

Pregnant

BY THE

MAFIA BOSS

KASI RYAN

PREGNANT BY THE MAFIA
BOSS



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PROLOGUE



Marko

Everybody always says that the first breath of fresh air once you get out of prison is supposed to be life changing.

It's supposed to be this mind-bending and surreal experience that puts all your wrongdoing into perspective. Perhaps clarity or some other perspective is supposed to make you want to see the error of your wicked ways and never break the law again.

Not me.

Sure, I can see opportunities all right. I can see the opportunity, but I have no interest in salvation. I have no interest in reformation or becoming an upstanding member of society—I only want revenge.

For the last seven years the only thoughts in my mind have been of blood and seeking my revenge for the wrongs that have been done to my brothers and myself. I have honed my skills and my methods have become more indulgent and far more creative. Every night I plot out the ways that I will make Dominetto Popova pay. Every morning I wake up to train to make myself into an even more lethal killing machine. I've thought only of how to get back at the bastards who put me in that infernal, soulless place. Just because I finally stand here as a free man doesn't mean that's going to change.

Now, after all my waiting, it's finally going to come true. My time has come. Dominetto Popova will rue the day that he

ever crossed me.

The guard issues me the standard set of jeans and cheap sneakers that they give to every convict once they have served their time and eyes me condescendingly. If any of the guards had any say in the matter, they would have kept me in some deep, dark hole for the rest of my days.

It makes them more comfortable when I'm behind bars.

Everybody seems to like it best when the animals are safely in their cages.

Perhaps it is simply pure ego that spurs me to wink at them on my way out.

I can't help but want to gloat when they have taken so much pleasure in attempting to make my life miserable since I got put in this shithole. They will go to bed tonight worried for their families and hoping that I have better things to do than remember their names.

They better hope to hell that none of my brothers report any more nonsense after I leave, or they will regret not murdering me in my sleep.

I step outside without chains for the first time in seven years. Sunshine warms my skin without electric fences casting a shadow overhead for the first time in years.

Birds chirp.

Grass sure is greener out here.

But none of it matters.

I spare one last glance back and over my shoulder to the barred windows behind me.

It would be impossible to know which window my brothers are looking out at me from, or if they are watching me at all. *So much time wasted.* I ball my fist and cross one arm over my chest with my knuckles pressing right into the space above my heart to let them know I see them, I will come back for them, and I will never forget my promises. Just like I know that they would never break their word on my behalf either.

They should be standing here with me.

They should be walking side by side to get our own justice.

As I stand outside the prison, an all-black town car pulls down the dusty drive and comes to stop about a foot away from me.

A stoic and serious-faced man dressed in an immaculately tailored suit exits the car and opens the back passenger door for me. He stands with his hands clasped in front of his person. I can't help but smirk at how professional he's being. Even given the current circumstances he doesn't let a single crack in his armor show. Alexsi was always the smallest of our group. He was the fast, quiet one who happened to have the luck not to be with us that night when everything went to shit.

Derek and Martino had worried, in the beginning, that Alexsi would betray us. They thought his spine was too soft. They imagined that he was going to cave under the pressure of having to navigate our business, the gang, as well as all our lawyers and lives while outside of the bars. Thankfully he more than stepped up to the plate while we ran things from the inside.

But me? I never had a doubt.

"Hello to you, too." My throat is dry and coarse with disuse as I greet my longtime partner and right-hand man, Alexsi Minov.

Alexsi's brow knits in concern for only a moment as he holds out his hand for mine. He squashes the emotion as quickly as it came. Honestly, I don't think that I could have done all of this without him. Without him running things in my stead we would have been lost. He was the only one of us not to be arrested in the fallout. But, more than that—he's been my best friend since we could walk.

"Everything is waiting for you in the car, sir," Alexsi addresses me formally. I don't even have the energy to question him on it. Our dynamic confuses a lot of people, but it works for us.

My hand lingers on the top of the doorframe as I take one last look at the prison that I've called home for seven years. My jaw aches as my teeth grind together uncomfortably. It's surreal that I'm finally leaving this place behind. No more threadbare blankets or overly egotistical guards. No more shitty food or cold showers or bullshit fights about people who just don't matter.

I might be free, but I have a lot of work left to do.

I will come back for my brothers.

I duck into the car and Alexsi shuts the door behind me. The cabin lights flicker on, and cold air cools my face. Soft music plays in the background and it's all so ... comfortable. The soft scent of musk and clean, polished leather ... and beside me is a thick manilla envelope. I unwrap the string holding the thing closed and pull out the contents as Alexsi puts the car into drive and we start to pull away from the prison.

Court cases and a summary of reports from my own cases and those of my brothers'. The information on our releases and conditions. 5 updated identity documents, and everything else that I need to seamlessly step into my life once again. Then, most importantly, paperwork pertaining to her. Every move that she's made for the last seven years down to her current college transcripts.

At the bottom of it all is a glossy picture.

She's grown.

I trace her pretty features as I memorize all the changed features. I trace her long brown hair and the curve of her slender neck. She's lucky that she took after her mother; it would be harder to contain myself with what I'm going to have to do were she to look like her father. The photo crumples slowly as I ball it into my fists as my rage bubbles to near bursting in my chest.

It doesn't matter how long it takes or what I must do—I'm going to make them pay for what they've done.

DELILAH



*This is exactly the sort of thing that I'm **not** supposed to be doing.*

The music pounds so loudly through the speakers that my teeth are vibrating. I can feel the beat *everywhere*. Granted, the seven shots of—whatever that was—hasn't helped a single thing. My inhibitions are lower than they have ever been before in my life. It's exactly the sort of place where anything can happen.

I can be reckless.

I can be stupid.

I can be *free*.

If only for just one night.

I've never been off leash before. Certainly not ever like this. Growing up as the Popova heiress comes with a very strict set of rules. All the twenty-two years of my life leading up to this moment have been about duty and image, of building up trust so that I could be allowed this temporary reprieve of my duties before I return home next week. It's my final year of college and the moment that I graduate I will cease to be *Delilah* and I will become Ms. Popova the heiress. It's extraordinary enough that I have proven myself worthy to be allowed into such a male dominated field.

But, tonight, I am simply a girl in a tiny dress dancing freely for what might be the very last time in my life.

Across the room is the next item on the agenda. He's everything that I've been hoping for. Exactly the *bad idea* that I will never again have the luxury of being careless about. Tall, muscled and covered in tattoos. The man is dressed in head-to-toe black, but he wears his clothes like he's doing them a favor. Strong jawline and dark brown eyes that even all the way from across the room it feels like he's planning on the best way to devour me whole.

I hope he does.

"Can I buy you a drink?"

A voice comes from beside me. Higher pitched, overly friendly. I can see the man from the corner of my eye, but I don't want to give him the satisfaction of having my complete attention. He's probably a good, kind man from the happy smile on his face and the hopeful puppy dog eyes that he offers as he eagerly awaits my answer but that's not the vibe I'm looking for.

I spin just out of the man's reach, hoping that he will take the hint as I trail the backs of my hands up along my modest curves and up into my now messy hair. There's only one pair of eyes that I want on me.

Only his attention is no longer on me. The dark-haired man is leaned forward in his booth. His expression no longer hungry but a derisive sneer as his attention is locked wholly and completely on the gentleman competing for my attention.

If you can even call it that.

"Hey, did you hear me? I said, 'Can I buy you a drink?'" This time he reaches forward and grabs my bicep which I rip right out of his hold. The kind, friendly smile dissolves from his expression instantly. In its place is one of pure spite, as if he couldn't fathom a single reason why I could ever have the audacity to refuse him what he wanted.

Typical. Just another man who views women as transactional objects.

Buy me a drink and clearly, I'll have to sleep with him. Disgusting.

But I'm not about to let this idiot ruin my night.

I spin prettily out of his hands and toward the center of the dance floor.

I glance up, looking for my mysterious man so that I can go back to enjoying myself ... but he's gone. Nowhere to be seen. I spin in place, looking to find any sign of him ... only to come face-to-face with the slimy asshole.

"Where do you think you're going? You don't have to play hard to get with me, you know. I'm already interested." The man reaches forward and places a hand on my hip as he attempts to coax me closer to him.

"Don't touch me."

He probably can't even hear me over the music.

He's going to ruin my evening. The man's grip tightens on my hip, seeking to prevent me from moving away from him despite my protests. A cold spike of panic spears through my chest at the brief captivity. *Of course*, this happens the first time that I am away from my guards. I've been praying for freedom, finally get it, and now look at the mess I'm in. Next thing I know, the man's hand is removed from my hip followed by a yelp of pain. When I spin back to see what happened, my mysterious stranger has removed the offending limb from my person and has it held back at an angle that must be quite painful.

He doesn't say a single word, he doesn't need to. The look on his face is more than enough to intimidate those around us into carving a small circle of space around him. He's taller than I thought. He stands a good head over me and his broad frame is just as alluring up close. Though, not to the man he's correcting.

I'm probably supposed to be intimidated. This is the sort of *red flag* behavior that my friends are always warning me to avoid but I've grown up with men like this all my life. The sort of man who springs into action anytime he is needed. It's sort of comforting just seeing the reaction that my savior had

soothed all the minor panic I had been feeling moments before.

The rude man grits his teeth and wisely stays silent until his arm is released. He seems to melt into the crowd behind him, but I don't bother watching to see where he disappeared to—I can only focus on the tall, dark, and handsome man in front of me.

“Thank you,” I say loudly, hoping to be heard over the heavy thud of the music.

The man doesn't answer me. That's okay. This isn't really the place for conversation anyway. This is a place for action, and he's already made the first move. Up close like this I swear I can feel his eyes run over me. He takes in the way my slinky top hugs my frame and the curve of my hip covered in the salacious skirt that I've chosen for this evening. That hunger in his gaze returns, met by an equal heat in my own.

I don't do this.

All my manners and etiquette training would dictate that I be no bolder than batting my eyelashes at him. Perhaps a coy glance over my shoulder but I'm empowered. I want him to stay. I want indecent things from those strong hands. Boldly I reach forward and place my hand on his chest. His gaze drops to where my palm rests on his chest with an almost curious expression. I close the distance between us quickly and press myself against his chest. I lift onto my tiptoes to make sure that he hears me. It's impulsive and crazy, I know, and he might not go for it at all ... but ... I want to try.

“Let me thank you?” I slide my hands across his broad chest and over his biceps (impressive even through his shirt) and down to his hands which I then place on my hips. He doesn't strike me as the dancing type, but I hold his hands in place as I start to move. I let my eyes drift close once more, dancing for him and only him yet again. Only this time, I can *feel* the effect my hips have on him.

Desire pools low in my belly and I surrender to the vixen image that I'm filling tonight.

I don't expect him to move—but he does. Just a slow, soft sway to match my movements and add stability as I turn around and press my ass back against him and grab a shot off a passing drink girl's tray.

I down it. Liquor still wet on my lips as his arms wrap more tightly against me, molding me to him.

The next thing I know we're in the bathroom and I'm pressed up against the wall.

My savior locks the door, and my head is spinning. I feel like I'm on fire in the best possible way.

Yes, is the only word running through my head on a loop. This is exactly what I wanted. His lips run feverish trails of passion down the column of my neck as he brushes my straight chestnut hair over one shoulder. He wraps the long locks around his wrist and holds them captive in his fist. I'm captive. Pinned between his strong frame and the wall. My palms press against the wall in front of me, arching back into him as his other hand slides up the front of my shirt to cup my breast possessively.

I'm a cliché and I don't care.

I can feel his touch *everywhere*. His teeth as they trail down the tendon on my neck, the way his calloused palms scrape over the soft skin of my breast and a sharp bite of pain as he rolls my peaked nipple between his fingers and pinches. I gasp and arch further into the contact as he drops his hold on my hair and snakes his hand down between my legs. My thigh's part for his exploration, slick with want. It doesn't take long for him to feel how badly I want him. He runs a finger along my center. He pauses when he feels how wet I am and chuckles darkly in my ear. It's perhaps the most beautiful sound that I've ever heard.

"All for me?" he growls darkly. I nod fervently. Perhaps I'm coming on a bit too strong, seeming a bit too wanton, but I cannot help myself. He slips a finger inside of the lace of my panties, teasing my core before he sinks a finger inside of me.

He doesn't need to know that I've never done this before.

I've never let a man touch me like this.

A moan escapes my lips as I let my eyes flutter shut and my head falls back against his shoulder. I'm totally held up by him as he sinks a finger inside. I reach behind me and fist his shirt and hold to the back of his head desperately as I'm lost to sensation. I'm going to be sore in the morning, but I don't care. Savior adds a second finger and I wince slightly as my body stretches to accommodate him.

"So tight," he growls again, setting a pace with his fingers. Oxygen comes in fast, shallow pants as sensation builds. His thumb brushes over my clit and I shudder. All rational thought goes out of my head. I exist only in the fire building inside of me. Savior's teeth nip at my neck deliciously.

"Dance for me." The demand is so low that I almost don't hear it. My heart hammers in my chest. The words struggle to find weight in the lusty haze that consumes me. Savior presses his hips into the back of mine, and I understand. Oh, movement is ... oh that's lovely.

It takes a minute, but I find my rhythm. Something is building. The fire is pulsating and cresting. I feel alive in a way that I've never felt before in my life.

"That's it; that's a good girl," Savior growls in my ear as my grip tightens. "Cum for me."

I don't even know how, but I want to. I want to give him anything he could ask for.

A banging at the door threatens to ruin everything.

"Don't listen to it," Savior warns as he redoubles his movements. His thumb circles that bundle of nerves and I can't breathe. I can't think of anything but his arms around me as I fuck myself on his hand. *More, I want more.* I want everything. I want to beg him to take me. People outside of the door be damned.

The banging gets louder and more insistent.

So close, I'm so close.

I shatter into a million pieces. I'm falling over and in on myself as I bite down on my bottom lip to keep from crying out in pleasure.

I do cry out in disapproval as he slides his fingers from me. The banging on the bathroom door is now a constant stream of sound as whomever is waiting for this space threatens to call the authorities and effectively ruining my night.

He grabs my hips and spins me around before I have a chance to protest further or adjust my skirt. He clearly didn't plan on stopping any time soon either. For a moment I think that he's going to kiss me. His hands slowly sliding from their holds as my dress starts to slide back into place.

Time's up.

We both know it. It's as unspoken between us as everything else between us.

I adjust my skirt as he unlocks the door to the pounding, glaring intruder who glowers at us, but I can't help but to laugh to myself.

Savior places a hand on the small of my back as he escorts me through the club and into the cool night air. The flat that I'm renting for the week isn't a far walk, and he doesn't question anything as I start to guide us in the direction of my temporary home.

A part of me wants to beg for his name. Something to call him other than *Savior*. I want to hear him speak. I want to hear his name so that this won't be the end. Yet, the other part of me wants to keep this a mystery. It wants to let this be only what it is. Just a fling. A random, crazy, one night thing.

Savior's index finger twirls my hair absently as if he's thinking the same thing. His forehead falls to mine and a wicked, knowing smirk plays over his lips.

I want to invite him up.

I want to invite him inside ... both into my flat and ... well

...

No, I can't.

Oh, but I want to.

I push him away from me. Putting a reluctant bit of space between us as a final word of parting as my hair falls from his fingers. His knuckles trail softly along my jawline until they can rest under my chin. Savior's thumb brushes against my swollen bottom lip and every bit of me wants to kiss him. I want to wrap myself around him and have him carry me upstairs.

His hands fall from me, and I instantly miss their warmth. My hazel eyes lift to his striking blue and a sort of understanding passes between us. He reaches behind me and pulls open the door and I walk backward into the dimmed entryway. I can feel his gaze on me as I walk on still-weak legs up to my apartment. It's impossible to hope to see him again ... but somehow this just doesn't feel like goodbye.

MARKO



*B*uzzt Buzzt.

I cannot afford to ignore the phone in my pocket. The text message notification goes off time and time again. I know that it's important. I know that whatever Alexsi is sending me ought to have my whole and utter attention. I can't bring myself to move.

I stand across the street from Delilah's apartment door, still reeling from the club. Somehow, I knew that I would have her attention. I knew that I would. I'm the one that she was always drawn to. Granted, that was quite a long time ago. She doesn't seem to remember me at all. It makes things a hell of a lot simpler, but it enrages me further.

I half expected her to recognize me in that club. Didn't matter how dark it was, I thought that she would remember the man whose life and future her father had stolen. From my vantage point I can see as she travels up through the glass walls of the elevator. Her arms wrapped protectively around herself and a smile from ear to ear. She stops at the fourth floor and leaves. I watch as she passes window after window, and I trail after her from the street. I watch as she stops and then lights flicker on that had previously been off. The only thing that I hadn't been able to get my hands on was her current residence, but now I have that.

I cup my hands around the end of my cigarette and light the tip. I lean against a nearby tree as I see her wander around her apartment, heedless of the open windows as she strips her slinky top from her body. I can still recall the way that she felt

in my arms. How eager and willing she had been for my touch. She would have mounted me then and there. Only time will tell if that's a common occurrence for her or not—but I'm guessing no. Hard to tell on feel alone but from the slight amount of blood that she had left on my hands, I'm certain that before tonight her hymen had been intact.

All mine.

Mine for the taking.

Mine to possess.

Mine to ruin.

The only other setback that I must account for is how damned horny I have been. I've been so consumed with plots and plans for my revenge during my time away it was hard to reconcile when a pretty woman was throwing herself at me. I hadn't even meant to approach her tonight ... but the moment that I saw that creep put his hand on her ... something in me had just snapped.

If anybody is going to hurt my dear little Delilah, it's going to be me.

Pity for her that she's going to be the vessel for me in which to get my revenge but there's no way around it. I've considered every possible option. Daddy's little girl. Popova princess. If only her father could see her now. I smirk at the thought of it, how embarrassed she would be. The prospect of her being humiliated makes me even harder than I've been since she started dancing.

I should get a damned award for not following her up into her apartment and having my way with her.

But, I didn't plan this for seven years just to ruin it by impulse alone.

I didn't expect for her to taste so fucking good. I want to consume every single inch of her and so much more. I want to dominate her until she knows nothing exists but my touch. I certainly had not been expecting for her to be so ready and willing to accept my touch.

I rub my fingers together, remembering the feel of her on my hands and the way that she felt in my arms. More than anything I'm going to have to get myself under control. I didn't expect to be as attracted to her as I am. I already want more. I must remind myself that there is still time.

I reach into my pocket and pull out my cell phone. The number I recognize as Alexsi's flashes on the screen.

"Sir?" Alexsi's gruff voice answers on the other side of the phone in greeting.

"I'm busy," I respond as I watch Delilah move through her apartment. She wiggles out of her skirt and doesn't bother adding anything else before she heads into what I presume is her bedroom. Would she be moving so easily in such a public view if she knew that I was still standing here, watching her? Would she put on a show for me?

I suppose I won't have to wait much longer until I find out one way or another.

"I won't take up much of your time, sir. I merely wished to inform you that we have managed to secure the information that you wanted about Mr. Popova's location."

I smirk and drop the cherry of my cigarette to the ground to stomp into the dirt with the toe of my shoe.

"Perfect. I'm heading back to the offices now. Did you acquire the property that I instructed you to last night?"

The property that I'm referring to is a concrete structure in the warehouse district. Thick walls and plenty of insulation. Perhaps it could be considered paranoid of me to want such a place to turn into my home ... but it will not take much for what I want it for.

Specifically, the basement.

"Of course, sir, everything is in motion as requested. I have the builders coming in the morning."

"Whatever it takes, I want the work completed by the end of the week."

There's a moment of silence from the other end of the phone. If it were anybody else but Alexsi, I would take the silence as insolence. But, given our history, I know that he is simply calculating all the things that he needs to accomplish to make my goals happen.

“Of course, sir, it shall be done.”

“Good. I'll be in and out periodically so I want you to make sure that everything will be prepared for my guest.” I warn darkly.

