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BEAST

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NANNY TEMPTS THE BEAST

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Nanny Tempts the Beast

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NANNY TEMPTS THE BEAST

MINK

Finding a nanny for my niece and nephew isn't something I ever thought I'd be doing. But now I'm all the family they have left. I can't let them down, and I won't.

All I have to do is hire a nanny. I interview plenty, but I know the moment Charlotte walks in the room—she's the one. Innocent and young, something about her pulls me in until I want to know every last detail about her. She's amazing with the children, and she soothes the beast that lurks inside me. Her touch quickly becomes an addiction, one I won't deny.

Charlotte doesn't know what sort of man I am or of the danger that follows in my wake. I should tell her the truth, but I can't risk her leaving. So I show her what she means to me by visiting her room every night, by giving her more than me than I've ever given anyone else.

But danger is part of my life, my business, and my dark world. When Charlotte and the children are threatened, I'll stop at nothing to keep them safe, and I'll tear apart anyone who tries to take them from me.

When I toss the white lilies into the dark grave, I can't put my grief into words. Not ones that would matter.

Burying my brother is the hardest thing I've ever done. Burying his wife right beside him, the second hardest.

The mourners filter away through the gravestones as the sullen sky offers no sun, no bright path ahead. Only a few figures remain. Oleg and a handful of my top soldiers—they stay. Everyone else scatters as if they're afraid the grave yawns open for them instead of my brother and his young wife.

This never should've happened. If anyone was destined to go to an early grave, it's me. I'm the head of the Nabokova family, the one who lives a life of privilege, power, and danger. Not Michael. Not my little brother with a family and a life beyond the confines of the Bratva.

"Mr. Nabokova." A woman's voice.

I don't know how long I've been standing here just staring, replaying times together with Michael. How I'd kick anyone's ass who so much as sneezed at him when we were in boarding school. His college graduation. His wedding. I was there through all of it. And now... I scrub a hand down my face. Now I'm here for the end of it all.

"Mr. Nabokova." The voice comes again.

I turn to find a familiar woman, her eyes watery and hair an iron gray. "Yes?"

“I’m Babushka Anna.”

“Oh, yes.” I remember her and the full vetting I’d ordered when she became the nanny for Penny and Ari.

“How are the children?” It’s a reflex to ask. I can’t imagine how they’re feeling. Six-year-old twins with no idea what it means that their parents are never coming home again.

She shakes her head. “Not good. They cry and ask for their parents. Again and again they ask, and I’ve told them the truth, but they don’t understand.” Tears well and roll down her wrinkled cheeks. “They keep asking, even after the memorial service. I—” She wipes away her tears. “I can’t explain it any better. It breaks my heart. It breaks me, you see?” She sniffles.

“I appreciate your service.” I take her cold hands in mine. “And the children need you now more than ever.”

“They do.” More tears fall. “But I cannot stay.”

“What?” I must be hearing her wrong.

“I don’t have long.” Her chin trembles, but she takes a deep breath. “The doctors found something.” She meets my eyes. “Cancer. I’d already given notice when...” She glances at the graves. “When it happened. And I’ve stayed on to help the children through it, but the pain is so much now.” She shudders. “I don’t have long.” She squeezes my fingers. “I’m so sorry. I’d stay with them if I could. I love them.” That’s when she breaks, a sob ripping from her, and I take her under my arm and hold her as she cries.

Her sorrow is mirrored by my own. My niece and nephew, twins who were a wonderful surprise, are alone in the world. Left to me. Though I’ve always had a soft spot for them, I’m still a hard man. One with a violent past and an even more violent future. Clawing my way to the top cost plenty of lives and staying here will cost more.

But I won’t let it take theirs. They will live long, happy lives, just as their parents wanted for them. I took an oath at their christening, and I will never break it.

I am their protector, the one they can rely on. However, I know my limitations. I know my temper, my lack of finesse, and the

brutal way in which I run my affairs.

I'm not a father. I shouldn't be a guardian for those two innocent souls. But I am, and I will fight for them until my last breath.

"I'm so sorry. They were so kind." Babushka Anna throws a small bouquet of lavender into the graves, then turns to leave.

"Have all your medical bills sent to me. Anything you need, I will provide. Thank you for your service." I motion to Oleg, and he walks over to her. "Arrange it," I order.

He nods.

"Thank you." She clutches her hands to her chest. "Thank you, Mr. Nabokova. I will stay with the children tonight and say my goodbyes, if that's all right with you."

"Of course."

Another of my men helps her out of the cemetery as Oleg comes to stand by my side.

"How are you holding up?" he asks.

I don't answer. Oleg and I have been friends for long enough. He knows the pain, the loss, the grief that pulls me down like a weight at the bottom of the sea.

He sighs. "It's still so hard to believe that it's real."

That's true. It really is. I feel like if I pay a visit to Michael's house, he'll be right there in the kitchen trying to feed the twins their baby food. But, of course, that was years ago. The twins aren't babies anymore, and Michael isn't ...

"I need you to contact an agency about retaining a nanny. Anna can no longer care for them as she's been doing."

"Live in?" he asks.

"Not yet." I glower. Inviting a stranger into my home is bad enough. Having one live with me is something I can't agree to, not when so many organizations would love to have my head.

"All right. I'll set it up."

“I need the new nanny no later than tomorrow. Babushka Anna isn’t going to last much longer, and the children will need support.” Support I can’t offer. Maybe in another life I could’ve been a softer man, one who could inspire love instead of fear.

“I’ll get it done.” He lingers for a moment then walks away and whistles for my other men to go with him.

I stand alone in the fading light for a long time.

Saying my goodbyes.

Promising my protection for Michael’s children.

And vowing vengeance on the ones who took his life.

*S*cribble down the address that Marie sent me and hope this one will pan out. I haven't had much luck on the job front. The interview I went to yesterday—the husband was way too handsy. They offered me the position, and I turned it down.

But I'm getting desperate. Some good luck has to hit me at some point.

“How's it going?” Suzy leans against the entrance door to her office. She always has a smile on her face, which can be hard around here some days.

“I'm done if you need your computer back.” I get up.

She waves me off.

I suppose Suzy has been my good luck charm. I fled my mom's house two weeks ago with only one bag. At some point, I'll need to go back and get the rest of my things. The most important thing is Lulu. I had no choice but to leave her behind. I haven't worked up the nerve, and I'm always scared my mother's boyfriend will be there. I try to avoid that man at all costs. He's the reason I finally decided to leave.

“Any luck?” She gives me a hopeful look.

“Yeah. I've got an interview today. Thanks again for setting me up with Marie.” Suzy was nice enough to get me in contact with a woman who helps families place nannies. I've never actually been a nanny before, but I worked at a daycare all through high school. I really loved it there.

There's something about children that always makes me smile. I only left the daycare because of the distance from the women's shelter. There was no direct public transportation there, which would have meant me taking four different buses there and back. Although I was sad to leave the kids, I knew there was no way it would work out.

"I see how you are with the kids. I'm going to hate to lose your help around here." She sits down in her chair behind her desk.

"I'm likely going to be here for a while. I'll need to save up some before I can get a place of my own."

Suzy's eyes soften on me. She's so kind and compassionate, not only to me, but to all the women here. I swear she's an angel on earth. Helping women when they are at their lowest point to rebuild and get their lives together. I will forever be grateful for what she's done for me.

"I know, honey. You'll get there."

I thought I'd already gotten there. I had been saving up over the past year. I put every extra dollar I had away so that I could move out on my own. Then someone found my stash. It could have either been my mom or her boyfriend Rick. Both, of course, denied it.

That was one of the worst days of my life. For so long I had to grin and bear both my mom and her sleazy boyfriend, knowing I was working on getting out of there. Every time I would put some money away, it gave me hope that a better life was waiting for me. That I only had to be patient. Seeing it reminded me to keep my head down and continue working. When I discovered it missing, all those hopes and dreams went down the drain.

"Thanks for everything. I'm going to get ready." I stand.

Suzy reaches into her desk to pull out a day bus pass. "Use this."

"Thank you." I take it from her before heading back to my cot area. I grab the black pants and the button up, pink blouse that has small roses all over it. I hadn't made it out with much, but

the shelter does have extra clothes for those who need it. These are a bit snug, but it will have to do for now.

I run a brush through my hair before putting on some mascara and lip gloss. I stare at myself in the mirror and debate if I should take my glasses off. I think they make me look younger. I leave them on for now.

I grab my stuff before I head out, checking the bus route to see the best one to take. It's not too bad, but the pass Suzy gave me will come in handy. I'll have to take two buses to get there and walk the rest.

Once I'm on the bus, I take a few minutes to scan over the email again to memorize the kids' names and their father's. There's no mother listed that I can find.

I cringe, worrying there might not be a mom in the picture. The twins look young. The email didn't give an exact age. It only stated that there were two young children. But if I had to guess, I'd say they were five or six years old. The dad could be a grieving widower. Not all men are horrible, I try to remind myself. At least I pray they aren't.

When the bus comes to my final stop, I check the time and see that I'm still a bit early. I step off and walk briskly in the direction of the address. The area is beautiful and clearly where all the rich people live, but as I keep going all the other houses fade away.

I look up at the giant house on the hill. My destination. It's breathtaking, but the hill is going to be killer. If I can even get up the driveway. A giant gate blocks the way to the home.

Two men step out as I draw closer. One is in a suit while the other is in all black. I can see the gun strapped to his hip. I slow down.

"Who are you?" the one in the suit asks.

"I'm sorry." I tuck a piece of hair behind my ear, feeling nervous all of a sudden. "I'm Charlotte Davis. I'm here about the nanny position. I have an appointment."

"ID?" he asks as the giant gate begins to swing open. I pull my identification out of my bag and hand it over to him. "You

walked?” He gives me a curious look.

“I took the bus, but it only goes so far.”

He nods.

“Give Johnny your purse. He’s going to check it.”

I hand it over, wondering who the hell these people are. Are they famous or something? He hands it back a moment later.

“He’s going to pat you down next.”

I nod, but my stomach tightens. I take a deep breath, wanting this to be over.

Johnny’s hand lingers a bit too long under my breast and along my hips. The other man doesn’t notice as he checks things over on his tablet.

“She’s good.” Johnny smiles and steps back.

I take a step away from him.

“I’ll take you up.” He motions to a black car off to the side.

“I actually...”

“Mr. Nabokova doesn’t like to wait.” He gives me a stern look.

I swallow.

“Okay.” I agree, thinking this might be a very bad idea.

A swift knock at my office door tells me the next candidate has arrived. I've already interviewed three nannies and one "manny," as he called himself. None of them are right for the job. Though, of course, I'm just guessing. I have no clue what my niece and nephew need. Not really.

Johnny swings open the door and guides a young woman into the room, his hand at her lower back.

She's young, her clothes ill-fitting, and her big eyes focused on everything but me. She's afraid. I can feel it.

"Hands off her," I growl at Johnny.

He backs away quickly.

"Don't touch her again." I pin him with a glare as she steps forward, clearly trying to get away from him.

"All right." Johnny, clearly perplexed, gives me a deferential nod and backs out of my office.

I keep my scowl on him until the door closes. He shouldn't be manhandling the help. Especially when the help appears like this girl. She's young, fresh, and I can almost taste the innocence dripping off her.

Nothing like the other interviewees who were on point with their dress as well as their confidence; this girl is unsure. One of her shoes has a hole in the side, and I can almost bet the clothes she's wearing aren't hers at all. They hug her curves far too tightly.

“Um, Mr. Nabokova?” Her voice is hesitant, sweet.

I almost close my eyes at the way it caresses me. “Come in.” I gesture toward one of the chairs in front of my desk. Not the same one as the others sat in.

I return behind my desk and sit down.

She does too, the button clasped between her breasts in a death match to stay fastened.

I don’t stare, but fuck, just the hint of her demure white bra beneath her top has my cock thickening. What the fuck is going on with me?

I need to get down to business, take care of this interview and move on to the next. “As I’m sure you know, Ms. ...” I look at her and wait.

“Oh, Davis. I’m Charlotte Davis.”

“Ms. Davis, as I’m sure you know, this position is to care for two six-year-olds. A girl and a boy, fraternal twins.”

“Yes, that’s what the agency said. I’d love to work with your children—”

“Not my children. My niece and nephew.”

“Oh.” Her brow creases for only a second. “All right, your niece and nephew then.”

I pull a piece of paper from the top of the stack on my desk and read through her credentials, sparse as they are. “You’ve worked at a daycare?”

“Yes.” She smiles. She fucking *smiles*. It makes my chest heat in the oddest way, and I can’t seem to get it under control.

“You have to stop doing that.” I grit the words out.

“What?” She blinks.

I clear my throat and try to recover what little civility I have. “I mean, you’d have to stop working at a daycare if you were to nanny for Penny and Ari.”

“Oh.” She shrugs. “That’s not a problem. The commute got to be too much, so I couldn’t keep working there.”

“Is it a far drive from your home?” I ask.

“Just a lot of busses to get there, yes.”

Public transportation. She’s a pauper. No wonder she’s wearing hand-me-down clothes and holey shoes. A little angel with no money and hope in her eyes.

Her hair is the color of honey. Warm. And her lips a cute little bow of coral pink. I can bet they’re soft, so delicate to touch. I’d bruise them with my lips, with my—

“Can I meet them?” she asks.

“Meet?”

“The children.” She smiles again. That smile is going to fucking end me.

Maybe I’m going through some sort of grief spiral. I don’t know, but I can’t seem to stop staring at her eyes, her mouth, that strangled button between her tits.

“Not today. I don’t want to confuse them.” I actually just want her all to myself.

“Oh.” She nods. “That makes sense.”

I stare.

Her cheeks begin to turn a darling shade of rose. Have I ever been in the presence of this sort of innocence? Other than the children, I think not. This beautiful girl doesn’t even realize she’s sitting in front of the most dangerous man in the city. She walked right into my web willingly. What is a man like me to do with such a delightful morsel? I can’t let it go to waste.

She wets her lips. “Anyway, I know the agency said this would be a position that is eight-to-five every day, including weekends, and I want you to know that I’ve already figured out my route to get here on time. That won’t be a problem. I always try to be punctual. Marie said that would make me a great fit.”

“I’m afraid the agency was incorrect.” I grab the rest of the resumes and dump the stack into the wastebasket beside my desk.

“Oh.” Her face falls. “Oh. Well.” She stands and shoulders her cheap bag. “Thank you for taking the time to speak with me, Mr. Nabokova.”

“Sit.”

She complies immediately. I like it. It makes me hard. Fuck, I’m twisted. And now I want to twist her.

“The agency was incorrect about the nature of the position. It’s live-in. I expect you to return here this evening with your things, ready to start in the morning.”

Her eyes widen, and that smile bursts free again. “What? Really?”

“Yes. Johnny will drive you to your home so you can collect what you need, and then the rest I can send for tomorrow.”

“Oh, okay.” She looks down.

“What is it?” I lean forward.

“Nothing.” She shakes her head. “It’s nothing.”

“It’s Johnny, isn’t it? He makes you uncomfortable. He did something to you?” I slowly open the middle drawer of my desk and run my hands along my favorite 9-millimeter.

“Oh, no, no. I’m not—um. No, everything’s fine.” She nods and stands again.

I stand too. “I’ll drive you myself.”

“What? No, Mr. Nabokova. You don’t have to—”

I walk over until I’m standing in front of her, her face tilted up to meet my gaze. “I said I’ll drive you, Charlotte. It wasn’t a question.” I itch to grab her chin and kiss her hard, searing myself onto her flesh. I don’t. Even when her breath hitches and her gaze goes to my lips. I don’t.

“Come.” I stride past her and into the hallway.

I’ll deal with Johnny when I return. But first, I need to secure my little angel here at my home. Where she’ll be safe. Where she’ll be all *mine*.

We sit in the back of some fancy SUV that almost resembles a tank. The man from earlier at the gate with Johnny gets into the driver seat. I really wish I could have gone back on my own. This is going to be embarrassing and awkward. He might even change his mind about hiring me once he finds out I'm basically homeless.

