curbs the appetite real quick.”

She cocks her head. “Dick.”

“Prude.” I turn around to my door.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

I stop, and spin around on my heel again.

“Like what?”

“Me being a prude.”

I lean in close to her and whisper, “I wouldn’t like it, I know it.”

“You know nothing.”

“I know enough.”

“Is that so?”

I scoff a laugh. “You’re challenging what I know because I told you the truth about yourself?”

“No, I’m insinuating that you’re an unintelligent, overly cocky asshole with a deep need for approval from me that you’ll never get.”

“Sweetie, I need nothing from you.”

“Oh?”

“Oh.” I nod, lips pressed to keep from curling my upper one.

“Then why are we here?”

“Fuck, I don’t know! Maybe because you popped your head out the door to talk to me.”

“No.” She shakes her head vigorously. “Why are we here? In this castle, locked away for months to ensure that our marriage happens?”

“God. Do you listen to yourself talk?” She crinkles her nose as I increase my volume. “Like it or not, Esperanza, we’re in this for the long haul. So, you can pout all you want. Avoid me, insult me, pretend like you don’t find me the least bit attractive, but it won’t change the fact that we’re getting married. And you’re stuck with me forever.”

“We’ll see about that.” She utters under her breath, but I hear her and the look in her eyes tells me she knows I did too. I don’t know what she means, but I know she didn’t intend for me to hear her.

“Now, who’s the unintelligent one?”

“Still you.” She slams the door in my face, and I snap my head back at its impact with the doorframe. I grit my teeth and cross the hall to my room, fucking furious, reaching for another cigarette and lighting it up.

As I take my first drag and breathe it out, I grit my teeth and look out at the early evening sky. Thick snow clouds are mostly covering it and large flakes are falling down, promising a turn of the weather. Not a good turn, I’ll tell you that much.

Not good at all.

**ESPIE**

“**H**e is the worst human being I’ve ever met.” I growl, throwing myself onto the biggest bed I’ve ever seen. I think it’s bigger than king-sized. Is that even a thing? Are all Russians giants?

I groan into a pillow as Olive angrily unpacks, and all I can think about is the way Adrik looked when he spoke to me. Not the treacherous words coming out of his pretty mouth, or the cutting accusations, or the fact that I accidentally insinuated a possible void of our marital contract.

Nope. None of that. All I can think about is his face, his tattooed neck and hands, and probably arms and chest, and—

What the hell is wrong with me?

“Espie, will you help me?” Olive snaps, sounding a little aggressive, and I stand to aid her, unzipping another punch in my suitcase and following her to a giant closet almost as big as the massive room we’re staying in.

“This is your side.” Olive waves her hand to the right side of the closet and I find a hanger there to hang up this Versace dress that Olive definitely packed for me.

“You know, you’re giving him what he wants.” Olive finally says, after we’re nearly unpacked, stomachs growling from not eating for far too many hours.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“He likes to mess with you, and you let him.”

“I do not.” I cross my arms over my chest defensively.

“Espie, I know you. You let him under your skin too easily.” I try to hold by my defense, telling me to argue with her. Maybe she’s right. It’s possible that I do go back and forth with him longer than I should. I could shut the conversation down at any time, walk away and not look back, but I don’t always do that. Not until it’s gone too far.

“Fine.” I relent.

“Fine?”

“Yes. Maybe I do... do that.”

“Hm.” She zippers her suitcase with a nod and lifts it up to one of the shelves in the closet. I hand her mine, and she does the same to it, storing it right next to hers.

“We need food.” I say after it’s so quiet I can hear her stomach growl, and we’re sitting watching snow pile up outside the window.

“Well, obviously *smokestack* over there isn’t planning on eating anything tonight.”

“So, we find out where the kitchen is.” I stand, offering her my hand.

“I’m sure there’s a lot of them.” She doesn’t take it.

“Potentially, Barth will be in a better mood? Help us get something, so we don’t starve.” I suggest, and she stands with a sigh.

“This isn’t the vacation I thought it would be.”

“Really? How ever did you expect it to go?” I try not to give her a look to accompany my sarcasm.

“I don’t know. I just wanted it to be fun for us. For you, mostly.”

“For me? Why?”

“Because it’s bullshit.” We step out of the bedroom and proceed to the main staircase.

“What’s bullshit, Olive?” I ask more gently than my previous tone.

“You having to deal with this is bullshit. I mean, have you always felt this way? This trapped and burdened and—“

“Olive,” I grab her shoulder and stop us just before we’ve reached the stairs. “This life is all I’ve ever known. You’ve gotten to live, and I’ve watched you grow and make mistakes. It’s been so wonderful to see you make mistakes. I never could, never can.” Tears well in her eyes that make me feel worse than I already do that she’s seeing the world through my lens.

“You are the bravest person I know.” She whispers and pulls me into a hug. I hold her close, trying to take the pain of this reality away from her and bring it back to me. I can carry it for myself. Don’t need anyone else to feel sorry for me, or know just how rough it’s been being raised by masculine men in a world expecting me to be the epitome of femininity and poise.

“It’ll be okay. Really.” I mumble into her fuzzy sweater and she sniffs.

“I should be comforting you. Not the other way around.” She pulls back, and I wipe a tear off her cheek with the back of my finger.

“You’re my little sister. I’ll always be there for you.”

“I’m not little anymore, Espie. I’m here for you too.” She squeezes my hand and I offer a smile that doesn’t meet my eyes as I nod.

“Then we’re in this together.” I sigh.

“Together.” She agrees, and we head down the steps towards Barth, who is on a security post by one of the five front doors in the rotunda.

“Hello ladies.” He seems a little annoyed. Probably got chewed out by Adrik for giving away his daddy drama.

“Hi, Barth.” Olive twists a finger around her short brown hair mindlessly, and he watches.

“What do you want?” He finally asks.

“Oh, just some food would be nice.” She grins, doe-eyes fluttering about, and he rolls his eyes.

“The chefs haven’t arrived yet. Too much snow has already piled up.”

“So, how are we going to eat?”

“I don’t know. We have the supplies, already hired shoppers to get everything. But I guess we just have to wing it? Do any of your guys know how to cook?”

I laugh. “No.”

“Well, then it’s hard to say when we’ll be able to eat a proper meal. You can head down to the nearest kitchen and see if we’ve got snacks?” He shrugs.

“You wouldn’t go out and get food for us?” Olive flirtatiously blinks, and I try not to laugh at his guffaw that someone as gorgeous as Olive is flirting with him.

“I— well... The storm is picking up, and I can’t leave my post...”

She sighs in a higher pitch than normal, and he tilts his head in consideration.

“Okay. I’ll see what I can do. Just, don’t tell anyone. Especially not Adrik.” She shakes her head, lips pouting.

“Of course not.” She assures him very seriously, and he takes one last look at her before heading towards the garage. After he disappears, I swat a hand to her stomach.

“Ouch!” She over dramatizes.

“Where did you learn to do that?”

“Do what?”

“Be all flirty and stuff?”

“Oh, please. It’s the only way to get what you want.”

“There are many other ways to get what you want that don’t include flirting.”

“Name five.”

“Simply asking would suffice.”

“Uh huh. I’m sure being beautiful has nothing to do with the fact that people do what you ask.”

“Me?”

“Yeah! Where do you think I learned that from?”

“I do not flirt with people to get stuff!”

“I mean, you don’t have to... The boys would literally die for you. You’re like a goddess to them.” Her eyes go wide and I scoff a laugh.

“Stop.”

“It’s true! You’re a looker.” She puts on a twenties accent like in the old films she watches. We both giggle at this as we head back up the stairs, intending to go back to our room, before a figure steps out from the darkness next to our hallway. Olive lets out a yelp, but I can tell, by the glowing blue eyes, exactly who it is. He lets out a laugh at Olive’s reaction, but I stand my ground, waiting for him to explain his ever-irritating presence.

“Can I talk to your sister, Olive?” Adrik asks more politely than I’ve ever heard him speak.

“I don’t know. Can you?”

“Don’t be brat.”

“Oh, if you want a brat, I’ll show you—“

I pull my hand from hers, and she stops.

“I’ll be right in the room.”

“Espie—“

“Go.”

She doesn’t want to leave, eyes faltering between us.

“It’s fine.” I whisper to assure her. She relents after a moment, lumbering back to the room, but leaving the door cracked open.

We look at each other at the same time, two frames hovering in the darkening hall as the sun goes down.

“Hi.” He offers, and I raise my brows implicitly. “I’m sorry.”

“For acting so rude all the time? Or just your general dick-like qualities?”

“For both.” He quickly nods and I’m taken off guard.

“*Both?*”

He nods, stretching out a tattooed hand. “Bygones?”

He really has some nerve, trying to put aside a fight that he started and continues to provoke. All he wants now is my hand to shake, to affirm his outlandish truce. But that’s something that isn’t ever going to be his.

God, I sure as hell hope I’m never truly his.

I look back up into his eyes. “I’ll pass.” I intend to go straight to my room, but he catches my arm to stop me.

“Come on, Esperanza.” The smile in his voice makes everything so much more clear. All he was doing was fucking with me.

He isn’t sorry at all, just bored.

I shrug away from him, glaring at his pink smirk and marching straight back to my room, but not before flipping him off. His chuckle in response causes chills to rise on the back of my neck, and I only despise him more because of them.

How is it possible that this is my fate? This vile human being who takes pleasure in my pain. A masochist with a mission to make my life a living hell. He’s no husband of my choosing, that’s for damn-well sure.

Luckily, we don’t see him the rest of the night, and Barth made it back with food. It’s more food than we need, but it will do. I think it’s mostly Russian food. All of it is good, but then again, anything tastes delicious after not eating for nearly an entire day.



Somehow we finish everything and retire to the bed with full stomachs.

“We should watch *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*.” Olive suggests as she grabs her laptop off the nightstand.

“Mmmm.” I stall, not wanting to watch that movie for the thousandth time, but not having the heart to tell her no. “Okay.” I whisper, and she giddily opens the laptop, going right to the movie and clicking play. We don’t even make it halfway through, and she’s beginning to close her eyes.

It’s freezing cold in this room and I’m beginning to see my breath so I nudge her and her eyelids fly open in shock.

“Hey.” I whisper and she turns her head to me with a sleepy smile.

“Hi.”

“Are you cold?”

“Freezing.” She nods and I look around the room, noticing the blizzard picking up outside.

“We should light a fire in the fireplace.” I suggest, and she slides out from under the covers. I follow and we walk together towards it. There’s already wood in it, but I don’t know what type of fireplace this is. It’s enclosed, so it could be gas. Olive crouches down and fiddles with the glass and I look for some sort of switch. The one’s in our house back home are gas-lit, so if this isn’t one of those, and it’s probably not given my recent luck, we’ll have to figure something else out.

“I don’t think this is a gas one.” Olive determines just as I find the switch and flick it on. The blue fire ignites until it licks up the edges of the wood and a soft yellow light floods the surrounding area. “Oh!” she claps and I let out a laugh and help her up.

On our way back to the bed, I grab some fur blankets off the chairs facing the fire and we quickly sprint back to the bed, shivering and squealing like little kids. We shiver under the sheets and I close the laptop, quickly setting it beside the bed and tugging the blankets over us both.

We're quiet for a little, staring up at the ceiling, listening to the fire crackling and the wind howling as the storm picks up.

"You know what this reminds me of?" Olive pokes me with her cold toe.

"Dude." I poke her back with mine and she giggles.

"It reminds me of the time we played that game. Do you remember? The one where we were orphans living in a snowy castle." I burst out laughing at the memory of our well-off little selves in expensive dresses imagining we were poor and deprived.

"You wore your ratty old blanket wrapped around your head and we pretended that we were snowed-in and we had to bundle up." I turn on my side and she laughs as she turns on hers.

"We actually had the most dramatic play time as kids."

"We did." I smile softly, reminiscing. She smiles back, her eyes fluttering more than before and I get scared because I don't want to be alone just yet. "Hey Olive." I whisper, poking her little nose that I swear hasn't changed since we were little.

She opens her eyes. "Yes?"

"Can we pretend, just one more time?"

"What do you mean?"

"I just want to imagine that we're not here because we were forced here. Or that just across the hall is a monster of a man that I'm meant to marry..."

She reaches for me, drawing my eyes back to hers in the dim light of the fire. "Yeah." she nods.

"We're princesses, our parents are both living and just upstairs in their rooms. There's a storm, but we aren't scared."

I shake my head. "No, not one bit. We have each other."

"And we always will." She whispers back and I pull her close to me, letting her nuzzle her head into my chest like she did when we were little and I had to convince her to turn what

she was afraid of into something funny right before bed. As her breathing deepens, I kiss the top of her head.

“Goodnight.” I say, though I know she’s already asleep.

I WISH I could fall asleep that easily, but even with a full stomach, a comfortable bed, and my sister close to me as the fire warms the room, I’m wide awake. No matter how hard I try to believe the little story Olive and I just made, I can’t stop seeing Adrik every time I close my eyes. Even when he’s not around, he annoys me. How am I supposed to get through the following months without going completely insane?

This is how horror movies begin. Like that one Olive loves... the shining? Horrible movie. Absolutely unnerving. She says that’s what makes it good art, but I say why waste my time being scared about something when real life is already horrifying enough?

Self-fulfilling prophecy, I suppose.

I turn over and look up at the painted ceiling. It’s strange. Just like the paintings in the foyer downstairs. Animals killing one another under strange moonlight and tall grass hiding mysteries only the painter will know. I force my eyes shut and just like that, I’ve fallen asleep. But my dreams provide no escape because I still see Adrik in all of them.

This time he’s got a gun to someone’s head and as I approach him, I realize the gun is to my head. And I’m watching this play out over and over, thinking each time it will be different, but it isn’t. I’m in danger, and he is the reason, and I cannot escape it. Can’t scream because my voice is muted. It’s a panic that makes my entire body feel frozen. Not just rigid, but cold. Colder than I’ve ever been.

This icy chill covers my skin and sinks into my bones, and eventually, it’s what wakes me. The sun has barely risen, snow is still falling. Maybe faster and more furiously than last night. I look over to my left. Olive is still fast asleep, not noticing that the cold from my nightmares has carried over seamlessly. Eerily.

I slide out of bed, nose cold, lips dry and cracked, and shiver all the way to the closet. I decide on a long sleeve thermal turtleneck from Raf Simons winter collection and my cream Gucci cashmere cardigan with gold buttons down the center. For pants, I pull out my black high waist Prada leggings from a drawer on my side of the closet. I pair it with my cream terrycloth sandals, also Prada, and then a random pair of black fuzzy socks to keep my feet warm.

Even with every layer on me, I'm still cold because my face and hands feel like icicles. I push through the pain of it and make my way out of the room, remembering to grab a book I've been wanting to escape into since arriving here. As quietly as I can, I head down the hall to the staircase.

Hopefully, the chefs have arrived by now and made breakfast because somehow, even after the giant meal last night, I'm starving. I curve around the staircase and wander down the hallway opposite the garage.

Had it not been for the stream of light under the doorway, I wouldn't have checked the first room on my right, but I push the door open and peek inside.

It looks like a tiny little kitchen. Sink on one side, stove on the other and a little dining nook tucked on the back wall right beside a tall window. The floors are checkered and the wood on the cabinets is weathered. No one seems to be doing anything inside, and I figure there has to be some food somewhere, so I begin a quiet search through the cabinets. They're filled with cups and plates and silverware, but no sign of food.

"Hm." I tap my finger over my lips.

"Oh, great." A grumble startles me and I quickly turn around. Great is not the word I have in mind when I see him, and by his sarcastic tone, I can tell he feels the same.

"Good morning, Adrik." I say without a shred of enthusiasm.

"Mm." He grunts, eyes sleepy as he stumbles over to the stove, turning the knob until it clicks. I step back and watch

him pull out a cigarette, touching it to the stove that isn't lit. His eyes are closed when he brings it, unlit, up to his lips. His unsuccessful first inhale leads to wider eyes than before.

“The fuck?” He mumbles and attempts to turn the stove on again. It clicks a few times and still no fire. “You gotta be shitting me.” I feel like saying the same thing, but for a different reason. Is he trying to blow us up? The fire's clearly not lighting but I can smell the gas and he's not stopping even though it's rancid.

“What?” I ask calmly, though I want to tell him to stop immediately, and he eyes me for a moment before shaking his head.

“The fucking power's out.”

“You say that like it's happened a lot.”

“It's known to happen in storms. The whole town goes down. We've tried to get back-up generators, but they fail every time. Fuck.” He punches the stovetop and I sit down at the table.

“What are we going to do?” I am genuinely concerned because I've literally never left the house for even a sleepover. Now I'm in the middle of Russia, in a snowstorm with my sort of sadistic fiancé, possibly on our way to freezing to death.

“The fuck if I know.” He's still trying to mess with the stove, and I open my book. Wanting nothing more than to entirely ignore him and fade into the pages of the world in my hands. He continues to fiddle with things, grunting and punching and growing more irritated by the second. I can barely focus on the words I'm reading with all the noise he's making.

“You know, you got us into this mess.” I glare up at him from my book as he noisily clanks a pot down on the stove, like putting it there will make it light.

“What mess? I got you the fuck outta that house you were withering away in.” He takes an accusing step towards me.

“I happen to like being home.” I lift my nose in the air and tilt my head to the window, not sure who I'm trying to

convince.

“Oh really?”

“Really.” I bite back enough that I can see my breath.

“Pretty ungrateful of you to not recognize my effort to keep you safe.”

“Right. That’s what you were doing.”

“The fucks that supposed to mean?”

“Figure it out.” I force a sarcastic grin that doesn’t meet my eyes, and he squints back at me.

“*Zho-pa.*” He grumbles an insult that roughly translates to *brat*, and turns back to the stove.

“What did you just call me?” I snap my book shut, and he doesn’t look back. Instinctively, I stand to my feet and make my way through the icy air to his side.

“Move.” He crosses the kitchen with the pot, cigarette secured in his mouth once again.

“Why do you hate me?” His brows go tall at my demanding question, and he turns, pulls the unlit cigarette away from his round lips with a look of bewilderment.

“*You* hate me.” He enunciates, and I say nothing, tense my brow to disagree, though I can’t.

“Don’t pretend it isn’t true, Esperanza.”

“My name is Espie.”

“No. It’s not. But that’s the fucking point, isn’t it?”

“I’m not following.”

“Shocker.”

“If that’s supposed to be some dig at my intelligence, I think you’ve overstepped the line marked ‘delusion’ and you’re free-floating in crazy-town.”

“Alright, calm down.” He presses a palm to his hangover headache, and I know it’s a hang-over because I can still smell the alcohol. As he brings the cigarette to his mouth again,

remembering it isn't lit, he growls deeply, kicking the cabinet, and recoiling with a limp before sending a few frightening punches to the sink. I watch in horror, frozen by the frigid air and his even icier mood. He slumps down onto the floor despondently after a few minutes, and I take the moment of silence to breathe deeply.

"Just leave." He grumbles under his breath, twisting the cigarette around his fingers.

"No." I quickly say, just above normal speaking volume, and he looks up, eyes fiery and determined.

"Leave!" He shouts, and I barely flinch, crossing my arms. This must be the drop that brims his glass because he flies up, right in my face, piercing blue eyes stabbing me where it hurts. I *could* just leave. Could stop feeling his breath on my lips and his body heat collecting with mine, could stop everything right now by turning on my heel and exiting out that door. But I don't. I'm frozen by his proximity, equally fearful as I am pulled to him.

And I hate him all the same, but want him nonetheless. God, what's wrong with me?

His chest rises and falls, and the tips of his fingers reach for my lips slowly, intently. I watch him. Do nothing but follow his hand with my eyes. Feel the pulse of my heart beating in my ears faster than it should for standing so still.

I tilt into him, wanting him to touch me. Why do I want this? It's just for a moment, I forget myself, that is until Olive's footsteps down the main stairwell send us both flying away from each other like repelling magnets. Like the way we should always be.

She steps into the kitchen just as I raise my book to my face. It's upside-down, but it's too late because she walks in and sees us all flustered. There's a beat where she's just looking between us curiously and then finally her eyes land on me and I swallow the lump in my throat.

**ADRIK**

“**W**eird vibe.” Olive curls her upper lip. “Can I talk to you?” Her eyes go wide towards Espie, and I shove a hand through my hair nonchalantly. Espie follows her out of the room promptly, and I clutch my chest to shut up my heart. It’s beating so fucking fast it hurts, and I know I almost made a mistake. It’s these damn cigarettes. I need one, and I can’t have one, so my body found a distraction. That’s it. I still loathe Espie San Giovanni, and that’s not changing any time soon.

The only thing I can change now is finding a source of fire to light a cigarette and forget the burning in my throat and the itching all over my skin.

Last night I got properly drunk—downed half a bottle of vodka, stood out on the balcony in the freezing cold to light a cigarette and my fucking lighter fell into a mound of snow. I have half a brain to go outside and dig for it. But the snow is already taller than me, and that’s quite an extreme resolve when I haven’t exhausted all of my resources. Then there’s my headache also rendering me useless in dealing with the glare of light off every snow-covered surface.

I make my way out of the kitchen and down the hall. There’s a small staircase mid-way through, leading up to a massive library that overlooks the small town we used to think we ruled as children. What an awakening we had when we realized we were in fact not royalty at all. Not in the traditional sense, anyway.



I lumber up the stairs, trying not to step too hard because my entire body hates me when I'm hungover and any excess movement causes me to vomit. It's why I'm always a little drunk at all times. Better this way. Better not to feel too much.

At the top of the stairs, I cross to the double doors, pulling them both open and searching the center of the room where the lounge area is. On the right, I see what I've been looking for. A nicely lit fire is still burning bright in the fireplace. I don't know who lit it or when, but I don't care because I can finally smoke.

My father would kill me on the spot if he knew I was smoking around these old books. And I do think about leaving after I've lit the cigarette, but I've made the effort to come up here, I might as well stay.

I cross to the window and open it up, taking my first drag of the morning, and then everything feels better. The air is freezing, but I don't mind much because I think it's helping my headache. Or is that just the nicotine kicking in?

"God, you're inescapable." Espie's voice alarms me, but I try not to show it. I tilt my head as I take another puff and press a sarcastic grin in her direction. She crinkles her nose at me, beginning to turn around.

"You don't have to leave." I shrug, but my words are quick. She stops moving and eyes me up and down.

"I do, actually."

I turn more towards her. "Why?"

"Because."

"Because...?" She sucks in her bottom lip, brows tense and lowered like she can't figure me out. I can't figure her out either because it's too fucking complicated in her brain.

After a second more, she crosses her arms over her chest. "Why do you always do this?"

"Do what?" I take another drag, trying to keep my heart rate from skyrocketing because I can tell she's about to accuse me of something idiotic.

“You just keep pushing me.” She shakes her head. “Why can’t you let me be?”

I cock my head. “I’m only trying to get to know you.”

“No you’re not.”

“You don’t know one thing about me. How could you assume you’re right?”

“Because I know the type of guy you are, and I don’t have any desire to be anywhere near you.”

I scoff with an amused grin. “Well, that’s gonna be a little difficult when we’re married.”

“Gee, thanks. Haven’t agonized over that fact since we met, or anything.”

“Agonized? That’s a little dramatic.” I turn back towards the window, but I can still feel her eyes on me. “Are you gonna stare at me all day or do you have something else to say?”

“You’re such an asshole.” She jeers just as the chandeliers, above us, flicker on.

“Power’s back.” One of the boys calls from the bottom of the steps. I shift my jaw and glance over at Espie, whose eyes are focused nowhere in particular.

“You don’t seem happy about that,” she finally says.

“About the power?”

“Mm.” She nods.

“Well, if the storm continues, it’s just going to keep cycling on and off. So, I wouldn’t suggest changing into a sundress or anything like that.”

“I don’t wear sundresses.” She blinks her bright-green eyes in my direction, and I turn to head out the door.

“Pity. You’d look hot in one.” I graze past her.

“You’re disgusting.” She calls after me and I turn around.

“Well, sweetie, you’re not so pleasant to be around either.”

She scowls at me as I continue to back up before turning around and galloping down the stairs.

“Fuck you.” She calls after me, like she’s reminding me to grab something while I’m out.

“Fuck you too.” I call back in the same candor. She really is a nightmare— fucking hot, though.

Just as I reach the end of the stairs, my phone buzzes in my pocket, and I pull it out to see it’s the boss.

“Sup, *Otets*.” I press the phone to my ear as I walk down the hall.

“Adrik. Where the hell have you been? I haven’t been able to get a hold of anyone.”

“Yeah. Bad storm. Power outage.”

“Did Esperanza tell her brothers?”

“About?”

“The power outage?”

“I— I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know? You’re supposed to be getting to know one another.”

“Yeah, not going so great for me.”

“Kias would have had her wrapped around his finger by now.”

“Fuck, so sorry I’m not Kias!”

“Me too.”

I grit my teeth, think about hanging up, but don’t. Instead, I let the silence between us settle as I head up the main stairwell.

“Look, Adrik, this is serious. I need you to work very hard to ensure this contract remains.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I close my bedroom door and cross to the window, taking a long drag while he responds, so he doesn’t know I’m smoking.

“It means that if the San Giovanni’s think she is in danger in any way, they will have grounds to make another attempt at dissolving our arrangement.”

“I’m not following... how is she in danger?”

“Adrik, do you ever listen when I’m speaking, or were you just born an idiot? The safe-house power is going out in below freezing weather, that’s dangerous. I need you to order the boys to find somewhere else to stay. If these power outages don’t stop, we could lose this contract. And we can not, under any circumstance, lose this deal.”

“Yep. Got it.”

“And Adrik?” He pauses and I wait for him to continue. “Use any means necessary to ensure Esperanza marries you.”

“Any suggestions?” I think I know exactly what he’s implying, but I just want to hear him say it.

“You’ll figure it out.”

“Such confidence you have in me.”

“Do as I say, and stop fucking around. If the girl hates you, fix it. *Nemedlenno!*” He hangs up before I can respond, and I toss my phone across the room in aggravation. This entire thing is his fucking fault in the first place. The rebellion, the contract, even Kias’ death. He makes these split decisions, choices that are permanent and hurtful, and then he acts like everyone else is the inconvenience. I’m fucked because of him.

There’s a knock on my door after I send a couple of punches to my dresser, and I don’t respond to it because I would rather not talk to anyone, especially not Espie.

“It’s Barth.” Barth’s deep voice calls from the other side of the door.

“Whaddaya want?”

“The boys and I have some questions and concerns about the worsening weather.”

I sigh. “Come in.”

He opens the door and slides in, closing it quietly behind him. “The snow is really picking up.”

“Yes. I just got off the phone with the boss. He’s suggesting we look for somewhere else to stay.”

“There isn’t anywhere with power in a three hundred-mile radius. It’s a big storm.”

I cross my fingers on top of my head. “I don’t know how, just figure it out.”

He nods quickly. “We’ll keep you updated.” I nod to acknowledge him, and he turns to leave before twisting back around.

“The chefs aren’t here. They won’t come until the paths are cleared on the roads and up to the house.

“That’s fine.”

“Well, none of our guys cook.”

“And the Sicilians?”

“No, sir.” I bite my lip with an exasperated nod.

“Do we know how long the power will be on?”

“Not sure. We think it could be in hour intervals.”

“Fine. I’ll be down to cook some breakfast in the staff kitchen by the stairs.”

“Oh, that’s not necessary—“

“It’s fine. I’ll be down.” He nods once and backs up out of the room, closing the door behind him. I pull out another cigarette and with the last of the one I’m smoking I press the end to it, sucking in to light the new one. This is a trick I haven’t used since I was just a kid without a lighter, but it works anyway.

I toss the old one out the window and proceed to the staff kitchen to scour the refrigerator for something to whip together. Cooking was always something my mother did for us. Even with all the chefs we paid, she still wanted to be the one to cook for us. I would be her sous chef more often than

not, following her around and helping with whatever she'd let me.

Now I'm a bit of an expert at it. Not to come off cockier than I already am, but food is one of those things you know you're good at because if it tastes good, then it is. Simple equation really. I rummage through the fridge and pull out some eggs along with a pack of ham. The ham isn't for breakfast, it's more of a dinner thing, maybe with some gravy and mash, but I can work with it. Slice it really thin and fry it up. I also have enough ingredients to make French toast, so I add that to the imaginary menu as well.

I never like to just make scrambled eggs. The texture irks me. So, I always throw in mushrooms, onions, corn, cheese and I usually use chicken broth to cook it in. That's more of a trick I learned from my mother, but it hasn't failed me yet.

I get to work rather quickly, whipping things together in record timing because I don't know when we'll lose the power. The scents of everything cooking at once must be wafting throughout the house because a lot of the boys are grazing past the kitchen, popping their heads in to observe every once in a while.

After I've cooked everything, I call out to the foyer to let everyone know it's ready. I grab a plate for myself, stack it with whatever I want because we have more food than we probably need, even with the grand size of our security team. The boys take shifts coming in and out of the kitchen to eat while I make my way to the theater room on the lower level. I spot Espie on my way, and she looks as if she wants to say something to me, but she doesn't. So, I roll my eyes and continue on to play one of my old Xbox games on the theater screen downstairs.

Most of the day, the power cuts my game on and off, and it becomes too frustrating by the fourth time that I head back upstairs to see that many hours have passed, and it's nearly nightfall. Olive and Espie's chatter is carrying throughout the main foyer from somewhere upstairs, and I decide perhaps I should try to be a bit nicer to her, considering we're stuck in this for the long haul.

I follow their voices until I'm upstairs, and then my heart drops into my stomach. The door at the end of the hall is opened, light bursting into the darkness that usually occupies that space. My feet move before I can think straight, and then I stop in the doorway, watching Espie twirl around in one of my mother's gowns.

"What the fuck are you doing in here?" they immediately stop laughing and turn to me.

"We were just bored and—" Olive begins, but I step closer to them, and she shuts up.

"So you thought breaking into my mother's room and trying on her clothes was a good idea?"

"We didn't know this was your mother's room." Espie's brows pull together and up, like she's sorry for me. I don't need her to be sorry for me. I need her to stop being such a fucking bother.

"Get the fuck out!" I wave at them, and she swallows, not moving. Olive tugs on her arm, but Espie just narrows her eyes at me.

"We didn't break any rules..." She finally has the audacity to say, as if that's at all a factor of their lapse in brainwaves.

"Who fucking cares about the fucking rules? You have no right to be in this room!" I'm shouting now— can feel my face growing hot, cheeks hurting from the scowl.

"Okay!" She shouts back as Olive unzips the dress. I watch as she steps out of it, throwing her sweater back on over her turtleneck and leggings and moving towards the door.

"Maybe if you actually spoke kindly to me, we would have known not to go in here." She says as she's brushing past me, and I grab her arm firmly, bringing my forehead an inch from hers.

Baring my teeth, I whisper, "Maybe if you weren't so unbearably prissy, I would have the patience to speak to you."

She grimaces, offense circling her parted lips as she rips her arm away from my clutch and pushes me out of her face

with her fist to my chest. The second she slams her bedroom door, I walk over to my mother's dress, pick it up off the floor and hang it back in the closet. It takes every ounce of strength I have not to fly off the hinge again as I walk out of the room and close the door, leaving me in the dark once again.

Anger is still swelling within me, like an infected wound it's poisoning my insides, and I no longer have any desire to ever be trapped in an awful marriage with a brat like her.

I take every positive thing back that I've ever thought about her. She's insufferable. A completely loathsome princess, with an aggravating propensity for always following the rules, and waving her supremacy over everyone she comes into contact with. Well, I can follow the rules too, and I know of one that if broken, will result in our little deal ending...

By any means necessary, I will successfully seduce Espie San Giovanni, and she will never be married to me or any other mafia heir for that matter.



## ESPIE

It's been two days since the power outages have been rolling in and out in two hour increments. But ever since 6 am this morning, it has remained on consecutively. That will be about four hours of power— longer than we've been able to have it our entire stay.

Barth told us at breakfast that the snow is so high, it will take five years to melt. He was definitely lying about that. He likes joking with Olive and me. I'm just glad he wasn't joking when he told us the snow finally stopped falling.

It's not so bad here, but ever since a few nights ago when Adrik yelled at us, we've been avoiding each other. A fate I don't mind, to be honest.

Olive and I have mostly watched old movies on her laptop, charging it in the hours we have power. It's been a strange sort of vacation that feels far too similar to being trapped at home. With the added bonus of Adrik Mikhailov, who I deeply regret referring to as a bonus; His name and that word should not be in the same sentence.

Now I'm alone in the library, almost finished with the book I started upon coming here. It's the first in a series, I believe. Truly gripping. It's wonderful to finish a book like this, in a beautiful old library with towering ceilings and a cozy fireplace. Just as I'm reading the last page, captivated by every word, I'm pulled out of the story by Adrik. He sits down in the chair next to me, placing a mug on the table between us.

“I brought you tea. Olive said you liked Earl Grey.” I look up at him, then down at the mug.

“I like London Fog. Not Earl Grey by itself.”

He tenses his brows, pouting his plump lips to the side. “I don’t know how to make that.”

I look back down at the pages of my book. “No. I wouldn’t suppose you would.”

He cocks his head, and I’m certain that comment will make him leave or get pissed and say something shitty, then leave. But he doesn’t. He just looks at me, blinking his thick lash line, until I look over at him.

“What?” I ask with annoyance.

He shrugs, moistening his lips. “Nothing.”

“Then why are you staring at me?”

“Because you’re beautiful,” he says, completely serious, and so different from his normal way of speaking to me that it’s startling. I laugh in disbelief and his eyes light up like it’s the best thing he’s ever heard.

“What do you want?” I close my book.

“To make you dinner.”

“Tonight?”

“Yes.”

“Isn’t that a little weird for us? You and I, sharing a meal?”

“If you think that’s weird, then I guess we won’t get to go out on other dates when the snow clears.”

“Dates?”

“Yes...”

“You didn’t say tonight was a date.”

“I didn’t?” He looks up in thought, then back into my eyes. “Must’ve slipped my mind.”

“Why do you want to go on a date with me?”

“Because I haven’t properly courted you.” Is he for real?

“Okay, you’re being too nice, and it’s freaking me out.”

He scowls, puffing his lips. “You’re impossible.”

“That’s more like it.”

“Espie—“

“You’re calling me by my name now? Are you feeling feverish?” I reach across and press the back of my hand to his forehead, then instantly regret it because we both seem to react to our skin touching. It’s like a chill sweeps over the room, a ringing in my ears like an explosion just happened nearby. I retract my hand quickly, and his bright eyes toggle between mine.

“Are you gonna let me cook you dinner or not?”

I consider it for a moment, only to make him wait, and then I nod.

“GREAT. I’ll be by your room at seven to take you down to the main kitchen.” He knocks on the table with a smug look and stands to his feet, heading for the door.

I watch him leave, bouncing away like he’s winning some game that I haven’t figured out yet. After he disappears from the doorway, I take a deep breath like I’ve been stuck underwater for our entire conversation, and I’m just now coming up for air.

“Interesting.” I whisper to myself, perplexed, while I finish the last page of my book. It’s interesting— my book, and Adrik’s strange and sudden interest in courting me for no reason. We’re stuck together regardless, unless Vince has made any progress against it. He wouldn’t risk updating me anyway, so I just have to wait it out. I’ll admit I’m concerned what someone like him would even know about cooking, but I guess letting him cook for me isn’t a horrible idea. Dating Adrik Mikhailov, is, though— a bad idea.



“HE WANTS TO MAKE YOU DINNER?” Olive’s confusion is written across her face as she closes our bedroom door.

“Yeah. I thought it was weird too.” I shrug and sit down on the bed.

“Is it a date?” She lowers her voice and takes a step closer to me, flopping back on the bed. I turn towards her with a nod.

“He said he wants to go on more dates or something like that. Like it was implied. I don’t know, is that normal? Do guys just tell you what they want like that?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, suitors always just bought my affection. Dates were somewhat assumed.”

“So, you want him to buy you more things?” She slowly asked, voice going higher at the tail end of her sentence. I shake my head, scrunching my nose.

“No. I don’t know what I want.”

“Well, clearly he does.” Her eyes go wide with her suggestive tone, and I smack her with a pillow. She squeals and hits me back.

“I’m serious, Olive. Vince was clear about me not...” I raise my brows implicitly, and her face falls flat.

“Fucking him.” She grins and I roll my eyes.

“Yes, that.”

“Okay, well, the man is making you food. He’s not trying to fuck you on the table.”

“Olive!” I blink, wide-eyes, coughing out a laugh or gasp, not sure which one came first. She chuckles, through her teeth, shoulders to her ears. “Not funny.” I shake my head.

“Then why are you grinning?” She pokes my knee and I slap her hand away teasingly.

“Help. Please.” I relent.

“Okay, okay.” She sighs, sitting up to get more serious, the childlike mannerisms disappearing as she does. “So, what time is this dinner?”

“He’s coming up here in an hour.”

“Shit. Where have you been all day?”

“In the library, trying to read away this reality.”

“Oh, sweetheart.” She sarcastically grimaces and I roll my eyes.

“Olive, for real.”

“This is for real, Espie. You have to stay focused. I don’t want you to be stuck marrying this idiot. So, you play nice, but don’t let him get near you.” My mind trails to the other morning, his body close to mine, lips nearing me and unfortunately that longing for us to get close again, stirs.

“Are you paying attention, Espie?” She snaps her fingers in my face and I nod.

“Yep. No kissing.”

Her brows tighten and mouth parts slightly. “I... definitely didn’t say that.”

“Basically, you did.” My cheeks grow flushed and she nods slowly.

“Okay...” She draws out. “You just have to give Vince time, right? Simple. You hate him, he hates you.” I blink, only blink, and she scowls. “You do hate him, right?”

“Vehemently.” I swear up and down, and she doesn’t quite look as if she’s buying it, but continues anyway.

“Okay. Then get dressed in something not too in your face, and you’re good to go.”

“Okay.” I nod, looking towards the closet, but not moving.

“You want me to go with you?” She asks flatly.

“Mhm.” I nod, blinking over at her innocently, and she rolls her sage eyes with a grin.

“Come on.” She tugs on my arm, and we walk over to the closet, rummaging through the things I brought. I choose a pretty cropped knit sweater with balloon sleeves from AMIRI. She looks at me like I’m crazy.

“It’s cute.” I press, looking at it again.

“It’s bulky.”

“I like looking like a marshmallow.”

“You do not.”

“Well, around smoke-show-seducer, I do.”

“Espie.” She shakes her head. “No one talks like that.”

“Well, I do. And I’m wearing the *marshmallow*.”

She raises her arms in surrender. “Hey, you said you wanted my help.”

I ignore her and pull out my black skirt with a tiny white floral pattern on it and black buttons down the front. The power’s been on all day, and I think it will be perfect for the new temperature inside this place. Olive looks on with a disapproving grimace until she sees the skirt.

“Oh! She’s brought out Gucci.”

“Shut up.” I grin and quickly change into it, grabbing some thermal white socks to show her the finished look. She looks me up and down and then eye’s my hair.

“What?” I ask, a little self-conscious now.

“Can I do your hair?”

“What are you going to do?”

“Here.” She comes over and turns me around, pulling half my hair up and wrapping it around in a messy top knot, leaving two pieces out that frame my face in the front. I watch it all in the mirror, slightly impressed by how quickly she was able to do it.

“For someone with short hair, you sure know how to style it.” I smile at her through the mirror, and she smiles back, accepting the compliment before going into one of the drawers

and pulling out a gold necklace. I know it very well, it's mother's old locket, the one she gave to us both.

Neither of us have ever worn it out of respect. We wanted to avoid fighting over the only sentiment gifted to us before her passing. She unclasps it, coming straight for me.

"No, Olive." I step back and she continues forward.

"It's fine. You'll need mom with you tonight."

"I really, don't think—"

"Espie, please. I want you to." She presses and I sigh.

"Okay." I barely agree, and she gleefully puts it around my neck just as a knock resounds at the door.

"Who is it?" Olive sing-songs, like she has no idea.

"Adrik." He mocks her tone, and I stifle a laugh as I cross to the door, waving goodbye to her. She runs up to me as I grab the handle, tightly hugging my waist.

"Good luck." She whispers and steps away as I open the door, nerves setting in. Adrik hovers in the doorway, a thick knit black sweater with tears through it, showing bits of his tattoos underneath. He's wearing charcoal joggers and black slippers, and he smells incredible. I'm definitely holding my breath looking him up and down, and he licks his pink grin.

"Ready?" He holds out his tattooed hand, his wide smile with surprisingly bright teeth— considering his chain-smoking habits— and it makes me even more on edge. I reach for his hand and my insides swell with something like hunger but worse. It's not just that we're holding hands, walking down the stairs like we're actually together, it's the fact that he hasn't said one unpleasant thing to me yet.

I remind myself that it's just a game. That's all this is to him, so that's how I'll treat it.

We cross through the main foyer and then down under it— a way we haven't ever gone, following a dimly lit hallway with paintings of war in black frames on red walls. The next hall we turn down is mostly stone, with small windows to see the town below us. Snow plows line the streets by the dozen,

but we'll probably be in here for another day before we can get out and drive around.

Not that we'll even get to go anywhere. Why get my hopes up when I can barely breathe at home without being watched? We continue a bit further and then a long set of steps, lit by rows of LED lights close to the floor, lead down to something I can't see. We follow them and just before we reach the bottom I can see a dark wood door, slightly cracked open.

Upon arriving at it, Adrik lets go of my hand and opens it up the entire way, revealing a beautiful sight. A candle-lit kitchen with high wood beams, thick stone walls, dangly plants, and herbs hanging from every direction and a wood table already set with candles and a single red rose in a black clay vase. I gasp a little, not on purpose, but just because it's the only reaction one should have to such extravagance.

He grins in my peripherals and walks with me inside, closing the door behind us. I look around more, completely captivated by how much peace the room is filled with.

"Do you like it?" He grins like he knows the answer.

"It's..." I nod. "It's very nice." I swallow nervously because he's close, and my heart is pounding, and my mouth is dry.

"Wine?" He asks, and I get embarrassed because I think he can tell I'm nervous.

"Sure." I smile, and he goes in ahead of me, grabbing a bottle off the bottle rack taking up an entire wall. When he comes back to the table, he pours a glass to the brim and then a glass half full of red wine.

I grab the glass that's to the brim, and his eyes flick up to me. They're blue, very blue. And now I'm even more nervous.

"That was mine." He grins, pouring more into the half-empty glass.

"Oh, how sweet of you to think I don't like a good red."

"I don't know what to think of you, Esperanza." That glint of mischief flickers and I plaster on a grin, despite my disdain



for being called by my full name. He crosses to the kitchen and turns on a small radio, resting on a wooden shelf above one of the sinks. Jazz begins playing, and he turns it down a bit, beginning to rummage through things.

“You can sit.” He says, continuing to pull out pots and pans. I take a large gulp of my wine and cross to the corner of the kitchen, hoisting myself up on the marble countertop, but before the counter aligns with the back wall. This way, I can look over his shoulder as he cooks. He looks over at me with a grin, titling his head.

“I meant at the table.”

“Oops.” I don’t care, don’t even pretend to care, and he must like this because he lets out a genuine laugh before crossing to a silver door that is definitely a walk-in fridge. I watch him enter, rummage through some things and fill a basket to the brim with ingredients, holding some under his arm and chin as he staggers back to the stove. Amused, I watch as I drink my wine. He sets everything on the counter and glances over at me again.

“What’s up?” I take a sip of my wine, enjoying watching him struggle.

“I’ve got a job for you.” He grabs a few onions and a knife.

“Oh, no. I won’t be cutting any onions, dear.” I smile sweetly at him, taking another sip of my wine.

He cocks his head. “Oh, *dear* thinks you will.” He pushes it closer to me, that familiar smirk on his lips. It heats something in me that it shouldn’t. He’s an asshole, what the old historical romance novels I like would call a *rake*, the beast keeping me in this castle. I shouldn’t be looking at his full lips and wondering what they would feel like on mine.

“You’re supposed to be cooking for me.”

“And you’re supposed to be sitting at the table. Guess we all get to learn some lessons tonight.”

I narrow my eyes at him and take another sip before beginning to hop down. He anticipates what I’m about to do,

before I can complete the action, and grabs my waist, pulling me gently off the counter and setting me down on my feet.

His touch shocks me, sending more of that heat billowing through me. I'm immediately reminded of this morning, of his fingers so close to my lips, of the way my pulse sped up, wanting him to touch them. Wanting to feel what he could arouse in me, no matter how wrong it is. No matter how much I shouldn't want it.

I wait for him to take his hands off my waist, but he doesn't. He looks down at me with those smoldering eyes, his fingers flexing on the curve of my waist, and his eyes drop to my lips.

I've kissed men before, and been kissed. Not being able to do much else, it was the best way to test any chemistry between them and I, and they always fell far short of what I wanted. What I hoped for.

Something tells me Adrik wouldn't fall short.

That's not a good enough reason for me moving closer to him, the scent of dry onions, cigarette smoke, and the soft hint of his cologne filling my nostrils as I loop my arms around his neck, going up on my tiptoes to press my mouth against his.

There's no excuse.

But I do it anyway.



## ADRIK

I'm surprised by Espie's eagerness, by the soft, heated press of her mouth against mine, and I'm thinking this will be easier than I thought— seducing her— but then the radio switches to some alarm system, and she retracts from me as I cover my ears.

“The hell?” I walk over to it, fiddling with the stations that won't work. Nothing seems to work on it, not even the volume. “Fuck. Shut up!” I yell, tapping the base of it until it stops, and jazz music begins again like nothing ever happened. I turn back to her, and she's already cutting the onion.

Damn, maybe this won't be so easy if she's willing to lose a fight, just to avoid kissing me.

I step over to the stove and get to work, frying up some fresh herbs from a few of the plants dangling above me. Espie pushes the wood cutting board over to the stove with freshly chopped onions just as I'm pouring the red wine in the skillet.

“Thanks.” I nod her way, taking the cutting board without looking at her. I'm in the zone now. Plus, ignoring her a little will only make her more interested. And fuck, I need her to be interested if I'm gonna make this shit work— breaking our contract and all.

“What was that alarm?” she asks as I'm tossing russet potatoes into a pot.

“Dunno.” I shrug, pulling out one of the steaks from its casing and laying it into the pan of frying onions and wine.

“You cook a lot?”

“Moderately.”

“Who taught you?”

“My mom.”

“Oh.” I glance over my shoulder to see her frowning.

“Don’t look like that.”

“Like what?” She grins, a little tipsy, I can tell.

“Like you feel bad for me or something.” I wince and turn back to the steak, covering every simmering pot as she hoists herself back onto the counter.

“Okay. Then I won’t ever look at you again.” She looks down at her feet, finishing off her wine in record time. I take another sip of mine to catch up.

“Why not?”

“Why not, what?”

Her voice is irritating. I tell myself that as I turn towards her, even though I’ve been the one keeping her talking all this time, refilling her wine glass, making this seem like a date. Getting her closer to me.

“Are you drunk already?”

“No.” She shakes her head and I raise my brows until she giggles. “A little tipsy.” She pinches her fingers and I shake my head.

“Figures you’re a lightweight.”

“I’m not.”

“Okay.” I turn back towards the food, and she pokes my shoulder with her toe. I shrug away from her with a growl, so she knows to stop.

“I’m not.” She repeats, adamant now.

“I said okay.” I raise my voice a bit, exasperated. I definitely thought I’d enjoy this seducing her thing a bit more.

“I’m just joking.” She says under her breath.

“So, you are drunk?” I flatly ask.

“No, I’m saying I’m joking about being worse than I am.”

I breathe out my nose at this, and she sets her glass down. It’s apparent to me that she rarely drinks, and I know she won’t feel good tomorrow if she keeps it up on an empty stomach. I don’t understand why I care, probably because it will be a total inconvenience to me if she’s even bigger of a pain in the morning.

“You’re gonna need some bread and water.” I pull a fresh baked loaf out of the oven that I had one of our chefs make this afternoon and slice her a couple of pieces. After grabbing the table water and a cup, I bring it over to her. She smiles gently and takes them, watching me work as the jazz music quietly plays in the background. I cook for a while, and we’re quietly content.

“Thank you.” She breaks our silence and I turn with curious eyes to meet hers. Then I remember part of the reason, I am determined to seduce her. Her warm skin looks smooth and supple, the candlelight catching the curvature of her cheekbones and the freckles across her cute nose. Her eyes are easily the most incredible things I’ve ever seen. And I’ve seen countless eyes on numerous faces—but hers take the cake, win the prize—you get the picture. They’re like portals into a prism of tall, endless trees.

“I wasn’t kidding this morning when I said you were beautiful— are, beautiful.”

She rolls her eyes with a grin and takes a piece of bread, dipping it in olive oil and spices from a bowl I don’t remember getting her.

“What is that?” I ask, taking a step towards her and instead of answering, she grabs me a piece, dips it in and hands it to me.

“Try it.”

I take it from her and take a bite. It’s actually nice. Oregano, garlic, rosemary, salt, pepper, olive oil, and balsamic

vinegar. All Italian shit—or at least that’s what I’d say, if I weren’t so overcome by how good it all tastes like this.

“How did you put this together?”

“You were preoccupied.” She looks over at the food almost ready, cooking its last few minutes on the stove. I cross my arms over my chest as she nods, “Hm.”

“You cook?”

“No.” She laughs. “But, I have a garden. It was my mother’s, and before she passed, she gave it to me.”

“I’m sorry.” I tense my brows, for some reason, forgetting she too has lost her mother.

“Was your mother much of a gardener?” She asks, and I can’t answer because talking about her sucks the life out of me. It brings up memories and stories that only piss me off because they all remind me of my murderous, psychopathic father. She can sense I’ve grown quiet, and I think explaining that will be even worse than just quickly answering her, so I nod.

“Yeah. She liked to garden.” I turn towards the food and glance over my shoulder. “Dinner’s ready.” She grins at me, a look on her face that I can’t fully understand, before she hops off the counter and walks over to the table.

I grab the plates and plate them neatly. Steak with caramelized onions, roast potatoes, Russian radish and cucumber salad, sauerkraut, crispy green beans with bacon, and a corn casserole that one of the chefs insisted on making as per tradition for dates. My father and mother used to always request it. Not super Russian of them, but whatever. It’s here, so I’ll put it on the table begrudgingly.

I lay her plate in front of her and sit down with mine.

“This smells and looks incredible.”

“It tastes delicious, too.” I pick up my fork.

“You haven’t tasted it yet...” She snickers, grabbing her fork as well.

“Well, I don’t need to, to know it’s good.”

“If only.” She shakes her head.

“If only, what?”

“No, no, nothing.” She smiles and I hard press her.

“Tell me, Espie.”

“There you go again, calling me Espie.”

I shake my grin. “Don’t change the subject.”

“Okay, it’s just, you’re very confident.”

“I am.” I take my first bite of steak with a smirk, and she does the same.

“And you have a right to be.” Her eyes go wide, as she enjoys my food. I nod in agreement, taking a few more bites as she continues to do the same. We’re quiet for a bit, just the sounds of eating food and jazz echoing in the kitchen.

To be honest, it’s not uncomfortable—the silence between us. It’s strange that it’s been this breathable between us, considering how at each other’s throats we are on the regular. I tell myself it’s the food. Food always brings us together. I resolve to enjoy it while it lasts.

God knows she’ll get pissed at me again, sooner rather than later.

“This is nice—you, cooking.”

“Really? I’m nice?” I sarcastically jest.

She blinks. “Funny.”

“And *funny* too? Wow! Who knew, if I made her food, she would become such an angel? Not me.” I shrug sarcastically, and she shifts her jaw that’s parted into a grin.

“Admit it, Esperanza, you like me.” I take a sip of wine, and she takes a sip of her water.

“You’re not the worst right now.”

“Woah. That’s big. Can I get that written down?”

“Adrik, don’t ruin it.”



I pretend to surrender. “Alright, alright.” I look down but catch her biting her lip, looking at me. She really is fucking hot, like fuck, I wish I could just fuck her right here.

Somehow, we make it through dinner without me pissing her off or rushing this whole seducing thing, and I guess that is positive. But the more I’m around her, the harder it is to show restraint. After we eat, I take her for a walk through the castle, telling her stories of when I was younger. Women love to reminisce, so doing this will earn me a spot in her mind, one that makes her think I’m sensitive.

I’m not a genius, but I think it’s a pretty brilliant plan.

“So, your older brother, Kias...” her eyes tilt up to me as if to make sure this is correct.

“Yep.” I grin over at her, and she blushes, looking down.

“So, he pushed you over the railing of that staircase?” She points to the one we’re about to go down.

“Yep. I landed on the carpet, but broke my ankle. He was a fucking nightmare.”

“Who found you?”

“Well, they rushed down to help me— the rest of my brothers. When Old *Otets* had to break away from important business to help, he didn’t believe I was injured, so I walked around on it for a couple of days until mom flew in and... Well, moms always know when their kids are hurt. Needless to say, she was furious with my father. Kinda funny, actually.” I rake a hand through my hair as we bounce down the steps, and she grabs my arm as we turn down the next flight.

“Huh? What’s wrong?” I stop and turn to her.

“You don’t have to do that.”

“What?” I chuckle, trying to meet her eyes in the dim light of the torches on the walls.

“Pretend things don’t hurt by saying it’s funny.” She looks up at me, empathy making her brows turn up at the inner corners, eyes going round and sad. I shake my head because I

won't stop making things funny that aren't. I've had enough pain in my life, and I shouldn't have to feel it anymore.

"Espie, I'm okay." She doesn't seem convinced, so I throw in, "Really, I am."

"Okay." She quietly accepts it and I take her hand, pulling her down to the theater room.