FOR THE NEXT FEW DAYS, wherever Delilah goes—I go as well. To her lavishly indulgent lunches and spa treatments down to the clubs that I know she is looking for me in every night. Her final days of supposed freedom. I track her movements and desires. I note her taste in clothing as she window-shops. I think about each and every moment of weakness where I could take her, and she wouldn't even know to put up a fight before it happened.

One of the most important rules of revenge is to know thy enemy, and before I take her, I'm going to know her better than she knows herself. I'm going to use every piece of information that I glean about her to twist and turn her own thoughts for my purposes before I leverage her to destroy her entire family legacy. Perhaps they've warned her to be careful. Perhaps they've mentioned to her that an enemy to their family has been released ... or perhaps she's ignoring their words of good intention to have her little vacation. Either way, I'm slightly surprised that her father hasn't come looking for me.

I wait for any sign that her guards will return. I wait for any notice that her family is keeping tabs on her.

Honestly, they're making it too easy for me.

If the roles were reversed, I would have been there when he got out, to put an end to any possibility that there might ever be any repercussions. Perhaps, if she's a very, very good

little girl, then she might even be allowed to enjoy herself along the way.

If not? Well, then I suppose that it's not going to matter much either way.

At the end of the week, I get the message.

It's ready.

Time to move onto the next phase of the plan.

DELILAH



“*T*his one? Orrrr this one?”

I hold up one dress to my chin and then the other. I can't make up my mind. They both have their uses. Both dresses show way too much skin to be considered any kind of decent, but I can't bring myself to care.

“Not that it matters, because you're just talking to yourself in the mirror here, De,” I mutter unhelpfully as I sigh and plop down on my bed. I know that it's incredibly stupid that I have been going out night after night, looking for my mysterious stranger because he's not going to show up. It was a fluke. I'm allowing myself to act like a child.

So, what if I've been forced to act more mature than my age my whole life?

There's nothing wrong with wanting to show a little bit of skin and let myself go a little crazy ... at least that's what I'm going to keep telling myself. Each relaxing day that passes is just another day closer to the inevitable end. My break will be over, I will have to go back to school and back into the life that I was born for. I just wanted to have a few happier little memories to tide me over until my father ends up marrying me off to whatever contact will bring the Popova empire more power.

Though, now that I know what real passion feels like, the prospect of spending time with another man isn't nearly as acceptable as it was before. The notion of some boring man in a business suit pawing at me because he feels like he's entitled

to my body ... doesn't really sit well with me. It's just not appealing. Even less so whenever I see my savior every time that I close my eyes.

I've dreamed about him every night.

Given how protective my father has always been of me, I've never exactly been given the opportunity to have a crush on someone before. The only men that have ever been allowed near me were business contacts or family members for obvious reasons. As far as my father was concerned, my purity is a virtue ... something that adds to my 'value'. It took a long time for me to see the stupidity of that. I have been brainwashed into thinking that being a virgin means something. Now I know it's just another tool to be used against me.

When Father said that he would name me as his heir, I knew that would not exempt me from an arranged marriage if he so saw fit ... but I'm not going to let him, or any other man, have control over my body. If I were a son, it would never have crossed their minds.

If I must go out hunting for my handsome savior every night in order to have this choice be of my own making, then so be it. If I were to indulge myself in the silliest of girlish fantasies and wear silly little dresses to feel alive like that for even five more minutes ... I'm going to do it.

I choose the red dress that plunges low and wraps around my hips. I pair it with a set of pale nude pumps and tuck my phone into a clutch, but before I can make it to the door, I have a call from an unknown number.

"Hello?" I answer curiously. I almost hang up when there's no answer from the other side.

"You are a very difficult woman to find." A deep, sexy voice comes from the other end of the line. I recognized that voice immediately. I'm instantly sucked back into the memory of the club. I sink down onto my ottoman and press my thighs shut. Heat surges through me now with that memory.

“I don’t see how that’s possible, considering you walked me home. I’m sure if you wanted to find me that badly it wouldn’t have been difficult,” I quip with a surprising boldness.

“You would have preferred for me to simply show up at your doorstep?” he teases back. There’s a hint of laughter in his voice that sounds divine.

Would I? What would I have done if that was exactly what had happened? If I had walked outside and he had been standing there? It would have tied into the fantasy that I’ve been playing with in my head certainly.

“Thinking about all of the things that we could have gotten into?” he muses as if pulling the thoughts directly from my head.

“Maybe,” I answer. I have no idea how he could have gotten my phone number, but right now I don’t care. I appreciate the effort that he’s obviously gone through.

“Perhaps we could make a couple of them reality?”

My breath catches in my throat. I want to play into this so badly.

“I don’t even know your name. You don’t even know anything about me,” I say simply.

“I thought that you wanted the mystery, Delilah.”

A smile spreads slowly across my features. Of course, if he has my number, he’s figured out my name too. “You make a habit of stalking women that you seduce in club bathrooms?”

“You are the only woman that I have ever wanted so badly I was forced to utilize a club bathroom.” He speaks so boldly, so openly that I almost don’t know what to make of it. I’m taken off guard by his bluntness. I hate that I’m attracted to this.

“I bet that you say that to all of the girls,” I flirt.

“Why don’t you come downstairs, and we can talk about it a little bit more?”

I stand upright in shock. I rush over to my living room window and spot him standing down there beside a black town car. He's even more handsome in the daylight. He looks up like he knows exactly which window is mine, and my god, his smile. My heart stops in my chest.

A little bit more fun won't hurt anything.

"And if I come down there with you, then what?" I ask playfully.

"Then you will have a chance to get to know me a little better. We can get a little lunch and see where things go?" he speaks softly.

I can't stop the smile splitting my face. "I don't have anything better to do."

"Then why are you making me wait? First lesson, I am not a man who likes to wait for anything at all, Delilah," he says with a hint of firmness that thrills me. I want to hear him speaking like that directly into my ear.

I pull away from the window and hang up on Savior. I can't think of a better way to spend the afternoon. How romantic that a man I had a chance encounter with went so far out of his way to ask me on a date. I practically fly down the stairs and nearly break an ankle in the process. I pause at the foot of the stairs in order to straighten out my dress and saunter out into the afternoon air.

"You know, there are a lot of people that would consider this to be a huge red flag," I tease as I move up beside him. Like a gentleman he steps to the side to escort me into the car.

"Then I would caution you on the dangers of getting into cars with strangers."

I pause directly in front of him. I can't help but want his hands on me. I let myself indulge in the smile on his lips and the soft dimple it causes in his cheek. "Tell me your name and then you won't be a stranger to me anymore."

Savior runs his tongue over the line of his teeth before nodding me toward the car. "Marko," he says plainly.

“Well, Marko, I look forward to whatever date you have planned.” I dip into the car and swing my legs in delicately as he walks around to the other side of the car. The interior is nicer than I imagined. I figured that he had money, I just didn’t think to guess just how much it might be. Everything inside of the car screams at luxury, just like the car services that I have back home. I wonder for only a moment what he does for a living.

Marko slides into the seat beside me and places a possessive hand on my knee as if it’s the most natural thing in the entire world. It’s sorely tempting to climb right back onto his lap and pick up where we left off the other night. If that’s the goal for both of us, then why wait?

“So, now that you’ve got me here—what’s the plan?” I angle myself toward him and his hand slides slightly higher on my thigh and brushes against the hem of my dress. Would it be so bad to be a little bit naughty?

“Well, actually—”

My phone goes off in my pocket and I lift my hand to signal that I need a moment. “So sorry, just a second.” I feel a heat rising to my cheeks in embarrassment. I can’t think of a faster way to have the mood killed than to have a phone call from your father in the middle of a conversation. Even less so when I’ve got a man’s hand creeping up my inner thigh. I place my hand on top of his with a giggle to stop his exploration. “It’s my father—just a moment.”

Marko’s hand tightens as I answer the phone.

“Where are you?” My father’s deep voice demands. It’s the sort of tone that he uses whenever something isn’t going the way that he wants it to go.

“Hello to you, too,” I answer flatly. “We agreed that this week—”

“Hush.” Father cuts me off and I’m taken aback by his rudeness. He promised me that this week was just for me. That for one whole week I was just going to be a normal college

girl on vacation. He promised that he wasn't going to call me. "I asked you a question."

I flash Marko an apologetic smile before angling away from him to cup my hand over the mic on the phone as the car pulls away from my flat and starts to pick up speed. "What's wrong?"

"Damnit, Delilah! Answer the damned question, or I'm going to have the boys pull your location off your phone."

"You wouldn't," I seethe. He has no right. He's breaking his word and I don't appreciate the tone that he's using. "Why don't you calm down and call me back."

Normally I wouldn't dream of speaking to him in such a fashion, heir or not. I would never speak to my father disrespectfully, but he's getting on my nerves, and I'm supposed to be training to take over. That doesn't work well when he talks down to me like that.

"There is a bit of a situation. I need to know where you are and then I need you to get to the closest airport. Do not question me further. Do it," Father orders in a voice that leaves no room for argument. "Never mind. I have your location now. I'm sending a security team to your location right now. Call me when they have you in their custody."

"Okay ..." my brow furrows in question. I have no idea what could have gotten him so worked up, but I don't have time to ask as Marko pulls my phone from my hand. What the hell does he think that he's doing? "Hey!"

He puts his finger up to my lips to silence me and then drops it back down to my leg. This time he holds onto it possessively, firmly enough to indent my flesh.

"Has nobody told you how rude it is to interrupt a date?" Marko says smoothly into the phone.

I feel like my heart is going to burst out of my chest. The hell does he think that he's doing. Anger bubbles in my chest at the audacity of him. "Pull the car over right now," I order.

"Shut up." Marko says firmly and his expression shifts instantly from something amused to downright hostile. I reach

for the door handle as every red alarm bell in my head goes off all at once. The car speeds up and the doors won't open. I can hear my father's shouted words from the other end of the phone. The windows won't open either. My panic is making me miss their conversation, but I catch the end and know that I'm in big trouble.

“Oh, don't worry about your daughter, you bastard. I will take great care of your precious baby girl. I'll afford her every kindness that you have ever shown my family.”

The window on Marko's side cracks open and he throws my phone out of the window. He grabs my thigh and shoulder and shoves me back into the seat beside him before he wraps his heavy arm around my shoulders and sinks lower into his seat. No matter how much I struggle or fight it doesn't matter—I can't overpower him. Marko practically ties me to the seat beside him with the damned seatbelts.

“Now, where were we? Guess we have a hell of a lot to talk about after all.”

MARKO



I can admit when a plan is no longer going the way that I want it to. I can also admit that I can think quickly on my feet. At least there was no way to plan for her father to call in the middle of our date. I had hoped to enjoy just a little bit more time with her before pulling the rug out from underneath her feet, but I can't say that I hate this either.

I love the adrenaline rush it gives me when she fights like this.

“Get off of me!” Delilah screeches as she kicks her high-heeled foot at me. I catch it and grab her ankle with my other hand. I haul her toward me until her legs are wrapped around my hips and watch with clear, unfiltered amusement as she realizes the situation that she's put herself in. She freezes for only a moment before attempting to struggle against me like it's going to make any difference.

Of course, it won't.

She doesn't even know where we are. She's been struggling in vain the entire car ride over. I chuckle to myself as I haul her out of the back of the town car and over my shoulder. She thrashes and shouts, but it makes no difference. There isn't anyone here to hear her in the first place. Even if they did, these sorts of people would never dream of interfering with my business.

“Let me go!” Delilah screams and attempts to bite me. I think I might like this fiery version of her even more than I liked the vixen version.

“The more you struggle, the more that your dress rides up over your ass and I’ll warn you, it’s very tempting to spank you for all of that screaming,” I say simply and shake my head at her. For a moment she stills as if considering the risk or attempting to call my bluff.

“You wouldn’t—” she starts as if she’s going to threaten me.

So, I do.

I leave a nice red handprint on the swell of her ass that shuts her up quite effectively.

She doesn’t even bother attempting to question my plans for her as Alexsi opens the door to my newly finished home. The scent of freshly dried paint is nearly overwhelming in the entryway, but I can see even from the first glance that this place is exactly what I wanted it to be. A veritable fortress. Nothing will be getting in or out of here without my permission.

I carry Delilah to the stairs leading down to the basement that I’ve designed just for her. I place my free hand over the scanner and the heavy door swings open and then thunks shut again behind us.

“You can’t just ... you don’t ... stop this!” Delilah protests, but she’s starting to lose her voice. I have half a mind to gag her. My cock stirs at the thought of her all trussed up and helpless for me.

“You’re only making this harder on yourself than it needs to be,” I warn her plainly. There’s no need for all the dramatics on her part. If anything, this makes the date more exciting in my opinion.

I head to the end of the well-lit hallway and her fight starts to leave her as she takes in the plain gray concrete walls and the sturdy looking doors on either side of them. I wonder how she might react if she knew what was inside of them. I cannot wait to see the look on her face when she finds out either.

I open the door to the bedroom that I’ve created for her, happily surprised by the warm hearth waiting inside. A

fireplace on the opposite wall. Floor to ceiling curtains give the impression of windows despite there not being any. Thick, plush carpeting lines the floors and stops at the ensuite bathroom with a full walk-in shower. Most impressive is the four-poster bed on the elevated platform.

I drop Delilah there and her slight frame sinks into the mattress and plush bedding. She sneers at me and quickly scrambles up the bed as if that's going to stop me from getting my hands back on her should I so choose.

“Aw, don't be like that. We can still have a nice time together. Don't you think so?” I tease in a slightly condescending tone.

“Get fucked,” she spits bitterly.

I smile and take a half step toward the bed. I start to unbutton my shirt and shrug. “If that's what you want ...” I trail off, knowing full well that she's going to take those words exactly how I want.

Delilah grabs the closest thing to her, a pillow, and throws it at me with as much force that her slight frame can muster. It's more than I was expecting, to be sure, but still not enough to dissuade me.

“If you're going to behave like this, I will have no choice but to punish you, Delilah. You can make this a lot easier on yourself by getting over this tantrum,” I say plainly.

“Tantrum!” she argues as a single tear rolls down her cheek. “Is that what this is to you? A tantrum?”

I don't dignify that question with an answer.

She angrily wipes a tear from her face with the back of her hand and pushes herself up onto her knees to glare daggers at me. “My father will find you here, mark my words.”

I lean forward and let my knuckles press into the bed and return her glare with equal malice. “I hope that he does.”

For the first time, fear flickers in her eyes. It seems to click that I wanted this. That her father was my whole goal and not some happenstance comment that I made.

“In fact,” I continue. “I’m counting on it.”

“... I’m bait ...” she whispers and sinks down onto her heels.

“Good girl, you’re catching up.”

She doesn’t look at me. She shakes her head. “My father will not play your games. He’s not going to allow me to be a pawn. If you knew him ... you would understand. This is a stupid attempt on your part. I’m just some daughter. If you know my father, then you know that I’m nothing to him ...”

I shake my head. “I know plenty about your father, and I assure you, playing dumb with me is going to get you nowhere.” I push the words out through my teeth. “I know good and damn well that you’re his heir, and therefore you’re going to get me exactly what I need, my little Popova Princess.”

It’s like the damsel in distress, happy-go-lucky club bunny act drops in an instant and she becomes exactly who I claim that she is. “So, what do you want from me, then?”

“As you said, only you have it a little bit wrong.” I stand upright and walk around the side of the bed. To her credit she doesn’t try to run from me this time. She tracks my movements with her eyes as I grow closer as if she can’t decide how much of a threat that I clearly am to her.

“I am not going to use you as leverage. You might be bait, but I have no intention of returning you to your dear ol’ father. At least, not until I’m good and finished with you.”

“What ... exactly does that mean?”

Her eyes dart to my lips, and I know that I have her on the hook. She can’t help herself.

“I intend to use you against your father in the most ironic of punishments. Delilah, I plan to make you my blushing bride. You will have my child, and then I shall take your father’s empire from him in a way that he cannot fight. A way that he cannot stop or hinder. If you’re a very good girl, once you’ve made me an heir or two, I will allow you to go about your life as you please.”

Delilah scoffs. “I would rather die than ever touch you again!”

My smirk widens. “That’s just not true, is it?”

“I will *never* sleep with you!”

I shake my head. In a blur of speed, I shoot my arm across the bed and grab her by her arm and haul her closer to me. She struggles but I overpower her. She smells so damned sweet it’s intoxicating. She grits her teeth and tries to push me away, but she can’t hide the flush of heat I can feel coming off her.

It’s no effort whatsoever to pin her to the bed with her arms trapped on either side of her head.

“If I were to touch you again right now, I bet that you would be wet and ready for me ... wouldn’t you?” My nose runs along her profile and nudges her face to the side. She makes like she’s going to bite me but can’t deny the truth of my words.

“I’ll remind you how easily I got you to cum in that bathroom, and that was only using one hand, little princess. I could do a lot more ... so long as you behave.” My knee pushes her legs apart so that I can settle in between her thighs. I slowly start to lower my weight onto her as if to prove my point even further.

She’s looking anywhere but my eyes, but I can see her breathing quicken.

Her dress slides up her thighs as they part for me, and I press ever so softly against her core. Her breath hitches and stills as she tries not to react.

“You like it rough, don’t you, Princess?”

She cuts her eyes to me sharply. “And if I don’t comply?”

I shift. I push upward and shift so that I’m holding both of her hands in one of mine and I grab her by the throat as I press more firmly against her core. “I’m going to get what I want from you, one way or the other,” I warn darkly. “If you intend on getting out of here in one piece, Princess, you’ll do what I say.”

I push off her roughly and leave her exposed as she is on the bed. I exit the room and the door falls heavily shut behind me so that she can have some time to think about her options, little as they might be.

DELILAH



*W*ait.

The word dies on my lips. I mean to call out to him. I *want* to jump up and off this bed and run to the door. I want to catch him before he leaves so that I can attempt to reason with him. There must be a way out of this situation. I *want* to do all those things ... but I'm frozen.

I'm practically glued to the mattress with fire running through my veins.

I cannot believe how wet I am. To the point where movement feels uncomfortable, but I have no choice but to sit up. I scrub my hands up and down my face. "Stupid, stupid, *stupid*." I can't chastise myself enough. For being stupid to get into a car with a handsome stranger in the first place or for allowing myself to get kidnapped. I always get the background check. I never make stupid moves. I always play it safe. I always have the guards on me at every possible moment.

I guess that's why the whole situation was so damned thrilling ... just the idea of doing something reckless and totally crazy for once ... and yet here I am. Literally locked in an underground bunker with a crazy man whose last name or family I don't even know.

I don't even know what my family has done to him. I have no idea why he is so against my father. It's certainly no surprise that my father, given what he does for a living, has made more than his share of enemies ... but never to this extent ... or rather, none that I don't know about. There's no

way that we had a mortal enemy of this caliber without knowing their faces and the exact crimes that we've committed against them.

It's not like I could have ever seen this fight coming.

Marry him? I could never. That's exactly what I was trying to use him to *avoid*. I don't want to marry him, least of all now. I just wanted to *fuck* him. Was that so bad?

Why does he have to be so fucking attractive? It's downright criminal.

Literally.

I need to get out of here. No matter what happens, above all else ... I will find a way out of here.

My legs are weaker than I would like as I slide out of my heels and stand up. I guess I can use my shoes as makeshift weapons if I absolutely must ... but hopefully it won't come to that. Firstly, I will get the hell out of here, then secondly, I will find out who the hell Marko is and what he has against my family.

A baby, he says.

For a moment I hesitate as the image of what that would entail pushes to the forefront of my mind. Images of him filling me, pulsating deep inside of me in a way that I've never thought to imagine before ... claiming me like that ...

I shake my head to push the images away by force. None of that. It absolutely will not and cannot happen.

I walk around the perimeter of the room—cold concrete walls. I push the curtains aside to find nothing. Not even so much as a hand hold. There's a recess in the wall that appears to be a closet filled with clothing in my exact size and a collection of shoes. Lingerie in drawers also my size ... I ignore that. Clearly, he expects me to be here for quite some time.