For a brief moment, I'd gotten excited thinking maybe I was finally catching a break. That all my problems were almost fixed with a snap of the man's fingers. But now I'm filled with worry that he will renege on his offer.

"Where to, sir?" the man asks Mr. Nabokova, who then looks to me for direction.

I ramble off the address, not actually saying the name of the shelter. I don't miss when their eyes meet in the rearview mirror. They either know exactly where I'm taking them, or it was only a coincidence. I'm thinking maybe it was the latter. Why would either one of them know where the women's shelter is?

"I'll actually need to make two stops if that's okay, Mr. Nabokova."

"Call me Reese."

"Okay," I agree. I'd agree to anything to take my mind off the coming embarrassment.

The vehicle grows quiet as we pull out of the gate.

“Why two places? Not that it’s a problem. I’ll take you wherever you need to go.”

I tuck a piece of hair behind my ear. He really is a sweet man for taking the time to do this for me. Even so, I’m not sure how much I should tell him about my life.

I find myself talking all the same. “I was staying with my mom until a few weeks ago. I still have some things over there. I left in a bit of a hurry, and I wasn’t able to take as much as I would have liked.” I don’t mention Lulu because I’m not sure how he feels about animals. But there is no way I’ll be able to leave her again. It was hard enough the first time.

“Did something happen between you and your mother?” he asks in a casual tone, not pushy, not demanding, but I can feel him waiting for my answer as if it’s important to him. I can sense his eyes on me. I don’t look at him. The man is too handsome, too dominant, too ... *man*.

Though I admit, I’d felt a strange sense of relief when he told me he wasn’t married. That’s usually the opposite for me. I prefer the dads to have a wife. Not that it matters a lot of the time.

He’s still silent, waiting for an answer to his question. Despite his patience with me, I get the feeling he’s the sort of man that doesn’t like to be kept waiting.

“She thinks I lied to her when I didn’t.” I tell him the truth.

“About?”

I play with a loose string on my bag. He’s going to push until I spill everything to him. I fidget with my glasses, something I tend to do when I get nervous.

“You can tell me what happened.”

I look up into his eyes. The way he’s looking at me is different this time. There’s a softness to him.

“It’s a bunch of family drama. You know how that can be.” I try to brush it off, feeling embarrassed about the whole thing. My own mother took her boyfriend’s side. They’d only been

together for maybe three months when she chose to believe him over me. She even had the nerve to say that I was flirting with him. Gross. The man always smelled of cigarettes and cheap beer.

The car grows quiet once again. I debate asking him about Lulu, but each time I open my mouth the words don't come out.

"You can ask me anything you want, Charlotte." He gives me a knowing look.

Am I that obvious? I do tend to wear every emotion on my face even when I try not to.

"Do you like cats?" I finally ask. His eyebrows pull together as he stares down at me. "Or are you a dog person?" I add.

"I've never had either." He shrugs. At least he didn't say dogs. "Why do you ask?"

"Just wondering." I bite the inside of my cheek. His house is so fancy, he's not going to want a cat there. I wonder what it would cost to board her for a little bit. My stomach starts to ache, thinking about it.

"We're here." The man rolls to a stop in front of the shelter.

"I'll be right back." I start to slip out of the car, but Reese's hand comes down on my thigh.

"I get out first," he tells me.

"Okay." Why does it matter who gets out first?

"It's a security thing." He fills in the blanks for me. His door opens a moment later, and he steps out, looking around before he offers me his hand.

"If you'll wait here, I can—"

"I'll come in," Reese cuts me off.

"No men are allowed inside unless you work here."

"It will be fine." He puts his hand on my back before leading me towards the door. He presses the call button. We're buzzed in a moment later, to my surprise.

When we enter, Suzy is standing there with a bright smile on her face. “Mr. Nabokova. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Whaaaaaa? How does Suzy know him?

“Charlotte was stopping by to collect her things.”

Suzy’s smile falters for a moment, then she recovers.

“I got the nanny job. It’s live-in. Isn’t that great?”

“Yes, sweetheart. Why don’t you go get your things, and I’ll wait with Mr. Nabokova.”

“Okay, I’ll be right back.”

“Five minutes, or I’ll come to check on you,” he says.

“Okay,” I agree. He must be in a hurry to get back, and I’m making him take me to two places. Am I already blowing it?
“I’ll be quick.”

I head straight for my area, grab my things, and shove them into my bag. It really doesn’t take me long. I don’t have much.

Reese and Suzy stop speaking when they see me.

I’m going to miss Suzy. She’s been nothing but kind. “Thank you for everything. When I get time off, I’ll try and come by to help with the children.”

“You don’t have to do that.” She gives me a warm smile.
“Enjoy your days off.”

I shake my head. “I owe you and this place.”

“You don’t owe us anything. This is why we’re here.”

Still, I wish there was more I could do.

“Are we ready?” Reese takes my bag from me. He looks odd holding my worn-down backpack next to his fancy suit.

“Yes.” He puts his hand on my back, guiding me out once again. He doesn’t say anything about me staying in a shelter as we head toward my mother’s place. I’m really hoping she’s not there. I have a feeling Reese is going to insist on coming up with me. It will be so much worse if her boyfriend is there.

“This is where you lived?” he asks when we step out onto the sidewalk.

“It’s not so bad if you make sure you’re inside before dark.”

His face hardens. “I see.”

“Wait here?” I try again.

“No.”

I stare up at him, willing him to change his mind.

He doesn’t. “Lead the way, Charlotte.”

My stomach seems to turn over, and I swallow hard. “Okay.” I agree, praying that no one’s home.

She knocks hesitantly on the apartment door. It's like all the others—peeling paint and the number done in faded stencil.

It's a shithole.

“You have to knock on your own door?” I ask.

She shifts from foot to foot, then pulls a set of keys from her bag. “It's complicated.”

“How so?” I scan the hallway. It's dingy, but no one else seems to be around. Nobody watching. Good.

Charlotte sighs. “I used to live here. I mean, I lived here for years. But then Mom met Rick, and it wasn't long before he moved in.” Her hands shake a little as she puts the key into the lock.

“And you left in a hurry because of Rick?” I ask the question quietly. Almost softly. This little angel doesn't need to know the depths of hell that await Rick if he so much as touched her.

She turns the key and pushes the door open. “Yes.”

“What happened?” I grip her elbow lightly and pull her back. When she collides with my chest, I instinctively wrap one arm across her chest. Above her tits and below her neck, I'm holding her tight against me.

Her breath hitches. “Mr. Nabokova?”

“Reese,” I remind her.

“Reese.”

When she says my name, it sets a fire in my blood. But I’m scaring her. I have to be. Despite my inclinations, I force myself to withdraw my arm. Then I turn her around so she’s facing me.

“Tell me what happened.”

Her cheeks turn a bright red, and her eyes start to water. “I really need this job, okay? You saw where I was living. I don’t want to risk messing this up with—” She gestures toward the cracked door to her mother’s apartment. “This. I just want to get my Lulu and go.”

“Lulu?”

“Oh.” She blinks away the tears that were threatening. “Lulu ...” She smiles when the door creaks open a little.

I reach for my gun, then see an orange paw poking through the crack. It pulls the door open more, and then a fluffy, pudgy cat eases out and meows at Charlotte.

“Lulu!” She kneels down and scoops up the animal.

“Yours?” I eye the feline.

“Yes.” She buries her face in the cat’s fur and gives her a kiss on her head. “You’re all mine, aren’t you, big girl? I’m so glad you’re all right. I wanted to take you with me, but I couldn’t. It all happened so fast.” She holds the cat up so they’re eye to eye. “Do you forgive me?”

Lulu leans forward and butts her forehead against Charlotte’s. I’ve never had a pet, never wanted one, especially not a cat. They’re mercurial and territorial, just like me. Two of us don’t sound like a good idea, but when I see the way Charlotte hugs the cat like it’s a lifeline, I can’t say no.

“I know it’s a lot to ask, but could I—”

“She can stay with you at my home.” I push the door the rest of the way open and peer inside. The hallway isn’t the only dingy part of this building.

“Thank you.” Charlotte follows me in, and then I feel something. Her hand. She puts her hand in mine and squeezes, her big eyes on me as I look down at her. My chest gets itchy and tight, and I have the strongest urge to kiss her. Right here in this fucking hovel.

“You’re welcome.”

“I’ll only be a second.” She squeezes my fingers again, then pulls away and hurries along the dim hallway.

I follow into what is clearly her room. It’s the only bright spot in this place. One wall is decorated with what can only be art given to her by the children at her daycare.

“The children love you.” I look them over as she gathers a few things—mostly clothes and cat toys. Lulu sits on the narrow bed and watches me.

“Children are so kind. They love so hard it hurts. They forgive without a thought.”

I scan the room for any photos of her with someone else. A man. To my relief, there aren’t any. Not that it would matter, of course. Charlotte is off the market, forbidden to any other man. But at least I don’t have add another name to my list. I already have one at the top.

I lean against the wall behind the door as she hurries around the tiny room. “So, tell me what happened with Rick.”

She freezes for a moment, then continues packing. “He ...” She shakes her head. “He’s made disgusting comments to me from the moment I met him. And then a couple of weeks ago he ...”

“Go on.” I keep my rage reined in... for now.

“He cornered me in the bathroom after my shower. I usually keep the door locked, but I guess I forgot that time. He ... he tried to ...” She takes a deep breath. “He tried it, but I kneed him then locked myself in my room until my mom came home. I told her what happened.”

“And?” I already know what happened next. People don’t surprise me anymore, but Charlotte hasn’t learned those hard

truths yet—that people will do anything to keep the peace, to keep what they have even if what they have is nothing but shit.

“She didn’t believe me,” she says quietly, one hand scratching Lulu’s chin.

“She believed you. She just didn’t want to, and it was easier pretending she didn’t.” I consider adding her mother to the top of my list. But she’s just a symptom of the problem: Rick.

Charlotte seems to shake it off and grabs a few more things to stuff into the tote bag she’d dug out from under her bed.

I’ll have to come back for Rick. She needs to get out of here, to get some space between— A noise in the hallway breaks me from my thought, and I reach for my gun.

“Well, look who decided to crawl back home.” A man. No, less than a man.

I don’t grab my gun. I don’t need it.

“I’m just getting Lulu and a few things. That’s all.” Charlotte gives me a look, and I see the terror in her eyes. She shakes her head at me, telling me not to move, to stay hidden behind the door. Not a fucking chance.

“I was hoping you’d come back. Time for us to continue our little conversation we were having in the bathroom the other day.” He’s just on the other side of the door.

“I’m leaving.”

“You aren’t going anywhere until you give me what I want.” He steps all the way into her room, his hands going to his belt. “Shoulda done this a long time ago.”

“Stop!” Charlotte backs away.

“Shut the fuck up. Trying to get me in trouble with your cunt of a mother. I’ll show you what that gets you.”

“I think I’ve heard enough.” I step forward.

He whirls. “Who the fuck are—”

I strike out with my right, catching him perfectly on the jaw. He hits the floor hard.

Stepping over him, I take Charlotte's hand. "Wait for me in the hall." Then I pull her from the room, the cat under one arm, her bag under the other. "Don't move."

"Can we just go, please?" Her voice is shaking as she clutches at my shirt.

"I'll only be a moment." I gently pull her hands away, close the apartment door, then turn and start rolling up my sleeves.

Rick groans, and I hear him stumble into the hallway, then he barrels into the living room.

I'm ready for him, tripping him easily so that he falls onto the coffee table, shattering the cheap piece of shit as he hits the floor. I'm on him in half a second, wrapping my forearm around his throat and squeezing. It's so easy. Then again, killing has always come naturally to me.

I dig my knee into his back. "You never should've touched her."

"Let go," he sputters out, his blood dripping onto the dirty carpet.

I smile. Not because I'm happy about what Rick did to my Charlotte, but because I'm going to enjoy killing this man down to his very last breath.

I should be freaking out right now. Yet the only thing I feel is grateful that Reese came to the apartment with me. I hug Lulu tighter, thinking about what would have happened if I had come back here alone to get my things. I push those thoughts away, not wanting to go there in my mind.

There is no missing the ugly groan coming from the inside of my mother's apartment. I wish I could say that I feel bad for Rick, but I don't. So I continue to pet Lulu and wait.

It's not long before Reese is stepping out into the hallway and shutting the door behind him. He doesn't look as if he's been in any sort of struggle. He still looks as handsome as ever. There's a speck of blood on the collar of his shirt.

"You got everything?" he asks with a smile. He lifts his hand to tuck a piece of my hair behind my ear. It's then I notice his knuckles are red.

"I think so." I lick my suddenly dry lips, wondering who this man really is. Maybe he's just a stand-up guy who doesn't like when a man tries to intimidate a woman. I saw the darkness in his eyes when he looked at Rick. It's so different from how he looks at me now.

"If you forgot anything, I'll replace it for you."

"You don't have to do that. You've already done so much."

He places his hand on my back to guide me out of the building. I feel a sense of relief as we walk out. I'll never have

to see Rick again. I'm glad Reese taught him a lesson, though I'm sure he'll cry to my mom about it and lie about what happened, but I can't worry about that. I'm safe, employed, and I have my fur baby Lulu back in my arms.

"You have a wardrobe allowance. It comes with the job." Reese throws it out so casually.

I push my glasses up my nose. "Really?" That seems odd.

"Yes. There will be times that we might go out to nice restaurants and events." He must see the panic on my face. "It's fine. I'll handle it. You worry about getting settled in, and I'll take care of everything else."

I don't think he realizes that I would stand out like a sore thumb in some fancy place. A nice dinner to me is when I get to eat fast food and not some frozen dinner heated up in the microwave.

"Oh no," I whisper under my breath as we step outside. Lulu starts to growl. Reese goes rigid when his eyes land on my mother, who is coming up the sidewalk. I almost don't recognize her at first. She's all dressed up today. She even has makeup and heels on.

"You're back, I see. Didn't take you long." She flicks her cigarette into the grass. "You owe Rick an apology for the lies you made up about him. I don't understand why you do these things for attention." She finally notices the man standing next to me.

How could you possibly miss him for even a second?

"I took care of Rick for her." Reese's eyes turn cold once again. My mother doesn't notice, because she only smiles up at him.

"What do we have here?" She lifts her hand to bring it down on Reese's chest. He strikes fast, wrapping his palm around her wrist to stop her from touching him. My mom's eyes go wide as she finally realizes the danger she might be in.

"Reese." I place my hand on his shoulder. He turns to meet my eyes. "Can we please go?"

“If that’s what you want to do.”

I nod. As much as my mother seems to always hurt me, she’s still my mom. He releases his hold on her, flinging her arm back. She stumbles, the heels not helping her as she falls on her ass.

My instincts have me going to help her, but Reese pulls me back and keeps guiding me toward the car. I look back over my shoulder only to see the disgust and anger clear as day on my mother’s face as she glares at me. I’m not sure what I did for her to despise me, but I can’t worry about any of that right now.

“In,” Reese says. I slip into the car and slide over so he can get in. The door shuts, and we pull away. I promise myself no matter what happens I’ll never come back here again.

Lulu circles around in my lap trying to find the perfect spot before she finally lays down, curling herself into a ball.

“I’m really sorry about that. I didn’t mean to get you wrapped up in my problems.”

“You’re mine now. That means no one touches you.” The way he says it almost sounds like he means more than just his employee, but I know better. This man is part of a world that I’ll never experience. I’m the hired help, and I’m very grateful for that.

“Thank you for everything. You’ve done so much for me.” I lean up to kiss him on the cheek, but he turns his head. His mouth brushes against mine. I gasp, jerking back. “I’m sorry. I was...” I trail off, my mind blanking. After all this, I’m going to get myself fired. Heat rushes to my face. “I think I just stole my first kiss.”

A slow, sexy smile pulls at his mouth. “You didn’t steal anything, Charlotte.”

“I said that out loud?”

“You’re far too innocent and sweet for me.”

What does that even mean? “Sorry?”

“You have nothing to be sorry for, sweet angel.” He brushes his thumb across my lips. “It’s me that should say I’m sorry, but I’m not sorry at all.”