I walk us through the doors and flick on the lights, showing off the rows of chairs on an incline and the theater screen bigger than most standard theaters. Her eyes grow wide, and she squeezes my hand, turning to me.

"Olive would love this."

"Oh yeah?" I don't care, but her being excited is making me feel good. So, I let her rant about all the old movies Olive likes and how she would never get to see them on a screen this big unless I let her. Somehow, I get roped into agreeing to do a screening party of whatever Olive wants tomorrow. By the time we make our way back to our rooms for the evening, she's onto another topic, talking a mile a minute.

I nod along, trying to keep up, but mostly admiring the way she gets when she rants about something she likes. Now she's on the topic of clothes and I can get behind that because I think anyone with money should invest in knowing about fashion. Otherwise, you're a bit of a disgrace in my opinion—I think Espie would share that.

"Well, goodnight." She turns towards her door, but I catch her hand and pull her into me. She lets out a breath when our chests touch, and I tuck some hair behind her ear with my fingers, resting my hand at the side of her head after.

"Goodnight." I whisper. "I had a great time with you." She licks her lips and nods slowly. I watch them part, and then I look deeply into her eyes, fixated on breaking the first rule of courting, so we can move this seducing thing along.

My chest is shaking with the rapid beating of my heart, skin is burning like I need this to live, and I think it's because I really need a cigarette. Usually, that's why I'm like this, this

persistent. I lean in, lowering my lips to hers, breathing in her sweet scent as her breath brushes my lips.

She isn't stopping me, almost looks frightened, but the hint of curiosity in her eyes is enough to edge me on. This is it, I'm less than a millimeter away, I can almost feel the tingle of our collision.



## ESPIE

“E spie! There you are! I was getting worried, you’d never come home.” Olive’s loud greeting alarms Adrik and I and we split apart just before our lips get the chance to touch.

Holy shit! What was I doing? How did I let it go that far again?

He leans against the wall, looking pissed and biting his lips. I touch mine, the longing left on them like a residue. Olive tugs my arm, but I’m in a daze, as if there are stars swirling around my head like a cartoon and Adrik’s face is on every single of them.

“Good night Adrik.” Olive’s cutting tone causes him to press his lips together sarcastically and just as she yanks me inside, she slams the door in his face.

“What the hell were you thinking?!” She whisper-yells, eyes a little crazy, like I’m the child, and she’s the parent, scolding me for staying out too late with a boy. She’s not in the wrong, though, I am.

I almost kissed Adrik after ranting about clothes of all things to him, and he actually listened. and then for some reason that was enough to make me want him. Maybe it started earlier than that, with him telling me little snippets of his childhood, something I didn’t know he would do...

Whatever the reason, let’s be completely clear, I do want him. But I shouldn’t and can’t have him.

I fell right into his trap, played his game and he out-played me. All I do is shake my head, fingertips not leaving my lips as I recount the events of tonight.

“I have to be better at this.” I shrug, looking nowhere in particular and turning towards the fireplace.

“I’m not following...” Olive crosses the room to face me again.

“He’s better at playing this game than I am.” I despondently say, flopping down on a chair in front of the fire.

“Is that why you were kissing him? Because he’s better at playing games?”

“I didn’t kiss him.” I snap back, and she sits down next to me.

“Oh.”

“I was about to, though.”

“Oh.”

“Why, ‘oh’?”

“Because I don’t know what else to say. Vince is working really hard, and you’re not really acting as if you want to be out of this as much as you let on.”

“Olive, how could you say that? You know I despise him.”

“Maybe you do...”

“I do.”

“I’m saying, you might hate him, but you like the way he looks.”

“How can you know that?”

“Because you’ve never looked at anyone the way you look at him.”

“How do I look at him?” I ask, slightly horrified that my sister has watched us interact enough to know that I like the way he looks a little too much.

“Like, he’s the only person in the room. And even if he wasn’t, you’d be able to spot him in any crowd.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“He looks at you the same fucking way, dude.”

“He does?” I ask a little too quickly and she side-eyes me.

“Girl...”

“Okay, so I think he’s hot? That’s about where my attraction ends. And it’s not going to change the fact that I will not, under any circumstance, give in to him. I just have to keep playing nice and ignore the impulses.”

“*Impulses?*”

“Yes. Kissing him is just an impulse because he’s attractive and knows how to seduce.”

“Mhm... and how do you plan to ignore these impulses?”

“I’ll just do better next time. I swear.” She bites her upper lip like she wants to give me more things to think about, but chooses differently. If I could guess why, it’s probably because she sees how much I’m already beating myself up over this. I don’t need someone else telling me I was too close to breaking the rules of courting— no kissing until engagement.

Though, I guess in a way, we are engaged... but then again... I probably shouldn’t start reasoning away things now. Not the best idea— not with someone like Adrik.

We watch the fire together for a bit until Olive yawns.

“Bed?” She asks, and I nod gently, getting up and wrapping my arms around her as we walk. After we crawl into bed and snuggle up under the covers, she turns on her side to face me. I’m staring at the ceiling, but I can tell she’s observing me, so I turn my head to her, and she laughs.

“Why are you looking at me?” I giggle with her and she sighs.

“I just want you to be more careful.”

“Olive, I am... I will be.”

“This isn’t just a random family, you know? They’ve been our mortal enemy since I don’t know when. They’re dangerous, especially Adrik.”

“He doesn’t seem *that* dangerous.” I roll my eyes at the thought of him thinking he’s hot-shit because someone fears what damage he could actually do.

“Please,” She whimpers, and I turn my body towards her, tensing my brows in concern. “Please don’t give them a reason to do something awful.”

“Olive.” I whisper, brushing a strand of hair from her cheek. “Everything will be alright. Okay?” She nods unconvincingly, and I wonder if she’s been worried more than she’s let on this entire time. She always puts on a tough act, but I know she’s more sensitive than me about most things. I pull her close to me and let her fall asleep, rubbing circles in her back to soothe her nerves.

*Dangerous.* I guess he is. Guess they all are.

I just hope I can pull this acting challenge off, or Olive’s fears might be realized. There is no way in hell, I’m letting that happen, though. I’ll convince him— no matter what it takes— that I am aware I have no way out.

Even if that means playing along with his pointless mind games.



IN THE MORNING, I immediately get up upon waking and get dressed into a workout set from an Adidas x Gucci collaboration. Tight long sleeve, ribbed workout top with thumbholes, and long leggings with the same rippled pattern the entire way down. I think it’s reflective in the dark, and colored a midnight black that makes my eyes pop. I pull my hair up into a messy ponytail and grab my custom Prada Cloudbust Thunder sneakers, also in black, and head out the door as quietly as I can, so as not to wake Olive.



She always sleeps late, always has. I've gotten used to doing everything in my power to not wake her because she has always loathed getting up early. I wish I could have that luxury, but as a child, I always had tutors from the early mornings to evenings every day while she got to go to real school and play outside after dinner.

The only reason I've left my room at six am, while it's still dark outside, is because Barth mentioned to Olive and me that there was a gym on the upper level of the castle. I wanted to ask him for more details— considering how vague his description was— but he and Olive got their flirty eyes on, and I zoned out for the rest of their conversation. I've definitely got to talk to her about that part later— her and Barth.

Now I'm on a hunt for the gym, running up the steps on the far side of the house, and getting a pre-workout trying to hunt the place down. I make it to the top level without using the elevator, which was dumb, but I did it because I wasn't certain if I'd actually find it.

I aimlessly wander down a few more hallways until I stop at the back of the castle, turning the corner into a curved rotunda that looks like the entrance to a ballroom. There are glass doors to the left that I only need to walk a foot further to see that I've finally reached the gym.

With a sigh of relief, I turn to it and near the doors. When I get close enough, they slide open and the fresh smell of rubber and metal hits my nose. It's like the room has never been touched, even the black walls look freshly painted. The ground is a rubber material and there are rows of workout machines and equipment the entire way down the rectangular shaped room.

I go straight to the treadmill that's facing the back wall which is entirely glass, overlooking the other side of the mountain. Endless miles of snow capped mountains and towering trees, all kissed by the orange glow of the rising sun just beyond the tallest mountain.

After shoving my AirPods into my ears, I begin my workout, imagining I'm running on clouds in the sky, not a

gym in the house belonging to my intolerable husband-to-be. I listen to this intense instrumental music playlist. It's like I'm running into the height of battle. Usually, this is all I listen to when I work out, really amps me up.

I'm super into it, breaking a sweat, probably panting out loud, but I don't care because I'm alone and free, and I'm pumping my fists in the air like I'm leading the charge down a mountain, my army behind. Just as I'm about to swing my imaginary sword, someone pulls an AirPods out of my ear and I whip my head to see Adrik, looking deeply disturbed by my display.

"What the fuck are you doing?" He grins, his thick lash line blinking up at me, eyes even brighter than normal— if that's possible— in the light from the sunrise.

"I—" I clear my throat because the first word has come out all crackly. "I'm just," I pant. "Just running."

He purses his lips, furrowing his thick brows with a slow nod that gives me hope he's going to drop it. "Okay." He shrugs before going into a fighting stance, closing his fists together like he's holding a sword. I blink at him, embarrassed, as he swishes it through the air, making sound effects.

"Okay, very funny." I reach my hand out, palm facing up. "Can I have my AirPods back?" He stops with a chuckle, placing it in my hand as he bows.

"Of course, your *royal highness*." He rises with a teasing crooked grin, and turns towards the bench press. I shove the AirPods back in my ear and the music starts up again, getting me through the rest of my workout, as I self-consciously try not to breathe too loudly or imagine another scenario requiring obscene arm movements.

I happen to glance over a few times, just to observe where Adrik is, of course. He's wearing a white t-shirt and basketball shorts, backwards baseball cap that always makes guys look hotter and I hate that. And he does look extra hot this morning. That's super annoying, more so than usual because I came to the gym to get my mind off him, but it seems like that's impossible.

God, he makes forgetting him so unachievable.

When I'm done with my workout, I step off the treadmill and head towards the door, still blasting my intense instrumental and then Adrik jumps in front of me before I can leave. I pull out my AirPods, eyebrows rising as if to ask what he's doing.

Winded, he grabs the hem of his t-shirt and wipes his face with it. I try not to go wide-eyed at the abs on his heavily tattooed torso. He takes another breath that seems almost nervous and I furrow my eyes waiting for him to speak. Although, it is enjoyable to watch someone so unbothered by everything, seemingly squirm. I'm flooded with a small sense of accomplishment, and I don't know why, because this clearly is an act—has to be.

“Can I help you?” I finally ask, and he shakes his head before taking a breath to speak.

“Would you like to go out tonight?”

“It's it still pretty bad on the roads?”

“We'll mostly be on one road, and they plowed them a couple of times already. Even chemical-treated them this morning.”

“So it's safe?” I arch a brow and he drops his shoulders.

“Why would I put you in danger?” His question throws me for a second because I had no idea that he cares so deeply for my safety. I guess it's still part of his game, but he seems so genuine. After I haven't answered for a few seconds, he waves a hand in front of my face. “Hello?”

“Yes. Okay.” I nod and he cocks his head.

“You want to go?”

“Yeah, what time?” I try to sound nonchalant, but I'm pretty excited to leave this place, even if it is only for a little while.

“I'll meet you in the foyer at eight.”

“Alright.” I brush past him, chills rising as I feel the sticky skin of his arm graze mine.

“Wear something warm.” He calls after me and I turn around, walking backwards for a second to give him a sarcastic thumbs. I catch a little grin before I spin forwards, that tells me he finds it funny, which makes my heart flutter before I remind it of who he is and what he’s really doing.

To survive tonight, I should keep reminding myself of this. Write it on a piece of paper and keep it in the pocket of my jacket because I can not, under any circumstance, get swept up into his games. Not again.



## ESPIE

“Can you help me?” I summon Olive who’s sitting on the bed in our room while I’m in the bathroom getting ready. She flits in, assessing my needs before I ask. I’ve been struggling with the zipper on this Valentino Embellished pleated silk-tulle gown. Gorgeous black and beige layering, small birds stitched to the bodice of the a-line top portion and down the sleeves. It’s just a bitch to get on.

“Got it.” Olive simpers over to me, gently zipping up the back and brushing down the sleeves at my shoulders. “You look beautiful.” She whispers.

I’ve gone for a bright red lip, simple eyes— just mascara and smoky black eyeliner— and large bouncy curls down to my waist.

“Thank you, Olive.” I smile through the mirror as I clip on black pearl earrings the size of a quarter each. Never was allowed to pierce my ears, so I’ve gotten into collecting vintage clip-ons. Olive, being the youngest, has three piercings in both ears. I was always jealous of that, but I’ve grown to like the jewelry I own, even if the reason I own it is a constant reminder of my lack of freedom.

“I think I’m ready.” I nod as she hands me my black Gucci, boots.

After slipping them on and grabbing a long white faux fur jacket, I make my way to the foyer. When I’m at the top of the steps, I nearly think Adrik is late since he’s nowhere in sight,

and then I feel an arm snake around me back, and I look over to see his smiling down at me.

His grin falters as he looks at me, looking me up and down as we step onto the black wood floors of the grand foyer.

“You’re stunning.” He whispers, and I’m taken aback by it, not sure how to respond. Barth hands him a heavy black jacket, long, with a large hood on it and gold buttons down the center. He steps away from me to put it on over his far-more-casual-than-mine outfit, and holds out his arm for me to take.

I do, watching him as he and Barth speak about which car to take.

After clacking down the long staircase to the garage, they end up choosing one that looks like an army car. It’s matte army green with high wheels like a jeep, but a wide body like a hummer.

Adrik helps me up into it and then proceeds to his side as one of the wooden garage doors opens steadily. We back up the steep driveway that’s clearly been snowplowed numerous times, with the amount of dirty snow stacked on either side of it. That makes me feel a little safer going out on the roads, I suppose. As we head down the mountain in the dark, the lights from the town glow like a little snow globe dream land. It’s quaint and sweet looking, somewhere you think only exists in books or paintings.

“Am I too dressed up?” I worry and Adrik shakes his head.

“No, you look perfect.” I don’t know how to take that compliment because he’s saying it with such genuineness that I don’t know what to think. This new, nicer version of him is confusing. It makes me dislike him even more than I already do because I don’t understand why the hell he thinks I’ll fall for it.

We weave our way through the small-town lit with fiery lampposts and covered in character. Every building is different, but each one has a cottage feel with dark wood pillars and white stone walls and black scalloped roofing. The car stops in front of a pub and my enchantment ends.

“We’re going to a pub?” I arch an eyebrow and his face drops.

“Is that not good enough for you?”

“Well, I’m not wearing an outfit worth fifty thousand to get drunk at a pub.”

“Who said anything about getting drunk, princess?” He smirks like he’s leaving out information that would relax me. But he likes to push my buttons, that much is still true. Even though he’s softened a bit, I know it’s just a continuation or this version of him. For whatever reason he thinks he can act like someone he’s not to get what he wants. Well, I’m just as capable of pretending the same, so I slide out of the car, head held high as we approach the door.

Clamor—music, laughter, and clinking glasses— is carrying right through the door before Adrik even opens it. I look at his grin as he grabs the handle, swinging it towards us and ushering me in with his hand. Despite everything in me not wanting to do this, I suck it up and push myself forward. On the inside it’s how I’d imagine a place like this in a town so quaint, to be. Completely and totally crowded, dimly lit, torches everywhere. Long wooden tables, a fireplace in the back. I feel like I’m about to go on a quest to another kingdom and this is where I’m meant to meet some fairy who has the power to heal the land.

Unfortunately, that’s not the story I’m in. If anything, I’m more like Belle in *Beauty and the Beast*. Instead of being on a mystical quest, I’m trapped in the Beast’s clutches, waiting for Vince to rescue me. I’m not even in a story where I can save myself, I’m not the hero, I’m the stupid damsel in distress. And Adrik truly does distress me. Not just because we’re complete opposites, but because he’s such an asshole that he can’t see past his own reflection.

He points to the bartender with a large black beard and thick framed glasses that make his eyes look huge. The man perks up like he recognizes us and waves a thick hairy hand in our direction.

“That’s Kuznetsov.”



“Kuznit—Ku—“

“Let’s just let me do the talking. Kay?” He pats me on the head patronizingly and I furrow my brows up at him as we approach the bar.

“Ivan Ivanov!” The thick Russian accent comes through as the man chuckles at nothing in particular.

“Mircolin Kuznetsov!”

“It’s been long time, *tovarishch!*”

“Too long!” Adrik agrees. I’m completely confused, but despite Adrik telling me to keep my mouth shut, I stick out my hand to the man.

“I’m—“

Adrik quickly cuts me off. “This is my wife, Nina Ivanova.” I slowly turn my eyes towards him, confused. The bar tender chuckles deeply and nods.

“Nice to meet you, *dorogoy.*” The crinkles in his pink cheeks deepen, and I nod gently. “Please, find a seat! Enjoy.” He motions to the tables and Adrik nods with a grin, saying something to him in Russian that I can’t decipher, and then we find a seat by the fireplace at the end of a long table.

We sit in silence for a while, listening to a violinist play stance folksy songs and watching the fire dance to them. Adrik’s eyes don’t falter from me. I can tell he’s watching intently, and I’m nearly done with it. Why pick now to show an interest in me?

It’s just as Vince said, he’s a flirt, a seducer. I just need to stick to my guns and keep playing along.

“You want a drink?” He calls over the noise of the pub, and I turn my head to him, resting my chin in my hand.

“Sure.” I shrug, and he looks down at my lips then back to my eyes. He doesn’t break that dazed deep stare into my soul. I wonder how many girls that works for. Probably a lot, considering his reputation.

“What do you want? Some frilly drink? Something sweet?” He sarcastically gasps, fingertips to chest. “Oh, I know, a cosmopolitan!” I lower my brows, lips parted in shock by how quickly he can become his usual annoying self.

“I’ll take an IPA.” I blink, and he blinks right back, cocking his head to the side in amusement.

“A beer?”

“Yes.”

“You want a beer?”

The crease between my brows deepens. “Yes. That’s what I just said.”

“Okay.” He tilts his head suggestively and stands to his feet. “She wants a beer.” I hear him say to himself as he walks away with an amused grin. I roll my eyes and settle more into my seat, looking back at the fire and admiring its beauty. As incredible as it is—resting by the fire like this— I know that what it is, is dangerous. I couldn’t reach for it, or it’d burn me, couldn’t match its heat even if I wanted to.

Some things are just like that— beautiful to look at, but never to touch.

He comes back with our drinks rather quickly, considering the growing crowd, and I reach for mine as he sits back down. He pulls it away from me in response, and I cock my head in question.

“Is that not my drink?”

“Not yet.”

I shake my head. “You actually can’t go more than an hour without getting under my skin.”

He tilts his chin and I hate that I find it so hot. “It’s too much fun not to.”

“Can I have my drink?” I reach for it again, but he pulls it away.

“You can when you answer this simple question.”

“What question?”

“What do you find most attractive about me?”

I grimace and shake my head. “This is stupid. Just give me my drink.”

“Not until you answer the question.”

“Why?”

“Because this is a date, and we’re not talking, and I want to know what you like about me.”

“Nothing. Final answer.” I reach for the drink, and he gives it to me this time, an annoyed look turning down the edges of his disapproving frown.

“You’re no fun.”

“Ditto.”

“Honestly, I didn’t even have to bring you here. I could be a complete tyrant and lock you in your room for the entirety of our stay.”

“You wouldn’t do that.” I take a sip of my IPA, and it’s good, fantastic even. Better than I’ve ever tasted, and I don’t get to drink beer that much. It’s mostly white wine at fancy dinner parties where men try to impress me with expensive gifts and elaborate settings.

“Maybe you’re right.” He shrugs. “But, you don’t know me, so—“

“You keep saying that, but ninety eight percent of the time, you’ve shown how much of a dick you are. So, tell me, Adrik, how am I supposed to assume anything more of you than the unpleasant person I see every day?” His brows twitch, and he takes a long sip of his beer, looking away from me and to the fire.

“You’re not so pleasant yourself.”

“Another thing you keep saying.”

“Well, this entire date was supposed to be fun, and you’ve managed to ruin it, so I don’t know what else to tell you.”

“Sitting at a pub and drinking beers is your idea of fun?”

“No.” He shakes his head. “It’s *yours*.”

“I’m sorry, did I give you that impression last night? Because I definitely don’t just get drunk for fun.” I can feel my eyes go wild with bewilderment.

He shakes his head. “This is a pub designed after that book you’ve been reading.”

“What?” I look around and notice the paintings on the walls, the antler chandeliers, and even the milk glass candles on every table. It’s exactly like the one from my book, and now I’m lost. “How?”

“I’ve come to this pub since I was a kid. Russians are big fans of the Valkinov Knight series.”

“You’ve read it?” He pouts his lower lip, squinting as he shakes his head vehemently.

“No.” He chuckles. “No, I definitely have not.”

“So, you did this for me...?” He shrugs like it’s no big deal, but it kind of is. It’s quite a length to go just to court someone. More than I can say about anyone who has ever courted me before. This is personal, and meaningful, and now I have to force myself to remember why he’s doing it.

“Thank you.” I resolve, and he nods proudly, taking another sip of his beer and glancing at the person beside me. I hadn’t noticed them until just now, but I think they’ve been next to me for a while. Subtly, I glance over my shoulder because Adrik’s eyes are not leaving them.

He’s got dark long hair, tight untamed curls, and leathery skin. His silver eyes are looking at me up and down as he licks his chapped lips.

“*Ty ochen’ seksual’naya zhenshchina?*” He asks, and before I can explain that I don’t speak his language, Adrik flies across the table, hands right to the man’s throat and they both tumble to the stone floor with a thud.

Everyone stands to their feet, cheering and shouting as Adrik and him struggle. This man is huge, bigger than anyone

I would ever want someone to fight. Adrik is strong, but I don't see this ending up in his favor.

Somehow he seems to have the upper hand, delivering blow after blow to the man, finally pinning him down to the ground. Blood begins to splatter the floor around the man's head, and it's about this time that I process what the hell is going on.

Adrik isn't just fighting this man, he's about to kill him.



## ADRIK

“**S**top!!” Espie’s voice is faint in the background, screaming, pleading for me to break out of the trance I’m in, but I can’t. This fucker under my punching fists can’t call the woman I brought here sexy and be a decent human being. He should be put down, just like they do with dogs when they make fatal mistakes.

His brawn has served him no purpose under the weight of my skill. So blood splatters as I pound him into the ground, determined to finish him.

Crack after crack, I know his bones are breaking, and the crowd is cheering and no one is stopping me because this is Russia, not some LA bar for pompous rich boys. The scum has nearly gone limp under me, giving up the fight or going unconscious. Either way, he’s close to dying, and I won’t stop until he’s lifeless.

Everything in me that stirs my anger, that’s calloused me, that’s broke me, is coming out with every violent maneuver. As it so often does, my fights always turn this way. They start out for a reason I deem worthy but in the heat when I could pull away, back down and let them live, I push forwards. It’s vengeance that dries me, and winning always alleviates that for a moment, though transient.

Dark spots begin to cloud my vision as I continue to pound him into something unrecognizable, blood splashing up at me like I’m slapping the top of a deep pool, and then someone leaps on top of me. Their body collides with the back of my

head and I grab them as tightly as I can and throw them off me towards the fireplace, then the cheering stops.

A sick feeling begins to ignite in my stomach as I capture the worst scenario imaginable out of the corner of my eye. Espie, flying backwards through the air, landing with a thud against the edge of the fireplace, motionless on the floor. I turn to her before I even realize that I'm moving, reaching her just as the edge of her dress begins to catch fire. I tear my jacket off and toss it to the ground, stomping out the fire before it gets any worse.

I can't tell if she's burnt or bleeding, but I scoop her up in my arm, eyes bleary because how the fuck did I get so out of control? Somehow, I went from avenging her, to hurting her within a matter of moments. The crowd parts for me, allowing me to head straight for the door.

"Barth!" I scream through the quiet town mostly asleep except for the lively pub. "Barth!" My voice cracks and a car whips around the corner. I can't tell if it's mine because snow has begun falling again, but as it approaches I see its wide outline, the dark green paint, and I know it is.

The second it pulls up, I lay Espie on the back seat, climbing inside and pulling her onto my lap.

"Step on it." I say when he's paused too long.

"Yes sir." He turns the car around, and we go as fast as we can in this weather, back up the mountain. While we drive, my heart pounds in my ears that have begun to buzz. My bloody hands pull up her burnt dress, inspecting the bottom of her legs to make sure there are no marks.

I don't pinpoint any in the dark, but it's no relief. She's still unconscious, and I'm still so fucking idiotic for doing what I did—ruining the night with my temper. But that asshole would have gotten away with being an empty-headed pervert if I hadn't done something.

"Fuck." I slam my fist against the window, and Barth knows by now not to comment while I'm still seething. We're parked in the garage before I realize we've even passed



through the entrance, and I immediately get out of the car, pulling Espie close to me again and carrying her inside.

I march in the direction of our rooms, stopping for no one, not even looking at the eyes of all the boys, curiously watching my frantic movements. Thankfully, none of the boys are hers. I'm fucked if they see us because Espie in danger is a big *no no* for Vince and his disciples.

Seducing her is the only way to break myself out of this contract without a war ensuing, hurting her is probably the best way to make an even bigger enemy of a powerful mafia family. And that comes back on me. Fuck, I really am fucked.

We're nearly to her door, and then I realize if I bring her to Olive like this, it's like tattling on myself that I can't protect her, and she goes home. *Otets* shoots me dead, and our families reignite a bloodbath of a war that no one will survive from. At the top of the steps, I sprint down the opposite end of the hall and take the elevator to the fourth floor.

There's a suite there where my parents would stay when they weren't at odds. I vaguely remember how to get there, and turn down a couple of hallways when I reach the level, wandering around until I see double doors. White ornate wood with pearls fastened in it, tells me I must be in the right spot.

I barrel to it, holding Espie tight to my chest and pulling the doors open. It's dark at first, but when my eyes adjust, I can see the large bed with a canopy, a fireplace and several tall trees where small birds flit about, and bookcases stuffed from floor to ceiling. There are a few seating areas around the room, but I take her straight to the bed, laying her down gently.

How could I let this happen to her? Fuck. I fucking hate her most days, but this could be bad, horrible if it gets back to the wrong ears. Still, something else seems to be bothering me about this, something that is more than a duty to keep her safe because of our contract. But I won't acknowledge it because these types of things never pan out well.

Something as fleeting as feelings are nothing to be tampered with. Because they are just that—fleeting. Not to mention, probably induced by other variables.

She's hot, nice to look at. That's all. Yet as I watch her sleep— her long lashes touching her soft flushed cheeks, her thick brows relaxed and unaware, her red lips gently parted— I get this rush. This urge to kiss her that freaks me the fuck out so much I have to pull myself away from her.

“Pajamas. She needs pajamas.” I nod to myself, changing the subject to get the hell away from my alcohol-adrenalin-rush cluttered mind. That's all it is, a bad combination and probably an overdue smoke.

I head to the closet where rows, and rows of clothes that haven't been touched in years, occupy the entirety of it. None of which are for sleeping, by the way. I exit and head to the bathroom, where in the center there is a large island. I open some drawers until I find an almost Victorian looking white nightgown with puffy long sleeves and a small bow at the hem of the frilly bust.

“Sure, why not.” I say to myself and sprint out of the closet, to an empty bed.

“What is this place?” My heart skips as Espie whispers, rubbing her head and turning away from one of the windows.

“This is my parents' old suite.”

Her face contorts as though she's realized something, and she's not happy about it. I take a step forward with the nightgown, and she takes a step back.

“I'm trying to give you pajamas to wear tonight.” She shivers, looking at the white sheet-like dress in my hand.

“That was your mothers?” She seems guarded, almost scared of me.

“Yeah.” I whisper with a nod.

“I want to go back to my room.”

“I think you should stay here tonight.” I would like to avoid explaining what's happened because I don't know how much she remembers, and it's as much of a risk telling her as anyone else on her side.

“What about you?” She raises a brow.

“I’ll stay here too.” I carefully take a step towards her.

“I want the bed to myself.”

I nod my head in all directions as quickly as I can. “Yes, of course.”

After looking in my eyes for a second more, she holds out her hand and takes a step towards me, nearly falling forward. I flank to her side in an instant, holding her steady.

“Am I going to be okay?” Her voice shakes with worry, and a pang of guilt rushes through me. I never feel guilt, not like this. Haven’t in a long time. I despise it.

What the fuck is she doing to me?

“Yes.” I swallow and lead her over to the bed.

“Turn around.” She waves her hand at me, the nightgown clutched to her chest.

“Esperanza, I think I should help you.” She gives me the evil eye and I surrender, palms up, turning around. If I wasn’t already pissed at myself, I would find that look amusing, but my brainless rash decisions have caused the air between us to have more weight than I’d like it to.

“Fuck.” She growls under her breath, material crunching and swishing.

“Everything okay?” I ask, and she continues to fiddle with something aggressively. I halfway turn around to see that she can’t reach the zipper at the back of her dress.

“Adrik!” She warns my wandering eyes.

“Okay, I’m just— I can help, if you let me.”

“No.” She bites back, determined even more so to get it—grunting and hissing. I sigh and watch for only a moment more before completely turning towards her and grabbing her shoulders.

“Let me help.” She looks me dead in the eyes, a strange distant stare that almost concerns me because I feel like a monster, but I reach for her zipper anyway. She watches my hand until it’s behind her back, and steadily I pull it down her

torso until it stops at her waist. Our breathing is in rhythm, but I doubt her heart is as loud as mine.

Why the fuck is my heart beating like this? I've undressed hundreds of thousands of women in far more precarious situations, yet somehow this is the most intimate I've ever felt with someone else. She blinks her long lashes at me, and I look down at her lips as she licks them. Does she want me to kiss her? Shit, should I?

*Stop overthinking this, Adrik. I am supposed to be seducing her, after all.*

Slowly, I lean in, and now her gaze is flicking between my lips and eyes. Her breath caresses my skin and chills rise like endorphins have been injected into me everywhere that I can feel her. Carefully, I brush my lips against hers and just before I can continue, she presses her open hand to my chest. Chills rise from there too, but this time, her touch is to tell me to stop.

Her elbow stiffens and I retract, clearing my throat and turning back around like I wasn't about to kiss her.

"Adrik..." She whispers and I face her again, far too hopeful— it's embarrassing. Her eyes grow sad after a moment, and then she shakes her head. "Turn around." She orders and I do, everything in me sinking like my organs have been thrown into quicksand.



# ESPIE

“**Y**ou can look now.” I say through a shiver that’s just caught up to me from being in this cold room, naked for a brief moment. This nightgown fits me perfectly, comfortable and loose, but certainly not made for winter. It’s a thin cotton, flowing and delicate.

“I’ll start a fire.” Adrik has been staring at me as I fidget with my sleeves, and I realize my teeth have been chattering. Definitely doesn’t help the headache I have. The last thing I remember is trying to pry Adrik off that man at the pub.

Horror was surging through me. This man that I loathe was seemingly defending me, and that felt good, until it didn’t. Because I realized he wasn’t stopping and what was once an impulse to protect, turned into a murder. Did he murder that man?

I shake again as he steps back to me, his silhouette lit from the light behind the growing fire in the biggest fireplace I’ve ever seen. The light also shows towering trees collected in every corner, like a forest collided with the room. And now I really think I hit my head too hard because everything is making less sense and that can’t be real. I shake harder, teeth chattering this time. He must notice because as he steps closer, concern contorts his perfect features.

“Are you okay?”

“My head hurts.” I stiffen, pull back a bit as he reaches for me with bloodstained hands. He sees me looking, even though

I try to hide it, and then something strange happens... He looks remorseful.

“Did you kill him?” My eyes grow wet without my consent, my voice coming out weaker than I wanted it to.

He shakes his head solemnly. “No. Was about to, though.”

My eyes grow hotter with this, and I can't understand why I care what he does, but I guess I care about lives. And we never kill for reasons like a glance or a stupid comment that I couldn't even understand. Brutality must be chosen wisely and applied rarely— that's what Pops always taught us and he ran things the old way before Vince came along and was even more adamant about the value of all lives, despite their connection or lack-thereof to us.

I swipe a tear away with the back of my hand, hoping he doesn't notice. “Are you sorry?”

“What? That I defended you?”

“No.” I blink. “That you took it too far.”

“I think that's for me to decide.” He offers a weak grin and a flash of him throwing me towards the fireplace, tears through the memories swirling around in my throbbing head.

“Are you joking?”

“No.” He shakes his head. “He was scum. I was keeping you safe.”

“How? By almost killing the man? Or maybe you mean about the part where you threw me off you.” His eyes grow wide, and then that look of pain returns to him, creasing his face and shifting his glance.

“I didn't mean to hurt you, Espie.” I know he's serious now because he isn't calling me Esperanza. The guilt in his eyes forces my anger to dissipate, and I hate that I feel sorry for him when he doesn't deserve it. He takes a step closer, and I look at the burnt fragments of my once gorgeous dress, laying on the floor in a heap.

“My dress is ruined.” I don't know why I say this, it's stupid really, but my chest is tightening expectantly at the feel

of him nearing me in the dark and I'm nervous. The lingering heat from his skin, still on my lips from moments ago. I should have just let him kiss me, get this longing over with and blame the act on my head injury.

He looks down at the dress when he's a foot away from me. "I'll go into town tomorrow and buy you every dress I can find."

"I don't need every dress from that town, I just want this one."

"I'll contact the designer to make you a new one."

"That's not the point."

"Then what's the problem, Esperanza?" I look up at him again, and now I wish I hadn't because his eyes are so blue and so sharp that I'm in a trance. I don't even barely notice that he called me Esperanza because he's so insanely hot it's not fair.

"My name is—"

"Espie. I know." He nods with a grin, and I instinctively reach for it, tracing the divets in his high cheekbones down to his defined jawline. His eyes narrow, but he doesn't object.

"How hard did you hit your head?" He's smug now, and I won't give him the satisfaction.

"Stop." I wave a hand in the air dismissively and break myself away, turning towards the bed with that pit in my stomach telling me to just touch him for real already. Maybe he's right. I did in fact, hit my head pretty hard. The moment of impact is replaying on a sickening loop as I curl up under the covers.

"You need another blanket?" He asks when I'm still shivering in the freezing cold sheets. They're silk, and in the summer that's a lovely choice, but everyone knows flannel is the way to go in the winter if you live in the mountains. I know that, and I haven't left the heat of LA my entire life.

"I-I'm freezing." I shake, trying to pull myself deeper into the sheets.



“I’ll go look for more blankets,” he turns from me, but I catch his hand. It’s so much bigger than mine that I am gripping mostly his fingers. He tilts his head to me and I stiffen, unsure of the words already forming on my lips before I can stop them.

“C-can you just— will you— will you hold me?”

He’s skeptical, or uncertain, or perhaps no longer interested now that he knows I want him like he wanted me a moment ago. I wait, wondering what’s going through his mind, and then he nods, pulling off his shirt.

“W-whoah, I d-didn’t ask to have sex with you!”

“Body heat is better felt with fewer clothes.”

“I think I’ll b-be f-fine.” I shiver, trying to get out the words quicker than he’s undressing, but it’s no use, he’s already in his boxers. He pulls at the hem of them and I jolt up to stop him, causing my head to spin and a shooting pain to roll down my spine. I cry out, eyes squeezing shut, and then he’s by my side, arms holding me securely as he lays me back down.

“Are you okay? Do you want ice?”

“I-I’m already freezing, Adrik.”

“Right.” He shakes his head like he’s beating himself up before crawling over me and sliding under the covers, pulling me close to him. The heat of his skin is incredible, warmer than the fire is making the room. His heart is beating a mile a minute, and it doesn’t stop, even after we’ve laid in the dark for several moments.

“Is your heart okay?” I twist around in his arms to face him, and then the chills rise when I remember how strange this is— our proximity. How odd it is to be held by someone, especially someone I was pretty sure I despised just a few hours ago. Hell, a few moments ago. I think I still hate him, but I want him. It’s almost like I have no choice but to touch him.

There’s a fear growing deep within me like a black hole, and it’s caused by the strange way we perfectly fit together. It

frightens me, even more than the look in his eyes right now as we hover in a brief silence, arms around one another like this is normal. Like we have always been this way and we're simply coming back together from a long separation. Now he seems so restrained, afraid to speak as if doing so will shoo me away.

Adrik Mikhailov, the one that isn't shy about anything, is biting a small corner of his upper lip and blinking at me like he's scared to answer my question. He raises his hand to my face, following the curve of my cheekbone with his fingertip, then brushing his thumb from the corner to the bottom of my lip. My heart lurches towards him, my stomach tying in a knot.

"It's fine." He finally whispers, but I can still feel it beating for the both of us. I press my cold fingers to his warm chest, and he cups my hand with his.

"Are you nervous?" I whisper back, looking at the tattoos covering his entire torso.

"Esperanza. Me? Nervous?" He pushes like it's ludicrous, thick brows going tall.

"Yeah, don't act like it's silly." I scrunch my nose at him with a smirk. He grins back, nothing smug or ill-intent ending in it. Caring, and soft—two things I would not use to ever describe Adrik in any other scenario.

His hand is still over mine pressed to his chest. I look back at his tattoos trying to make out what everything is in the dark. There isn't a blank spot on his skin, but they stop very starkly right under his jaw.

"Why not on the face?" I ask, and I know he knows what I mean because he's been watching me observe his body.

"I don't know. Never liked face tattoos, too cliché for a Bratva kid, I guess." He shrugs his lips and I breathe a laugh through my nose.

He cocks a brow. "Was that a genuine laugh from Esperanza San Giovanni?" He's pretending to be beside himself, and I shake my head, shifting my jaw into a grin.

“Don’t get used to it.” I warn, trying to sound stern, but it comes off all flirty and sweet despite my best attempts to make it anything but.

“Yes ma’am.” He lowers his voice a little and our grins become something that fills the space, like a bouquet of flowers freshly cut from a garden and placed in the center of the room. It’s light and comforting and for a moment, I forget that I loathe this man, that I’m not meant to even be near him like this, let alone kiss him, but I’m leaning in. We both are, inching closer with grins that are turning to looks of *should-we-do-this*, between breaths of *I-want-you*.

His lips lightly nudge mine and I slide my hand out from under his, grasping the back of his neck as our lips collide, sending me into a rush of pleasure beyond anything I’ve ever experienced. He pulls me closer to him, and now it’s primal. Our lips moving like we’ve wanted this all along. Like, the rude remarks and fights that never seemed to end were just our way of saying “*I need you*”. And we *are* saying that, right now, with every caress, every heavy breath between lust-filled kisses. It’s pure desire.

It’s so strong— our want for one another— that it’s out of my hands, like trying to control a riptide. I can’t fight it, I’m swept up, and nothing— not even my harsh reality creeping in at the edges of this momentary pleasure— could stop me. His hands trace down my spine, leaving my skin longing for more, and I don’t want him to stop until he grips my hips. That’s when it all hits me like I’m being pounded in the face by a powerful wave and I can’t ignore how badly I want this to continue but how imperative it is that we stop.

“Stop.” I breathe as he kisses down my neck and I don’t want him to, but he needs to, we both do.

“What’s wrong?” He whispers into my skin before planting one more chill-inducing kiss and then looking deeply into my eyes like nothing else matters to him but my happiness. A lie that especially hurts because this has to be a part of his game. Right?

“We can’t.” I shake my head, grabbing one of his wrists. He lets go of my hips in response and pulls me closer to him, still looking in my eyes.

“You don’t feel well?”

“No, it’s not that.” I look down, and he pinches my chin with his thumb and index, lifting my eyes back to his icy blues.

“Then what is it?” He’s not giving up.

“We should wait.”

“Until...”

“Until we’re married.”

“We’re gonna be married anyway...” The crease between his brows deepens and I can’t say what I really want to; that Vince is actively trying to get me out of this contract and sleeping with him would mean the end of that plan— would mean, I’m stuck with him.

In the height of desire, that sounds okay, but Adrik is not who I want to be with. We don’t even like each other most days. In fact, this is the only moment since I’ve met him that we’ve gotten along without saying something to cause the other frustration.

“Espie,” he searches my eyes and I mindlessly bite my lip.

“I’m...”

“You’re...?”

“I’m a virgin.” He busts out laughing, and I’m a little taken off guard. “What?” I’m feeling a bit flustered, and more like how I normally get when he’s around— like I want him anywhere but next to me.

“Espie, I know.”

“H-how?” I self-consciously ask.

“You’re the firstborn... you literally can’t look at a man the wrong way. I know how this shit works...”

“So, you know why it totally makes sense for me not to want to...”

“Espie, this isn’t a normal scenario. You and I are stuck like this. We might as well start exploring now.”

“I- I don’t see it that way.” I shake his hand away, and he looks hurt, which is another new face for him that makes me feel bad, but it shouldn’t. It’s just manipulative. But I think it’s working because I still want him, and if he kissed me right now to shut me up, I might not have the strength to say no again.

“Look, I’m not gonna push you. I just want you now because—” He stops and looks past me for a moment before licking his bottom lip and looking back.

“Because?” I push, and he gets a crooked grin.

“Maybe you’re right.”

“I am?” I’m caught off guard by his sudden change from persistence to passiveness.

He weakly presses his lips together, “Yeah.” I study his face to see where the hint of irony is, but I can’t find it.

“So, you’re done asking?”

“Yes.” He whispers, closing his eyes like he couldn’t possibly stay up another second when he was very much awake a moment ago. I twist around in his arms and right before I’m about to fall asleep he whispers, lips pressed to my ear, “But, I’m not done *trying*.”



## ADRIK

I wake up on fire. Not actually lit, but my skin is burning and itching and begging me for nicotine. I slide out of bed, glancing over at Espie to see if she's still in bed, and she is. Sound asleep, curled up under the covers.

I walk around the bed to the side of the bed that I took my clothes off at, and rummage through the pile of them until I find my cigarettes. Quietly, I cross to the dimming fire, barely holding on, and light one up by pressing the back of it to some red glowing wood.

After taking my first drag, my body thanks me and the symptoms seem to dissipate rather quickly. They always do when I give them what they want. Espie hates my smoking, I can tell by the way she scrunches her nose when she smells it, then there's her overt comment about her dislike for them, back on the first day we met.

I'm not the attentive type, haven't kept a woman around long enough to care about what they want, but for some reason, I care about waking Espie with the smell. So, I cross to the window and crack it open, looking up at the thick snow clouds in the bluish, early morning sky as the gray clouds from my cigarette join them.

You know, it's possible I also don't want to wake Espie because I don't know what I'm going to get from her. She could be pissed at me this morning, irate for kissing her. I wouldn't put it past her. After all, she is such a priss about everything.

“Good morning.” Her sleepy morning voice greets me and I twist around with a slight grin. Still not sure what she’s going to do or say.

“Morning. Last night was—“

“A mistake.” Okay, so that’s the version of her I’m getting today.

I purse my lips and blow out another puff through the side of my mouth.

“Right.” I shift my jaw and flick the end of my cigarette with my fourth finger. She blinks at me sleepily, eyes extra green from her smeared makeup, and dark freckles across her nose seemingly more prominent. I think we’re staring at each other for too long. This has got to stop.

Seducing her is never going to work if I keep fucking it up by acting like an affectionate puppy dog.

I twist away from her like I’d rather be anywhere else, and she ruffles the covers, sliding out of bed and grabbing her dress off the floor.

“Well, let’s *not* do this again sometime.” She weakly attempts a joke, but I’m pissed even more because I could have just fucked her last night. I could tell she was close to letting me. Why the fuck did I think dragging this out would be a good idea? I say nothing as a breath another puff out of my nose, and she scoffs when I don’t respond.

“You really are an asshole, Adrik.” This throws me because all I’ve done is give her more patience than she deserves, and now she’s mad at me?

I twist around to see her almost at the door. “Fuck you, Esperanza.” She turns around, slight shock rippling across her face, like she doesn’t know how shitty she is for saying I’m anything but generous to her.

I think her eyes grow a bit bleary as a slightly pained grimace makes its way to the creases of her abnormally flawless face. “Fuck you too.” It’s a sad, weak sort of insult that almost hurts worse than her screaming back at me.



Why the fuck does it hurt?

She spins around on her heel and exits the room abruptly, slamming the door behind her. I ball up my fist and press it to my forehead before smacking it a few times, gritting my teeth as I do.

“Fuck.” I growl, shoving a hand angrily through my hair before taking another long drag, and shutting the window that’s begging to make me shiver considering I’m still only in my underwear.

There’s still blood on my hands so when I’ve finished my smoke, I go straight to the bathroom, take a hot shower and wash it away. Try to wash everything away. Her hands on my skin, lips pressed to mine. Her traces don’t deserve to linger on me. I won’t let them.

After my shower, I rummage through the closet and find a black heavy knit sweater with a built-in white collar and some Adidas track pants—you know, the black ones with the white stripes on the side? Not my usual go-to outfit, but I can’t walk around the house naked and I can’t put back on what I wore last night. Not a fucking chance—all bloodstained and crinkled on the floor.

I do grab them off the floor, though. And after slipping on some socks, I toss the clothes in the laundry shoot on the wall just before exiting the room. It’s dead silent in the house, but then again, it’s nearly 6 am, which means the boys will be gearing up for a shift in positions. Thankfully, it seems Espie has made it back to her room before that shit takes place. I’m saying *thankfully* not because I care about her saving face, but because her guys would have seen her walking about with her dress from last night in a night gown that is certainly not hers.

I swear, just thinking about her sets me on edge. This is by far the most frustrating woman I have ever tried to seduce. Every time it seems like we’ve made a couple of steps forward, all of a sudden, she’s running the opposite direction at high speed, cursing me as I try to pull her back. It’s fucking frustrating. I’m definitely more charming than she likes to give me credit for.

After I make it back to the hallway where our rooms are, I knock on Espie's door. Not sure why it's my immediate thought to make sure she wasn't seen. If anything, our departure from one another moments ago should have been enough for me to let her suffer the rest of the day. But, here I am, knocking like a simpleton on the door, heart erratic and mind racing.

I keep knocking because no one is answering, and then finally the door swings open, and it's Olive. She looks absolutely pissed. If she had a weapon right now, I swear by the look in her eyes that she would kill me on the spot.

"What the *hell*?" She grumbles, rubbing her large eyes with the backs of her hands.

"Hi, is Espie here?" I try to see around the corner, but she closes the door even further than it already is.

"Why do you want to know?"

Why do *I* want to know? Hm. Well, let's see, your sister spent the night with me and I want to make sure we don't get caught before I can fuck her properly. Of course, I don't fucking say that, instead I remember the stupid movie day I promised Espie and blurt that out to release the tension that was building with my pause.

"A movie day?" She repeats.

"Yes. Esperanza," I try to look around the edge of the door, but she blocks my view. "She said you like old movies, and we've got a massive screen in the theater downstairs."

"So, you decided that you would wake us both up before the sun has even risen to... what? Be a fucking asshole?"

"What? First your sister calls me that, now you." I jab a hand in her direction, and she furrows her brows, confused.

"I— I thought you haven't seen Espie yet..."

"I haven't..." *Fuck*. "I was just saying, she's called me that before."

"Well, now I have too. Funny how that works."

I sigh, not ready for this pointless conversation so early in the morning, or really any time of day for that matter. “Just, tell her I came by, will you?”

She stiffly nods once.

“So she *is* in there?” I ask and she shakes her head.

“Just, please go. We’ll see you at breakfast when it’s served at nine— You know, a normal fucking time for people to wake up?”

“God, you’re almost as annoying as Esperanza.” She doesn’t even answer me, just slams the door in my face. What the fuck did I do to her? I shake my head, exasperated, and twist around, about to head into my room until Barth clears his throat, and I jump back.

“Fuck, man. Don’t scare me like that.”

“My apologies, I didn’t know you were so easily frightened.”

“Usually, I’m not.” I rub a hand over my chest. “What’s up?”

“Did I hear you’ll be down in the theater today?”

“Yes, it seems like it.”

“I just wanted to offer to be on post there with you.” I shrug my lips downwards, looking at him curiously. Usually, I just pick someone random to help. This is an interesting turn of events that he seems more interested in being around us since the girls have joined.

“That’s fine, yeah. Why not?” I press my lips together, forcing a grin.

“Great.” He turns around and marches off. I watch him, a little confused, but not too concerned about it because his life doesn’t concern me. Especially not when this whole Espie situation is throwing me for a loop. I thought after kissing her, she’d be into everything. It’s not really going as smoothly as I hoped, and it does have to go a lot smoother than it is now, to ensure I can break away from this death sentence of a life of marriage to her.



AT BREAKFAST, I wait in the dining room, watching the chefs lay everything out for us, watching the doorway for Espie. It's the dumbest shit ever, but I have to show her more than she already knows. According to her, I've been a dick. I prefer the term, independent or not easily manipulated. But to each their own. Either way, I have to get her to want me again.

When her and Olive walk through the doors, I stand up and pull out a seat for Espie. She entirely ignores me and sits on the opposite side of the table, whispering back and forth with Olive like I'm not even here. I hide my aggravation, clenching my jaw tightly until it pops as I sit back down.

“How did you both sleep?”

“I barely slept.” Olive bites, and I blink at her dramatic comment.

“Well, good thing, we'll be relaxing and watching some of your favorite movies today.” She only raises her brows as if to say ‘whatever’, and Espie serves herself some food, not even glancing my way.

Fucking infuriating.

“So, Esperanza, did you sleep well? I heard people usually sleep better when they're being held.” I crookedly grin as her eyes flit to mine, rage burning behind her greens, and I still love fucking with her. Damn, I wish there was a way to break our contract by pulling shit like this. She just makes it too easy.

“I didn't hold her last night, weirdo.” Olive curls her upper lip as she butters a large blueberry muffin. Espies shifts her slightly parted jaw, shaking her head at me before mouthing ‘Fuck you’. And I breathe a laugh through my nose before taking a bite of my omelet.

The rest of breakfast, Espie is quiet, while Olive tells no one in particular about the first movie we'll be watching. Barth hovers nearby the whole time, seemingly more invested than

Espie and I combined. They end up talking, kind of giving each other looks that curdle my stomach before I can finish my food.

After breakfast, we head right to the theater. On the way down, Barth lets the chefs know where we'll be all day by chatting with the head cook on the intercom. Espie is ahead of us all, like she already knows the way, and I guess she does. But it's just annoying because it's like she'll do anything to get away from me.

Olive and Barth are really hitting it off, and I wonder how long they've been hitting it off. I try my best to ignore it, brushing past them as we walk into the theater. Espie is already seated in the middle section, center of the theater. I climb the steps and shuffle to her row, sitting right next to her as she watches me with annoyance.

"Hi." I lean in and whisper when I'm seated. She rolls her eyes just as Olive and Barth enter, spotting us and climbing the steps.

"Actually," I raise a hand for them to stop. "I think my fiancée and I should have this row to ourselves. Why don't you take a couple of rows down?"

Olive cocks her head and Barth doesn't oppose, watching her from the corner of his eyes. She continues to look at Espie, like they are talking to each other non-verbally somehow, and then she shrugs before pointing a finger in my direction.

"You win this time, *Mick Jagger lips*."

"That's not really an insult."

"It is to me." She turns around and Barth leads her to another row.

I furrow my brows, shaking my head as Espie snickers next to me. I could say something to shut her up, but if she's in a good mood now, I'd rather not spoil it. A good mood equals the possibility of breaking through that wall she's put up again.

I glance over at her and for a moment, she looks into my eyes like she wants me and then looks away. Interesting

change of events. The light dim and I call the guy in our operating room to turn on whatever Olive wants.

She shouts at him, “Dirty Dancing.” And Espie sits up quickly.

“Olive, that’s not as old as the other movies we usually watch.”

“I like it, though.”

“I just thought you would want to watch *Singing in the Rain* or *Roman Holiday*.”

“Nope.”, is all she says, and I can tell Espie is forcing herself to let it go. I thought she wanted Olive to choose the movies today. So, I find it rather intriguing that she’s so opposed to this one. As the movie begins, she pulls out her phone, scrolling through social media.

I usually have a strict rule about phones and movies, but I don’t feel like I can say anything. It’s too risky considering she’s already pissed at me. I glance over at her a couple of times and then the fifth time, she’s already looking at me.

“Why don’t you want to watch this?” I whisper, and she lowers her eyes back to her phone screen. “Come on, Espie. I didn’t mean to—”

“Oh, so I’m getting the nice Adrik now? What a treat.” She glares up at me, and I narrow my eyes at her, holding myself back from sending her a snide remark right back.

“Hey, I’m not the one who got all butt-hurt about— well, I don’t even know why you got shitty with me. I didn’t do anything—“

“That’s where our problems always stem from, Adrik. *You didn’t do anything*. You’re just living, not caring or concerned for anyone else or their emotions.”

“*Emotions?*” My brows go tall.

She crosses her arms. “The point is, you’re selfish.”

“Woah, backtrack. What emotions?”

“If you really don’t know, I’m not going to tell you.” She sits up straight, looking towards the screen and grimacing a little. It’s barely detectable, but I see it now. Somehow, I’ve hurt her.

I lean in. “Can you just give me a hint?”

“No! Could you just leave me alone?” Espie bursts out rather loudly, and Olive whips around, eyes narrowing at the both of us.

“Would you both shush it?” She snaps and twists back around.

“Yeah.” Espie snaps and stands to her feet, exiting out the other side of the theater. I chase after her before I realize I’m moving, picking up the pace when she takes the nearest exit and nearly tripping down the steps in the process.

“Espie!” I call after her, running at full speed now because I don’t see her in the hallway. And then I feel the draft, and it’s like everything happens in slow motion. Espie’s assumed that the back door leads to a deck, when in actuality it leads to a steep hill, one that is no doubt slippery from this weather.