When I reach the bathroom, I find that most of the products are familiar to me. Just how long has he been watching me? I cannot believe that he studied me to the point

that he knew this much about me and what I like. It's both terribly creepy ... and sort of flattering. I've trained my whole life to not let people see me in this way ... and yet he still managed it. Clearly, he's very good at what he does.

Everything I need to live in the comfort and luxury that I've grown up in is down here in this room with me. I wrap my arms around my chest as I continue to search for something, anything. There are no hidden trap doors or anything that can be used against him. He's thought of everything. Even the heavy door, which was bio-coded to him. I try it anyway—it just beeps at me angrily, not wanting to let me out.

A soft, cold, hopeless feeling forms a small ball inside of my chest and I don't know what to do about it. I don't know how to stop it from growing either.

I have nothing to do but to sit here and wait until he returns and hope against hope that I can somehow get past him and through the door. But make it out to what? To where? I don't even know where I am.

I shrug out of my now too-tight dress and crawl into the bed and cry myself to sleep.

* * *

THE BEEP of the heavy door wakes me with a start. My eyes snap open, and it takes a few moments for my groggy mind to fully realize where I am and what has happened to me. My whole body is sore—certainly sorer than I can ever remember. I can feel the vestiges of a dream still clinging to the fading parts of my mind ... something pleasant that has left me infuriatingly wet between the legs.

The heavy door swings open and I pull the thick comforter to my chest possessively as I watch a blond man in an amazing power suit stroll into the room holding a silver tray. Domed silver lids of various sizes cover the massive tray that I can only imagine is holding my breakfast. He pauses for a moment as if he's not wholly certain where it is that he wishes to deposit the meal.

“This table will be fine. Thank you, Alexsi.” Marko’s deep voice comes from the armchair by the fireplace, and I yelp in surprise. I scramble back up the bed a little further because I had not even realized that I was not alone in this place. I did not hear Marko arrive. Who is Alexsi? They must work together.

Silence fills the space as Alexsi removes the domes, and the scent of fresh cooked food rapidly fills the space, and my stomach growls in anticipation. How long have I been asleep? How long has it been since I’ve eaten anything? I’m starving.

Alexsi leaves and the pair of us are alone. I slowly roll my attention to my stalker. My voice is firm and disinterested. “Just how long have you been sitting there?”

He does not answer me. Instead, he heads to the breakfast selection and picks an apple slice from the fruit selection on the platter to take a bite.

“Hungry?”

The audacity of this man.

“No,” I lie. My stomach threatens to give me away instantly. I hug the blankets closer and hope that he doesn’t hear it.

“Perhaps you would like to have a shower before joining me for breakfast?” Marko asks arrogantly.

“I don’t suppose that you’re planning on leaving so that I can do that, are you?”

Marko grins softly to himself. I can see the dimples on his cheeks as he peruses the selection.

“Are you going to get out of that bed, or am I going to have to pull you out of it?”

I’m glad that I didn’t bother changing before bed last night, not that my clothes will cover much from view. I know that he would do it, too. I know that he would grab me by my ankles without a second thought and yank me from this bed whether I was wearing anything or not.

“Don’t you dare,” I warn him.

Marko laughs—laughs at me. “I don’t think that you’re in any sort of position to be making demands of me.” He turns, chewing slowly on a grape. “Unless you misunderstood the position that you’re in.”

“If you think that I’m going to give in to *any* of your demands, you are dead wrong, asshole.”

Marko’s shoulders round and he raises to his full height. A cold trickle of fear runs through me as he slowly turns, and I know that I’ve made a mistake. That fear blends with a far more powerful emotion low in my belly as he takes a single step toward me. His voice lowers, and all amusement fades from his face.

“Get out of the bed, Delilah.”

It’s not a request. I try to make myself smaller against the headboard. I know it won’t do me any good, but at this point I just want to make him angry. It feels like the only thing that I can do—so I do it.

“Make me.” I sneer in his direction.

Marko smirks. I have only about half a second to prepare myself before he moves. He rushes forward so quickly I can’t even react before his hand closes around my ankle through the bedding and yanks me downward. I try to kick at him with my other leg, but it just gets wrapped up in the blankets.

I grunt and try to struggle but my body is too sore. Marko has the sheets off me and my body up and over his shoulder before I can blink as he carries me from the bed and drops me unceremoniously.

I scramble to my feet and make off as if I can get to the bathroom, but Marko’s arms wrap around my waist and lift me back up into the air.

“I would have forgiven you for the first offence. But for this I must punish you.”

“What!” I bark and laugh sarcastically. “Get your dirty hands off of me!”

He drops me on the foot of the bed, and I stand right back up, glaring at him in challenge.

“Off,” he demands and gestures with one finger to my dress.

Heat and indignation flush through me. I clench my teeth together as if that will result in a different outcome. I could struggle, but he would just rip the dress off me.

I almost want to let him.

“You’re a sick bastard, you know that?” I fume.

“You’ll want to stop calling me names if you don’t want to lose more privileges. See if I allow you to eat anything else today.”

I pause because he’s right. I’m wholly and utterly at his mercy until my father comes to save me. Marko could do anything that he wanted to me, and I would be powerless to stop him. Angry, my shaking hands grip the fabric of my dress as I awkwardly scrunch and rip the thing from my frame. I hurl it across the room beside where we stand. My hands lift as if to cover myself, as if I could block myself from his view. But then I lose, and he knows it.

I stand in as much defiance as I can muster and glare up at him.

“On your knees.”

“In your dreams.”

“Oh, absolutely. I bet in your dreams as well,” Marko snarks right back to me. I don’t know where this is headed, but I hate that my heart is racing so damned much. I slowly lower myself to my knees, never breaking eye contact. It might just be my imagination, but I swear that I hear his breathing hitch.

“Apologize.”

I wish I could glue my teeth shut to keep from speaking to him—but I can’t. I bite out the word. “Sorry.”

“I’m sorry, I could not hear you. Speak up.” Marko cups a hand over his ear as he waits.

“I’m ... sorry ...”

He makes a clicking noise of disapproval. “It certainly leaves a lot of room for improvement, mind you, but I suppose I shall accept it for now.” His eyes rake down my frame as he smirks. “Very well, enjoy your breakfast.”

He speaks a touch too quickly. He turns and picks up my discarded dress from where I threw it and chuckles to himself before heading for the door. “We will try again when I return. I hope that you will be in a better mood then.”

The heavy door clicks open, and the moment that it shuts I bolt for the closet. I try to wrench open the door, but a light on the handle flickers red. He’s taken away my clothes.

MARKO



*N*ever in my life have I been as tested as I was moments ago.

I am a man who has operated with single-minded focus for my entire life. I am driven and capable. And for some unknown reason that woman in my basement appeals to me more than any woman ever should. I almost lost it when she dropped to her knees. I had expected her to fight me there too, but something about her looking up at me without a damned thing on ... I have to play my cards right. I must be careful with how we move forward because if I don't ...

Damned tempting woman.

The door to the basement slams behind me with a loud clang, and Alessi walks slowly behind my wrath with careful and measured steps. I want to hit something. I want to hit lots of things. What I had *really* wanted was to pull her over my knee and spank her until she cried. I wanted her to feel the irritation that I felt with her tongue, but I didn't trust myself to keep my composure.

I don't think I can handle being in a room with her like that ... not until it is time.

I throw open the doors to my office and head straight for the well-stocked bar. I don't even bother with a glass as I throw the lid to the vodka to the side and drink straight from the bottle. I'm so consumed in my thoughts I can barely even taste it. I can't feel the burn in my throat either. On some level, I find that I am missing the hooch that Martino had made in

his cell back before they had separated us from one another. That had been a smart move on their part—but in the end it won't matter.

I turn to the clock on the wall and note the hour. "Report," I mutter gruffly.

Alexsi hesitates for a moment, unsure if that's really what I want to discuss. It's not, but it is what I choose.

"The commissary accounts have been refilled. I have tails on all the guards that you requested, sir."

I nod and move for my desk. I sink heavily into the chair and push the papers in front of me apart. Papers and news clippings. "Were you able to get the phone to Martino?"

"Yes, sir. Of course." Alexsi answers. From the hint of pride in his voice, I know that it was no easy task for him. I have no doubt that it will take Martino a couple of days to catch up to the changes in technology from the last time that he held a phone, but I expect that we will be able to contact one another very quickly. He will be indispensable once he's back online.

"And what of Dominetto's movements?" I ask. I need to keep moving forward so that my focus does not return to the woman in the basement.

"He has called men back from their posts. It appears that he is gearing up to make a large and calculated move. I would not be surprised if we see something from him soon," Alexsi answers.

I shake my head. "No, he will plot and plan until he is certain that he can strike us where it hurts the most. Are all our allies on the inside watching the boy's backs as well?"

They damned well better be. Some of our more idiotic enemies had gotten brave for a little while during the time that all three of us were behind bars. They thought that we were incapacitated, and they were safe ... not that it had worked. Now that I'm out, they will think twice before attempting to make any moves against us.

“Yes, of course. I am fairly certain that we can bribe the guards to be on our payroll by the end of the week.”

“Good, see that it is done.” I scrub my hands down my face. I don’t do so well with the waiting parts.

Perhaps it would behoove me to send that old bastard some additional incentives to force his hand.

Before I can remark to that thought, the sound of a distant crash registers. My brow knits in curiosity as I move to the small room next to my office filled with security monitors. Alexsi is in the room first, glancing over the small screens until he can find the source of the noise.

He mutters softly in Ukrainian.

When I see it, I can’t help but smile.

There she is—my little wifey, standing with her eyes deadlocked on the camera. I wondered how long it would take her to notice just where they were. Looks like she has found at least one of them.

“What is she wearing?” Alexsi asked incredulously.

I lean in closer to the monitor and chuckle. She couldn’t get into the closet because I had her barred from it—sneaky little thing. I glance to the bed to confirm my suspicions and note that she managed to turn the sheet into some sort of wrap dress.

Her fire does things to me.

“What is she holding?” Alexsi asks again. I note the overturned breakfast and that she’s holding something to her throat, but I cannot see what it is clearly. I roll my eyes. I’m not interested in her empty threats. I push away from the table holding the monitors and head right back for her. That’s what she wants. She might as well have written me a personalized love letter for how obvious it was. I guess she wasn’t satisfied earlier. I tried to let her off easily, but now I’m going to have to make her see reason.

“Don’t come any closer!” she shouts, as if she has any power in this.

She shuffles three steps back when I enter the room, hands in my pockets. She's made a mess of the place. The mattress is off kilter, the food is ground into the carpet seemingly untouched. I nudge one of the plates aside with the toe of my shoe and choose not to focus on the broken piece of plate that she's holding pressed to her throat. She has no desire to die, no matter what she says. That much I am certain of.

"Well, you have my attention," I say with a touch of boredom.

"Let me go, or I will remove your bargaining chip," she threatens.

"You are a terrible negotiator, you know that? You are making demands when I already have what I want," I counter. She presses the piece into her hand tighter as if that's going to make a difference.

"If you wanted pain, my dear, all you had to do was say the word ..." My brow lifts as I watch the innuendo settle. Her grip slackens. Her eyes dart to the door behind me, noting that I have left it open on purpose just in case she was, on the off chance, being serious about this little display.

I want her to think that she has a chance.

I want her to give me the opportunity.

Just as I expected that she would—she makes for the door.

My arm snaps out and catches her around the middle, but she's armed. With a feral cry she slashes that bit of broken plate and manages to cut me right across the side of the face. I hiss in discomfort and feel my temper flare. It's annoying more than anything else, but the look of pure horror on her face when she sees the blood trickle down my cheek ... it's worth the discomfort.

The plate falls from her hand when she drops out of my gaze and things seem to happen in slow motion. She tries to close the door and put distance between us, and I catch it. Her bare feet slap against the cold concrete floor as she picks up speed, running awkwardly around the sheets that she's bundled herself up in.

I whistle, slow and low because I know that there isn't anywhere that she can go. I lift one hand to touch the wound. It's not anything that will even need stitches, but I'm sure that it only adds to her fear as I slowly follow her. Something stirs low in me as she frantically pulls on each door handle that she comes to, only for them not to give.

She turns for the stairs, and I catch her by the hair. The beautiful sound that leaves her lips has nothing at all to do with pain as she wrenches her body back into mine. Her hands lift and close around my wrist and the sheet falls off her. I pull her back until she's flush with my body.

"This is not behaving, dear."

My free hand holds her by the hip as her clawed fingers bite into my wrist and hands, trying to free herself. Her chest heaves, but she stills when my hand flattens out over her stomach. She falls back into my chest as my hand starts to travel lower. I watch with fascination as her nipples harden and she bites down on her bottom lip. I can feel the heat of her before my fingers brush against her core. She's soaked down her thighs.

"As I said before, if you wanted attention—there were easier ways. You don't need to be so theatrical. If you want my touch again, dear, then you just need to ask sweetly for it." My middle finger runs the slit of her as my grip on her hair tightens. Her thighs attempt to close around my hand, right until I flick a finger against the tender bundle of nerves. The whimpered sound of frustration she makes is perhaps the sweetest thing that I have ever heard in my life.

"You can have what you want," I remind her as my hand slips between her thighs. "You just have to behave. But since you've been a naughty little troublemaker ..."

My hand stops its movements, and it only takes half a second before her hips attempt to chase the friction. Instead, I force her to walk down the hall back into the room she just vacated. I remove my hand from her sex and kick the mattress back into place. I reach behind the headboard with my free

hand and produce a pair of thick leather cuffs and throw her face down on the mattress.

“What the hell are those for?”

“They are going to force you to behave.” I catch her wrist as she attempts to push me away from her and close it in the cuff then affix it to the metal loop in the headboard. I doubt she was even cognizant of them last night. She tries to stop me, but I do the same on her other wrist and ankles until she’s splayed out—frothing mad—on the bed before me, bared and wholly exposed.

My touch lingers on her calf. Her skin is so soft. She turns her face away from me as if somehow that will prevent me from seeing the look of lust written all over her. I indulge myself in the feel of her as my hand runs up the inside of her leg, stopping just short of where she wants the attention. I skip over her sex and let my fingers skitter up the flat expanse of her belly until I can cup the swell of her modest breast in my hand. Index and thumb closing over her nipple and pinching.

“Now, is there something that you wanted my attention for?”

She doesn’t turn her head to look at me, even as I lower my head to kiss the valley between her breasts. My tongue trailing over to her nipple so that I can catch it between my teeth, flicking softly.

“Nothing at all?” I ask once more. It appears that she’s physically biting the inside of her cheek to keep from speaking. I smirk and pull back. “Very well. I shall leave you here to learn your lesson. If you come to your senses and remember what you want, call to me. I will hear it.”

With that, I leave her.

DELILAH



*I*t takes less than a day before I break.

At least, I think that it is less than a day. I can't tell how much time passes. I cannot stand being stuck here, immobilized, wondering what is going to come next. My nipples are painfully hard. I can't even close my legs to get any sort of relief.

"Okay!" I call with my eyes scrunched shut. My frustration echoes through the room as I pull angrily at the cuffs locking me in place. I will lie and say that I have to pee, or that I'm starving, or anything. I won't tell him that I keep replaying his hands over me. I won't remind him that I'm losing I will lie. No matter what the consequences might be. I don't even care how obvious it will be either.

"Do you hear me?!" I call out to nobody. "I said OKAY!"

I don't know what I was expecting. I don't know if I just assumed that there would be some sort of intercom system that would trigger and allow him to gloat at me or something. I pull the cuffs against the posts they are tethered to in frustration. I tried everything to get them off, including attempting to miraculously bite through the leather, and it would not happen.

He makes me wait.

Of course, he's going to make me wait. He wants to savor his victory.

It feels like an eternity passes before the door opens again. He strolls in dressed in all black, though this time his sleeves are rolled up to the elbows, showing off all his tattoos. The top

button of his shirt is undone, and I can see that there are more on his sculpted chest as well. I cannot imagine what they are for, but I have a fierce desire to see them, to trace them with my hands and tongue.

I track his movements with my eyes as he strolls into the room and carefully sidesteps the mess that I made this morning. He comes to stand at the foot of the bed, and I attempt to clamp my thighs together to keep from feeling so exposed. His hands lift from his pockets to rest on the two wooden posters as he levels me with a dark, hungry look, but he says nothing at all.

I don't want to apologize to the man who has kidnapped me. I don't want to say anything of the sort because I will not do what he wants.

And yet.

"Fine," I mutter under my breath.

Marko's grip tightens on the wooden posts.

"I said fine! I'm ... I'm sorry, okay?" I spit finally, fire in my eyes as I glare at him. I press my lips together firmly before allowing the word that I know I need to say tumbles reluctantly out of my lips. "Truce ..."

Marko smirks. "Truce?"

I turn my face away and nod. "Yes, that is what I said. So, can you get these cuffs off me maybe?"

"I rather like you all trussed up like this. I think that you're going to have to do me one better," he says arrogantly.

I should have seen that coming.

"What do you want?"

"You to apologize, properly this time."

The words feel like vinegar on my tongue. "Sorry," I mutter without conviction.

Marko undoes one ankle for my troubles.

"I said that I'm sorry!"

“I think that from here on out you can address me as sir ... unless you wish a more affectionate term like hubby? I suppose that I could be amiable to such a thing.”

“I’m sorry, sir.” I lock eyes with him, fully unprepared for the look I get. My stomach tightens and heat rushes between my legs as he undoes my other ankle. I push myself up to a seated position and nod pointedly at my wrists. He takes his time walking around the bed.

“What else?”

“I’m hungry, sir ... and cold,” I mutter reluctantly.

He glances at my pebbled flesh and smirks. “Then you better not take advantage of my mercy.” He undoes one wrist and I instantly free my other one. I know there’s no point in attempting to run from him now, so I don’t even bother. I pull my knees up to my chest and hug them to my body as Marko nods in the direction of the camera I found earlier, speaking silently to whoever must be on the other end.

“Get dressed and clean yourself up if you like. I will have food ready when you are finished.”

Slowly, I unfold from the bed and squeeze past Marko. “Thank you, sir ...” I whisper. I hate that I don’t hate the subservient feeling either. Part of me wants him to follow me into the bathroom so that we can pick up where he left off ... but I don’t dare say such a thing out loud. I splash cold water on my face and quickly make myself more presentable. Just enough to feel like I’m on slightly more even footing with him. I say nothing as I move to the closet, happy that it is unlocked for me. I pick a dress that will give me more coverage than a lot of the other options and pull on a pair of panties at random. The soft fabric swishes around my thighs makes me feel more human. Shockingly, when I emerge, the room is cleaned up and fresh food is waiting for me like nothing ever happened.

Only this time, there’s two place settings.

“Joining me?” I ask softly as I slide into the seat across from him. It’s not like I could get out ... might as well play

along and see what information I can get out of him at the very least. That's what I'm trying to convince myself of.

Marko says nothing. He waits until I've selected what I want before helping himself to a full plate as well, but he doesn't eat from it. I've consumed half of my plate before my stomach stops growling at me in protest. Feeling emboldened by the full belly and hot tea, I dare to ask, "Why me?"

"Because it had to be you."

"That's a very glib answer, thank you. So helpful you are, sir." I sigh and stab at a vegetable before pushing it around my plate.

"At first, it was because I needed you. Your father owes me a debt, and I will collect on it—no matter the cost."

He speaks so calmly it's remarkable. "And now?"

"Now ... I want to fuck you on every surface in this room," Marko admits with a soft shrug. He says it so casually I don't even have time to fully process my shock.

"It is certainly a bonus, given that we will be married in the next couple of days. You and I are going to have beautiful children, Delilah."

There's too much to unpack there. I can't even fathom where to start.

"What is it that you think my father has allegedly done?"

Marko locks eyes with me. "That is between your father and I."

I put my fork down loudly and scoff. "Yet I'm the one that is going to be paying the price for it, aren't I? Don't you think that entitles me to even a little bit of information?"