“Don’t be sorry.” He has no reason to be. “You’ve been my knight in shining armor today. I will forever be grateful and in your debt.”

“You should be careful with your words.” His voice drops, and his gaze goes to my lips. “There are some people in this world who you would never want to owe a debt.”

My stomach flutters for some reason. I’m not sure what he means by that, but for the first time in a long time I’m excited for my future.

Oleg gives me a strange look when I return to my office.

“What?” I sit behind my desk and run a hand through my hair.

“You know what.” He looks out the door as if he can see Charlotte.

She’s upstairs getting herself and her cat situated. Once she’s done, I want her to meet the children. Though, I admit, the thought of sharing her with them almost makes me jealous. Almost. But that would make me a monster.

“A cat?” Oleg shakes his head. “What the hell?”

“Nothing wrong with a cat.” I shrug.

“A cat and a suddenly live-in nanny. Is there anything I need to know?”

“Like what?” I grab a document from my desk and glance through it. A contract for warehouse space on the dock. The owner has no idea how much illicit shit I intend to process through his building. I sign it and toss it down.

“Like what’s going on with this girl. She came out of nowhere. We haven’t even finished our background check and you’re moving her into the house.” He scratches his chin. “And who is that guy you killed?”

“Is the cleanup crew done?”

He pulls out his phone. “Yeah, had some trouble with the woman, but they knocked her ass out. She’ll wake up and have

no fucking clue what went down.”

“Good.” I sit back. “He’s no one. A piece of garbage who tried to take advantage of an innocent girl. I was too kind to him. But at least he’s gone. He won’t be hurting anyone else.”

Oleg digests that information. He knows I’m a man without soft spots, except for one. One I keep well hidden: the women’s shelter. I provide a great deal of funding for it. It’s a tribute to my mother, a woman who survived enough abuse for two lifetimes, but who still managed to raise me and put me on the path to greatness. I was a child when my father hurt her over and over again. She protected Michael and me from the monster he became every time he hit the bottle. I couldn’t do anything then, even though I tried. But now I’m a man, and I will never stand by and let it happen.

“Got it.” He gives me a look of understanding as he paces back and forth a few times. “Well, he’s taken care of. All cleaned up.” He fidgets with the top button on his suit coat before dropping his hands.

I know that fucking look. “Spit it out.”

He sighs, and I realize he’s taking Michael’s death almost as hard as I am. Michael and I met Oleg when we first arrived in the US. Oleg tried to kick my ass, I won, and then we became fast friends. As I rose in the Bratva, he came with me. And as Michael put some distance between himself and my business, Oleg and I strengthened our friendship. But we always loved Michael. Everyone did. He was my opposite. A golden boy to my dark prince. Fuck, I still can’t believe he’s gone. Not just gone; *taken* from me.

Oleg starts slowly, “I got a call while you were out. The Volislavs are making some noise about us moving into the heroin market.”

“That’s because they think the market belongs to them, when everything in this city belongs to *me*.” I tap the paper on my desk. “The shipment will be here in two weeks. We need to be ready.”

“And ...” He clears his throat. “And the other matter with them?”

“You mean the murders of my brother and his wife?” I take a deep, steadying breath. “Once we have the shipment under our control, we move on them. I want every last one of them. Uri and Gregory—they pulled the trigger. I can fucking feel it. They didn’t delegate this hit to some underling.” My rage rises with each word. “I want them in the cave. I’ll make it slow. Make it hurt. Take everything from them the way they tried to take everything from me.”

The fucking Volislav brothers. Our mutual hatred has roots in the old country, and it’s also tinged with the blood of my family. Tangled and dark, our pasts could only bear bitter fruit, and now it’s ripe on the vine.

“Your blood’s up.” He raises a brow. “It’s understandable.”

I wave a dismissive hand. “I’m fine. Just ready to fight. Ready for vengeance. Michael deserves that from me, at the very least. He deserved a life.” I rub my forehead, realizing I haven’t slept in days. I can’t. I don’t feel like I can truly rest until I destroy the ones who killed my blood.

“I understand. You know I do. But there’s more to it. It’s her.” He glances at the door again. “You just met that girl today, and you’ve already killed for her. What—”

“She’s the nanny, and I find her very ... interesting. That’s all.”

“Interesting?” His eyebrow lifts even higher.

“Yes. Tell the men she’s off limits.” I look up. “Oh and take Johnny out to the cave.”

Oleg whistles. “What did Johnny do?”

“She’s afraid of him. There has to be a reason.”

“The nanny’s afraid of him?”

I can’t tell if he’s being thick or just surprised. “Charlotte. Yes. He scared her somehow. If he touched her ...” My hands curl into fists.

He backs off. “All right. I’ll send him to the cave.”

“I also want you to arrange for a new wardrobe for Charlotte.”

“What the fuck do I know about clothes?”

“You?” I bark out a laugh. “You know fuck all about how to dress. I mean, I want you to call my tailor and have him recommend a *woman* to be her personal shopper.”

He smooths the lapels on his designer suit. “I dress great.”

“Don’t get your feelings hurt.”

He almost smiles. “You’re different. Maybe it’s what’s happened, all the bad shit that’s come down on you. But there’s more, too. That girl—she’s done something to you.”

“Maybe I just needed a distraction.” I know I’m lying. What’s more, so does Oleg.

“Holy shit.” He takes the seat across from me.

“What?”

“You know what. I didn’t think it would ever happen. You don’t so much as look at the women who try to get your attention. But this ... nanny? She turns your head?”

“Like I said, she’s interesting to me.” I rise. “Now see to it the children are ready to meet her. I want us all to have a nice meal together.”

I haven’t been avoiding the children. Not exactly. I just don’t know what to say to them. The grief I’m feeling is a dark current that rises and ebbs, flows and swells. I keep it buried deep, preferring to let my anger rise to the surface. But I can’t do that with them.

They need a soft touch. The touch of a woman like Charlotte. The touch of an angel.

I'm almost afraid to touch anything. I hold my hands up and inspect them. They look clean, but this place is so fancy. My bag is so out of place sitting in the oversized chair by the fireplace. I didn't even know they made bedrooms with fireplaces in them. This room is bigger than my old apartment.

I walk over to the bed, running my hand across the comforter. It's the softest thing I've ever felt in my life. I try to climb up onto the bed, but it takes me a second. I almost slide off and onto my booty. Why is the bed so freaking tall? I suppose it's meant for bigger people like Reese. He does take up a lot of space.

Once I finally manage to climb up onto the bed, I let myself fall back on the mattress. I think this is what it would be like if you were to sleep on a cloud. I swear it instantly molds to my body. I'm not sure I'll ever be able to get up from here. It's a huge improvement from the cot I've been sleeping on in the shelter. It's crazy how quickly things have changed for me. This morning I was basically homeless without a penny to my name, and now I have a job and live in a super fancy house.

I let my eyes fall closed and enjoy the moment. But it doesn't take long before my mind drifts, and my thoughts are consumed by Reese. Of the way his mouth had brushed against mine. It was the simplest of touches, but I felt it throughout my whole body. He makes me feel things I've never felt before.

I reach up to touch my lips and wonder what it would be like if we truly kissed. I try to shake the thought from my head. That's the worst idea I've ever had, which is saying a lot, because I've had a lot of bad ones.

Lulu interrupts my thoughts when she jumps on the bed. She's clearly done with her inspection of her new home. She crawls up on me, trying to get comfortable on my stomach. Her little paws make it painful. Not that I would ever let on that it's uncomfortable. That would hurt Lulu's feelings. She's the only one that has been there with me through everything. I can always depend on my little fur baby.

After a few turns she finally plops down, and her purring starts.

"I've missed you so much." I scratch under her chin. Her head pops up and her ears begin twitching. "What?"

She stares at the door. I see the handle wiggle and then hear a small, sweet laugh that has me sitting up. It's not long before the handle jiggles again. I'm about to ask who it is when the door pushes open and a little girl with curly brown hair stumbles inside. It's the same color as Reese's. Lulu immediately jumps down to check out our guest.

"Hi," she chirps. I know she has to be Penny.

"Hello." I sit all the way up on the bed.

"Are you a ghost? Ari said you were, but sometimes he tries to scare me." She puts her hands on her hips. She's so freaking precious that I want to squeeze her.

"No. I'm—"

"Oh my god! Kitten!" she screams, scaring Lulu, who darts out the door and takes off down the hall. "Come back! I'll love you!" she shouts, chasing after her. I'm on my feet within seconds to go after them both. A little boy with the same brown hair is standing in the hallway shaking his head.

Penny is quick. She rounds the corner, and I do the same. We enter yet another long hallway. How big is this place? I see Lulu up ahead darting into a room. Penny is hot on her heels. She's on a mission.

A moment later I hear something crash to the floor. My heart jumps into my throat. I slide to a stop as I enter the room. A giant vase lies on the floor, broken into a million different pieces. The little girl's eyes start to fill with tears.

"It's okay. I just need you to stay back, honey. I don't want you to get hurt." I lean down and scoop up Lulu so that she doesn't get glass in her paws. "Will you hold Lulu? Wouldn't want her little paws to get cut."

Penny holds her arms out; her eyes are still filled with tears.

"What the hell happened?" Reese comes barreling into the room. Penny's eyes go wide.

"I broke the vase," I blurt out. I see Ari standing behind Reese with his arms folded. He resembles a mini-Reese. Neither of them are buying what I'm selling. But that's my story, and I'm sticking to it. Us girls need to stick together.

"Don't move, Charlotte," Reese says. I can tell from his tone he's mad. This might have been the final straw. He's having to do one thing after another today because of me. *You're more trouble than you're worth, Charlotte.* My mother's words float through my head.

Reese moves toward me. With each step, I hear the pottery breaking under his soles. He lifts me off my feet, carrying me back over to where Ari is standing. Next, he goes and gets Penny, who is still clinging to Lulu.

"Go wash up for dinner," Reese says as he puts Penny down next to me. She leans into my side.

"Go on, honey." I run my hand through her hair. "You can take Lulu."

Her brother holds his hand out, and she takes it. Even as he pulls her out of the room, she keeps looking back at me.

When I turn back to Reese, he's towering over me. I have to tilt my head all the way back to look up at him.

"I'm sorry." I lick my lips. "I know you're mad but—"

"I'm not mad."

“Oh. Okay.” He sure seemed mad.

“I was worried one of you was hurt.”

My heart melts a little more with every interaction I have with this man.

He tucks my hair behind my ear. I want to lean into his touch, but I don't allow myself to. He is only being nice, and my brain is trying to make it into something more.

“Penny already likes you. Is it that way with everyone you meet?” He studies my face like he's trying to find something.

“You met my mother,” I remind him. I think it's safe to say not everyone likes me.

“That is jealousy.”

I scrunch my nose, not understanding.

His gaze darkens. “Go get ready for dinner, Charlotte, before I do something you're not ready for.”

“What?” I hope it's not something with dogs. They never like me either.

“Now. Charlotte. Go now.” His voice is gruffer.

I turn and dart out of the room. My heart is racing all of a sudden. That tingle I felt earlier comes back. I don't understand what this man is doing to me, but I don't want it to stop.

“*B*ut why does it matter if I know how to do my letters right?” Ari grumps.

“It matters so people can read whatever you’re writing.” Charlotte’s voice is gentle. “If you keep doing your ‘a’ without the little tail on the back, it looks like an ‘o.’”

Ari grumbles.

“Is this right, Miss Charlotte?” Penny holds up her sheet of letters.

“Yes, that looks good. You must’ve already been practicing.”

“Mommy always helped me with my letters so they—”

“Writing is stupid.” Ari swipes his paper and pencil off the table and stands.

“Ari.” Charlotte, still gentle, kneels next to him. “Talk to me.”

“No.”

Penny sits at the table and puts her head on her hands. “It was an accident.” She snuffles.

“I *told* you.” Ari’s irritation turns to anger. “I *told* you not to say it.”

“Ari. What did you tell her not to say?” Charlotte reaches over and puts her palm on Penny’s back.

“She knows.” Ari backs away, his eyes watering. “She knows she’s not supposed to talk about them.”

“About...” Charlotte swallows hard. “About your parents?”

“Shut up!” Ari turns and runs, yanking the door the rest of the way open, then stopping when he finds me standing in his way.

“Ari, you need to apologize to Charlotte.”

His hot, angry tears are pouring down his cheeks.

“Reese. He needs a break.” Charlotte comes over and gently touches his shoulder. “You can go to your room for a little while, all right? But Reese is right about that apology. I know you’re hurting. I do. And I wish I could take that pain away, but I can’t. I owe it to your—to them—to make sure you grow up properly and telling me to shut up isn’t it.” She drops to her knees in front of him. “If you want a hug, I’m right here. But if you want to go be alone, that’s okay, too.”

He turns and tears down the hall to his room.

Charlotte sighs, and I give her my hand to help her up.

“He hates me now,” Penny sobs. “He told me not to talk about Mommy or Daddy, and I—”

“You can talk about them as much or as little as you want.” Charlotte rushes over to her and hugs her tightly.

Charlotte does all the things I don’t understand—the love I can’t figure out how to give. These children—I’ve pledged my life to them, but I don’t know what to do when Ari gets angry or Penny cries. That’s why Charlotte is a godsend. She’s only been here two days, and already Penny and Ari are learning and becoming more talkative. But it’s not without its bumps. After all, the children still don’t really understand why their parents aren’t coming back.

“It’s snack time.” Charlotte wipes Penny’s tears. “Why don’t you go to the kitchen and see what Marguerite has whipped up for you? And if you want, you can take Ari’s snack to him in his room. Okay?”

“You think he’s still mad at me?”

“Oh, honey.” Charlotte kisses her forehead. “He’s not mad at you. Not really.”

“Okay.” Penny doesn’t sound too sure, but she leaves and only glances at me before hurrying to the stairs and down to the kitchen.

“Sorry about that.” Charlotte stands, the new summer dress she’s wearing hitting her in all the right places.

The personal shopper hasn’t let me down. When she arrived with a car full of things last night, I wasn’t able to stay and see Charlotte’s face when she got a look at all of it. I wanted to, but the Volislavs decided to show up at my club downtown. Brazen. Foolish. I couldn’t let it stand. I flex my bruised knuckles, my busted skin a reminder of the carnage.

“Are you okay?” She steps toward me, her eyes searching my face.

I reach behind me and close the door. “You’re so good with them. Doing the things I can’t.”

“You can.”

I advance on her, only stopping when there’s just inches between us. I’ve forced myself to leave her alone the past two days. The first night at dinner, the children were curious but quiet. Charlotte was nervous at first, then warmed up to them. I watched her every move, and when it was time for bed, I wanted to throw her over my shoulder and carry her to my room. I didn’t.

She’s here for Ari and Penny. Not for me. I keep reminding myself of that even though she seems to take up my thoughts when I’m not busy retaliating against my enemies and planning their destruction.

“You seem tired.” She reaches up and trails her fingers along my brow. “Sorry.” She blushes and starts to pull her hand back.

“Don’t.” I grab her wrist. “Don’t stop.”

Her lips part, and she reaches higher, her fingers stroking the dark hair at my temple. “So soft.”

I smirk. “First time anyone’s said that to me.”

“I guess you don’t have a habit of letting people touch your hair.”

“No, decidedly not.” I move a breath closer, and I can feel her tits brushing my chest with each of her breaths. Just that little bit of contact sends a blaze of desire through my blood. How does she do this to me, and why can’t I stop myself from wanting her?

“Good.” She smiles, a devious little quirk of her lips. “I like being special.”

She has no idea. None. She’s the only woman who’s ever warmed the ice in my blood, and she’s standing right in front of me, her gaze on my mouth. I could grab her and bend her over the children’s table. But that’s not what she deserves. No, with her, I’ll take my time. Savor her.

“Have you ever been kissed by a man?” I ask.

Her eyes flicker to mine. “Just ... just you.”

I shake my head, then grab her hips and turn her around so I can push her against the wall.

She gasps.

“That wasn’t a kiss, angel. This is.” I press my lips to hers. She’s so soft, so warm. I want more, so I lick along the seam of her mouth.