“Shit.” I breathe, my heart-rate picking up as I sprint to the door, unsure of what I’ll see when I lay eyes on the blanketed world outside.





## ESPIE

I don't know how this happened. My world is upside-down, cold, and dark, and I don't think it's because I made it onto the balcony.

The anger I had for Adrik is what led me to run outside just to get some fresh air, to stop struggling to breathe because I felt like I was in a cage— more so than usual.

Crunching footsteps from somewhere far off alert me, but I can't see anything, it's dark and wet and cold, and I think someone I've slipped into a snowbank. My body is frozen as the sound of feet sliding down towards me grows louder. Then a thud shakes the mound of snow where I'm stuck, revealing a stream of light from some fallen snow.

“Espie?” Adrik calls, tapping on the mound and loosening its hold on me. I wriggle my way free as he does this, and I end up pulling myself away so hard that I fall back onto the hill. His red, wet fingers are in my face as he offers me his hand to get up. I'm soaking wet, shivering and slowly stiffening.

“Please take it.” His piercing eyes are sad and worried, turning down at the edges like the corners of his pink lips. I shake, reaching for him the best I can. When he realizes I'm not just being obstinate and that I am, in fact, freezing faster than a popsicle in the arctic, he scoops me up and cautiously climbs the slippery hill that I slid down. The moment we're inside, he carries me upstairs, and I am shaking harder than ever have. His speed is causing chills to rise on my damp skin,

covered in soaking wet clothes. Somehow we make it up to his room, and he shuts the door with his foot before carrying me to a giant bathroom with a bath the size of a hot tub in the center of the room. He turns on the water, and it falls in steady streams from somewhere above.

Steam forms around us rather quickly, and he sets me down on a bench by a wall that's just one long mirror. I watch as he grabs everything I need, sniffing and shaking in my wet clothes.

“Take off your clothes.” He says, like he's all business, as he places a towel next to me.

“What?” I blurt, not because I didn't hear what he said, but because I will not be getting naked in front of him. Is he serious? I know I was mad at him moments ago, though I can't recall why because I'm too cold to think properly.

“Espie, this is how people get hypothermia. Please, hurry.” I take a labored, shaky breath, trying to change as he turns from me, but I'm struggling. The clothes are sopping wet, too heavy for my shaking frame to pull off.

“Help.” I croak as my heart beats rapidly. I think it's because I'm nervous that I'll freeze, but also because I know what my request entails. He turns towards me, surprise occupying his expression— eyes a little rounder, mouth parted, brows slightly raised as if at any moment I'll order him to turn back around. But I don't. With each step towards me, my heart skyrockets until my breathing is constrained because he's arms length away. He reaches out, taking one more step, slowly and cautiously grabbing the hem of my sweater.

I try to breathe steadily, so he can't see my shaking frame. Why I would be self-conscious about this now, I don't know. He tugs upwards, gently pulling the sweater off me and tossing it to the floor, which makes an awful sloshing sound that we both giggle at. He looks down at my bra, my black simple bra that really doesn't fit me properly because the cups are a little too small.

“I suppose you know how to take that off.” He breathes, cheeks a little flushed, before he looks back to my lips. I only

nod slowly as he gently trails a hand down my abdomen and slips a finger between the hems of my sweatpants and thong. I can't hold back my shaky breath as chills cover my entire body.

This is okay, right? We aren't doing anything... he's just taking my clothes off, so I don't freeze. It's a kind gesture.

I watch as he pulls my sweats down, crouching to my feet and holding a hand on my thigh. My heart screams at me to stop this, to do anything else but let this man touch me. But it feels astonishing— his warm hand on my freezing skin— and I think I need it, so I don't die of hypothermia. That makes complete sense, at least it does right now.

I lift my leg out of one pant leg as he steadies me with that hand on my thigh. Then he does the same with the other leg, using his free hand to hold down the wet fabric as I lift my other leg out. He looks up at me, eyes fixated on the length of my body. He stops trailing up me, undressing me the rest of the way with his eyes as he stands, meeting my gaze.

“Well, you can get in the tub and...”

“And?”

“And, I'll wait,” his eyes flick to my lips, and he reaches up, grazing them with his thumb. “I wait in my room.” He swallows, barely moving, hot breath warming me as he looks into my eyes like I'm the only woman he's ever seen like this.

“Okay.” I barely whisper, and he furrows his brows, leaning in as his hand trails down my neck, brushing wet strands from my shoulder in one maneuver. I look at his lips, preparing for him to collide with mine because he's staring at mine with such focus, and then he whispers.

“Your lips are turning blue.”

“I should get in the bath...” I glance past him and he tilts his head to the side to grab my attention again. “I have another idea.” He whispers, looking down at my lips before colliding with them desperately. I press a fist to his chest, about to object his advance, really, I am. But I can't bring myself to it because the rush of chills overtaking my body clouds my

mind. Either that or I'm just weak— weak from the cold, weak to his warm touch.

I sink into him, adding to the longing like he's kick-starting a part of my heart I didn't know I had. I grab the collar under his sweater with both hands, pulling him into me. He pinches my chin with his thumb and index, pressing a hand to the mirror behind me. Everything in my body is yearning for more, the taste of his lips, the smell of his musky skin, the strength of his hands. He trails my jaw with the back of his thumb, following through to my shoulder, then sweeping the tips of his fingers down my spine, stopping half-way to bring me closer to him.

Between shaking breaths, we continue to connect, our lips hot with burning desire unlike anything I've ever encountered. It's desperate, like coming up for air when you've been shoved underwater. We grip at one another in a way I haven't known, and I'm the one grabbing his sweater, pulling it off over his head to reveal his tattooed torso. He kisses down my neck as we reconnect, and a moan escapes my throat. I can feel him smile into my skin as he kisses further down my breast, making his way to my stomach, and I grab his hand with my fingers and pull him back. He looks up at me, curious more than anything.

“I've never—“

“I know.” He says with a whisper.

“So...”

“So, I don't have to if you don't want me to...” A shiver rolls down my spine and then my eyes find the tub, nearly full, the room growing steamier from it. I'm not so cold anymore, not because of the steam, but because of Adrik. He's warmed my skin with his touch, speeding up my heart rate, so my blood is pumping through me like an unstoppable freight train. All I want, all I can see right now, is him.

There's a burning in the deepest parts of me as I look back at his messy black hair, burning blue eyes brighter than fire, lips resting against one another patiently waiting for me to kiss

them again. Fuck. Is this me rationalizing? Is that really all it takes— a pretty face and a propensity for pissing me off?

“Espie?”

“I—” my heart is pounding in my ears, among other places that are pulsing for him, begging me to let them live a little. Perhaps if Vince does get me out of this, it can be our little secret.

“We don’t have to actually have sex, Espie.” He smugly grins. “Then it wouldn’t technically count...”

My heart rate quickens somehow, though it’s already hurting my chest just with its speed. “Well, what would we do?”

He tugs at the top of my black thong, just where my hips connect with it, and I suck in my bottom lip, biting on it, so I don’t say anything to stop here. Slowly, he pulls it down, before rising to his feet and pressing me against the mirror. The sound of my breath is the only thing besides running water that occupies the space between us. His eyes toggle between mine, steady and unmoving.

He flicks a brow up. “You ready?” He whispers and I nod once. He cups his tattooed hand over my cheek gently kissing my lips, then chin, then jaw, sucking when he gets to the center of my neck. I gasp as his fingers find their way to the point of me most desiring his touch. I’ve never been touched before, not by anyone else. I’ve kissed, that’s it. Even his mouth on my throat is a foreign, delicious feeling, every brush of his lips tugging between my thighs.

So, I don’t know if it’s normal that my skin is burning, my depths longing for the sensation of him bringing me pleasure. It’s these strange, familiar and foreign feelings wrapped into a conundrum that makes me believe this moment was meant to happen all along. If this was our destiny, for him to hold me this way, then I’m fine with it just to forget what our reality really is.

I can’t even recall why I never wanted this in the first place. His lips on my throat are enough to make me forget. His

fingers are brushing over the dark curls on my pussy now, sliding lower, grazing over my clit. I let out a small, whimpering yelp as his fingers press against it, rubbing softly, and I'm lost.

He brushes his fingers over me there, so softly that it feels like an erotic caress, rather than something filthy. I moan, shivering with pleasure, and when Adrik pulls back to look into my eyes the expression in them is so primal that I forget where we are for a moment. He kisses my lips again, as he continues to brush over me, and I feel like I can't breathe.

His forehead presses into mine, and he watches as I experience everything I never had the chance to feel until now. It's incredible, addictive. I want more of it, and I want it now—want him now.

I press my hands against his chest, grabbing at him, and he tangles a hand in my hair, whispering into my mouth, "Breathe. Just breathe." I let out a laugh that is more like a breath, and he grins, kissing my lips again with more persistence.

My legs are shaking, and I can barely stand as the pleasure rises higher, his fingers gathering my wetness, sliding it over my clit, sending bursts of pleasure through me. It's as if I've gone senseless to everything but his touch. He speeds up his pace when I curl my neck back, pressing the back of my head to the mirror. I let out a moan in the heat of my climax—in the throes of my pleasure—and he's grinning, watching me like this is giving him as much pleasure as it is me. I've never come like this before, not from my own hand, not from the toy Olive gave me as a private birthday joke. His fingers are better than all of it, rubbing, sliding, circling, and the orgasm feels like it's melting every bone in my body, like I'd fall down if he wasn't holding me up.

When I come down, winded and satisfied, he stops, using both his hands to pull my face close to him, then he gently kisses my lips and I can't stop blinking in disbelief. Because with the come down—my body easing into a desire to be held and his meeting that desire by pulling me into his arms—I realize what we've just done.

He takes my hand and presses it to the hard line of his cock in his track pants, laughing breathlessly, and I straighten up, pulling away just a bit.

“What’s wrong? Was it not good?” He nears me again, not allowing more than an inch between us as he searches my expression.

My brows rise sharply, and I can’t hide the smugness I feel, causing me to temporarily forget my woes. “The great player Adrik is self-conscious about his performance?”

“What? Who told you I was a player?”

“Oh you’re not?” I sarcastically ask and he shrugs with a grin.

“Yeah, I guess I am. But, I don’t really care about that right now.”

“What *do* you really care about, Adrik?” I sit down on the bench, still pant-less and in my bra. I think I catch him swallowing nervously as he sits down next to me.

“I dunno.”

“You don’t care about anything?”

“I like winning.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“Well, I don’t know how to answer your question, Espie.”

“*Espie...*” I repeat, and he has a twitch of a smile, but his eyes are sad. Why are they sad?

“I don’t have an answer for you. Not one you want anyway.”

“And what one do you think I want?”

“Something other than the answers I have.”

“Hm.” I don’t know what he means by this because all I meant was what affects him. And if he lost that, would his world never be the same.

“You should take a bath.” He nudges his head towards the tub that’s automatically shut off after filling to the brim.

“We should get back to Olive and Barth before...” I replay the events in my head of what just transpired, and he presses his lips, so the corners dig into his cheeks.

“Okay. As long as you’re not freezing.” He shrugs and I look over at the bulge in his track pants. Did he want me to do something about that? Most of what I’ve been taught by my tutors on mafia marriage is that the man should always come first. If he asks for pleasure, you should be a good little mafia wife and administer that. Now I feel bad, a sickness churning in my stomach as I stand to my feet in a daze.

He pushes himself up from the tub, taking my thong and stuffing it in his pocket. “I’ll take care of this myself,” he says with a wink, leaving the room as I stare after him in shock, imagining exactly what he might be talking about.

An image of him with my wet, silky thong wrapped around his cock, stroking it as he thinks of me and the way I came on his fingers, rockets through my brain and makes me flush all over again with renewed arousal.

*What the actual hell is wrong with me?*





## ADRIK

“Holy fucking shit.” I let out a quick breath once I’m in my room, wondering what the fuck is wrong with me. She was so aroused I might have been able to bend her over the sink and finish this, but I didn’t. I just got her off, and now I’m back in my room, hard as hell and thinking about the thong in my pocket.

I’m supposed to be seducing her and every fucking time, I barely get anywhere. Shit. She’ll be back. The look in her eyes when I gave her a pleasure that no one else has, is like a hope dangling in the air that I’m closing in on her. She will give in to me next time.

That’s what I’m thinking about as I shove the waist of my pants down, one hand wrapping around my fevered cock as the other fishes in my pocket for her thong, finding the damp material. It’s silky, wet with her arousal, and my cock throbs as I let go briefly to take it in my other hand, sliding the fabric over the hot, straining flesh of my cock.

It’s exactly the kind of filthy thing that would shock Espie, me in my room jerking off with her panties, and that brings me even more pleasure. I imagine the look on her face, half horrified and half aroused if she caught me like this, and I switch to jerking with my left hand as I bring the fingers of my right to my nose, breathing in her scent.

I should have eaten her out. I lick my fingers, groaning at the taste of her, imagining the way she would have moaned if

I'd pressed my mouth to her sweet little virgin pussy and licked her to the greatest orgasm of her life.

The thought of that, of her squirming against the counter while I pushed my tongue inside her, licked her hard little clit, sucked on it until she screamed my name, has me close to the edge. I've been jerking off regularly here, way more than I ever have when I was free to fuck around as I saw fit, but Espie seems to keep me hard and wanting to blow my load anyway. I'm aching to fuck her, not just because it's what Otets wants, but because *I* want it, damn it all. I want to push into her sweet virgin pussy and make her scream for me when I deflower her, teach her what it's like to come on a man's cock. I want to ruin every other man for her, since I'm not planning on keeping her for myself.

I stroke faster, sliding the slick material, wet with both her pussy and my pre-cum now, over the head of my cock. I imagine the sounds she'd make when I push my thick length into her, the tightness of her, the fucking *heat*, and that's all it takes to make my cock throb and swell in my hand, shooting out my cum into her tiny scrap of silk panties.

It feels so fucking good, coming in them like this, imagining her. Better than it should. I cup my palm over my cockhead, jetting out every last drop into Esperanza San Giovanni's thong, and then I lean back against the door, slowly stroking the last bits of pleasure from my cock as I come down from the orgasm.

I need to make things right with her. If I'm going to succeed in this, I can't keep running back to my room to satisfy myself. I need to get my satisfaction from *her*.

I shake my head, bite my lip until it hurts, then bite it some more until it's bleeding, and I don't care. With a heavy breath, I force myself out of my room, through my door until my toes are pressed against hers. I knock a couple of times, but it's silent.

"Espie, please. Can we just talk?" The door swings open, and she's changed into something warm, silver Prada pajamas with black slippers and a huge black cardigan that looks like

Miu Miu's runway knit from last winter. Her hair is pulled up in a tangled bun on top of her head, making her green eyes more visible and showing off her porcelain skin.

“Are we going to go meet them?” She says in a chirpy tone with a smile that doesn't meet her eyes. She's looking past me, through me even, and I want to ask her to talk to me, but she'll probably act like I'm crazy, considering this strange fake mood she's wearing like a pair of ill-fitted jeans. I sigh, shoving a hand through my hair.

“Yeah.” I nod, and she steps into the hallway, brushing past me and walking down the steps like she couldn't care less if I was next to her or even here at all. I jump into a light jog, meeting her side as we reach the foyer and turn down the hall. The entire walk to the theater, she is silent, not even looking my way.

I'm beginning to get a little annoyed because I'm not going to beg her to talk to me. Fuck, she should *want* to talk to me. I fucking blew her mind a second ago— went the furthest with her, she's ever gone with anyone— and she's acting like I bought the last sweater at the Gucci store. She really does own too many sweaters now that I'm thinking about it...

I only know because I wish she'd show a little more skin than she does. I've even cranked up the temperature in the house to let her crack out some other looks, but she still predominantly stays in large fluffy sweaters.

“So, you're upset.” I stupidly blurt, mostly to shut my brain up from thinking too hard about the silence. She glances over at me, eyes me as I furrow my brows, so she knows I'm ready to hear her out, but as we turn down the steps to the theater, she speeds past me and through the doors.

We walk in right at the fucking love scene of all the ones, and she keeps her head down as she makes her way past a very engrossed Barth and Olive, who barely notice us walking back up the steps. We sit back in our previous seats, quiet tension between us both as she rests her head on the back of the seat.

I want to know what she's thinking, what I did to piss her off so badly that she's barely looking at me. If it was about her

stupid question, then I can't fucking begin to explain how ridiculous it is that she's mad.

*"What do you really care about?"* She asked, all doe-eyed and innocent. How do I answer that? I don't give a shit about anything. It's kind of how I made it this far. Caring leads to expectations and expectations are never what you want them to be. I got sick of the let-down, sick of getting hurt, sick of feeling pain. So, I shut it off, shut it out and just keep on living this pointless life.

The only thing that could worsen it, is being tied to her forever, so I have no idea why I'm even giving this another fucking thought. I should be spending my energy on figuring out ways to seduce her, not worrying about why she's upset with me like some simpleton.

When the movie is over, which I've missed half of and have barely paid attention to in general, the lights slowly raise and Olive turns her head to us, noticing Espie's change of clothes.

"Where were you two?" She raises her brows, curious, but not the type of curious she would be if she suspected what we actually did.

"I fell outside."

Olive stands up. "What? Are you okay? Do you need anything?" She is about to start moving towards us, but Espie puts her hands up.

"No, that's okay. I'm fine, Olive." She glances over at me and I decide to help her— gain some brownie points.

"Yeah, I found her and helped her out. She had to change her clothes though, they were soaked. But we rushed down here after this one was done primping." She elbows me hard in the bicep like I'm selling it too hard, and I shift my jaw, grabbing the spot where it hurts.

"Well..." she looks between us one more time. "Thank you for looking after her, Adrik." Olive looks at me cautiously but with a tone of surprise as Espie nods for no reason.

"I say we watch Espie's favorite movie next." Olive claps.

“Oh,” Espie shakes her head, waving her palms across each other, “No. I couldn’t. This day is for you. You didn’t have to come along with me—”

Olive cuts in, “Well... I kinda did.”

“Well, whatever the reason you’re here, you are here, and you’ve been wonderful. I want you to enjoy this. We all do.”

“Yeah.” I nod and she side-eyes me. I’m just trying to get back on her good side. God, why is she being such a brat?

“Hmm. Well, if you insist...” she presses her finger to her lips, narrowing her round eyes. “Booth man?” She calls and a muffled, “Yes?” shouts back.

“Play, *The Breakfast Club*.” The lights dim after she says this, and she leans into Barth. They whisper together, and I almost feel like telling Barth to actually do his job and guard the fucking door, but I don’t because I know Espie will get even shittier with me and I don’t want that. Not while my plan to break our agreement is still intact.

“I hate this movie.” She mumbles and I chuckle. “What’s so funny?” She whispers and I shrug.

“You had a chance to choose a movie, and you hated the last one too, yet you’re still complaining.”

“I didn’t hate the last one.”

“Well, you didn’t watch it when we were in here.”

“I don’t particularly enjoy the movie, okay?”

“Why?”

“Because, I don’t.” She snaps, and I grimace accidentally, pulling my head back and resting it on the chair.

“I’m sorry.” She whispers, and I turn my head quickly because I’m surprised that she is actually saying sorry to me.

“It’s alright.” I shrug nonchalantly.

“It’s not—“

“It is—“

“No, Adrik... I’m saying... It’s not that I don’t like the movie, it’s that watching it reminds me of a time in my life where I thought I would be able to choose who I would marry. I used to watch it on repeat with Olive, and we’d discuss the types of boys we wanted to marry one day. Now...” She shakes her head.

“I get it.” I whisper, taking her hand that’s positioned on her armrest. She lets me and for a second, I feel chills up my arm and a weird knot in my throat as I interlace my fingers with her.

“You do, don’t you?” She whispers back, a soft smile that is definitely sadder than it is anything else, but I nod gently, slumping down in the seat a bit, so we’re more eye-level. We sit like this for a while, watching this truly pointless movie play out scene by scene, and I do mean, pointless. Nothing actually ever happens in it, and maybe I’d be a bad movie critic, but at least I watch things that have action. None of this boring high school shit.

I glance over at Espie a couple of times on parts that are stupid, and she does the same, squeezing my fingers as we hold in laughs and to be honest, I’m enjoying this. Enjoying the fact that she’s gotten over whatever twisted her up. The next time someone says something cheesy, I look over at her. Her eyelids look impossibly heavy as her long lashes slowly rise and fall with her efforts to stay awake.

“You can rest on my shoulder if you’d like...” Her eyes flutter over to me and without hesitation, she pulls the armrests between us, up, and curls up next to me, head on my shoulder, hand still clinging to mine, on my chest. I wrap an arm around her securely and my heart is pounding again. The way it did the other night when I held her like this. It’s weird, the effect she has on me. And I think it’s maybe because I know what I need to do to get her where I want her.

Seducing Espie isn’t an issue for me, it’s just the way I have to go about it because of the type of person she is. Most girls are easy. At least when I’m there, it’s like they throw themselves in my direction and even the ones that don’t, I can sway towards me. Those are the ones I like to pull, the ones

that act like they don't want me. And maybe they don't at first, which makes it all the more fun.

But Espie isn't like any of those girls. She likes smart things, things that make you think and show her that you're thinking too. I have to be smarter with her, work harder to make her think I care. And maybe there's a part of me that's scared about that *acting* bit. Because every so often when I'm with her, I actually enjoy her company.

But I won't marry— not her, not ever. So, this should be a no-brainer. I shouldn't like the way her head rests snugly between my ear and the curve of my neck, or how her small fingers easily fit between mine like they're supposed to be there. This shouldn't be my thought process. But it's this stupid thing I'm doing that's causing me to pay attention to those other things. I'm sure of it.

I just have to keep my head held high and my mind focused on the *prize*— freedom from this contract.



“Boss.” I’m shaking like I’m in the middle of an earthquake and everything is confusing. What day is it? What time is it? Why is it pitch-black?

My eyelids fly open when I realize I’ve fallen asleep and Barth is standing over me, Olive slightly behind him.

“Yeah?” I grumble, sitting up a little before I feel the weight of Espie’s head on my shoulder and I glance over to see she’s out too. Something about it takes me away from the concern that Barth’s urgent expression has induced, and I’m just watching Espie in a daze before he squeezes my shoulder.

“We’ve got trouble.”

“What kind of trouble?” I arch a brow and force my head to turn back to his.

“Another fight broke out at the Magdalin. They’re discharging both of the twins, Sal, and Locke.” Discharging means murdering them and making it look like an accident.



“The fuck?” Is all I can say. My father has his own special brand of letting people go and to hear that some of our longest standing members are being offed this way, friends, people I grew up with. It’s just a little strange. A sick, uneasy feeling weaves through me.

I’d like to note that this is odd for many reasons; To start, I certainly haven’t cared about discharging anyone before. The boys we did this to were always guilty of something— a liability, a rat, a big mouth with loose lips. But I never had to kill anyone my age, always older people, seasoned and well aware of what they were doing. So, maybe that’s why this hits a little harder, makes my stomach ache imagining it play out, and palms a little sweaty from the nerves of it all.

I get why these stupid fights are happening. Why people put their trust in my father, in Kias, and now all of that has blown up a bit. With each loss suffered, we’ve gained another rebel. Someone willing to risk it all to fight for a different way than we’ve been doing. To get me out of the inheritance line of the Bratva.

I think he blames me— my father— for everything. Kias’ death, my inevitable taking of his place, even these ridiculous rebels. It’s fucked of him, but he never could take responsibility for his wrong-doings and rest assured, he certainly has plenty of them.

“Sir?”

“Yeah.”

“We’re doubling down on security tonight.”

“Why? That shit happened in LA?”

“There was a threat that the rebels know where you are and aren’t afraid to strike.” I glance over at Espie, peacefully asleep, blissfully unaware of the surrounding danger. I want to tell Barth he shouldn’t be speaking about this in front of Olive, but I was too tired to think of it until now.

“Shit. Okay. Who are we bringing in?”

“Just some of the guys from the Minsk base. They’re flying to us now.” I nod, taking it in. I guess, the girls can’t

report being in any danger to Vince because this safe-house will be more crowded than it already is with strong and loyal Bratva boys. But they don't know the entire truth, and I'd like to keep it that way.

“Are we safe?” Olive quietly pipes up, her large round eyes widening a little. I close mine and gently nod.

“Yeah. We're safe.” I say. Though this is largely a lie because we might not be, not yet anyway.



## ESPIE

“Good morning sunshine.” Olive giggles and I try not to open my eyes because I can see the bright flashlight through my eyelids. Why does everyone like to wake me up so aggressively? Moreover, it’s definitely not morning, and I can smell the musky aroma of Adrik’s cologne swirling around me, so I know for a fact that I’ve been sleeping on him for God knows how long.

“Olive, get the light out of her eyes.” He warns her.

“I’m just trying to wake her.”

“She’s awake.” He growls back.

“How do you know tha—“

“I’m awake.” A crackly voice that isn’t quite mine escapes my throat, and there’s a brief pause before the light flickers off, and I open my eyes. “Where’s Barth?” I notice his absence immediately.

“He had to welcome our new arrivals.” Adrik gently says, and Olive nods, leaning against the back of a theater seat.

I’m still lost and groggy, so I ask, “Who?”

“Backup.”

I pull my head off Adrik’s shoulder to look in his eyes, that don’t seem as nonchalant as they normally do.

“Should I be worried?” I look deeply into his eyes, and he bites his bottom lip, adorned with a cut on it that I don’t remember him having earlier. “Adrik?” I look a little too hard

at the cut, and he turns his head away from me. Olive is a little more invested and far less chill than she was a moment ago.

“Adrik, you told me we were safe.”

“Yeah, we are, for now.”

“For now?” Olive crosses her arms over her chest.

“Yes. It’s highly likely that everything will be fine...” this doesn’t seem final, like there’s more he has to say, hovering on the tip of his tongue that he doesn’t want to give away. He’s obligated to, and Olive and I wait, watching him intently while flicking worried glances to one another. Eventually, he sighs loudly, running a tattooed hand through his jet black hair. “I think we should spend the night in the theater.”

“Why’s that?” I blink and he looks down at his hands.

“Because I think I may have given away our location, and I suspect all entry points are fair game. This is the only room without windows and steel lockable doors.”

“How?” Olive asks. “How could you have given our location away? That’s absurd.”

“Just, trust me.”

“Trust you? Did you fall on your head outside too?”

“Olive.” I warn, and she glances at me, betrayed that I’d take his side. This look hurts me, even more than the surprise that I’m against her on this. It could be because the remorseful look in his eyes reminds me of last night. Then it hits me.

“You think the fight you got into at the pub gave our location away?” I say, mouth parted slightly as Olive cocks her head in shock and concern.

“You got in a *fight*? Are you joking?” Olive’s eyes flit between Adrik and I but I try to ignore her as he shifts his jaw.

“I don’t know, maybe. It’s just, the guys causing all of these fights have eyes in places we haven’t expected. Even back at home...” there’s a sadness to his words, a weight he usually never speaks with. Actually, I think this is the first time I’ve ever heard him speak with such grave inclinations.

“Look, I need us to stay here tonight. If not for you, for Vince’s peace of mind.”

“We don’t have to tell Vince about this.” I blurt, and Olive looks at me like I’ve lost all of my marbles.

“Uh, yes, we do.” She raises her hands, waving them around for me to look at her, and I roll my eyes on the way to it.

“Olive, it’s not a big deal, we’re safe. Extra Bratva guys are coming, and we’ll be able to watch more movies.” She’s silent, staring me down, trying to figure out if there is something she isn’t getting. And I hope she doesn’t see it, but it feels like a projection of my thoughts could be thrown on the screen behind her at any moment, and I’ll be forced to explain what Adrik did to me.

He’s been silent, letting me deal with Olive this whole time. I glance over at him and he shrugs.

“Let Vince know if you think it’s important for him to be made aware of. I won’t stop you.” Olive looks extra confused by this.

“Can Barth stay with us?” Her brows raise and Adrik looks up at her.

“Why?” He gets his grin back, the one that curls at the edges of his lips and makes his eyes twinkle. It’s the one that usually pisses me off, but it’s not directed at me right now. And the view is pretty spectacular when I’m not furious with him.

“Because I feel safe with him.”

He shrugs his grin. “Is that all you feel with him? Safe?”

“Okay, Adrik.” I nudge him, but he doesn’t back down and now that fury is starting again, bubbling in me like it normally does before I explode.

“It’s funny how close you two are. He’s pretty old.”

“Just because someone is older than you, doesn’t make them *pretty old*. You’re not that fucking old, Adrik.” She’s not as worked up as that comment would have made me. She’s

more annoyed with him, I can tell by the way she's holding her shoulder crookedly, mouth half turned down at the edges, like she's done with his shit.

"Well, at least I'm not flirting with a girl half my age."

"No," her eyes go wide with sarcasm. "No, you don't discriminate, though. Body count is probably..." she pretends to think, tilting her head. "Well, I don't even think a number that high exists. I bet you're just *riddled* with STDs—"

"Okay!" I clap because Olive usually takes it too far and so does Adrik, so I know this wouldn't end any time soon. Plus, I can feel the angry heat rising next to me, and I won't be trapped with the both of them bickering all night. Adrik and I do that enough as is...

He curls his lip up at her like he's going to deliver some sort of earth-shattering, heart-crushing blow, but instead he snarks and laughs and stands.

"I'll go see if we can have dinner delivered here." As he stands and shuffles to the stairs, he turns back around with a spiteful grin, and I wince. "I'll see if Barth can bring it to us."

"Thanks." She flatly says, drawing out the words as he trots down the stairs and out of the theater.

I sigh when he leaves, a little relieved that it didn't get any worse than it already was. Olive scoffs, rolling her eyes and taking the seat next to me.

"He's honestly such an egotistical ass." She huffs and I nod, not agreeing as vehemently as I should and wondering why; I hope she doesn't notice.

"You didn't tell me he got into a fight."

"It was nothing, Olive. Really." I lie through my teeth, but I think she believes me because she's silent for a bit.

"Are you sure?" She finally asks, leaning closer to me and taking my arm. "Because you know, you can tell me if that's not true. I'm still here for you, like we promised each other. If there's something you're not saying—"

“There isn’t Olive.” I snap, a little too eager to stop her before she continues, before I have to lie to her anymore.

“Okay.” She quickly whispers, laying back in her chair, hand still on my arm.

We say nothing for longer than I expect, so much so that the silence is beginning to sound like a ringing in my ears.

“So... you and Barth...” I break, glancing over at her.

“He’s cute right?” Her eyes go like puppies, endeared to something in the air that I can’t see but know it’s probably an image of the man, floating up in her head.

“Yeah... he’s...” I search for the words that aren’t there because they aren’t true. Not to me, anyway. “No.” I shake my head, laughing, and she drops her jaw into an open-mouth grin.

“Take it back.” She pouts, still grinning.

“No.” I restrain my laugh. “Not a chance. He *is* old.”

She rolls her eyes in exasperation. “Not you too, Espie. He’s thirty-three.”

“And you’re 23.” I remind her.

“Not that big of a deal.”

“Yeah, I’m sure every twenty-year-old just dreamed of finding their match in a ten-year-old.”

“Ew. Espie.”

“I’m just saying.”

“It’s not the same.” She shakes her head and I laugh.

“It is.”

“No. Plus, we aren’t together, together. Just...”

I arch a brow, turning my head to her. “Flirting.”

“Precisely.”

“Mhm.” I implicitly nod, and she slaps my forearm with the back of her hand, and I part my grin, slapping her back. We giggle to one another, probably to keep the fear closing in on



the borders of our slightly less safe-house at bay. Eventually, the undeniable sweet scent of food lingers from somewhere nearby and Olive perks up as Barth wheels in a silver cart loaded with food and Adrik follows in after him, another cart similarly stuffed to the brim.

She tugs on my arm, pulling me to my feet with her, and we meet them at the base of the stairs.

“We’ve got a four-course meal, dessert, and snacks for the movie if you want any.” Barth smiles, mostly looking at Olive as he talks, earning him an eyeball from Adrik.

“Well, I also had them stock the mini kitchen under the stairs with drinks and extra food as well.” Adrik adds, and I catch a glimpse in his eyes of something alerting me of our situation, more than it has before. I don’t think he believes we’ll be out of here by morning, maybe not even by tomorrow night. I don’t say this, of course. Keep it to myself until I can mention it to him later and pray it doesn’t start a fight.

We grab our plates, go through grabbing food in a buffet style manner and I realize the food looks pretty much like an American thanksgiving; Turkey, ham, stuffing, gravy, corn casserole, mashed potatoes, green bean casserole, cranberry sauce—you name it and I guarantee you that it’s here.

“What’s the date?” I ask when I sit down, trying to remember reality while I calculate how long we’ve been here in my head, to no avail. It feels like months, but I know it’s only been a week, if that.

“Uh... December twelfth.” Barth says with a mouthful of green beans, looking down at his watch.

“Why are we having Thanksgiving food, then?” I look towards Adrik and he shrugs.

“Not sure. The staff really like American culture. Probably just wanted to do a themed dinner for us.”

“Can we do Cuban food one night?” Olive perks up, and we all turn our heads to her. “I like Cuban food.” She shrugs, a little less enthused at defending herself.

“I’ll see what I can do about that.” Adrik simply says, and she seems pleased with the answer, and I know I am. Anything is better than fighting with Adrik because no one ever really wins— no one except him. And I can admit that now, at least while I’m not cross with him.

After dinner, I’m so full I think I could fall right back to sleep, even though I definitely slept most of the day and I have a bad habit of going to bed late. Is it a habit if it’s just how you’re wired? I shake my head, stacking my plate on top of Adrik’s as some maids roll in mattresses adorned with gold comforters and fluffy pillows that make me even sleepier just looking at them. They lay them two-by-two in the space between the front row of the theater and the screen. Then, just like that, they’re gone, doors shut, locking us in for the night — or longer.

“So, what movie should we watch now?” Olive asks, looking between us.

“What if we do something else?” Adrik asks, blue eyes flicking to me and making my heart jump.

“Like what?” Olive asks, and he takes his gaze from mine to hers.

“Like playing a game.” His eyes have that spark in them that always means trouble.

I sit up straighter, searching his annoyingly flawless face before asking something I know will only lead to trouble, but I can’t stop myself. “What sort of game?”



## ADRIK

“I’ll be right back.” I stand up, jogging away from the group.

“You can’t leave, Adrik!” Barth’s burly voice calls, and I wave a hand behind me dismissively as I turn the corner and open the door to the mini kitchen just under the slope of theater seats.

I hope it’s still here—the game I’m after. It’s been years since I’ve played it with my brothers, and I just hope through the decades it hasn’t gotten misplaced or lost. I jog to the shelf above the popcorn machine, reaching it with ease, and remembering as I do how often as a child I needed a step stool to climb the counters and grab it. I slide my hand further back than I can see after no success, and then the tip of my fingers touch exactly what I’m looking for. After pulling the box down, I dust the top of it off with my sleeve.

“Hey, Barth said we should—“ Espie’s voice alarms me a little, but I don’t show it, tilting my head at her faltering in the doorway. She really is incredibly hot, I trail her body in the silvery pajamas she’s been wearing, and her cheeks go a little flushed when she can see what I’m doing.

“Barth?” I help her loss of words, and I think I see her swallow as she nods.

“Yeah, he said you shouldn’t be so close to the exit. The lights from the kitchen will shine under the door.

“It’s not that bright in here.” I point to the rectangular LED lights lining the base of the black wood walls and black

carpeted floors.

“I know, he’s just—“

“Doing his job.” I offer her a crooked, lip-pressed smile that makes her suck in her upper lip with a tick of her head. “Come on.” I lift my chin to the hallway as I near her, and she turns around, glancing back at the box in my hands as we walk back to the group.

“What is it?” She whispers, eyes smiling up at me and for the first time, fucking with her is the last thing I want to do... Well, not the last thing, but certainly not the first thing on my mind. This look, that grin, the way she’s been pleasant all afternoon like we didn’t fight for most of the earlier parts of the day— it’s doing something strange to me, something I’m uneasy about. It’s that feeling you get when you’re driving around and around to the top of a mountain with no guardrail.

Sick and thrilling and expectant.

“Not telling yet.” I whisper back with a grin, and she scrunches her nose. But not in the way she normally does. It’s this cute way that’s as if to say she’s just happy to be here. And honestly, I fucking hate that I love the thrill that gives me.

“Okay, Adrik, what’s this game you risked our lives to get?” Olive chimes in with this know-it-all attitude that pretty much defines Olive. At least what I know about her.

“I didn’t risk anything. Need I remind you, we have no intruders... Like zero.”

“*Like,*” she mocks. “We don’t know that for sure.”

I blink at her once, swear I’d say something far more cutting if she weren’t Espie’s sister, and force out a blunt response. “We actually do. I have my phone on and ready for any alarm or warning.”

She raises a finger to say something else, but Espie points to her warningly, shaking her head. I flash her a grin when she shuts up, and she sticks her tongue out at me.

“So...” Espie turns her face towards me after we sit back down in a small circle on the floor.

“So... this is a game I affectionately named myself called, Beat the Bullet.”

“That sounds like you came up with it when you were still in diapers.”

I blink at Olive’s snarky comment. “Always such wonderful words of wisdom pouring out of your mouth.” I sarcastically spit, opening the box as Espie breathes a little laugh that gives me a surge of something good. My brain feels light from it and I want to figure out how to keep doing that, so I can feel the way I do right now, always.

“It’s like chutes and ladders, but with guns and roses.”

“Guns and *roses*?” Olive isn’t impressed, nothing new there, so I ignore her as I set the game up. “Why isn’t the name just called Guns and roses?”

“Wow,” I look up. “For someone who knows so much about movies, I thought you would know the iconic band that all fifteen-year-olds wore plastered on their shirts about ten years back. Even though they probably had no idea what the hell then were even wearing.”

“Hm.” She doesn’t say anything more, and I consider that a win as I lay out the board game and continue to explain it until everyone looks confused.

“It’s elementary, I swear. We just need to play it once through.”

“Is there enough space to play it in here?” Barth asks, looking around the room.

I nod with a thoughtful frown. “Yeah, yeah. It’s perfect.”

“Alright.” He shrugs and I hand Espie a loaded nerf gun. I give one to the rest of the group and then roll the die.

“This isn’t like chutes and ladders at all.” Espie whispers, and I glance at her from the side of my eyes.

“Well, I guess you’ll just have to— TEN SECONDS!” I yell and everyone jumps up, the girls squeal as I count down, cocking my nerf gun in their direction while covering my eyes with my other hand. When I get to one, I set a minute timer,

and begin my search for them, which shouldn't be too hard—wouldn't be too hard if they'd stop moving every time I turn my head away. I know they're close by, I just have to focus.

After climbing to the top of the theater, I decide I'm much too tall, and I think it's giving me away. So, I crouch down, carrying the small nerf gun in my mouth as I crawl through the aisle. At the fourth row from the top, I spot Espie— curled up beside the seats, turned away from me, gun pointed in the opposite direction. I crawl to her quickly and quietly, and she turns around, panic filling her eyes as she cocks her gun, but it's too late, I already have my nerf gun pulled out, and I shoot her just before the timer goes out.

Her mouth drops in shock, and she shoots me for good measure.

“Doesn't count.” I whisper, leaning up, and her smile drops slightly as she looks at my lips.

“Is that a technicality, or because you're a sore loser.”

“Baby, I'm a sore winner too.” I lean in even closer. “Ha. Ha. I won and you lost.” I jest with a grin, and she fights one back, but I reach out and trace it with my finger, causing those tingles to react under my skin like a bottle of champagne. That sensation is constant, spreading the longer I touch her. She reaches up for my hand, seemingly about to say something, when someone shoots a nerf dart at the back of my head.

I whip around, holding the back of my head. Barth and Olive are standing at the end of the aisle, nerf guns pointed at us, smug looks on their faces that tell me they don't know just how close Espie and I were to... hell, I don't know what. I could have fucked her right here if she let me, ended our little agreement without her even noticing and satisfying my mouth-watering craving for her.

It's a little fucked, even for me, but that's never stopped me before.

“Alright, alright.” I raise my arms. “The alarm went off. Espie's rolling this round. If she gets shot first, she'll be out. If

she shoots one of you, you're in the gunman role. Make sense?"

"Yes. It made sense the last five times you told us the rules." Olive grumbles, stomping down the steps like I ruined her fun. Barth glances between us once before following her and I turn to carry on where we left off, but Espie is already on her feet, walking down the other staircase on the far side of the theater.

For the rest of the night, we play my game. It's very nostalgic— which usually isn't a good thing, but this game is all good memories. It was always an escape from reality or adults telling my brothers and I what to do. We used to play it with all the lights out, all throughout the castle. Usually we had to limit it to a couple floors or else it was just way too hard to find people. But it was a good game, something I remember fondly.

My stomach hurts by the time everyone is in bed with a movie I forget the name of playing on the screen. I laughed so much I think I somehow gained another row of abs. I can still hear Espie's laughter as her and Olive whisper to each other.

She's the bed across from me, her head only a few feet from mine. As much as we did today, and how early it started, I'm not really that tired. In fact, I feel more awake than I normally do. And I wonder why.

"Hey, Adrik." Espie over at me and Olive watches, waiting for something.

"Yes, Esperanza?" I smirk and she rolls her eyes.

"You haven't smoked all day." I cock my head at remembering this thought, brows tense with concentration as I try to recall when I last smoked, or even when I last wanted to.

"Oh shit."

"Why's that?" Olive asks, like I should know the reason.

"I don't know. But, I bet you're gonna tell me."

"How should I know? I'm not a mind reader."



I lower my brows at her. “You are a know-it-all, which is basically the same thing.”

“She is not.” Espie snaps back and I like the look on her face when she’s angry. It feels a little less likable the second I know it will cost me a set-back in this seducing shit.

“Yeah. What makes you even say that?” Olive asks a little less aggressively than Espie, who’s still staring me down, propped up on her elbow.

“Nothing.” I shake my head and lay back down. It’s silent for a while, and then Olive declares she has to go to the bathroom.

“I’ll go with you.” Espie sits up and I look at Barth. He’s already on it, sitting up quickly, and crossing to Olive’s side as she stands.

“I can go with Espie.” She points to her, and he shakes his head stiffly.

“Not without me.” She narrows her eyes at him, like she’s trying to size him up, but he isn’t budging, his height and physique giving him physical leverage over his immovability on the matter.

“Fine.” She relents and Espie lays back down.

“Aren’t you going too?” I ask.

“Don’t seem so excited to get rid of me.”

“Nah,” I swat. “You’ll come back.”

“Well, I’m staying here because I was only offering to go to keep her safe.”

Barth nods at this and takes Olive by the arm to move her to the hallway. After a few seconds, the door closes and locks again, leaving Espie and I alone. The booth guy has gone to bed for the night and I have a remote now, so I pause the movie.

“Why’d you do that?” Espie asks.

“Because, I don’t want them to miss it.”

“No.” She shakes her head, sitting up in her bed as I rest my chin in my closed palm, knuckles to my lips.

“Then what?”

“Why’d you insult Olive?”

“Is that a joke?” I know it’s not, but the space between her brows creases and her lips pout out without her even forcing them to.

“No. I’m serious. You didn’t need to do that.”

“What are you? My morality police? I can talk to her however I want to. She was being annoying, so I said something. Could’ve said worse.”

“Oh, how nice of you to restrain yourself.”

“Not the boss of me.” I sing-song to keep from throwing something worse back at her.

“Grow up.” She growls and lays back down, cuddling under her covers. The moments tick by, and it feels like half an hour has gone by. I check my phone to see if Barth messaged me, but he hasn’t. It’s only been fifteen minutes, but it feels like an eternity when Espie is mad at me and the silence is buzzing in my ears.

“I’m—“ I clench my teeth. “Sorry.” I force out like it hurts me, and Espie doesn’t respond. It’s silent between her and me until Olive and Barth come back, and we finish the movie without a word. Olive and Barth are snoring when the movie is over, and I switch to a background that looks like a dense snowy forest, flakes falling over an otherwise still picture. I watch it for a while, that feeling of desire burning in my lungs. I wondered when it would come back, that longing for my closest relationship.

Smoking outside will be best. The last thing I want to do is wake everyone and have to talk any more tonight when I’ve made an enemy of Espie again. Nothing new between Olive and I. She’s playing the role of annoying little sister far too well.

I feel around in the pocket of my track pants and find my pack of cigarettes as I slide out of bed, begging to make strides to the exit when I hear stirring behind me. I pick up the pace because it isn't too late to avoid chatter if I can't be seen.

"Where are you going?" A loud whisper echoes down the hallway towards the exit that I'm nearly upon. I turn my head to see Espie, wrapping her sweater around herself as she squints at me.

"Going for a smoke." I shrug and turn towards the door.

"Can I join you?" She asks a little more timidly, and I turn back around once more.

"As long as you don't talk too much." She looks as if she's considering something, and I can bet she's gearing up to argue with me. But after a second, she purses her lips and nods, ambling over to me as I unlock the door. It's several degrees colder outside than it was in the theater, and I shiver a bit as I lock the door behind us, crossing to one of the offices down the hall that has a fireplace and balcony.

We're quiet, cautious, though I don't know how caution matters now that we're going out on the balcony. This one in particular faces away from the town and towards the mountains, so hopefully that's safe enough. Nothing else really matters to me right now, nothing except for nicotine.

I stop when I'm at the ornately carved dark-wood door that I was forbidden to enter as a child. Of course, I still entered, but not when anyone else was around. After we're both securely inside, I close the door behind us, making sure to lock it. Espie is looking around the room, and I head straight for the desk positioned diagonally in the right corner. It's just as it always was when I was a kid.

She walks over to the fireplace that lights up the room in an orangey warmth, and she crouches down to it, warming her hands. I'm distracted from my task of rummaging through the desk to see if old *Otets* might have kept a lighter in here that I can take for the remainder of our stay. Just watching her, sends something through my body that exhilarates me more than I care to admit.

I think it's the work I've put into seducing her thus far. That feeling of hard work not yet paying off. It's like a game, this back and forth, and I like the high it gives me— like the high *she* gives me.

My fingers touch something cold and metal in the back of the drawer after a moment of looking with my hands and not my eyes. I pull it out, hopeful, but that's dashed when I see that it's only a six-inch foldable pocket knife.

I shove it into my pocket anyway and cross to the fire, giving up on the hunt, to light my cigarette. Espie's eyes are on me as I do this carefully, pulling it to my lips and taking a puff of it, feeling the satiating relief that only it can bring me.

I stand and head towards the double doors— glass with white crisscross strips over them that make it look like a little cottage. Espie is by my side as I unlock the door, glancing over at her eager eyes searching the sky.

“What are you doing?” I whisper as she grabs the handle before I can.

“Going outside with you.”

“No.” I near her a bit with my head, lower it more to her green eyes of fervor.

“Yes.” She whispers back, not budging. After a second, I sigh, shaking my head as I grab her hand on the handle and open the door, slipping onto the balcony. The shock, from warm to far below freezing, is intense.

I take a long drag as Espie shuts the door behind us, leaning up against the balcony railing and looking up at the night sky.

“It's beautiful.” She smiles in a daze.

“What'd I say about talking?”

“Sorry.” She shakes her head before lowering her chin in thought and then tilting her eyes to me as I blow out through the side of my mouth. I can tell she wants to say something so badly that it's causing her eyes to glisten, so I roll my eyes, palm to the clouds.

“Just say it.” I wave as I pull the hand back to me and take another drag.

“You apologized to me earlier.

“Yeah, don’t get used to it.”

“That was nice of you.”

“I’m not nice.”

“I’m well aware.” She looks back up at the sky. “But I think maybe deep down, you are.”

“Are...?” I think I know where she’s going, but I can’t believe it, so I have to hear her say it.

“Nice.” She concludes, glancing at my reaction.

I raise my brows with a nod like I’m intrigued, but I’m not because I disagree. And if she could see who I really am—know my motives, thoughts, intentions— she would feel the same.

“You don’t believe me?” She stands, taking a step closer to me and undoing one of the buttons of her nightgown as she does. I glance down at it, shocked.

“What are you doing?”

“Proving my point.”

“Don’t do that.” I shiver, not needing to fish her out from the cold again because she was stupid enough to strip in hypothermic weather. Her brows twitch up and she undoes another button. I watch her fingers continue this as she takes strides towards me, and I’ve stopped smoking. Just holding the cigarette between my fingers while my heart pounds at an unhealthy rate. She stops when she’s right in front of me.

She grabs my free hand. “Undo the rest.”

“No. Are you crazy?” I whisper angrily, and she licks her lips, sending me into some sort of frenzy like a hungry shark smelling blood.

She shakes her head. “No, but you just proved my point.”

“This proves nothing.”

“You’re nice.” She grins.

I grimace. “No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are.” She’s taunting me now.

“No, I’m not, Esperanza.”

“Then prove it, Adrik.” I look down at her slightly exposed chest then back to her lips as she whispers again, “Prove it.”



## ESPIE

**I**t's a mystery why I've gotten so bold— why I don't just stop right now and go right back to bed. Maybe it's because I want to prove a point; That Adrik is good and proper, and he wouldn't do anything I don't want him to. But then again, I do want him to do something to me, and this is certainly not proper.

Ever since this afternoon, his hands on my body is predominantly what I've been thinking about. Every time we've gotten close, I've wanted to give into this magnetic pull between us that raises chills over my skin. The kind that long for only one thing, and I don't think I've ever felt that before. Not until him.

So, I'm standing inches from his shocked frame, hand lingering on my exposed chest, the other clutching his reluctant one.

If I'm right, then I win this, and that's good— though I want more than I should from him, more than what I'm allowed. But if I'm wrong, and he takes me now, I'm not sure who wins. That part is muddled by longing so lengthy and deep it could span the entire ocean twice and still not be enough to cover its breadth.

“Esperanza...” he whispers when I pull his hand closer, and then without little effort on my part, he presses his cold fingertips to my chest, running them down after I let go. Down to the next button and over the chills he's causing.



I slowly look back up into his blue eyes, nearly glowing in the moonlight that seems brighter tonight, reflecting off every shimmering snow-covered surface in sight. A breath escapes me as he tugs at the button, and it clouds the space between us with a semblance of warmth. And though the frigid air is harsh and sharp on my exposed skin, I'll freeze before he backs away now.

"You don't want this." He shakes his head.

"I do."

"No, you're testing me."

I don't deny his words, reluctance swaying his tone a little. I swallow hard, forcing the nerves back down in my throat and the thoughts that I will not think because if I do, I'll remember why this can't happen; Why I should back down now and run back to the theater before anything transpires, but I can't.

Just like the temperature, I'm frozen. Beauty begging for the Beast to do the impossible. To care enough not to turn me away simply because he likes the look in my eyes when he hurts me. But the way he is staring at me now, makes me wonder if that's still true, if he still enjoys making me angry, breaking my heart, pushing me away until we're on either sides of a steel curtain.

"I can't, we should—"

"Okay." I pull away, turning towards the door, but he grabs my arm, pulling me back to him until we collide with a thud. His hands are in my hair and his eager lips are crashing into mine, and every other thought besides '*I need you, now*' is lost to the loudness of purse lust.

How have I gone my entire life without this, without being touched this way, wanted this way? Somehow we make it inside, hands clawing at one another, and I mean all four of our hands. I'm grabbing his sweater, pulling it off as he rips open my top. He takes a second to look at my breasts, bare because I haven't bothered to put on a bra.

For a moment I feel vulnerable, his hands tracing my collar bone as he looks at them, and then he grabs them, kissing

down my neck and right down to my nipples. I throw my head back as he licks them, kissing down my torso before rising to my lips again.

I cling to him, wanting so badly for him to continue touching me everywhere, nothing is enough, yet everything is significant. He kisses down my neck and I feel his approval of me with every touch. It feels wonderful— his skin on mine and his desire for my body, equal to mine for his.

“Fuck.” He whispers into my skin when I absentmindedly grind up against his cock. Where has this side of me been? How does it exist?

He grabs my hips to guide me in a steady motion as he pulls me to the rug in the center of the room. When he’s on his knees, pulling down my pajama bottoms to reveal my bare skin and exposed heat, he kisses it, guiding me over his shoulders as I tangle my fingers in his choppy black hair to stay myself. Unexpectedly, the tip of his tongue is prodding gently at my folds, pushing between them, gliding over my clit the way his fingers did before. The most electrifying current rises from deep within me and I let out a soft moan as he reaches up and steadies me, slowly sliding his hand down my chest and grabbing my breast. I’m not large chested— never have been— and I’ve never been more grateful for it than right now. His entire hand is over both of my breasts, gently rubbing over my aroused nipples as he licks with such precision I’m almost happy he has so much experience.

A flood of arousal, so intense I know I’m close to exploding, fills me. I’m fighting for my breath, watching his blue eyes watch me intently as he continues to lick, to suck, in such a way that I feel like I’m floating away from him. I grab onto him tighter, and I think he slightly grins as I reach my peak. It’s just a guess though because I’m seeing spots as the pleasure consumes me, and I moan his name accidentally. He kisses my pussy as he inserts a finger into me, grabbing my back and gently laying me on it.

The feeling is chaos, but the best kind of chaos. His fingers inside me feel like everything I would have ever hoped I would feel when getting this intimate. It’s incredible, making

me breathless as he presses his palm over my sensitive mound and gently rocks his hand inside me.

He watches, never taking his eyes off me unless he kisses down my chest, which he does a few times when I arch my back. I'm reaching another level of pleasure now, stronger than the one before. So intense, I don't know how I can survive it without moaning. My moans come out soft and desperate for more, but I'm not ashamed of them, not hiding how good this feels.