"He killed my father," Marko says simply.

It's not enough.

"He's killed a lot of men's fathers," I admit evenly. "If you are in the world that he is in, you know that is a hazard of the job."

He stares at me, as if implying that he does understand. Only this time he means that my father is supposed to be the collateral damage.

“So then kill him and be done with it,” I spit. I don’t want my father dead; I love my father, but I need to figure out Marko’s plan.

“That’s not good enough. Not for what he did. There is a reason that he called you the moment that he learned I was out. This is not some territory dispute where bodies are used as collateral damage or simply numbers to write on a paper ... this is personal. His slight starts with me but extends beyond me to my brothers ... I am merely returning the favor.” He speaks as he laces his fingers together in front of his face. “I will promise you a good life, Delilah, so long as you are a dutiful and loyal wife. I presume that his death will harm you, but it will be the only harm that I will ever intentionally cause you.”

He sounds like he means it.

“What did he do?” I ask simply and pull my tea toward myself. A muscle feathers in Marko’s jaw, and for a moment I don’t think that he’s going to tell me. It seems almost as if the memory is somehow still too fresh, too painful to bear.

“I do not share blood with my father,” he admits softly, though his expression does not change. “Nor do I share blood with any of the men that I consider to be my brothers. We have something stronger than blood, something that nobody can ever take away from us. Our father took us in off the streets, each of us from a different sort of bad situation, and I think that he only chose to bring me in because Alexsi vouched for me. I was a prick of a youth.”

“Still are,” I counter, which earns me a soft smile.

“Sure,” he allows. “Now, he didn’t take us in lightly. He made us work for our place, gave us skills ... training, knowledge that you just can’t get out on the streets. We likely would have ended up in prison a hell of a lot earlier than we did without him. He gave us a purpose in life ... and maybe we were naïve, didn’t know just what we were getting into for

the first few jobs, or maybe I just didn't care ... was grateful for it even ..."

I listen, and don't interrupt as I see him lose himself for a moment to his memories.

"Saved us, in the only way that he knew how and when your father took him ... when he ..." Marko grimaces. I have heard stories that my father can be a brutal man, but I've never had to speak to anybody that knew that side of him. It certainly was not the Dominetto that bought me ponies and covered my room in diamonds and pearls growing up ...

"The things that your father did to him out of spite ... and then to turn coward and have to hammer in that final nail into the coffin ... well, I can't let that stand."

"Coward?" My brow pinches. That's certainly not a word that I would ever use to describe my father. Not in the slightest.

"In the life you don't go running to the police ... we scared him, and we knew it. We outnumbered him. Father hurt him and we were going to finish him off ... so he framed us, all of us, testified and locked us away. He knew that we wouldn't be in there forever ... shame on him for not planning better."

Something sparks in my memory at his story. Something that I never thought anything about. I've done work for my father my whole life ...

"I'm not going to choose you over my father ... you have to know that" I admit evenly. It would be hubris for him to think that he could convince me.

"We will see."

I swallow hard and turn my focus down to my tea because the more that I think about it, the more my memory fills in the blanks. It wasn't my father who testified against Marko and his brothers ... it was me.

MARKO



Since our conversation a week ago, Delilah's treatment of me seems to have shifted. I don't fully trust it, but I understand it. Given that she will not ever be leaving my side again, I see no reason to keep things from her. She has nobody that she can tell; her knowledge of my actions makes no difference.

There is no chance that her father will get the upper hand on me.

Of this I am absolutely certain.

Alexsi knocks on Delilah's door before entering, just in case we are in the middle of something. Delilah pauses mid-sentence and waits for me.

"Enter," I command.

"Sir, we have news," he says simply, not even glancing in Delilah's direction. If a woman has ever tempted Alexsi, I have yet to see him act on it. I tried to ask him once, but I simply don't think that he's wired that way. It does wonders for his work ethic. I rise and follow him out of the room, leaving Delilah behind. She doesn't even question my comings and goings anymore. She expects me to come to her at any time, as she should.

"What has happened?" I ask.

"There has been a fire at the community center," Alexsi informs me, and for the first time in so, so many years, I hear a hint of rage in his voice. He pulls his phone from his pocket and starts to bring up photographs and news stories covering

the event. I know that he doesn't mean the one here in town, but rather the community center that we met in as children. It is not just an attack on me, but on all of us.

I know that it was Dominetto; he's calling to me—trying to feel me out. I know he doesn't know my location, but right now I don't care. I'm not going to let him get away with this either. I head into my office where the secure landline is located and dial the number, I memorized a long time ago.

It doesn't ring, and the man on the other end of the line doesn't bother to say a single word of greeting. I am certain he had to be expecting my call.

“Still a coward, I see,” I say roughly.

I can practically *feel* the bastard smirking on the other line, smug as he is. “I am not the one hiding on the other end of the phone.”

“No, you're destroying a haven for children because you got your feelings hurt,” I accuse, trying to get the rage out of my voice.

“I would like to speak to my daughter. Put her on the phone.”

“Bold of you to assume that she's still alive,” I say with equal arrogance.

“I do hope that you're not stupid enough to have harmed her.”

“Oh no, she has had her ... uses,” I say vaguely, knowing full well the implications that he will jump to. Just as I know that his concern is not actually for what I might or might not have done to his daughter, but for how it will affect him and his reputation. Delilah might not understand it, but she is just as much a pawn for him to use as anyone else in his blood-built empire.

“If you know what is good for you, and have any sense of self-preservation left, you will put her on at once.”

“Or what?” I scoff. “You will burn down another building? To what end? We both know if you could locate me, you

would have done so already. You're grasping at straws."

"I'm done with you, boy. Put her on." Dominetto sounds as if he were speaking through clenched teeth. Good. I was more than happy to find any way to get under the prick's skin. I want to piss him off. Bonus points if I could make him angry enough to do something irrational.

The *only* benefit that Dominetto Popova has on me is sheer numbers. A sort of dumb, brute force that he could command. Yet, like a coward, Popova is hiding behind his little army of fools, and it is only a matter of time before I draw him out.

"You know, I would love to do that for you, I really would—however—she's a little under the weather. It turns out that morning sickness is a lot more debilitating than one would expect it to be." I shrug. It is a lie. Despite my personal desires, it was not time yet to ravish the young Popova heiress, and she certainly was not yet with my child. Her father doesn't need to know that.

Dominetto seemed to be at a loss for words.

"In fact," I continue, "unless you have anything of urgency to say, I believe that I need to return to my wife's side. I suppose that I don't need to remind you what that means? It means that Delilah is mine. She belongs to me."

"A farce!" Dominetto rages.

Pride swells in my chest knowing that I've gotten under his skin—it feels a hell of a lot like a mission accomplished. It's just a battle; it's certainly not the war ... but it is a start.

I speak clearly into the phone. "Oh, it's real. I'm coming for your entire line, Popova. Your name and legacy ends with you—your daughter is mine, and the children that she bears will inherit everything. I'm not just coming to kill you, and I absolutely am going to kill you, I'm coming to take everything from you."

I'm not surprised in the least when he hangs up on me.

Even Alessi cracks a rare smile.

“Did you get the location?” I ask, knowing that he was listening to every word of the conversation.

“I got him.” Alexsi grins wider.

I ease back into my seat and drop the phone onto the receiver and steeple my fingers in front of my face. “Time for the next phase of the plan.”

DELILAH



Every night the nightmares have been getting worse.

Tonight, seems to be no exception.

I was just a child ... such a young thing. I didn't know what I was doing ... I didn't even know what I was saying. I just knew that I was doing what Daddy told me to do. He had always taken care of me, but he certainly had not always liked me. He had kept my mother and myself at arm's length. He kept us flush with cash so that we would leave him alone. I think he just wanted us to be pretty little dolls that he could look at when he wanted and put back up on the shelf when he was finished.

It had never been enough for me.

Then mom died.

I still don't know how, but I always assumed that it had to do with work. Daddy tried to get people to care for me, but they weren't what I wanted. They weren't who I needed. I needed him. He was not much of a father, not at first, but this case had been how I had earned his trust. He asked me to do something, so I did it, and that was that. He had told me what to say, how to act when I said it, and I hadn't even paused to think or question things. Stupid, looking back ... but it had seemed so normal that I hadn't even registered what I was doing as a big deal.

I had been so proud.

Father sent me into the court building all by myself. He let me pick my prettiest dress and did my hair to make me appear

younger and more sincere. I looked like the picture of innocence. I had just been so happy to wear my pearls ... such a foolish little girl.

I didn't bother listening when the adults were talking, because I was gearing up for my performance. A perfect, pretty performance. I was young enough not to have any concept of consequences.

When I had finished, the judge had thanked me. Daddy held my hand that night when he had taken me out for dinner. He actually held my hand and kissed my forehead. He told me I did such a great job. It had been the start of everything. It was the start of my indoctrination into the world of mafia bosses and Bratva leaders ... it was what had led to my next job ... and then the one after that. I was never allowed to get my hands dirty, and I certainly never wanted to, but I did like making my father proud. I liked the attention and the feeling of pride in a job well done.

How was I supposed to know that it was Marko and his brothers that I was condemning to a life in prison? How could I not realize that these were people?

Am I just as bad as my father?

I awake with a start to Marko standing over me. "Hey, hey ... wake up." His hand on my shoulder snaps me out of that dream state. I can feel my eyes stretched wide as I peer around the dark room, trying to make everything make sense. I don't even bother trying to fight him when he pushes me to the side of the bed and crawls in beside me.

Touching him has become so easy, casual almost ... try as I might to avoid the whole Stockholm thing ... I think I'm starting to see his side despite my best efforts. It's difficult to be mad at a man that I had a hand in condemning. I have no idea how he got out of prison. I have no idea how he's free ... but I don't know that he deserved to be in prison in the first place.

Marko wraps an arm around me, and I freeze. He must have heard me in my sleep, replaying events that I don't want to and things that I had so rightfully repressed before now.

“It is all right,” he says sleepily. I must have awoken him. Just how loud had I been to wake him? It isn’t until I am tucked into his side that I realize he’s shirtless. All those tattoos that have been out of my view before now are suddenly on display and available to me.

It’s hard to see in the dim red lighting that comes on every evening in my room, but I think I can make out a couple of the shapes.

“You’ve got to stop watching me sleep.” I chastise him verbally but make no effort whatsoever to pull myself away from him. In truth, it’s nice to have somebody here with me. It’s been something that’s been creeping up more and more ... I miss him when he goes.

He spends most of the day with me ... but then he leaves and I’m alone. Night is the hardest. Most of all on nights when my head doesn’t want to be quiet.

“Shh, fight later,” he muses in a thick voice that hints he might already be half asleep. I’m not in a place to argue with him.

Marko sinks down into the pillows. I don’t know if this is supposed to be a test. It doesn’t feel like a test, but why else would he willingly put himself in such a vulnerable position here with me? I could choke the life out of him or try to. I could ... I don’t know ... harm him in some way ... try to gouge his eyes out in his sleep. And yet he’s in here soothing me from a nightmare. It doesn’t feel real.

Hesitantly, I reach out and place my hand on his chest just to feel if he’s here. That’s the only reason ... just to make sure that I’m not fabricating all of this in my dreams. I can feel the indents of the chiseled muscle covering his chest and sternum. I can feel the heat of him warming my touch, and then his large hand lifts and covers mine, holding it in place on his chest.

It’s painfully intimate.

It’s a gesture of trust.

He looks different in his sleep; he almost appears peaceful. Those lines of thought that he wears aren't there. No ever-present scowl. I wonder if there was ever a time where he could have been considered carefree. I don't know what it sounds like when he laughs, but suddenly I'm nearly overcome with the need to know what it sounds like. What does it look like when he smiles despite his best efforts? Does he even have a sense of humor?

I shouldn't care.

And yet ... surrendering for a single night can't be all that bad ... can it? I suppose that there are worse things to help escape my nightmares.

I bite my bottom lip and slowly allow myself to rest my head on his chest. Even more slowly, I push my fingers through his hair. I glance up to see if I can see his eyes move or any other indication that he's really awake and waiting to see what I do, but his breathing is far too even.

I could do anything to him. My focus drops lower as I realize he is only wearing dark gray pajama bottoms. I'm a little surprised that he sleeps in anything at all. It would be so simple to slip my hand lower, to see if I could coax him into finding a whole other way to relax me and put me to sleep, but I don't know if I'm brave enough. I don't know anything about pleasing a man, certainly not like that.

Marko likely would be more than happy to teach me exactly how to please him.

Am I ready to cross that line? He swore to put a baby in me and yet he's been shockingly decent. He hasn't pressured me ... and I almost sort of want him to.

In the morning ... I promise myself that in the morning if I am feeling brave enough ... I'm going to surrender to the lust that I've been feeling this whole time.

MARKO



*D*elilah is half on top of me when I wake up. I only half remember coming in here in the middle of the night.

I remember waking up to the sound of her screaming in her sleep—and I had just reacted.

I also half expected her to somehow try to saw my hand from my body so that she could make a break for it. I figured that she would *at least* try to drag my sleeping form to the door and try to get the thing to open for her ... but she did not. Her leg is draped over one of my legs and her arm is wrapped all the way over my torso. She's sleeping, even breathing carefully.

If we had met in another life, would things have ended up the same way? I cannot deny the pull to her that I feel. I can no longer pretend that there isn't something about her that I'm obsessed with. I've never slept beside a woman before. I have slept *with* plenty of women in my life, but never like this. I've never shared a bed without having spent a few hours of quality time together.

The red lighting casts shadows over her, but I don't mind it. Her pretty hair fell over her face, so I brush it back just slightly. She has such a beautiful face. It's a mercy that she doesn't take after her father in the slightest. Pity about her mother.

I could wake her—indulge in all the sinful ways that I would *prefer* to spend my morning, but Alexsi and I have a very important meeting that we must attend to. I hate having to

leave her here, but I cannot yet trust her enough to come out in public with me. Certainly not when her father is closing in on us as well. I cannot have him, or anybody else, getting a picture of her when they believe her to be in such a vulnerable state. I cannot have anything that would tie her to this location either. Not yet.

I'll have Alexsi bring her breakfast before we leave.

The thought that I should leave a note for her pops up, and I squash that instantly. I don't owe her anything, and I certainly do not need to warn her when I leave. She's not earned that from me.

I start to lift her hand from my chest to slide out from underneath of her, but the moment that I start to slide to the side, she groans in protest. Her small hand tightens around me, hugging me closer back to her.

"Stay," she whispers, and I'm not sure if she even knows what she's saying, but I don't answer. I continue trying to slide away but her eyes start to roll under the lids.

"Shh, go back to sleep."

"Mm ... no, Marko ... stay," she mutters again, her hand sliding over my torso and cupping my hip to try to pull me closer to her once more.

I chuckle. "Good morning to you too."

"Don't ..."

Her fingers slip into the waistband of my pants, likely on accident. Given that it is morning and I'm waking up to a beautiful woman, that doesn't need to be something that she's doing. I deserve a freaking award for the sheer amount of self-control that I've been using up until this point. I have been on my very best, most restrained behavior. Anyone who knows me knows that restraint is not what I am famous for. I am the sort of man who lets his fists speak for him—who goes after what he wants regardless of the consequences.

"Don't start something that you can't finish," I tease and grab her firmly by the wrist.

Delilah's eyes snap open, and she seems to realize what she's doing. For a moment, we are frozen, locked into a standstill, as she is not removing her hand from my side nor is she allowing me to leave.

"Delilah ..." I whisper. "Go back to sleep."

Her focus drops to my lips, only for a moment, but I see her—and my self-control snaps.

It doesn't matter how early it is; it doesn't matter that I ought to have a stronger grip on myself. My lips find hers faster than I can think. One moment I'm lying next to her with the intention of leaving and the next I'm rolling her onto her back as her legs bracket my hips.

Ours is a slow, lazy sort of morning kiss. Even slower still do her hands whisper softly up my sides until they can round my shoulders. She traces the muscles in my arm and neck up to my hair and holds my face to hers as she deepens the kiss. Her soft moans are almost like whimpers of need. I band one arm under her waist and hold her to me as I sink my weight onto her and press my hardness against her core.

She gasps and her eyes shoot open, frozen once again for a moment.

I suppose I have a little bit more time.

I can make time for her.

It's setting a very dangerous precedent.

Her eyes flutter closed as she pulls me closer once more, and she shocks me by sliding her hand down between us. "Thank you for last night," she whispers against my lips.

Given that all my blood has shot straight to my dick, it takes longer than it should to catch up to what she's saying to me. She's thanking me. For comforting her or ...? Her hand slips into my pants and I no longer care what reasons she might have for doing what she's doing. I can tell that she's inexperienced by the tentative way she wraps her fingers around my length. Her breath deepens, and I just about lose my mind.

She strokes me softly, learning her way, and I make sure that she has room to do so. I lift onto my knees only enough to gain the leverage to rip her shirt clear from her body, exposing her chest and navel. She sighs softly as I kiss the side of her neck, biting and licking a trail down the muscle there.

The attention seems to embolden her, and her grip tightens. My arms nearly buckle. “Careful,” I groan into her shoulder.

“Like this?” she asks with a painfully vulnerable quality to her voice. I nod and press my forehead against hers.

“Yeah, just like that—such a good girl you are.”

“Does that ... does that feel good?” she asks softly.

I grin and open my eyes to see her watching my face carefully. I nod. “Fuck yeah it does, baby, just like that.”

I kiss her softly and feel the tension start to build—and I’m nowhere near done with her yet. I know that we don’t have an abundance of time at our disposal, certainly not enough time to indulge in her properly. I know that if I start something with her here and now, I’m not going to stop.

I kiss the tip of her nose and the point of her chin, and then lower. She tries to sit up as I slide down her body. She tries to keep pleasing me and that makes me even harder. I kiss lower until I can peel the last barrier between us from her legs. I lift them and put them on either of my shoulders.

“Marko ... wh—” Delilah starts to ask, perhaps out of curiosity or to protest, but she loses the ability to speak when I kiss her again. I lavish attention on that heat that seems to be the constant thought on my mind no matter the location or the time of day. My tongue parts her, lavishing her with attention, savoring the sweet taste of her to the music of her moans.

In any other situation, I would drag this out. Any other time I would languish here until she was screaming my name and begging for me to allow her to have release. Then there’s the wicked side that wants to edge her. I want to bring her to the brink of her climax and watch her struggle and squirm.

It certainly seems like more fun.

Her hands bury in my hair as she tries to curl around my head. I wrap my arms around her thighs to keep her in place. Her hips grind up against my face, and I can feel that tension building when I slowly ease two fingers inside of her and set a pace. I curl inside of her, and she nearly comes up from the mattress.

I think the sound of my name leaving her lips in a moan might be my favorite sound in the entire world.

She clenches around my fingers, her breathing stopping and locking in her chest as sensation rolls over her.

So, I stop.

Her pretty face crumbles as if she's going to cry. Her hands tighten in my hair as if to direct me back into the place where she wants me the most, but I refuse. A wicked, knowing grin spreads over my features as I shake my head.

"I warned you not to start something," I say simply, knowing full and damn well that walking is going to be next to impossible when I'm this rock hard. I doubt she would stop me if I took her now. More than anything I want to feel her come apart on me; I want to feel her orgasm shatter her from the inside out.

"I want to finish ... I started something I want to finish," she gasps, legs trembling on either side of my face as my fingers slip from her.

"I would love to finish you off, baby, but we have a plane to catch."

"We?"

I nod, changing my mind. After this, there is no way that I'm going to have her more than an arm's length away from me ever again. "I have business. I'm taking you with me, so you need to get ready, but if you ask really nicely I might be convinced to finish putting a baby in you later."

I turn my head to kiss the inside of her thigh with a chuckle.

I expected her to protest. I expected some sort of argument, but something darkens in her expression that I never could have expected.