She opens, and I delve inside, tasting and teasing. She makes a little noise in her throat as I grip her waist and pin her to the wall as I deepen the kiss, needing everything from her.

Her fingers twist in my lapel, and I slide my hands to her ass, gripping her and lifting her until she’s eye to eye with me. When I release her mouth and drag my lips to her throat, she moans and wraps her legs around me.

I need to be inside her. I can feel her heat, and I know she’s wet for me. I push my hips forward, finding out for myself. I’m right. And I lose a piece of my mind when I feel just how much she needs me.

“Have you ever been fucked before?” I already know the answer, but I want to hear it from her.

“I-I—”

I nip at her throat with my teeth.

“No, never.”

“Saved it for me. All of it.” I thrust my hips against her, and she grinds on me, chasing pleasure.

“Reese,” she gasps, and I thrust to her rhythm.

“I think I’m going to—”

“Miss Charlotte?” Penny’s sweet voice breaks the spell.

I hate to give this up, to stop what we’re doing, but I have to. Slowly, I lower Charlotte to her feet.

“Yes, honey?” she calls as she straightens her dress.

“Do you want some of the strawberries for snack? They’re really sweet.”

“Sure.” She looks up at me, her lips puffy.

I step back as the door opens and Penny walks in. The moment is over, but the fire between us is still burning. Smoldering. Waiting.

“See you at dinner.” I force myself to walk away.

“Okay,” Charlotte says breathlessly as Penny hands her a bowl of strawberries and cream.

It’s agony to wait, but I’ll be getting my own taste of something sweet very, very soon.

I stand in the doorway of the children's room watching them sleep. My heart breaks for them whenever I think of the loss they've suffered at such a young age.

Even after everything that happened between me and my mother, I would still never wish ill upon her. There was a time when things had been better between us. I think my grandma kept her grounded most of the time. When she passed, everything started to fall apart—including my mother.

It would hurt to some degree if I lost her. But I could never imagine the pain of losing your parents when you truly loved each other. Ari carries so much anger inside him. It's understandable, but I need to find some kind of healthy outlet for it.

I think Reese is going to have to be the one to help him deal with the anger, but I don't think they're close. At least not yet, but I see the way Ari looks to Reese. I know Reese loves them, but I can tell he doesn't have much experience being around children. In time, he'll learn. I can already see a difference in the way he interacts with them.

Tonight when I was putting the children to bed, Ari made sure he gave me the apology that Reese told him he needed to give me. It would have been easy for him to have forgotten about it or hoped that we had, but he followed through. It shows me that he respects both Reese and me, that he cares if he's upset one of us.

Slowly, I close the door, trying not to make a sound before I back away to head toward my room to get myself ready for bed. I pause outside my door and look towards Reese's room. I'm sure he's not even in there. The man is always coming and going at different hours of the day and night. I thought businessmen worked normal eight-to-five days, but what do I know?

I enter my bedroom and close the door. As I begin to get ready for bed, my mind drifts back to the way Reese had kissed me. How the feel of his lips on mine had lit my body up, causing this warm sensation to rise inside me.

It was so different than anything I've ever felt, and I found that I wanted more. But it's wrong, and I know it. I have to put an end to it. I need to tell Reese that it can't happen again. It could cause the children more turmoil, and it's my job to protect them.

I need to tell him now before I lose my nerve. I grab the pink silky robe off the hook and wrap it around myself. I tie the belt and take a minute to enjoy the feel of the material against my skin. It was one of the many things that showed up in my closet.

Every single piece of clothing that's been delivered has been heavenly. I know Reese said I have a budget for clothes, but I never imagined I'd own such beautiful things. I have to admit that it makes me feel as though I fit in a little bit more around here. Reese and most of his men are always in these fancy suits. The other men, who I think are security, dress nicely as well.

When I slip out of my room to look for Reese, I try his room first. I knock, but no one answers. His room is right next to mine. I'm not sure the man ever sleeps. I never see him coming or going from here. I decide to turn the knob and poke my head in, but I don't see anything.

The only other place he might be is his office, or maybe he's not home at all. I descend the stairs, wondering if it's okay for me to bother him in his office. I pause outside the door, thinking maybe I shouldn't. When I hear voices on the other

side, I change my mind and decide not interrupting would be best. As I'm turning to leave, I hear the door to the office open.

"What do we have here?" I turn back around, knowing it would be rude for me to ignore whoever it is that's speaking. An older man with greying hair stands there. He's dressed the same way Reese always is.

"Hello." I give him a smile. "I'm Charlotte. I'm sorry; I didn't mean to interrupt your meeting." I try to flee again.

"Stay put, Charlotte," Reese's deep voice rumbles before I see him come up behind the man in his office doorway. The way he says my name makes that warm feeling start to swirl deep inside me again. "This will have to wait for another night, Corso. If it can't then Oleg will go with you."

"Are you serious?" Corso asks.

"Are you questioning me?" Reese pulls his hands out of his pockets. Corso's eyes go wide for a second before they bounce from me back to Reese.

"Keep your eyes on me, and that will be your only warning." The tone of Reese's voice has me swallowing hard and taking a step back myself. I would fall over if Reese ever gave me the look he's giving this man.

"I'm sure we'll speak later." The man lowers his head before leaving.

"I'm sorry. I never should have..." I stop talking when Reese grabs my wrist and pulls me into his office. My feet leave the floor as he lifts me, my back hitting the door as he pins me to it. My body begs to be close to him. When his mouth crashes down onto mine, all thoughts of telling him we can no longer do this go out the door.

His mouth devours mine, taking what it wants. This is the first time I've seen or felt any true passion from Reese. This whole other man has been lingering under the surface. When he pulls his mouth from mine, we're both breathless. I try to catch my breath. Why does his body feel so good pressed against mine? I never want him to let me go.

“Was there something you needed, angel?” His words bring me back to reality, reminding me of why I’d come here to begin with.

“I was going to tell you that you should stop kissing me?” For some reason it comes out sounding like a question. I lick my lips, and his eyes drop to my mouth once again.

I’m pretty sure Reese Nabokova does whatever he wants.

Bring one finger to her lips and trace the outline of her sultry mouth. “You don’t think I should kiss this beautiful mouth any longer?”

She inhales sharply, her body full of tension and heat. “I ...”

“You’re right, of course.” I press my lips close to her ear.

“You’re here for the children, not for me.”

“Y-yes.”

Wrong, so wrong. I need her, too. I can’t stop thinking about her, even when I should be focused on destroying every last member of the Volislav family.

“I’m glad you’ve brought your concerns to me.” I keep her pressed against me as I carry her to my desk.

“You are?”

I sit her on the edge and run my hands along the pink robe that adorns her curvy body. “This is nice.”

“Thanks. I still can’t believe this job came with such a big clothing allowance.”

“When I see potential in someone, I cultivate it.” I drag my fingers along the sash she’s tied at her waist.

“You think I have potential?” Her eyes meet mine. So lovely and innocent. I should let her go, send her back to her room, and tell her to lock the door against the beast who lives in my breast. I don’t. And it wouldn’t matter; I’d break down that door like it was nothing to get to her.

“I know you do.” I pull the sash. “And I’d never want to distract you from capitalizing on it.”

She gasps as the robe falls open.

“You see, Charlotte,” I run my hands along the soft skin of her sides, and she shivers, “if you don’t want me to kiss your sweet mouth, I can make other arrangements.” I lean down and capture one hard nipple through the lace of her bra.

“Reese,” she hisses, her back arching as I cup her breast and squeeze.

She feels so good in my hands. Perfect, in fact. I move to the other nipple and reach behind her to unfasten her bra. Sliding the straps down, I let it fall off along with the robe. My cock strains against my pants as I stare at her tits, the nipples upturned and needy. I lick them, holding her waist as she runs her fingers through my hair.

“I’ll kiss you here, angel.” I run my lips along her skin, dropping kisses as I slide my hands lower and grip her pink panties.

“That’s not what I—oh!” She squeezes my shoulders as I pull her panties off and stuff them in my pocket.

I drop to my knees and spread her thighs. Her cunt is wet, the folds glistening as she looks down at me. “I’ll kiss you here too. Your first kiss.” I lean forward and lick her hot cunt.

A groan rises in my throat as I get the full, heady taste of her. Sweet and redolent of ripe berries, I lick deeper, tonguing her hole and spreading her wider.

“Reese, I can’t—this is—” Her words turn into a garbled moan as I focus on her clit. Sliding my hands to her ass, I press her to my face. I taste and lick and tease, drawing it out as her virgin pussy swells beneath my tongue.

She starts to rock her hips, her fingers in my hair as I rub the broad side of my tongue along her clit again and again. “Reese, oh my God. Reese.” Her thighs start to shake, and I focus on her sweet spot, then ease a finger inside her.

Her back bows, and the sound she makes almost has me coming in my fucking boxers. Jesus, this woman.

Her orgasm squeezes my finger, and fuck, I want it to be my cock shoved deep inside her virgin pussy. She deserves it sweet and slow, but I'm not that man. I'm the man who takes what he wants, and I want this woman so badly it fucking hurts. But I've already gone too far. Even so, I lick her more, greedily swallowing every bit of her wetness as she shivers and comes down from her high.

When I finally relinquish her pussy and stand, she stares up at me in a daze. "You ... you just ... You..."

I shrug and pull her robe tightly around her and double tie the sash. "You said we shouldn't kiss anymore. I'm just trying to respect your wishes, angel."

She starts to sputter, but I grip her ass and lower her to the floor, making sure she feels just how hard she's made me. Looking down, she stares at the outline of my cock, and when she licks her lips, I almost turn her around and bend her over my desk. But I don't.

"You should get to bed," I say more gruffly than intended.

"Okay." She nods.

"But you are never to wear that robe out of your room again. Understand?" I tilt her chin up and try to temper my anger at Corso. He was practically ogling her. Fuck, I may still end up popping him. He should know better than to look at what's mine.

"You don't like it?" She looks down at herself.

"I love it on you." I turn her around and guide her from my office and up the stairs. "But that's for my eyes only."

"Oh."

She's still languid, almost in orgasm shock. Fuck, that turns me on. When we get to her door, I pull her to me, holding her tightly to my chest.

"Have you ever come like that? Tell me."

Her eyelashes flutter, but then she holds my gaze. “I’ve never come that hard in my life.” She sighs almost dreamily. “I’ve never felt anything so ... so ...” She licks her lips.

I almost break, but I reach past her and open her door, then gently guide her inside. “Lock your door at night.” I close it, then stride to my room and straight into my en suite.

Pulling my cock out, it only takes a few strokes before I spend all over my hand like a goddamn teenager. This is what she does to me. Makes me want to dirty her up and, fuck, put babies inside her. I want her all for myself.

I clean up and stare at myself in the mirror, willing the greedy demon of my heart to settle down. The kids need Charlotte. I should back off.

The greedy demon stares back ... and smirks.

I watch Ari and Penny as they do their riding lesson. Penny is smiling while Ari has his normal stoic expression. Whenever I get a smile or laugh from him, I want to do a victory dance. Penny has warmed to me quickly, but Ari is taking a bit longer. But little by little, I see those walls he keeps up around him crumbling. I'll continue to chip away at them as much as I can without rushing him.

I really want to speak with Reese about spending some one-on-one time with him. The problem is Reese has been even more MIA these past few days.

He missed one dinner completely and another he had barely sat down when he got called away. Part of me wonders if he's avoiding me. There have been no more kisses—or anything else for that matter—since that night in his office.

When I told him that we needed to stop, I never thought about how it would make me feel. I miss him. I shouldn't because I barely know the man. He's more absent than he is here. Even so, I can't help but think there's some sort of connection between us. I think about him too much. Does he think about me? That's probably a foolish hope. I still have it all the same.

What kind of job keeps him this busy at all hours of the night? Not to mention the level of security that he has around here. What is it that Reese does that would require this many guards? I mean, I know the feel of the man's mouth between my thighs, but I have no clue what he does for a living.

When I notice Penny's cheeks are a little flushed, I go over to see if she's feeling okay.

"I'm okay." She smiles brightly, the sun giving her a little glow.

I brush the wrinkles out of my dress and return to the house as the kids finish up on their ponies. They only have about five minutes left.

"Charlotte," Marguerite greets me when I enter the kitchen. She's one of the many people that work here, and I have to say she's my favorite.

She reminds me of my own grandmother at times. She was sweet, but she also had another side to her. One that let you know there would be hell to pay if you crossed her.

"Afternoon." I give her a smile. "Going to snag a couple of bottles of water." She beats me to it and grabs them from the fridge.

"Thanks. Would you mind if later we steal the kitchen for an hour? I was going to do some cooking with the kids." I don't want to step on her toes.

Her face softens. "Of course you can. This is your home now. You can do whatever you'd like."

"But it's your kitchen." I wink at her before heading back down to the stables. This house really does have everything. You don't need to ever leave if you don't want to. It dawns on me that I actually haven't since I crossed over the threshold.

"Don't be stupid, you spoiled brat. I told you three times that's not how it's done." I hear Clyde. I start to run towards the stable.

"You don't talk to my sister like that!" Ari shouts back at the trainer.

I round the corner to see the stable doors are wide open. Clyde has his finger in Penny's face, and then he turns to Ari.

What the hell had happened in the short time that I was gone? Regardless of what it is, Clyde should not be speaking to the children like that. Anger begins to simmer inside of me.

“And what are you going to do about it?” Clyde takes a challenging step towards Ari. “I’m going to whip that bad attitude right out of you, boy.” Clyde goes for his belt buckle.

Before I even know what I’m doing, I drop the waters and grab the rake leaning against the stable wall. With one hard swing, I hit Clyde in the back.

He lets out a yell before his knees buckle, and he hits the ground.

“Up to the house!” I shout to the kids. Ari stands there, not wanting to leave me. “Take your sister.”

Ari takes her hand. Penny’s eyes are wide, but she’s not crying. Clyde groans in pain on the ground. Two men in a black appear from the side of the house, both of them running swiftly.

“You fucking bitch!” Clyde rolls over to his side and looks up at me, hatred written across his face.

“We have this, Miss Davis,” one of them says. He reaches for the rake in my hand.

“I-I don’t know what ...” I slowly release my death grip on it. I’ve never hurt anyone before, but I would do it again in a heartbeat if I thought the children were in danger. I was bullied and hurt by men plenty of times when I was a child, and that will never happen here. Not under my watch.

“Thank you.” I take both kids’ hands to lead them up to the house.

“That was so cool,” Ari says with a bright smile on his face.

“He was being so mean.” Penny gives a firm nod as she says it. Neither are shocked at all.

“That’s how you handle bullies, Penny,” Ari informs his sister, making her giggle.

I inwardly cringe. While I can’t say I disagree with Ari, I’m not so sure this is a lesson Reese would want me teaching the children. I still have no idea what came over me. My hands are shaking, and my ears are hot, my fingers cold.

“I was thinking we should clean up and maybe do some baking.” I change the subject to try and distract all of us. My adrenaline is starting to fade away, and the reality of what I did presses down on me. Had I overreacted? I could have gone in there and removed the children and let Reese deal with Clyde later.

I hold the kids’ hands tighter as I think about the possibility of being fired. When I worked at the daycare, I grew attached to some of the children. With Ari and Penny, it’s so different. It would break my heart to have to leave them. It’s a bitter reminder that they aren’t my children.

For the rest of the day, I wait for Reese to show up. I keep the kids busy for the remainder of the afternoon and into dinner. They both crash the second I put them to bed. They’re out before I get two pages into the story Penny had picked. It amazes me how resilient they are. They’ve suffered so much loss already.

I head to my own room to get ready for bed. I grab my eReader, ready to crawl into bed, knowing I’m not going to get any sleep tonight. I’ll be worried until tomorrow. I pause before I climb in and look toward my door.

I chew on my bottom lip as I walk over and unflip the lock. I even go as far as to crack the door open a bit, but I close it when Lulu pads over and peeks out.

“You’re right. We should just go to bed.” I close the door and crawl into bed. Lulu hops up and spins a few times before curling up next to me. “You don’t think he’ll kick me out, do you?”