He seems to enjoy that part, his smile growing over his perfect lips every time I let one out. He dips over me just as I'm at the height, kissing my lips roughly as he presses his hard bulge to my leg. Sharp, high moans escape me over and over as I grab the back of his neck, breathing into his smile as he kisses me, letting out a moan onto his lips at the peak of my pleasure. It's like he can feel what I'm feeling— sense my pleasure like it's his own, and I'm lost in it for a long time.

He slows down as I release, the pleasure causing my muscles to loosen and relax around his frame.

“Do you feel what I feel?” I whisper breathlessly after he kisses me again, fingers still inside my pulsing wet sheath. He chuckles and shakes his head.

“Not really. It does feel good, though, knowing I'm making you come.” The way he says this turns me on all over again, and I kiss his soft, warm lips. He grabs my right hand and guides it to the front of his track pants, opening them for me.

I quiver a little, unsure. He starts to rub his palm over my pussy again, fingers finding spots inside me that are still pulsing from his effect on me. I let out a quick breath and shove my hand inside his pants, grabbing his hard length. Though I know the mechanics of it, I can't bring myself to do it wrong, so I just squeeze it tightly. He breathes a laugh and pulls down his track pants and underwear, kicking them off and away from us.

I watch as he grabs my hand, guiding my stroking. He lets out a breath like the one I just gave, eyelids falling slightly as

he tilts his head to the side. When he lets go, I continue to stroke, not stopping when I feel myself building to another burst of pleasurable release.

“Faster.” He whispers, sucking on my bottom lip and I oblige, stroking his long hard length faster and faster. Just as I reach my peak again, he lets out a moan, his hot release splashing onto my upper thighs as I curl my body towards him in ecstasy. It pulses throughout my body until I’m gasping for air, and then he slows at the perfect speed for me to breathe again. He falls to his side, lying on his back next to me.

Our heavy breaths and the crackling fire are all that’s between us right now. For a moment, my mind is just as quiet, as fulfilled and happy as the rest of me, and then I realize how fucked we are. How close we got to being more, doing more... how much we have already done.

“Fuck.” He breathes and looks over at my uncontrollably bleary eyes.

“What’s wrong?” His shift is immediate as he turns on his side, grabbing my chin between his fingers and looking intently into my eyes like he really doesn’t know.

“We were too close.” It is all I force out, trying desperately to blink away the tears continuing to form against my will.

His face drops like he’s sad, or grown distant, and I’m sure I’ve just set off the ticking time bomb that is Adrik Mikhailov. He tenses his brows for a bit, looking between my eyes. I wait for the blow, but it never comes. In fact, he looks me deeper in the eyes somehow.

“I’m going to be your husband.” He whispers, and I can’t disagree with him, though the possibility is as equal as the impossibility of it all. If Vince is still fighting for me, I shouldn’t give up hope. So, why am I giving Adrik myself? It’s this horrible longing so intense I don’t know how to describe it other than chaotic. This pull between knowingness and dutiful dignity, then want and desire. Yet, I’m choosing the latter, when all my life I’ve always chosen to be precisely who I’ve been told to be.

Adrik catches a tear I don't realize is running down my cheek until his finger is on my skin. His touch feels the same as it always does. Like I'm made of metal shards, and he's the magnet, raising these invisible longings from deep within me up to the surface.

"I don't want you to cry", is all he says, brushing a dampened strand from my cheek.

"I'm sorry."

"Hey, no." he shakes his head, pulling me onto his chest, so my eyes are focused on the fire and the sound of his heart beating in my left ear. "Don't ever apologize for that shit, okay? We're in this together."

"We can't."

"Can't?"

"We can't do this again." He is silent for a while thereafter, and I look up at him to make sure he's still awake. He's just staring at the fire, his bright blues lost in some train of thought I wish he'd vocalize. I trace the edges of his perfect jawline with my eyes, stop at his chin, over the hills of his pink lips, between the slope of his cupid's bow, and I stop at his nose. I've never noticed it before, but there is a small scar that only the light of the fire is making visible, casting a perfect shadow over its ridge.

"What's that?" I whisper, reaching up and gently running a finger from the side of his nose and down. His jaw twitches like he's remembering something he's forgotten, and it's nothing good. He doesn't look over at me, instead he continues to watch the fire, tattooed arm is cranked at an angle under his head.

I think this is the best time to get dressed and leave. There's clearly a wall between us again, and maybe I've caused it, but he put it up. And I won't just lay here vulnerable and naked for him to ignore me. I've already screwed things up enough, I don't need a reminder of it.

I jolt myself to sit up, but he holds me tighter with the arm already slinked around me, and I meet his gaze, now

completely focused on me. Curiosity brews within me, and I'm sure my face shows it because he's never stopped me from leaving before, never cared enough too. In fact, half the time I think his goal was to get me to leave.

"My father."

I arch a brow. "He caused that?" I lower my chin to the barely visible scar now that his face is turned towards me.

"Yeah. I got a nose ring." He shakes his head, half-grinning, like it's stupid and painful all at once. "He has this rule about tattoos and piercings on our faces— my brothers and me."

"You broke that rule?" I rest my chin on his chest, and he nods, looking back at the fire.

"I came into the dining room for dinner that night, fresh piercing. Everyone was already seated, and I took my place next to Kias. Old *Otets* took one look at me and didn't say a word. Just got up, grabbed it and ripped it out of my nose before anyone could stop him. Noone would have stopped him. He was a dictator— *is* a dictator."

"What did everyone do after?"

"We ate dinner in silence while my nose bled. It's kinda how my family does shit. Ignore, suppress, always be a good little soldier for the boss. I wanted to get out of there. See the world, become an archeologist. Anything to get away from..." he swallows, eyes a little glassy, and my heart feels like it's being ripped out of my chest. How could I care for someone like him? I don't understand how it happened, but I do... I'm not sure what it means or where this care runs, but it's flowing for him and my heart is aching and all I do is brush a knuckle down his jaw.

"That's awful, Adrik."

He shrugs, grabbing my hand as I'm about to pull it away and kissing my fingers nonchalantly. This action makes that pain in my chest turn to a flutter, and I'm captivated by him in the most dangerous sense. Nothing about this is safe. He's not safe, I'm not, and none of us will be if I don't turn back now.

I've taken this too far, allowed myself to get tangled up in him when I know, ultimately, this is all a game.

At least, that's what I've been telling myself. Now I'm not as confident.

I should be able to think this without feeling more confused than ever, but it's too difficult to reason. How could someone ever care for a beast like Adrik?

A sinking feeling, in the pit of my stomach, tells me I might not be too far off from answering that question.

"We should get back." He whispers and I nod, rolling off him as he quickly stands, grabbing me a tissue to wipe off whatever remnants of him remain on me. I take it with a thankful, lip-pressed smile and wipe off my legs before changing back into my clothes. Though it's warm inside the office, I know it will be cold out in the hallway, so I put my sweater on, and we make our way back to the Theater. Just as I walk through the door— Adrik close behind me— Olive pokes her head around the corner, eyes flicking between us both in a way that scares me.

Fear shakes her whisper as she asks unsteadily. "Where have you two been?"

## **Chapter Twenty One: Adrik**

"WE—" Espie's eyes go wide as she glances back at me for help, but I don't know how to answer Olive. If I answer her too quickly, she could figure out what we did and then my plan will go out the window because we won't be allowed any more alone time together. But If I don't answer her soon enough, the outcome could be the same.

This is honestly too much thinking for one person to do, all just to have sex. Either I'm desperate or just stupid at this point. Espie nudges me with her elbow in the dark and I shrug towards Olive, crossing her arms over her chest like a mini Espie, waiting for me to respond with something good.

“Well, uh...” I shake my hand through my hair, becoming more aware of how we both look a bit disheveled. “Espie had to go to the bathroom.”

“Why didn’t you wake Barth?”

“Because Barth needs his rest so he can protect us best.” Espie responds for me, and Olive narrows her eyes, clearly not satisfied with our answer.

“Espie got really hungry for something other than popcorn and candy. She woke me up with her whining about it, so to shut her up I took her to the kitchen. You’re welcome for not waking everyone else up. Look, I wanted to sleep, but I couldn’t because Esperanza kept complaining to me about how she needed to go to the bathroom, or she was gonna shit herself.” Espie clears her throat, clearly annoyed with me, and I hold back a grin because she has that look in her eyes she gets when she’s pissed.

Olive arches a brow. “Espie was asleep when I went to bed.”

“I woke up.” Espie shrugs coolly. “Olive, is there a problem?”

“No. I was concerned about you, that’s all. But if you say you were fine—“

“I was. Just had to go to the bathroom and thought it best not to go alone.” She pauses another moment longer, looking between us before walking the rest of the way to us and grabbing Espie’s arm.

“Lock that door.” She points to me and I salute her, earning an eye roll from them both as I turn to lock us in again. The rest of the night is smooth sailing. Everyone falls asleep, and eventually so do I, drifting off without even realizing it. My sleep is more peaceful than it’s ever been, which is an odd thing to notice because I don’t really ever pay attention to how poorly I sleep most days.

In the morning I wake up to Tom and Jerry on the screen and Barth, Olive and Espie under their covers, laughing like it’s comedy gold. I yawn and stretch loudly, earning me the



attention of everyone, when really I only wanted to see Espie. Is that weird? I should figure that strange desire out.

“Good morning.” Barth raises his brows like I’ve interrupted them.

“Morning.” My voice is scratchy and eyes still heavy as I sit up. The smell of breakfast reaches my nostrils before I can ask what the plan is for today, and it seems like we’re still locked in here when another silver cart rolls in for us. The chef leaves without so much as a word, and the door locks once more after they’ve exited.

“We’re never getting out of here, are we?” Espie asks me and I shrug.

“How should I know?”

“You’re kind of in charge, aren’t you?”

“Less than you’d think.” I mumble more to myself than anyone else as I stand to grab breakfast.

“Actually, I’m waiting to get a call from the boss.” Barth pipes up, right on my heels, to get food as well. I cock my head back to him.

“Oh?”

“Yep. He thinks that the rebels were only threatening, so we’d surrender. They’re questioning some of them still.”

“Torturing.” I correct him and he sighs.

“Adrik, you know as well as I do that this is how our family works.” His tight curls bounce as he taps a bulky handful of breakfast potatoes onto his plate.

“Well, maybe I’m just fucking tired of it. We should be able to talk to these guys, figure out why the fuck they’re being so insistent—“

“It’s because of you, Adrik.”

“What?” I’ve never heard anyone say it out loud. Though, my father has his way of sharing his displeasure for my new role. He has never once said I’m the reason for this fighting.

“You’re...” he labors a heavy sigh like he’s trying to figure out how to put it nicely, but there isn’t a nice way to say I’m the reason everything is falling apart. I shoot a hand in the air for him to shut the fuck up and stop while he’s at it. He knows this sign well, so he nods, filling his plate a little more and sitting back down in his bed. The girls come over as I fiddle with the chocolate chip pancakes, spreading butter on each one. Espie’s eyes are on me, I can feel it, and I think she was listening to the conversation between me and Barth.

I’m not in the mood for talking though, don’t have time to dig into my feelings, so I avoid her, turn around and head over to my bed.

Most of the breakfast, Espie and Olive ask Barth questions about his specific line of work and act super interested in it, even though it’s the most basic security job in our family. I roll my eyes a few times when Olive makes flirty comments to Barth about his good-looking face or strong stature.

Almost immediately after we’ve finished our food, Barth gets the call that we’re free to go about business as usual.

“So, we’re safe?” Olive asks Barth as we walk towards the exit.

“Yep, extra safe now.” He nods with a grin that makes me gag, but gives me an idea. Odd combination, I know, but whatever. I glance down at Espie, who’s by my side.

“Are you free for the next couple of days?” I ask, and she looks taken aback by my question.

“Am I free for what?” Olive tilts her head back to us and I lean in a bit closer as we head up the stairs.

“I think it would be fun to go somewhere.”

“What do you mean?” She pulls her brows together just as Olive grabs her arm and pulls her close.

“We’ve got plans.” She answers for her, and my brows go tall.

“Do you?” I ask Espie, who looks to Olive like she’s confused.

“Oh.” She finally says, eyes shifting back to mine. “We do.”

“What are you doing?”

“We’re going shopping.” Olive proudly declares, and Espie looks even more confused than me.

“For the next few days? Where do you even think you’ll go for that? The town down there only has so many shopping experiences. If you haven’t noticed, it’s pretty small.” I fold my arms over my chest and Espie warns me with her eyes. She *warns me*? Am I her puppet now? Just because we did shit doesn’t mean I’ll bow to her every order and whim.

“Well, you’re not a girl, so I wouldn’t expect you to understand.” Olive snaps, practically flicking her hair in my face as she turns back round and pulls Espie the rest of the way up the stairs.

“Well, I’m going with you, so we’ll have plenty of opportunities to *understand* each other.” I sarcastically grin, and she glances back at me angrily.

“You’re absolutely not coming.”

“Oh, I absolutely am.”

Olive is about to say something else that I’m already prepared to rebuttal, and then Espie steps in front of her. “Okay! Enough. You can come along. Just, stop fighting. Both of you.”

“Esperanza, you’re not in charge here. Your permission means nothing.”

“*Nothing?*” She breathes, nodding like she wants me to say it again to be certain. It’s a hurt look, the kind that used to give me a rush, but for some reason, it’s fucking shitty. And honestly, fuck her for making me feel shitty.

“Yeah.” I grumble. “And I don’t want to go anymore.” I break my gaze from her and pull out a cigarette, sticking it between my teeth and marching away from them.

“Too bad.” Barth calls as I’m headed up the stairs. “Boss said you won’t be leaving Esperanza’s side for the rest of the

week.” I stop in my tracks, not looking back at the three of them, standing like statues at the bottom of the foyer steps.

“I guess I’ll just have to disappoint him then. Wouldn’t be the first time.” I continue up the steps and straight to my room, slamming the door behind me because I’ve been sober for far too long, and it’s starting to get to me. After lighting my cigarette, I grab the last of the *Russo-Baltique* Vodka off the dresser and step outside, taking sips in between smokes.

It’s what I do for most of the day— get drunk and smoke a lot out in the cold until I’m not even cold anymore because the core of me feels hot. Why the fuck am I like this? Why the fuck can’t I catch a break? I hate it. I hate this entire trip because despite what I said to Espie, I am not in charge. None of us are as long as my father is.

The sun is setting, sky getting gray as new clouds set in that promise snow for, I don’t know how long. Hopefully, they pass, hopefully. Then at least I can hit up a pub or something on my own to get the image of Espie being hurt by my words, washed out of my mind. Why it’s even in my head in the first place is not only a mystery, but a disturbance.

By the time I’m properly drunk, I’ve made it through the first bottle of vodka, and I’ve moved on to my second— *The Eye of the Dragon*. This shit is pure. That’s why I already took the liberty of swiping it from the cellar when we got here. No sense in wasting precious vodka. If anything, I’m doing my family duty by drinking it.

I take my fourth swig and light my fifth cigarette with the end of the last one, tossing the butt of it over the balcony just as the door swings open, nearly hitting me in the face.

“Where have you been all day?” Espie’s voice disappoints me, but only because I’m trying to forget about her and here she is acting like she cares.

“We don’t have to do this.”

“It’s freezing out here, come inside.” She steps out fully onto the balcony, closing the door behind her and reaching for my hand. Her frame is blurred around the edges, glowing

almost, and I know it's only the strange mixture of light from inside beaming out. But drunk me thought she was actually on fire for a second. Glad I didn't mention that. Or did I?

"Did I say something?" I flick the butt of my cigarette, inhaling deeply to try to regain some focus for whatever she's attempting to talk to me about right now.

"Are you high?"

"No." I scoff. "I'm not in high school." And her hand is on my shoulder before I realize my chuckling has caused me to lose my balance. I'm about to shrug her off, but her hand is on the bottle in mine, and I won't risk any sudden movements that will send this baby flying.

The vodka— not Espie. Though, I guess that would suck too.

"Give me the bottle." She tugs lightly, and now I'm mad.

"No!" I try to make a movement that doesn't feel natural, and she somehow rips it out of my hand. "The fuck, Espie?!" I rage, all the heat left in my body, coming out in one large cloud of vapor.

"I need to talk to you."

"Give me my *fucking* vodka." I really shove out the fucking like it's a punch.

"Then tell me the *fucking* truth." She mimics my *fuck*, and honestly, I've lost all desire to cooperate. I don't even know what she's talking about anyway.

"What?" I pinch the space between my brows, exasperated.

"Are you angry?"

"What do you mean?"

"Did I do something to anger you?"

"Espie, you always do something to anger me."

Her shoulders drop, and she pulls the bottle close to her chest, shaking her head. I watch the bottle intently before

glancing back up at her.

“Why are you being so mean to me?” I’m blinking, trying to figure out what the hell she is even trying to get at.

“Sweetie, you and I are not friends.” Her brows go low and there’s that look in her eyes again, glistening with a mixture of betrayal and pain.

“I thought... the other night.” She shakes her head like she’s trying to figure it all out, but she won’t be able to because the reason she’s confused is not her fault, but mine. Yeah, I can admit when I’m instigating— at least when I’m drunk. But I’m clear-headed enough not to tell her why she’s confused, not to put myself and my plans to get the hell away from this marriage contract.

“And then, last night... We...” It’s mostly anger creasing her face now, and then she looks right into my eyes, burning me with her glare. “Do you even like me?”

“Like you?” I shout drunkenly and she cocks her head back. “Baby, I barely even tolerate you.” With that, she reaches the bottle over the balcony, and before I can even lunge forward, she dumps it out and tosses the bottle into the snow below before turning towards the door.

“Go to hell, Adrik.” She swings the door open, nearly hitting me in her face again.

“I’ll meet you there.” I growl, too drunk to know what to do next, and too fucking proud to take it all back. And maybe if I was sober, I would have taken it back, wouldn’t have said it at all. But I did, and now I think I fucking screwed everything up, and not in the way I wanted to.

## **Chapter Twenty Two: Espie**

IT’S BEEN two months since we first arrived in Russia with the hope that Vince would get us out of here within a couple of weeks. He hasn’t. In fact, I still am not being told what progress he has even made on getting me out of this deal as he promised.

I wish I could say that Adrik and I are not on speaking terms. That we live separate lives, and he never bothers me. Not after our big fight on his balcony the night after our lock-in. I was so cross with him for so many days after that. I could barely speak to him without shuddering, remembering his harsh words to me. It's hard to tell if it was really the words, or the connotation they presented. But here I was, thinking we were becoming something more than just enemies, and then he throws it back in my face like I'm the crazy one for even insinuating it.

It was horrible between us, and thus the whole house suffered. Olive tried to get me to open up about the entire ordeal, but I just offered half answers, mostly lies and implying lies.

I really didn't think it would get any better with him and me, honestly, I thought it would get worse. But he did this, *thing*... this stupid and sweet thing that confused and elated me all at once.

"Espie." Hands were shaking me, a deep voice greeting me in the cold darkness of my bedroom. I nearly smacked heads with him, sitting up so fast. There he was, in my bedroom, Olive fast asleep next to me, and I could have hit him. He spent days before that, ignoring me, avoiding every room I walked into, and I honestly resolved that it was good— him ignoring me. I was hoping it meant that he'd just leave me be, and I could move on from being so utterly attracted to someone so horribly awful to me more than half the time.

I was about to say something like this, tell him to leave my room and stop bothering me and then I caught a glimpse of that look in his eye. The one that meant he was the good guy today— the one that was mostly kind to me. The one I got along with better than I'd cared to admit up until then.

"Come with me?" He said it like a question, not an order, but my body responded like it was. I slid out of bed, grabbing my thick knit, sage cardigan off the bed post and walked with him through the maze that is the safe-house. Endlessly trekking until we reached this room with stone walls and a metal ladder straight to the ceiling in the center of it.

“After you?” He motioned to it, that grin he has when he’s hiding something big, curling up the corners of his pouty lips. I had missed that grin, and I hated admitting it to myself, but I had. The days after our fight, his lips were reserved for brooding and smoking. That was the only time he was around me— to smoke. I should have hated him, but I couldn’t and that scared me.

I climbed the ladder upon his notion and he held me steady as I climbed, following close behind until we reached the ceiling and then he reached past me. He smelt incredible, warm and woody. I held my breath so I didn’t make a comment about it as his nimble fingers unlocked the latch on the door. He pushed it up with one hand and it flew open, streaming in barely-risen sunlight from above.

The smell hit me before the surprise did, but the second I took a couple more steps up, I gasped. Covering the entirety of the roof were wildflowers— my favorite. I had told Adrik about how flowers should always be wild because those are the most beautiful— the free ones. It was in the center of a tangent and I had no idea that he had even been listening to me. This is the moment I realized he may be actually paying attention to what I say, at least to the important things somehow.

As I fully stepped up to the roof, I saw the brown and cream flannel picnic blanket, laying out in a way that positioned it to face the mountains. On top of it was a picnic basket, and art supplies among a soft white blanket to keep us warm.

I walked over to it, Adrik silently followed close behind and I didn’t know what to say. It was beautiful, thoughtful, and kind. But how could I say that? His hand was on my back, helping me sit down, and wrapping a blanket around me before I could process any real words besides “*wow*”.

“Do you like it?” he asked, pulling out the most amazing smelling food and then I realized why it was so amazing. It was my favorite breakfast— Italian breakfast sandwich, *Panino Con la Mortadella*— and hot Brazilian coffee.

“This is more than I expected.”



He got a half-sad sort of grin before nodding. “Yes, but I’m afraid it’s far less than you deserve.” I caught my breath on that one, it was shocking to hear him say something like that, especially after icing me out for so long. We stared into each other’s eyes for a little too long, for people who hated each other. But I didn’t know how I actually felt about him, though it was beginning to be less like a nightmare, and more like a dream. Surely, this was just another one of his games, though I wasn’t sure because of the look of sincerity in his marble blue eyes.

“Espie, what I said to you that night on the balcony...” I shook my head, not wanting to relive it but he grabbed my hand and squeezed it, causing my words to retreat. “It was wrong, I was wrong. And I’m so sorry.” he said this like it could break me and I needed it gently delivered.

Although, I don’t think any form of delivery could have prepared me for the shock of his words. They were meaningful to me, not just because I thought he was far too prideful to ever say them, but because of how serious the weight of them felt. I swallowed a lump in my throat that had formed without me even knowing, and then I nodded gently.

“Thank you. And I’m sorry I threw your bottle over the balcony.” he chuckled, shaking his head and grabbing me a sandwich.

“Don’t ever apologize for putting me in my place. Not when you do it so well.” He handed me my sandwich with a twinkle in his eyes that the sunrise must have conjured. I think I blushed— hope I didn’t, but I’m sure I did when I took the sandwich. We ate quietly for a bit, watching the sunrise peak and lift over the tips of the jagged mountains.

We like sunrises, the both of us. That’s the first time we ever really agreed on something. It made me wonder if we had more in common than just our ability to get into explosive fights with each other. So, when we finished breakfast, we played a game.

“I’ll ask you anything and you have to answer it honestly.” I said like a demand, and he licked his bottom lip, mouth

parted slightly. It was so hot, I had to ignore my leaping heart to focus on his answer.

“Alright, I’m in.” He agreed and we were off, drawing and messing around with art supplies while we confessed things about ourselves, finding even more common ground than I would have thought we had.

“So, you like sunrises?” I used up my answer to confirm what I already knew, just to hear his reasoning, see if it’s similar to mine.

—

“Yeah, of course. But they have to be somewhere beautiful. An escape to the sky.” He added with a grin that still makes my heart jump to think about. He might be horrible half the time, but the man is gorgeous, and I won’t deny it out of pride.

“OF COURSE, we can’t have city smog and towering buildings blocking the view.”

“No, definitely not.” He agreed, those blue eyes as bright as ever, filled with something magnetic. They must be, because I was drawn into him instantly. And before I realized it we were tangled up again in the same blanket, staring into each others eyes with longing. He leaned in first, but I can’t accuse him of taking the lead when we both fell into each other. Our lips searched with longing for one another like just one collision wasn’t enough and I grasped onto him like he was a life vest and I had just been thrown out in the center of a stormy sea.

He kissed down my body as he undid each button of my pajama top, continuing down to my hips, kissing both of them with fervency, before grabbing the hem of my bottoms. I gasped— shocked, elated and absolutely lustfully driven to the point of insanity. Whatever he wanted to give me, I was ready for, and I needed it because I needed him. And I would have never said that then, but I remember the feeling I couldn’t put words to as he pulled off my pajama pants completely.

When he spread me open, I nearly passed out from expectancy, fingers at my opening, eyes on mine with a steady lust that was not going to be quenched without seeing me satisfied. And I wanted to be completely satisfied with him. A few days without it was actually horrible for me. Because while hating him, I wanted him in a way I hadn't wanted him before. Which made me hate him all the more for making me crave such a dangerous thing.

But at that moment, I did not hate Adrik Mikhailov, I craved him. So, when his lips collided with my opening, determined tongue pressing against my pleasure points, I moaned his name without even thinking. It echoed the space around us, but I didn't care if anyone heard. As long as he didn't stop touching me that way, I would have been completely indifferent towards everything else.

He swept his perfect tongue over my clit so many times that my entire body was somewhere completely new and different. I think I came ten times and I'm not exaggerating. When he finally stopped, he slid my pajama pants back on for me, kissing my quickly rising and falling stomach, which would have made me question his intention had I not been coming down from the most euphoric experience of my young life. I looked up into his eyes, glazed over with a new form of affection, no one had ever looked at me like that before, and I cupped his perfect jaw with my hand.

His hard cock was pressed to my stomach. Even through his pants, I could feel its hard length needing to be satisfied. I reached down, fully intending to pleasure him, but he stopped my hand, rolling on his back and taking me with him so I was sitting on his abs.

I traced a finger down them, covered in ink. Too much for me to point out every detail of, though I wanted to take the time to learn everything. He pulled my face to his, kissing my lips and then I kissed him back like it was normal and I couldn't have it any other way. His cold hand slid into the opening of my pajama top, grabbing my breast and softly thumbing over my nipples before sliding both of his hands down to my hips.

My body shivered under his cold and adamant touch as our lips continued to collide. While he guided my hips over his hard cock, straining beneath me, just fabric separating us. As he rocked me against him, I realized what he wanted and an instinct took over me as I ground myself over his cock, a strange sense of power filling me. He let out a moan into my mouth, sucking on my bottom lip as I moved faster over him. Eventually he took the lead, moving my hips even faster over him until his jaw tensed, eyes closed completely as I panted down his neck. Then he stopped me, holding me close as he turned on his side.

He kissed my forehead with a heavy breath, pulling the blankets over us both as we held each other for a long time. The silence felt familiar and easy and I liked the beat of his heart to the background of our breathing. It was a warm day, not because the sun had finally risen, but because our body heat was warm with satisfied passion. We were suspended for moments I care more about than I will fully admit, even now.

Though, that particular morning did feel different, holding one another and grasping at each other with that same frenzy that overtook us just a few nights before.

The rest of the morning we doodled with watercolor pencils and finished most of the coffee he brought until both of us were shaking a bit from how much we had to drink. That felt like a beginning for us, a new start, one where we could both agree to disagree and make it through this strange version of courting.

And that brings us to now, two months into this bullshit.

The problem is, no matter how badly I try to resist him, he continues to seduce me, and we continue to go further than I think we should. We mostly just keep finding ways to push the limits without him ever penetrating me, but it's not a great game to play.

Not just because the longing for that, specifically, grows the more we sneak around, pushing boundaries I shouldn't have ever needed to set in the first place. And then there's the

fact that we continue the same ebb and flow we have since I arrived. That back and forth that's seemingly never ending.

One day, we're great and fucking around in one of the cars in the garage when we said we were just grabbing something from the cellar. Then I'm angry at him all over again for something or other, and somehow he comes up with a way to make everything better— at least for a little while.

We're stuck in this stupid square dance. Except it's more of a circle, and we're going around each other like we're set on this course for collision. It's catatonic, and I don't know how we've continued like this— falling into and away from each other for months.

Today we're on good terms, and have been since Sunday. It's only Wednesday, so we'll see how far we can get without him getting drunk, starting a fight with someone— namely, me — or just deciding to display the horrible half of his personality. I'm starting to know when I set him off, why he lashes out, but it's too late by the time I recognize it, and he's already fuming.

I sigh as I make my way to the kitchen before the sun is up, trying to fiddle with this stupid nightgown that Olive and I got at a thrift store in town. She loves it, which I get because she's all about vintage designer things, but I'm more focused on the new. The present. Anyway, it's this old school frilly piece that I guess really isn't a nightgown at all, but I've decided it's the only suitable place to wear it.

It's a rose colored, silk and satin mixed, thin-strapped, mini-dress with a frilly almost animal-like pink fur around the entire top rim of it. I pull my hair down, and put on some pink socks that almost look like the fur material lining my dress. This is a little routine I've gotten into with Adrik, I sneak downstairs in the morning, and he cooks me my favorite breakfast. We pretend we aren't going to do anything, but he always ends up locking the door and touching me the way I like. Then we're on the floor or the counter or the table, doing stuff we shouldn't.

So, today I decided to wear something apart from an oversized sweater and sweatpants. After all, the snow has melted quite a bit, and I take that as some sort of sign to dress a little less. Who am I, and how have I gotten this far out of grasp that I am actually wearing something to seduce my husband-to-be into doing things with me that we know we'll do anyway? I trot down the steps, a little too pleased with myself, despite my slight nerves trying to force me into an honest look at myself.

I guess I haven't had much time for honesty these days. At the kitchen door, I knock three times, and it creaks open. Shirtless, a kitchen towel over his tattooed shoulder and a frying pan in his left hand, is Adrik's sleepy grin, greeting me before I've kissed it.

Yeah, we do that now— kiss each other for no reason at all and every reason possible.

“How'd you sleep?” He pulls out my chair for me and heads back over to the stove, that focused look on his face telling me he's missed the view. I look down at my dress.

“I slept well... probably better than normal in this new night gown.” I swear his ears almost perk up like a freaking dog, and he slowly turns to me, eyebrows up with a wide grin.

“Oh shit.” He breathes, eyes practically bulging as he clutches his chest dramatically. I let out a giggle that I think only he's ever heard because it never comes out unless he's around. “You look absolutely gorgeous.” He leaves the pan and walks over to me, dropping to his knees and kissing up my legs as I let out little breathy laughs, and he likes them. I can tell because he's grinning like he's pleased with me, and I love the naive sense of accomplishment this gives me.

His hands grip my thighs as he rises to my lips, then pulling me in closely with his hand at the back of my head. I melt at his touch as if I'm chocolate, and he's taking his time devouring me. It's the best feeling and the worst because I hate myself a little more than I hate him on our bad days, but I won't stop him. I've learned the hard way, starting things like this, doesn't ever end with stopping until we're both winded

and sweaty, swirls of pleasure twisting in our simple minds. And we are simple— simple for wanting things like this and being so easily distracted by one another.

He kisses down my neck and I grip whatever part of him is closest to me, throwing my head back as those all-too familiar and ever-addicting chills rise like I've been dying for his touch. In a way, I have. And I don't know when we got to this point— me wanting him so badly that my body aches when he isn't around. So strange how you can become so attached to the person holding you captive.

I'm definitely in a Stockholm syndrome scenario. Send help. But actually, please don't.

He kisses down my chest, and I'm quivering under the weight of his delicate touch because it's not the strength of it, but the implication. The way it tells me he's not stopping for anything, and I won't be the one to stop him. His lips find new ways to excite me as his hands explore other parts of my body.

We are lost in each other, clinging to every part we can until there is nothing left but lust and hot breaths on sticky skin. I swear we're on fire as he lays me across the table, intentionally not yet set.

“I see the plates haven't made their way here yet.”

“I don't need a plate for this.” He kisses me roughly on the lips, and he pulls my legs over his shoulders, going straight to the heat of me, already wet with arousal— and naked because I intentionally didn't wear underwear. Oops.

The second his tongue rolls over my clit, I moan, taking in a sharp breath that makes me cough. The fire I was talking about earlier, seems a little too real because I swear I can smell smoke.

My eyes fly open when I realize we're not the heat in the room, the growing fire on the stovetop, is.

“Adrik!” I yell, grabbing his head and trying to pull it away, but he thinks he's doing great work— and he is, but we're dying— so he continues on until I scream. “Fire! The

kitchen is on fire!” And he spins his head around, lips glistening with my arousal, and he picks me up, bringing me to the door before sprinting back towards the fire. He’s panicked for a second like he’s trying to remember something, and I’m speechlessly watching in horror.

After a second that feels like an hour, he sprints to a cabinet and pulls out a fire extinguisher, ripping the safety lock off it and shooting it right at the source of the flames. The fire dies down rather abruptly, and I breathe a sigh of relief that hurts a little from the smoke. He drops the fire extinguisher and turns to me.

“Are you okay?” His eyes are full of concern, more for me than the burnt offering of a kitchen I’m looking at behind him. I nod, tears crawling up to the corners of my eyes, though it’s unclear to me why. And I don’t think he knows either, but he meets me with an embrace that tells me it’s okay— we’re okay.

And for how constantly unstable we are, his arms wrapped around me feel pretty secure.



“WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN ALL MORNING?” Olive stops me in the doorway to our room, eyes filled with the same suspicion they’ve had for the past couple of weeks. She rests her hands on her hips, tapping her fingers as I glance back at Adrik, entering his room. I’m sure we both smell horribly smoky, but she’ll never know about that— us both smelling like a bonfire. He’s headed right to the shower, and I was too before Olive’s bombarding questions.

“I was just eating breakfast.” I shrug, attempting to walk around her, but she stops me.

“Did you burn it all?”

“No.” I shake my head, pushing past her successfully this time and hoping I did it quick enough to hide my reddening cheeks.



“And why were you out walking around wearing that?” She points to my frilly dress that I swore buying would be a waste. Guess that was common sense, something I’ve lacked these dwindling months. I don’t need Olive to remind me of that fact, either.

These days she’s been acting a lot less like my little sister and more like our mother. Not a fun combination for me, especially because I am breaking countless rules, maybe too many.

“Olive, you, of all people, are one to talk about *scandalous clothes*.”

“That’s completely besides the point, and you know it.” She’s really not happy with me, eyes narrowing like I’ve hurt her by lying this whole time. There’s no way she could know the lies I’ve strewn together to keep her questions at bay, but my guilty conscience is telling me otherwise.

I labor a sigh and turn around to face her again. “It’s not a problem.”

“What’s not a problem?” She arches a brow. “You’re sneaking around all the time for no reason, or intentionally dressing provocatively in front of Adrik, when just a couple of months ago you wanted to be seen as a fucking marshmallow with your oversized loungewear?”

“Olive—“

“No, Espie. You don’t get to let loose. Need I remind you \_\_\_“

“You might want to stop while you’re at it.” I take a step towards her, warningly. “I know very well my duty to our family. And if Vince was making any headway on his duty to me, I’d know about it, right?” Her lip pouts and she looks little again, small and fragile. Though I know she could bite back at any time.

“I can’t speak with you about this, Espie. I was instructed not to tell you anything.”

“Why?”

“Because you know as well as I do the effect that Adrik has on people. Especially you.”

“Excuse me?” My brows go tall as I raise my voice at her absurd accusation.

He blows out air from a bubble in her cheeks and shakes her head. “Never mind.”

“No, tell me.” I press. “What do you mean?”

She shakes her head and I nod in response. After we lock eyes in a battle of authority, she relents.

“You both have been pretty secretive. I never hear about what goes on during your dates and outings and runs to the cellar and walks on the property lines. You both either keep everyone awake with your fighting or on high alert with your disappearing. I’m not an idiot, and neither are the boys who came along to keep us safe. You’re spitting in their face, and you’re spitting in Vince’s face too.”

“Olive, you should be careful with what you’re insinuating.” My heart is beating out of my chest nervously as I keep an even tone.

“Should I? Or should I be concerned about you?”

“Concerned? By going out with my fiancé?”

“No, Espie. That’s just it, he isn’t your fiancé. He hasn’t even proposed to you!” She explodes and I shake my head.

“I don’t even want to be with him!” I whisper-yell, a weight in my chest that tells me I’m betraying a part of myself that has become addicted to Adrik. But I know it’s not a good addiction. Are any addictions ever good? He can’t be healthy for me, and wouldn’t make a good husband because he’s constantly so back and forth with me.

A while ago, I stopped reminding myself that it was a game, and started playing along. Nonetheless, that doesn’t mean that what I’ve said is not true. I can’t marry him, might be a better statement, but saying, *won’t*, is one-in-the-same—at least that’s what I’m choosing to believe. So, I stick to it as

she shifts her face into something a little more relaxed. As if this is what she was looking for from me the entire time.

“Then I would like to chaperone your dates from now on.”

“Wait... Olive that’s—“

“Necessary? More like, critical to insure you’re left untouched by easily persuasive and evasive-in-more-ways-than-one, Adrik Mikhailov.” I swallow hard, thinking about what this means I’ll be giving up. But perhaps it’s better to rip the bandaid off now, rather than when Vince breaks us apart.

Going cold turkey is usually not ever a great idea. That’s what I’ve read, anyway. Yet, this might be the only way to get out without anyone knowing how far we’ve gone, or going any further with him in general.

“Okay.” I say through my teeth, and she throws her arms around me. As I meet her in a less enthusiastic hug, I remember the other part of that thing I read; Quitting all at once often leads to an even worse relapse.

### **Chapter Twenty Three: Adrik**

I’M BUZZING in the best way possible because I’m so close to fucking Espie I can taste it. Literally— I can still taste her sweetness on my tongue. I step into the shower and rise off the smokey smell that I like and wanted to just keep, but it’d give us both away. And I can’t do that, not when I’m so close to winning.

You know, it is weird, though. The thought of not seeing Espie every day. Not getting to talk to her about shit, or fight with her, or make-up in the way we always do because she can’t resist my touch any more than I can resist hers. This is the most real fake relationship I’ve ever had, so perhaps my strange mixture of feelings has something to do with that.

I used to find her so annoying, but the irritation seems to have faded. Like, I don’t get bothered by it anymore. All the frustrating ticks she has, her prissy attitude, her quick temper when saying things I know she’ll hate. It’s all become familiar

in a good way. That thought alone is enough to make me feel uneasy.

I wash my hair, letting the hot falling water carry away everything but the scent of my shampoo and body wash. The steam in the glass shower fogs up the glass so that I am surrounded by its cloud, and it reminds me of Christmas Eve all over again. A month ago, though, it's still fresh in my mind.

“Olive and I have a Christmas tradition.” Espie looked up at me as I stood in her doorway, annoyed about something I can't remember now because it was stupid, and she's hot and that's more of what I remember— her looking perfect.

“Well, I'd like to join.” I asserted, really pushing myself into the entire idea of it all. She didn't seem too pleased with me or my willfulness. Her eyes flitted between mine, that green look of frustration giving way to relent.

“Fine.” She growled, shoulders dropping as she cracked the door open to reveal a Christmas tree by the window.

“Why is there a tree here? The boss has strict rules against \_\_\_“

“Lighten up, Adrik. We had a friend grab it for us from the forest behind the safe-house.” Espie rolled her eyes as Olive sat by the fireplace in an atrocious Christmas sweater, stringing cranberries on a long thread.

“Let me guess, that friend was Barth?” I glanced past Espie and Olive shrugged with a grin, keeping her eyes focused on her work.

“Does it matter who?” Espie's eyes looked back to mine, glowing like a child's— all hopeful and light.

I sighed and hooked a hand through my hair. “Guess not.” and she bit her excited grin, sending me into a bit of a brain freeze, just gazing at her until Olive snapped her fingers.

“Hello? We need to keep going or Santa won't deliver presents.”

“Santa...” I furrowed my brows.

Olive glared at me like I was the most ridiculous thing she'd ever seen. "Yes, you know, the round guy in a red suit, fluffy white hair and beard, says 'ho ho ho' un-ironically?"

"I know who Santa is." I blinked and Espie breathed a laugh.

"When we were little, we used to decorate the tree in our room every year because our brothers always told us that if we didn't, Santa wouldn't put presents under it."

I nodded at her, noticing the classic Christmas song playing in the background.

"Well, I'll help." I shrugged and stepped further into the room, picking up some clear ornaments off the floor by the fireplace.

Espie jogged over to help. "I can show you what to do with those." She grabbed my upper arm with her hand, pulling me down to my knees. I gave her a suggestive look that only she would know what I was insinuating. She shook her head at me, grimacing as she pointed her eyes over towards Olive, who was still engrossed in her decoration-making.

We sat the entire day and decorated ornaments, strung cranberries and popcorn, and eventually wrapped twinkling lights around the tree. Most of the day, Olive snapped at Espie and I for getting off track. One of the times I pulled her to the center of the room during 'rocking around the Christmas tree', and showed her a simple three-step dance.

I twirled her around in her white nightgown once belonging to my mother, and long knit sweater— red and cream striped— and I remember thinking she had never looked more beautiful. It was strange being okay with these thoughts. Christmas magic, maybe? It all got to my brain, and I was suffering in this alternate reality where she and I were really engaged, but we were happy.

Something I haven't truly felt in a long time.

There are just some things in life that when you experience them over and over, they begin to feel normal. Occasionally, that's a good thing— like me not wanting to feel any pain, so I

rarely do— but this was an odd moment for me. One that I'll remember for a long time, against my will. Not because it was in any way painful when it happened, but because the pain of life not looking like this for someone like me, with someone I want to be with, is undeniable and unavoidable. No matter how much I drink, smoke, or fuck with Espie— which is honestly better than being wasted or high off nicotine.

The day was good, though, besides Olive's annoying snapping in our faces and Barth eventually joining us. I did have a chat with him after that evening because he was getting far too close to Olive considering his age and her family name. And the obvious fact that he went behind my back to follow her orders and not mine about Christmas decorations and trees. It's a rule *Otets* made when we were young, right after he killed our mother and his brother for all the shit they did behind his back.

He was always a bitter man, but thereafter, he became brutal— sociopathic in a way. And maybe he was always like that— could be that the harsh shock of my mother's death made me grow up enough to notice it. Either way, my childhood was mostly over after that. So, no Christmas decor because my mother loved Christmas and anything she loved, my father despises.

But that night was strangely rewarding for me. Like I was gaining something back I had lost all of those years in empty homes on the holidays. Espie let me— ordered me to— decorate the topper, which looked like a botched experiment of gold glitter and an abstract shape somewhat resembling a star. Her reasoning was that I was the only one tall enough to reach the top of the tree without a ladder. So, I did the final honors of placing the gold monster on top of the tree. All four of us looked at the glowing tree up and down just as the sun set, and I offered to go make everyone hot chocolate and cinnamon rolls.

Espie insisted on coming with me, but I wanted to avoid raising any suspicions. I was a little more cautious back then of that, but not anymore. Caution is less of a factor now that I nearly have Espie ready to fully give herself to me.

Anyway, I said no, of course, and we got into this fight that ended with Olive and Barth insisting we go together to shut us both up. I begrudgingly agreed, and we went down to the kitchen together. The staff cleared out the second we arrived, like they knew they were supposed to, just because it was Espie and I.

I had a quiet chuckle about it, but Espie was a bit frazzled, thinking they assumed we'd be doing other things. I liked that look on her incredible face. Her cheeks flushed, eyes worried, rosy lips puffing out like she might cry at any moment.

“You’re being a baby.” I jested with her, earning me a glare that burnt a hole in the back of my head. Still, I smiled, proceeding through the pantry and fridge while she watched.

“Thought you just had to come with me?” I perked up, hands full, butter stick under my chin. She shrugged at this, just shrugged, and I think I realized another part of her at that moment. She’s never had to be proactive. Not a day in her life. Everyone has always told her what to do and how to do it and when it should be executed at the proper time.

When it comes to moments of action, she doesn’t know what to do, and I think I liked that because it meant the thing between us would be helping her. Not that I’m giving handouts or starting to do charity work or some shit like that. I’m not becoming some saint... what I mean is that is fucking around is clearly good for her. She’s finally spreading her wings from the nest.

When I break this contract, she’ll be able to decide who she wants to marry. And it won’t be anyone’s choice but her own. It is perplexing why, then and now, it’s given me another reason to keep going. And about half-way through us fucking around, I needed that motivation because every time we’d do shit, I’d forget why I wanted to break us apart.

Then I get reminded, and it’s like I have to start a fight with her to break up the shit that feels too good to be true. There’s nothing else I can do but hate her or make her hate me bad enough that we stop this shit. That only brings me back to square one.

I need to end this with her, and the only way to do that is to seduce her into having sex with me, and this will all be done with. *Otets* will never let me marry someone who's already been, 'deflowered', he's a man of tradition— a sadist, definitely, but he's nothing if not traditional.

That Christmas Eve, though, I let myself be happy. And it was nice, and honestly, I'd never say this out loud, but it felt good. Not the kind of good that you get when everything is just fine, neither black nor white. But good, like this lasting happiness in the pit of my stomach from laughing and cooking with Espie— who I forced to take over making the cinnamon rolls, though she was nervous about them at first.

It's a pleasant memory, one that makes me feel warm just thinking about it, but ultimately, this shower that I'm in, reminds me of it, not because of its warmth but because of how alone I feel. The smoke clouding around me like I'm in a void, echoing water splashing and cracking on the stone below my feet.

After the stupid fire this morning, interrupting Espie, and I's moment, we decided to part ways to wash up and meet later tonight. I suggested a walk through the town, but she wanted to pitch a tent on the roof and have a movie night with fairy lights and warm blankets.

She's not subtle anymore about what she really wants to do. I can still picture that dress she wore this morning like she's standing right in front of me. She's fucking hot, always has been, but holy shit, I almost lost my eyes from how hard I was staring at her in that thing. All pink and silky and soft like her amazing skin that I saw plenty of this morning, but plenty is never enough with us. It's why I planned to have sex with her— proper sex— this morning.

Fuck that, though. The rooftop tent sounds pretty good to me.

I turn the shower off and step out, reaching for the plush black towel by my shoulder and quickly wiping myself off.

It's not long before I'm dressed in Versace from head to toe. We don't go out much, so it's nothing fancy. Just a



*Medusa Music Hoodie*— black sleeves and hood, purple torso and this sick ornate peridot and rose design. With that, I toss on some black *Medusa Greca Cargo Pants* with extra pockets — they’re basically sweats.

I shake a hand through my hair to dry it a bit more. Though, it always has a mind of its own, curling at the edges in different directions on some days and others it just looks like a choppy mess. I don’t care much anyhow. Kind of like it that way. After grabbing some old school Versace socks in mint, I slide to the door, pulling it open.

I’m ready to talk to Barth about pulling out the old tent from the garage that my brothers and I used to camp in the library with. But before I can get too far out the door, I run into someone. Olive is standing, arms folded over her chest, a look of shock and irritation all over her face as she steps a few inches back from me.

“Oops.” I bare my teeth in a slight grimace to apologize without having to say sorry.

“Espie wanted me to tell you that I’ll be coming along on your dates from now on.” I furrow my brows.

“She’s my fiancée.”

She cocks her head like this is the dumbest shit she’s ever heard come out of my mouth, and I cock my head right back at her because what the fuck?

“You two really are something...” she mumbles under her breath, but I make it out anyway, and I think she wanted me to.

“Wait, so... you’re going on our date tonight?”

“Where are we going?” She perks up like I’m telling her we’re going to buy her dinner and ice cream.

“We aren’t going anywhere. I’ll be going on dates with Esperanza, alone.”

She presses her lips together. “Nope. Not anymore. Nice talking to you as always.” She pats me on the arm and turns around, but I lay a hand on her shoulder, spinning her effortlessly back around.

“Hey.” She swats at me, but I don’t move it.

“I’m in charge here.”

“And I think I can call the shots about this. Unless you want me to get Vince involved and the bodyguards can be around both of you twenty-four-seven.”

“You’re bluffing.”

She shrugs with a grin that tells me she would.

“This is bullshit. I want to talk to Espie.”

“*Espie?*” Her brows cock upwards, and I remember that I don’t call her that— not to anyone but Espie herself, and only on our good days, not our bad— never our bad. I grit my teeth and narrow my eyes down at her wide one’s. She knows she’s won this round, but I’ll be damned if she gets exactly what she wants. And I might just have the most perfect plan to resolve this little hiccup in my plans.

I plaster on a smile that I hope she can tell I’m forcing, and breathe a soft laugh through my nose. “I’m being silly. Thank you for caring about us both enough to chaperone.” Her face drops instantly, and for a fleeting second, I feel like I’ve won.

“Y-yeah...” She draws out as I turn away from her and practically skip down the hall just to seem like an unfazed asshole— it’s my best look, after all. I can’t wait for our little date tonight, considering how much work I’ll have to do to pull everything off. And I will, pull everything off so good I’ll have everyone on my side by the end of the night.

## **Chapter Twenty Four: Espie**

So, I’m going to be late for my date tonight. Everything that could go wrong, has gone wrong. First, and most irritating— Olive is going on my dates from now on, this one included. Second, the power has gone out today multiple times for no apparent reason.

Olive checked on it a couple of times, but was told to stay in her room. Super weird, and now we have to wait to style my

hair because it's pitch black except for the few candles I lit in a large decorative lantern on the counter.

"Can we please ask Barth to resolve this issue already?"

"You know, I'm not seeing him as much. Asking favors from him only confuses us both."

"*Confuses?*" I repeat with a sideways glance.

"Yeah. He likes me, you know." She proudly smiles before her warm sage eyes go all sad and turned down at the corners.

"He's still not talking to you much." She pouts her lips to the side, shaking her head as she pulls a cream hoodie over this earthy green tiered dress. Somehow she pulls it off, but if I were to try to wear that, I'd look like a crazy person. She always has the most interesting outfit combinations. She says it's vintage, but I say it's too much work when you can stick to modern designers and runway looks.

Just as I'm squinting at my blush in the dark, holding it up to the dim light of the candles, the power turns back on and Olive rushes to me with the curling wand as she's plugging it in. She styles my hair while I finish my makeup.

I go for a soft look, something not too over the top. Dark brown eyeshadow that looks very natural, turning my eyes up at the corners, deep berry cheeks and lips that look subtle and dewy, and finally, a little shimmer. Some at the tip of my nose, then inner corners, and tips of my cheek bones. That was Olive's idea, and I have to say, it was brilliant because it really ties it all together.

I can't really be pissed at her right now, not as much as I want to be because it will give away how disappointed I really am that she's going to be third-wheeling my dates. I won't be alone with him again unless we can figure out a different system than we have going right now.

A nervous breath escapes me as I think about the entire jumbled mess I've made with the relationship between my heart and head.

"What's wrong?" Olive lightly asks, probably thinking that it's her causing most of my frustration right now— which is

only partially true.

I bite my bottom lip, tensing my brows as I search for something to say. “Just hope Vince is making headway, is all.” I shrug, and she offers a sympathetic smile for words that feel a little less true than they did a few months ago.

“I promise, everything is going fine. Just keep playing along and stay an appropriate distance from him.” She grabs another strand of my hair. “Luckily, I’m going to help with part of that from now on.”

“Yes.” I nod, putting my makeup brush down because I’m satisfied with the way my makeup has turned out.

“Dress?” Olive asks as she leaves the bathroom to grab it from the closet. I take a look at myself in the mirror— an oversized Metallica t-shirt that I told Olive I found at the thrift store, but it is in fact Adrik’s. My hair is perfect, though. The curls look wonderfully soft and collected, as if they’re one consistent wave. It reminds me of an old movie star glam look. Olive comes back into the bathroom as I reach up to touch their soft shine and she slaps my hand away from them.

“Ouch.” I exaggerate, scowling at her, though it didn’t hurt that badly.

“Not yet, I haven’t set them with hairspray.”

I huff and turn around, taking the dress from her hands as she sprays a cloud of hairspray around me that I choke on. After it’s cleared and my hair still feels surprisingly soft, I pull off my t-shirt and slip into my dress.

This one has got to be my favorite one that I’ve ever owned. And I’m glad that Olive forced me to take it along. At least if I can’t be alone with Adrik, I can motivate him to figure out how we can be.

It’s this gorgeous pearl embellished Miu Miu dress in a muted seafoam color with gorgeous cream flowers with diamond centers along the entirety of the square neckline and thin straps. A Mini-dress with the perfect amount of elegance and sophistication. Thanks to my brother and sister-in-law— former Miu Miu models— I was able to get custom matching

flowers the size of a penny each, to fasten throughout my hair. Olive pulls open the satin bag they've come in and gently places them all over.

I feel beautiful and soft, and it only makes me wish we were going to be alone tonight— Adrik and I. There's not much time to think more on this because I'm already late, so I distract my mind by picking out shoes. Olive wants me to go with these Prada sneakers, cream with pearls on them, like the ones on my dress. But I quite like the Miu Miu gladiator style sandals made from a cream rope material and the same flowers on the rest of my look.

“Sandals.” I point to her right, and she sighs, handing them to me.

“Prada to break up the monotony of Miu Miu.”

“That's dramatic.”

“I like vintage.”

“Also, very dramatic of you.” I poke her nose, and she swats me away with a laugh before we both head to the door. I grab a long cream coat from Gucci that I have her hold, so it doesn't ruin my outfit, and I reach for the handle, opening the door while simultaneously gasping at the sight before me.

Down both sides of the hallway are tea candles, lit all the way down, with the heads of varying wildflowers scattered about. There's a song playing that I don't recognize at first, then it hits me— Phantom of the Opera Medley, a song I told Adrik I used to listen to on repeat while reading. I told him months ago, though, on that first morning we sat atop the roof. Are these the same flowers from then? Where did he keep them to dry them out properly?

“Oh God.” Olive mumbles under her breath, but I don't care. Tears progressively cloud my eyes with each step forward. Though I try to contain them the best I can as I follow the trail of candles— up another set of stairs, down many hallways, and into the room that leads to the roof. Carefully I climb the ladder, ignoring Olive's muffled snide

comments, until we push through the doors to the roof, and it's even more beautiful than it was the last time I saw it.