I could call her on it, but I feel like if I don't remove myself from her at this very moment, I'm going to risk it all. I rise to my knees and pull her with me. She's given up pretending that she's not attracted to me, and wraps her arms around my shoulders, but this time she kisses me and very, *very* deliberately rolls her hips down into mine.

"Do we have to leave now?" she whispers against my lips.

"Keep tempting me like this and I'm going to leave you here, strapped to the bed until I return."

I pinch her nipple just to spur her into motion. I try not to show how surprised that I am that she's being so compliant. The paranoid half of me wants to assume that she has an ulterior motive, but her body says otherwise. "Go get dressed ... and don't wear any underwear."

"Yes, sir."

DELILAH



E at your heart out, asshole.

The dress that I choose isn't something that I normally would wear. It's tight *everywhere*. The deep purple color of the gown fits like a glove. I pair it with black pumps and leave my hair down in loose waves that frame my face. Simple, but I cannot wait to see the look on that asshole's face. I've made up my mind to not let him touch me. It's what he gets for treating me like that. My whole body still feels like it's on fire, and every time that my memory oh-so-helpfully pulls up those flashbacks I'm overheated all over again.

Funny how quickly things change.

I'm halfway out of the closet and into the bedroom where I'm supposed to wait for him when I catch myself. I'm so busy wanting to get laid that I'm not even realizing what I'm doing. Since when do I want to impress him like this? Dressing to purposefully seduce my kidnapper? What the hell is wrong with me?

I should change.

I turn back to the closet but the door chimes before I can even think of removing the dress.

Marko whistles low in approval of my clothing choices. "You *really* want to finish what you started, don't you?"

I'm never going to get used to that smile on his face. It makes me weak in the knees. He looks handsome as ever, dressed head-to-toe in black with the sleeves of his shirt rolled up to his elbows. It's a classic and effortlessly handsome

choice, but he makes it look elegant and lethal at the same time. He leans against the post of the bed as he watches me silently.

I almost wish I was still naked, perhaps then he would change his mind and take me right back to bed. If I crossed this room right now and got on my knees in front of him ... what would happen?

“As badly as I would like to peel that dress off of you, we have a plane to catch.”

“Where are we going?” I ask, knowing that he’s not going to tell me.

He smirks and changes the subject. “There is one more thing that I think will complete your outfit, actually.”

He pulls his hand out of his pocket and lifts a ring into the space between us. A beautiful, antique ring that takes my breath away. He reaches for my hand, and I’m so transfixed in watching him put it on me that I don’t notice the insignia or crest on the inside. Having his ring on my finger makes it all ... real somehow. It feels heavier, but not in the negative way that I assumed it would.

My breath catches in my throat. It shouldn’t matter one way or the other. It’s not like it’s a *real* ring because this isn’t a *real* engagement. I keep reminding myself of that pesky little fact because he’s only in this to get back at my father.

So then why do I like it so much?

It’s a little thing. I think it means more to me that it’s not some flashy, giant stone that could have been picked out at any store by a person who is just looking to tell everybody, ‘*Hey, I have a lot of money to flash around*’. This is something that might have belonged to his mother even. I make a mental note to examine it closer when I have time in private later. If I’m ever going to have privacy again.

“Just in case,” Marko adds and places a hand on my lower back. He guides us out of the room and up into the main part of the building. I had been so distressed the first time that we came through here, given that I was thrown over his shoulder,

that I didn't even think to take in the details of my surroundings. It's not a bad little hideout. Marko has modern tastes even if they are a touch too gothic for me. There are elements of stainless steel incorporated throughout, black leather couches and a simple kitchenette in the distance. It looks like a warehouse that he's converted into some sort of condo and covered in state-of-the-art security measures. I wonder how much of it is simply because it's practical and how much is his personal tastes. I don't see a single piece of art or decoration, not even a gaudy statue of a naked woman or anything ... curious.

One thing is for certain: he's being entirely too trusting. I'm still technically his enemy, and anything that I can use against him or any item that helps me figure out where we are is something that I can use to get a message back to my father. Just taking me out of here in the first place is putting a target on his back. I'm sure the ring is meant to be an assurance that this is part of his plan. Anybody that sees it on my finger and links the two of us together is going to spread rumors. The sort of rumors that not even my father, as powerful as he is, will be able to squash.

Women like me can't just marry anybody—and they sure as shit can't do it in private.

Weddings between two families would be huge affairs. Not to mention alliances and territory lines would be instantly shifted.

Why would he trust me with this?

My heels click softly over the concrete steps leading into the converted warehouse.

“Something has changed ... hasn't it?” I ask softly. I almost don't want to know the answer. From the limited information that he's given me so far, I'm not sure that his issue with my father is entirely unfounded. It's turning me all around inside my own head. Yet, I know that if he ever found out that I was involved with it ... he would kill me too.

“There have been developments, yes,” Marko answers plainly.

He guides me out of the front door and the bright sunlight smacks me in the face. I recoil and move behind him. I didn't fully realize how dark it was down in the hole he put me. I'm not even completely certain how many days I've been down there. Without any natural indications of time, my circadian rhythm is all backwards.

"I spoke with your father this morning. It seems that he's pulling in allies. I assume that he thinks he has a genius move planned. I expect to see his first strike against me soon."

Drops a bomb on me, just like that.

He opens the car door and I slide inside. Knowing my father and the way that he operates, the way that he's trained *me* to operate, he must be three steps ahead of where any opponent thinks he is. If Marko thinks that he's about to make a move, then chances are that my father's already made it. Taking me is a personal affront to his reputation and an even bigger blow to his ego. Yes, it stands to reason that he's already struck, and Marko just doesn't know it yet.

Marko slides into the car beside me and places a hand possessively on my thigh. I angle myself toward him without thinking about it. I ignore the tendrils of desire already pulsating between my thighs. Now isn't the time nor the place. I will be damned before I mount him in the back seat of a Range Rover.

I have to focus. If my father saw me willingly wearing Marko's ring, he would kill me. He would much rather I chew off my own finger to keep such a thing from happening. He would expect me to fight and claw for every second of my captivity. He certainly would not tolerate the notion of my writhing underneath Marko.

Out of the corner of my eyes, I focus on the man beside me. I drink in the sight of him. Even just looking out of the window he's handsome. His hand is curled around the lower half of his face, seemingly deep in thought, but he keeps rubbing his thumb over the exposed skin of my thigh.

If I choose to sleep with him, I can kiss my legacy goodbye. My father will disown me; that's the part that I don't

think Marko fully realizes. It doesn't matter how much my father loves me—he loves his legacy even more. The Popova family and the empire that comes with it is all that matters to him ... and if I get in the way, then I am just as much at risk as any of his other enemies.

It's so hard to think about my own wants and next moves when Marko keeps inching his hand higher and higher with every bump in the road that we cross.

I must make a run for it.

That's the best way. If I stay, I lose something, no matter what.

We reach the airport and load up onto Marko's private plane. I wonder if my father has men watching us at this very moment. I wouldn't be surprised if he does. I try to stumble on the way to the plane and make Marko work for it—just in case.

We're probably going somewhere to finalize this sham of a marriage. So far Marko has been true to his word in that he would not harm me so long as I behaved. Can I really have his children? What sort of father would he be? For that argument, what sort of mother would I be? I haven't even finished college yet ...

He drops me into one of the bucket seats and roughly fastens the seatbelt.

"Is your continued silence because you are upset with me or because you are attempting to plot your escape?" Marko asks, and I ignore him in favor of intently watching the flight attendants finish getting everything for takeoff. I focus on their movements rather than meeting Marko's eye.

The pointed silence that falls between us is a warning of what's going to happen if I don't answer him.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I answer tersely.

"Well, I have to presume that you are still upset about this morning, or else you are attempting to figure out a way to disappear. Which will be difficult, as you have no access to money and no knowledge of where we are going."

Marko smirks knowingly.

“So, are you still upset about this morning?”

My lips pull into a tight line. “A little of both.”

Marko chuckles. “Disappointing. Here I thought that we were starting to get along, and you’re already planning to leave me?”

The plane lifts into the air, but Marko doesn’t seem to care.

“You are welcome to try, if you like.” He shrugs arrogantly. I hate how confident his every movement is. “Run, give it your best shot. I think I’ll quite enjoy hunting you down.”

I shift in my seat. My thighs rub together, and I try to fight the interest that rises with the connotation.

“You have no idea what I’m capable of.”

Marko’s smile turns predatory and heat surges through my core. The stewardess starts to serve lunch, or maybe it’s dinnertime now. It doesn’t really matter because I couldn’t eat even if I wanted to—not with him using that tone of voice on me.

“Show me then.”

My eyes drop to the silver knife that has been left for me with the dinner tray. I go to grab it, and Marko’s hand covers mine from across the aisle. He chuckles.

“That’s your move? That’s the best that you can think of. We both know that you have no intention of stabbing me. You just want to provoke me so that you have a reason to get all close to me again.”

I try to thrust the knife toward him regardless and get nowhere.

“See? I knew it. You could have just asked.” He pulls on my wrist, and I am yanked across the aisle and into his lap. “If you’re not hungry for dinner, I can think of a few other things you might be hungry for.”

I try to struggle, but the dress is too tight and he's too strong. He's not *wrong*. I just don't want to admit that I want him to touch me. I want to not think about it for a little while. I will continue plotting the best escape routes once I'm back on the ground again. That would be the best course of action. I can run once I see where we land.

But if I run ... I might not ever get the rest of the answers that I want.

No, running is the only option because once Marko finds out what I did he will kill me.

The heat of Marko's breath is just outside the shell of my ear as he pulls me further into his lap. His firm, broad chest presses against my back and he keeps me prisoner.

"I'll take that as a yes, then."

He stands, and I'm forced to rise with him. He marches us toward the back of the plane and forces the knife out of my hand. It clatters to the floor somewhere, forgotten, as he kicks open the cabin door that leads to a small, private bedroom. He spins me and pushes me off center so that I fall heavily back onto the bed.

The look that he gives me next is something so predatory that all other thoughts go right out of my head.

It's peaceful, almost, to just live in the moment. To allow myself to feel the desires and wants that he makes me feel. The worry can wait. All the unanswered questions will still be there when we land; I don't have to make any choices right now. It's almost funny how quickly I can rationalize all of this as he advances toward the bed.

I'm rooted to the spot. Despite all the rest of it, this desire for him has been on a constant loop in the back of my head all day.

Marko stands at the foot of the bed, looking as if he wants to consume me whole ... and I want him to. He grabs one of my legs and pulls my heel off, flinging the shoe to the side and repeats the motion with the other.

I should kick him. I should have flung my heel at his head for reading my body so clearly.

“I think I want to hear you say it.” He grins as he looms over me. “Tell me what you want, and it’s yours.”

It’s an open-ended offer. I could ask for anything in the whole world but with him looking at me like that, the only thing that I want is for him to rip all my clothes off. I want him to finish what he started this morning. I want him to ravage me until I can’t walk straight ... there are a hundred different things that I want him to do to me right now, and I will be *damned* if I say even one of them out loud.

“Stop thinking about what could happen, all the possibilities of tomorrow and the unknown. We’re thousands of feet in the air right now and none of that will matter until we land. For once, just think about yourself only. What do you want?” Marko’s smooth, deep voice washes over me. His hands run up along the outsides of my legs until they slide over my hips and then press down into the mattress on either side of my body.

Having one thing for myself can’t hurt ... right?

My chin lifts to him and my eyes lock on his lips.

“Say it,” Marko whispers.

But I can’t, I can’t say it. Instead, my body answers for me in the only way that I know how. I grab hold of his shirt and pull him closer. My lips find his and I pour every single part of me into the kiss. Every fear and insecurity that this situation has brought, every newfound desire, all the confusion and lust—all of it. I let go of my reservations because he’s right; they all can wait. There’s no denying that I am completely attracted to this man.

He lifts me easily and slides me up the bed and pins me there with his hips. My skirt rides up my thighs as they part for him, lifting to either side. My movements are fumbled and rushed as I try to unbutton his shirt and fail. I pull until the buttons scatter and my hands can roam over the muscled expanse of his chest.

Marko's lips trail around the corner of my jawline and down my neck, a hot trail of kisses and nips of teeth as he reaches for the zipper of my dress. The moment that I'm free of it, he wrestles it down my torso. There's no more hesitation, no more waiting—only desire.

Need makes my movements artless as I tug for his belt and fling it aside. I've been ready for him since this morning, since I first laid eyes on him in the club all that time ago. I was ready for him to be my first even back then.

His hand cups my breast as the other snakes between us, brushing against my core in a way that has my hips bucking up into his hand. I should savor this; I should take my time and enjoy it, but need won't allow it. I push insistently at the waist of his slacks until he gets the message and assists me.

“So eager,” Marko teases. “You want me that badly?”

“Yes,” I breathe. The word is more of a moan than anything, and he clearly wasn't expecting that to be my answer. “I do—please.”

Something in his expression darkens and he tears my dress the rest of the way off of me. He leaves the fabric in tatters and slides out of his slacks. No more waiting. No more teasing games. I want him, all of him, and I want him *now*.

He positions himself at my entrance and gives me a look of warning. This is it, the last chance to say no, the last chance to change my mind, but I'm not going to.

“Please,” I moan, and the word is cut short as he slides into me. My eyes nearly roll into the back of my head at the sensation of it all. It's unlike anything that I could have ever imagined. His fingers were one thing, stretching and filling me ... but this ... this is like he's become a part of me.

It takes a moment to adjust to the sensation and another to remember to breathe. He doesn't give me much longer than that before he thrusts into me again, claiming me, owning me inside and out. I hold onto his biceps, and the ring he placed on my finger glints in the dim bedroom light. I'm consumed by fire. Swallowed whole by sensation.

“So, fucking perfect,” he groans.

I could hear only that sound for the rest of my life and be happy. He lifts me so that I’m straddling his lap. He places a hand on the headboard for balance as he encourages my hips to work against his. I wrap my arms around his shoulders as he thrusts up into me. I can hardly breathe. He feels so fucking amazing.

His hand falls between us, rubbing my clit in tandem with his thrusts, working me right back up to the edge that I had been teetering on this morning. I’m thrown into my orgasm with almost no warning. He groans as I clench and come undone around him.

“That’s it, that’s my girl,” he compliments and swallows my moans with his lips. His tongue caresses mine as my hands get lost in his hair. We should have been doing this from the beginning. Even basking in the glow of my orgasm I can feel the next one building. It’s almost painful how alive I feel. I want more—I want everything.

“Give me another one, that’s it,” Marko says against my lips and the rest of the world fades away. I want to cum for him. I want to give him exactly what he’s asking for. I want to be his good girl.

My second orgasm is more intense the first. It feels like a tidal wave that doesn’t end. The heat is everywhere, and he doesn’t stop, repeatedly until he’s carried over the brink with me. I feel him, pulsating deep inside of me, filling me in a way that I can’t properly process.

I think I blacked out for a moment from the pleasure.

The next thing I know, he’s laying me down on the bed and pulling me into his broad chest.

“Mmm ... stay,” I mumble as my arm wraps around him. This is nice. I think I might be able to get used to this. I’ll be ashamed of asking him to stay later. For now, I want him here.

Marko grins and pushes a lock of sweaty hair from my forehead. “For you? Anything.”

I'm drifting off before I even have a chance to question if he means it.

MARKO



If I don't get a grip on myself, I'm going to become addicted to that woman. I never should have allowed myself to stay in that bed. I shouldn't have allowed myself to sleep for a second time beside her, let alone give in simply because she asked me to. I can already feel my need for her sparking again, and I've only just left her side. I've left a couple of my men at the small hotel where I've had to leave her. Hopefully she behaves while I'm gone. The last thing that I need for her to be doing right now is causing trouble. She asked me to stay with her. Even when we landed it seemed that hadn't changed.

Call me crazy, but I think she's starting to come around to the idea of me. I was prepared to have to force her every step of the way during this process, but this? This is better. She barely struggled at all when we landed ... didn't even put up a fight when I locked her away in that hotel room.

At least she seemed high enough on her endorphins to not question where I was going. Perhaps this is a good chance to test her a little. I have complete faith in my men. If she tries to run, then they will stop her. There are no ifs, ands, or buts about it. They will lock her back in that room until I can return and punish her properly.

Part of me thinks that she will stay. Part of me wants her to run.

I'm getting under her skin. I can feel it.

I need to focus.

“How much further, Alexsi?” I ask through the lowered partition. He has been glancing back at me for the better part of the drive, but he won’t ask what I’m thinking. He would never intrude on my thoughts like that, even if he wants to.

“ETA seven minutes.”

I pull my gun from between the seats and check the magazine before reloading it. I lean forward and tuck the weapon into the back of my pants. I know where her father will be, and I’m going to meet with him. It’s going to be a nice little surprise on my behalf to attempt to negotiate terms for his surrender. It will be easier on Delilah if he waves his little white flag, but I’m also not stupid enough to assume that he’s going to give up just like that. Not him. I fully expect her father to fight until his very last breath.

I’m also banking that his love for Delilah is real enough that he wouldn’t risk her getting harmed accidentally because of a foolish or rash action. Hopefully I’m not terribly wrong on that front.

The moment we pull up to the safe house that Dominetto is occupying, I can feel eyes on us. I don’t have to see the weapons to know that they are there, trained on me. We park the car right out front, and Alexsi stays a few steps behind me as we walk up to the front door.

From the smell I would bet that this is one of his factories. He’s certainly running something illicit out of this basement.

I wonder just how much Delilah knows about the more unsavory products that her father pushes. I wonder what she would say. Would she continue attempting to run such an operation, or does she plan to shut down this side of things when she takes over? Absently, I wonder if she knows about the drugs or the girls. Something tells me that the notion of a little murder isn’t something that she will balk at ... but the rest of it?

I will have to ask her later when we start to build our new joint empire.

Unlike her father, I don't intend on keeping her locked away forever. She can play princess in the bedroom all that she likes, but I intend for her to be a partner once she proves that she can handle it. She's already more than proven that she likes a little challenge.

The front door opens, and a large, shirtless man covered in tattoos opens the door. He doesn't say a single word but merely moves out of the way as Alexsi and I head inside.

"Now this is stupid, even for you, Vysotskiy."

The voice addressing me is coming from the kitchen, so that's where I head.

"Congratulations on finding me. I suppose that means you have at least half of a brain cell when I had assumed that you possessed none." Dominetto Popova speaks without looking up from what he is cooking on the stove. Red wine in a long-stemmed glass sits on the counter beside him, which he takes a small sip of before replacing it. From the smell, it seems like a personal batch of the mass marketed substances downstairs. Lucky for me that sort of shit stopped fazing me a long time ago. "Don't you know that it's rude to come to another man's home uninvited? You did not even bring me a gift."

Despite the conversational tone that Dominetto spoke with, the glare that he sent in my direction was meant to kill.

I make sure to smile my most charming smile at him in return.

"I'm sure that you have more than enough party favors in the basement, Popova. You don't need any more from me."

He doesn't like that comment at all. Fuck, I almost wish Delilah was here. Seeing her father all pissed off like this? Knowing that I'm winning? Getting me hot as hell.

"Where is my daughter?" Popova demands.

"Sadly, she was not feeling well enough to make the trip. Morning sickness, like I said, but I will send her your regards, of course." I grin and start arrogantly poking about his cabinets. No doubt he would think it beneath him to outright swing at me, but, fuck, I hope I can provoke him enough to

make that happen. I would love to have this out, man to man, without all the politics of our last names getting in the way, but I will keep him talking for now. I need just a little bit more.

Dominetto sneers at me. “I have tolerated your insolence long enough. I should have had you murdered in that prison!”

I smirk. “Yeah, you probably should have.”

“Give me one reason why I shouldn’t have my man over there rip your arms off and beat you with them for annoying me.”

“Because like it or not, you know that you need me if you ever want to see your daughter again. Furthermore, I am now the future of your family line. So, I suggest that you dispense with this pointless attitude and sit down so that we may go over conditions of your surrender.” I sit heavily at his dining room table. To irritate him more I lean back in his chair and put my feet up on the cheap wooden surface.