Lulu doesn’t have an answer, but she does purr softly as I scratch under her chin. That has to be a good sign, right?

With a sigh, I turn off my lamp. I try to get lost in a romance novel, but no matter how hard I try to concentrate, all my thoughts drift to Reese.

My fate lies in his hands.

*J*og up the rough-hewn stairs etched into the side of the cliff. The cave is hidden beneath my feet, and Oleg is finishing up the work I started.

I needed that stress relief, so it's a good thing Clyde fucked up royally today. His blood washed off my hands with ease, and I don't think we'll be needing his services here any longer. If he survives, anyway.

Marguerite is kneading dough as I enter the kitchen. She gives me a knowing nod. "I never liked him."

"Late for breadmaking, isn't it?" I ask and grab a plum from the fruit bowl.

"Late for torture too?" she shoots back.

I take a bite of the plum and smile. "Never too late for that." I continue through the house and up the stairs.

When I get to Charlotte's room, all the tension that had me humming comes back. But it's different now. It's a need that's been building up every moment I've been away, and it doubles every minute I'm in her presence.

The taste I'd had of her wasn't enough. Not nearly. And after what she did today? I owe her. She's fierce. Violent, even. Fuck if that doesn't turn me on. I've had a long day of maneuvering and sewing discord among the Bratva about the Volislavs. It hasn't been easy, but I've almost cleared my path to victory—a bloodbath that will end in their deaths and no

negative consequences for me. It won't be easy. They know what I'm up to. I don't give a fuck. I'm still coming for them.

I take a deep breath and shut off that part of my mind. Instead, I focus on the door, the thin panel of wood that separates me from my angel. An angel of vengeance, apparently.

Did she lock her door like I told her? Or does she want the monster to come inside?

I turn the handle and push. The door opens on silent hinges. I can't stop the smirk that curls my lips, the rush of heat that suffuses my blood.

She knew I'd come.

I push the door the rest of the way open and ease inside, silently closing it behind me.

She's asleep, a tablet on her chest and her cat stretched out beside her. I should leave, should walk out of this room and let her sleep. I don't. I walk over to her, staring down at her as she dreams.

Lulu wakes and stretches, then hops down and trots to the bathroom.

I take the tablet from Charlotte and turn it over. She's reading a romance novel. I flip through a few pages until I get to the good part. *My, my, Charlotte, what naughty tastes you have.*

"Hey, what ..." She blinks her eyes open, then reaches for the eReader.

I let her take it, and she hastily powers it off.

"Interesting reading material." I sit beside her.

Her breath hitches, and I can't tell in the low light, but I'd bet her cheeks are turning a dusky crimson right now. "I just—that was—it's from the *library*," she says defiantly, as if the greatest works of filthy imaginations don't reside in the hallowed halls of such an institution.

"I'm not judging. I rather liked the part where she sucked his ___"

“Where have you been?” she interjects. Then she puts a hand to her forehead. “I didn’t mean to say it like that.”

“You can say it however you like.”

She blinks again, and then her face falls. “Oh, did you hear about Clyde? I know you did. Look, he was being awful, and I know I shouldn’t have hit him, but he was—”

“You shouldn’t have?” I lean closer to her, taking in her scent of lavender soap and crisp linen sheets.

“I mean, violence is never the answer. That’s what I tell the children.”

“Exactly. That’s a fairy tale for children. Adults know that, sometimes, violence is the only answer.” I reach out and rest my palm at her throat.

Her pulse beats riotously beneath my touch, and she doesn’t push my hand away. “I don’t know what came over me,” she whispers.

“Never apologize for striking down those who would harm you or harm the ones you care about.”

“So you’re not mad?”

“Mad?” I lean even closer, our lips almost touching. “At you? No.”

“What about Clyde. Is he okay? I hit him with that hard rake.”

“Don’t worry about him. I took care of it.”

“You did?” Her lashes flutter, her soft breath caressing my lips.

“Yes. He won’t be around any longer.” I stroke her jugular with my thumb, and her skin pebbles beneath my touch.

“Didn’t I tell you to lock your door, angel?”

She swallows hard. “You ... did. Yes.”

“I warned you.”

“Yes,” she whispers huskily.

“But here I find it unlocked. Why is that, Charlotte? Why would you leave your door unlocked when you knew that I

would discover it? When you knew I would take advantage?” My grip tightens on her throat just a hair, just enough for her to *know* in her gut that I’m a predator and she is the most exquisite prey.

“I just thought—” She gasps as I use my other hand to squeeze her breast.

“Yes, go on.” I rub my thumb over the hard peak.

“I just thought that you might want to talk about—oh!” She cries out when I twist her budded nipple, pinching it between my thumb and forefinger.

“You wanted me to come to your room, didn’t you?” I trail my lips along her jawline. “You wanted me to continue what we started the other day?”

She clutches my jacket, her body quivering as I continue stroking her nipple and move my other hand down her chest, past her trembling stomach, and to the edge of her panties. Without another word, I slide my fingers underneath the fabric and run them along her wet slit.

My cock jerks, and I groan when I find her so fucking wet. I could slide inside her easily, give her virgin pussy my cock until we both find our release.

“Reese.” She arches her back, her legs spreading, offering me more.

I take it and slide two fingers inside her impossibly tight cunt. “So wet, angel. Do you want me inside you? Is that what all this is for?”

“I-I want...” She gasps as I stroke her clit. “I want you to kiss me again.”

She doesn’t have to say another word. I claim her mouth viciously, kissing her hard and showing her that she belongs to me. Before we even met, she belonged to me, and I belonged to her. And now that I’ve had a taste of her, I’m never going to let her go.

I cling to Reese as he owns my mouth. There is no other way to describe the way he's kissing me. My body no longer feels as though I have control over it. All the sensations are overwhelming, but I don't want him to stop. I want more. The reasons we shouldn't be doing this fall by the wayside for now until there is only Reese and the things he makes me feel.

He works his fingers in and out of me as he continues to kiss me. His mouth is almost savage and claiming, but his touch is gentle as he brings me pleasure. It reveals the two sides of Reese. There is something dark and mysterious about him, but when he's close, I feel safe and crave his touch. I'm not sure many others get to see him the way I do.

I gasp for air when his mouth leaves mine. But he doesn't stop kissing me. His mouth works its way down the column of my neck, never leaving my body. Still, he manages to remove my top. He kisses his way down to my breasts before sucking one of my nipples into his mouth.

"Reese." I moan his name. My hips try to move in sync with his fingers. His teeth drag across my nipple, making me whimper. He moves to the other breast, giving it that same attention. I had no idea how good this could feel, how safe and all-consuming. But that's the case with most things when it comes to Reese. He's been taking care of me since the moment he met me.

“Do you want more, angel?” he asks against my breast. “You want my mouth between those lush thighs again? Have you thought about it? Have you touched yourself trying to get off?”

“Yes,” I admit.

“Yes to what? To wanting me to eat your pussy or touching yourself?”

My cheeks burn at his crude words, but there is no denying that my body loves them. He has all the evidence he needs all over his fingers that are no longer moving in and out. I try to roll my hips, needing his fingers to move, but he grips my hip with his other hand, pinning me to the bed. I want to cry out in frustration, but I don't.

“Answer me,” he orders.

“Yes to all of it.” I would probably say anything at this point for him to continue, but my words are the truth. He sucks in a deep breath. His thumb grazes my clit, making my whole-body jerk. The throb between my thighs is unbearable at this point. I need him.

“Tell me,” he growls. “Tell me how you touched yourself and thought of me.”

I'm so turned on that my shyness is gone. I just need him to move his fingers. To do anything at this point to give me relief. “I tried. In the shower and last night in bed. It didn't work. I couldn't get off at all. It didn't compare to actually being with you.”

The few times I touched myself before I met Reese, I managed to get off. It was nothing compared to the orgasm he gave me in his office. But since then, there is nothing I can do to bring myself to orgasm. My body is on some kind of strike and only wants his touch. He's ruined me, and now he's holding out.

“This is all your fault.” I raise my hips again, trying to provoke him to move, but he keeps me pinned in place. I slip my hand down to try to give myself relief since he's withholding it. I can't take it any longer.

“Did I say you could touch?” He grabs my wrist to stop me.

I cry out in frustration.

“This is mine.” He moves his fingers inside of me. “Only I make this pussy come. Whether it be on my fingers, my tongue, or my cock doesn’t matter to me, but I’ll be the only person that ever has the pleasure of doing so.”

“Then do it,” I snip, surprising myself. A smile spreads across Reese’s mouth, making him look charming. I’m so freaking close. I only need a little more. “No!” I cry out when he pulls his fingers from inside me. He pulls my panties from me, his mouth going straight for my clit. He sucks it into his mouth, his tongue stroking it, sending me over the edge.

I cry out his name, my fingers gripping the sheets as the orgasm takes me. My eyes fall closed, but my heart keeps pounding away. I melt into the bed, enjoying my moment of bliss.

“Not done yet, angel.” My eyes flutter open to see Reese coming down over me. He’s naked now. Still no fear comes. I know your first time can be painful, but I trust Reese to handle me with care. I might not know him very well, but what I do know is from the moment I entered his home, he’s done nothing but protect me.

“I don’t want to be done.” I grip his shoulders.

“That’s good, because we’ll never be done.” His mouth claims mine. I can taste myself on him as his cock presses slowly into me. He’s thick, taking up every inch of space. He stills for a moment before he thrusts all the way.

I let out a small cry into Reese’s mouth, but he keeps on kissing me. The burning starts to fade away, and a new sensation grows. I start to kiss him back again.

“My fierce angel is ready for more so quickly.” He pulls out and thrusts back inside of me.

I let out a gasp. It’s a different feeling. More intense and the connection is deeper.

I stare up at Reese. His groans of pleasure turn me on even more. I think it’s the fact that I can get these sounds from him. His eyes are almost wild as he fights for control. I can feel it in

every hard line of his body. He doesn't want to hurt me, but he wants more.

I wrap my legs around him and start to meet his thrusts. I don't want him to hold back. I want all of him. Our stolen night together may be the only chance I get.

"Angel." His voice is strangled. "You're going to come for me."

I was already almost there. It's almost shameful how fast I go off. His hand slips between us, finding my clit.

"I'll do anything for you." The words slip past my lips easily. He lets out a loud groan as my body locks around him. Another orgasm hits me from somewhere deep. His warm release spills inside me as the orgasm rocks through me.

Reese buries his face in my neck. I hang on to him tighter, not wanting to lose this connection. I'm not used to being this close to another person. I don't want it to be over.

He presses soft kisses to my neck, his mouth coming to my ear.

"I'm going to hold you to that, angel," he says.

I think I gave Reese more of me than I ever planned on. But I don't regret one second of it. And I wasn't lying when I said I'd do anything for this man.

“*Y*ou aren’t listening.” Oleg sighs.
I look at him in the rearview mirror. “You said Corso is likely on the take with the Volislavs.”

He squints but returns his gaze to the road. “I said that, *and* that we should kill him.”

“He might still be useful.” I rub a hand along my stubble. Would Charlotte like it if I scratched her soft thighs with it? I don’t know, but I certainly intend to find out tonight.

“We only have a few days before it all goes down.” Oleg pulls up to my gate, and we pass through quickly.

“I’m aware.” I feel the clock ticking with every one of my heartbeats. Soon, I will avenge my brother and his wife and be able to look his children in the eyes and tell them I killed the ones who took their parents away.

“You’re distracted. The nanny—”

“Isn’t up for discussion.” I give him a warning look.

He throws up his hands and does that thing where he chews the inside of his cheek.

I throw him a bone. “I know you’re trying to look out for me. We’ve been in this shit long enough for me to know when you’re getting antsy, okay? But I’m fine. Charlotte isn’t some momentary distraction or some sort of ...” I can’t find the words.

“A way for you to process your grief?” he fills in as he pulls inside the nearest garage bay.

“It might look like that, but it’s not.” I step out of the car. “I intend to process my grief the old-fashioned way.”

“Revenge.” He nods as we enter the back hallway.

“Exactly.”

“All right.” His shoulders relax just a hair. “I’ll shut up about it.”

“I’ve known you long enough to know that’s bullshit, but at least wait a few days before you bring it up again.” I continue down the hall as he turns into my office. Business can wait. I want to see Charlotte and ... for the first time, I’m actually curious about what the children are doing. She gets so excited when she talks about them, about all the potential she sees inside their little heads. Maybe she’s infecting me with that excitement—no, not excitement. *Hope*. That’s what she’s giving the kids and me. Hope that even though their parents are gone, we can still be some sort of family.

Smiling at the thought, I walk out the back door and run into an argument.

“I told you not to eat my apple!” Ari points a finger at Penny.

“I didn’t eat it. I gave it to Lollipop,” she responds sassily.

His face is red, anger rising in him like a tide.

Charlotte hurries up, the yellow sundress she’s wearing like a breath of summer. “Ari, she fed it to the horse. It’s okay. I can go inside and get you another one.”

“No!” he fumes. “The picnic is *ruined*. She ruined it!”

“Ari, you have to calm down.” Charlotte wraps her arm around his shoulder, but he shrugs her off and storms away toward the grove of peach trees.

“He’s always mad. He looks for things to yell at me about.” Penny wipes at her eyes, all the sass gone now that her brother isn’t standing in front of her any longer. “He wasn’t like this

when—” She stops herself and swallows hard. “Before,” she amends quietly. Her little chin starts to quiver.

Charlotte pulls her into a hug, and then her gaze meets mine. There are tears in her eyes, ones she doesn’t shed. The way she holds on to Penny—she’s like a mother, one who is doing the best she can. The same sort of mother mine was. It strikes me right in the chest, the sensation of warmth and need all wrapped up together. And I’ve only ever felt it for her, for this unlucky girl who fate put in my path.

“I’ll speak to Ari.” I stride up to Penny who looks at me with wide eyes.

“Thank you.” Charlotte smiles. “I think he might listen better if it’s coming from you.”

“I don’t know.” I still can’t figure out how to interact with the children, but maybe that’s because I’ve been so focused on taking out my enemies and getting justice for their parents that I haven’t given it my all. In fact, I know I haven’t.

Penny sniffles.

“Shh.” Charlotte strokes Penny’s hair.

Though it seems odd, and nothing like me at all, I drop to one knee behind Penny.

She turns and looks at me.

“Hi.” I sound like an idiot.

“Hi, Uncle Reese.” She still clings to Charlotte.

“Ari is in a rough patch. Just like you are. But I’ll talk to him, okay?”

“Okay.” She sounds uncertain.

“I’m sorry I haven’t been around much.”

She turns toward me, finally letting go of Charlotte’s skirt. I can almost feel Charlotte beaming down at me.

“I’ve been busy with work things.”

“Daddy always said you did all the hard work so he didn’t have to.”

I smile because I loved Michael. My brother was everything I'm not, and his blue eyes shine out of Penny's face. "He was right, and I didn't mind it. I wanted to work so your dad could focus on you."

She nods shyly. "Sometimes ..." She tangles her little fingers together. "Sometimes when I see you, I think maybe you're him."

My cold heart breaks at that.

"But then I remember he's gone. Not coming back, right?" She sounds almost hopeful, like maybe I'll give her a different answer.

"No, sweetheart, he's not coming back." I hold my hand out, and to my surprise, she takes it. "But I promise you, I'm going to do everything I can to give you a happy life. One where you feel safe and cared for and ..." I glance up at Charlotte, the tears back in her eyes, but this time along with a bright smile. "Loved," I finish.

"I love you, Uncle Reese." Penny wraps her arms around my neck and hugs me tightly.

"I love you, sweetheart." I hug her back, not letting go until she does.

Penny looks over my shoulder, and she frowns a little. "Ari is so mean sometimes."

Charlotte strokes a hand down Penny's hair. "It's all right. He'll calm down. How about you and I go inside and see if we can find some more apples?"

"Okay." Penny wipes at her nose and gives me another shy smile as Charlotte leads her back to the house.

For some reason, just knowing that Charlotte approves and seeing her give me a million-megawatt smile, it gives me hope that maybe, despite everything, I can be someone the children can count on.

I turn toward the peach orchard and steady myself for the biggest challenge yet—winning over Ari.