He's added towering trees of many kinds, some with different fruits adorning them. Grass is covering the entirety of the once brick roof. Lining all the stone walls are now bushes that have whimsical contrasting deep green and lime leaves. There are flowers everywhere and sticking out of random points of trees and bushes are little glowing fairy lights. There is an outline of a fairy, but they're only bright enough that you really have to look to notice them. I can tell, by the way, that they're swaying, they must be connected with some sort of clear wire.

Throughout the garden on the ground, there are little mushroom garden lights that also look like they're from a fairytale. This entire rooftop is like an escape into the pages of a book, and that's why my face is wet with tears as Adrik stands in front of me. He's wearing a puffy white silk shirt and black slacks with suspenders.

All of his tattoos are so much more visible now, through the sheer top and the deep cut of it. He's wearing his classic Prada coat boots with chains, that reminds me who he is, but doesn't clarify why he's gone to this length for a date he very well knows Olive is along for.

"Welcome." He holds out a hand to me with a grin and helps me up from the ladder.

"Yep." Olive grunts from behind us. "I'll just pull myself up." I glare back at her, but she doesn't notice as she heaves herself onto the roof begrudgingly. She's usually all about adventure, so I know the problem is Adrik.

I don't blame her, either because all I've done is complain about him, and all he's acted like is an ass around her. But with me, he's been different. Yes, we're hot and cold... but right now... everything is warm. My heart is pounding, hands are sweaty, and he looks like the beast finally turning into a prince.

"Do you like it?" He asked when I've been staring too long at him, admiring what he's created.

“This is the most incredible thing anyone has ever done for me.” I whisper with a soft grin, and he meets my eyes, wiping a tear with his thumb that was still rolling down my cheek.

“I’m glad you like it.” He seems a little nervous. Strange because it’s very rare for him to ever seem off his game. Oftentimes, I think he could spit-ball with anyone, get himself out of any situation just by how quick he is on his feet. But he seems different right now, and I don’t just mean the way he looks. He’s breathing heavier, swallowing more, shifting his eyes between me and the scenery far too quickly.

“Is everything okay?” I quietly ask, and he takes my hand, dropping to his knee. Yes, singular— one knee. Olive gasps louder than I do when he pulls out a little wooden box from his pocket, holding it in his hands like a clam and opening it up to reveal the most insane ring I’ve ever seen.

It’s a large kite-cut pink diamond, practically floating above the rose gold band that looks like a branch, and underneath are five tinier diamonds spurring out from the tip of the largest one. It’s the most incredible piece of jewelry I’ve ever seen.

“Esperanza Maribelle Alder San Giovanni, I’ve been courting you for many months. And though our contract states that I don’t need to do this to be betrothed to you. I want you to know that I do choose you to be my wife. So, will you marry me?”

His words are smooth and rehearsed, but nonetheless I want them to be true. Why is this not in any way concerning me? I should be running away, telling Olive I’m done for the night. But I’m swept up in the emotions of it all, so I nod, tears brimming my eyes, though I don’t know what this all really means for us.

I sense Olive shift, her eyes between us as he slides the gorgeous ring on my finger and stands to his feet, leaning in to kiss me.

I should turn away, Olive shouldn’t know that we’ve kissed, let alone the other things we’ve already done.

Technically, we aren't breaking the rules because we are engaged...

I hesitate, but he gives me a chin nod, lifting my chin to his lips with the tip of his finger. He kisses me before I can think more on the technicality of it all, and I think I fall into the kiss a little too much, but everything feels like a fairytale. It always does when our lips collide and my chin gets that familiar chill, never ceasing to take me off guard.

"Alright." Olive claps, but not to congratulate us. "That's enough." She pretends to gag and Adrik smiles into the kiss as he dips me down, hand under my back before raising me back to my feet and wrapping an arm a little too low around my waist.

Olive is wincing, covering her eyes with displeasure, and I'm trying to sense what she's thinking besides how disturbed she is by this all. I would have been disturbed months ago when we first arrived, but I'm not right now. In fact, I wish Olive weren't here right now, so I could kiss him for real—among other things...

"So, anyone up for some dinner?" Adrik grins and a couple of the boys come out of the bushes right on cue, carrying a long wooden picnic table with benches attached. On top of it are the same little mushroom lights among silver platters of food with two place settings at one end and at the very far and opposite end, one place set. They place it down in the center of the roof and disappear back from where they came. Probably guarding the outskirts of the roof, though this is the highest point in the safe-house, so I don't know who would even be able to get up here if they tried.

We take our seats and Olive is slumping around like she hates her life. I try not to laugh about it because I am fairly annoyed at her insistence to come along. On the other hand, Adrik is definitely making her pay for it.

The dinner is lovely and that same song plays over and over on a lovely loop, enhancing our time and making it feel a little more dreamy. Adrik and I don't fight the entire time. He keeps telling me how beautiful I look and staring at me like I



really am the most amazing thing he's seen. I want to believe this is Ernest, and he's finally grown a spot for me in his heart. That if Vince can't get me out of this, we might just be okay. I can live with the rollercoaster that is Adrik Mikhailov, if at the very least he doesn't hate me. Especially when I've tried desperately not to hate him.

"Should we take a walk?" He asks, holding out his hand for me to take as he stands.

"Sure." I nod, and he holds a hand out for Olive, but she waves it away.

"This rooftop isn't that big. I'll chaperone from right here." Her lips curl slightly in disgust like she can't get the image of us kissing out of her brain, and I do feel bad about that. Although, she did promise not to tell Vince anything if she could come along on our dates, so here's to hoping she keeps that promise.

We begin our walk around the garden, hand in hand, without Olive breathing down our necks.

"This is a Russian pomegranate tree. The largest I could ship in on such short notice." He's practically yelling when he says this, then he leans in and whispers, "Play along."

"Wha—" before I can finish my sentence, he presses me up against the tree, hand trailing up my thigh, and I let out a breath. Without missing a beat, he reaches up, covering my mouth and repeating, "*Play along.*" I nod, and he slowly retracts his hand from my mouth.

"Wow! It's gorgeous!" I say at the same volume he was yelling at as he continues up my thigh with a nod, leaning in. I grab the hair at the back of his head, pulling him in closer until our lips graze. He keeps them this way, dragging his bottom lip over mine, looking in my eyes for a second before kissing down my neck and grabbing my even thigh tighter.

Just as he gets down to my collarbone, fingers almost at my heat, making me hold my breath, so I don't moan, he grabs my hand and pulls me along the pathway. We go deeper into the trees and bush area before he continues.

“These are blackberry and raspberry bushes. A little early for them, but I hear these are sweet.” He lowers his voice again, pressing his forehead to mine. “I want to rip this dress off you.” He whispers, looking down at it.

“Do it, then.” I whisper back before loudly saying, “I’d like to try them!” He licks his smirk, colliding with my lips again in a hungry, rushed sort of way. It stirs the kind of feeling you get when you’re knocked off your feet and onto your back unexpectedly.

I’m floating under the weight of his touch and I think we both know how dangerous this really is, but that does stop either of us from doing anything about it. His fingers are already petting into my soaked heat, eyes lock on mine as he ignores my silk underwear, shoving his fingers around it into my opening.

“Oh,” I moan before he covers my mouth, eyes still focused on mine, and I nod to let him know I can do this— I can keep it up. He presses into me further, and I dig my nails into his strong shoulder.

“They are good.” I force out steadily as he presses deeper into me. Just as he kisses me softly again, there is a stirring from behind us, branches moving just enough that I know someone has seen us.

## **Chapter Twenty Five: Adrik**

THE RUSTLE in the bushes puts me on high alert and I drop to my knees quickly. Espie gets confused by this, and I know she does because she’s grabbing the top of my hair, tugging on me desperate to pull me up. I peel myself away from her grasp and pretend to be picking black berries, handing her one just as Olive breaks through the line of bushes.

“I want to try the berries.” She says like she’s disappointed she didn’t catch us, and honestly, I was so close to fucking Espie for real that I don’t even think Olive could deter her from it.

“Here.” I reach behind me, handing her one as I wipe my lips to get rid of Espie’s lipstick residue. I pop a berry in my mouth regretfully and turn around to see Olive grimacing and puckering her lips in the same way I am.

“I think Espie got the only sweet one.” I lie, spitting mine out, and Olive follows suit.

“Yeah. Must be it.” She eyes Espie, who’s been silent. I look up at her slightly disgruntled state— flushed cheeks and pink nose.

“Are you cold yet?” Olive asks, holding out her white jacket for her. Espie only nods, probably thankful for getting an out, instead of explaining why she looks the way she does.

I wipe my berry hands off on the grass before standing and helping Espie slide the jacket on each arm. Something about doing this makes me feel good on the inside. Maybe it’s the waft of her perfume or the way she just expected me to help her... I don’t know. It just makes me feel strong. Not the type of strength I feel when I win a fight or kill a cock-head in a pub. It’s this weird satisfied, almost happy feeling.

I shrug away from her when she reaches for my hand because the feeling freaks me out a bit, and she tries to meet my gaze, but I avoid it. Avoid looking at the ring on her finger, too, because that makes me feel extra shitty.

So, my plan partially worked, and Espie and I won’t be watched as closely as we were about to be because we’re engaged. But at what cost to my sanity will this bring if this strange softness for her persists?

“I think we should head to bed, Espie.” Olive watches between us carefully.

“Are you tired?” I raise my brows, lowering my chin.

“No.”

“Past your bedtime?” I cock a grin, and she crosses her arms so quickly, I wouldn’t be surprised if she stomped one of her feet.

She shakes her head. “No.”

“It’s fine if you are. I can walk her back to the room after we...” I tilt my chin to Espie before I forget why I wasn’t looking at her in the first place. Her eyes are fearful of what I’m about to say, which gives me a little sense of happiness. Which makes me feel a little better than fucking with her this way, still does that for me.

“After you?” Olive draws out, arching a brow.

“After we look around the garden some more.” Espie tilts her eyes from mine and I know I’ve upset her, just not sure when the initial offense was.

“Actually, I’m rather tired.” Espie forces a yawn and takes a step from me. As she does, it’s like my equilibrium has been slightly affected. A part of me is with her, and it hurts when she pulls away— more than it should and more than I care to admit.

I think it’s because I was so close again, close to drawing her into my room tonight and sealing the deal that will break ours. There’s a strange feeling lingering in the pit of my stomach as I watch them walk away, and I think I should give up, at least for tonight.



I LAY IN BED, eyes glued to the ceiling, limbs buzzing with the feeling of being so close to Espie. My eyes trace the fan as it spins around until I’m dizzy, and it’s a lot like how I’ve felt since meeting Espie. Except, before, I used to hate the feeling — despised the constant reminder of my annoying future wife. Now I’ve grown to like it.

It’s most easily described as someone really loving that spinning teacup ride, but getting motion sickness on them every time. My problem is that I’m stuck in the teacup, spinning around so much that I’ve forgotten how it feels to be still. And I know when I get off, I’ll feel sick for a bit because of it, all, but I’ll be out of this arrangement. Parting ways with Espie is for the best, and in the end, I’m giving her what she deserves— someone who can truly connect and care for her.

Again, not that I truly care about that... but it's a nice parting gift.

Look at me, I'm being *nice*. Old *Otets* would be even more disgusted with me than he is right now.

I'm disgusted with myself. Two months alone with my supposed future bride, and I haven't been able to fuck her yet. Instead, I got her off, and I'm going to spend another night stroking myself to release until I can fall asleep.

The more I think about all of these dynamics and things I don't really ever give myself time to think about, I feel a bit sick. Either I smoke and get drunk to stop thinking, or... I grab my phone off the pillow beside mine and type out a message to Espie.

*"Hey, meet me in the library elevator in thirty minutes."*

If she's already asleep, I'll drop it, but I'm not going to go another second thinking when I could be doing. I swing my legs over the bedside and jog to the door, whipping it open to see a tall figure hovering in front of me. My heart leaps as I jump back. The figure turns its head on a dense mass that could loosely be referred to as a neck. He eyes me up and down before turning around to face me.

I reach for my knife before I realize I've already changed, and I'm only wearing my marled sweats from Balenciaga.

"Hi." I force a smile and the beast that would put The Rock to shame speaks in a gnarly low voice.

"I'm Von." His Russian accent is thick, and I'm trying to assess what he's here for and why. He hasn't lunged at me just yet, so surely I'm not in too much danger. If he did lunge, though, I would certainly die.

"Great." I force out through grit teeth. "Why are you in front of my door, Von?"

"The Sicilians told Von to guard yours and Ms. San Giovanni's door."

"Oh," I shift my jaw. "Did they now?" He stiffly nods. "Well, I don't know if they failed to mention this, but I'm in

charge.”

His face drops a little, like he’s trying to understand, and then he shakes his meatball of a head. “I didn’t—“

“It’s quite alright. Please head up to the top floor library. I believe that one is in need of guarding. Those doors need to be guarded because of the French windows overlooking the town.”

He blinks at me for too long, and I’ve already grown impatient with beef-for-brains.

“Go on.” I shoo him with the backs of my hands, and he hops to the left, stomping off like a friendly giant towards the stairwell. With a new speed— because I’m not sure who else is in on this little spy game— I sprint down the hall, going straight to one of the bedrooms on this level that I know has a bottle rack with some *Taste of Diamonds* champagne. It’s the room where I ditched the fairy lights and tent that was meant for tonight. I thumb through the rack when I arrive, finally finding the one I was after and then as I’m leaving, I grab two flute glasses off of the bar table and then, I notice the fur blankets that I think could aid in my seducing. So I grab the white and brown one, swinging them over my shoulder and sprintgin out the door, heading over to the stairs in a rushed, quiet way, avoiding the squeaky bits of wood along the hall. I grab the battery operated fairy lights and rip the entire comforter and pillows off the bed in the room.

They are a dark shimmery blue that, I think, have been here since before I was born. I wrap them around myself, and over my head, the thick down material weighing me down substantially. Their darkness will aid in camouflaging me on the way to the elevator.

That’s the hope, anyway.

I quietly exit the room, closing the door behind me and quietly walking across the floor runner, back down the hallway, again making sure to avoid all the creaky bits of wood.

Just as I reach the staircase elevator, I hear heavy footsteps up the hallway and some quiet but aggressive whispering.

I hop around the corner again, shading myself from the open hallway. Two guards step up to the floor and look around like they sense something is off. I hold my breath, hoping they don't spot me. And then I realize, I haven't fucking gone through the shit I have to act like a scared little kid desperate to escape. So, I step out into the more lit area, only by moonlight from the windows, and the boys turn around.

"Sir." One of them sighs after realizing who it is. "What are you doing out of bed?"

"Well, this is my home, is it not?"

"Yes," the other one, blonde, thin lips, says with a shrug. "But we were told to—"

"Guard me and Espie's rooms?" I arch a brow and slowly step forward—the way I've seen my father intimidate people. They both nod vigorously, and I press my lips together.

"Just so we're clear, Espie and I are engaged. We don't need extra security detail. If anyone tells you otherwise, you will refer them to me. You got any problems with that?"

"No sir." They nod in unison, and I nod back.

"Goodnight." I say more like a warning, and they turn around, heading back down the stairs, whispering about something, but I can't hear and don't care.

I run up the stairs, press the button for the elevator, feeling pretty proud of myself for figuring this all out, though I know that talking to three of the guys won't change the orders, the rest of our boys got from God knows where. So, I should still make sure Espie and I are locked away with no interference from any other misinformed men.

The elevator is a good meeting spot. It's huge, first of all. And I think it can fit at least twenty people comfortably. It was a special request of my father when we installed them. It's necessary in our line of work to be able to move large quantities of bodies—dead or alive—in a short amount of time. Thus, the extra large elevator was born.

The doors part and I step inside, laying out the comforter and pillows and lining the outskirts of the elevator with fairy lights. Just as I turn to lock the elevator in place— another wonderful and necessary feature, the doors part open again and Espie is standing in the doorway wearing nothing but a red lingerie dress. And when I say nothing else— I mean... nothing else.

My jaw drops and I have to stop it from falling much further, or I know I'll look ridiculous. I grab her hand and pull her into me, kissing down her neck and shutting the doors behind us. Locking them and the elevator in place. The dim lighting and mostly the fairy lights on the floor keep us from stumbling around.

When I make it to the library, I shut the doors behind me, striding to the center of the room where there is a lounge area. I pull the longest couch between the two smaller seats on either side of the fireplace, making an area on the floor where I lay the blankets down, placing the Champagne and two flute glasses on either side of it.

I don't know how much time I have, but I hastily grab more pillows because the floor still seems a bit empty and I place them around nicely before adding some more wood to the dimming fire, and pushing it around with the poker stick. The large wood doors knock together as one of them parts, and I turn my head calmly, though I hope it is who I summoned.

“Hi.” Espie pokes her head around the open crack in the door and my heart rate increases drastically.

“Hello.” I grin. “Come in.” She steps inside, a bright red frilly nightgown, that I'm sure is lingerie, is draped over her petite frame. It looks almost see-through, but I pretend not to notice just to keep her from getting angry at me and leaving. *Seduce her*— that's all I have to do. And seduction is always a bit of a back and forth game like this.

“What's all this?” she asks after closing the door and nearing me. Her eyes focus on the nest of blankets and pillows behind me and I rest the poker stick back in its place before crossing the floor to her side.



“It’s to celebrate our engagement, of course.” Her shoulders slump a little as she slowly nods, eyes trailing over towards the fireplace.

“I see.” She presses a finger to her bottom lip and I take her hand, pulling it from her face and down towards the champagne on the floor.

“Would you like some?” I hand her a glass as I pop it open and the cork flies somewhere deep into the library. She watches it like she can see where it went, though there’s no way she could.

“Sure.” she says, barely above a whisper and I pour her some, then me. She’s distant, and I can’t figure out why. We clink glasses and I attempt to catch her drifting gaze as I *cheers to us*.

“Are you upset with me?” I take a sip of my champagne, making every effort not to sound like I’m desperately searching for a response I want or can work with— I definitely am, though.

“No.” She shakes her head. “Not right now, anyway.” Her smile is soft, but her wandering glances are far from me. I’m a bit fed up with it at this point, so I take her chin in between my fingers and force her eyes to mine. They’re greener than normal, fervent with something I cannot guess if I tried.

“Then what’s wrong?” I whisper and her eyes get glassy.

“Why did you propose to me?” She whispers back and I let go of her chin because I have her attention now; I’m sitting on an answer she needs.

“I told you why...”

“I want to hear it again.”

I purse my lips, narrowing my eyes at her. “Because you deserve a proposal. Just because we are contractually bound, doesn’t mean I don’t...” I bite my tongue until it hurts and her head flicks so fast to me I think I hear her neck crack.

“Don’t what?”

I clear my throat, fixing the almost slip-up that would have cost me more than proposing, and more than seducing her combined. "... It doesn't mean I don't choose you. If I could, I would have chosen you." I lean in, lips closer to hers as I betray the truth of why we're here, why I'm seducing her, and whisper, "I do. I choose you, Espie."

"You smell remarkable." I whisper in her ear, pulling her hips into mine. She grabs my hand and guides it to her breast, and I oblige, immediately cupping in firmly and bringing my lips to hers.

I barely touch her plump, sweet lips as I look into her eyes that are light green lights, telling me to do what I've been planning to do for months now. It's finally happening and there's this sense of accomplishment that floods through me as I kiss down her neck again, then her soft chest. Her hands in my hair feel spectacular.

I've grown addicted to the way she tugs at my hair and claws at my back when she's really feeling good. Tonight, she's going to feel incredible, even better than all the times we've touched each other before because tonight I will fuck her so good, she'll be begging me to do it over and over.

And I will for good measure because that's what the plan was— seduce her, take her virginity, and get the hell out of this contract. It's a pretty good deal, I think as I caress her incredible body with my hands and lips. A great deal, even.

I raise back to her eyes and pick her up, pressing her against the wall as she wraps her legs around me, arms around my neck, eyes focused and sparkling.

"You really are incredibly stunning." I whisper, pressing my forehead to hers.

She bites her bottom lip, cheeks a little flushed, as she traces a finger around the outline of the tattoo on my chest. After a second of chills spreading from every place that her skin is on mine, I raise her chin, so she can look me in the eyes.

Before I can speak, her eyes flicker with a hint of concern as she whispers, “Are we really doing this?”

I lick my lips, looking down at hers then up, brushing her long dark hair behind her ear. “I’m ready if you are.” I trail a hand down her breast and gently cup both, rubbing my thumb over one of her erect nipples. Chills rise over her chest and I gently kiss them as she lets out a soft breath, eyes no longer hesitant, but hungry. Her lips part, eyebrows pulling together as she gently swipes her index finger over my bottom lip.

With a resolved nod, she whispers. “I’m ready. I want all of you.”

## Chapter Twenty Six: Espie

MY LIPS ARE NEARING ADRIK, words I don’t know how to comprehend, falling from his lips. “*I choose you, Espie.*”, he said to me just moments ago like they were words curing the greatest aches of my heart. And I want to believe him, I do, because it will make everything so much easier. At least that’s how it seems right now— that Vince can’t do anything about this contract and I really am stuck with the man sitting in front of me.

At least if we’re stuck together, he won’t hate me, in fact, it seems like he really wants me to be his. Though, he hasn’t actually answered my question the way I had hoped. *Why did he propose to me?* He’s a very matter-of-fact type of person. Not in the smart way, either, though I won’t deny his intelligence. Emotions are something he really doesn’t have a forte for, but the explanation he gave me is highly emotional.

So, there are two options here that could be the reality. One is that he’s somehow radically shifted to having some semblance of compassion for our complicated relationship, and is now completely on board. Or—the more likely option—he’s playing a game still, but I don’t understand what he gains from it. That leads back to square one— confused.

His lips are less than an inch from mine, and all of my insides are pulsating to the speed of an unknown beat that

always seems to fill the space between us— rapid, rushed, desperate. And I do want him desperately right now because he’s shown me a new side of him because I hope he cares for me in some way now that he didn’t before.

“What are you thinking?” He whispers, brushing his lips against mine as his eyes glance down at my breasts then back up.

“I want you.” I whisper, and he tenses his brows like he needs me to spell it out for him, though he understands what I’m asking. I can tell by the slight grin turning up the corners of his plump pink lips. I elaborate implicitly, “*All of you.*” The words fall from my mouth as if they are not my own, but they are. Completely and totally my will and desire pushing through any ounce of common-sense left in my longing lips that need Adrik like I need to breathe.

When he kisses me, all else falls away, and I’m shocked as he runs his hands down my body in the dim light surrounding us, that I’m his. At least, for right now, I’m the object of his affections. Perhaps that’s seriously deluded that I’ve come to a point where even the idea of him touching me in this way, makes my heart jump, but it does. So, I guess in a way, I am deluded. In another, I’m desperate.

Everything about him has drawn me out and in, over and over, yet I still want this more than anything. It’s dangerous, unsafe, breaking every rule, but I can’t help myself. This new desire to let go of everything and give him myself, could have to do with what he did for me tonight— making a magical garden, dressing like a prince, and proposing...

It is surprising that he proposed, given his stance on it. A couple of months ago, we got into a fight over the whole notion. I was expressing how romantic proposals are, and he objected, saying they were antiquated, outdated and just a way to display how perfect couples can make their relationship look to everyone else.

Needless to say, we were shouting at one another by the end of it, until I left the room in tears, and he didn’t chase me.

And because he didn't care enough to hunt me down to apologize, I cried even more.

We had just made our little ritual of going too far, a regular ordeal and I felt vulnerable, hoping the conversation could lead to some answers about what we were doing. To uncover if it meant something to either of us, other than carnal longings and lustful whims.

His finger trailing down my chest brings me back to the moment. He travels lower and lower, grazing my lacy red lingerie that I've put on just for him. It's the one I bought while Olive was in the changing rooms at a boutique in the town below. The second I brought it home, I was instantly aware of the implications of owning such an item, so I stuffed it in the back of the closet, even almost threw it away out of sheer embarrassment.

That was the beginning of letting go for me. Letting go of the idea of being perfect, and giving in to my innate desire for Adrik. I threw my oldest friend, caution, a curveball and willingly chose a new one for the first time in my life— *lust*, pure unbridled lust.

Adrik guides me backwards, laying me down on the fluffy fur blankets in the center of the lounge area. It feels safe, warm, and surrounded by books. His eyes are fixed on me, like he's trying to figure out if I was lying when I said I wanted all of him. I wasn't and I do. And if I *were* to lie right now, if I could, I would be telling him that none of this means anything to me. Which means that knowing I feel the opposite, is far too real for me to acknowledge.

That thought rages through me, pangs against my chest like a sick realization that maybe him being my first will be more monumental than I thought. But before the idea can really take hold of me, he kisses my lips again. It's so intent and fervent, I lose sight for a moment.

My chest rises close to his, and he slips his hand under the arch of my back like it's made for him. Is this how everything is always going to feel? If Vince gets me out of this contract, will I ever have passion this intense again? Or is it the fact that

I shouldn't be doing this— that I'm finally breaking the rules, and getting a say in my life— the only reason I'm so exhilarated by him?

His lips pull from mine and I tangle my hands in his hair, fully intending to bring him right back to me, and then his hand is at my heat. He slips his fingers across my opening when he realizes I'm not wearing underwear. I quiver under his touch, wanting it more than I ever have.

He begins sliding a finger inside my wet arousal. "You're tighter than you've ever been." He whispers and my jaw shakes. I hope he doesn't see, hope he doesn't determine that I'm far too nervous to do this because I'm also far too desperate for him. His finger slowly enters the depths of me and I softly moan because somehow his hands are magic and have that effect on me. Everything he does feels so incredible, I swear it's not just because no one else has ever touched me like this.

He's moving slower than he normally does, and I'm assuming it's to be careful. I try to loosen up for him, but I can't help that I've gone too far into my head and psyched myself out a bit. I didn't know what tonight would bring when I came here, though I had a suspicion, given our heated moment in the garden when we were alone. That idea has taken on a life of its own and given him permission to take my body as his own in any way he'd like. And though I didn't say that explicitly, I said enough for him to know exactly what I meant.

"Hey." He whispers to get my attention, and I pull my eyes from his hand at my heat, back to his. Those piercing blues, normally readying themselves to attack or put up a wall, are completely opened. For the first time I really see his intentions, and I know how badly he wants me, at least for right now. I'm so sure of this that if I tell him I would rather not continue down this path we're on tonight, I think he'd be able to convince me otherwise.

Though neither of us have ever had a problem with needing to fan the flames higher. I think we're always on the verge of burning so bright it could set the world ablaze. An

intrusive thought tells me the feeling might not be mutual. That's a real fear— that it's been one way and this is some weird form of slow torture— the back and forth, the sex and fights, the courting one day and ignoring the next. Then there's the fact that he's done a lot with far too many women for me to ever think that this is something special to him. But it's incredible for me, and obviously, he keeps coming back, so it has to be good for him in some way. Right? That's what I have to convince myself of, to align with the lust practically possessing me right now.

“Hi.” I finally whisper back after his hand stops moving, and his fingers press against my lips.

“What are you thinking about?” I chuckle nervously, mostly because I'm the one who normally has to ask this question. He's always been mysterious and elusive to me, but tonight, I'm the one with secret inhibitions. And I like the way he's trying to figure me out.

“Does this feel good to you?” I ask him, looking down at his fingers lingering inside me.

“Yeah.” He nods like it's this definite thing, which makes me feel better than it should, and worse because I've not done things I thought we would before actually having sex. Given, that's where this is supposed to be leading.

“But, is there something...?” I inhale a quick nervous breath, attempting to push through. “I don't know...” I shake my head. “Something else that I could do for you?” He blinks at my lips, then back to my eyes.

“Are you asking if you can...?” His brows rise implicitly.

“I've only used my hands to...”

“I know, but you don't have to if you don't feel comfortable.” He twitches a grin that's soft like the look in his inviting gaze.

“I want to.”

“This is a lot for you in one night. What if we just focus on you and us?”

“You don’t want me to...?”

“I do...” There’s a quick distance in his eyes that travels across his face. I don’t understand why, but my first inkling is to assume he’s withholding something from me, but what could it be? Does he not want me to try things with him because he thinks I’ll be bad? Am I not good at this stuff? I’m new to it, but he hasn’t seemed to have a problem with my lack of skills before.

“But?” I press nervously, and he looks back at me before shaking his head.

“Nothing. I do want you to.”

I bite my lip before pulling his to mine. For a second, I think he hesitates, stiffens his neck a little, but we still collide. When we do, everything fades away, and it’s just desire in the air that we’re breathing. I’m fully ardent for him, wanting whatever he has for me to consume my body and take me into another reality where nothing matters but getting exactly what we want.

His hands grip me now with more determination, and he lifts my lingerie off my body, exposing everything to him. He holds me closer to his bare chest before lifting me up and carrying me over to a bookshelf. He rests part of me on one of the shelves, pressing me against it before kissing me again. I drag my nails into his tattooed back, and he throws his neck back a little, chin raised. With a grin, I kiss down his neck, covered with tattoos and the scent of the most incredible woody cologne.

His hold on me is firm and assuring. I’m exhilarated by him, lost in what we are to each other currently— tools of pleasure. If I keep telling myself this, I can have him the way I want and ignore my heart telling me to stop this immediately. I reach for his sweats by sliding my finger tips down his abs, but he stops me right when I’m at the line of his boxers underneath them. He grabs my hand, and brings it back to his chest before whispering into my ear, “Not yet”, then placing me on my feet.



I freeze, watching as he drops to his knees, pulling me closer to him, and I hold on to the shelf behind me to steady myself on his shoulders. Before I can fully gain balance, his tongue is pressed to my clit, and I'm gasping from the surge of pleasure it sends throughout my body. He traces his tongue in a steady figure eight— over my opening, then back to my mound.

It's a form of endurance, trying to hold myself steady as he rolls over me. He speeds up just a bit but continues in the same pattern until my legs are shaking, and he's slipping a finger inside me. His adamant tongue flicks over my aching clit until I lose control over everything, and I'm grinding my hips into him. He steadies them just as the bursts of pleasure become too much for me to bear, and I let out a moan as the height of my pleasure takes over.

Chills rise across my thighs as he grips them tightly, knowing full well that I'm at my peak, but not slowing down. I try to reach for his head, tell him I've come, but he grabs it and carries me back to the fur covered center of the lounge.

He drops me down rather quickly, briefly knocking the wind out of me, but my collision with it is nothing compared to the pleasure building once again. He's at my opening again, and he doesn't stop, pulling my thighs over his strong shoulders just as I rise to a pleasure I've never known. It's out of this world, immeasurably euphoric.

I can't hear myself for a second, but I know I'm moaning his name, short sharp moans only being released because I have no other way to release such pleasure.

He kisses up my stomach, stopping at my nipples, and takes turns between the two. Our sticky bare skin presses against each other as he looks into my eyes, inserting a finger in my drenched sheath again. He moves it slowly as he licks my nipples lightly. My heat quakes with pleasure as I hold him steadily, wanting more. Then the chills rise and my head curls back, and he shoots up to my face just as I am released from the euphoric pressure, into bliss once more.

His eyes study mine, greeting me when the chills subside and my muscles relax. Slowly he pulls his hand out of my wet heat and I watch in a daze as he wriggles out of his sweats and underwear with one hand, in a swift movement. He kisses my lips with his, that are still damp from my heat and the moistness of our collective sweat. It's salty and sweet, but his lips are soft like they always are; Plump and perfectly fit for mine.

He kicks his clothing fully off his ankles using his feet. I watch, mostly because his body is spectacular and because his long hard length is so close to my opening that I begin to shake a little. He doesn't notice, and he sits up on one of the emerald sitting chairs with a soft blanket draped over the back, calling me to him with his fingers.

I rise, crawling over to him as he watches, stroking himself just a bit as his smirk grows, eyes dazed like he's never seen someone like me before. His hand reaches for my head, when I get nearer to him, rising onto my knees, so my face is at his length. I let him tangle his long fingers in my hair, guiding my lips to his tip.

"Try." He whispers when I hesitate, not sure what to do, but hoping instinct will take over. Do people have an instinct for sucking dick? Or is this a new concept? I'm pretty sure it's just as natural as everything else we've done.

With one last breath, I open my mouth. The second my lips collide with his tip, he lets out a little moan that makes me wetter than I already am.

I flick my eyes up to his as I pause, and he gives me a nod like everything is better than okay, so I continue. I suck all the way down to the base of his length and back up again.

His soft breaths, after the first two movements, grow into a moan and I raise my eyes to him as he mouths, "Holy shit, Espie" to me, and I grin up at him, watching his reaction as I do it again.

"Fuck." He whispers a bit louder, head pressed back against the headrest, and I continue to suck harder, moving faster, and so hot and turned on. I love the way his jaw

clenches when he tilts his chin, love the look in his eyes when I caress my tongue over him a certain way, and just absolutely everything about him.

I continue to suck, moving faster and faster, until he tugs on my hair and I look at him confused.

“Come here.” He whispers and I pull myself onto his chest. His hands are under my hair, and he’s shaking his head like I’m unbelievable, and I love that feeling. This whole time he’s been the expert, but this, I feel superb at. And it gives me a sense of accomplishment.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” He whispers, lifting my hips, so they’re above his length, knees on either side of him. I nod gently.

“Are you sure, Espie?” He studies my face and there is that thing behind his eyes again, that thought he won’t tell me, the one that I’d rather ignore, so that everything we’re doing, will continue. That’s precisely what I’ll do then because I’ve made it this far and because I want him completely, even though I know the cost.

I’ve convinced myself that Vince is nowhere near helping me, that I’m trapped with the beast who might be a prince who might also still be the beast. I can’t figure out which version of him is real, but I am being held by one of those versions now. And he’s sweet and endearing, and hot and adamant.

His hands hold my hips steady as they hover over him, our bodies slightly dissolved, sweaty, longing. He won’t break his eyes from me, barely has this entire time, and I think it’s making me want this even more. Because besides the stage distance that only happens every-so-often, he is looking at me like I’m the only person in the world who he wants or will want ever again.

I like that feeling, like the look of this beautiful ring on my finger even if it is a fickle promise, and maybe I just like being wanted, but at least I’m making a choice. Right here, right now, I want him. And I’ll be damned if I let the rules, my perfectionism, or any sort of familiar guilt, stop me from this.

“Espie?” He whispers, trailing my lips. This is a thing we do. I thought it was just because we liked to touch each other, but I think it’s turned into an unspoken term of endearment. Shit, am I actually delusional now?

“Yes?” I shake my head, and he pulls his finger away. I’m sitting on his stomach now, his fingertips are lightly stroking up and down my thighs as he studies me, biting his lip.

“You’re somewhere else tonight.” His brows go low and serious.

“I’m not.” I lie.

He nods to disagree. “If you don’t want to—“

“Don’t.” I cover his mouth, and he furrows his brow, peeling my hand away from his perfect lips.

“Do you want me?”

“Yes.” I nod, my body vibrating with the word like it’s a superpower to order him to fuck me.

“I’m not gonna hold back...” he trails like a warning, looking down my torso like he’s hungry, then back in my eyes with a new look of pursuit. I’m his now, I’ve said, and he knows it. I’ll do anything to have him.

“I wouldn’t want you to.” I force out, though my heart is racing endlessly. With that, he picks me up and lays me on my back instantly, hand still under me as his hard length nears my opening. The closer he gets, eyes focused on my face as I watch, the more I begin to feel nervous.

He’s huge, at least I think he is. Not that I have anyone to compare to... but what if it doesn’t fit, what if it hurts, and it ruins sex for me forever? I shake again at the thought, and though I try to play it off by jostling my head, I think it’s obvious. His brows pull together for a moment, rivets in his cheeks growing larger as he purses his full lips.

His hand beside my head lifts, finding a new place to rest. My cheeks grow pink under his touch as he lifts my eyes to him.

“Breathe.” He reminds me and takes a deep breath in to demonstrate, nodding for me to join. I take a shaky breath, let it out steadily with him. We’re a mirror of breaths for a second, and then he just kisses me. Like he really wants to, like my lips remind him of their need for his, and I fall into him and down this rabbit hole of lust and longing until his tip is at my opening. He pulls his eyes to mine. They’re toggling, dancing back and forth to see if I’m okay.

I nod, breathing in his scent as I lift my hips to his, forcing his length into me. A short breath escapes his mouth and I bite my lip because for the first time we’re both in a state of pleasure and trepidation and neither one of us wants to stop. So, we don’t. His hand reaches down, grabbing one of my hips and tilting it up slightly as he enters me very slowly.

With every movement inside me the urge to moan grows more intense, and though it sounds dramatic, I could come right now by how good he feels in me. It’s the craziest, best feeling. He’s big, definitely, but I’m not worried if he’ll fit anymore. Because he’s almost all the way in. I want him to go faster, want this to never end; his slick tattooed skin on mine, his hands all over my body, him inside me so that we’re no longer two fragments of a torn quilt, but stitched up and serving a purpose as one.

He lowers his lips to mine with a hot breath, and I let impulse take over, shoving my hips to his until they knock against his. That’s the brief pain I was told happens for the first time, the ripping feeling that sears through me for a moment.

I wince, clenching my teeth together. Adrik completely stops moving, grabbing my chin until I open my eyes.

“Why’d you do that?”

“You were making me wait.”

“For good reason.” He’s gentle with me, and for some reason that makes me emotional. I feel the tears welling up in my eyes, lips trembling embarrassingly, so I try to look away, but he doesn’t let me.

“I’m okay.” I force the emotions away, grip onto him, so he knows this is what I want, to really give it to me the way he promised.

“Okay.” He whispers before thrusting into me again. This time the pain has almost fully subsided and all that’s left is the pleasure he’s able to bring me. He grips me tightly, and I grip him right back, digging my fingernails into his skin. He thrusts faster, kissing me roughly, and I won’t let him stop. It’s like I’m drowning, but I like it and I want his weight on me, I want the pain that feels better than anything I’ve ever experienced—good or bad.

“Fuck.” I gasp, feeling myself climb and seeing in his eyes that he’s close too. Just as I’m about to explode, the friction of his length caressing my sheath with adamant perfection, he scoops me up and presses me against the stone wall by the fireplace. I wrap my legs around him as he kisses down my neck, then back up my jawline.

He’s taking his time now, teasing me because I was about to come, we both were.

“Fuck me.” I whisper when his lips are dragging across mine and his breathing is sporadic and desperate.

“What did you just say to me?” He whispers into my mouth, a mischievous grin across his lips and twinkling in his bright-sky eyes.

“You heard me.” I barely get the words out before his length shoves me even further up the wall, scraping my skin a bit, but I couldn’t care less. He’s giving me everything he’s got, fucking me so hard I can only breathe in when he’s pulled out, and out when he’s pounding into me. Everything in me feels like it’s falling forwards and backwards at the same time, as if pleasure is shoving its way into me so that I no longer exist as just one person, but two. So that Adrik and I are connected in some spirit realm where everything between us is so aligned that we’re attached to one another forever—content and blissful with our new existence.

My sheath quakes with each thrust of his long length, perfectly curving with the parts of me that need the most

attention to give me the greatest pleasure. “Fuck.” He rests his forehead on mine, and I’m getting closer, about to explode, moaning as I throw my head away from his.

He begins to kiss my neck, but ends up stuck in one spot, moaning into my skin. I think he’s saying my name and I get new chills somewhere in my chest that almost feel unnatural because I think I’m instantly addicted to this, and I’m only on the cusp of existential pleasure.

I let out a higher moan just as his lips collide with mine again, and then he lays me on my back, and we’re somehow tangled up in the fur on the floor again. We hold on to one another like we’re trying to make this change permanent— us becoming one being. Our hips are colliding over and over, and our heavy breathing is producing too much carbon dioxide. I know because I’m high off it, high off his breath and the way he feels inside me.

We’re moaning into each other’s mouths, eyes only opening to glance into one another’s until we’ve reached some sort of impossible realm of pleasure that sends us both into a fit of cussing and clenched jaws.

“Adrik.” I moan as he speeds up even faster, and then I reach another peak of indescribable, out-of-body ecstasy, I’ve ever had.

“Espie.” He moans back as I feel him swell and throb, the hot rush of his cum filling me, and he moans my name over and over into my lips as I hold tightly to him. He thrusts for a little longer, slowing down as he does. Our breaths are in perfect rhythm, like we now share a lung— among other things— and he rolls off me, laying on his back, heavy breaths as his eyes fixate on the ceiling.

I catch my breath too, wanting so badly for him to pull me on top of him like he sometimes does when we’re both finished. He doesn’t, though— doesn’t look at me, doesn’t even ask me if I’m okay after everything. Worry starts to swirl in my chest as I watch him.

“Adrik?” I whisper, breathing still shaky, body beginning to shiver from the adrenaline coursing through my veins.

He doesn't respond, so I say his name again like calling into a void, as he continues to look up at the ceiling like it's the only thing that matters to him. I even glance at it a few times to make sure there isn't something there that he's concerned about. But it's just a dark wood ceiling, vaulted into four dome quadrants like the keel of a ship, bent and bowed to a small circular skylight at the tip.

"Adrik?" I whisper like I really don't want to admit that I'm a fucking idiot for letting this happen, and I think I am because silence is all that hovers between us. My stomach churns, mouth floods with saliva, eyes go blurry, and I try to hold myself back, but I don't think I can... I'm about to be sick.

## Chapter Twenty Seven: Adrik

ESPIE'S sudden movement breaks my eyes from the ceiling. She jolts to her feet, a fur blanket wrapped around her body, and before I can say anything, she sprints to the doors. She tears one open, and now I'm up, wrapping a fur blanket around my waist in a panic before I realize, there's no need.

If anyone finds out we had sex, the deal will be off anyway. So, why am I still running towards the door, trailing behind her as she sprints down the hall and enters one of the bathrooms next to the library? She slams the door before I can reach it, and I knock lightly over the wood, worry, clouding my better judgment to just let her be. The task is done, I should be happy, elated even, but I feel horrible, and I don't have any idea why.

Shouldn't freedom feel... I don't know... *freeing*?

"Go away." her voice echoes within the confines of the small tiled bathroom. I know she doesn't want me to go away, that she means the opposite. Yes, I understand girl code, but only so I can defy it. It's a difficult language to learn, but I have. Just never used it this way, to stay instead of go.



“I’m not leaving.” I croak above a whisper, and the toilet flushes. The water runs for a while as I lean against the door, fully prepared to barge in the second she unlocks it. After a moment, the knob turns, and I don’t have a chance to catch myself before the entire door swings inward. I knock against her— very uncoordinated of me— and grasp at the air with my free hand.

“Fuck.” I growl, catching myself before my head smacks the sink and now the door is gaping, her fur blanket has dropped, and all I can stare at is her naked body. She sniffs as I kick the door closed and lock it, looking at her up and down before grabbing the blanket off the floor and handing it to her.

She doesn’t take it immediately. “Go.” She whimpers through a shaking voice.

“Espie, I didn’t—“

“Leave me alone!” She screams and I cover her mouth instinctually before I remind myself that it’s okay if we’re caught now. I retract my hand, but keep my proximity, wanting to improve it all, if only she’d let me. I don’t care why that is, all I know is I want her to be okay.

Her lip quivers as she takes a breath to speak, the fur blanket now pulled close to her chest. “I don’t need you, or anyone else, talking about this. Do you hear me? We toasted our proposal, we snuck an innocent kiss, I said goodnight, and went to bed.” She’s ignoring the fact that she’s crying enough tears to fill a drinking glass while she forces out the words like they pain her. Am I just supposed to ignore the fact that she is falling apart in front of me, turn around and fall asleep with the taste of her still on my tongue?

“Did I hurt you?”

Her face contorts at my words like I’m completely dim for even asking. “You’re a head case, Adrik. I thought you wanted me.”

“I do.” I whisper, ignoring the impulses to shut the hell up and leave.

“Then why were you ignoring me?” Her words feel like a stab to my stomach.

“I—“

“Don’t fucking say you don’t know what I’m talking about, Adrik, or so help—“

“Okay.” I hold my hands up in surrender. “I wasn’t going to say that...” I don’t actually know where I was going because the words have a mind of their own at this point. What am I supposed to tell her— that after we had sex, I felt like the weight of the roof had caved in on me? That my entire body was racked with such guilt I couldn’t even look at her? I have no intention of sounding like a fucking pussy, I want to be honest, she deserves that. But, I can’t talk to her when she’s like this, can’t bare to see the look in her eyes when she knows I’ve fucked her to get rid of her.

I convinced myself I was doing both of us a service for doing this, but after we finished, I couldn’t bare the pain it brought. And I’m embarrassed to even fully admit it to myself. So, I tried to shut it out, shut her out, and keep my eyes locked on the only thing in sight— the ceiling.

“I’m done.” She whispers when I don’t continue my sentence, when I just stand there like a fucking idiot, reevaluating everything I’ve ever done until this point.

“No.” I whisper back.

“Yes.” She stands her ground, not attempting to move.

“Espie, I’m sorry. You have to believe me. I—“

“What for?”

“What?”

“What are you sorry for?”

“I— for ignoring you... Is that a trick question?”

“No.” She shakes her head, wet lashes blinking down my chest, and I can tell she’s softened a bit, so I take her perfect chin between my fingers.

“I’m sorry.” I kiss her lips, and she doesn’t stop me. “I’m sorry.” I whisper again and kiss her cheek. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” I say over and over again, kissing every inch of her tear, dampened face until a smile cracks over her soft lips and I kiss them again for good measure.

Her head is in my hands as I press my forehead to hers, and we just stare at each other for I don’t know how long before she whispers my name like a question.

I look into her eyes, and she nods gently as I wrap the blanket around her and guide her out the door. We make a silent walk back to the room, though I know if we were caught now, the jig is up. And maybe I don’t want it to be because I just had the most amazing sex of my life. That has to be it, we fucked so well that it’s messed me up a bit. I’ll be back to equilibrium in no time. After a few more nights like this one—minus the fight— we’ll part ways and all will be well for both of us.

We reach my room without running into anyone, which tells me that the boys clearly spread the word about leaving me and Espie the fuck alone. I open the door for her, and guide her into the room, hand on her lower back.

I feel her eyes on me as I look for clothes. No sense in lying, I kind of like it— am a little distracted by it, actually.

She is fucking hot in every way imaginable, and winning the title of the best sex partner, is probably going to be a tough one to shake. I glance over at her a few times, and she blushes. That makes me laugh. She’s blushing like she’s never seen me naked, like we haven’t fucked around for months or haven’t just fucked minutes ago.

“Are you cold?” I ask, standing to my feet and wrapping my arms around her waist. She nods to me through the mirror and I kiss her cheek before heading to my dresser and pulling out a large knit sweater from Givenchy— black with white embroidered detailing at the wrists.

I run back to her with it, and she turns to face me. She really is fucking perfect— her body could cure me of any

addiction alone, but what she can do with it... Fuck, kill me now because I want to fuck her all over again.

Maybe I can drag this whole thing out just a bit longer. Just to get it all out of my system—the entire fucking and getting fucked the best I ever have. I lick my bottom lip as I toss the sweater to her, and she catches it, sliding it on with her arms raised, giving me a full view of every curve she has.

I blow out a heavy breath as she pulls it the rest of the way down and crosses the bathroom to me. Immediately, I scoop her up close to me, hands under her perfect ass as she grins up into my eyes.

“We’re getting married.” She grins, brows pulled together in disbelief, and that’s where my fantasies about fucking her all end. She can see the shift in my face, but I try to change the look, appear happy or at least shocked as well, but it’s too late.

“Sorry.” I whisper and she studies me, mouth dropping.

“What?” She attempts to pull away from me, but I hold her close.

“I’m not good with relationships.” I shake my head, endeavoring to form new words that won’t sound so stupid and weak, but she cups my cheek with her soft hand and forces me to look at her.

“I’m not either.” She shrugs, but she’s not the problem and I hate that she’s making it seem like we’re in the same boat because we aren’t. If anything, she’s perfect, and I fucked that up.

“Okay”, is all I whisper back, to keep from fighting for her value that I’ve failed to fully see until now— too little too late, I guess. Doesn’t mean I can’t pretend I’m in the same boat with her, at least a little longer, if only to let me get these fucking feelings out of my system. “Stay with me tonight?” I whisper into a kiss that she eagerly reciprocates.

“I don’t know...” she trails before I kiss her again.

“Stay with me.” I repeat and she sighs. “Olive sleeps in late, by the time we’re up, she won’t even know you’ve been

out the whole night because we'll be down at breakfast.”

I think she nods, lashes flushing against her pink cheeks.

“Is that a yes?” I grin, and she lowers her chin like I'm dumb, but she likes it, and I like that look, makes me feel high in the best way.

“Yes. I'll spend the night.” She nods, and I kiss her forehead, entangling my fingers with her as I lead her to the bed. We curl up next to each other and I wish I hadn't given her this sweater because we'd both be fully naked right now if it weren't for my generous chivalry; Never have I ever described myself as either of those things. I must really have had life-altering sex.

She twists around in my arms right before I'm about to nod off to sleep, and I feel like I've been pulled from my dreams with a magnet.

“Adrik?”

“Espie?” I whisper sleepily, barely moving my mouth, eyes closed.

“Do you think we can share a room? When we get married, I mean.”

“What?” My eyes fly open to see the seriousness in hers. “Why are you thinking about that right now?”

“Because, my mother and father never shared a room, but my brothers share rooms with their significant others.” I could barf being alluded to as a *significant other*.

“I don't know why we're talking about this right now...” “what I wish I could say is, no. No, we aren't getting married, so, no, we shouldn't share a room and fuck, you're digging that knife deeper into me because I hate the fact that I'm such a fucking asshole. And fuck her for making me hate myself—that's a very difficult task that no one has been able to conquer. No one, until her.

“I think a lot before I go to sleep.” Same, but something I'm trying to avoid tonight. Given the very divided and frankly confusing stream of consciousness since fucking her. “And I

thought, since you like this... cuddling and stuff, that you'd probably enjoy sharing a room. I'd always hoped my husband would want to share a room with me and—?"

"Espie." I cut her off. "I just..." I exhale through my nose, lips firmly pressed together. "Can we talk about this in the morning, please?" She blinks at me like I've wounded her bit, but she has enough sense to recognize I'm in no way cognizant enough to have this conversation. Of course, I would share a room with her. Of course, I would want to hold the person I choose close to me at night and know they are in the safest place they can be. I can't say that though, not to her, not when I'm sabotaging us.

"Okay." She whispers, turning back around in my arms. I think she tries to pull away from me a bit, but I don't let her. I bring her close to my hips, so her skin is against mine and our body heat can grow even more. Not sure why I do it, except the fact that I want her to know I care that I've hurt her, and keep hurting her. Yet another reason why it's better if we don't end up together.

She dozes off to sleep, her breaths growing longer and heavier while I lay wide awake. What she asked is playing on a loop in my mind, and I hate myself for shutting her down. This is all a little fucked, but it's for both of our freedoms, so it is what it is.

If I can sneak around a bit more with her, help her see that I'm terrible for her and give me a way to work out my need for her body... then we'll both be good to part ways. At this thought, I remember that we left evidence of more than just a celebratory glass of wine in the library. Our clothes are still there, probably laying by the fire or strewn across an isle of bookshelves.

If anyone finds them, we'll be over— the gig will be up, and I'll not be able to draw this out to make it hurt less for both of us. Sure, it's for different reasons, but I can't have that being snubbed by some half-wit security boy finding the evidence, or worse, Olive.

The only solution is to make a trek upstairs immediately, or else I can't sleep tonight. As I slide out of bed, leaving Espie soundly asleep, I catch a look at her soft skin, dips of her cheekbones, and fluttering lashes. My heart lurches out of my chest and all I can do is grab it, shove it back inside and tell it to get the fuck over whatever the hell it's doing to me. I will not be sleeping next to Espie much longer— won't be bound contractually, or fucking around with her.

As I force myself out the door to go grab the only things capable of ending this trip besides the truth of what really happened, I shove both my hands through my hair.

Shit, I've really made a fucking mess of things. But then again, what's new?

### **Chapter Twenty Eight: Espie**

I WAKE up to the sound of booming thunder that somehow shakes the entire safe-house at the base. My eyes fly open, and I'm confused for a moment where I am until my mind gives me an instant playback and I turn over in the dark to an empty bed.

I don't know what the time is, but it's definitely not morning, and Adrik is gone. The bathroom door is wide open and from where I'm laying, I can't see any movement. The only sound permeating throughout the room is the heavy, torrential rain pounding against the windows and exterior of the castle.

It wasn't my plan, any of this— having sex with Adrik, spending the night in his room, and certainly not waking up to an empty bed. There's a twisting sick feeling in my stomach, traveling up to my throat and I try to swallow it, shove down the anxiety, and force my eyes shut again, but I can't. I watch the windows steadily stream water, blurring the view and making it look like black waves curling and swishing outside.

Every worry I have is creeping in my mind as I lay alone in bed. When Adrik is with me, I can forget them for a while, but what if this is the worst thing I could have ever done to my

family? No amount of antidotal kisses or distracting touches could alter the reality—I am no longer a virgin, and if Vince finds out, there will be no end to this marriage.

A tear streams down my cheek as the door creaks open, and I turn over to see Adrik, arms full of the remnants of our night in the library. He shuts the door, brows pulling together in a low, concerned sort of way when he sees me. After tossing the pile to the floor, he crawls in bed, scooping me up in his arms and kissing my forehead.

“Are you okay? What happened?” He grabs my face in his hands, studying it for anything that will give him some sort of idea as to why I could be crying again. Why is it that I’m always crying over him in some form or fashion?

“I’m okay.” I whisper, lips shaking, and his mouth parts like he doesn’t believe me.