“There will be no surrender. You will return my daughter by the end of the week. I will have that monstrosity aborted even if I must cut it out of her myself, and you and your insipid little friends will meet a very nasty end. If you hand her over within the house, I might give your criminal friends a swift death in exchange for your very, very painful one.”

I shrug. “Maybe. That is certainly one way that it could end. However, I think that you’re forgetting who has the upper hand here.”

“Oh, I understand that you think that you are here to take me by surprise. I think you feel very confident right now, imagining that you’ve gotten one over on me ... but you could not be more wrong.” Dominetto taunts. He turns and points his knife in my direction. It’s just so funny to me that I can’t help but to laugh.

“Oh, you think that I’m holding her hostage ... that I’m keeping her against her will? Hardly.”

“I’m sure that you have done something to her that ended up in her being brainwashed, but I will fix that, no matter what

you have done. Tell me your insipid terms so that I can have her back.”

“That will never happen,” I assure him. “The only thing that I want from you is an explanation.”

“I don’t have to explain shit to a child like you!”

“Alexsi, the phone please,” I snap at Alexsi, and he hands over the small device. I toy with it in my hands as I watch Popova, reading his body language. “Tell me why you did it, or I’m going to pin you to that counter and make you watch every second of your daughter begging me to impregnate her.”

Popova sneers and slams the end of the knife into the butcher’s-block counter that he had been working on. “You test my patience, boy.”

“Why did you betray my father? Why did you turn your back on years of partnership ... destroy everything that he had spent his life building ... for what?” I ask simply, laying it all on the line. I’m going to kill him either way—but I want closure.

“Is that what you think that you are doing to me? Threatening me with footage of a whore? If she did as you said she is dead to me. No daughter of mine will beg for some *Bratva trash*.” Popova spits in my direction.

The spittle falls lamely to the floor between us.

I smirk.

“This Bratva trash is only giving you what you deserve ... and so much more. Since my father raised me with manners, consider this my formal warning. I will rain war down on your head, Dominetto. You will hand over the keys to your empire by the end of the week. I’ll grant you the mercy of time to get things in order, unlike you ever showed to my family. But then, I’m taking everything. Whether you surrender or not.”

I push up to stand; the cheaply made chair scrapes angrily across the floor as I do. I fix my jacket and smooth down the coattails before winking at the old man. He doesn’t seem half as intimidating while he’s boiling with rage directly in front of me like this. I take half a second to consider how many men of

his are standing in this room at the ready and weigh my options one last time.

Soon he won't have so many guardians.

“In fact, I really hope that you don't,” I add with a shrug.
“I've spent years picturing all of the ways that I would like to dissect you.”

DELILAH



I'm alone when I wake up.

I shouldn't care. I've spent most of my life waking up in beds alone ... this isn't any different.

My arm stretches out to the side of the bed where Marko should indent, but of course it's cold. I'm naked and more than a little horny. Damned ego of mine. Even when I've so clearly surrendered to my desire, I can't bring myself to beg him to get me off before leaving me like this.

I refuse to imagine what he's out doing right now.

I glance at the hotel room door. Such an innocuous looking thing. Seems like I could just walk on out of here if I wanted—but I know better. There are guards on the other side for sure. Certainly, big enough guards that my paltry fighting capabilities will not be nearly enough to take them down. No balcony, so that's out too. But at least there's sunlight.

Upgrades.

I drag myself out of bed and grab the first things in the closest suitcase I can find—Marko's. I pull on the black t-shirt that he usually wears underneath his button downs and a pair of his boxer briefs. It's the most covered up that I have been in days. I don't even bother looking into my suitcase because I know for a fact that the only thing in there is scandalously lacy underthings and a lot of dresses too tight for making escape plans in.

Those sorts of dresses are best used for *attracting* Marko's attention, and I'm going to have to try like hell to find a way to

avoid him if I'm going to get out of here.

I wonder what else he left lying around for me to get into.

This is another one of his tests. I can practically feel it.

He probably put something in here to lure me in ... or something that's going to snap shut on my fingers and keep me trapped and at his whole mercy until he comes back here and sets me free. If he sets me free. Suddenly I'm imagining being stuck here half over the luggage rack while Marko takes his time with his tongue from behind. I'm writhing and moaning but there's nowhere for me to go, no escape to be had. I'm stuck and forced to endure the perfect sort of torment.

Maybe I need a cold shower to collect myself.

I shake my head to push those stupid, unwanted thoughts from my mind.

I push clothes and a bottle of cologne out of my way. I absolutely do *not* open it or smell it. I poke around inside of his toiletry bag, looking for a razor or straight edge of some kind that I could use to my advantage ... if the circumstances called for it. Nothing. Of course, there's nothing. I push aside socks and then, there, at the bottom of his bag, is a black leather portfolio closed with a zipper. At first, I thought it was only the lining of the suitcase, but no.

I chuff and shake my head. "No way this is what I think it is." I say to myself as I pull it out. "Leaving such obvious clues ... and here I am talking to myself."

I toss it on the bed. I open it, of course. Marko doesn't strike me as the sort of being who left this here by accident, knowing that I was trapped in a room with nothing better to do. Clearly this is a gift. He *wants* me to read it. He wants me to open it up and devour the contents ... why else would it be here? Right?

So why do I feel so damned guilty in opening the damned thing.

I pace around the room for a moment, weighing my options.

He didn't even leave anything else in the room to help signal me as to what state or country we're in right now. I wasn't allowed to speak to the staff at the desk or anything ... nothing. I'm wholly and utterly lost, and the only thing that I must go off ... is the portfolio on the bed.

I run my fingers through my hair in frustration. I don't owe him anything. I'm his prisoner. A captive. A figurative little love slave to him at this point. He kidnapped me ... could be meeting with my father right now and making choices for my future that I have no part in ... that I certainly did not agree to.

That makes me angry enough to flip open the case.

I jerk back away from it like it's going to somehow come alive and attempt to bite me.

Obviously, nothing happens. It's just a case. Loose papers and glossy full-page photographs of me that were clearly taken by somebody with a surveillance lens slide over the unmade bedding. I expected that much. It looks like police reports and a detailed description of my comings and goings. I crawl up onto the bed by the papers and start to thumb through them. It's not just me that he's been keeping tabs on. He has the autopsy report from my mother in here as well as her arrest records. There's more on there than I knew about. Out of respect for her memory, I gloss over those.

Underneath is the least surprising information, my father's file. There's not much that the police or the FBI have managed to pin on him. He's slippery like that. The same way that he's also taught *me* to be slippery. Yet, morbid curiosity glues my eyes to the pages. My father and I have an understanding. No secrets between us outside of what he plans for my birthday every year. Do I think that means that my father's *entirely* honest with me? Absolutely not. I'm not stupid. However, I thought I knew more about the business than what these shipping reports and ledgers would imply. These aren't just gun deals or money laundering.

This is ... something else entirely ... some of these don't even make any sense. If it's implying what I think it is ... something in my blood runs cold. These must be fabricated. I

was supposed to find these documents, and Marko wants me to willingly be by his side as his wife. It would be in his best interest to sabotage my faith in my father. It would serve his purposes to alter these documents and imply that my father ... that he's ...

There's a crash at the hotel door, and I don't even have half a moment to try to scramble and put the contents of Marko's suitcase back to rights before the door is practically kicked in.

My body goes into high alert as I scramble back and off the bed, taking half of the pages and contents with me. I can't even fully process what I'm seeing. Alexsi is holding his ribs and limping while one of the other men supports him with Alexsi's arm around his shoulder. Marko stumbles into the room as Alexsi collapses on the side chair. One of their men pulls out a slightly battered cigarette for Alexsi to smoke while he roots around the room's minibar in search of something strong enough to take the edge off.

Marko falls back on the bed and waves off the men who instantly abandon their search for strong liquor and close the door.

It's only then that I fully register how much red is now in this room.

Red dripped on the floor and splattered across the wall where Alexsi had been brought in. Red seeped from Marko out over the covers of the bed and hopelessly stained the papers that I had been reading only moments before.

My eyes widen in horror as shock turns my blood to ice in my veins.

"Is that blood? That's blood ... what happened ... holy—sit down!" Never mind that he is sitting down. I think he is in shock. Is this what shock feels like? I've seen blood before; I've got a strong stomach. I certainly do not mind the stench of copper and iron, but this is something different entirely.

This feels like somehow, I'm hurt too, and I refuse to examine that new emotion too deeply.

I rush to his side and reach forward without thinking. I press my hand over his where it is cupping his ribs. I have no idea what happened, but I can guess who did this to him.

He's losing too much blood. I can tell by how pale his face is getting.

He could die.

"The iron, baby, the iron," Marko coughs around the word and points with a finger to the iron.

"What the fuck am I supposed to do with an iron?!" I say in a voice shriller than I recognize.

I'm normally so good under pressure.

I grab the iron from the table anyway. The unplugged cord whips around uselessly, and I can't think. I can't put the pieces together.

"Why are you laughing at me? Stop laughing and tell me what to do!" I scream at him.

Marko and Alexsi exchange a knowing look. I think that Alexsi might even be smiling. Is he mocking me right now?

Marko lifts the corner of his shirt and nods in the direction of what looks like a nasty stab wound. I can guess how he got it.

"Baby, I need you to turn on the iron and cauterize this wound so that I don't bleed out before you're done yelling at me."

"How can you be laughing at a time like this?" I chastise. I feel like they are going to need a hell of a lot more than a little cauterization to make that bleeding stop. I don't even know what sort of weapon inflicted something like that. "You probably deserved this!"

I'm talking as I'm plugging in the damned iron.

"You can't expect me to ... to ..." I look at the thing in my hand as it's starting to heat up and then over to the slow, disjointed way that Marko is pulling off his shirt.

Don't look at his muscles, Delilah ... now is not the time.

“Come on then,” Marko grunts as he hurls the wet shirt to the wall. I swear for a second it sticks before leaving behind a terrible trail in its wake.

“I can’t.” I shake my head despite the iron hissing that it’s ready. I glance at Alexsi, who looks like he’s about three puffs on that cigarette from passing out, but he only unhelpfully shakes his head that he’s not going to help. Bastard doesn’t even look at me when he does it.

“You can—and you will,” Marko says firmly.

I think I’m crying. Something hot and wet slides down my cheek. I grit my teeth—and do it.

MARKO



“*I* should let you die!”

She might be screaming at me, but she’s still helping. The irony of the situation isn’t lost on me. I grit my teeth until I swear my jaw is going to crack under the pressure of keeping myself silent. It wouldn’t help my image any to go shouting in pain over something that I asked her to do. Never mind that I might need her to do something like that again in the very near future. I’m still going to need a doctor, but I’ve bought myself a little bit more time ... which is exactly what I need.

“Yeah, you probably should have.”

She could have used this as her golden ticket to run as far and fast away from this place as she possibly could. She could have stuck her finger in the wound and made it worse so that she could interrogate me, kill me, or any number of things ... but she didn’t. She helped. She helped, *and* she’s still staying.

I have no way of telling how bad the internal damage is, but right now it doesn’t matter.

I point at the liquor sitting on top of the minibar and she grabs the vodka. I flick the top off with one hand and chug more than I likely should. It burns like rubbing alcohol all the way down. I do it again and wince before tossing the open bottle across the room to where Alexsi sits. He’s likely got at least a broken rib in there, but I’m still counting this as a victory in my book.

One step closer to getting my revenge.

No doubt Delilah is going to ask about *how* I ended up in this sorry state, and until I figure out how to spin the story, I'm sure as hell not going to tell her. I can't even begin to guess how poorly the conversation would go if I told her that she's only a few miles away from her dear old dad right now.

Delilah drops to her knees in front of me, and despite the circumstances, my dick stirs. Talk about bad timing. Just *seeing* her like this gets me going.

I force myself to focus on what she's doing. Perhaps I am in shock after all because it sure looks like she's tearing off sections of the sheets to use as bandages. She doesn't say a single word as she grabs the nearest bottle of liquor, she can get her hands on and wets the bandage before starting to wipe away some of the blood on my stomach and chest.

I hiss in discomfort. "That's cold," I say without venom.

She glares daggers up at me. "You've been stabbed ... and you're complaining that a rag is a little *cold*?"

I shrug one shoulder in response.

"Unbelievable," she mutters and goes back to her task. Her little fingers start poking and prodding at the space around the injury, and she shakes her head as she inspects the burned and newly blistering skin. At least that part I can't really feel because she burned all the nerve endings off. Not that I'm complaining there.

I grab her hand by the wrist and my brow furrows. "What are you doing?"

"Seeing how bad it is!" she protests and tries to pull her hand away.

"Baby, you did just fine. I'm fine ... see? Been through a lot worse. Survived all that, this is no problem."

I glance at Alexsi who shrugs in agreement with me as he uses the butt of one cigarette to light the next one. Everybody copes in their own little ways, and who am I to rob him of his vices in a moment like this? If smoke starts to come out of a punctured lung hole, then I might step in.

“But that’s not—” Delilah starts and cuts herself off again. In the tussle I pull her up to the bed until she’s straddling me. She’s careful to keep herself hovering just out of my reach, just far enough away from me to keep from forcing me to surrender to even more temptation.

“I’m fine. See?” My other hand lifts and brushes against the point of her chin. It’s taking more of a concentrated effort than I originally assumed to keep from wincing or flinching as she moves, but I’ll have my injuries checked later. I’m half tempted to call her out for caring about me so much. A part of me wonders what she will say ... and the other part is arguing that she will run out of this room faster than I can try to yank her back if I say anything of the sort.

The question of what happened is written clearly all over her face. She’s biting on her lip to keep from saying it out loud.

“Careful now, or I’m going to start thinking you missed me a little bit,” I tease. “Might even go so far as to think that you like me a little bit.”

It’s supposed to be a joke ... but once the words leave my lips, they don’t sound so funny anymore.

My blood is on her hands and my ring is on her finger. What a pretty fucking picture that is.

“I hate you,” she whispers as her forehead falls to mine. My hands run up the backs of her legs and over the curve of her ass until I can settle them on her hips.

“Did you steal my clothes? Nosy little wench,” I tease without the same enthusiasm that I might otherwise. I figured she might do as much, and judging by the papers that I’m sitting on, she found exactly the documents that I wanted her to find.

“Are you really, okay?” she asks softly.

“Yeah, baby, I’m good.”

She nods and lingers for a moment before lifting herself and smacking me open handed on the chest with both hands. “Good! Because I’m going to kill you myself!”

I chuckle. “For what reason today?”

She reaches under my hip and rips one of the papers clear in half trying to bring it out in front of me. “These!” She hurls it into the air, and it floats slowly downward. “All of them! You wanted me to find them ... for what? I’m supposed to just believe all of those little papers. They could be edited. You could have forged them all somehow. I can’t just ... I can’t just ...”

My brow arches. “If you didn’t believe them, then you wouldn’t be so angry right now,” I say simply.

She lets my words sit for a moment and really start to sink in. She shakes her head again. “No, he wouldn’t ... those ledgers ... the shipping manifests ... I’m not going to just take your word for it.”

“Your father’s about as crooked as they come. You think that I got stabbed here for nothing?”

“Why did you get stabbed then?” she practically screams at me. She’s off the bed and pacing the floor wildly. I can see Alexsi tracking her movements. He’s stopped smoking, and the cigarette dangling from his lip just keeps dropping ashes onto his lap as he waits to see how this conversation is going to end.

Doesn’t feel good. That’s for sure.

“Poor reflexes?” I tease, and Alexsi almost grins at me. That’s an accomplishment in and of itself.

“I’m serious! If you want me to take you seriously, if you want me to attempt to trust you, then you need to be honest with me! You can’t just come here, covered in blood and injured, and expect that I won’t have a single thing to say about it!” she shouts.

I reach for her again, but she pulls her hand out of my reach.

“Did you kill him?” she shouts. “Is my father—is he dead?”

The muscle in my jaw tenses and ticks. That's the question that I do not want to answer.

"No," I grit out finally. Though, it was not from lack of trying on my part.

I cannot tell if she's pained or relieved. I'm not sure which one I want to see, if I'm being perfectly honest with myself. Irritation starts to well within me. "Happy? Is this how you wanted things to go?"

"I never wanted *any* of this!" Delilah shouts as she gestures to the room at large. "I never wanted to be involved! I never wanted to see you again! I never wanted to get kidnapped or to ... to ... any of it!"

She doesn't seem to realize what she's said.

Curious, because it's certainly not something that I would have expected to have come flying out of her mouth without checking herself first.

"Again?" I repeat slowly, carefully. There was no way that she said something like that out of the blue. She might have heard about me in passing, but I doubt it. I cannot think of any other time where we met, otherwise I wouldn't have had to go through half as much trouble in locating her.

Delilah pales and her eyes go wide. "What?"

"Don't play dumb with me, baby." My voice drops and my gaze sharpens as I stare at her. "What do you mean see me again?"

"From—from this morning ... yesterday, I mean see you from yesterday. I hoped that you would leave and never come back."

She's backpedaling now since she made a mistake and she's been caught. She knows that no matter what she says I'm going to keep pressing her on it.

"No, that's not it ... but keep lying, see how that works for you." I rise off the bed and lock her in my gaze. Something akin to fear flickers across her features. She tries to duck and move aside from me but my hand juts out and snatches her by

the neck. I hold her throat carefully, applying no pressure, but I want the threat of what I *could* do to linger between us.

A beat passes and she doesn't answer, so my grip tightens. Her hands shoot up to wrap around my fingers to try to keep distance between my hand and her throat.

"Funny," I continue, "somebody in our line of work ... normally the first thing that you learn how to do well is lie. Isn't that right, Alexsi?"

I don't have to look at him to know that he's produced a gun from some hidden place on his body and now has it resting in his hand, carefully balanced on his thigh. His breathing is still labored but far slower now that he's in fight mode.

Tears well in her eyes, and she tries to blink them back as if that will somehow make all this better.

"Your fight is with me," she blurts. "All of it. The reason you were put in jail, the testimonies, everything that has happened ... it might have been my father's orders, but it was me. I am the one you want dead, not him!"

"Impossible." The word grits out through my teeth and my temper is on the verge of breaking.

"You don't remember ... because you weren't allowed in the court room. My father paid the police holding you to claim that you were too dangerous to be allowed out in public. He concocted all of it ... and I took the stand. I lied. I blended just enough truth into the story to make it believable. I was just a baby ... I didn't know better ... I ..."

The tears fall freely from her now. My grip tightens, and she's in danger of being lifted off her feet. I walk us backward until I can pin her up against the wall. Rage moves my fist, and it smashes into the plaster beside her head, but she can't flinch. Bits of powder and debris cling to her hair as I stare her down. It must be true. Why else would she lie? She hasn't gone out of her way to defend her father to me before now so it ... it must be true.

“If this is some pathetic attempt to save him now ...” I growl.

“It’s not! It’s the truth!” Her hands drop, and she scrunches her eyes shut, gasping for breath. “Kill me now and be done with it! Let it be over now! Kill me and have your revenge so that nobody else gets hurt! Please!”

Her voice breaks. Her face is turning red, and she’s sobbing with every tiny morsel of air that she can drag into her lungs. I want to do it. She’s willing to die right here and now so that her father lives.

Something in the back of my head sees her sacrifice for what it is ... even if I don’t want to.

She means me.

She doesn’t want *me* to be hurt any more.

That’s why she’s telling me now.

I lean in close enough that I could lick her tears from her face if I wanted.

“I can’t kill you, baby, not when you might be carrying my little bastard in there.” My words are poison, lethal as they pour out of me. I want her to hurt. I want her to rage just as much as I am as I drop her. Delilah drops to the floor, spluttering and coughing as she cradles her throat in her hand.

I squat down next to her.

“If what you say is true, then what makes you think that I would grant you an easy death? Hm? I will make you suffer in ways that you’ve never dreamed of. You will have my baby if I must strap you to a bed and visit you every night until I’ve ensured it. I told you there was an easy way to do this ... but you’ve so obviously chosen the hard way. You will never see the light of day again.”