I hold Penny's hand as we walk back to the house. I can't help but peek over my shoulder to watch Reese go to speak with Ari. Poor thing has so much anger inside of him. I hope that Reese can get through to him. The way that he handled Penny moments ago brought tears to my eyes. I don't think he realizes how much he means to these children.

"Will you braid my hair like yours?" Penny asks, pulling on my hand.

"Of course, honey." I open the back door to enter the house. It's nice seeing Reese while the sun is still out. He's gone so often. He does try to make most dinners, but once he's finished, he's right back out the door. I want him to be around more for moments like this one.

My curiosity about his job grows each day, but I never seem to get up the courage to ask him what he does.

It's been almost a week since he first came into my bedroom. Each night before I go to bed, I leave the door unlocked, and he comes into my room, waking me with his soft touches and hungry mouth.

When he's with me, it feels like he can't get enough of me, but then nothing. I guess I'm out of sight, out of mind. He only seeks me out at night while the rest of the world is sleeping. I try not to let it bother me, but I'm starting to grow attached.

"I forgot Lily Pad!" Penny releases my hand to run back down to where we were having the picnic to grab her stuffed frog. I

head for the kitchen to get a couple of apples quickly to go ahead and take down now.

I stop when I hear someone say my name. They're not calling to me but talking about me. I quickly realize that it's Oleg and Marguerite. Part of me knows I should turn around and come back later, but my feet stay planted to this spot. I'm curious to see what they have to say about me.

"She's a sweet girl, and the children adore her. I hope Reese knows what he's doing." I guess a few people have picked up on what's going on between Reese and me. Our stolen moments in the night haven't gone unnoticed.

"Don't worry over it. I'm sure it will be short lived. Let them get it out of their systems," Oleg responds.

I'm not sure there is any getting Reese out of my system, but I'm not so confident it's the same way for him when it comes to me.

"She might grow attached. Then what?" Marguerite tosses back.

"Reese said this is only a momentary distraction. He's got a lot going on." Oleg says.

I take a step back and then another. My chest starts to ache.

Marguerite lets out a loud huff of annoyance. "Then he needs to stop now before it gets out of hand."

I turn, not wanting to hear anymore. My eyes burn with tears, but I fight them back.

This shouldn't hurt as much as it does. I knew what this was. Reese has made me no promises. If anything, he's been so good to me already. My life has changed so much since I got here.

"Got her!" Penny shouts, holding up the pink stuffed frog. "Hi," Penny chirps.

I spin back around to see Oleg standing there. I force a smile.

"Hello, little lady," he greets her back. I hold my hand out for Penny.

“Let’s go braid your hair now.”

She takes my hand so I can make our escape. I hope he doesn’t realize that I might have overheard. We head upstairs and to her bedroom.

Lulu peaks from where she was snoozing away as if it were her bed. I love how much she’s taken to both of the children. Oftentimes, I’ll find Penny talking to her and Lulu loving all the attention.

It isn’t until a few hours later that Ari comes bouncing into the bedroom with a smile on his face. As sad as I’m feeling about everything, I can’t help but smile right back at him. It’s nice to see him happy.

“Marguerite said it’s time for dinner,” Reese announces, coming in a few seconds behind Ari. “Why don’t we all head down?”

Penny picks up Lulu before she and Ari take off.

“Don’t run, and wash your hands,” I call as I try to follow them out, but they’re already on the stairs.

Reese snags my elbow and pulls me back. His mouth is on mine as he pins me to the wall. I melt into him, forgetting about everything else while he kisses me. His hands are everywhere. That neediness I always feel from him comes back full force. I moan into his mouth, my feet leaving the ground as he holds me to the wall.

“I can’t get enough of you.” He licks and sucks at my neck. His hand moves between us, and a moment later his fingers slip into my panties. “Already primed for me. Fuck, I love that.”

I am. He does this to my body. He’s the only man to ever get this kind of reaction from me. My body craves him. That’s the scary part. I know it will never go away.

He pulls my panties to the side before his cock brushes against my sex to find my opening. I grip his shoulder as he thrusts all the way inside. I tense for a moment, my body still getting used to his size.

When he starts to move inside of me, my body opens up more for him. His thrusts grow harder and faster. His fingers dig into me. I'll be surprised if he doesn't leave marks behind.

"Reese." I moan his name, my orgasm pushing down on me.

"Give it to me, angel. It belongs to me just like you do." His words spring me into bliss. The orgasm cascades through my whole body all the way to my toes.

Reese lets out a loud groan as his warm release spills deep inside of me.

We both try to catch our breath as reality starts to seep back in. His cock slips from me as he places me back onto my feet. He even fixes my panties and rights my dress before he sees to his own clothes.

My shyness starts to emerge once again. All of our moments are shaded in the dark. Right now, everything is covered in light. I'm not falling asleep in his arms. I'm standing in front of him not sure what to say.

"Angel." He brushes his mouth against mine. When he pulls back, he stares into my eyes, and I think he's going to say something else.

"Reese," Oleg calls his name. "We have to go now." Reese steps back from me a moment before Oleg enters the hallway. I can tell from his face something is wrong. His gaze bounces between us. I inspect the suddenly-very-interesting floorboards.

"I'll be right there." Reese waves him away.

Oleg turns and leaves.

"Tonight, angel." Reese kisses me again before he takes off, leaving me standing in the hallway. I'm not sure how I feel. My emotions are all over the place.

Tonight, I think I'll lock my door. Time and space might be good for me. To detach myself from him before I get any more attached than I already am. If that's even possible. But based on the way my chest aches, I think it's already too late.

Leaving Charlotte and the kids feels wrong, but I have to do it. Tonight is the night we strike our enemies and leave them in the ground.

“We have a problem,” Oleg says as we load into the black SUV. A row of similar SUVs is lined up along the drive with more stationed at our holdings throughout. This is a war, one that will be over tonight.

“What now?” I grab the semi-automatic from the seat beside me and check the magazine.

“Uri and Gregory haven’t been spotted at all today.”

“They’ve gone to ground?” I meet his eyes in the rearview.

“I don’t think so.” He shakes his head. “I’ve got a bad feeling about all this.”

“You always have a bad feeling.” I’m on the cusp of wiping out the Volislavs and getting justice for my brother and his family. For *my* family.

“They know we’re coming. Corso is a fucking snake.”

“We planned for that.”

“I know, but the fact no one has seen them is ... concerning, to say the least.”

“I get it. I do. You’re always trying to watch my back, and I appreciate it. But it doesn’t matter if they’ve fled the city or are hunkered down in one of their safehouses, I’m going to find them, and I’m going to kill them.”

He nods, the machinery in his head still turning as the sun dips below the horizon, and night settles in for good.

Uri and Gregory Volislav aren't planners. Not really. They set a trap for Michael—one he never could've seen coming. But that isn't the norm for them. They went out of their way to strike us, to take what I loved most. It worked. Maybe they took a note from that and are planning something for tonight. It doesn't matter. Like I told Oleg, this night will end with them dead.

"Ari seemed happier." Oleg doesn't relax, but he's smart enough to change the subject.

"We had a talk."

"Yeah?" He lifts a brow.

"He takes after me more than Michael it seems. He wants to learn how to fight, to defend himself and his sister."

"He doesn't need to fight. He's got you."

"For now. Tomorrow isn't promised to anyone, Oleg. If Michael's death taught me nothing else, it taught me that. So starting tomorrow—"

"If we survive."

I smirk. "*When* we survive, I'm going to start teaching him."

"He's only six." He turns off the main highway toward the docks.

"Right. He'll be a killing machine before he even hits puberty."

That gets a barking laugh from Oleg. "Something to look forward to, at least."

"I have plenty to look forward to." I close my eyes and picture Charlotte, her curious gaze on me and her lips slightly parted. That woman—she's become like a talisman to me, a touchstone that I need for my life to have meaning.

"The nanny?" Oleg asks.

“Charlotte.” I nod. “Tomorrow, I’m going to ask her to marry me.”

His mouth drops open as he stares at me in the rearview.

“The road!” I point.

He turns the wheel sharply, barely avoiding the guard rail. “Marry you?”

“She’s the one. She’s mine.” I already sent for my mother’s ring from the safe deposit box. “If—I mean *when*—we survive, I’m going to focus on her and the children. They deserve that from me.”

“I ... Are you certain this is what you want? It’s so fucking fast, Reese.”

“I’ve never been more certain of anything.” I smile just thinking about being married to Charlotte, introducing her to people as my beautiful wife. “And like I said, tomorrow is promised to no one. I want to be a family, to have a life. Penny and Ari need me, and I won’t let them down.”

“But what about the business?”

“I’ll still handle business of course, and once the Volislavs are gone, things will settle down.”

He slows as we reach the docks. The heroin shipment should already be in the warehouse, and my workers are standing by to load up two 18-wheelers with the product.

My hackles rise.

Oleg senses it too because he swerves just as a hail of bullets slam into the car. “Fuck!” He turns the wheel even harder, using the side of the car to take the barrage of shots.

I throw myself sideways, lying low as the car careens across the gravel. We slide to a stop as more shots ring out.

“Already in the shit.” Oleg is lying across the center console, a grin on his face as he picks up his favorite submachine gun from the floorboard.

“You ready to do this?” The fire in my blood is just beginning, the start of bloodshed and all-out war.

“Been ready.” He shoots out a quick text to our soldiers who are waiting only a mile away. The Volislavs no doubt killed the few guards we left at the docks, but they were decoys. Just a sample of what’s to come.

“They’re rolling.” He pockets his phone. “We should wait.”

“We should,” I agree but reach for the door handle.

“You’re such a fucking maniac.” He shakes his head, then reaches for his own door. “First to 20 kills wins!” he cries before jumping out and opening fire.

“Motherfucker!” I follow and rain down hell on the Volislav soldiers, exacting their blood in retribution for my own.

I can’t bring my brother back, but I can certainly send an army of souls to hell for daring to hurt my family. So I do. I kill and kill, a gun battle that echoes across the water. The cops know to stay away, but that won’t stop people from calling. Not when it sounds like World War III over here.

It doesn’t matter. I won’t stop. Not until all of them are dead. So we fire, killing without mercy until we’re pinned down behind the SUV. The tires are all blown, and the Volislav men are yelling back and forth, trying to get a plan together to rush us.

But then another rush of gunfire erupts, and our men rush through the shipping containers, guns out and bloodlust in their eyes. They run past us, a river of hatred and anger. I wasn’t the only one who loved Michael; who’s seen the way his children suffer. My men are loyal to a fault, and they show it with their vicious dedication to killing every last Volislav soldier.

When it’s over and the wharf is once again quiet, I survey the carnage. Dozens of Volislavs are dead; a handful of my own are too.

“Full trust funds for their families,” I tell Oleg.

He wipes some blood spray from his face and nods.

I continue through the bodies and into the warehouse. The shipment is here, intact. But the more I look, the more certain I

am that the brothers—Uri and Gregory—aren't here.

“Like cowards, they sent their men to die for them.” Oleg doesn't hide his disgust.

Something itches at the back of my mind. A niggle of worry. One that grows by the second. I left 20 men at the estate, plus the usual contingent of eight guards that are most familiar with the grounds.

I pull out my phone and dial the gate guard.

It rings.

And rings.

Then voicemail.

“We need to get home.” I turn, and before I can even think it through, I'm sprinting away from the cache of heroin and bloody vengeance.

I have to get back home. To *her*. To the kids.

Uri and Gregory aren't in hiding; they were waiting. They must've known I would destroy them, their army nothing compared to my rage and my own sizeable force. So, instead, they're going to try and finish the job they started on Michael's family. On *my* family.

“Boss?” Oleg catches up with me.

“The children!” I yell over the sound of our pounding footfalls.

“You think they'd try to—Fuck!” Oleg knows as well as I do that the Volislav brothers are the scum of the earth. They'll stop at nothing to strike at me.

I reach the nearest SUV and jump in. It starts up, the fob on the dash. Oleg tries to get in with me, but I shake my head and shift into reverse. “Rally the men and follow me home.”

There's no time. None. Not to argue or discuss it.

I throw it back into gear and sideswipe the shipping container to my right as I speed down the gravel road toward the

highway. Toward home. Toward my family and the danger waiting at my door.

Penny rubs her eyes with her little fists as she tries to fight sleep. “Again?” she asks. Her eyelids are growing heavier by the second.

“If that’s what you want, honey, I can read it again.” It doesn’t go unnoticed that Ari isn’t making an irritated noise at Penny asking me to read another story. I don’t know what Reese said to him, but something has settled inside of him.

Penny nods, cuddling Lulu closer, causing her to purr loudly. She’s loving every bit of Penny’s attention. She’s even let her put little hats and stuff on her when they have a tea party.

I open the book and start reading once again. I don’t get far before loud bangs that sound like gunfire echo through the house. People suddenly begin shouting, and all hell seems to be breaking loose. I jump up from the bed, not sure what the hell I should do. I don’t want the children to see me panic, but I’m sure it’s written all over my face.

“We have to go,” Ari says, getting up from the bed. “Our dad’s safe room was in his bedroom. I bet Uncle Reese’s is in the same place.” Safe room? What the hell is happening here?

I put my finger to my lips before I peek out the open bedroom door. I jerk back when I see a man coming down the hall with a gun at his side. I motion for the kids to get behind me. I look around the room and grab the closest thing to me that I can use to hit him. My heart pounds. I can’t believe this is happening. But I know without a doubt that I will protect these children with my life.

I wait with bated breath for what seems an eternity until he steps into the room. His gun is drawn. I let him take a few more steps before I strike. I swing the panda lamp as hard as I can onto the side of his head. He's too tall for me to crash it squarely, but I do my best. He lets out a loud yell before tumbling over.

"Go!" I shout. Both the kids take off down the hall towards Reese's room. I follow after them, praying that Ari is right about the location of the safe room.

"Fucking bitch." The man's hand wraps around my ankle before I can get clear of him. I try to pull my foot free, but his grip is too tight. When I see it isn't working, I go for his head with a hard kick. Pain explodes through my bare foot, but he loosens his hold enough for me to run.

I take off, heading for Reese's room. When I enter, I see Ari and Penny are already standing in a small room.

"Come on." Ari motions. Penny holds Lulu close. I can tell she's trying not to cry. I run but a hand grips my hair, pulling me back.

"You're going to pay for that."

I turn and stare up at the same man as before. Blood runs down his face. I must've busted his nose with my foot.

"Shut the door!" I shout to the kids. My captor's eyes shoot toward Ari and Penny.

"Not without you!" Penny shouts right back.

The man lets my hair go, and I know he's heading for the twins. I reach out, scratching as hard as I can across his face. I turn to run for the door. I almost make it, but he's on top of me once again.

"Charlotte!" Ari shouts.

I lock eyes with him. He's not sad or scared. I can see the anger on his little face. I reach out and grab the door as the man tries to pull me back. I shove it as hard as I can, but it's not enough. It doesn't close. I can't let the children get hurt.

I turn quickly and go for this asshole's nuts. Three other men come flooding into the room. He lets my hair go again. I throw all my weight into the door, making sure it closes all the way this time. Pain burst through my side at the impact. I slide to the floor. A sense of relief fills me knowing that the children are safe.

"You had one fucking job!" one of the men says. He lifts his gun and shoots the man in the head. His body hits the ground next to me.

Holy crap! He shot his own teammate. That can't be right. Maybe they're called partners in crime? I have no freaking clue what these people refer to each other as. All I know is that I'm in way over my head.

I watch as he lowers his gun and turns all of his attention on me. I don't recognize him.

"Did you get them, Uri?" a fourth man asks, coming into the room.

"No, but he got her." The man referred to as Uri puts his gun away as he makes his way over to me. He grabs my arm and yanks me up. I fight back a scream; the side of my body is still aching. "She is rather pretty, even all banged up." He pulls me into him. His nose goes to my neck as he takes a deep breath. "Smells good, too."

"Why are you doing this?" I finally get the words out. It's starting to get hard to breathe. I clench my hands into fists to stop them from shaking.