“Espie...” he trails, and I tuck my head into his chest.

“We can’t be apart.”

“What?”

“We can’t ever end this contract.”

He’s silent for a second, and I’m not confident why. I glance up just as he answers. “Were we thinking that was an option before...?”

“I’m sorry.” I sniff. “I’m not trying to be confusing.”

“You’re confusing me. Did you have a bad dream?” I don’t have a good answer for him, so I just nod, and he tilts his chin up like he’s cracked the code, pulling me closer to him and rubbing circles in my back. I love his hands on me, I always forget myself when they’re tracing my skin or holding me intently.

“Just try to sleep, okay?” He whispers before kissing the top of my head and I nod, burying my head further in his chest, now covered by a sweatshirt he must have put on to go fetch our things.

Before I realize it, the smell of his woody soft shirt and the feeling of his safe hold on me, lulls me to sleep. My dreams



are littered with images I haven't thought of nor seen since I was a child. Beauty and the Beast, the cartoon... It's like I'm stuck in a loop of watching all the parts I hate. The wolves chasing Belle, an arrow going right through the Beast's heart, the curse on a spoiled rich boy with no love in his heart. Over and over and over, they swirl around my head until I wake up feeling so sick I might puke.

The rain is still pouring down the window like it was last night, but it's clearly morning— early, but still, morning. I twist around in Adrik's arms, and he groggily groans, pulling my hips back to his.

"I need to go back to my room." I whisper and he groans back in response. "I'm serious." I barely get the last words out before he's kissing down my neck and making me forget everything I need to do. The sickness from my nightmares dissipates almost instantly like he is medicine for my worries and I reach back, grabbing the choppy jet black hair at the back of his tattooed neck.

He grips my hips ever tighter, slipping a cool hand down to my heat, still warm from being wrapped under the blankets with him.

"You should've slept in your room last night." He mumbles into my skin, sending chills over my entire body until I feel his arm between my legs. He kisses down my nape, grabbing the bottom of the sweater he gave me and pulling it up. I shimmy my arms out of it as he pulls it off my head, kissing down my back and squeezing my breasts with his hand as the other one tosses the sweater to the floor.

He stops kissing for a moment, and I tilt my head behind me to watch him pull off his sweater and throw it behind him. He grins at me sleepily, eyelids still heavy, but the piercing blues revealed behind them want me as badly as he's made me want him. Grabbing my hips again, he brings me close to him and our bare bodies collide under the covers as he kisses my lips, sliding a finger down to my pussy, already wet and aching for his touch.

I reach behind me just as he begins to rub his finger over my clit. His hair twists in my fingers like it wants me there as much as I want to be and his breath is in my ear, my heart rate spikes. My skin pulsates with pleasure that leads me into a blissful explosion, curling my toes and taking my breath away.

Just as I begin to let out a moan, he covers my mouth with his hand and I know I have to be quiet, now more than ever. We're a few feet from Olive, and though she will be sound asleep, that does not mean she's impervious to curious noises coming from Adrik's room.

I take deep, long, steady breaths through my nose as he plunges his length into me from behind. The pleasure is unimaginably immense. There is no trace of pain like there was last night. He's hitting every spot I need him to as he thrusts in me like, body colliding with mine over and over as he kisses down my neck.

We're both close now, though I can tell he's trying not to make noise, he's moaning a little in my ear and I grin, arching against him as he breathes faster, moves faster. He feels so good inside of me, better than I could have ever imagined, and I want more. The press of him against my back, the way it feels as he pushes me forward, one hand on my ass as he speeds up, his thick cock pounding into me in a way that feels so blissful, I never want it to end.

*So this is what Olive has been going on about all this time.*

We come together at the same time, our bodies clinging to one another in perfect rhythm as his heat releases inside of me. Our friction is even more blissful than the last time as he slows down, pulling out and releasing my lips from his grasp. My chest rises and falls with his as he holds me close to him. Our naked bodies never feeling quite as vulnerable as they do now — in the stormy light of day, in his room, after entering one another's depths, the only way he truly could.

"You're not leaving now." Adrik whispers groggily.

I breathe a laugh. "I'll leave the second you fall asleep."

“Noooo.” He draws out in a sleepy whine as his long arms double up around my waist.

“I cannot get caught leaving here, Adrik.” He nuzzles his head into my back and I shake my grin, imagining his sleepy pouty lips and blinking thick lashes pretending to be sad. After a while, our breathing settles and his body goes soft and relaxed. I pry myself out of his arms and slide out of bed, glancing over at him as I pick up his sweater off the floor and pull it over my head.

He really is the hottest human I’ve ever laid eyes on. His strong jaw, clenched, his lips puffed, perfect nose sloping up to his thick lashes and furrowed brows. The look of his jet black hair sticking to his starkly pale forehead sends a smirk rippling across my lips, and his tattoos covering his body that I’ve mostly memorized, make my heart leap.

I walk over to his dresser after forcing my eyes away from him, so as not to get back into bed and fall asleep next to him again. In the top drawer I find a pair of sweats, and I slide into them before quietly exiting the room and crossing over to mine. Thankfully, when I open the door, Olive is sprawled out in the center of the bed, mouth parted, short brown hair all over the place as she lightly snores.

I breathe a sigh of relief as I shut the door behind me with absolute caution to make sure it doesn’t make a sound, and then I cross to the closet. There I pull out my Miu Miu Cotton Striped Cardigan in navy and red with brown buttons down the entirety of the cropped, ribbed material and a dark navy collar. Next, I grab my Prada cream corduroy overalls and some navy socks.

After stripping out of Adrik’s clothes still hanging off my frame, I toss them into the laundry shoot and head straight for the bathroom to take a shower.

While I’m washing away the memory of Adrik still fresh all over my skin, I think I should have gone to the gym. Perhaps it would have served as a means to an end—the end being, my feeble attempt to forget my fated relationship with Adrik.

It's not that I don't have the most fun I have with anyone when I'm alone with him. If he's in a good mood, we are in this perfect synchronization that's so unstoppable it's almost scary. But when he shifts and something ticks him off, or he mysteriously puts up a wall, it's like we've taken twenty steps back. It wouldn't be so addicting if every step forward didn't feel so pert and monumental. Like the stars align every time we look at each other and breathing the same air isn't suffocating, it's magical and mesmerizing.

I step out of the shower, no less confused about what to do, and even more distraught over what I've done. It's weird that I feel so secure with him, yet so unsteady at the same time. And I wonder if the unsteadiness is from the root of this all— the inevitable.

Vince's promise to me is no longer on the table, not if he knows what I've done. That's the truth, even if I wasn't with Adrik and this whole thing was a horrible mistake, I would still be considered unsuitable for marriage. Purity— as antiquated as the notion is when it's attached to sexual expression, is still a rule unchangeable even by our new era initiative. This is the way things in my world work, it's the way they always have, and I've gone and metaphorically— as well as literally— fucked it up.

I quickly dry my body off and ring my hair out, turning on the blow-dryer and trying not to think about anything else, though that's a really tall order for my busy brain. After my hair is sufficiently dry, I twist it up into a messy top knot and slide into the clothes I picked out. My clip on gold hoops that could wrap around the length of the tip of my finger are still resting in the center of the vanity from the last time I wore them. So, I put them on too before sliding on my navy socks and stepping out of the steaming bathroom.

Thunder booms loudly just as my stomach growls, and I decide it's time for breakfast, so I tip-toe over to the door.

“Wait.” Olive alarms me just before I grab the handle. “Where were you?”

“I was just in the shower.” I quickly say, not turning my head towards her.

“No.” She presses. “Where were you the entire night?”

“I was here...” I am lying through my teeth and when she pauses for longer than I expect, I turn around to see her furrowing her brows like she really can’t remember.

“Huh.” She finally nods.

“Hungry?” I change the subject as soon as I can, and she nods again.

“I’ll wait for you, if you want to get dressed and come down with me.”

“No, no. That’s okay. You go ahead.” She waves, still looking rather dazed, like she can’t recall a memory. It’s probably because she and I never lie to each other. I’ve gotten too good at lying to her on this trip. I’ve had to, though... what with my little addiction to Adrik that’s spun completely out of control.

My stomach ties in a knot as I turn back around, pull the door open and step into the hallway. It’s quiet, but I can hear a few of the boys walking upstairs.

They reach the top of the stairs just as I do, and I immediately notice Barth in the front and center of them. All Bratva boys, serious looks on their faces as they nod good morning and walk right past me like they’re on a mission. I grab the railing to head down the stairs, and really, I was about to, but my curiosity has piqued. So, I twist my body around as far as it will go and watch as they head right to Adrik’s door.

They don’t even knock. Barth just opens the door, and they all file in like they’re meant to be there, and honestly, I get worried. Quietly, I turn back around and slowly creep across the wood planks, all the way to the frame of his door that’s cracked open.

“What do you mean?” Adrik asks with a growl.

“You’re supposed to be courting her, not doing this.” Barth grunts back, and I have to cover my mouth to keep from

squeaking. Holy shit, they know?

“You think the San Giovanni’s are actually going to follow along with the boss’s plans when I marry that girl?” *That girl?* The cold tone he’s using sends shivers down my spine, and now I’m shaking like the first wave of an earthquake hit, and I know there’s more shockwaves to come, so I steady myself with the wall.

“Sir, what are you insinuating?”

“I’m *insinuating* that we ditch the boss’s plans. They’re outdated and everyone is growing sick of his mis-steps.”

“Kias wouldn’t have wanted this.” Barth’s concerned voice warns.

“Kias is dead.” Adrik spits back. “And you know who killed him?”

A new voice speaks up, weak and young. “One of the San Giovanni’s...”

“No. My father. Out of sheer stupidity for sending him into a trap. His leadership is outdated.”

“And you’re going to be a new type of leader?” Another new voice pipes up of, thick Russian accent, robust in tone.

“I have zero interest in becoming your leader, but that’s where we are, aren’t we?”

“Adrik, we didn’t come here to fight.”

“Good because I won’t be fighting anyone on this.” his hands clap together, and I try to lurch around the corner to get a better look as he continues. “I fucked Espie to get the fuck out of this contract and that’s it. I have no feelings for her. Is that clear?”

I think my knees hit the floor before I realize they’ve buckled in. And I’m trying to catch my breath like I’ve been running a marathon, but there isn’t enough air in the world to help me take enough in. Everything is spotty, my eyes are throbbing and then my head collides with the floor, welcoming me into a dark panic room that is the recesses of my subconscious.

All that echoes through my mind is his words, slamming against me over and over until I'm screaming into an abyss.

Adrik Mikhailov has ruined me, and I willingly welcomed it upon myself.

## **Chapter Twenty Nine: Adrik**

THE MOMENT I hear a thud outside my door, I get paranoid. More paranoid than I already am by saying the things I have. While they should be true— and were, at some point or another— part of me cannot shake the pain I feel to speak them aloud. Is it because saying it to people and thinking it in my head is so much worse than I anticipated?

Or is there another reason why saying I feel nothing for Espie and fucked her as part of a plan to leave her, has affected me this much?

“What’s that?” Barth turns towards the door and swings it open just as Olive pushes past him.

“Move.” She grunts and surprisingly Barth looks like he actually did get shoved pretty hard. Olive stomps over to me, red-faced, about to lay in to me for something stupid, I’m sure. Probably for waking her up before noon.

I raise my brows at the group of boys for them to leave, but they’ve barely filed out when Olive throws the first punch.

“Oh shit.” One of the boys mumbles under his breath as I catch her fist before it hits my nose. She whips her hand away and is gunning for another as I plan to block it and Barth grabs her from behind. She grunts, teeth baring, eyes fiery and determined to get out of his clutches, but he is stronger than she is. Her movements are swift, and he wasn’t prepared earlier, but he is now. And he isn’t going to let her go until she calms the fuck down.

“Olive.” He whispers to her, and I feel like I should leave the room. “Calm.” I flick my brows up at her and cross my arms over my chest as she takes a few deep breaths, and he lets her go.

She flies at me the second he does, and before I have a chance to react, her fist successfully collides with the right side of my face. My bottom lip and cheek burn instantly with the stinging pain of a strangely powerful punch for someone of her stature.

“What the fuck?” I growl, tasting the metallic heat of blood flooding my mouth from an unknown source. She winds up for another, and I know I’m in the Bratva and all, but I won’t hit a girl. No way, especially not Espie’s sister.

I hold in my fury and take a step back, clutching my face as Barth locks her in place again.

“You can talk to him, but I’m not letting go of you.” He grunts as she fights him for a bit before relenting, eyes welling with tears.

“How could you do that to her?”

“What?” My heart instantly drops to the floor, and her words stomp on it before she’s even specified what she means. Because I know full-well what she is asking, know the connotation, and I know she’s heard my conversation with the boys.

“You fucking bastard! You really are fucking useless, aren’t you?”

“Where is she?” I growl back.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?”

“Yeah, dipshit, I fucking would! That’s why I fucking asked.”

“You’ve been doing a lot of fucking, then?”

“Shut the hell up, you have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You don’t get it, Adrik! You’re nothing. You’re done.”

“What does that even mean?” I spit back, looking behind her to see if I can spot Espie in the crack of her open doorway.

“Don’t you go to her!” She threatens, and I sickly laugh, mostly to keep from screaming for them both to get out. God,



the fucking feeling of my shouts, tensing my jaw and hitting the backs of my teeth as they come out, is all I need right now. Then I remember, I haven't fucking smoked in days. That's a new record for me.

I don't say anything as I turn around, ignoring this entire shit fest transpiring and digging through my draws until I find a packet.

"Sir..." Barth has his diplomatic voice on, and I won't have it. "It would be best to talk this out— all of us."

"Are you shitting me?" Olive growls, and I cop a fake smirk that hurts me worse than I've already hurt myself by making such a fucking catastrophe of everything. I crouch over to my fireplace and light it, cross back to Olive with it in my mouth.

"I need to talk to Espie."

"She never wants to see you again."

"You told her?"

"No, daft dickwad, you did."

I immediately recall the knock at the door, a few minutes before Olive's barging in. How much did she hear? Clearly, everything she needed to, to conclude I'm undoubtedly who everyone thinks I am— a good-for-nothing disappointment. Well, fuck everyone. I made the hard choice for both of us, at least that's what it seemed like at the time.

I blow out a thick cloud through the center of my mouth, right in Olive's direction, and she coughs drastically, like I've really blocked her airways.

"Adrik, knock it off." Barth snaps, and I cock up my brows at his audacity.

"Excuse me?"

"I said, knock it off." He enunciates and I lick my bottom lip. Fuck, nicotine is the only thing keeping me from flying off the hinge right now.

"I need to talk to Espie." I press, eyes back to Olive.

“No.”

“Then, I’ll just go find her.” I blow out another puff, and this one hurts my busted lip. There’s blood on the cigarette, and I whip my head back to Olive, who smirks like she’s proud of her work.

“She hates you, Adrik. You ruined her life, and you have the fucking delusional confidence to go after her now? People like you never change. Even when someone as good as Espie comes along. It’s sad. I feel sad for you.”

“A nice sentiment, but I don’t need your pity. And I certainly don’t need you pitying me so you can feel better about yourself.”

“You don’t know me at all.” She shakes her head spitefully with an unbothered grin, and she’s right. But I wish I did, so I could know where to punch that it’d hurt.

This is bullshit. All of it. It’s better I end it all now. Put everyone out of their misery.

I pull out my phone and call my father, put in on speaker, so Olive knows I’m letting them both go.

“Adrik?” *Otets* answers.

“I have some unfortunate news to report.” Olive stiffens her nose, trying to break free from Barth again, who holds her back with concerned eyes at me. I don’t need anyone to worry about this anymore. I broke us out of a shit deal, and now Espie can be with someone who doesn’t fuck her up so badly. For the first time, I’m actually giving her what she wants, what she deserves, with no strings attached.

“Out with it. I don’t have time for dramatic anticipation.”

“Esperanza is not a virgin.”

“Are you fucking kidding me? She isn’t? How did you find out?”

“I have sources... regardless, it’s definite.” There’s a long pause, and I figure he’s cursing under his breath or taking a shot of that Vodka bottle on his desk that he hasn’t cracked open since the day Kias died.

“The deal is off, then. I won’t do anything more to cause higher tensions within this family. I’ll alert Vincenzo that the deal is off, and I need you on the first plane back tonight. Is that clear?”

“Well, I had some ideas about—“

He cuts me off with a volume that cracks the audio on my phone. “*Is that,*” His voice evens out to a forced calm. “Clear?”

I lick my bottom lip angrily as Olive takes a breath to speak.

“Yes, Sir.” I hang up immediately before she can say anything, and Barth lets her go.

“You’re free.” I wave her out the door with a flick of my wrist, but she just stares at me, dumbfounded, distraught, eyes glassy with willful tears.

“You’re an idiot.” She barely says above a whisper before turning around to head out the door. Barth tries to grab her, speaking lowly, but she snaps away from him.

“Don’t fucking touch me.” She shrills. “Ever. Again.” Her stomps and eventual slamming of her door make me wince as I head to the bathroom to pack, taking another long drag of my cigarette.

“Are you serious?” Barth follows me.

“What?” I spit, not looking at him, as I drag my luggage out and begin throwing shit in it haphazardly.

“You’re really going to just let them go?”

“You heard the boss. That’s it.”

“You weren’t telling him the entire truth.”

“Oh, so now you’re some moral compass? Your job is not to tell me what to do, last time I checked.”

“No, but yours was to marry Espie, and somehow you got out of doing that too.” I turn around to see he’s already walking out the door, and I’ll be damned if he gets the final word.

“I’m not the one selling out for a girl, by the way. Since you were so concerned about me doing that.”

“Adrik, that wasn’t why we came to talk to you.” He spins around on his heel, and now I’m fully attentive. “We thought you should know the implications of fraternizing with a San Giovanni. Contract or not, she was not yet your wife. You’ve made a new war with our strongest ally, and you’ll pay for that. So, I don’t need you to be angry with me, too. I was only trying to prevent the inevitable?”

“And what are those? More war? I hate to break it to you, but you’re in the wrong line of work if you think you can prevent war.”

“No, Adrik.”

“Then what? What inevitable?”

“The breaking of your heart, sir.”

I burst out laughing because he has to be pulling my leg. Though, the more I laugh, the less I think he’s joking. His face remains flat, almost a little sad, and then he turns out the door as I continue to cackle, mostly to keep from thinking about what he’s said.

But the moment it’s silent, I take a very long drag and stare into space. After finishing the cigarette in this stance, I toss it into the sink and continue packing like a mindless drone. That’s all I want to be from now on.

I can’t fathom Barth’s ridiculous words, but the growing ache in my chest, like the splintering of my insides, is just about as annoying as they are. Just as I zip up my suitcase, there’s a knock at the door. I twist around to see one of the San Giovanni boys standing in the doorway.

“There’s a meeting in the theater. Everyone is expected to attend.” He gulps nervously, and I feel bad for the man. No one else was probably brave enough to order me around while I’m like this. Call it a guilty conscience or a moment of weakness, but I decide to cut him some slack.

“Alright.” I nod and follow him down to the theater. I don’t expect much, just the boys, maybe Barth excluded. He’s

probably tending to Olive like a lapdog, trying to get her to forgive him for doing his job. That's a lost cause, though. I might not know Olive very well, but I can tell she's not the type to give second chances.

The second I arrive, my whole body tenses, stomach lurches, eyes go a bit blurry when I see Espie and Olive seated on the left side of the theater, surrounded by their guys. The shrimp who walked with me here, joins them and then one of my boys on the right side of the theater calls me over.

I have half the sense to walk over there right now and tell Espie that I didn't do this to hurt her, but I don't know if that's even true. I can't figure out if anything I did was genuine. I just know how badly everything in me aches since it all fell apart.

With as much gusto as I can manage, I take a brisk jog over to the boys and take my seat in the center of them. There are a few cameras set up in the space between the seats and screen. Just as I pull out my phone to ask Barth what the hell is going on, up on the screen pops Vince's head on the right and my father's on the left.

"Good morning to you all." Vince begins. "I've called this meeting to discuss the outlined points in our contract. I think you all will find it very fascinating what we have discovered and what, we think, needs to take place to resolve them." I glance over at my father's face, who is completely calm. He knows what he's going to say, what we're going to do. Nothing can phase him now.

"And in that contract, does it not state that the firstborn daughter of your family must be given to her husband as a virgin? Is that not the rules of every mafia engagement?"

Vince's brows tense ever-so-slightly, but he's a master at keeping calm. He has to be in this business. "I assure you, that's not what I've brought everyone together to discuss."

"Well, that might be so, but I've been alerted by Adrik just an hour ago of her *impure* status."

“Are you trying to tell me that my heavily guarded sister, who has a chaperone and has not ever been alone with a man, is not a virgin.”

“Vincenzo, I don’t know how you run your household, and quite frankly have no interest in going over those details. All I know is that your sister is not a virgin, and thus we wish to dissolve the contract.”

“Esperanza?” Vince snaps, ignoring my father’s pompous reaction that makes even me want to slap him. This wasn’t the plan. I didn’t want the whole world to know that she wasn’t suitable to marry. I just thought my father would end everything with a discussion between him and Vince. Espie is in my peripherals, so I glance over at her. Her eyes are flooded with tears, cheeks shining in the light from the screen as Olive holds her tightly. She tucks her head into the curve of her neck and Olive speaks for her.

“It’s true. But Adrik is the one who took her virginity.”

“How could you let this happen? You were supposed to watch her.”

“And you were supposed to be getting me out of this contract!” Espie shouts at him, clearly forcing the words out. The boys huddle closer, keeping her out of my sight. Now the truth is out. The complete truth. She never intended to marry me anyway, and now I have no idea what I meant to her in the first place. I thought she wanted me, at least enough to say yes when I asked her out and to be seduced. But perhaps she was playing me this whole time too.

It’s a stupid thought because I’m still a dick. I fucking know. And I feel worse now that everything’s out in the open.

“We’ll discuss this privately.” Vince tells them both, and then my father clears his throat.

“So, as you can see—“ he begins, but Vince smacks his hand on the desk to shut him up

“Listen here, Nik. I won’t be bested by a bunch of violent, power-hungry fools. You’ve made too many careless mistakes, and it will come back to bite you in the ass.”

“Ooo. That’s frightening, Vincenzo. I certainly don’t see your power growing much more. Not with a whore as your firstborn girl.”

“*Otets*, don’t you fucking talk about her like that!” I yell, standing up as the boys usher Espie out of the room, whose sobs break the heart that I didn’t really know I had until it broke for her.

The call ends, and I try to take off after her, but one of the boys turns around with a knife. Barth comes out of nowhere to step between us, and I push him aside.

“Stab me.” I threaten him, teeth bared. “I dare you. The only way you’re going to be able to stop me from getting to Espie, is to kill me.” I gear up to sprint right for him, but Barth shoves me back.

“Stand down.” He growls, smacking my chest as I glare at knife-boy, thinking he’s hot shit. They disappear up the stairs and I shove Barth with little success.

“Go to the Chevy waiting in the garage. We’ll grab your things.”

He growls at me and I stand my ground to prove a point, though I can’t stand being in this hellhole any longer. “Now.” He gets up in my face before turning up the stairs, leaving me alone.

“Fuck.” I kick nothing and head up after him, crossing the length of the castle until I reach the stairs leading down to the garage.

The car is already unlocked, two of our guys are sitting in the very back seat. Pretty sure this is the car Espie and I fucked around in. I recognize the black leather seats when I slide inside.

“Ready to get home, boss?” One of the guys asks as I have flashbacks of kissing down Espie’s neck. I grab a cigarette from my front pocket and stretch over the front seat, using the cigarette lighter to light it up, taking a few puffs. Neither of the guys try to keep up a conversation with me because I’ve

clearly ignored them, and have no interest even looking in their direction.

We sit there for a while longer, until the guys come out with bags packed. They load them in the car next to us before getting in that one.

We'll probably fit in a couple of cars, considering how massive of a group we have now that the Minsk base boys are with us. They'll most likely fly back on the plane they flew here.

I take a few more drags in much-needed silence, numbing out the thoughts of Espie and the fact that that's all I have left now— thoughts, memories, lingering traces of her on my skin. Then there's my busted lip and cut cheek, Olive's ring-clad hand, delivered just a few hours ago. I touch it instinctively, just as Barth comes out with the rest of the boys. Two more cars, not including mine, fill to the brim with us and Barth joins the one I'm in.

As the garage doors lift, he looks back at me with sad eyes, and I furrow my brows at him before flicking my eyes to the outside to ignore him. But he's waving something in my face that I can't ignore.

"Here." He hands me a paper that's ripped out of a journal, folded in half with Espie's name scribbled on the top.





## ESPIE

**M**y whole world shattered the moment I knew the truth — that Adrik Mikhailov’s affections for me were nothing more than a game. Surely, I’m smarter than this, raised better. You would think so, wouldn’t you? Now I’m nothing more than a weak link in my family, unusable and unfit to marry into a strong mafia family to strengthen our own.

“It’s going to be okay.” Olive whispers to me as we board a plane that was flown in for us from Italy, the moment Vince knew it was all over. I look out the window, rain dripping down in the early evening light. It’s blueish-gray, like the clouds hanging lowly above us. We’re waiting for take-off until there’s an opening for us to leave.

They say the storm should pause in a few minutes, long enough for us to get up into the clouds. While that’s all well and good, no amount of waiting will stop the storm brewing within me and welling up over the edges of my heavy eyes. I haven’t stopped crying since I found out the truth, and I don’t know when I will.

I suppose tears aren’t endless. Eventually, I’ll drain myself dry of them. But the pain of losing myself to Adrik, will always remain. My life will be a constant reminder of that. No doubt, Vince will marry me off to the most willing candidate, whoever that may be, and I’ll gladly accept the horrid sentence. I deserve it. Happiness is nothing to me now, not when my heart aches just by breathing.

Sure enough, just as they've alerted us, the plane takes off a few moments later, and we break through the clouds. Everyone has been told to leave their seatbelts on for the entire flight because of turbulence. Apparently, this storm is spanning over most of Europe and the ocean. It's been raining since I gave myself to Adrik, so maybe there's correlation there.

I made someone angry, and now my entire world will be filled with stormy days and the sun will seem like a distant memory. That's the way I'll have it from now on. It makes sense to me in this state. A memory flashes through my mind like the lightning in the clouds below us, and I clutch my stomach to stop from thinking about it, but it doesn't work.

"Yellow is your favorite color?" Adrik's eyes were so surprised, so intrigued as well. I liked that I could take him off guard like that.

"Yes?" I pretended to be confused, but I know my smile couldn't be hidden behind furrowed brows and batting lashes.

"Hey, that's a great color... it's well... it's very you."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I laughed as he bent over and picked up a dandelion that was swaying right behind the fence lining the outskirts of the warehouse. He handed it to me like he was presenting me a lavish gift, and laughed like he was sweet, and he pursed a grin.

"It's like this. A wildflower— sunny and bright and free." At this, I snarked a laugh. "Hey! What?" He chuckled, waving it at me to take.

I'm surprised our cheeks didn't fall off the entire time because we were smiling like everything was perfect and normal and not at all the way it truly was.

"Well, firstly, that's a weed—"

He raised a finger in the air. "All wildflowers are technically weeds..."

"Whatever," I shook my grin, and he licked his parted lips, brows cocked up. "Second, I'm definitely not *free*."

“*Debatable.*” He tilted his head and I rolled my eyes before continuing.

“And thirdly—“

“Oh, there’s a third.”

“Yes. Of course.”

“Of course there’s a third.” He tapped his palm to his forehead sarcastically, and I took the flower from his other hand with a grin. “Third?” He reminded me.

“Yes. Thirdly, that was far too cheesy to be real, and I think you should work on that. You don’t want any girls thinking you’ve lost your touch by spouting off cringy shit like it’s a compliment.”

He paused for a moment and the golden sun hit the back of his head, making him look like he was glowing. That pale angry boy was gone, and in his place was a magical human with the supernatural abilities of being exceedingly hot and outrageously kind. I wanted to bottle him up, close my eyes like taking a snapshot to keep it forever in my mind, the time someone looked at me the way he did.

After a pause of his eyes flitting between mine like he saw something different every time he looked, he took a breath to speak, pink lips parted gently.

“Well, Espie, I don’t need any other girl.”

I lowered my brows at his tone, remembering that Vince working on getting me out of this, was not shared knowledge and we in-fact were meant to be getting married.

“Oh...” I breathed. “There you go again. ” I quipped, swallowing the nervous lump in my throat before he reached up, tucking a strand behind my ear that the wind kept blowing over my lips.

“If you think *that* was good, then you’re going to be blown away by the rest of the cheese I’ve got hidden up my sleeve.”

“I never liked cheese.” I laughed as he neared my lips.

“I never liked flowers.” He whispered, lips grazing mine until they inevitably connected like a perfect fit, sending rivers of longing through my entire body.

Another tear rolls down my cheeks as I recall the memory like it’s forcing its way to the surface. Every touch, every glance, every golden blade of grass like we were in some alternate world where everything was glowing and happy. But it’s not, and it wasn’t, and it can’t ever be— not between him and me.

Was he pretending, then— to like me when he didn’t? Were moments like those all a lie?

I hold back a sob, but it still shakes my whole body as I try to catch my breath. Then Olive’s arms are around me again, until I’ve exhausted myself fighting the memories and pass out with them swirling around my head.



WHEN I AWAKE, we are back in LA. It’s a gloomy day, but no rain. It’s a rarity here if it rains for more than a day— more than an hour, really. But still, it’s gloomy.

Everyone is unloading the luggage and Olive’s arms are still around me. I pull my hood off my head and glance over at her. She’s sleeping soundly, unaware of our arrival.

“Hey, sleepy head.” My face feels swollen and stiff, and my voice, scratchy.

“Mm.” Olive’s eyes open in shock, and she looks around for a second before she realizes where we are.

“I’m surprised we slept the whole time.” I whisper as the last of the boys unload from the plane and to the cars waiting on the runway.

“Hm.” Olive nods. She isn’t much of a talker when she first wakes up, so I help her to her feet. We hold each other as we exit the plane, walking down the steep stairs, and right to the open car door.

“Welcome home.” Olive’s driver for when she’s in LA, Mac, greets us as we enter the car. Olive nods sleepily, and I wrap an arm around her again as he chuckles. His chuckle reminds me of Adrik’s. I don’t know why.

All I know is that I could cry right now, and I think I’ll always feel this way; A little broken, and kind of like I’m about to crack at any moment. I look out the window as Olive curls up on my lap and just as we’re leaving the airport, the rain begins. I so hoped it would be sunny, but obviously with my luck, I didn’t think it would be. Though, I had no idea it would rain, carrying over all the feelings from yesterday—the awful, gut-wrenching, embarrassing, tumultuous feelings.

“How was it?” Mac asks when I’ve been too silent, and we’re already thirty minutes into a forty-minute drive home.

“Yeah, it was... It sucked.” I grit my teeth with a heavy breath through my nose, and look out the window at the rain rolling down the window like the early morning I met Adrik. That fateful, twisted morning that hasn’t seemed to end and the worst part is... Adrik was everything I hated, and everything I ever wanted, all wrapped up into a conundrum. And maybe I got my wires crossed there a bit, misplaced the magnet in my compass and thought for just a moment, he could be my conundrum.

But all of that is gone now, he made certain of that.

I hope he gets the letter I slipped under the door, hope he knows how horrible of a person he is because of what he’s done. Most of all, I hope he knows I don’t think he could ever do anything to make up for the pain he’s caused me and my entire family.

“I’m sorry.” Mac finally says, turning his eyes back to me when we’re at a stop light. His large features always made me think he could be a model or an actor. It’s strange he got roped into this type of life— being in the mafia.

“That’s alright.” I barely voice before the light is green, and a car is beeping at us because he’s just watching me with sad eyes, and I’m staring back, trying to convince him— both of us— that I’m fine.

The rest of the drive, we're silent, and then we get to the gates, and it's like waiting for thunder after the lightning. It's expected, but somehow no less terrifying when I see my house at the end of the long driveway. Trees twist and bend in the winds and rain, carrying on around us as we park in the very front by the steps.

"I'll park the car." Mac says, though, I know how this works. I offer a forced grin and a slight nod as he leaps out of the car with an umbrella and around to my side. I shake Olive awake and pull her outside with me just as he opens the door. She's stumbling a little until some rain hits her because she's not paying attention to where the umbrella is.

"Shit." She growls, and I pull her back to me as Mac walks us up the stairs and right to the front door.

"Thank you." I nod, and we head right for the front door that swings open to reveal my brother— all of them. I shift my jaw as my eyes flit between them, and before I can say anything, their arms are around us both.

"We missed you." Vince says first, and the others join along. After a minute of confusion and slight relief, Antonio, Romeo, and Tito pull away while Vince remains close to me.

"Well, you're out of the contract." Antonio flashes me a grin and I try to smile, but it's not as good of news as I thought it would be. You know, given the circumstances at hand and the heart I used to have left somewhere between Russia and the Atlantic Ocean.

"You're not mad anymore?" I mostly speak to Vincenzo.

"I'm happy you're home." Very diplomatic of him. "You must be tired, you should both go get some rest."

"I slept the entire way." I note and they all look between each other.

"Well, I think we should take some time before we discuss what we'll do to resolve this issue."

"Espie isn't the issue." Olive snaps, speaking up for the first time since we walked through the door.

Vince sighs, and I know it's because when Olive and I team up, it's pretty difficult for anyone to win. We're very persuasive together. I take the soft, intellectual points and drive them home, while she's persistent and bold with maintaining our stance. That got us into some fights with Pops when we were little, but Pops doesn't even know about what's going on. Not unless, after Vince got off the phone with us, he called him.

He's been in Italy, taking a trip with some of the elders. I think he left when Olive and I left for Russia.

Everyone looks between us like they want to avoid setting off the bomb we're creating, ready to defend one another and whatever point we agree on. I might be on the verge of crying, but I won't be snubbed out of knowing what the plan is, not when my entire life just exploded, and I haven't yet picked up the pieces. I don't know if I ever will.

"What is the next step for me?" I ask calmly, looking right into Vince's eyes. He hesitates for a moment, and then the boys all nod like he should tell me.

He clicks his tongue and looks back at me. "We're working to overthrow the Bratva. Rome's wife, Kira—"

"We know my sister-in-law's name." Olive bites and Vince continues with a slight rise of his eyebrows.

"We know her and her twin brother, Koa, are meant to be in charge. It's in their best interest that the issue of you no longer being a virgin is resolved. Therefore, tomorrow evening, we'll have a small wedding."

"I'm sorry, for who are we talking about?" Olive takes the words right out of my mouth as my chest tightens with such intensity, I almost grab it.

"For Esperanza and a lower ranking Yakuza boy. He's head of security, a reasonable contribution, and most importantly, his family is willing to ignore your impurities to create a strong union."

"What?" I spit and Olive jumps in.



“Of course, they’re looking to ignore that she’s no longer a virgin, they wouldn’t ever be able to marry into our family any other way. This is totally unfair, ridiculous, outrageous, and —“ I grabbed her shoulder to shut her up, and she cocks her head to me, face red like she could have gone longer. With a heavy breath, deeper than I’ve been able to take in a long time, I lower my chin until it’s touching my chest.

“Okay.” I say, looking up at them all. “I got our family into this mess. I appreciate the second chance.” They all look wide-eyed and stunned, but I’m done fighting, done trying. I’d rather be stuck in a loveless marriage than bare the shame I’ve brought upon my family. If I can still help them in some way, even in my current state, I will do what needs to be done.

“But, Espie—“ Olive’s eyes go rounder and I shake my head.

“Excuse me, please.” I say to them all, including Olive, letting go of her and pushing through the group to go up the stairs.

“Well, that was easier than we thought it would be.” I think I hear Antonio say and by the silence that follows, everyone gave him a look usually reserved for dumb things he says without thinking.

The tears in my eyes can finally spill over when I’m at my door. I fumble with the handle through bleary eyes and slip into my room, closing the door behind me gently and crumpling to the floor before I can take two steps inside. The sobs that rack my body now, are sleepy, drained, powerless. Everything in me is shutting down, and I want it to, need it to, so I can escape to somewhere in my head that’s better than this place, better than any book I could read?

I continue to sulk for hours, my body doesn’t have the energy left to do anything but this. The floor is cold, and now a puddle of tears rests under my head. My wet hair is tangled in it and I think I’m dying because my stomach feels shaky and weak, and I can’t feel my fingers anymore.

I don’t know how long I’ve been here, only that I will remain here until someone peels me off the uncomfortable

floor and tucks me in bed. If that never happens, if Olive gives me my space and the night turns to morning again, I'll lay here until the wedding.

This might be my last night in my room, and all I can do is sink into the floorboards and disappear. Maybe if I did that, I wouldn't ever have to leave my room and I could ignore everything in the world that has torn me to pieces— namely, Adrik Mikhailov.

### **Chapter Thirty One: Adrik**

I'VE BARELY CAUGHT my breath since coming home, haven't brought myself to look at Espie's letter, either. So, that's shoved in my back pocket and will most likely get thrown in the next wash cycle if I forget to pull it out. I'm going to intentionally forget because I can't think about her without getting this horrible bone-aching pain that carries throughout my body in sharp pangs.

What the hell did she do to me? How have I gotten this pathetic over a woman I didn't even like a couple of months ago?

"Adrik?" My father is snapping his fingers in my face. The second I got off the plane, I was called into his office, and he's been going over the details of some new plan with me. I could focus if I had a smoke before coming in here, and if the ripped up contract that I've just gotten out of wasn't reminding me of the shit-show that took place yesterday in Russia.

"Yes?" I straighten up, eyes as serious as I can manage, tone as grave as it should always be when I address my father — when I don't want to get punched or worse, that is.

"Were you listening to a word I was saying?"

"Certainly, sir."

"*Certainly?* What are we in the 1800s?" My brows tense in a quick twitch that I iron out before he can see. Espie— that certainly was because of Espie and her eloquent speaking.

I bite my cheek until it bleeds and when I test the blood, I feel relieved, only a little, but it's enough to get my mind away from the thought of her, so I can refocus.

“Regardless, tonight, I need you keeping watch of the Homefront.”

“Why is that?”

“Because, we'll be going to the San Giovanni's house.”

“What for?”

“To collect on a promise I made to them a long time ago—much longer than this idiotic contract.” He scoots it aside, but I keep my eyes on him, so I don't have to think about it, refocus on the blood on my tongue as he continues. “We're going to end the San Giovanni's.” For some reason, my entire body reacts and I feel like I'm being pulled into an endless pit, falling at full speed.

“What does that mean?” I try to make my tone even.

“Exactly what I said— No one in that wretched family will be left alive by morning. Whatever members of their gang would like to join us— non-blood related, of course— will be escorted to the Magdalin for immediate testing. If they pass, they will be initiated into the Bratva.”

My mind is swirling because that endless pit I mentioned has somehow ended, and I've crushed every bone in my body at the base of it. I falter for a moment and my father cocks his head.

“Are you going to be sick?” He looks at me, disgusted—more than usual.

“No.” I force out through tight and unsteady lips.

“Then what the hell is your problem, boy?”

“I want to go with you.” I stand up straight, making myself look like a soldier.

He laughs in this sick way that makes me want to punch him and then when he sees I'm still serious, despite his incompetency, he raises his brows.

“No.” He laughs, shaking his head. “No, you won’t be going.”

“Why not? I know them better than any of you by now? Or have you forgotten I’ve been exiled to Russia with them for the past three months?”

He sighs like he doesn’t have time for me, or he isn’t interested in this conversation anymore.

“You are much too close to Esperanza for me to trust you with this.”

I attempt to hide the way her name makes me physically want to double over in pain as I grit, “Are shitting me?”

“No.” He looks me up and down. “I said no.”

“But, *Otets*—“

“Do you ever listen a measly moment of your pathetic life, Adrik?” He growls, standing up quickly, hand to his belt and I know he’s packing an 8-inch blade just below it. I don’t step back though, in fact, I step forward. Because maybe I have a death wish now that life somehow feels even more miserable than before, and could be I’ve just grown up enough to be sober and bold at the same time.

“You’ll regret keeping me back.” I threaten, and he pulls out the blade, swinging it at me. I don’t flinch, and he seems shocked by this, almost irritated. So, he swings it again, this time nicking the tip of my ear. Blood rolls down it accompanied by a burning pain, but still, I do not move. I stare him down until he purses his lips into a crooked curl of disgust.

“I highly doubt I will ever regret anything besides having you as a son.” I want to lurch forward, strangle him until he begs me to stop and lets me go with them, but I won’t. I can tell by his threatening tone that he will take necessary measures to keep me away. And by the blow of his words that I’ve always known to be true, I can tell he will kill me if I take one step out of line.

“Get out.” He enunciates, and I turn around, marching out of the room with intentionally heavy feet. I head straight for

the elevator, heart pounding as I pull out my phone and jump inside.

It's empty, so I put on the emergency stop and ring Espie's phone. It hangs up after a long round of rings, so I try a few more times until I realize she may have blocked me. I may have fucked up everything for her, but I won't be the reason she—or anyone else—dies tonight.

Next, I try Vince, but he hangs up after the third ring and when I try again. A piercing set of ascending notes goes off in my ear this time, then a robotic woman's hassling voice alerts me that my call cannot be completed as dialed.

"Fuck." I shake the phone and through the glass, see some of our boys waiting at it, looking up at me like I'm an idiot. I press the stop button again and the elevator rises to the top floor and I step out and into my suite. Three of my brothers are playing video games on the couch, and they don't even notice I've arrived. I bolt up the stairs and down to my room, shutting the door and locking it behind me. Then I cross to the bathroom and lock that door too for good measure. I make my way to the back of the bathroom and head into the fully enclosed, stone shower, closing that door and turning on the water.

I will not risk anyone knowing what I'm doing.

After dialing a number of a man I know too well, for reasons too extensive to explain, I wait while it rings.

"Adrik Mikhailov, you bastard." The smile in Artyom's voice carries through the phone like music to my ears.

"Hey, Arty. I need a favor."

"Oh, I haven't given you a favor since you were..."

"Sixteen. First car bomb."

"That's right." He sounds older than how I remember, older than someone I only spoke to eight years ago. He's in a tough business—Arty. Everything the Bratva needs, the sources, and has guys to get the job done when gaps need to be filled.

“Yes... Well, listen. Tonight, I need to ask something of you. Something I really wouldn't ask if it wasn't absolutely necessary.”

“You're scaring me.” He chuckles, waiting for me to get the words out.

“I need you to go against the Bratva for me.”

The line is silent for a little too long, and I wonder if I might have missed his answer with the running water. I feel like anyone could walk in at any time and my heart is racing because Espie is in danger, and it's all my fault.

“Go on. I'm in a safer place to speak frankly.”

I sigh a silent breath of relief before continuing. “I need you to help me stop my father from making a huge mistake.”

“Which is?”

“He's going to kill the San Giovanni's tonight, or at least try. But I've never seen him this deranged. It's like he's driven mad by fury.”

“That man is always driven mad by fury. It's his constant state.”

“Will you help me?”

“Hm. I don't know, kid. It's really asking a lot.”

“I know, I just can't lose—“

“Oh?”

“Uh...”

“Adrik Mikhailov, in love?”

“I'm—“ I shove a hand through my hair and turn to the other corner of the shower. “I'm not *in love*...”

“Hm. Sounds to me like a rescue mission for one of the Sicilians...”

“Well, it's not.”

“Whatever you say, kid.” He chuckles.

“So, you'll help?”

“I’ll get my guys on it, but you’ll need to meet them at the San Giovanni’s. I won’t be looking like I just sent hell on your father without being forced to by you.”

“He won’t even know you were involved.”

“I’ll take that as you agreeing to be there.”

“Well, not exactly. I can’t leave... he’s got me cornered.”

“Never stopped you before.” I bite my lip that’s still healing from Olive’s punch, pressing the back of my index finger to my mouth as I think. “Look, kid, if you can’t be there, I can’t send my men. Simple as that. They’ll follow you from The Magdalin discreetly, and I assume you’ll be able to take it from there?”

I inhale deeply and exhale with a hearty, “Ah, fuck it.”

“So...”

“So, yes. Let’s do this. Have them meet me in fifteen minutes.”

“Done.”

“Thanks, Arty.”

“No problem, kid.” I’m about to hang up when he continues. “Oh, and Adrik?”

“Yeah?”

“Be careful.”

“I will.” I hang up and shove my phone back in my pocket, unlocking the bathroom door and sprinting to my closet. I pull out the case from the back—the one I never use. Kias got me this when I had just turned sixteen. My first weaponry set. I’ve never touched it, and told him it was too important to mess up. He laughed and told me that’s what weapons are for, but I didn’t listen.

I’m glad I didn’t because now I have unaccounted weapons at my disposal. Maybe Kias is helping me from the beyond, like he knew I’d need them at this time or something. It’s stupid, I know, but I need to believe someone other than Arty is on my side.

I pull out three different blades and shove them into the blade pockets of my jacket. Next I grab two hand guns, my favorite— .22's with gold embellishment and wood handles. Glorious little things. I pack away some bullet rounds in my boots and load each gun full, sliding them both under the waist of my black skinny jeans and recovering them with my black t-shirt.

I don't need to check the time to know that I'm running out of it, and the earlier I can get to Espie, the better. So, I head back out of my room, feeling heavy and ready to take down anything in my way. The boys are still playing video games downstairs, and it's pitch black in the suite except for the blaring tv.

I cross to the elevator and am about to go down it before I realize that might be a little too obvious. Instead, I take the emergency stairs and sprint down every flight like my life depends on it because in a way it does. To know I caused Espie and her family's death, is basically a death sentence for me. I couldn't live with myself if that happened and I don't know why, nor do I have the time to think about it.

Feelings will only slow me down. The only thing I need is adrenalin and the willpower to kill my father if I need to. That's it, that's all I can do now. The second I hit the bottom level, I remember the contract. It's torn and still in *Otets* office, but it's worth grabbing. With a heavy breath I shove my legs into action, back up the stairs and to the floor where his office is.

Before opening the door, I peek my head around the corner to see what I'm working with and it looks like everyone is migrating down the main stairs so I quietly slip into the hall and trot down the hallway with light feet. When I get to the office door, I knock lightly and it creaks open. Through the crack, I inspect the room. It looks empty, so I push open the door and slide inside, closing the door behind me.

I run right to the desk, but it's clear, so I dig through a couple draws to no avail. Just before I'm about to give up because I'm wasting time, I see it in the trash and I pull it out, doing a quick stitchup job with some scotch tape and stuffing



it into my pants before making my way back to the emergency stairs and to the back of the Magdalin. Sweat drips down me, washing away with the rain beginning to pick up outside, I rush over to one of the cars in the back.

Arty always sends blue cars— I don't know why, but it's just his thing. The driver's seat is open, and I can see someone sitting in the passenger side. The second I open the door and slide in, I can tell the entire van is full.

“Are you all ready to stir shit up?” I ask as I buckle my belt frantically.

“Fuck yeah.” A few of them say.

“What's that?” I ask, revving the engine of the Hyundai like it's an exotic sports car.

“Fuck yeah!” They all shout this time and I swing it into drive, zooming out of the alleyway and straight for the main road. I know there are other cars following us because Arty would have sent more than just a car-full to me, and because he told me that's what he's doing. I drive haphazardly and aggressively, though. The boys following me can take it, they always pull through, and they aren't new to something like this.

We're flying against time, gliding over the sleek pavement that promises to wreck us if I keep driving like this, but I won't stop. Nothing will stop me from getting there before my father.

We peel around corners, weave in and out of traffic like a fast and furious movie, and run red lights with no complaint from anyone in the car. They live for this shit. It's why they're in the special division of the Bratva that deals with more nefarious acts and tends to bend more rules than they should. It's why they're perfect for this, and why I think we might have a chance against my father and all the mindless goons he's ordering to do this.

We're a minute from the San Giovanni's, turning down the last corner of the street, and then I see the open gates through the heavy rain and I know this is our immediate in. I turn into

them and ignore the security sitting in the booth. It's odd, he didn't even try to stop me.

He looks almost— before I can finish that thought, I see the hoard of cars outside. My father's cars. Men with guns and black attire headed to the front door as swarms of Sicilian boys come out of every door at the front of the house.

It looks like the beginning of a war.

“Shit.” I smack the steering wheel with both hands. “Shit. Shit. Shit.” I growl, hitting the wheel each time I curse under my breath.

“We have to go around the back entrance.” The passenger guy says— white hair, midnight skin, white tattoo of a dragon along his jaw and curving around the outline of his face, stopping just above his sharp brows.

“No.”

“I'm telling you, that's the only way around this.”

“I'm telling you, no. There isn't a back entrance for cars.”

“Well, there is a garden we can drive through—“

“No.” I shake my head, knowing how much that thing means to Espie. It was a gift from her mother and I won't be the one to destroy that too. I've already fucked everything up enough. This is me making it right, not worsening it.

“Well, we don't have another choice.” He takes the wheel and turns it right towards the garden. I try to take it back, but he has muscles bigger than my torso, and he isn't giving up. I lift my foot off the gas, but by that point we've barreled past the ensuing war and are flying over a hedge like we're in a monster truck. The lift off the ground gives me a chance to take the wheel back just before we land, and I manage to steer us away from the garden and onto a walking path.

Grass and mud fly up around us as we spiral out of control at the back of the house. Eventually, we stop when a large tree branch from the storm pops one of the tires and immediately skids us out. The car tilts for only a moment, and then we sink a bit to the left.

“Everyone good?” I ask and there are mumbles of *yes*’s, so I glare at dragon man and slide out of the car.

“You’re welcome.” He jeers and I shake my head looking at the donut rings of mud and grass in the backyard. Thankfully, we flew over the garden and the only thing that probably needs to be replanted, is the hedge we clobbered.

I get a glimpse of the back door and as I start moving towards it, the group joins me.

“Are the other cars gonna be here soon?” I whisper so as not to give us away before we can help. We’ll most definitely be mistaken for intruders, especially considering the Russians on the front lawn and all that, but I would rather not activate them prematurely. Not before I can explain myself and help them.

“Yeah. Freshie over here will wait for them.” I tilt my eyes back to see a blue and green haired, buzz-cut, mocha-skinned, almond eyed boy no older than I was when I started to take big missions with big consequences.

“Shouldn’t someone a bit... older be left to wait?” I look back to a very unimpressed look from *dragon tattoo* man, and I shrug in response. “Just a suggestion.”

“He’s our most accurate shot in the entire division.” He notes, clearly irritated with my questioning of his aide. I glance back to Freshie, who’s smiling at me with the nicest grin, a grin that hasn’t seen death yet. Innocent, eager to do his job well— even if he doesn’t know what that means just yet.

“Very well. Good luck.” I nod to him, chest strangely tight for not usually giving a shit about these types of things. Dragon tattoo grunts in response, kicking down the back door like it’s a domino and I step inside wordlessly, though it’s highly impressive.

I’ve never been down in this kitchen before, and I have absolutely no idea where to go, so I opt to run through it, all the way to the exit. No one is here, which means they’re probably in a safe room, but would Espie have time to get there? Or would she be somewhere else?

It seems impossible to find anyone in a house this huge, especially when I don't know the layout or where Espie would even be.

"Let's split up." I whisper to *dragon tattoo*, and he gives me a nod, signaling where to go with his hands. The men behind me break apart, but he sticks by my side.

"You can't stay here."

"I will until we find the girl."

"I can find her myself."

"You need our help for a reason, let me do my job."

We're in a whisper match that I can't win, so I shake my head and pull out my gun, cocking it out cautiously just in case anyone from the Bratva has already broken inside.

He pulls his .225 out, and we take cautious steps, checking our surroundings as we do, until we're at a staircase. If this leads to the top of the steps where the main foyer is, I could guess where Espie's room is. She stomped up there the night we fought on the front porch. The night I came for dinner.

"Stairs." I nod to them, and he nods back, following me up until we've reached a level that looks dark and windowless. I trail down the hallways, *dragon tattoo* on my heels, and then we turn a corner. A light beams at the end of it, so we continue on until we're at an intersection.

Double doors to our slight right, long hallway to our left and straight ahead another dark hallway. I look between them and then decide that the left seems approximately where the foyer would be, so I move in that direction. The further we get down the hall, the more easily I can hear gunshots. They grow louder until we're out in the open foyer. I stop at the curvature of the stairs because Vince is yelling just beyond them, behind closed doors that, I assume, are his office.

He may be on the phone or disputing something with backup for what's going on outside. Either way, he might be the best shot at fixing this, so I want to warn him first, want to tell him I've got backup.

I lower my gun and make my way to the doors where his voice is echoing from, and then I hear heavy footsteps coming around the corner accompanied by gunshots.

“Get behind me.” Dragon tattoo yells, and I do. I leap behind him quicker than I’ve ever moved, cocking my gun around the side of him like he’s a barricade.

A blood-curdling yell gurgles beyond us as the footsteps grow, and then they pause.

“Dragon? What are you doing here? The boss didn’t—“ Dragon tattoo, apparently named Dragon, shoots whoever is beyond him. The Bratva guy hits the floor with a thud, strangled noises like they’re choking on their own blood continue before he takes another shot, and then they stop.

“Dead.” Dragon declares as more footsteps approach.

“Go.” He orders me, but I don’t move, so he says it again, only this time it’s booming; I run towards the doors, tugging them as fast as I can. Another shot goes off, and this time the bullet whistles past my ear, pinging off the doors in front of me. Bullet resistant wood.

I pull at the handles again as Dragon shoots at his new attackers, but they won’t budge.

“Vincenzo!” I yell, banging on the doors. “I know you’re in there.” Nothing. It’s silent.