I grab her wrist and hold up the hand she’s wearing my ring on in front of her face. I grab her by the chin and kiss her forehead roughly before dropping her back down to the ground.

“Till death do us part, baby, for better or for worse.”

DELILAH



*T*he bastard wasn't kidding.

No sooner than he left, Alexsi dragged his wheezing ass out of the chair with his gun trained expertly on me and hauled my ass to the bed. He handcuffed me to one side with just enough leeway to pace a little bit but certainly not enough to do anything else. I paced for a bit, and then I sat on the edge of the bed, plucking at the sheets as anxiety ate at me.

I can hear my guards shuffling outside of the hotel room door every few minutes, so I know that I'm not alone. I have no idea what Marko left to do, but I hope that he stopped by a doctor at the very least. I don't know if or when he's coming back.

He has to come back.

No matter how much he wants to punish me ... he wouldn't just leave me here.

He'll have to feed me at the very least, right? If what he said ... *oh god*. There's no way that I'm pregnant. There's just no way that I am. It's impossible, isn't it? I bend forward with my head between my knees to keep from hyperventilating. It's too early to tell, that's for sure. When was my last period? I don't even know. I never thought that I needed to track it before. It was sort of just something that happened.

Birth control.

Fuck.

I haven't been on birth control since I left college. I forgot to pack it, but I didn't think that I would need it ... and it's been *weeks* now since I've been with Marko locked up in that basement, likely fertile as hell.

Shit.

Shit.

Can I be? Is he going to leave me here, pissing on sticks every day until he finds out one way or the other? We aren't technically married, so it's not like he meant his last words ... right?

I glance down at the ring on my finger again. I should take it off and hurl it down the toilet on principle. I have no reason not to. I push it around my finger in a circle with my thumb as I take in all the small details. I try not to think. I don't want to be inside of my own body right now. I don't want to wonder if my father is dead ... or if Marko is dead. Will I be left here to rot if Marko dies? If he does ... how will my father find me? Will I even be able to look my father in the eyes ever again?

Part of me wants to go home and find my own proof ... to find my own paperwork as to what my father's business entails, but I know that I'm likely to break my own heart if I dig too much. Of course, he's not a *good* guy ... but he's, my father. I'm his princess. I always have been.

But what if ... I might want to be Marko's queen.

Night falls before I know what's happened. No more slivers of sunlight come through the heavy curtains, and I am not able to go and investigate. My anxiety drains me. I must have fallen asleep where I was leaning against the headboard, because the next thing I know, I'm being rudely awakened by the beeping of the hotel room door.

All the lights are off, and I can't see a thing beyond the red light on the doorknob.

A shadow moves in front of it, and I know it's him.

Marko prowls into the room slowly and doesn't say a word. I try to push myself up against the headboard where I'm handcuffed, but my hand is asleep, and my shoulder feels like

it's on fire from being held at a strange angle for the better part of the day. I don't know why every single part of me wants to scream at him to say something, to say anything at all just so that I have some semblance of an idea about what's about to happen to me. The silence is going to drive me mad.

My throat hurts too much to speak.

Part of me wants him to crawl into bed and hold me until I can figure out my true feelings regarding all of this. Maybe I'm going crazy. Probably, since I both want to fight and fuck him at the same time. What a stupid thing to want.

He's changed clothes. His cologne and clean scent cover the residual blood tang that he left earlier. My heart is pounding. I can feel the drumming in my temples as dread of whatever is about to happen threatens to spur on another panic attack. He sets something small and metallic sounding on the dresser. My eyes are adjusting to the light but not enough to see what it is. I can make out the shape of him as he lifts his hands to slowly start undoing his buttons.

No.

He can't be serious. The thrill of anticipation surges through my body without my permission. If only I didn't know exactly how his body felt pressed against mine. If only I didn't know what heights of pleasure his hands and tongue could bring me to—filling me, pulsating ... the weight of him between my thighs.

But I don't want it like this. I don't, but my body is at active war with me over it.

I clamp my thighs together and shake my head. "No," I whisper. I can't manage anything above that for the burning in my bruised throat.

Something in my voice makes him pause, but only for a second. He untucks his shirt and pulls it from his pants but leaves it loose on his shoulders. He moves silently to my bound wrist and undoes the metal. I could cry with relief. It's worth the pain caused by the blood instantly rushing back into the abused limb. I pull it into my chest and cradle it there with

my other arm. I press my lips together and hope that somehow, I'm going to get out of this without crying, because I want to cry. I want to shout and rage, but I know that will only make things worse on me.

He needs me alive, wants me alive ... but he's already made it very clear that he wants me to hurt.

He moves quicker than I can imagine and grabs me by the ankle and hauls me toward him. I try to scream, but the sound cuts off quickly because it hurts. His grip is bruising. I see a flash of a sneer on his face as I try desperately to grab the opposite side of the bed. I end up pulling the sheets off that half of the bed entirely as I fight to get away from him.

"No!" I cry out. The word feels like sandpaper as I kick my free leg at him, but he catches it and hauls me over to him. With no care to my pain whatsoever, he yanks me over and pins my thigh down with one of his knees and places a hand on my chest to keep me down. I turn my head away from him, expecting him to start stripping me so that he can fulfill his threat from earlier.

I just want his hands to touch me softly again.

He trusted me and in one move I betrayed that trust. We will never be in a place where I can explain myself to him. I'm a blended mess of emotions, and I try to hit at him—try to aim for his wound even, anything that will get me free, but he grabs my hands and pins them to the bed above my head.

"I have something that you need to see. Stop fucking fighting me and behave, or I will make you," Marko growls.

I hate that he sounds sexy even when he's threatening me.

Clearly, I'm losing my mind.

Curiosity gets the better of me even though there isn't anything even close to compassion or forgiveness in his voice. I stop fighting, and he lets me go. For a moment I'm frozen there on the bed in case this is some sort of test. Just in case I misheard him. Or ... well, I don't want to move too fast and get slapped accidentally. My father used to do that if I moved when I wasn't supposed to or if I surprised him.

I shouldn't compare them ... but right now he's just so angry that I can't help it.

Marko kicks off his shoes and plugs the thing he brought with him into the tv. The screen hurts my eyes for a moment when he turns it on. I wince and sit up slowly to see what he's brought to show me.

I don't register what it is at first.

I'm looking at the inside of a judge's office. The sort that is usually just off a courtroom. My father is standing beside the man in his judge's robes. Clearly, the man is uncomfortable. Likely because my father is idly toying with an impossibly large knife. How he got something like that into a courtroom is wholly beyond me. He always liked to let money speak for him.

My father walks slowly toward the judge, and Marko turns the sound up on the TV. It's clearly surveillance footage. I have no idea how he got it, and I don't care. I know that judge ... and I know why Marko is showing me this.

"It's perjury, Mr. Popova! I can't do it!" the judge cries. He knocks into his desk, but my father doesn't answer. The judge holds his hand up in front of him defensively. As if that would help against that knife. Absently, I wonder if that was the same sort of knife that Marko was stabbed with.

"The girl was clearly lying! She could not stop crying! She's compromised! There is no way that the jury will rule in her favor! There are already whispers about discarding her testimony entirely for mental health reasons!"

My father lunges and the judge screams and flinches back. My father's knife slices through the air directly beside the man's head and lands with a heavy *thunk* into the wood of the desk behind him.

"I-I'll fix it ... I will ... I'll fix it." The judge looked visibly pale even on the CCTV footage.

Father grabbed him by the front of his robes and pulled him in close. So close that I almost can't hear the words that he says.

“See that this ends my way, or else you will come home one night and find that I had my way with your wife and that pretty little daughter of yours.”

I’m going to be sick.

On the screen, my father drops the judge, who should be above reproach from all of this. He stumbles and shifts to try to recover himself from what just happened and the ultimatum that he was given.

I’m still reeling when Marko shuts the TV off. Darkness folds around me as I’m frozen on the bed. I can’t properly process what he showed me. He clearly went through a hell of a lot of trouble to find this footage today.

If I understand it right ... then I’m not the reason. My testimony made no difference at all. I wasn’t the one who got him locked away.

It feels like a weight is lifted off my chest, and I don’t know how to process it.

Marko squats down in front of me. I can see the outline of his features in the darkness. I can see the blank look on his face like he’s studying me. It feels like he’s waiting to see which side I’m going to fall on. His hand lifts and brushes my hair back behind my ear and comes to hold the side of my face.

“I don’t understand ...” I say softly. The emotions I’m overflowing with are threatening to clog my throat.

“You were involved, but do not think for half a fucking second that I can’t see through that manipulation shit your father is so fond of pulling. I had to know if it was you. I had to know if you were telling the truth ... and you were ... but it was only what you *thought* was the truth. You didn’t put the gun in my father’s mouth. You didn’t sign my death warrant or lock away the key.”

“But I’m complicit. I sat there knowing it could happen ... I never did anything to even try to fix it. I could have ... I could have tried ... I could have done—” I bluster. It’s not like it would have made a difference with my father going out of

his way like that. I don't know what could have possibly happened to make his grudge against the man that Marko calls his father that bad, but he was clearly going to stop at nothing to get what he wanted.

“It's like you're asking to be punished even though you were a victim of his narcissism too ...” Marko teases.

I try to swat at his shoulder, but I can't quite manage it. Nothing feels real anymore. I feel like the proverbial rug has been yanked out from under my feet, and I can't tell what direction is up. I'm in free fall. The only thing anchoring me to this world is Marko's hands on the tops of my thighs, squeezing softly as he speaks. His voice darkens and I focus on that. It's easier to focus on that and only that.

“If you *want* to be punished, baby, all you had to do was say so.”

I cling to the innuendo like it's a lifeline.

Yes. Anything would be better than this. Anything at all. Anything that will help quiet the noises in my head and make the troubles I've been toiling over all day long go away ... even for a minute ... that is all that I want.

Before I can overthink my way out of it—I kiss him. I place both hands on either side of his head and I kiss him with everything I have. Every bit of frustration and pain, every tiny morsel of passion and rage, so strongly that it knocks the pair of us over.

Marko grunts in pain from the impact. I forgot he is injured. My hands go to tend to the wound as I try to sit up.

“Oh! Oh, I'm sorry!” I bluster, and the moment my lips are no longer on his, the urge to cry returns.

Marko grabs my hair and pulls me right back down on top of him. His kiss is hard and demanding, punishing in a way that feels like a test. It feels like he wants me to take it—to see if I'm ready for everything that he has to give. I want it. I want all of it. My touch isn't kind. I pull at his clothes as he pulls at mine until suddenly his hands are *everywhere*. It's not enough. Right now, I don't think that anything would be enough.

I need skin—I need more.

Marko must be thinking the same thing, because his hands cup me underneath my ass and he lifts us both until he can place me on the bed. He peels me out of the borrowed underwear until I'm laying bared before him. No foreplay, no preamble, because this is about need and not simply desire. He steps out of his pants and places a hand on either of my inner thighs, and when he enters me it's hard and bordering on cruel. All his frustrations and rage over everything that we've been through seems to culminate in this union. It's all that I can do to hold onto his arms and enjoy every last thrust.

My hips find a rhythm with his, and I curl up until I can grab his shoulders and pull him down on top of me. I wrap my arms around his neck and lose myself. I let go of all restraint. I don't try to be quiet; I don't stifle myself and neither does Marko—it's the most liberating feeling that I've had in longer than I can remember.

We topple over the edge together. The force of my orgasm makes it feel like my own personal fireworks display in the darkened room. The intensity of it rips through me until my legs spasm and we both collapse onto the bed, boneless.

“Marry me,” Marko pants.

It's not the same as before. It's heavier. It's *more*.

“Forgive me?” I question softly.

“I will if you will.” Marko grins. I can feel it against the side of my face.

I can't help but return the gesture. “Then yes.”

MARKO



Under no circumstances should I be waking up alone.

Delilah is not where I left her, well fucked and exhausted while being half sprawled out on top of me. Last night feels almost like a fever dream. It doesn't feel wholly real. I remember her agreeing to marry me. Not because of the circumstances that surround us, but because she wants to. She wants me. That much I am certain of.

The room is dark. Movement makes my head spin—not sure why I am so dizzy.

Gingerly, I press against the wound she sealed up, and it's still holding, so I know that isn't the reason. I wouldn't have been surprised if the thing had opened back up during the night, given what I was doing before I fell asleep. I don't hear the water running, and the bathroom door is ajar, so she's not in there either.

Irritation and concern spikes. I push myself out of bed and pull on my clothes quickly, fumbling in the dimness of the room before I can rip the curtains open. The window is still shut—no balcony in this room. So, where the fuck is she? Her bag and all my things are still here. The thumb drive is even still plugged into the side of the TV. It's like she vanished out of thin air.

I step into my shoes and wrench open the door. My guards lay there on the ground. I stoop over to check if there is still a pulse—there is. No blood: they are just unconscious. I have no idea how she managed to pull that off, and right now it doesn't

matter. She can't have gotten too far. She has no idea what city we are in nor where to go. What the hell was she thinking?

I run through the lobby into the attached parking garage. Alexsi is there, slumped over in the driver's seat of the car. How in the hell did she manage to knock him out, of all people? I was vulnerable, asleep. I have no idea how she would have gotten anything that would make me feel like this ... let alone take out all my men and my right-hand man by herself. It seems impossible.

But what other options are there? No other explanation even sort of makes sense.

Whatever the hell she's up to—I'm going to get to the bottom of it right now.

I pull out my phone and bring up my tracker. It takes a moment for me to get a good signal from inside the parking garage, but in only a couple of moments the little red dot that shows her location shows up. Good. She's still wearing the ring that I gave her, none the wiser to the chip inside of it so that I can always find her. So long as she's wearing my ring there's nowhere on the planet that she can go where I won't find her.

I'm tempted to throw Alexsi out of the car and leave him here for allowing himself to be caught off guard, but so was I.

She's got a hell of a lot that she needs to answer for at this rate.

"Get up, now." I reach in through the open window and pull the door open. Alexsi nearly slides over sideways onto me, but I slap at his face enough to start him stirring.

"Move over," I command. It takes a little bit of effort, but I get him to move over into the passenger seat.

"Sir? What—what happened?" he asks blearily. I can tell that it's going to take him a few minutes to get his bearings, but we don't have that sort of time. I connect my phone to the car's navigation system instead of answering until the little tracker moving along the map is ready. I put the car into motion as Alexsi shakily buckles his seatbelt.

Even dazed like he is, I still wouldn't have anyone else as my backup.

If this is some sort of betrayal after what happened between us last night ... I don't know how I'm going to handle it if I'm being perfectly honest with myself.

Impossibly, she seems to be heading to the location that her father retreated to the day before last. The large warehouses are usually a bad idea to attack blindly because they could have absolutely anything inside of them. I have no knowledge of how many men her father has hiding away in there, and I haven't yet found a way to hack into their security system despite Alexsi's best efforts.

There's no way that he could have gotten to her.

If he had somehow kidnapped her from the room, me and my men would all be dead. There was simply no way around it. We would all have had our throats slit in our sleep. He's the sort of coward to do the job the easy way just to ensure that he wins.

Well, he's not going to win today.

There must be some sort of explanation. If not ... then my plan's deadline is just going to have to get pushed way the hell up. One way or another, this all ends today. It has to.

I glance at the navigation system and note that Delilah's little red dot has stopped exactly where I thought that it would. I step on the gas. I'm not going to get there in time to stop her nor reason with her. If it's her father somehow—I must get to her before he does something truly reckless and stupid.

Good thing this car has a small arsenal in it.

I'm coming for you Delilah. For better or for worse.

DELILAH



Out of all the places, he had to bring me *here*.

I feel like this is a poetic sort of meeting. The beginning and the end, all the same. I hate it. I hate everything about this. This is the same place that I used to come to when I was younger. The warehouses never had anything in them before. At least, nothing that I was allowed to know about. This was the goal that my father always had me working toward. All my training was supposed to culminate in him handing over these sets of keys to me so that I could ... I don't know ... take over.

Seeing it now, standing disillusioned in front of these doors ... I can see it for what it was.

It was a carrot that he dangled in front of me. Something to keep me quiet and obedient. It was supposed to keep me moving forward no matter what. Just another cog in his machine. He was never going to let a woman run the family business. He was never going to hand it down to me because he never even told me *half* of what he was up to in here.

I can feel my heart breaking.

He set me up for everything.

If anything went wrong, the only thing that he would hand me is the blame. He would name me his heir and then fuck off into retirement so that I would be left to clean up his messes. It all seems so glaringly obvious now that I feel ashamed of myself for ever thinking that it was anything else. College was just to get me out of the house. It was a stall tactic. Something

to indulge me with so I wasn't in his hair while he was running the shadier parts of his empire ... growing them into a behemoth of a monster, or something else terrible.

I need to see him. I need to talk to him.

I have no idea what I'm going to say, but I can't do *nothing*. One way or another, it needs to be sorted out. One way or another, I must hear the truth of things from his lips and hope that he doesn't put a bullet between my eyes on general principle. I can imagine all the things that he's thinking about me allowing myself to be kidnapped.

I guess it was for the best, all things considered.

I take a deep breath and push open the side door. I trail my fingers over the familiar walls. Only, for the first time, there are hundreds of wooden shipping crates inside. The markings on the sides are unlike anything that I have ever seen before. Certainly not anything that I know my father to use. A sour, sinking feeling moves into my chest and turns my stomach. There's no way to open one without alerting the men. It's pure dumb luck that they haven't already started to close in on me.

That, or my father is watching me already. He might have seen me coming a mile away.

I'm not ready to have this conversation, but I have to.

I stand at the foot of the metal staircase leading up into the "manager's office" were this a normal factory. It's just a room that leads to another door, which will likely lead to where Father is. He likes to have his true offices hidden out of sight.

Somewhere in the distance I can hear the sound of men on their rounds, talking softly to one another.

I hesitate for another moment before the P.A. system comes on.

"In or out, daughter. Do not dawdle."

The sound of my father's voice startles me and echoes through the metal building. Everything else seems to go silent. Whatever is going to happen—there's no point in trying to

avoid it now. I take the stairs slowly as I try to mentally prepare myself for what's about to happen.

Yet, it's all for nothing because when I'm standing in front of my father my mind goes blank.

The disapproval is written all over his face.

"What are you wearing?" he demands. I glance down at the dress I pulled on, far too short and far too tight, but it was the most modest of all the things that Marko had allowed me to pack for this trip. It's not something my father ever would have allowed. He would have locked me in my room. It's strange how standing before him now, seeing him in another light, is showing me all the ways that he's mistreated me. All the abuse that I've been willfully blind to over the course of my life now seems so glaringly obvious.

When I don't answer him, he tries another tactic, cutting right to the chase.

"How did you get away?" What he's really wanting to know is if I've been followed and if Marko knows where I am. He wants to know if he needs to put men on the door to make sure that we're not interrupted. I'm tempted to ignore it.

He's not the only one who gets to ask questions here.

"What are you running through this warehouse, Father?" I know that he won't answer me, but I need to at least try. "Girls? Drugs? Something worse? Tell me those aren't true, and you don't do those things ... tell me that you aren't the man that he thinks that you are ... please ..."

"If anybody deserves to have answers here, Daughter, it's me. I could ask you the same thing. Are you the whore that he claims you to be? Tell me that you aren't stupid enough to give yourself to that ... that ... mongrel!"

I wince at the accusation. "He's not what you think he is."

"Is that why he invaded my safe house, making threats and trying to kill me?"

"You would have done the same thing! How many times have you tried to kill him over the years? Hm? Did he even do

anything wrong, or did he just get in your way?”

“I wasn’t about to have those dogs running around, nipping at my heels, because they didn’t like what I did to their bastard daddy.” My father waves his hand dismissively as if my concerns mean nothing to him. As if their lives mean nothing to him.