"Innocent, too." Uri smirks down at me. "Maybe not so much anymore. I have no doubt Reese already fucked you by now."

Tears prick at the bridge of my nose.

"Please. You don't have to do this. The children wouldn't hurt anyone, and I'm just their nanny." Why would these thugs be after the kids, anyway?

Uri lets out a mocking laugh.

"You have no idea the devil you let slide between your legs." His hand tightens on my arm. "Drugs, whores, money

laundering are only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to Reese.”

“No.” I shake my head. I hate that, in my mind, I start to put things together. The late hours and all the security around here suddenly make sense. Tears roll down my cheeks.

“You’re either fucking stupid, or Reese did a good job hiding it from you.” The sinister look in his eyes makes me uneasy as he looks over the rest of my body. I’m only wearing a long night shirt.

“You should fuck her on his bed.” The other man laughs.

“That’s not a bad idea.” He starts to pull me toward the bed. I try to fight him, but he hits me with a slap to my cheek, making black dots form in my eyes before he tosses me on the bed like a doll.

“I want a turn,” one of the other men says, his eyes all over me as he grabs his crotch.

I scream and try to fight him off, but Uri is too strong. Memories of Rick try to surface. I can’t let them. I have to keep trying to get out of this, to defend myself.

Where the hell is Reese?

“Reese!” I scream for him.

The men laugh as Uri reaches for my ankle and drags me down in the bed.

There’s no way out of here for me. My only solace is knowing the twins are okay. That’s all that really matters.

They're here. I know it the moment I speed past my busted gate and the dead soldiers littering the drive up to the house.

The night is windy, and a light drizzle coats the house in dark grays and blacks. All the lights are out as I skid to a stop near the front door.

More dead men line the walk, and I want to rush through the doors, guns blazing. But that would be stupid. My enemies are watching me right now, their eyes following every movement. That's what Uri and Gregory do—they're the sort of guys who, when they were kids, would pull the wings off butterflies for fun.

I sprint around the side of the dark stone mansion, the rain intensifying and pelting me as I bypass the main house. Shots ring out, and dirt flies up around my feet, but I keep going. I have to.

My heart pounds as I run full speed away from Charlotte, away from the children. The rain serves to hide me as I reach the top of the cliff and pick my way down to the narrow staircase carved into the stone. They haven't found it yet. If they had, they'd be waiting here to pop me as soon as I showed up.

The cave is safe. I hurtle toward it, my mind counting each fucking second it takes for me to get all the way into the first cavern, past the iron grate, and deep into the rock.

No one's here. No one alive, anyway. I sprint by the dark places where Oleg and I exert our influence on our enemies, where I spill blood to bring peace. My feet almost slip on the limestone as I turn a corner into the dark. But I know the way.

Slowing, I reach in front of me until I feel slick wood, the timbers soaking up the humidity that covers every bit of the cave. I pull the rusted handle and find another staircase. With quick steps, I spiral up and up, only quieting my ascent once I'm almost at the top.

I should be gassed. I'm not. I'm chomping at the fucking bit to get to Charlotte and the children.

When I open the trap door into the pantry, I rise slowly and close it behind me.

"Give me a juice box." Someone's in the kitchen just ahead.

"Fuck off." Another voice.

I edge closer to the door, my hair dripping, my clothes soaked, my blood on fucking fire. Pulling my knife from its sheath, I ease forward and open the pantry door just a crack.

"My blood sugar's getting low." The other guy yanks the fridge all the way open and reaches for a Capri Sun.

"Fuck off, I said." The first one reaches for a bottle of white wine; likely one Marguerite uses for cooking.

I don't wait another second. Slipping from the pantry, I creep up behind the squabbling pair. The first one goes down easy, my knife opening a smiley face across his throat. The other turns and tries to pull his gun, but I sink the bloody blade into his heart. He falls with a *thunk* and a small, surprised cry.

Moving stealthily, I duck behind the kitchen island as the door to the main house opens.

"What the—"

I throw my knife, embedding it in the speaker's chest, then pull my 9-millimeter and finish the job. From here on in, it's a gunfight.

I rush to the man in the doorway and grab a fistful of his shirt, then walk him back into the hall as he chokes on his own blood. Shots erupt, the rounds ripping into his back as I use him as a shield.

Aiming around him, I take out two soldiers, then pop another one in the head as he peeks over the stairs.

Once I drop the dead weight, I sprint into the foyer. A bullet sends searing pain through my side, but I double tap the asshole who shot me, then sprint up the stairs and down the hall.

“Reese!” Charlotte’s scream of terror is like a lightning strike to my nervous system, and I pound full speed down the hall.

I fire a shot at the guard outside my door, miss, then slam right into him with my shoulder. I hear his ribs crack from the impact, and he fires a torrent of shots as he goes down. Grabbing his wrist, I slam it against the floor until he lets go of his gun, then I take my pistol and beat him with it until his face is a bloody mush.

My bedroom door opens, and Gregory is standing over me, his gun pointed right at me. “About time.” He smirks, the scar I put on his right cheek a dark slash of purple on his pale face. “Get up, asshole.”

I do.

He jerks his chin toward my gun. “Drop it.”

I do. I have to.

“Bring our guest in. I want him to see this,” Uri calls from my room.

Charlotte whimpers, and I force myself to stay calm, to play along. I have to make sure she’s safe before I go beast mode on these pieces of shit.

When I see her lying on the bed, tears in her eyes and terror written large on her face, I swallow my rage. I can’t lose my cool.

“You’ve been plowing this little thing?” Uri stands and yanks her up by her hair.

She screams and tries to scratch him, but he yanks her around to his front and pins her arms behind her.

“Let her go. This is between us.” I lean against the door and cross my arms nonchalantly.

“Don’t want us to get a taste of your special piece of ass?” Gregory asks and moves toward her.

“I massacred your soldiers at the docks. Killed every last one of them.” I yawn. “Shooting fish in a barrel. There were a few who we could’ve spared. We didn’t.” I hate for Charlotte to hear the truth like this, in this unforgivably brutal way, but I never got the chance to explain it to her. Maybe it’s better this way. Maybe if she sees me for the monster I am, she’ll know what a future with me looks like. Will she want it?

“Can’t make an omelet without breaking some eggs. I learned that from your father.” Uri glares at me. “The man you murdered. The one who should be here right now, running this city.”

“I killed him. I’d do it again.” I shrug. “Besides, he was *my* father, not yours. You should’ve left your beef back in the homeland. Instead, you brought it over here. You took my brother from me. His wife. You tried to take their children.”

“We will.” Uri glances at the safe room. “I’ll burn this house down around them if I have to, but your line is going to fucking end *tonight*. We owe it to Alexei.”

“Alexei didn’t give two shits about you. He only took you in to save face when my mother left with Michael and me. You weren’t his blood. He was Bratva. You’re ... nothing.”

“He was like a father to us!” Gregory yells and raises his gun to my face. “And you took him away over a fucking woman?”

“That’s what you idiots will never understand. She wasn’t *just* a woman. She was my mother, and she was way too fucking good for Alexei. But look—” I adopt a conciliatory tone. “There’s one thing that helps me get through the loss. One thing I like to think about that makes it worth it, and I’ll share it with you. Maybe it will give you the same comfort it gives

me. It's this: Whenever my mother takes a piss in heaven, it rains down on Alexei in hell."

Gregory swings with the gun, catching me in the jaw and rocking my head back.

Pain explodes through my face, but I don't make a sound. Instead, I level my gaze on Gregory as if nothing had happened.

"Just for that, I'm going to fuck this *kiska* raw then strangle her with my bare hands."

Uri tsks. "Oh, Reese. Now you pissed him off." He still holds Charlotte tight, tears rolling down her face.

Gregory turns and advances on her.

"Don't touch her!" I warn.

She kicks out with one foot and nails him right in the shin.

He yells and reaches for her anyway.

Then several things move at once. Me. My gun hand. The panic room door. And the world on its axis.

“No!” I scream when, out of the corner of my eye, I see the door to the panic room start to open. Fear like I’ve never known fills me at the thought of something happening to the children.

Two of the other men spin around at the same time to look towards the door. Uri’s attention is on me.

I scramble to the other side of the bed, trying to get out of his reach. His hand wraps around my ankle as gunfire starts to explode through the room. I keep fighting him with every ounce of strength I have. I stretch my hand out towards the gold paper weight of the earth that is almost within my reach. Just a little bit more and I’ll have it.

Relief fills me as my fingers finally wrap around it. I hold tight to it as Uri yanks me harder this time. The force of the pull drags me across the bed. Gunshots continue to ring out through the room. Uri pulls out his gun, training it on me.

“Stop or I’ll shoot her!” His attention is on everything else happening in the room.

I slowly shift over some out of the line of fire. Not that it would take him much to get it back on me. With all my might I push up and swing the globe in my hand as hard as I can. I make contact with the side of his head. Warm blood splatters against me.

He screams, stumbling back as he trains his gun on me again. I brace myself at the sound of the gun going off. Uri’s eyes widen before he drops to his knees in front of me.

Ari comes running to us. He lifts his arms and swings a fire poker, hitting Uri across the back. He falls forward with a thud.

“Baby.” Reese is in front of me, his hands cupping my face. His eyes are wild.

“I’m okay.” I pull back from his hands. “Penny?”

“Here!” She steps out of the panic room, holding Lulu in her arms. She doesn’t even look scared. In fact, she scrunches her nose in disgust when she sees a dead body a few feet from her.

“Why did you open the door?” I try to get off the bed. I have to elbow Reese to get past him.

“I was making a distraction.” Ari shrugs. He’s still got the fire poker in his hand, but he looks okay. More men come pouring into the room.

“How many bullets you got in you?” Oleg asks.

I jerk my head to look in Reese’s direction. It’s then I notice the blood that’s soaking through his shirt.

“One. It’s fine.”

“Doc is on the way.” He nods.

“I’m not through with them.” Reese motions to the men on the floor. I can still see the rise and fall of Uri’s chest. His breaths are shallow, but he’s still alive. But by the look on Reese’s face, I’m guessing he won’t be that way for long.

“On it.”

“Come.” Reese holds his hand out to me. I take it as he leads the children and me out of the room and back into their bedroom. Neither one of them seems the least bit fazed by everything that just happened. Come to think of it, Ari was the one to bring up the panic room. Which tells me that they are used to living in this world. They’ve already become accustomed to it at such a young age. Unlike me. How long have I been living in it without having any freaking clue what was truly going on?

The house seems to flood with more people. Marguerite even shows up, coming to the kids' room. I turn on a movie for them, not sure what else to really do right now. I kind of feel like I'm in a daze, like this isn't real life. But maybe that's shock or the effects of adrenaline. All I know for certain is that the children are all right, I'm unharmed, and Reese saved us.

Reese stands out in the hallway. He's giving orders and so on while still making sure he has eyes on us.

"I've got them." Marguerite sits between the children, one arm around each of them. "Go on and get cleaned up."

"Doctor is here," Oleg tells Reese, who only nods in acknowledgement but doesn't move.

"Shouldn't you go?" I ask, leaning up against the door frame, my knees wobbly.

Ari lets out a laugh as the cartoon genie starts up a funny song. He and Penny are already engrossed in the movie, as if nothing at all out of the ordinary just happened. They're fine. Reese is bleeding but fine. The only one not fine? Me.

Oleg makes himself scarce, leaving us alone. Reese moves in closer to me. He lifts his hand to touch my cheek, but I step back. "You should see the doctor."

"Come with me."

I shake my head. "No." I'm sure he's not accustomed to hearing that word. "I need a shower." I motion to myself. Blood still covers my clothes and skin. Someone else's blood, and I put it there by smashing his face in with a paperweight. I shudder.

He stares at me for long moments, his eyes full of so much, but all he says is, "Okay. I'll see the doc, and you can have your shower."

"Thank you." I try to step past, him but he grabs me, pulling me into him. His mouth comes down on mine in a ravishing kiss. He's very clearly making his claim on me. Letting me know that we are far from over.

“Go, before I change my mind.” He releases his hold on me. I dart into the bedroom and head straight for the shower. I strip my clothes off as I go. Once inside the shower, I turn the heat all the way up. I get to work on washing every inch of myself a few times over. But it does nothing to wash away my anger. My horror at the blood fades as I think about all the things Reese hasn’t told me, hasn’t been straight with me about.

Each second that passes only has me getting madder and madder. This is bullshit. I’m over being Reese’s mistress. Isn’t that what I am? He only comes to me at night. He’s gone all the time. I clearly have no idea what he’s out there doing. Didn’t Uri say he has hookers or something? My stomach twists thinking about him being with someone else. He’s all I know.

The thought of him not being in my life causes my chest to hurt. But this isn’t going to work for me. Not only me; the children deserve better. They don’t need a part-time father. I don’t want to be with a man who would rather be away doing whatever it is he’s doing all night than having dinner with us.

I huff out a breath as I get dressed and towel dry my hair. I’m sounding like a crazy person. There are five million other things I should be mad about—especially all the violence that just exploded around me—but the reality is I’m not.

I walk over to my bedroom door and flip the lock into place before I crawl into my bed. I want all of Reese or none of him.

I won’t settle for less. Not for me and certainly not for the children.

I do my best to sit still as my doctor gets a look at the bullet wound in my stomach.

Oleg winces as Dr. Grant wipes antiseptic over the entry wound. It burns like a motherfucker, but I don't make a sound.

"Always the tough guy." Dr. Grant shakes his head, his thin, white hair barely moving. He uses a set of metal tongs to spread the wound.

Fuck!

Oleg turns almost green and has to step out for a moment. It's hilarious, given the horrible shit we've done to our enemies in the cave. But he's always been like this if one of us is injured. He just can't handle it. I'd never tell him this, but it's kind of endearing in a weird way.

Dr. Grant sighs and pulls the tongs away. "This is going to hurt. I can see the slug inside, doesn't seem to have shattered or broken into bits. It's lodged in your lowest rib, but it doesn't seem to have busted the bone. I'd prefer it if I could get you to the hospital so I can remove the slug and—"

"Just take it out." I grit my teeth as Oleg returns, his eyes averted from the wound, and hands me a bottle of the good whiskey from my office.

"I can give you a local, but it won't take away the pain entirely." Dr. Grant pulls out a needle set from his bag.

Oleg makes a hasty exit.

I take a big swig from the bottle and lie back. The image of Charlotte swinging that globe and smashing Uri in the face replays in my mind over and over. So much so that Dr. Grant asks, “Why are you smiling? I’m digging around in your goddamn insides, and you’re smiling.”

“Because I’m in love.” I take another big drink.

“Jesus Christ,” he grumbles and gets to work.

I feel the pain, but it’s a dull ache, not the acute sensation of the wound. “She’s a fighter, my girl.” Another swig.

“Hold still.”

“She took down my enemy, knocked him to the fucking ground. Hell, she probably would’ve stomped him in the dick if she’d had time. I was there though. I was there to save her and the children.” The alcohol warms me as I close my eyes and hear the crunch of Uri’s cheekbone. “It was so, so good. Fucking hot.”

“Ok, I’ve got the slug. Bone is badly bruised, but I don’t see a fracture. Of course, the only way to know for sure is an X-ray, and you’d have to go to the—”

“No.” I wave him away. “Sew it up. My blood is getting hotter by the second. For Charlotte, for my warrior nanny.”

“You’re in love with your nanny?” His bushy white eyebrows pop up. “Cliché, isn’t it?”

“No, fucking perfect is what it is. Now sew.” I take a few more gulps, then finish the bottle. “I’m telling her tonight. Then I’m going to fuck her until she passes out. And then—” I grin. “I’m going to torture Uri for hours. *Hours*. Too bad Gregory’s already dead. But Uri. He killed Michael. He’s the one who started all this shit. And he thought he could touch my girl?” I let out a raucous laugh. “She touched him right back, with interest.”

Another long-suffering sigh from Dr. Grant, and then he leans back and says, “Done. I went ahead and gave you a tetanus shot as well. You need to rest and—”

“Thanks.” I sit up and pat him on the cheek. “I’ve got a nanny for my wife. Excuse me, Doc.”

I stride down the hall, though I may have to lean on the wall a few times for balance. When I get to her door, I go for the handle.