“Gaaaah!” I growl, pounding my fists on them before turning back around to see Dragon in a fist fight with five men. He doesn’t notice me anymore. His eyes are darker, more alert for anything coming against him, but he does not have time to tell me what to do.

I bolt up the stairs instinctually just as someone grabs my heel and pulls me backwards, knocking the wind out of me as my ribs hit the marble stairs before my chin. With my caliber still in hand, I reach behind me and fire without looking as I regain my breath. The hand still drags me, so I know I’ve missed, and then a searing pain slices against my calf. He’s cutting me, blood is oozing from my leg, soaking my already ripped skinny jeans and ripping them some more.

I turn around to see he's continuing to drag me— Barth is dragging me down the steps, knife in hand, eyes furious and unwavering. The way they always look right before he kills.

### **Chapter Thirty Two: Espie**

SOMEHOW, I've managed to pull myself up off the floor and make it to the nook at the base of my windows overlooking the gardens. The storm must have knocked over things because it looks crazy outside. Mostly I force myself away from this reality and right to the pages of this book.

It's a historical romance—castles and snowstorms and brooding heroes, all the things I shouldn't be reading right now. All the things that make me think of Adrik. I'm so lost in it that it takes me a moment to react when my door busts open and a black-suited man approaches me. I know by his face covering that he's with the Bratva, and he does not look like he's broken into my room to have a pleasant conversation with me. I close my book, about to scream, but he shoots across the room, covering my mouth and wrapping his arms around me.

He pulls me out of my room and I try to make noise, but he tightens his grip on my mouth. I'm kicking now, thrashing more like it, heart beating out of my chest, adrenalin pumping to tell me to fight back.

I would if I could, but they're too strong and too determined to drag me down the hallway. We're getting further from the foyer and I know Vince is in his office. If I can scream loud enough, someone will come to my aid— if not Vince, then one of the boys.

What the hell is even happening? How did he get in here in the first place? If security has been compromised, it's likely that I will not get help and these could be my last moments. Tears stream down my face as I begin to give up, but then a thought surges through me as I relax my body.

I'm not ready to die— though broken and ruined, I am not worthless.

With all of my might, I bite down on the man's hand, and he whips it away, dropping me onto my back. The second I hit the floor, I scream at the top of my lungs, and that's when I hear the gunshots and when the masked man swings me over his shoulder and runs around the corner.

"Let me go!" I beat on his back and kick my legs wildly until he sits me down and pulls off his mask. I lose my breath when I see Adrik. Busted lip, sweaty hair sticking to his forehead the way that always makes my heart leap, and finger raised for me to shut the fuck up. I nod, though I have so many questions as the sound of bullets pinking off one of the walls, closest to me, grows louder as they get closer.

"What the fuck is happening?" I whisper, and he shakes his head, so I don't say anything more as he reloads his gun and takes a couple of shots from around the corner. A few fire-back shots sound off as he dodges them, and everything I hate about this man in front of me is gone. I don't want him to die, and could cry thinking about it.

What the hell is wrong with me? He should be the last person I want to see in a crisis like this, but he's the only person I can see that I couldn't stand being apart from. My adrenaline begins to shake my body in powerful tremors from sitting still. I know this won't get any better unless I can run a couple of miles in one direction— preferably as far away from this house as possible.

"Follow me." He grabs my hand and I wipe away a tear I didn't notice until it blurred my view of Adrik. We run down the hall past two lifeless men in pools of blood. I cover my mouth with the free hand I have as the possibilities of what horror might await us downstairs, flood through my mind.

"Don't look." He whispers in a very protective way, a way he hasn't spoken to me before, not like this. He pulls me close to his chest, arm around me as we step around things he shields my eyes from, and then we're at Vince's office doors and gunshots pop off outside like a full-out war is transpiring. I don't look in that direction as my entire body shakes with fear.

“Tell Vince you’re here. Quickly.” He whispers, knocking on the door and nodding to me.

“Vince? It’s Espie. Please, let me in!” I cry, body shaking as tears leak from my eyes. We wait for a moment and then the door unlocks, and he grabs my arm, subsequently pulling us both inside and slamming the door behind us. Every lock on the door repositions automatically, and he turns around, looking us both over.

“What the fuck are you doing with him?” He pulls out a .225, pointing it right at Adrik’s head, he raises his hands in surrender.

“I can explain.” He assures as Vince tilts his head for me to get out of the way. His round clicks into place with the flick of his finger, and he cocks more adamant than before. I shake, conflict brewing within me at the thought of losing Adrik all over again by Vince’s hands. But then there’s this part of me that tells me to let it be, to stop protecting him because he did the opposite to me. I can’t listen to that, though because it’s clear he’s risked his life for me to be here. That he isn’t with the Bratva outside, fighting with our boys.

He tilts his head to me, eyes steady, unwavering, that protective intent brimming behind them.

“It’s okay.” He whispers and my bottom lips quiver, fresh tears welling in my helpless eyes that he seems pained by. I don’t want him to die, definitely not. Whatever has happened between us, is nothing compared to the pain in my chest at the thought of losing him. I know Vince won’t shoot him if I’m near, so I will not move.

The clanking of Vince’s impatient gun alarms me, so I whimper, “Vince, let him explain.”, not taking my eyes from Adrik as if looking away will make him disappear.

“He can explain while I point this at him. The second he gives me a reason to pull it, though, I won’t hesitate.”

“Vince.” I cry, but Adrik takes his arm off my shoulder, grabbing my hand and squeezing it reassuringly. I shake my head for him not to do this, not to make me move away from



him because I know what will happen if Vince is this angry, and we are desperate for an upper-hand. Vince watches us, his eyes flitting to our hands from his peripherals. He looks like he's remembering something and for a second, he doesn't seem angry, but his stance against Adrik remains the same.

"Go." Adrik nods behind me, and my jaw shakes as a quiet sob escapes my mouth.

"No." I cry, hot tears, frightened and fervent, just as much as my shaking voice.

"Espie." His eyes get glassy as he whispers this, and I've never seen him with this amount of pain in his eyes, not enough to leak out of him the way mine does. So, I step back when he lets go of my hand, pressing myself against the wall as he turns back to Vince.

"Alright. What the actual fuck is going on, Adrik? And don't fucking smart-ass me. Just shoot straight." He looks like he's about to make a comment, but decides against it and stands for a moment in thought, terror running across his eyes like a horrid recounting of a memory, and then he lowers his chin.

"My father wants to kill all of you, and take whatever is left of your gang after this is over."

"My family is in the safe-room a hundred feet underground. They were all in the foyer for a discussion when this broke out. My wife and kids, my brothers and sisters—well, I thought Espie had been brought down by Mac."

"I think Mac was killed. There was a body by her door." I inhale sharply, covering my mouth, they both tilt their eyes to me. Adrik's brows pull together, and his whole face contorts in a pain that looks like he's sharing mine, and I just want to be held by him. Despite everything, I want to feel the safety of his arms that once felt like a weakness to long for.

"Don't look at her, look at me." Vince orders and Adrik turns his head back to him quickly.

"So, why are you here, Adrik?"

“He wouldn’t let me come with them. Said I cared too much about Espie.”

“You wanted to go with him?”

“Only to stop him, and to warn you all. I tried to call—“ he turns his eyes to me. “Tried to get in touch with you to tell you, you were in danger.”

“Adrik.” Vince warns, and he turns his eyes back to him as I try to take steady breaths.

“You conspired against us the entire time you were in Russia. What makes you think I will believe a word you say?”

He laughs indignantly, pinching the space between his brows. “Because I’m here, Vince.” Vince cocks his gun and Adrik raises his hands again. “I’m here.” He repeats softly. “I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t care about...” he pauses. “Can I please talk to Espie?”

Vince’s eyes flit between us, and I beg him with my eyes to allow it. He nods once but doesn’t lower his gun as Adrik turns to me.

“Espie, I don’t understand what happened between us.” Tears are welling in his eyes, and mine are following suit. “I’m sorry.” A tear rolls down his cheek. “Truly, truly sorry. I let my selfishness, and ego, get in the way of something seriously...” he shakes his head as another tear escapes his piercing blue eye and rolls down his pale cheek. “Inexplicable.”

“Well, explain it. Because this gun still has a bullet reserved for you.” Vince interrupts and I glare at him, but Adrik ignores him, taking a step towards me.

“You’re not ruined, not in my eyes.” A sob shakes my body as he takes my hands. “I don’t expect you to ever forgive me, or ever want to be with me, but I want you to know that I’d do anything to protect you. Even if you never want anything to do with me, I will dedicate my life to protecting you, so you can live the way you’ve always wanted.”

I can’t believe the words coming from his mouth. Everything in me is flooding like the tears steadily streaming from my eyes. It’s like every thought I ever had that longed for

him is being confirmed by my heart's answer. The one I've been ignoring, the one that echoed in the laughs we shared, lingered in the heat of our touches, and directed the fights that masked something between us, we couldn't explain to ourselves. It's like ripples of memories are interlinking over one another to crescendo up to now— To this moment.

“Espie, I want to be with you; Forever. If you'll have me, if you can somehow see past everything I am. I want this to be real, for us to be...” He shakes his head, and I feel my brows rise with expectation and shock as he whispers, “Espie, I think I love you.” He says it like he needs me to help him figure it out. Like it's something he's as scared of as I am because we're highly flammable, and because somehow we fit perfectly.

“Yeah?” I ask, new tears replacing the old and rolling down my cheeks.

“Yeah.” He laughs nervously, and I bite my lip as I watch all his perfect features because this boy I've loved since I don't know when, and then I know right here and now that I love him too.

It's like discovering you have a new freckle on the face that you look at every morning in the mirror. It could have been there for days, months, years... but you never noticed it until now. There it is, though, resting right where it should, right where it's supposed to be. And I know, undoubtedly, Adrik is meant to be stuck to me, and I to him.

“I love you too.” I whisper and his forehead presses to mine. The click of Vince's gun makes me turn my head in a panic, but it's not cocked to Adrik anymore. He walks over to his desk and sits down, looking between us both.

“I want to marry her, Vince. Please, we can figure this out, make this right...”

“No.” He shakes his head. “You may go. Fix this the way you said you will. The way you said you will protect my sister. Do that.”

“No. I’m not leaving, Vince. My family will not stop at this destruction, and your family cannot hide in a bunker forever. You need me, maybe just as much as I need Espie. And I’m not leaving here without your blessing.” Adrik pulls out a folded up packet out of his pocket, smacking it flat on the desk. “I fixed it, I didn’t understand why at the time... but —“

“Stop.” Vince raises his hand and Adrik swallows, pulling me closer to him. I’m holding his large tattooed hand with both of mine, tear-stained face, eyes pleading with Vince as he studies us like he can’t figure out what to do with us. His eyes trail to the war ensuing outside, and worry covers his expression that was once stark. Then his eyes are back on us, and he opens the top drawer of his desk as Vince pulls out a marriage contract, already signed by everyone necessary to validate it. Everyone, except for us.

“I don’t know why, but I haven’t ripped it up yet. So, Adrik,” He looks to Adrik who straightens up. “Do you take Esperanza San Giovanni to be your wife?”

“I do.” He immediately says before tilting his head down to me, lifting my chin, so our eyes are locked and whispering again, “I do.”

I don’t fight the tears that flood; They are joyful, surreal. Vince hands him a pen, and he signs the dotted line before handing it to me.

“Esperanza, do you take Adrik Mikhailov to be your husband?”

“I do.” I nod, not breaking my eyes from his as his lips part into a bright smile that reaches his eyes and sends little creases just under their clear blue light. He leans in to kiss me, but Vince snaps to stop us.

“Sign.” He’s grinning a little now, holding back laughs, and I think he’s happy for me. I softly smile a thank-you as I lean down to sign, and he nods back.

“I now pronounce you, husband and wife. You may now kiss the bride.” Vince declares and Adrik’s hand is already at

the small of my back as he dips me down, lips early meeting with mine in the most earth-shattering way. We melt together, tightly holding on to one another and forgetting everything around us.

Before I can catch my breath, the office doors burst open, every lock spewing in random directions. Adrik grabs me, ducking us under the desk and shielding me with his body.

### **Chapter Thirty Three: Adrik**

I TWIST around after metal and wood pieces stop flying. There in the doorway is my father, a few of our guys, heavy and ready to kill.

“Stop!” I yell, and his eyes flit over to mine with fury before he realizes who I am, and then shock riddles his expression before he cocks his gun at me.

“I told you not to interfere.” He’s about to shoot me when a clack of another gun goes off and a bullet soars right through his left shoulder.

“Fuck.” Vince, slides me the gun from his side of the desk and I lift it to my father, who is about to give the boys orders to kill us all. I can tell by the signal he gives— twisting his fingers as he raises his fist.

“Wait!” I stop him before his fist is up, and he inhales sharply, exhaling with a teeth-barring grimace.

“The contract, I taped it back up.”

“You what?” He snaps.

“I fixed it, and we just signed marriage papers, so you cannot hurt us without the Bratva elders knowing you went against a contract with the Sicilians.”

“Why the fuck would you do that?”

“Because I love Esperanza, and I would never let you lay a hand on her family. You could kill me now, and I’d still find a

way to protect her.” He shifts his jaw like he’s considering the loss if he just kills us all now. Espie shakes under me and I hold her steady.

“You’re a poor excuse for a son. In fact, don’t bother coming home. You’re no longer a part of this family.” This would be the first time someone didn’t get let go by way of killing, but he’s in a corner. The elders won’t care so much if he lets go of someone without killing them, as much as they’ll care about his war-starting against a contract they approved.

“Vincenzo, this isn’t the end.” He sneers, and Vince presses his lips together like he could give two fucks. And I’m feeling the same because if they ever come for us, we will handle it and win. There is no way I’m letting anything happen to them, especially not Espie.

“Let’s go.” He grunts, and the men help him out of the house. I watch out the window as he calls off his guys, still fighting with Vince’s. Slowly they back down and load in the cars, disappearing out the gate and revealing the tornado of destruction they’ve left in their wake.

“Holy shit.” I whisper, looking at the disaster before us and around us. The blood in the foyer, dripping down the stairs. Blood that belonged to Barth after Dragon killed him. It was before I could reason with Barth, who was almost rabid in his ruthlessness to stop me. I won’t remember him that way. He was a good man, cared for me when no one else did.

My father is doing something to those men, something illegal. I’ll find out soon enough, and we can end this war between our families, for good. I lift Espie up, inspecting every inch of her that I can until I decide there are no marks or scratches.

“I’m okay.” She finally whispers, and I pull her close to me as Vince stands, fragments of his home crunching beneath his feet as he inspects the mess.

“We’ll need to leave the house for a while.” He says in a daze as he walks out, calling someone on his cell and speaking in hushed tones until we’re left alone. We hold each other in

silence as the realization sets in that we're married, and then she laughs.

In the mess, in the horrible reality surrounding us, she laughs. And I look down at her for a second like she's lost it before I lose it too. We laugh between each other for a while, mostly because I think it's all we know to do now. Such a strange mixture of disarray and complete clarity. She's the clarity, my clarity. And I will never let her go.

"Alright, we're moving." Vince ushers a group of every family member who was in the safe house, through the foyer, shielding who I assume to be his daughter's eyes when she passes through. His wife is holding an infant in her arms, tears still streaming as Vince whispers to her quickly, hushed and emotional. He kisses her between fast words, and I wonder what their story is.

It seems like he's going to stay here and help clean up, but she's grabbing onto him with her free hand, not letting go. It's like he forgets everything, following her out the door as the others rush ahead, getting into their respective cars and speeding off. I assume, to meet their significant others. But mine is right here, and we don't have a car.

Olive pokes her head around the corner, shielding her eyes from the horror scene in the foyer as she looks between us gleefully.

"Married?" Her brows lift. I chuckle and nod. "Come on. We're going to stay at Rome and Kira's house. They've got this massive farmhouse, and you'll love the twins. Well, wait. Do you like kids?" She's already grabbing our hands and pulling us out the door and into the clear evening air.

"Uh, yeah." I chuckle and pull Espie closer to me as she chuckles into my shirt. Olive rambles on like she doesn't hate me anymore, so I accept that because I have no idea what Vince said to them about me to make everyone accept me into their family. Whatever it was, it must have been some sort of cinematic heart-felt speech. Either that or they're a very forgiving family.

All the clouds in the sky are clear, and the stars are shining brighter than they normally do in the heart of the city. I think I can even see star-dust tonight. Espie and I are mesmerized by it, lagging further behind Olive, who turns around with her hands on her hip.

“Are you coming?” She asks like a little sister would, and I like that she seems so young when she’s kind. She is pretty young, I guess. Doesn’t punch like it, though. I rub my cheek, remembering her nasty right hook, and she smirks.

“Gotcha pretty good, didn’t I?” She asks as we approach her little VW Beetle Bug. It’s definitely custom— pale blue, shimmery and new looking, and the interior is all fuzzy like Sherpa. I am not certain how that works out for her in the summer, but I won’t make a comment because we’re on a sibling up-swing.

We slide into the back and Olive starts the car with a wide grin.

“Do you love it?” She asks, and Espie’s eyes go wide.

“Oh my God, Olive. I completely forgot to look at it when we arrived. When did it get here?”

“Apparently just a week ago. Romeo drove it up from Calabasas. They have that custom shop there. Anyway, I thought it would be in a lot later.”

“It’s so cute.”

“And thankfully it was being shielded by that house on wheels beside us.” She says as she pulls out of the driveway and onto the street.

“I love the car.” I add after it’s been quiet for far too long, and both Espie and Olive burst out laughing. I roll my eyes but can’t hide my grin from making Espie laugh so hard accidentally.

For most of the drive, we listen to acoustic songs with girls who sing too softly to understand what they’re saying. And let me just say, it’s a long drive, so there must be a lot of those types of artists. It seems endless. I enjoyed it though because



Espie was safe beside me, holding my hand or curled up on my lap.

When we finally arrive at the farm, it's nearly sunrise and a dog runs out to greet us as we step out of the car. It looks like everyone has arrived a little before us, and the smell of freshly cooked bacon wafts through the air.

“Welcome!” A bright-eye, tall woman, with flowing auburn hair that almost looks like a fire in the sunrise, looks far too familiar. She's accompanied by a little boy attached to her leg. He can't be older than three. His large sapphire eyes look up at me nervously, and I wave. As soon as I do, he hides behind her further, and she extends a hand to me.

“Hi! I'm—“ I make the connection of who she is before she finishes introducing herself, so I interrupt.

“Kira, Kira Volvo.” Her grin widens as she nods, like she's glad I remembered her. We used to sit next to each other in one of our training classes when we were probably no more than ten years old. I haven't seen her in years. Last time I did, she was working with Kias.

“Adrik, it's good to see you again.”

“Likewise.” I gently nod, knowing better than anyone what both of us have been through. “Thank you for having us here.”

“Oh, it's really no imposition. We love guests.” Her smile is contagious, and she picks up the boy still deciding if she likes me and rests him on her hip.

“Who's this?” I ask, and he hides his face from me again.

“You wanna tell him your name, buddy?” His hand is in his mouth, tongue out, as he shakes his head and hides his eyes again. She laughs as she takes his hand out of his mouth. “This is Sawyer.” He grins at his name, looking up at her, and then she breaks away like she remembers we're here.

“Well, please, come inside. We'll get you each a plate.” She reaches her hand to Espie, who takes it gladly and whispers back and forth with her as I trail behind. The grin on my face has never been this consistent. I'm exhausted, drained, and maybe a little shocked that I'm actually free from

my family. But despite all of that and perhaps amongst it, I'm completely whole.

Breakfast is wonderful and happy. Everyone is talking like we didn't just experience something traumatic. It's weirdly normal and filled with laughter. The twins run around with their chubby little legs, zooming under the chairs and around the house like it's a playground.

Romeo has to ask them to calm down more than once, but mostly he runs after them and instigates their craziness.

"Selah, Sawyer, let's be careful." Kira calls a few times, but their laughter ensues, and she shakes her head with a grin. I look over at Espie, who meets my gaze with such peace and contentment that I feel like nothing is real—in the best way.

"You're beautiful." I whisper, leaning in and kissing her gently.

"Ew." The two little girls who told me their names were Sailor and Nari resound in unison.

Vince clears his throat. "That's gonna take some getting used to..." and Espie laughs, pulling away, and I grab her face again and kiss her forehead. She giggles and scoots closer to me.

"Well, I don't know about you guys," Antonio claps. "But Stella and I are exhausted." She side-eyes him with a grin that tells me they're not going to bed anytime soon, and I cough implicitly. Everyone chuckles at this, and Antonio's face drops.

"You know what, at least we still have sex."

"God. No!" Olive closes her ears and Vince covers Nari's ears while Scout covers Sailor's ears.

Stella coughs out a laugh through a parted grin and stands with him as he guides her up the stairs.

"Please take the third floor, back left room." Kira asks as they continue walking up the stairs.

"Gotcha, sis. We know our designated room." He calls back, and I turn, eyes wide and lips pressed together, looking

towards Espie who grimaces at me, lips turned down at the edges, teeth bared.

“Nice.” I nod to no one in particular and the group picks up conversation as normal, with Espie’s other brothers asking me about what types of things I aspire to do now that I’m free from my family. Mostly I tell them I travel, but Espie adds that I love history, and everyone starts asking me all of these questions like it’s the most interesting thing ever discovered about a person.

For the rest of the morning, we visit with family and somehow, the day passes into night and the children are all asleep in one room. I’m not a parent but it seems like a bad decision, though Espie said the cousins never want to be separated when they’re together, so I guess I get it.

“We’re gonna go up to bed. Do you guys need anything else?” Kira asks as Romeo rests his chin on her shoulder, arms wrapped around her waist.

“No, I think we’re good.” I nod and look over to Espie, who nods.

“Thank you!” She adds.

“Yes, thank you guys.” I nod as they turn around the corner to walk up the stairs.

“Of course!” Kira laughs a little too hard, so I’m assuming something’s going on that we can’t see.

“Goodnight.” Romeo chuckles, and then it’s silent again.

“Your family is...”

“Crazy.” She laughs and I pull her onto my lap. She drops her arms around my neck. “And now they’re yours too.”

“True.” I whisper, too distracted by her lips to think of a better response before I kiss her. Her lips are soft as always, amazing against mine. We’re exhausted, the both of us, from not sleeping for a whole day. And jet-lagged from coming back from Russia not but a day ago. I pull away and kiss her forehead, feeling dizzy from the lack of sleep and the intensity of our kiss.

I lift her up in my arms, and she holds me tightly as she directs me where our room is located.

“Keep walking.” She laughs, and I kiss her once more before following her orders. We reach the back of the house and a door is at the end of the blue gray wood floors and walls.

“This is it?” I ask and she nods. I open the door with my free hand and, after I step inside, gently kick it shut with my foot. There’s a balcony and the doors are opened, letting in the sound of crickets to resound throughout the room comfortably. There’s a large white bed on the far-right side of the room, and I tuck Espie into it before crawling in next to her. The room is the perfect temperature, cool and cozy.

She turns on her side, looking into my eyes like she’s trying to understand something.

“What?” I whisper through a grin.

“This just feels so...”

“Surreal?”

“Yeah.” She whispers with a grin, and I pull her closer to me.

“I feel exactly the same.”

“A day ago, I thought you were gone from me forever.”

“Same. And I didn’t know why I felt that way— why it hurt so bad.”

“And now?” She asks sleepily.

I pull my head back to see her face. “Now I’m all better with my wife in my arms.”

“Me too— in my husband’s arms.”

Somehow, we fall asleep at the same time. I don’t know how long we’re out, I just know that it’s very bright when we awake and Olive is standing over our bed, dressed in a gown, makeup down and hair pulled back.

“What the hell?” I groan as she opens the blinds, making it brighter than before.

“Get up.” She claps and Espie throws a pillow at her as I shield us under the sheets.

“Guys, come on. You don’t want to miss this.” She tugs at the end of the covers and Espie peaks her head out.

“What?”

“I have a surprise for you both.”

“Well, we have sleep we need to catch up on. Is it that crucial that we should go right now?”

“Yes. One hundred percent.” Espie curls back under the covers and I raise my brows at her. She narrows her eyes like we don’t have another option, so I nod, pulling the covers off the both of us.

“Alright.” My grainy morning voice agrees as I pull Espie out of bed with me. Olive grabs Espie’s hand, but places one on my chest to stop me from following them out the door.

“Huh?” I mumbled, rubbing my eyes, confused.

“The boys will be up to grab you soon.” I suck in my upper lip and look towards Espie who shrugs with a sympathetic smile and I sigh, “alright”, before sitting back on the bed.

Just as I’m deciding to lay back down, my phone buzzes on the nightstand. I check it, just to see who’s trying to reach me, and then I see that it’s a crucial call from someone I had forgotten I’d given a very specific task to.

### **Chapter Thirty Four: Espie**

OLIVE IS PULLING me through the house by my hand, and I’m rubbing my eyes that have not fully opened yet. It’s sunny and quiet throughout the house. Strange, considering it’s stuffed full of my loud family.

“Where is everyone?” I ask as we head down the steps.

“Oh, they’re out.” She suspiciously intones, and I stop letting her pull me when we’re at the door.

“Where are we going?” She turns around, pouting a little.

“It’s a surprise, okay? Just come on.” We stare each other down for a few moments before I relent, body and mind still too exhausted to put up a real fight. It’s breezy outside, but the sun warms up my face and I inhale the fresh air deeply just before we get into her car.

She speeds down the long dirt pathway and eventually the two-lane road that goes on for miles in both directions. I don’t say much, just enjoy the drive and her peaceful indie music playlist. It’s a sunny sort of day, making me ready for summer and experiencing a new season with Adrik.

The thought of him makes my heart race a little and my lips curl into a smile. I hope he’s okay with my brothers. Whatever the plan is today, it’s certainly strange that they’re surprising us separately and so far apart. We’ve been driving for an hour and a half. Almost like we’re going— before I finish the thought, we’re pulling into Pops’ house.

I can see part of the garden, covered in white flowers and sheer curtains flowing around the edge. The house looks as if nothing horrendous ever happened to it. No bloodstains, bullet holes, shattered windows or broken doors. It’s pristine, as it’s always been.

“How—“

“Vince called his guys.” She grins over at me as we park.

“And the garden—“

“Not yet!” She raises a finger for me to stop asking questions, and we get out of the car at the same time. I’m awed by how this could have been done so quickly, but Vince is certainly the type to get the impossible done. It’s why he makes a great leader and why I’m going to need the number for his *guys*.

“Come on.” She excitedly grabs my hand and pulls me to the front porch steps. The front door is just like new, better than it was before, in fact. They part open and we step inside to a foyer completely decorated with every white wildflower imaginable. They’re in a garland on the railing, hanging in

place of the chandelier with lights glowing somewhere within the canopy of them, and in every direction I can see.

“Holy—“ I can’t even finish my sentence, I’m so gob smacked. By the time I have the proper words, Olive takes my hand and leads me upstairs to our room. When the doors part, a flood of squealing voices envelops me.

My sister in-laws— Jess, Stella, Kira, and Scout, dote over me and begin discussing what we should do with my hair and makeup, and I’m just looking between them all with utter confusion.

“What is going on?” I finally asked when there was a brief pause between their chatter.

“Oh! You didn’t tell her, Olive?” Jess tenses her brows and Olive shakes her head.

“I thought we were going to surprise her.” She shrugs with a laugh.

“How much more surprised can I be?” I laugh, and the girls join in before Stella takes my hand and the girls part for us.

Hanging on the wall is the most gorgeous wedding dress I’ve ever seen. It’s a princess dress, but not too puffy on the skirt, stitched with colorful flowers. Slim A-line and sheer plunging neckline. The sleeves are just the right amount of poof and continue down into a sheer fabric that stops at a full-sleeve length. It’s cream and dream-like, yet colorful and absolutely me to a T.

“Do you like it?” She nervously bites her lip, looking between me and the dress. I nod vehemently, grabbing her hand and squeezing it.

“Oh my God, this dress is revelatory. It’s magical, truly, Stella.”

“I put it together for you a few months ago when all of this contract business was brought up. It was partly my fault that it happened, and I felt awful about it, so...” She waves a hand at it to present it to me again with a laugh.

“Stell, you are too sweet. And honestly, if anything, you’re responsible for my chance at happiness in a way.” She shakes her head.

“No, that was fate. I can’t take credit for it. You two are meant for each other.” She walks over to the dress, pulling it off the hook and laying it flat on the bed behind us.

“I’ll take her hair!”

“I’ll take her makeup!”

“Nails!”

Everyone is running around like mad women, fully dressed and ready for a wedding I showed up to in a hoodie and sweats. I feel as though I’m in the center of a tornado, just trying to keep my eyes focused on one thing at a time, to no avail. This goes on for an hour or so and then it’s all hands on deck to get me into the glorious princess dress and I haven’t even seen myself in a mirror yet.

The back is a laced corset, so Olive holds my hips as Stella tightens it on one side and Jess on the other. After it’s fully laced, they bring out shoe options. It sounds weird, but I’ve always had this dream of getting married without shoes. Some sort of dreamy, lush outdoor wedding where they weren’t required. After everyone is giving their input and reasons why I should choose one shoe or the other, I just shake my head.

“I’m going barefoot.”

They look between each other for a second, and then Kira nods, “Barefoot it is, then.” And they scramble to put the shoes back as Olive helps me over to the bathroom to see myself in the full-length mirror. I nearly lose my breath when I catch sight of myself. My makeup is subtle and beautiful. Shimmery mauve lips, warm pink cheeks that look natural and flushed, soft brown shadow, and brows.

My long dark hair is partially pulled back. Half of it is held back by two large braids on either side and wrapped into a bit, with ringlets hanging from it and flowing down the rest of my hair. Wildflowers are fixed into the braids as well, and the



dress is partially off-the-shoulder, revealing my skin that looks soft and glowing.

“Olive.” I shake my head in disbelief, and she grins, taking my hand and twirling me around.

“You’re a vision.” Scout smiles fondly as the other girls join her, looking at me through the doorway. It feels like a sweet moment, calm and peaceful after the length they went to put me together.

“Are we ready to start?” Jess asks, looking at her phone like she got a text.

“Yes.” I nod, for some reason, slightly nervous for a wedding to a man I know I love, and am already technically married to. This is sweet, though. It certainly was not my idea to have a literal shot-gun wedding. Now we get the chance to have a beautiful memory. And not a moment too late because our story is just as special the way it was meant to play out.

Olive grabs my hand and I take a deep breath. “Be my maid of honor?” I ask and she grins excitedly, nodding.

“Of course.” we wrap our arms around each other just as Kira flicks her hand towards the door.

“Okay, people. We’re moving out.” She says all authoritatively like we’re marching into battle, and you have to love Kira for all her Bratva quirks. I know I love Adrik for his. My heart fills with expectancy as we head down the steps and through the main dining hall that’s also decorated for a reception. I barely get a good enough glimpse of it, but if it’s anything like the foyer, I’m sure it will be incredible.

We head to the back door that leads to the garden, and they stop me right before I can exit, getting in a single file line like they practiced this a few times. The door parts open and in comes my father, grinning from ear to ear. Instantly, I smell his aftershave and cologne mixed— a core memory that always makes me feel at home. He looks me over, tears welling up in his eyes, before he takes me in his arms and holds me closer to his chest.

“My beautiful daughter. Today is a good day.” He pulls me back to look at my face and notices a tear in my eyes before I do, wiping it away with his handkerchief. “Today, you marry for love.”

I nod, pulling him close to me again and trying to savor this precious moment of him and me. Olive leaves when someone pops their head in to tell her the music has started, and the sound of violins briefly floods the room as she steps outside, closing the door behind her to bring us to the silence again.

“Are you ready?” My father asks, his arm still around me when Jess walks out next.

“Yes.” I nod, smiling softly and taking in the warmth of his embrace.

The girls follow one after the other until I’m the last to go and Pops retracts his arm, bending his elbow for me to take his arm. I do so just as both of the doors part and a soft round of string instruments play a soft ballad. A long pathway into the garden is lined with white wildflowers and every chair is filled with family— blood and gang.

We take steady steps forwards, and then I see him at the end of it all, under a flowery canopy spanning the entire area — Adrik. He’s dressed in all black from head to toe, shiny black boot that look newer than his usual chained ones. I look back up into his eyes as I continue forward, his lips are quivering like he’s trying to keep it together. I won’t look away, but a tear rolls down my cheek at the immense joy and utter disbelief, fate has generously gifted me.

Adrik is everything to me— Everything I ever wanted in a fairytale, he’s it, wrapped up in leather packaging and delivered just on time.

We stop right in front of the altar, where Vince is standing as officiant. Adrik steps over to us and shakes my father’s hand, who proudly pulls him into a hug and slaps him on the back.

“Take care of her.” He wags a finger at him and Adrik nods.

“Always, sir.” My father gives him a smile of approval just before kissing both of my cheeks and taking his seat next to an empty chair with one flower on it, reserved for my mother. If she were still alive, I would have wanted them both to walk me down the aisle. Adrik takes me by the hand and guides me back to our spot, front and center.

“You’re so fucking gorgeous.” He whispers to me as the music softens to a sweet melody with only a violin. Vince begins the ceremony by seating everyone, continuing on to declare the notions of our gathering and the traditional marriage spiel. I don’t listen much because when I look at Adrik everything else fades away.

All I know is that when a ring is on my finger, and we say, “I do”, I kiss him like the world would end if I didn’t. And we’re wrapped up in one another until the whistling starts and clapping resounds. Adrik raises our hands like we won a championship, and we walk back down the aisle as the cheering continues.

“Where do we go?” He laughs, and I laugh back because I have no idea. One of the boys ushers into the house and when we get inside, we get to the dining room. Two seats are at one head of the table tonight, and they’re reserved for us. We sit down before Adrik whispers something to one of the security boys, and he scurries off like he’s on a mission.

“What task did you give him?” He looks over my face like he’s trying to memorize it before kissing me softly on the lips.

“You’ll see.”

The rest of the guests flood in as the kitchen staff serve drinks, and within the hour we’re all cackling and carrying on as music plays in the dining foyer and the kids run around crazily. Somehow, Adrik has become best friends with Sawyer, who is attached to him now, sitting on his lap and chewing on his fingers while the guests carry on. I lean in a few times to talk to them both, and Adrik’s hand never leaves mine.

After dinner, which was mostly steak and edible flowers, the guy that Adrik sent away comes in with a box, handing it to him like he's presenting a royal scepter.

"Thank you." Adrik takes it, placing it on the table in front of me and passing Swayer over to Kira.

"What's this?" I point to it, and he leans in. "A gift we talked about a while ago. Open it." He kisses my cheek and chills run down my neck.

"Is it appropriate to open?" I laugh and he nods sheepishly.

"Yes."

"Alright." I tear it open and resting on top of black tissue paper is a little box. I open that up and find gold hoop earrings.

"They're beautiful, but I don't have my ears pierced, Adrik..." I put the box down when he doesn't say anything and peel back the tissue paper in the bigger one. Underneath it is a piercing gun. My jaw drops a little and he chuckles.

"You said you always wanted to get your ears pierced and —"

"And you promised you would go with me when we got married."

"Now we're married."

"And, I'm *with* you, so..."

"Okay." I suck in my grin, and he closes his fist in a victorious pump before pulling the gun out and grabbing his vodka off the table, dabbing some on a clean napkin and wiping my ears. The guests catch sight of what's going on and the room goes a little silent.

I think surely my brothers will yell at me, tell me no and force me to go to my room for even thinking about defiling my body with piercings. But then I realize that I'm married and completely free to do whatever the hell I please— reasonably. And I look right in my brother's eyes as Adrik pierces my ears. Vince is shaking his head a bit, but Pops doesn't seem to mind, which is all that really matters to me anyhow.

“All done.” Adrik says after I’ve barely felt a thing, and it could be because I’m a little more than tipsy. He holds up his phone for me to look at them, and I love them instantly.

“Thank you.” I look back at him, tears in my eyes because it’s such a marking moment for all of me to be given to all of him, and somehow we’re both better for it.

After dinner, we are sent off with wildflowers tossed at us as we get into a car. One of the boys is driving us tonight. To where, I do not know, but every time I ask Adrik, he just shakes his head and grins like he knows something I don’t.

We drive for an hour, and mostly we kiss during that time. Poor guy in the front probably had a night shift tonight, and didn’t think he’d have to ignore newlyweds making out in the back seat of our car reserved for high-profile missions.

We laugh between one another as we continue to kiss, until my head is on his lap and his fingers are twisting the spirals of my curls. The car stops and our driver taps the steering.

“Here.” He declares, and Adrik helps me out of the car. I nearly topple over when I see a beautiful cottage style house; Ivy running up the siding, a smoking chimney, wooden beams and lush landscape that makes it look like we’re in the middle of a forest and not only an hour or so out from LA.

“Is this where we’re staying for our honeymoon?” I gleefully ask and he shakes his head.

“Oh, then why are we here?” I laugh as he takes my hand and pulls me to the front door.

“Because this is our home.”

“Home? But I didn’t know—“

“I had it built a while ago. It finished up just this morning. I just wanted a place to escape to when the Magdalin felt overcrowded. I also hated living next to my ghost brother’s old room.”

“How did you choose the style?” I’m shaking my head and looking around at everything in awe.

“Well, I always loved the town we visited at the safe-house. It was a place where a lot of childhood memories were made. Back when I wasn’t smart enough to figure out how grim my family actually was. So, I don’t know... I had it made. Almost thought about canceling the entire project and selling the property off to someone until, well, this morning when I got the call that it was done.”

He unlocks the front door, and it swings wide, revealing a beautiful cottage style house complete with a grandfather clock, earthy decorations, a cozy kitchen with hanging brass dishes and plants in every corner of the ceiling. And far as I can see, it’s the most beautiful place I’ve ever laid eyes on.

“I HAVE one more gift for you.” He pulls out a piece of paper ripped from a journal. It’s like the very harsh one I left him right before we left Russia. But this one has his name at the fold and I take it nervously, opening it up and reading;

*“DEAREST ESPERANZA MIKHAILOVA,*

*You have taught me many things about life, but one of the most important, is the strength to fight for love and not against it. Before I met you, sobriety was never in the cards for me. I went for years numbing the pain of living just to stay alive— if you can call it that. But who you saw me to be, changed me. And everything about you has made my sober life far more worth living than anything cigarettes and alcohol could do. I don’t need those, if I have you. In fact, I don’t need anything else in this entire world if I have you. You’re my compass, my muse, my heart, and my light. I’ll never stop protecting, loving, and fighting for you.*

*Thank you for loving and believing in me. You’ve taken this beast and turned me into a prince.*

*All my love, heart, and whole being— your husband,*

*Adrik.”*

I LOOK up from the letter, tears in my eyes. “You were never a *beast*.”

“I was never a prince either, but somehow you showed me both sides of myself, and I will never stop trying to give back to you for changing my life for the better. I promise to help you get everything you deserve from life.” He whispers, wiping a tear away with his thumb and kissing me softly.

“Adrik, you’re everything I ever wanted, I just took my time figuring it out. You’re thoughtful, kind, and brave, and you care about things that other people turn a blind eye to. You’re not afraid to see things for how they are and how they should be. There is no one on this planet, or dimension— or whatever else there is in books and fantasies— that is more right for me than you.”

He breathes a laugh through his nose, his grin reaching the creases under her eyes again, and he kisses me with such intent that I could swear we’re spinning around in a circle. This time is a good circle, a circle of trust and mutual love, more essential than the air we breathe. We’re lost to one another. Lost in time and touch, and given to passions, we never have to hide from one another again.

I’d choose Adrik all over again, go through the pain it took to get here, if it meant we’d always be like this. I was naive to think that I could choose love. Love doesn’t wait for you to choose it, it chooses you. It’s as simple as that. Anything less than genuine and you might as well box it up and toss it to the curb. Because love is nothing if not genuine. So straightforward, it punches you in the face if you dare ignore it. I wasn’t trying to ignore it, though. I didn’t even see it coming.

But here we are, bodies clinging to one another. Anything, and everything I am is bending towards him like a sapling to the sun. And I don’t know when he became a sun instead of a moon, but he is a sun to me now— my sun. The warmest, most assuring light in every uncertainty we’ll ever face.

All is beyond perfect between us, but instead of a, *happily ever after*, closing the chapter at the end of our book, we get to live out this fairytale for the rest of our blissful lives.

## EPILOGUE: ESPIE

It's one of those mornings where it's raining outside, and I would rather not get up. The past few weeks, especially, I've felt ill waking up. Adrik thinks it's from the rainfall that we get in this area. Something I've actually grown to love because Adrik is all the sun I need.

He's been taking care of me every day, reading books to me, cooking amazing meals that make my mouth water to think about, and watching the sunrise from the back porch most mornings. That's when it's not raining, of course. We've only been married for a month, but it feels like forever and also a blink of an eye.

"Your breakfast is served." Adrik's grin can be heard in his smooth voice as he slides into bed next to me with a wood tray. It's coffee and a breakfast sandwich with a fruit parfait. I have it most mornings, but for some reason this morning, the smell of it makes me want to hurl. I slide out of bed, thumping across the floor as Adrik calls after me.

Glasses clink just as I make it to the bathroom, hurling out whatever is left in my stomach from dinner last night. I'll spare you the details of that, bit. Mostly because looking at it makes me heave. I close the toilet and flush it just as Adrik runs into the bathroom.

"What's wrong? What happened?" He's inspecting me, hands on my knees, as he waits for a response. I shake my head, it feels light and a little dizzy.



“I can’t explain it. I just...” I shake my head, and he raises his to mine, kissing my forehead gently.

“I’ll run a bath and grab the thermometer. We’ll get you better in no time.” He assures me, waiting until I nod to acknowledge him. With a soft smile, he jogs out of the bathroom and I shut the door behind me, looking at myself in the mirror. I feel and look frail, eyes sunken in just a bit, skin paler than usual. Surely, I’m just coming down with something and this is the last leg of it. Or...

I look down at the cabinet where I left a box that I thought I wouldn’t be using for a long time. It was a just in case purchase more than anything else. It wouldn’t hurt to get it out. Just to calm my nerves a bit, so I rest easy.

I fish through the bottom shelf and pull out a pink box with a pregnancy test printed on the outside. Quietly I pull one out, open it up and lock the door behind me.

The instructions say not to chug water, but that’s the only way I’m peeing on this stick before Adrik comes back, so I fill a cup up with sink-water and chug. Soon enough I’m able to go, and I lay the test flat down on the sink when I’m done, setting the timer for three minutes.

Adrik knocks on the door just as the time goes off.

“Just a minute.” I call and pick up the test, eyes immediately wide with shock when I see the positive sign.

“A minute? I’ve seen you in every way imaginable, I don’t think we have much to hide between...” He opens the door, looks at the box on the counter and the test in my hand, and drops the thermometer to the floor. The case breaks open, and he stands expressionless, eyes looking between the test and me.

“You—“

“I’m...” I look back down at it in disbelief before saying just above a whisper, “Pregnant.” He’s silent for a moment, and I say it again. “I’m pregnant.” I look up just as his arms wrap around me, and I don’t know how to take this rollercoaster of emotions.

“You’re pregnant.” He whispers, grabbing my face in his hands before I show him the test.

“It’s a plus sign.” He nods and I nod back.

“Are you mad?”

He cocks his head back before laughing. “Does it look like I’m mad?”

“Uh, no but—“

“No. This is great news. This is... we have talked about having kids one day—“

“Yes, one day. Not when we’ve only been married for a month and,” I gasp. “I don’t even have a garden ready.” He furrows his brows, trying to figure out where my brain is going, but I think it’s already left my head. I’ve got as good a guess as him as to why everything insignificant seems very significant now.

He smiles at me after a second before taking my hand.

“Let me show you something.” He pulls me out of the bathroom and into the hallway, leading me up the second floor then down to the end of the hall. The door at the end of it has a stain-glass window in the upper portion, and I don’t remember seeing it a few weeks ago when we were up here. They’ve been finishing the top level still— the group of construction guys that Adrik hired to make a few additions to the home. I haven’t been allowed, nor felt up to, to look at the progress since we first arrived. Still, the beautiful door is a shock.

“Go ahead, open it.” Adrik lifts his chin to the handle and I reach for it, turning the golden globe knob and losing my breath at the sight of the incredible room before us.

It’s like this glorious combination of a garden and a library. Its two levels are separated by a metal spiraling staircase with plants draping around the railing and from the ceiling and next to the towering arch window with sunlike detailing at the top. Bookshelves span from floor to ceiling of the rich brown wood, and cozy fur rugs are tossed throughout among Moroccan print rugs.

Little lanterns with colored glass shards like miniature stained glass, hang from the ceiling at different heights, and I think I smell a fireplace somewhere around the corner.

There's eclectic looking couches of all different types that somehow work with the cozy space. And I'm having trouble knowing where to look when all of it is so stunningly dreamy.

"It's a library and a garden. I thought you would enjoy it since—" I don't let him finish as I leap into his arms, grabbing his face as he wraps his arms around my waist to hold me up. My lips embrace his as we fall into one another, and then he's carrying me somewhere I can't see because I'm caught up in him.

My back hits something soft as he kisses down my neck, and then I see I'm laying on a hanging bed. Ropes hold it in place just under the upper-level loft, and we're tucked in a corner, surrounded by books and candles and a fireplace on the back wall.

"This is so gorgeous." I breathe as he kisses back up my neck, softly caressing his lips over mine.

"I'm so glad you think so."

"This was what they were working on for a month?"

"Yeah." He nods with a sweet grin. "We had to take out the roof to get this high vaulted one and include the upper level. The bookshelves were built into the walls, and I think you'll love every book in here. Except for maybe the small history section I dedicated to myself. You probably won't have any use for that section."

"Oh, I think we can find use for every area of this library." I smirk and his eyes go wide.

"Esperanza Mikhailova, are you insinuating we have sex all over this room?"

"You said it, not me." I grin and we laugh into a kiss and his sweet soft lips tell me everything will always be this perfect. My hands caress his back as he unbuttons my pajama top, eyes asking if this is okay.

I pull him close and kiss him softly before nodding, and he obliges, continuing to unbutton as he kisses down my chest in a way that brews such anticipation within me that I'm already wet with desire. I tug off his shirt as he reaches the hem of my silk pajama bottoms, and he grabs my hand after I toss them to the floor. Slowly, he pulls the bottoms off, including my thong, and tosses it to the floor.

I love the way he does this, love the chills that it induces and the swell of desire that I feel for him when I look in his adamant eyes. We're always like this, always intertwined and looking deeply into one another, like our souls have a secret language. I would say how dangerously and desperately I love him forever, and he would tell me the same.

His warm, soft lips kiss my hips with gentle fervor as he interlocks his fingers with mine. He rises to me when I let out a soft breath of pleasure, and we're on our side's just gazing at one another. His sharp, defined features look inviting and alluring, his smile turning up at the edges when he sees how in love I am.

"I love you too." He whispers like he can hear my thoughts, and occasionally, I think he can. He's truly my prince. I wrap my legs around him as he pulls me close, kissing me again with more intent than before. Passion floods through my veins, taking over my body as we pull his boxers off together, revealing his long hard length, ready for me to embrace his with my entire being.

I hold tightly to him, unwavering from his longing glances, as I roll onto my back. He watches me, eyes glowing in the candlelight like he's never known someone to be so alluring. The look he gives me is one that will not change. It's a soft yet fervent passion that won't be shaken or moved.

I trail a hand down his tattooed chest then the hills of his abs, and his hands gently caress down my body in response.

"You're everything." He whispers and I roll over onto his chest, hips hovering above his hard length, eager for me to make a move.

“You’re everything.” I whisper back with a grin, crashing my lips into his in the most ardent impulse of adoration I can possibly muster. Our lips connect over and over with a perfect pleasure inducing passion that makes me lose my breath.

We’re tethered to one another in a way that no mystery existing could explain. As he rolls me on my back, he kisses down my chin and the center of my neck. When he’s at my collar bone, fervently tracing his perfectly lips over my skin, hard length pressed to my inner thigh, I moan his name and he looks up with a grin.

“I love it when you say my name.” I breathe a laugh as he continues down my chest, sucking on my nipples exposed to his indefectible touch. His warm skin, against mine, makes my toes curl into the cool sheets below me just as he reaches my heat. His lips are on my mound, and he sucks, just before caressing my entire opening with his tongue.

“Adrik.” I moan again as the rush of satisfaction arises with ripples of chills that always take over the surface of my skin when he touches me. Except now, they’re much deeper. The depths of me rise like high tide at the bliss of his unrestrained touch. He swishes his tongue over me with a speed that’s both excellent and inhuman, and I breathe out a sharp whimper of pleasure as my body tightens with the surge of gratification as only he can bring me.

I heave heavy breaths as he inserts his fingers inside my wet heat. I’m eager for him to enter me, nearly begging him just to do it, but his fingers find the spots he knows I can’t resist. And I’m so wet with expectancy that my heart is pounding in my chest and my entire body is a drum pounding to the beat of Adrik’s heart.

He’s fully to the back of me, rubbing my deepest desires into an arousal so strong I press myself head back into the pillow. He rises to me, keeping his hand inside as he whispers, “Look at me.”

I take steady breaths, forcing my eyes to his and ignoring the thrill of desire telling me to tense, everything that feels good. He presses his forehead to mine and I reach down,

grabbing his hard length, slightly wet with his intentions, and I stroke. He curves his fingers inside me, sending my body into a natural reaction to throw my head back as the intensity waves through me. But he shakes his head, kissing my lips and murmuring into them, “look at me”, again and again. Every time I stray from his impossible blue eyes, he reminds me.

Until we’re both winded, sticky skin hot with one another’s breath, pressed to each other like we’re stuck this way. My pleasure builds so intensely that my vision begins to shake, but I do not take my eyes off him, nor does he. I feel the swell of our bodies more intently than I ever have. As if his pleasure is my own, thus doubling mine.

We cling to one another until he grabs my hand and presses it to the pillow beside me, pulling out just as I reach this new pique of elation and pressing his tip to my opening.

“You okay?” He breathily asks when I wrap my free arm around his torso and spread my legs to prepare for his massive yet wondrously satisfying length to enter me.

“Yes.” I nod, and he presses into me a bit more, knowing what I can take, but being cautious anyway. “Give me everything you have.” I whisper and he cocks a grin.

“Always.” His lips are on mine again as he plunges to the back of me, sending a ricochet of pleasure splintering through my body and shaking me to the core.

“Oh my God.” I whisper into his lips as his eyes set on mine as sure as the stars in the sky, set in place by some invisible force we try to comprehend but never really will. We’re definite and infinite, and all-consuming.

Everything he is to me— pleasure and perfection, love and heated passion— is written in a book called fate, and we’re staining the pages with a love that’s too powerful to ever wrap up in just one string of words.

He’s thrusting in me, to the parts of me I never knew I had. We’re panting each other’s names as we grip tightly to something we’ll never let go of, and it feels like the most

exhilarating and safe thing I've ever experienced in one moment.

His soft lips kiss down my neck as I raise my hips to his until they're crashing like the waves on a shore. He delivers his purpose with such consistency I gasp his name and his lips are on mine again, eyes set low and focused. We thrust over and over, rocking between shared breaths, until he's on his back, and I'm in control.

I grab the bookshelf behind him and ride him as he moans, reaching up and grabbing my breasts as I speed up, guiding his length to parts of me I want and need as I reach a peak. Swiftly, I drop back down to him, and he grabs my waist as he sits us up, running a hand through my hair as he catches his breath.

I kiss his lips as well as I can while moving, skin wet with our shared passion. His legs are folded under me just as mine wrap around his, and we're thrusting still, holding tightly to one another. My breasts bouncing just enough to make my nipples hard as they brush back and forth over his chest, and his hands are back in my hair as he kisses me once more, thrusting to the back of me.

I want to throw my head back, but he's locked with my eyes, and I'm held in his embrace and the pleasure is so intense that we're just existing in this world all on our own.

"I love you." He moans with a satisfied grin.

"I love you." I whisper back sharply just as I reach a height of ecstasy, so tall it takes my breath away, and his hot flood releases into me as we roll to a slower pace. We fall down on the mattress, and it swings back and forth a little. Our arms and legs are still tangled together as he presses his forehead to mine.

"You're pregnant." He whispers after a moment of us just staring into each other's eyes in a dreamy, fulfilled type of way.

"I know." I laugh in disbelief, and he trails a finger down my jaw before kissing my lips with his soft, sweet ones.

They're still wet with our untamed passion and burning love so large it could replace the earth with its all-pervading nature.

"We're going to be okay." He whispers very gravely, and I study him for a moment before wiping the sheen of our kiss off his round lips.

"We are." I nod.

"There's no one I'd rather be with and no where I'd rather be in the entire world than with this family." He presses a hand to my stomach and then to my cheek, and I tilt my head into his touch.

"I mean it when I say you're everything, Espie."

"I know." I laugh at his serious tone because there is nothing he could say to make me think otherwise.

"I know, but—"

"But?"

"Vince asked a favor of me. It's something that will ensure my promise to you will expand to our generations."

"What does that mean?"

"We discussed taking down my family."

"You said you were done."

"And I am, but if I can offer assistance to them in some way, I want to try."

I'm nodding slowly, trying not to freak out as I let him finish.

"Koa and Kira should be in charge. They are meant to be the leaders of the Bratva, not my family. It's how it was always meant to be until my family snubbed them of their titles."

I shake my head, trying to comprehend this all and recounting his promise to let me be involved in the action if there was ever any. He knows how useless I felt in my family, and he has promised to never let me feel that way again.

"But, you said that if you got involved—"



“I want you to help as well.” He nods gently. “We just need to attend a few meetings, provide information, and aid with the logistics.”

I raise my brows implicitly. “So, no fighting?”

He shakes his head vehemently. “No fighting.”

“You promise?” I lower my brows in anticipation for a response.