“I thought we were supposed to have principles! A code that you’ve beaten into my head since infancy! How is thi—”

He clicks his tongue against the roof of his mouth disapprovingly, and suddenly I’m five again, hearing him talking down to me for doing or saying something he doesn’t like.

“Are you raising your voice to me?”

My mouth snaps shut. I’ve been conditioned to be submissive to him my whole life ... and I hate how easy it is to slip into that role he’s forced me into. My hands ball into fists at my sides.

“Don’t do that. Don’t just intimidate me so I do what you want!”

“Careful now, Princess, you are starting to sound guilty. Have you done something that you ought to be guilty about?”

I bite the inside of my cheek out of habit. Something I’ve always done when I’m trying to keep something from him. It goes against everything that I’ve been raised to be.

“If you are ... if you are hiding what I think you are ... then you’re a dirty whore. I won’t suffer a dirty whore to live.” He turns on me, walking closer with each word and a look of terrifying fury on his face. “If it’s true ... then I will have never had a daughter. Do you understand me? I will unmake you. I will make it so you’ve never existed.”

I know he’s serious. I know that if I admit to what I’ve done—willingly—he will kill me right here and now with his bare hands.

“If, however, it’s not true ... then you only need to say the word. Speak the lie out loud and all will be forgiven ... as

soon as you kill the bastard who dared to say such blasphemous things about you in the first place. You must do this in order to prove yourself.”

I don't have a chance to answer, not that I have any idea what to say to something like that. We're interrupted by the sound of an explosion and the sprinkler system going off.

MARKO



*I*t's just a little explosion.

Certainly nothing near as grandiose as I would have liked to throw. I would have much preferred to lose my temper and run the car straight into the side of the building, guns blazing, until I found the little woman who is about to be my wife. I hope that I'm not too late.

GUNSHOTS RAIN DOWN through the side of the building in the direction of the explosion, but Alexsi and I aren't there anymore. That was part of the plan. We're around the side of the building. Thankfully, whatever the hell Delilah did to him has finally worn off enough that he's back on his game. He squats down by the side of the building to give me the boost that I need to get in through an open shop window. I pull him up and then we're inside.

It looks like the distraction served its purpose, because we don't run into anybody in the back half of the warehouse. Alexsi made calls the whole rest of the drive here; we've got back up on the way, and our contacts are pulling the ripcord on the prison plan. It's hasty and bordering on too sloppy for my personal tastes. There are far too many things that might still go wrong, and I don't have a way to account for them.

Delilah was not supposed to go rogue.

It's beyond stupid that she's gone off on her own, and I have no idea what to expect when I find her.

At least, if nothing else ... if everything goes wrong, my brothers will be out in the land of the free once again. That was objective number one. Should I fail in this mission somehow ... if I fuck it up or end up losing my life, then they will be able to finish what I've started.

That much I'm positive of.

The thought brings me comfort. It makes my steps more even as I move silently over the metal grated floor.

I'm waiting for sounds, screams, shouted conversation ... anything at all that will tell me that I'm going in the right direction. Of course, I must be headed in the right direction. It feels almost bittersweet that I should be standing here. After all, my years of planning, it's finally at an end. I wanted to have my brothers here with me when it happened. We all should have been given equal opportunity to end this bastard ... to have our revenge, but I will have to do my best to dole out all the justice that I can.

The sound of my gun cocking echoes through the eerily still space as Alexsi and I round the corner. I lead with the barrel of my gun as the voices start to grow louder. Delilah's, I recognize instantly. She's shouting at someone. I have to assume that it's her father from the way that her voice trips and stumbles over her words.

Dominetto's words aren't as clear, but I can feel the intention behind them, the way that he's barbed them to do as much damage as possible.

I signal for Alexsi to go around the room to the other side. I don't hear any signs of fighting, so I assume that means that he made it without issue. I push open the door slightly with my gun, thankful that it doesn't creak as I take a survey of the room. It appears to be an office of some sort. A wall of fogged windows lines the opposite side, and I can see shapes beyond it. Dominetto and Delilah are behind it. I can see her gesturing wildly at him as she shouts. There's no point in attempting to reason with him—I could have told her that.

"You are plotting against me?" Dominetto shouted.

“You think that I arranged for an *explosion*? You think so little of me that you think I would be here as what ... some sort of distraction?”

She’s crying. I don’t like it when she cries.

“I should have known better. I should have killed you the moment that I saw you. You’re working with that pig!” The shadow arm of Dominetto raises and I can see the silhouette of the gun as he points it at Delilah. She practically falls over backward; she tries to get away from him so quickly.

There’s no more time to waste. I storm into the room. I only allow myself a split second of assessment before I make my move and fire. The bullet hits Dominetto in the hand, as it was intended to. The gun in his hand fires, and Delilah screams before she drops to the ground. Her hands clamp down over her ears and she shakes all over. I want to tend to her, but there’s no time.

All that matters is that the bullet didn’t hit her.

I lift my leg and kick Dominetto as far as I can. He’s a well-built man, but he doesn’t have the height or the range that I do. Off balance, he stumbles back and catches himself with his good hand on the closest table. He growls like a feral, enraged animal and charges at me. Dominetto isn’t the sort of man to get his hands dirty if there’s a possibility of losing. We both know that. He would have no problem attacking me if I were tied to a chair and he had a knife in his hand. That’s the sort of thing that he’s always gotten off to—but this is different. The way that he fights is disjointed and uncoordinated because it’s fueled by rage. I’ve succeeded in pushing him over the edge. He knocks the gun out of my hand.

He swings and catches me in the side of the face. His injured hand limply produces a knife from somewhere on his person and I catch him by the wrist. The fight doesn’t last long. The sounds of knuckles against bloodied skin seem to grow louder with every movement, but with all the adrenaline coursing through me I can’t feel a damned thing. It’s a blur of fists and grunts and blood until I finally get the old bastard on his back. My knee presses into his chest as I stare down at

him. Sweat and blood drip from my jaw onto the floor where I lean over him.

“This is it, old man. This is the last chance that you’re ever going to get to come clean.”

The tang of blood on my tongue is overwhelming. I run my tongue over my teeth and spit the mess to the side of Dominetto’s face. He ought to be grateful that I didn’t spit it on him.

The man grins and grits his teeth. “Just get it over with, pig.”

“Tell me why you did it! Tell me why you turned your back on the man you called partner, why you destroyed his legacy ... why you will die a coward!”

Dominetto laughs. It’s a cruel and hollow sound. His head lifts as his eyes lock onto mine.

“You are just so sure that it was me, aren’t you? You haven’t even figured out that you’ve been looking in the wrong places for years ... have you?”

“Typical. You’re in the last moments of your life and you’re still trying to place the blame anywhere but yourself, aren’t you?”

“You’re so happy to place all the blame on me, pig. Go ahead. If that will right the wrongs in your book—so be it. But don’t be surprised when it won’t stop this. Whatever plans that you’ve made, thinking that you’re moving in secret ... you’re wrong. This is so much bigger than you and your idiot brothers.”

Something about his tone gives me pause, just for a moment. I don’t want to believe what he’s saying is true ... I don’t want it to be true. I’ve spent years researching this. I can’t have missed anything. It’s not possible.

“You’re bluffing. Scare tactics are beneath us.”

What if he’s not bluffing? What if there is more to all of this than I could have possibly known? It feels so impossible, but what if it’s not? Either way, Dominetto must die for what

he did. I watched him take the life from my father. He hasn't lived a sinless day since then. The things that he's done to my wife and siblings alone are enough to kill him for his crimes.

I can't walk away from this.

He's here, under my thumb—I'm just a little bit of pressure from getting my vengeance ... but the seeds of doubt have been planted.

I lean down closer to him, and he wheezes under the pressure that I'm putting on his chest.

The words are there, on my tongue—all the questions that have fueled my hate are about to die unanswered.

The sound of a gun cocking seems impossibly loud.

It cuts through my inner monologue and turns it into something else. I can see Delilah standing out of the corner of my eye, but I'm frozen in place.

“What are you—” I start, but she interrupts me.

“Get off of him.”

“What?” I ask incredulously. She cannot possibly be serious.

She holds the gun out in front of her with the practiced ease of a trained marksman.

“I said get off of him.”

DELILAH



Marko is frozen. He's glaring at me. I guess he has a pretty good reason to be glaring at me. I can see the wheels spinning in his head as he accuses me of every possible treachery. I haven't fully chosen which way I'm going to land. There have been mistakes on both sides, but there is one thing I know for sure—if anybody is going to kill that bastard, it's going to be me.

“That's my little princess ... good ... kill him just like I told you. Took you fucking long enough,” Father says from where he lies on the ground. His breathing is labored. It sounds like a punctured lung or two, but I can't focus on that right now. I cannot allow my feelings to get in the way here. Not this time.

Marko stands slowly, and the power that I hold in this room right now settles over me fully. Neither one of them risks moving for fear of setting me off. My father doesn't even dare to lift himself up off the ground when my gun slowly shifts from being aimed at Marko to being aimed at him. My gaze narrows.

“What the fuck are you doing, you stupid bitch?” Father warns. Confusion is written over every piece of his face. Clearly this is the last thing he ever thought could happen. My teeth clench together. I don't want to kill him ... but I don't want Marko to do it either.

“So, it's not just me that you've lied to your whole life. It's everybody, isn't it?”

Father rolls his eyes at me, and his head falls heavily down to the floor.

“This is why Mother killed herself, isn’t it? She wanted to get rid of you. She couldn’t handle the constant mind games anymore, could she? After everything that you’ve put her through ... she snapped. The overdose was on purpose.”

Father smirks. “I watched her do it. I could see the pain in her face when I did nothing to stop her. I stood there, watching as she gasped like a fish. I don’t regret letting her die. I would do it again. It was one less weak coward that I was forced to be tethered to.”

My chin dimples and my hand shakes.

He rolls his head over to look at me. There’s nothing behind his eyes now. No more pretending to love me, no more pretending that I’m going to be his heir—just blank coldness that chills me to my core.

“I thought that you were getting better. For the longest time you were so insipid that I could barely look at you ... then you started to show potential, true potential. You started proving yourself to me, and I thought at the very least I could bide my time with you until you willingly surrendered yourself to a prudent match. I would be rid of you and my power would increase, win-win.”

“Stop it ... why are you saying these things?” I don’t want to cry, but I can feel the burning tears of shame and hurt welling inside of me. My eyes will blur, and I can’t have that. I try to blink away the tears, but they keep building.

“You wanted the truth, so here’s the truth. I never wanted a daughter—I wanted a son. A daughter is useless to me. You only were allowed to live because you’re pretty enough to be tempting to my business partners. I was going to tell you that I arranged for your engagement the week following your return to campus, but then all of this happened.” His hand flops uselessly on the ground.

He’s losing a lot of blood. The puddle around him is growing by the minute. He can’t have much longer. He’s going

to pass out soon from blood loss alone.

“Not that it matters now,” he continues. “Now the deal will fall through. Even if you don’t kill me here and now, he would.”

“Who would?” Marko asks tensely.

Dominetto’s gaze rolls in that direction, but clearly, he has no intention of answering Marko.

“Go ahead, Princess, pull the trigger and put me out of my misery. Better you do it than him—it will be faster. Just know this. He will come for you, for all of you, for crossing him. He’s had his sights set on you, Princess, for a very long time. He’s not going to be pleased ... and he’s just about the only person in the world that I have ever been intimidated by.”

I want to do it. I want to do it for my mother, for my own sake even, because of all the hurt and pain that he’s forced me through ... all the abuse and lies ... the horrible things he had me do while attempting to prove myself to him. Now that the moment is here, it’s so much harder to act than I thought that it would be.

“You asked me why I did it? Why he had to die? It wasn’t personal ... I was just following orders.”

Marko’s nose scrunches into a sneer. He wants to beat my father’s face in with his bare hands. I can see it written on every bit of his face.

The notion that my father could be taking orders from somebody is impossible. I would know. But, then again, there’s already so much that I don’t know. He’s nowhere near the person that I thought that he was all this time. He’s not the man that raised me ... he’s not. I don’t even know who this man is. He wears my father’s face, but he’s not him. Makes me wonder about myself in some ways. Am I the person that I think that I am?

I sniff back tears and blink to clear my eyes. I lift the gun once more.

“Give it to me,” Marko says softly. He doesn’t move toward me, like he’s afraid that I’m going to do something

crazy or turn the gun on him instead. Maybe I will. Maybe I'm just tired. "You don't have to do this ... you certainly don't have to do this alone."

Marko holds his hand out, extending the offer to make the choice for me. He's offering to shoulder the blame and make it all better, at least his version of better. I hate that my mind is already offering up all the tasks that I'm going to have to complete as a result of today ... all the research that I'm going to need to do and how quickly I'm going to have to act in order to get my hands on it.

This was supposed to be the end. It was supposed to be the end of the line. With this horrible act, I'm supposed to be set free so that Marko and I can figure out what comes next for us. But like always, I'm just left here with more and more questions.

I could let him take the gun, but I don't.

I hold it out and wait for my father to close his eyes.

"Any last words?" I say dryly. It's taking everything in me to keep my composure.

He sighs and nods his head. "Run, Princess ... run as far and fast as you can."

I aim, line up my shot, close my eyes—and pull the trigger.

DELILAH



Three months later

This is the first time that I've ever seen Marko nervous. It's another hour yet before we arrive at the prison, and he's hardly said a word to me. After my father died, the only thing we really did out in public was make the marriage official.

In a way, this is the longest that we have spent together outside of the bedroom in months. I had to go home and collect my things from my father's property. I finished out the semester of school, and then my research started. Most of the Popova empire is being dissolved, piece by piece. It's not the ending that I had hoped for ... but it's the best I can have, given the circumstances.

All the research that I'm uncovering only leads to more questions. I hate knowing that I'm no closer to finding answers today than I was three months ago. Marko has been busy absorbing the properties into his new family and building the empire needed to lead us up to this day.

I place my hand on top of my husband's where he's holding onto my thigh. I hesitate before speaking. I don't want to upset him, but he's thinking so loudly that I can practically pluck the thoughts out of thin air.

"Are you still thinking about it?" I ask finally.

He glances at me but doesn't turn away from the window.
"Hm?"

"I said, are you still thinking about it?"

Marko pulls his hand away from his face and scrubs down the scruff there. He shakes his head, then pauses and sighs. “I am trying not to dwell on it. I’ve planned for this day for a very long time ... and now I feel like it’s being tainted somehow.”

“Because of the letter?”

Marko nods.

It was an ominous thing to get this morning. We had still been in bed when Alessi brought the letter to us. It was handwritten, but it wasn’t in a script that either one of us had recognized right away. A masculine scrawl, to be certain, but beyond that I keep drawing up a blank.

Though, the warning on it was clear.

Have fun with the boys today—I’ll see you soon.

Simple. There was no form of address or any other markings, but in only a few short words it validated everything that my father had said as he was dying. We are being watched. We don’t know by who or what the powers that be might want with us ... but somebody has their eye on us. Furthermore, somebody knows that the boys Marko calls his brothers are slotted to be released today.

I have to assume that the letter is a threat. I *also* assume that whoever sent it is the man who thought I would be marrying him. No doubt just another one of my father’s entitled bastard cohorts who feels entitled to me and my body.

“I won’t let anybody touch you ever again. You know that don’t you?” Marko says simply. He reaches over and flattens his hand over my abdomen. We only just confirmed the pregnancy a week and a half ago, and I only have the very smallest of bumps forming on my otherwise flat stomach, but having it acknowledged like this fills me with butterflies. I place my hand over the top of his and nod.

“Of course, I know that.”

“We will find out who wrote this letter ... and I will break every one of their fingers for making you feel threatened. Do you understand?”

Marko threatening to maim another person shouldn't make me feel as flattered as it does. I can't help it. I know it's not an idle threat either.

"Perhaps I'm just feeling a little nervous all around then," I confess softly. "First the letter ... now this ... what if they don't like me?"

Marko smirks. "Oh, they will be plenty pissed at you at first, given who your father is ... but once they are all brought up to speed you don't have anything to worry about. They are going to love you just like I do."

"*Just* like you do?" I tease, knowing that it's going to get an intense reaction from him.

The muscle in his jaw feathers and his gaze darkens. "Absolutely not."

I can't help but to laugh. "Are you sure? You think that you have sufficiently laid claim to me?" I shift in the seat so that I can straddle him. I let my elbows rest on either of his shoulders and my hands rest behind the headrest.

Marko's hands slide up my thighs and curve around my ass, squeezing firmly as he pulls me further into his lap.

"Are you insinuating that you need a reminder of who you belong to?"

I grin and lick my lips wickedly. "I just think that we both could use a little something to help take the edge off a little bit, don't you?"

I roll my hips down into his deliberately. Marko's eyes shut and he shakes his head. His voice darkens deliciously. "I do not have nearly enough time to take the edge off properly *and* show you who you belong to."

I lean forward, my nose just barely brushing against the tip of his before turning his head to the side. My teeth close around his earlobe as I speak. "Try." I know damn well what I'm in for. I need it more than he knows. I've been neglecting those needs during the time that we've been apart, and I need to feel him inside of me. I need all of him.

He tries to kiss me, but I keep just a breath of space between our lips. My hands go for his shirt, undoing the buttons with confidence until I can flatten my palms out over his broad, tattooed chest. I moan softly, feeling him tense and shift under my touch. I brush my lips just barely over his own, waiting for him to be set over that edge. I move for his pants next, undoing them and pushing as best as I can to work them just enough down his hips so that I can reach my prize ... but I won't yet.

Marko undoes the zipper of my dress, leaving it open in the back as his hands run over my spine, caressing every inch of me before he pulls my arms free. The fabric drops and pools around my waist before his lips find my breasts. I hold tightly to his hair as my head falls back, savoring each sensation. He has this magical, fantastic ability to set my whole body on fire every time that he touches me. I can't breathe; I can't think. Best of all, I can't worry about anything outside of his hands on me.

It's a damned good thing that I chose not to wear anything under this dress, for exactly this reason. His hands drop off my ass, smacking it playfully before he tugs the fabric up and over my thighs, and everything bunches around my middle. He kisses as low as he can reach, following each caress with tongue and teeth until I'm gasping for air. Only then does he touch me where I want it most. His fingers trail wetly down my center, spreading me in my own slick as he circles my clit in a torturously slow pattern.

I try to kiss him. I want to use my lips to silently ask for what I really want, but he backs away, teasing me further. I moan in frustration and try again. My teeth capture his bottom lip and I'm rewarded with a guttural groan of his own. Suddenly we're moving. He flips us both so that I'm on my back over the seat. He spreads my legs further, pulling deliciously as he slots himself between my thighs and poises himself at my entrance. I pull greedily at him, wanting more—wanting everything that he has ... and my greed is rewarded.

He seats himself to the hilt and I press my hand against the door so that I don't move with the intensity of his thrusts. His

worship of my clit is amazing, perfect pressure in time with his long, deep strokes. My free hand drops to my breast, pinching and rolling my nipple there as he quickly works me toward my climax.

“Such a perfect fucking thing you are,” Marko says darkly. My cheeks flush red as I feel him taking in the sight of me. “Is that how you like it? Just like that?”

I nod, “Yes, please—please, I want more.”

“More?” he repeats, and I nod.

“Please.”

“Say it again. It sounded good.”

“Please, sir, I need more ... please!” My voice borders on frustration as I surrender to the heat crashing around inside of me, the pleasure welling without end as I will him to let me cum.

“Ask me nicely.”

I’m squirming and writhing under his attention, pinioned between him and the seat as he keeps it exactly where I need it.

“Please can I cum? Please?”

“Cum for me baby.”

I do. I clench and convulse, squeezing him for all that I can as he fucks me. My orgasm topples me over an edge that I’ve never imagined. It feels like each time he manages to take me higher and higher.

“Oh, Marko, oh god!” I breathe but he doesn’t stop. I brace my hand against his chest and push, needing a respite from the overload of sensation, but he only laughs.

“Oh, I’m nowhere near done with you yet, baby. You got a long ride ahead of you.”

I can’t wait.

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