It doesn’t turn.

I stare down at it, confusion blooming in my mind like a weed. “What the fuck?” I try it again. Doesn’t turn.

I stand there for a minute just trying to figure out what the fuck is going on right now.

“Charlotte?” I lean against the door. “You in there?”

“Yes.” Her curt reply.

“Open the door.”

“No.”

“What?” I press my forehead to the wood. “Why not?”

“I’m not interested in being lied to, in being your mistress, in any of the things you’ve been using to string me along. I deserve better. The children deserve better. I was almost killed, and I had no idea we were even in danger to begin with because you never told me anything!” Her voice rises, then she speaks quietly again. “So please step away from my door. I’m not some plaything for you to pick up when you feel like it. And I’m *certainly* not your secret mistress.”

Secret mistress? What is she talking about? Every man on this property knows she’s mine, that she’s not to be touched, looked at, or even breathed near.

I’ll show her the truth. But first she needs to open the damn door.

“Open the door, Charlotte.”

“No. Good night.” Her petulant tone makes my cock throb.

“I’ll give you one more chance, angel. Open the door.”

“You told me to keep it locked, remember?” Oh, the sass on her.

I lick my lips, then step back and bring my foot up. With a hard surge forward, I kick the door in. It splinters at the hinges and slams against the wall.

She sits up in bed, her eyes wide, her hands clutching her blanket.

I don't bother trying to close the door. If she wants everyone to know she's mine, I'm more than happy to do this where everyone can hear it.

"Stitches." Her eyes go to my wound.

I reach for my pants and undo them, then shove them and my boxers to the floor. "Take off your clothes, Charlotte."

She swallows hard, and her gaze travels to my rock-hard cock. "What are you—"

"I said take off your clothes." I step to her and pull the blanket away. "I want to see what's mine." I raise my voice and let out a harsh yell. "Charlotte is mine. All fucking mine. Forever."

The corners of her mouth turn up the slightest bit. "You mean it?"

"Every fucking word." I lean down and plant my arms on either side of her. "Now take off your clothes before I rip them off you."

She wets her lips, then hastily reaches down to remove her T-shirt and panties.

"That's better." I fist my cock and give it a single stroke before climbing on top of her.

She sniffs. "Are you drunk?"

I nod and rub my cock along her wet slit. "Drunk on love."

"Love?" She shudders as my cock slides against her clit.

"I love you, angel. I love everything about you. I want you to be mine forever. My wife, my partner, mother of my children—including Ari and Penny. You're the woman I've been waiting for, the one I never thought would appear. But here you are."

Her eyes water and she cups my face. “Do you mean it?”

“Every fucking word.” I kiss her mouth, tasting her, sinking my tongue against hers until we’re both breathless.

“I love you too.” She arches, moving her hips along with me.

Why do those words sound so impossibly sweet on her lips? I kiss her again just to taste them. Pure sugar.

“I’ll never lie to you, never hide anything from you. What you saw tonight? That’s part of my life. It was, anyway. Uri and Gregory—they killed Michael. I vowed to end them for what they’ve done. End their line, end their business, end their lives.”

Her cheeks flush. “Good.”

“Good?” I raise a brow.

“If they’re responsible for harming Ari and Penny and killing their parents, then good. They got what they deserved.” She runs her nails down my sides and grips me. “I want that. I want you to do what’s right to defend your family.”

“Always.” I notch my cock at her entrance. “I’ll always defend you. You’re my family, Charlotte. My heart.”

She smiles, then whimpers when I hit her clit just right. “I need you—all of you.”

She doesn’t have to ask. I slide into her wet pussy, her walls clenching me tightly as she moans and throws her head back.

I suck her throat and start a fierce rhythm, one that everyone in the house can hear. Charlotte’s going to feel me for days, her body taking every bit of my claiming as she claws at my back and moans loudly.

Stopping isn’t an option, so I keep thrusting, taking all of her and giving all of me in return. My release is already rising, pressing along my shaft.

Her body shakes, her eyes wild as I pull one of her nipples into my mouth and bite down.

She cries out, and then her body tightens and uncoils in steady waves, my name on her lips as she comes on my cock.

I can't hold out, not when my love is in the deepest throes of pleasure. With a hard shove, I seat myself deeply inside her and kiss her hard as I let go.

She feels so perfect, her cunt claiming me so tightly as I spill inside her, coating her with me. I want her to remember this night, this promise of forever, for the rest of her life.

I know I will. Tonight I destroyed my enemies and claimed my bride. I've never wanted anything more. Nothing will ever break the bond forged between us and the new family we've created, and I'll tear apart anyone who tries to come for us again.

EPILOGUE

CHARLOTTE

I hurry into the bedroom. Reese narrows his eyes as I pass by him and go straight into the closet. I put my finger on the keypad, and the wall slides down, revealing more diamonds and gems than any girl should have. According to my husband, that's not true. He insists on buying more and spoiling me rotten.

My fingers run along the pearl necklace that belonged to Reese's mother. He gave it to me to wear at our wedding. I know it's going to be perfect for tonight. I grab it, swipe my finger on the keypad, and the wall moves back into place.

"What are you doing?" Reese stands in the doorway of our closet and crosses his arms over his chest.

"Aren't you supposed to be getting ready or something?"

"I don't look ready?" He glances down at his suit.

"What?" I fight back a giggle but lose.

He narrows his eyes on me again. He is definitely ready. His suit fits him perfectly, and he knows it. "If you want to play, all you have to do is ask, wife."

I take a step back, putting the giant island in the center of the closet between us. "We played twice today already." I would be up for a third, but we don't have time.

"You think the island will keep you safe?" He knocks on it. "What's with the dress?" His eyes roam over me. Now I realize exactly what the look he gave me earlier was for when I slipped past him. He noticed my light pink sundress I got a

few weeks ago. With my belly growing by the second, I had to get some new things. I didn't take into account that my belly would make the dress fall higher up on my leg.

"I have a date." I lift my chin in defiance.

"Is that so?"

"You have plans tonight and got all dressed up. I can do the same." I know I'm poking him, but that's my intent. He growls before coming for me. He's right. The island does nothing to stop him. He pounces on me like a lion.

I moan when he takes my mouth and starts to ravish me. We've been married six months now, and I don't foresee this honeymoon period being over anytime soon. Reese always has his hands on me. He's a little jealous and possessive. Okay, maybe that's a bit of an understatement. The man is possessive, and I'm not going to even try to lie and say I don't enjoy it. I eat it up. I've never had someone who loves and takes care of me as he does.

"Hey, that's *my* date!" Reese sighs, letting my mouth go.

Ari is now standing in the doorway with his arms folded over his chest. He's the spitting image of Reese.

"You're trying to steal my wife?"

"You're stealing my sister," he tosses back.

"I suppose I am." Reese releases me from his hold.

"We're almost ready. I wanted to add one more touch." Reese sees the pearls in my hand. His face goes soft. They may not be the flashiest or most expensive piece of jewelry I have, but I have to admit they are one of my favorites. The sentimental value is unmatched.

"I love you," he says before dropping another kiss onto my mouth before I leave the closet and head back to Penny's bedroom. When I enter, she's in the center of her room twirling around to make her dress flare out.

She's been so nervous about the father-daughter dance tonight. She kept saying she had no clue how to dance. Reese overheard her and, in true Reese fashion, a dance instructor

showed up at our doorstep the following day. Not only did he teach Penny how to dance, but Reese made sure to take the lessons with her. I didn't know it was possible to fall more in love with him, but I did that day.

He's kept his word making sure he's home more often in the evening and spending time with the children. Ari has come so far with Reese guiding him. The two of them are so much alike.

"I love this dress. Do you think I'm as pretty as you were on your wedding day, Mamushka?"

"Prettier."

She beams at my praise.

I walk over, spilling the pearls onto her neck. "I want you to wear this tonight. This belonged to your grandmother. I got married with them on. One day you will too."

Penny spins around to face me. Her eyes fill with tears before she throws herself at me, wrapping her arms around me tightly.

"I love you, Mamushka." It never gets old hearing her call me that. A few months ago, she called me mom. She asked if that was okay. I told her she can call me anything she likes, but I could see the worry in her eyes. She loved her own mother dearly. Ari had been sitting with us in the kitchen when we were talking about it. The word mamushka came from him. Now they both call me that.

"I love you too." I drop to my knees so I can get her a proper hug, then kiss her cheeks. "Are you ready?"

"Yes." She starts to get giddy. I grab my phone so that I can take pictures.

"Stay here, okay? I'll call for you." I descend the stairs, meeting Reese and Ari at the bottom. I smile when I see Reese has the corsage he picked out for her himself in his hand. My smile turns bigger when I see Ari has one too.

We didn't have a dance today, but we're making one of our own here tonight. When I'd brought up the idea, I was sure

he'd shoot me down. Honestly, I think Ari agreed because he thought it would make me happy. He's turned into such a sweet boy who always looks out for Penny and me. I have no doubt that is Reese's doing.

"You can come down," I call up to Penny.

I quickly pull out my phone as she starts to come down the stairs. I don't want to miss a moment. They won't be young forever, and I want to enjoy every second. I take a million pictures of it all. Especially of Reese putting her corsage on.

"Why are you crying?" Reese cups my cheek.

"I'm just really happy." I didn't know life could be this sweet. That there was this kind of love in the world. I tell Reese that he saved me. He always shakes his head and says I saved all of them.

I thought I'd come here to be a nanny, but as it turns out, I came here to be loved and give love in return. Forever.



More MINK is on the way! How does a rough prize fighter save a mafia princess from a dark fate? Coming soon!

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ALSO BY MINK

Unforgettable

Tonight's the night. I'm going to propose to the woman who's turned my whole world around. She's everything I'm not. Warm and sweet, so creative and talented. I'm beyond lucky.

I'm ready to pop the question.

The only problem is, when I meet Stella at the restaurant, she has no idea who I am, who she is, or why she has a lump on her head. What's worse, she's terrified ... of me.

Stella's injury wasn't an accident. No, someone hit her with a lethal blow that, luckily, didn't kill her.

Instead, she lost her memory, but I intend to make her remember why she's the most special woman in the world. I'll never stop loving her, and I can only hope that eventually she'll remember me. If she doesn't, I'll do everything in my power to make her fall for me again.

And for the person who thought they could take her from me? I'm coming for you.

Bodyguard's Obsession

Nothing surprises me anymore. At least nothing did ... Until she fell into my arms. Fiona is young, beautiful, and a superstar. It's my job to protect her from her crazy fans and one particularly dangerous stalker. It's *not* my job to watch every little move she makes, to hang on her every word, and to imagine what it would be like to get a taste of her.

I tell myself to keep my distance and stay alert. It pays off when I save her life. But it also wakes me up to the fact that she's not safe on the Vegas stage. So I seize the chance to take her for myself... For her safety, of course.

I bring her home, to the vineyard where I grew up. The problem is, home has its own shadows, ones I've tried to outrun. But I'll deal with them if it means Fiona is safe.

But her stalker won't give up, not until she's his or dead. I won't let that happen, and I'll do anything to protect Fiona, no matter the cost.

His Clever Kitten

She intrigues me, this walking conundrum of a woman. A kitten sweatshirt, big glasses, and a trusting nature—she's practically catnip for a man like me. So much so that I let her kidnap me at gunpoint. Instead of demanding money, she tells me of her troubles with a local mafia family. The Lucenzios want protection money from her, and if she refuses to pay, they'll wreck her brand new kitty store, Pawsitively Perfect.

Lucky for Maddy, I happen to be at war with the Lucenzios, and I'll happily destroy anyone who dares tread on Maddy's business or her heart. She needs protection. So much so that I find it best to keep her close. Very close. In my bed and in my heart, my clever kitten has dug in her claws. And maybe I like it that way.

Besides, I have no choice but to love her. After all, she took me hostage from the moment I saw her.

His to Keep

A bodyguard's work is never done, especially when you're protecting a girl like Cara. For months she's teased me, showing me glimpses of skin and flaunting her innocence. I'm a hard man, one who has a job to do. Bringing down Cara's father and his crime syndicate is why I'm here.

It should be the *only* reason I'm here.

It's not.

I'm here for Cara, and I've wanted her since the day I was first assigned to her protection detail. Claiming her was never an option, not when my plans always ended with her father's death.

But the more I see of the sheltered girl with the innocent eyes, the more I think she belongs by my side. Even if it goes against my family's plans, I intend to make Cara my bride and my queen.

And if anyone gets in the way of my love for Cara? Well, like I said, I'm a hard man, one who doesn't mind getting blood on his hands for the woman he loves.

119 Kitty Lane

MINK takes a trip to Cherry Falls in this sweet romance.

Starting my new life in Rosewood Ranch is easily the best decision I've ever made.

New friends, new job, new everything. But by far the very best part of it all is meeting Amethyst. She puts the Cherry in Cherry Falls, and I don't think I'll ever be able to get her out of my mind ... or heart.

She's too young for me. Too pure. She doesn't know about my past. But even though I can throw reason after reason out there for why we can't be together, I can't stop myself from claiming her as mine. She's not meant for a rough man like me, but that won't stop me.

I'll protect her from this world, allow her to grow and flourish the way she deserves. That's my plan. Until she's taken from me. Until I find out her father's plans for her... But I'll always find my sweet Amethyst, always keep her safe.

And heaven help anyone, including her own father, who tries to steal her from me.

Santa Material

A big bear of a Santa and the handy woman he loves. Spoiler Alert: He's going to stuff her full of Christmas cheer.

Taming His Bride

Book 4 of the Blushing Brides Series.

Stealing His Bride

Book 3 of the Blushing Brides Series.

Claiming His Bride

Book 2 of the Blushing Brides Series.

Knocking Up His Bride

Book 1 of the Blushing Brides Series.

Four brides, four rough men with a soft spot for the women they love.

Under His Spell

A haunted house, a ghost story of lost love, and a brand new love blooming under a full moon. This spooky sweet story is sure to get your blood racing for all the right

reasons.

Beauty Tempts the Beast

Revenge is his life's work, but when he finds his Beauty in the heart of an enemy, will he be up for a career change?

Loan Shark's Obsession

He knows priceless objects when he sees them. So when he sees her, he *knows*.

His Stolen Bride

Her first husband never touched her. He's dead. Now she belongs to Santino, and there will be much, *much* touching.

His Stolen Princess

They were meant to be ... until they weren't. So, he steals her. Logical. Also, there's a cat.

Stalking Her Sweetly

Who's stalking whom?

Hitman's Heart

He's a badass who kills without remorse. She's a good girl who gets caught in the crosshairs. He saves her, but can he keep her?

His Secret Treasure

He says artifacts belong in a museum. She says he stole an ancient box that belongs to her. Can they come to terms over her box?

My Hero's Secret Baby

He's a hero to her, the boogeyman to everyone else. Can they have a future together?

His Tiger Queen

She's a princess in a heavily guarded tower. He's the prince next door. Did I mention there's also a pet tiger?

His Virgin Heiress

She's a thief. He keeps her safe. But can she give up jewel heists for love?

Cuffed Love

MINK's personal favorite. Seriously. I love this book.

Stuffed

Stuffies, hitmen, true love, and accidental homicide? MINK at her finest.

His Sweetest Sin

He's a priest, not a sinner ... Until he sees her.

Locking Her Down

She broke into an animal shelter. He's the only one who can help her, but this attorney knows what he wants in return (hint: it's not justice.)

Marco's Girl

Marco is the bad boy prince of a mafia empire, but his heart is set on a darling good girl.

Pop-up Love

Mobsters, mayhem, a Hallmark movie, and a pop-up shop full of love? Yes.

Beauty and the Boss

She wants to bring her cat to work. He wants to bend her over his desk. Win-win.

His Virgin Queen

He killed her husband and took her for himself.

His Deadly Darling

She's spicy. He's determined. Together, they're unstoppable.

Hitman's Prey

He always seemed so nice ... (and hot).

Snow Angel

She wants to beat him in the lights competition; he just wants her. This Christmas is lit.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



MINK writes sweet and salty romances that always satisfy with a happily ever after.

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