“As surely as I can promise you that we will all be safer once this is dealt with.”

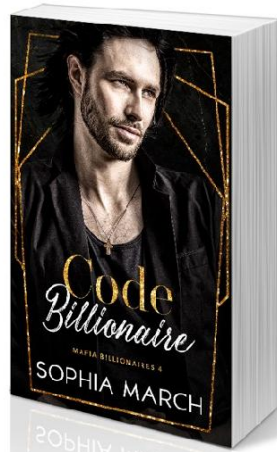
“Then I’m in...” I cup his cheek with my hand, toggling between his eyes. “Always.”

“Always.” He whispers back, kissing me again with more love than I ever thought I would experience or deserve. And I believe in him, in us— that we can take down his family by helping Koa and Kira.

We’re unstoppable together. In the still quiet bliss of everyday life, in the big moments and small, in the hard and trying— we will get through it all. As sure as the sun in the sky and the finite prints of our interlocked fingers, I will get through anything with him by my side. That’s a promise of its own, and one I will cherish with every beat of my heart.

Thank you so much for reading. If you’re interested in more of my work please join my facebook group for teasers, contests and up to date new release info. I’d love to have you. You can join [here](#).

Have you read other works by me? If not check out my book Code Billionaire below.



## Chapter One: Scout

Measuring the length left of the jungle is rather difficult while you're simultaneously running from rabid monkeys, and bleeding out of your foot that got caught on a vine when you dropped from the sky. Of course, I don't feel any pain. How could I when it's not real? Just simulations—although fairly decent ones for someone not trained to pick it all apart the way I am.

Being a QA tester wasn't my first career choice, not considering my credentials. Graduated high-school at 15, and college at 20 with my masters in Information Systems Security. *Gifted*, I think they call it, although nothing about the jobs I've had since then have really felt like a gift.

It's a long story as to how and why I ended up in this horrible job in a crappy part of town, working a night shift on my second job of the day with burning eyes glued to a LED screen. But, I'll skip the nitty-gritty—mostly because it's just too damn pathetic. And it really doesn't matter—regardless of what job I've gotten into, none of them have ever been able to challenge me. I guess that's what they mean by peaking at a young age. I think I peaked at 20 because it's all been downhill from there.

Then again, maybe a challenge shouldn't really be my priority with everything else I have to take care of. This job pays the bills—some of them, at least, and that's what I really need to worry about. Not *personal fulfillment*, as if anyone other than the lucky few ever really get that from their work.

In game, I'm headed up a mountain to the monkey shrine that will win the game and save the forest from the deathly creatures trying to extinguish the *Enraders*—species of intelligent life in another dimension. These game devs just keep getting crazier, but their games—far too easy to beat and even easier to hack. I sigh as I grab the shrine and all the monkeys turn into cheering Enraders. *Another easy win*. Time to start over for the third time tonight. It's boring and repetitive, and it doesn't pay nearly enough, but I remind myself that at least it pays *something*.

“Scout!” A bored-sounding voice comes from the door, and I swivel in my chair, coffee-cup in hand. *Same, buddy*.

It's my boss, Mike, standing in the hallway. “You have a visitor.”

“Visitor?” I raise an eyebrow. I can't really think of anyone who would come to see me. I'm too busy to have a *friend group*—something that I'm told is essential at my age but that I've always found difficult. My mom has always used terms like “withdrawn” and “standoffish” for me, and my guidance counselor always used the slightly kinder “introverted.” So even when things were okay, I was never super popular, is basically what I'm saying.

“Yes, can he come up?”

*He? Interesting. Maybe it's someone who wants to offer me a third job.*

“Okay.” I shrug and pull my headset off, letting it rest around my neck. I'm not really expecting a third job offer, although it would certainly fill in a gap that I've been struggling to close. For as long as I can remember, since I was able to, I've been providing for my mother and half-sister. Her father is some LA drug pusher who disappeared the moment

my mother fell pregnant, and it was up to me to keep her sober and the two of us—now three—from ending up on the streets.

Like I said, not exactly a way to build a flourishing social life. My mom has done her best to get her life turned around after that, but it's been a rough battle. And then there's the cost of living for myself. In this LA economy, I might as well move to Bali and get a mansion far away from the madness of the life I somehow acquired by luck of the draw.

I swivel back to my computer as Mike disappears, trying not to make myself anxious with thoughts of who it could be. I honestly don't know, and that makes it somehow worse, all the way until a figure steps into the bluish glow of my screen. "Hello, Scout."

The voice is deep and smooth, with a British accent, and I turn in my chair, standing as I switch on my desk lamp and pull myself up to my tallest height—not much, but a girl's gotta do her best.

"Hi." I shake his hand. His bright-green eyes are almost glow-in-the-dark, and his jet black hair glistens in the blue light as he takes a seat. His looks are intimidating, and his commanding presence tells me this is someone of great importance. I sit down after him, and my Naruto gaming chair squeaks in the brief silence. *Great.* We're allowed to bring our own chairs, and no one else in the office would think anything of it, but it somehow makes me feel self-conscious in front of this Adonis of a guy—who I don't know, and still hasn't said why he's in my office. He doesn't mention it, though, just studies me for a moment and then back at the screen in the corner behind me.

"Congratulations." He tips his chin at the screen, revealing my second win.

"Thank you." My voice comes out as a nervous whisper, and I cringe, clearing my throat nervously. *Who is this man?*

"I'm Vincenzo San Giovanni, but you can call me Vince." His British accent thickens as he introduces himself like he read my mind. His name isn't British, but I'm sure there's

some story there I'm not aware of—and that to be honest, I'm too tired and overworked to really care about.

“I'm—“

“Scout Summers. I know.” He grins affably, as if we're already friends. “Ms. Summers— Can I call you that?”

“Scout's fine.”

“Scout, I have an offer for you. One that I hope you won't refuse.”

“Wait... are we... is this *The Godfather*?” I lean in and whisper, “Am I being scouted for the mafia?” His eyes go wide but I don't let him speak before changing my sarcastic tone to one that's genuinely intrigued. “How did you know my name?”

He breathes a laugh through his nose that sounds slightly relieved and leaves me genuinely suspicious.

“Look, I'm a part of an... *organization* that's in need of a mind like yours.”

“What sort of—“

“The pay will be a modest 300 hundred.”

I narrow my eyes. “Three hundred—a week? For the whole project? You gotta be a little clearer here—I do have freelance rates for my work if that's what you're wanting, and—”

Vince smirks. “Three hundred thousand, Scout. For the duration of the project.”

“Th-thousand?” I stutter. The numbers don't quite make sense in my head. I never imagined I'd make that kind of money in my entire life, let alone in one go.

“Yes.” He responds as if I'm trying to make a joke, but I'm not. Not at all. “You'll be leading our coding and design teams under my brother, who will be introducing new technology for the entire team to build. This is top secret and requires you to not ask too many questions.”

“Wait. I'm still trying to wrap my mind around this... how did you find me?”

“How I found you is not critical, but what you do with my offer is.” His voice flattens, as if he’s starting to tire of the conversation. Which—he’s clearly rich and influential, so of course he is. He probably resents having to come in this building at all.

I slowly blink at him as he waits patiently for my response. *Requires you not to ask too many questions* throws up a whole hell of a lot of red flags, but then again, the offer of three hundred *thousand* dollars turns those flags a nice shade of green. That kind of money, while obviously a drop in the bucket for him, is life-changing for me. I could pay off our debts, put some money in savings—

“Is this long term?” I blurt out the question. “Are there more jobs after this one, or is it a one-off?” That kind of money makes even a one-off job feasible, but I want to know where his head is at.

“If you succeed in bringing quality work to the table, it will be.” Vince narrows his eyes at me. “Your thoughts, Ms. Summers—Scout?”

I know the money should be my primary driver here, but even more so than that is the idea that this could be a challenge. A *real* challenge that involves *real* stakes—and if I’m being honest with myself, that excites me even more than the money he’s offering.

“I’ll do it.” I quickly nod, and he relaxes back in his chair with a grin.

“Wonderful.” He pulls out a piece of paper from his jacket — an odd choice on a hot summer night— and unfolds it, handing me a gold pen as he pushes it across the table. It’s my contract— which I’m sure in any other scenario, I should have a lawyer look at before I jump into such a proposition. A random man walking through my doors to offer me an obscure job in an undisclosed location for an erroneous amount of money, is risky as hell. I know that. But also—what the hell do I have to lose at this point?

I want the challenge, but I *need* the money. My family needs the money, and even if my gut is telling me that this is a

situation I should sleep on before signing the dotted line—I'm already scrawling my name on every page that requires it. If this is something fucked-up, I might be in more trouble than I am already, but hell—I'm barely treading water as it is.

I slide it back to him, and Vince takes it, looking through each page.

“Great,” he finally says, standing to his feet with a grin. He stretches his hand towards me and I grab it, shaking with a confidence I don't quite feel. “I'll message you with details of the location. Your start time is tomorrow morning at 7 a.m.. Don't be late.”

“I never am,” I tell him with a grin plastered on my face that doesn't quite meet my eyes. I don't want him to think I'm anything *but* confident about this. “Thank you, sir.”

He smiles pleasantly. “You can call me Vince. We won't be seeing much of each other, I don't think. But we can dispense with the pleasantries on both sides.”

“Vince,” I agree.

“Tomorrow, then,” he says, and then he's gone, vanished like the Ghost of Christmas Future—future bank account brought out of overdrawn status, that is.

I drop back into my chair, rubbing a hand across my face. *Shit*. With the promise of *that* kind of money, I can quit both of my jobs and get some actual sleep tonight. For the best probably, because this kind of job is going to require me to be on my A-game, not exhausted and foggy-headed.

Immediately, I throw all of my things in my satchel hanging from the hook on the wall and stomp over to my manager's desk.

“Mike!” I call, so he can hear me over the robot game he's playing with exploding condiments in space. He whips around, alarmed, as he pauses the game.

“What?”

“I quit.”

“What?”

“I quit!” I call a bit louder, and he scratches a spot above his forehead before taking off his headset.

“Why are you not working?” He glances back at my empty office.

“I *quit*.” I exaggerate, so he hears the words coming from my mouth without asking me anything else.

“You— Why?” His bewilderment tells me he genuinely has no idea that this job is horrible, considering the demanding hours and barely-legal-minimum-wage pay.

“Mike—” I warn and he shakes his head.

“Well, I’ll mark your two weeks—“

“No, Mike. I quit now. Effective immediately.”

He cocks his small head and his glasses slide down his nose. “You still have the monkey game—“

“Goodbye, Mike.” I adjust my satchel up over my shoulder and saunter down the hall to the elevator. It lights up the floor where my feet are as the doors part and I step inside.

“You’ll regret this. You—“ Mike is calling after me, but the doors close before I can hear anything else. *Goodbye and good riddance*.

## **Chapter Two: Tito**

### *Two weeks earlier*

Violence is such a perplexing principle of the life I’ve led since I was very young. It’s a requirement in the family I’m a part of, although I’ve done my best to eschew it whenever possible. What *I* want, what I’ve tried to accomplish for years now, is to convince my family to accept that there’s a way to blend technology with our existing lifestyle to lower—if not extinguish—the body count that they don’t seem to mind racking up.

Unfortunately, all it’s done so far is get me labeled the family nerd, and mostly ignored. Today, though, I’m starting fresh—and that has me just outside my older brother Vincenzo’s



office with a PowerPoint pitch on my iPad tucked under my arm.

“Come in,” he calls a moment after I’ve knocked. I step inside and Vince looks up from his work, a hesitant smile on his face as he meets my eyes, as if he knows what I’m here for. “Have a seat, brother.” He motions to the chair across from him and I do just that, placing my iPad on the desk between us.

“What brings you downstairs for the first time this week?” He laughs, and I crack a grin as I shake my head.

“Well...” I scratch the back of my head as I unlock my iPad, revealing the PowerPoint. Vince looks at it for a second, flipping through the slides before shifting his eyes back to me.

“You want us to use your inventions?”

“Not just you. Our entire Sicilian mafia family all over the world.”

He seems immediately drawn in, more so than usual, so I don’t waste time, flicking through to the next slide. “This could be a way to initiate peace. Better technology, fewer deaths, and more trust between our alliances who will eventually get administered tech too. It’s the perfect way to show we value life without breaking that New Era objective by using old methods.” I swipe to the next slide, where there is a list of my inventions and descriptions of their use. This goes on for about ten slides. Hundreds of inventions with multiple uses. Essentials and luxuries, but all equally useful in the grand scheme of things.

Vince sits back, and I expect the usual spiel—*Pops will never go for it, it’s too expensive, too unusual, an unproven method that could just be a waste of time*—the excuses have always been limitless. But this time, he surprises me.

“Maybe it’s time to consider it,” Vince says slowly. “I’ve been talking to our father—”

“Exactly!” I rush forward without allowing him to finish, too excited for this in to think my words through. “With the progress we’ve made in other areas— this could bolster our

current course of action. We could even break free from the Russians with this type of tech. Get Espie out of the horrible deal Antonio and I made with them a year ago—”

Vince’s face goes suddenly pale, his eyes widening, and I realize what I just said.

*Shit.*

“What deal?” Vince’s voice is harsh. “Tito—”

“Look, the point is, the tech—”

“Tito, what deal?” Vince snaps, his voice taking on a tone that I normally only hear from our father, and I cringe back in my seat.

“I—we—” I sigh, wishing Antonio were here to smooth-talk our way out of this. He could stall a stampede with his words. Our original plan was going to be much more tactical than my spewing. By the time the matter was brought up— if it was brought up— it’d already be resolved. But that all has been on halt because Antonio and Stella have been so busy lately, I’ve barely gotten a hold of him to see how we are meant to work this shit out.

With Kias dead, it leaves Adrik, the next oldest brother, to wed Espie. I don’t know much about him, except that he’s rumored to be the black sheep of the family. *Rough around the edges* doesn’t begin to touch the rumors I’ve heard. He’s no one that any brother would want coming within a hundred miles of their sister, that’s for fucking sure.

“Tito, fucking answer me.” Vince snaps his fingers in front of my face.

*Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fucking fuck.* I’m on my own in this, and I can see all of my carefully constructed plans for this meeting falling apart, all because my mouth ran ahead of my brain. A problem since I was a kid, but never with these kinds of consequences.

“What deal did you make with the Russians?”

I let out a sigh. “A deal to join our families in marriage. We promised Espie or Olive, whoever was able at the time, to

marry into their family.”

“You what?” He spits at me, words hitting together like a car wreck, causing me to cringe in the silence that follows.

“We—“

He raises his hand for me to stop.

“I heard you, Tito.”

“It was Stella’s life or—“

“Our sister’s. One of them.”

When he says this, coldly, I realize how awful it truly is, but the entire situation was awful. There’s no way to explain this because the truth is we made an emotional decision that felt like a far off scenario, resolvable by the time it was actually a problem. But with Kias dead and the tensions higher than ever, I don’t see an end to it— unless the end is the Russians getting their way.

“Your inventions, are they fool-proof?” Vince’s voice cuts through my thoughts sharply, like a razor knife. He’s *not* discounting my pitch, but I feel too awful to even be excited about it, the ramifications of what Antonio and I did all coming home to roost at once.

“Maybe. Hopefully.” I let out a breath. “I’ll need time and manpower to test them. To make sure.”

“How many people do you need?”

“Are we going to talk about this deal more or...?”

“We’ll deal with it. How many people do you need?”

“To?”

“To pitch this for the elders in Italy within a month from the start of the project.”

I raise my brows in shock. I’d hoped Vince might take my ideas into consideration, but *this*—

“I—I’ll need the brightest minds in tech, IT, hacking, coding, and constructing tech devices. Whoever we can afford or get. Especially if we only have a month from project start.”

Vince begins writing as I'm talking, nodding along.

"So?"

Vince looks up at my question, and I push forward. "Does this mean you'll give it a go? My idea, I mean."

My brother sighs, setting his pen down. "Look, it's a great idea, and honestly, I think it could work in our favor. For the contract that we have to break and for the New Treaty that needs to move forward with new ways of thinking. That doesn't mean I'm not fucking pissed at you, Tito, or that I'm going to lightly forgive you for what you and Antonio did, either of you. Or that you kept it from me. But it *is* a potential solution, so yes. We'll be moving forward."

"Okay. For what it's worth—"

"You're sorry. Tell it to Espie. Or don't, actually, because I don't want her to know if we can help it, if it can be solved before deadline." Vince's jaw tightens. "Don't fuck this up, Tito."

"I won't," I tell him quickly. In a way I'm relieved it was me who spilled the beans, even though I hate being front and center for Vince's disappointment, even more so than Pops'. If Antonio had been the one to tell him, well, I don't know. He'd blame it on his issue with authority or his irresponsibility. At least now it's out in the open and can be resolved.

And my tech is going to come to life. With funds and a team at my disposal. I feel guilty and elated all at once—and hopeful that this can work. That I can show my brother that his trust isn't misplaced.

"You should have everyone you need at your disposal, and a location for your work by the end of the week." Vince crosses something out on his notepad and looks up.

"Thank you, Vince. I won't let you down."

—

The following two weeks fly by as I do everything I can to help Vince find the perfect people for my team. They need to be knowledgeable and independent, but take orders well, and

not ask too many questions. We can't just let anyone into our family business, after all. This is top-secret, and that feels exciting. This is the culmination of so many of my dreams—I just wish it were for different reasons.

It's Sunday now, a day before we're meant to start working on the tech, bringing designs to life. All of my ideas are clearly outlined in a folder on my computer, with very extensive explanations and instructions for each. All we need is the last piece of the puzzle, the leader of the coding and design team. There's a lot of technical work, and it requires someone who knows just as much as I do to make it work. If we don't find this person, the entire operation will go far too slowly.

After dinner, I lay in bed, defeated by the challenge as I search through the same website of potentials. My eyes burn, my head hurts, and I have a knot in my throat from the anxiety creeping in. In roughly ten hours, we'll have a team with one missing link. Just as I'm about to give up, and just accept the fact that I'll have an incomplete team, I get a text from one of our guys. It's a link to a secured document run through a friend we have in the government.

The picture of the woman is so startling that it distracts me from anything else for a moment. *Scout Summers*. She's stunning, with huge doe eyes, thick chocolate curls and soft umber skin, full lips turned up in a smile for the photo, though it doesn't quite reach her eyes. She's flawless, the most beautiful woman I can remember seeing, and as I tear my eyes away from her photo and keep reading, I realize it's not just her mind that's stunning.

Intellectually, this woman is a genius. She graduated early from undergrad and her master's program, and from her credentials, it looks like she's everything we could want and more. She could hack anything with this type of education, build a device from the ground up without needing to check the guides, and take charge of the way it's done as well as I can. She would be the perfect extension of me, able to help the team and pull more than her own weight.

I'm out of bed in a second, flying down the hall to the wing of the house where Vince and his family are staying while their home is being renovated. The door is cracked open, so I burst inside, just in time to see Nari, my niece, pop out from behind a couch in her pink pajama-dress. I leap back because she frightened me, but she doesn't seem to realize it.

"What are you doing?" Her small voice asks, big brown eyes blinking up at me.

"What are *you* doing?"

"Looking." She says with a little shrug like it's the best comeback she has. I purse my lips and look around at the empty sitting area.

"Where's your daddy?"

"He's with mommy."

"Where's your mommy?"

"Sleeping."

I slowly blink at her, glance at the open door to her room, where a projection of flowers is flowing down the walls.

"Shouldn't you be sleeping?"

She thinks for a minute, then looks back at me. "No." She grins defiantly, clutching a stuffed animal.

"Hm. I think mommy and daddy would think differently."

"No." She grins and I shake my head.

"Come on, Nari." I hold out my hand, and she takes it after a moment's reluctance, as if she knows I'm right. Together, we walk back to her room and I lift her into her bed, tucking her in under her flower-covered duvet.

"You're going to sleep now, right?" I ask as she smiles at me like I'm her favorite relative. I know I'm not. If there was a sibling she'd choose to spend every day with, it would probably be Espie. They're pretty inseparable these days.

"Maybe." She sing-songs.

“No, Nari. The correct answer is, *Yes Uncle Tito, I will go to sleep and dream about—*”

“Well, look who’s up again.” Vince’s voice comes from the doorway. “What did mama and I tell you about bedtime, Nari?”

She rolls over, faking sleep, and Vince lets out a sigh, crossing the room and crouching down next to me beside the bed.

“Goodnight, Nari. Let’s please stay in bed tonight.” He raises his brows implicitly, and she nods gently as he raises to kiss her on the forehead. She wraps her little arms around his neck, and he whispers something in her ear, making her giggle. I can’t help but smile. It must be nice what he has. But I’m okay not having it. I’m not missing out on much if my siblings keep having kids. Anyway, being a cool uncle is much easier than being a parent anyhow.

Being a parent would require finding a partner—at least for what I’d want out of life—and that means dating. Which I’m fairly shit at. Not that I don’t know how to talk to women, or haven’t had a handful of pleasurable encounters with them—but there just always seems to be something else I could be doing with my time. I keep hoping the perfect girl might just fall into my lap, like what happened for Vince, but that seems to not be my luck so far.

Vince pats my shoulder as he stands, and I follow him out the door. We walk to the sitting area and he lights a fire, warming the slightly chilly room. I sit down, and he joins me as the flames crawl up and around the pile of wood in the stony fireplace.

“What’s up?” He asks casually.

“I found her.”

“*Her?*”

“The person we’re looking for.” I pull out my phone and show him the screen. He squints at it for a moment before taking it from my hands and scrolling through the identification document.

“Says here she takes night shifts at the QA testing company downtown.”

He continues to read, and I watch, hoping he’ll have the same reaction to her that I did. Well, not the *same*—I feel oddly jealous, thinking of my brother finding Scout Summers as gorgeous as I do. Which is stupid, because I’m interested in her for her mind, not her looks. Certainly not for anything other than convincing her to work for us.

“I’ll go.” He hands me my phone back, and I furrow my brows.

“Go?”

“I’ll go offer her the job.” Vince draws out the words as if I’m a bit slow.

“She has to start tomorrow.”

“She’ll say yes.” Vince stands confidently. “Please, enjoy the fire. I’ll be back soon.” He’s already heading to his room before I can fight him on it. *Shouldn’t I be the one to go offer her the job? And why does he have to go in person?* Perhaps it’s because this is so last minute. I think he’s far more charming than I, so surely she’ll say yes to him. If I were to go, she might think I have ill-intentions simply because my nerves usually cause me to talk people’s ears off. Well, that and passion. If I’m passionate, it’s like a motor on steroids—can’t stop running until I get it all out. No, it’s better if Vince goes.

After Vince walks back out of his room, suit and tie, black coat and slicked hair, he gives me a wave.

“This’ll be easy,” he assures me as he disappears down the hall. I sink into the couch a bit more and stare at the fire for a while. The heat on my skin makes me feel tired and soon enough, my eyes begin to close. I don’t realize I’ve dozed off until I wake up at 3:45 am. The fire has died down, and the room is nearly pitch black. I sit up with a yawn, stretching my body as I stand. It’d be smart to go back to my room, sleep a little before my first day, but I can’t calm my mind as I exit Vince’s wing of the house.



I decide that my anticipation is just too strong to go back to sleep, so I quickly get ready, throwing on whatever I can find. My brothers all have an eye for fashion, especially Romeo, but I can't usually be bothered. I check the time when I'm done to see I only took about ten minutes. Great, I'll be roughly three hours early. *Might as well get started on something while I'm at it.* I grab my laptop and iPad, a duffle bag filled with starts to different projects, and my briefcase full of finished products that I know work.

I trot down the stairs to see Van waiting by the car, my driver for today.

“Are you guarding tonight?”

“No, I was instructed to wait for you.”

“By whom?”

“Vince. He told me last night when he arrived here that I should be here for you three hours ahead of schedule.” I let out a quiet laugh because Vince knows me too well.

*Will Scout be there?* I hope, as I slide into the car, that Vince was able to convince her to join the team. I have a gut feeling that she's the piece that matters, that having her with us could be the difference between success and failure.

I climb into the front seat next to Van, who glances curiously at me.

“I get carsick in the back.” I shrug, and he raises an eyebrow as he starts the car.

“I'm not complaining, just shocked. You San Giovanni boys usually like the chauffeur experience.” He chuckles as we pull out of the driveway.

My excitement builds as we grow closer, and I can't wait to see the space Vince got for us. It's disguised by an old car wash headquarters, abandoned, I think. That's all Vince has said about it, but I don't care what it looks like as long as it's mine. This is the first time my family has really recognized my passion as a strong career choice, something to aid my family, not hinder it. I just want it to be good. *It has to be good.*

“Here we are.” Van parks in the center of a small dirt lot, lit up by one streetlamp at the corner of the building. I unbuckle my belt as Van says something about a perimeter run and grab my bags before hopping out of the car.

“You can scan your finger for the code.” Van calls just as I notice there’s a keypad next to the front doors. I nod and he disappears behind the building. As I approach the keypad, it seems to glow intensely and I reach for it, pressing my finger to the small screen in hopes that’s where I’m meant to. It doesn’t work. So, after a few rounds of guessing, I end up finding the actual scanner underneath the keypad. I’m glad no one saw this because I’m supposed to be a tech guy and I definitely just struggled to use a basic piece of security equipment. *First day jitters.*

I open the door and walk down a long, dark hall, leading to a double door that I kick open with my foot. The moment I step through the threshold, the lights power on.

“Welcome, Tito San Giovanni.” A robotic voice says, and I feel as though I’m in Star Trek or something. I shouldn’t act too surprised when I requested a smart-house for the work location. Still, I’m pretty floored about it. Everything glows with newness and possibility.

I can barely take it in because as soon as I spot a work desk, I think of an idea I had last night, just before falling asleep. I have just enough time to set up a mainframe on a motherboard and a surplus of tools to do it. As I approach the desk, I drop my bag at the desk and get right to work. Time passes faster than I thought it could, and it only feels like a few moments have passed when I hear the sound of someone else walking in.

I don’t look back at them, just check my watch to see an hour has passed without me knowing.

“Welcome, Scout Summers.” The robotic voice echoes through the room, and I freeze.

*She’s here,* is my first thought, coupled with *shit, Vince updated that quickly. Or someone did. Whoever is in charge of it.*

I'm still frozen in place as I hear her footsteps coming closer. As I weld another wire to follow the path for movement action of the device, I feel her stop next to me.

“What are you working on?” Her voice is soft and smooth, almost hesitant, and it rattles something in me. I feel something in my gut, a sensation I'm not used to, and I grit my teeth as I refocus on the project in front of me. Scout's presence here is about making our mission successful, not my own attraction.

“It's supposed to be a tracking device.”

“Don't they already have those?” Her tone doesn't seem to suggest she's insulting me, only that she's curious. If I were to answer her bluntly, and I could, I would tell her how superior and unique this tracking device is compared to all the rest. But I don't want to talk her ear off within seconds of meeting her, so instead of going with my first impulse, I hold back, continuing to focus on my work and offering a simple, “no” as my answer.

After taking a few breaths and welding a few more wires to the motherboard, I still feel her eyes on me. I realize I haven't looked at this woman since she's arrived. I'm being rude, and I don't want her to leave, so I stand up and turn to face her, holding out my hand. But my introduction dies on my lips.

She's even more gorgeous in person, which I wouldn't have thought possible. What this woman was doing moldering away in a indie game tester's basement, I'll never know, because she could be one of Romeo's model friends. Everything about her—the soft skin, dark curls tied up on her head, wide liquid eyes, high cheekbones in her delicate face—it all comes together to create a vision of such absolute radiance that I'm speechless. Tongue-tied. And she seems to realize it, because a small smile plays on her lips.

“You're the brother Vince told me about, right? The one running this gig?” She grins a little wider, taking my hand, and I'm pretty sure I lose the ability to think.

Not just that, but the touch of her hand on mine sends an electric jolt through me, straight down to my neglected cock. It hasn't been touched by anyone but me in some time, and even that's fallen by the wayside with my recent fixation on convincing my brother to give my ideas a try—but just the touch of Scout's hand is enough to bring my libido roaring back to life, the room around us suddenly feeling small and hot despite its sprawling size.

Somehow, I recover enough to introduce myself. “That’s right,” I manage. “Tito San Giovanni. I am, in fact, *running this gig*.” I force a smile, but it’s not as hard as I thought, because her smile is infectious.

What *is* hard is my dick. Uncomfortably—and inappropriately—so. I shift, hoping she won't notice, as her grip tightens on my hand.

“Scout Summers.” She introduces herself with that smile still on her lips. “Although you probably heard that weird-ass robot introducing me as I walked in, if you weren't too distracted.”

“I was. Distracted, I mean. But I still heard her. It. The robot.” *Shit*. I'm stumbling over my words, making a fool of myself, and still holding her hand—which is also probably inappropriate in the circumstances. “Nice to meet you, Scout.”

“Likewise.” She pauses, glancing at the table strewn with my work and designs. “So, want to explain to me what it is I'll be doing here?”

She comes to stand next to me as I turn back to the table, and I can feel the tension shimmering between us. Or maybe I'm just imagining it. There's a magnetism here, an attraction, that I've never felt with any woman. But more than likely it's one-sided, and I'd just be causing problems by pointing it out. By making a move.

This is my life's work at stake. My *dream*, more so than a partner or a family has ever been. Scout Summers is gorgeous and brilliant and in every way maybe a match for me—and in other circumstances, I'd be dying to find out.

The work has to come first though. Maybe it'll only ever be work. But as the time ticks by and we start to gush to each other about our love for the anatomy of good technology—the quality of the work by well-trained hands—I start to forget why we're both here.

As she talks, I get lost by the sweetness of her voice and the intelligence with which she speaks. Her cheeks get flushed when she laughs about the horrible robotics class where Mrs. Weaver told her she wouldn't amount to anything with a robot so weak. She took that as fuel, not a beatdown or a mark of anything but a bitter teacher who never saw her real dreams come to fruition.

*Fuck.* I can't believe what I've found in her. A combination of brilliance, humor, and unmistakable ambition and drive wrapped up in the most gorgeous woman I've ever seen—I'd been hard pressed to understand what had made my brothers make the romantic choices they had, even when they seemed ill-advised and even dangerous, but now I do. I'm logical to a fault, always have been, but this connection with Scout threatens to undermine even that basic personality trait.

She's perfection in every way. Perfect not just for this job, but for *me*, the one woman who really might be everything I've ever dreamed of and more. And for the sake of my *other* dream, the one that's coming to fruition in front of me, I need to put those feelings aside.

Scout Summers and I are, in a word—impossible.

### **Chapter Three: Scout**

I got the best sleep of my life last night—or at least, as good of sleep as anyone could ever have with an old futon from Craigslist as their bed. I was up well before my 7 am arrival time anyway, and took my time in the shower for once. *Not too long from now, we won't have to worry about the water bill. Maybe I can even splash out on some nice hair products.*

Curly hair doesn't like the cheap shit, but it hasn't been much of an option for me.

I head to work, sun barely risen, birds beginning to greet the day, and the smell of propane in my rickety old car taking me down route 101 to the location Vince messaged me this morning. I'll be two hours early, but I think it's necessary, considering I have no idea what I'm stepping into, and I haven't quit my day job yet. I just called in sick, something I never do, to give me time to assess what I'm actually doing. To see if I need to scurry back from my impulse to quit last night and go back to my main job at a data analytics company up the coast tomorrow.

I follow the directions to a tee, and it takes me to a tiny parking lot just up ahead by a towering sign that says **Rick's Scrub and Go**. It looks like it used to be a car wash, but it's clearly abandoned, except for an expensive-looking black SUV parked around back—and I assume, my new job waiting inside.

The area is nicer than where I currently work, but definitely not pristine. There's one other car parked in the dirt lot, and I pull up next to it. My rusty green Subaru Outback next to this shiny black Bentley is a bit of comic relief as I step out with my satchel in hand and lock the door manually with my key.

"See you in a bit, Bug." I tap the roof of my car with my palm as I stride to the entrance of the building. At the doors there's a modern keypad, numbers glowing in the light of the early dawn. I type in the code that I've been given and wait as the lock clicks open. A small beep lets me know I'm good to go, so I grab the handle and pull it open, stepping inside.

A long hall of dark gray cinder blocks leads to double doors with a sliver of light underneath. I take a deep breath as I step towards it, hoping this is everything I've ever wanted in a job, and I'm not being led to my death by stupidity. Should I have brought a weapon of some sorts? It's not like I even own one. All I have is pepper spray on my keychain. I guess that will have to do.

I hold it up close to my chest as I approach the doors at the end of the hall. With one last adjustment and creak, the door opens, and I feel like someone has swiftly punched me in the stomach when I catch a glimpse of what's inside. Spotlights dangling from towering ceilings, hovering over varied stations. In the corner looks to be some sort of testing room with a mirrored glass to observe. On the right are long metal tables lined from the front to back walls in rows of two. Atop of them are gadgets and gear galore, with anything you could imagine you need to build anything from microchips to robots. The entire back wall has a surplus of tools and technology on top of everything else already visible.

As I open the door wider I see the left side of the room, and it looks like little cubicles for coding, hacking, probably research. By the looks of their advanced set-up, these might even be able to do more than what I'm imagining.

I step inside, a robotic voice announcing my arrival, and I instantly see the only other person in the room—or his back, at least.

He's tall and broad, bent over a table working on something. I cock my head to try and see around his brawny frame, but I can't make out what he's doing. I make my way towards him, hoping I can get a glimpse before he notices me. It must be Vince's brother, and I can't help my curiosity.

He doesn't notice me until I'm already standing next to him, he's so wrapped up in what he's working on. A trait I can appreciate. "What are you working on?" I ask softly, seeing that he's tinkering with the motherboard of a device the size of my palm.

"It's supposed to be a tracking device," he says without looking up.

"Don't they already have those?" I realize too late that my comment might come off as sarcastic, but thankfully he doesn't seem to take it that way. He still doesn't look at me, though, toying with a wire as he moves it into place.

"No," he says simply. And then finally, as if he realizes that his standoffish-ness could be construed as rudeness, he

turns to face me—and stops just as he’s about to speak, his hand extended.

*Is this guy actually as awkward as he seems? As I can be sometimes?* I don’t think he’s rude exactly, I understand being wrapped up in work, but he looks stunned speechless at the sight of me—which doesn’t make sense, since he should know I’ve been hired. *Does he know I’ve been hired? Is this a mistake? Am I about to be fired from a job I haven’t even started?*

Visions of zeroes that aren’t even there yet leaving my bank account fill my head, and I try to tamper my anxiety with a smart comment, which isn’t always the best tactic but sometimes works in my favor. Guys aren’t usually used to pretty women who speak up, especially not brainy ones to boot.

“You’re the brother Vince told me about, right? The one running this gig?” I grin at him with a confidence I don’t feel, taking his hand that’s hovering between us. He doesn’t shake it, just stares at me like he’s seeing not just me for the first time, but a woman, period. Which feels a little awkward—but also weirdly good. No one’s ever looked at me the way he is, with those green eyes that look as if they’re staring into my soul, shaggy dark hair and a chiseled face that looks like it was designed by a god. It’s enough to tell me without words that he is the brother—only Vince’s brother could have these same stunning good looks packaged into what appears to be a hard-muscled body wrapped in joggers and a NASA t-shirt. And, if the device he’s working on is any indication, the brains to go along with it.

He seems to shake himself out of his daze suddenly, smiling down at me. “That’s right. Tito San Giovanni. I am, in fact, *running this gig.*”

His voice is almost teasing; a nice recovery. “Scout Summers,” I introduce myself quickly, feeling a real smile playing on my lips at the conversation. “Although you probably heard that weird-ass robot introducing me as I walked in, if you weren’t too distracted.”



“I was. Distracted, I mean. But I still heard her. It. The robot.” Tito stumbles over his words, still holding my hand, and if it was anyone else I’d be shaking him loose. But his hand feels good. Broad and warm, making mine feel small and delicate inside of it, and I have to tear my eyes away from his lips as he speaks. They’re full and look soft. “Nice to meet you, Scout.”

“Likewise.” I pause, glancing at the table strewn with what appears to be work and designs. “So, want to explain to me what it is I’ll be doing here?” *Anything to stop thinking about his lips*, I think frantically, as Tito finally lets go of my hand.

He turns back to the table, beginning the explanation of the work, and I do my best to follow. Inwardly, I’m wondering what the hell this is that I’m feeling, standing next to him. I took a job, and he’s my employer. The kind of tingles I felt when he touched my hand are entirely inappropriate, as are all the thoughts I had about his lips, and his body—

I’ve never had time for dating. I’ve been out on one or two, but the problem with dating is that eventually they want to know things about you, and my life typically scares men off. Or so I assume. I’ve never actually shared—because my overall awkwardness when it comes to dating and my aversion to the idea of sex with any of them right off the bat meant I rarely got a date two, let alone three or more.

But if it *had* ever gotten that far, I would have had to share that I have a manic mother and a half-sister I’ve been helping to raise, and that doesn’t exactly turn men on. Nor would the shabby apartment they’d eventually see, or the fact that I can’t ever offer to pay for anything.

My goals for myself—to get my family to a good place and finally be able to focus on my own future—have always been bigger than the urge to find a partner. To fall in love. Right now, I’d look like I was trying to find a man to take care of me, and the last thing I want is to be dependent on *any* man. I saw what that did to my mother.

This job is the key. Which means that, even if Tito is the most drop-dead gorgeous nerd I’ve ever seen, even if he’s

fascinating and brilliant, even if our conversation for the rest of the morning flows smoothly right into me going off to start on the tasks I'm assigned—and all of those things are absolutely true—I can't get distracted by him. More than that, I can't risk this job by fooling around with my boss. I can't risk *anything*.

Tito is, at first impression, the kind of guy I never thought I'd meet. And he is absolutely, completely, one-hundred-percent off limits.

I just have to be okay with that.

—

Two weeks in, I'm absolutely certain of two things—that taking this job was absolutely the right decision, and that Tito San Giovanni is the biggest temptation I've ever faced. If he were interested in *me*, that is, which I don't think is even the faintest possibility. He doesn't flirt with me at all, which I appreciate, considering the fact that most men in tech can't wrap their heads around a girl being good in this field at all, let alone an attractive one. And it allows me to push aside my attraction to him and focus on the work, which is the most challenging and best that I've ever had the opportunity to take part in it.

I fucking love every second I spend in Tito's lab. The days are long and grueling, but they seem to go by in a flash. There's a lot of things that are kept secret even from me, the project head just under Tito, and that coupled with their last name and clear Italian heritage has me wondering from time to time if there might not be more to this than they're letting on. *Mafia* has run through my head more than once, but I always push it aside as overdramatic. I know there's plenty of mob presence in LA, but surely I didn't end up accidentally working for them?

The hefty payment coming to me at the end of the month makes it easy to not think too hard about it, too. It does occur to me that I'm waiting on a payment when the job is finished, and that if they *were* the mob, enforcing that contract I signed would be impossible, but I force myself not to think too hard

about that, either. I'm already in it, and I can't get either of my jobs back, so I might as well see this through.

Tito and I have been arriving early every morning, like an unspoken agreement that we both follow to geek-out about tech and show each other ideas we've never revealed to anyone. It's the best relationship I've ever had, and we're not even together.

"This is brilliant, Scout. I mean, seriously. I can't believe you've never shown anyone else this." He's sliding through images on the iPad he gave me for company purposes, looking at the drawings I've transferred to it. They depict a type of stun gun that connects with the frequencies in nerve endings to allow for temporary control of body movement. It's such a long shot, and purely hypothetical stuff.

"Thank you. I seriously doubt its logistics, but—"

"What? You're the smartest person I know."

"You barely know me." I laugh.

"Then you must believe how true it has to be if I've determined it so early on." His eyes focus on mine, and the heat from my cheeks make me look away from for a second. "Honestly, you really are, Scout."

I'm suddenly aware of how close he is to me, of how his hand is nearly brushing against mine, of how despite the fact that he always wears much more casual clothing than his brother, his cologne smells expensive and warm. If I were in his bed, pressed up against him, I'd come away smelling of it too.

*What the fuck are you thinking, Scout? You're never going to be in his bed, and that's just fine.*

"Howdy!" McLaren—welding and constructing devices department of this project—busts in the room with his booming set of pipes, thankfully breaking the moment before I can say or do anything stupid. Tito and I jump away from each other, and my heart thuds in my chest—because there

was no reason for him to jump away too unless he was thinking the same things I was. Or something like them.

*Get a grip, Summers.*

McLaren's chubby, unaware frame bounces over to us as he pulls his Matrix-looking sunglasses off, replacing them with his tiny wire-framed glasses. His light-brown hair is sticking to his forehead as he pulls a clear plastic box the size of a pen from his pocket. Inside is a copper coil.

"Oh, thanks man!" Tito exclaims, taking it from his hand as McLaren nods, still trying to catch his breath from the walk over to us.

"It's a hot one, guys!" he finally declares as he turns to go over to his desk. I smile at his enthusiasm as I bend over my work desk to get back to wiring the electrical stalling device I've been working on. When it's done, it should be able to cause a blackout to any building for up to ten minutes. The goal is an hour, but we'll work our way up to it through tests. It's just a matter of the tension between radius and power, and working against the struggle of that unequal distribution.

Most of the day, the team floods in and out of stations, hard at work for next week's trial run. Tito told me they'll take a handful of our tech and test it out in the real world. I wish I could go to see it in action, but I have an inkling it will be dangerous. It's mostly because Tito winced when I mentioned how cool it would be to go. I dropped it after that.

After a long day of helping move the teams along, aiding with fusions, guiding electrical processing, and coding, everyone heads out to go to dinner together. I'm on my way out too, following close behind the crowd, when I notice Tito is still lost in his work at his desk. I turn towards him and one of the guys calls for me.

"Come on, Summers!"

"Yeah, I'll catch up." I turn my head to answer, not taking my eyes off Tito. The room grows quiet as I backtrack to him, and he turns his head slightly when he hears me.

"You should go eat with the others."

“And you shouldn’t be so bossy.”

He tilts his head, raising an eyebrow, and I wince. *I probably shouldn’t have said that.*

“Well, I am your boss—” He turns back to look up at me, and I pull a chair beside him with a laugh.

“What’s this?” I point to the glassy pieces he’s connecting to a little navigation add-on for weapons.

“It’s going to make the map visible in real-time.”

“Hm.” I observe as he forms what looks to be an eyepiece. “Interesting.”

“You know, you really don’t have to stay—“

“Did you think I was being sarcastic?” I nudge him, and he turns his whole body towards me.

“Scout, I just... it’s— well, I’m—“

“You should make a translation device to decipher your frequent word-fumbling.” I laugh, and he tries to hide his grin as he turns back to his work.

“It would be useless to create something like that.”

“Why, because you’re too hard to read?”

“No.”

“Then what?”

“It would be useless because it only happens when I’m with you.”

Both of us freeze the instant he says it, and Tito flushes, points of red high in his cheekbones. My heart stutters in my chest, the words tumbling over and over in my head—*it only happens when I’m with you*—but I know I need to give him an out. He can’t have meant to say it.

“You’re lying,” I say teasingly. “That’s absolutely ridiculous.”

He’s very still, though, his green eyes searching mine as if he’s trying to work out a solution to a problem he can’t fix—

which is ridiculous, because I don't think there's a problem in this entire world that he's not smart enough to solve.

"I'm not," he says softly.

"Sure." I force out a laugh, unable to let myself take him seriously. I can't think of where we'd go from there.

"I'm really not." His hand is on mine before I realize it, and my heart flips in my chest again.

"Tito—" My voice is a warning. Warning him off of this—me—us. His hand doesn't move, his green eyes still fixed on mine, and I see a flicker of something there that makes my chest ache. A longing that I recognize—to be seen, to be wanted, to be appreciated.

Or maybe I'm reading way too fucking much into all of this. All I know is that the tension I feel now has been building since the day I walked into this room, and now my stomach is tightening and my mind is racing, my heart beating a mile a minute, and I don't want him to move his hand.

"You have soft hands for someone who works so hard," he finally says, not quite meeting my eyes as he pulls away. It scares me that I didn't want him to do that, that I wanted him to keep holding on for I don't know how long.

Tito is handsome and brilliant and in another life, probably perfect for me. I might even be perfect for him. I don't know what his type is physically, but I know our minds are certainly a match for one another, and we get along better than I ever have with anyone. But in this life—I don't see how.

Vince hinted that this could be more than a one-off job. I'd just wanted to gauge his seriousness when I'd asked, but now that I'm actually here, I want to stay. I want a career like this, and the money now just feels like a perk. A side benefit of the fact that I'm doing work that really challenges and drives me for the first time in my life.

I always promised myself I wouldn't compromise anything about myself or my dreams for a man. I've never let a man seduce me into changing my mind about their value in my life,

and I'm not about to start now. And even if I were willing to entertain the idea—

A man like Tito— powerful, brilliant, good-looking— would have expectations in the bedroom that I can't imagine I could ever satisfy. A man like him, nerdy as he is, doesn't want a nervous virgin who's only ever even been kissed a handful of times. I'd disappoint him and embarrass myself if we went there, and then where would I be?

I'd lose both my friendly relationship with Tito *and* my job, and for what?

“We should both go to dinner.” I break the silence when he hasn't spoken since pulling away from me. The confusion on his face makes me realize how I phrased it, and I shake my head, waving my hands like I'm erasing a white-board. “No, no, no. I meant—alone—separately—”

A smirk tugs at the corners of his lips, making me shut up, my cheeks flaming pink all over again.

“Now who's word-fumbling?” He grins, and stands up, stretching. “Let's catch up with the others.” He tilts his chin towards the doors and I nod.

I stand up without thinking about how close I am to him, and the second I realize my body is nearly brushing his as I stand, I take a step back. My sleeve catches on the arm of the chair behind me and as we turn to go, I lose my balance. I feel myself falling past Tito before I can grab anything to stop it. Just before my face is about to smack onto the cement floors, Tito's arm goes around my waist, pulling me back upright and steadying me.

“Thank you.” I swallow, not because my head was about to burst open on the ground, but because we're now an inch apart, and I can feel the heat of his body. It's like sunbathing on a perfectly breezy summer day. Moving away from him seems impossible, and I don't want it to be an option— his leg running alongside mine, hip pressing to my stomach, hand clinging to my waist as if I'll fall again without him to hold me. Honestly, I might try that if he lets me go now.

“Are you alright?” His soft concern makes my knees weak, so *no, Tito. I’m not alright.* I nod instead of being honest, brushing stray curls from my forehead that probably fall right back into position after I move my hand.

“Okay.” He inspects my eyes for any hint of injury, but he won’t find anything except nerves if he dives deep enough. My heart is fluttering like a trapped bird, and I don’t think it’s from the near-fall. It’s from Tito’s touch, his closeness, and how badly I want to turn in his grasp and plaster my body against his broad, hard frame.

His long brown hair was pulled back into a bun before my fall, and in the quick maneuver to catch me, it must have fallen out. It’s down to his shoulders in waves, and he narrows his eyes for a moment when he sees me inspecting the shine.

“You have nice hair.” I whisper stupidly.

“Not as nice as yours,” he murmurs, his voice just as quiet, and husky like smoke.

I look back into his green eyes that remind me of borosilicate glass. They *do* look like glass— his eyes— glistening like the edges of clear water washing over early morning beaches. There’s a sharp intelligence behind those eyes, a mind always in motion, and I want to understand his mind, let him talk to me in his kind voice, and watch his face light up the way it does when he speaks about something he loves.

In two weeks, I’ve come to feel things for this man that I didn’t think were possible for me to find space to feel for anyone. I’d thought I’d kept those feelings decently locked up—but it feels like Tito just broke the emergency glass and took a hatchet to the lock.

“Should we go?” I ask quickly, trying to cover up why I’ve just stared at him for so damn long. He doesn’t seem to mind the staring. Nor do I. At least, not until I realize it’s not normal—to gawk at someone for minutes.

“Yeah.” He nods, slightly biting his lip. I let out a breath when he’s moved far enough ahead of me because I don’t



think enough oxygen is in my body. My head's a little woozy and my stomach's feeling like I swallowed a boulder.

As we head out into the humid evening air, I check my phone to see a text from McLaren.

"Ghost Pizza Parlor, Culver Ave." I read it aloud again, so Tito can hear from wherever he's parked, and then I realize he's right beside me.

"Gotcha." He rubs his ear that I just yelled in.

"Sorry." I laugh and he shakes his head.

"No, all good. You've got great projection." We laugh for a second as we approach my car. I unlock the door, and he grabs the handle before I can, opening it for me.

"Woah." I choke out accidentally.

"Oh." He steps back when he realizes what he's done—gone out of his way to open a door for me that I was already unlocking. "Sorry." He grimaces and backs away a step, and that's when I notice the car on the other side of him—shiny, black, and strongly resembling the Bat-Mobile, although this one has a driver sitting in it, waiting on Tito, I'd guess. Suddenly my Subaru makes me feel a little embarrassed, although that isn't really fair to her. She's been a good car.

"I like yours better." Tito's voice brings my eyes back to his.

"My car?" I raise my brows, glancing back at his.

"Yeah. It's got... *carattere*."

"I believe that would've just been easier to say in English."

"Yeah, it sounded better in my head." He flashes me an embarrassed smile, and we stand there looking at each other like teenagers, instead of a powerful probably-billionaire and a master tech expert.

"I'll meet you there?" He shoves his hands into his pockets, and I notice the bulge of his biceps at the edge of his shirt. They're honestly breathtaking, and I don't know how I'll ever get used to it, seeing as how every other guy I've ever

worked with in this industry looks like they haven't seen the sun in a year, let alone walked through the doors of a gym.

"Sounds good!" I chirp way too quickly, jumping into my car and closing the door.

I pull out of my spot before he does and head towards the road. After about a mile of driving, I realize he's right behind me. We arrive at the pizza place, and it's not very crowded, but then again, it's only mid-week. I slide out of my car and close the door, locking it as Tito steps beside me. He's like a shadow, close beside me, hands nearly touching as we make our way to the door. *Why is he so close?*

"I won't trip and fall again, if that's what you're worried about," I tease, and he flushes a little again. I notice that he puts some distance between us then, stepping forward to grab the door, and I want to kick myself for saying anything.

Just as he reaches for the handle it opens with the ring of the bell dangling above it and the group of our colleagues stop when they see us.

"We thought you weren't coming, you two always take forever to leave and—"

"All good!" Tito raises a hand to Jan, who is attempting to explain himself—breaking a sweat while he's at it. "Scout and I can get something on our own. See you all in the morning." He waves at everyone, and they nod vigorously, vehemently agreeing with him as we pass them by and arrive at a sign that says to seat ourselves.

Tito takes my hand as the door closes, and I hope no one is seeing this. I would hate for them to think I only got this role because of something between Tito and me. Not that there is something between us, I just don't want it to look like it. *Why is he still holding my hand?* I shiver as he leads us to a corner booth for two, telling myself that it's because the restaurant is a little chilly, and I'm wearing a short-sleeved shirt.

I've never been here before. It's small and dimly lit, rustic and cute with exposed brick walls and a single menu on the

table. The kind of place you'd go on an intimate date—which this isn't, of course. It's a work dinner. With candlelight.

“This okay?” He stops in front of it and I sit down without answering. “Alright.” He chuckles and waves for the waitress. He orders a couple of things for us to start, including the most expensive red wine on the menu. That, combined with my salary and the Bat-Mobile parked outside the facility, means my guess of *probably-billionaire* has just been updated to *definitely billionaire*.

No one has that kind of money unless they're from a long line of business success, which would be plausible if I'd ever heard of the name *San Giovanni*. I mean, either that—or he's in the mafia. A thought that seemed dramatic and ridiculous, but now as I'm sitting across from Tito with my stomach in knots, feels more and more plausible.

The more I think about it, the more it makes sense— a mysterious job offer from a man in a trench coat, a strange job location, an endless budget to get the best of the best people and materials. *Shit*. And what if he is? Am I doing something illegal?

Nothing I've seen so far makes me think that what we're doing is for nefarious purposes. *Tito* doesn't seem like a nefarious kind of guy. But I'm also not told everything.

“Here you are.” The server comes back in a flash with a bottle and two glasses. She sits them in front of us before uncorking the bottle and setting it down for us.

“Thanks, Maggie.” Tito nods to her with a smile, and I realize he must come here often, if he knows the staff by name.

“Sure thing, we'll get the rest of those appetizers out for you too!” She dashes away before we can mumble thank-yous through courteous smiles. Tito pours my glass before his. We stare at each other for a moment, and I try to reconcile with the fact that this is just dinner after work and not some weird date that wasn't meant to be a date, but certainly feels like one. *Shit. Is it a date? No—*

“What are you thinking about?” He takes a sip of his wine to make the question seem more casual than it is. Because, it’s not, for the record— not casual to ask someone like me what I’m thinking. The fuck if I really know what I’m thinking. Typically, it’s twelve things at once, and I’m not about to rattle everything off to someone I work with.

“Too personal?” He laughs but when I nod his smile slightly drops. “Oh, I— That was— just— it was... stupid. Sorry.” He shakes his head and takes a longer sip of wine.

I join him, drinking nearly half the glass in one go. But that boulder in my stomach seems to have let up. The alcohol must have melted it away, and now I’m feeling more confident. I don’t drink much— mostly for this reason. To turn out like my mother, dependent on stimulants and numbing mechanisms, would be a nightmare.

Tonight, I will make an exception, though. As much as it makes me cringe to even think about this, I need it if I hope to keep my cool and possibly even my job. One way or another, I will keep this work friendship strictly platonic and that starts with me not acting like a blushing bimbo in front of Tito San Giovanni. So, if I have to down a bottle of red with him to keep things normal between us, so be it. And it’s most definitely *not* a date.

Get Code Billionaire [Here](#).