



REVENGE

OF THE

Savior

AVA PRESSLEY

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MAFIA VOWS OF DECEPTION

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ADRIAN

A light drizzle fell from the sky over the cemetery. Jimmy's casket sat splattered with rain, floral arrangements being watered by the heavens. I stood next to my brothers—not blood, but family all the same. Dante to my left, Leo to my right, we mourned the death of Jimmy “The Shark” Franco, though not quite like Elise.

It was a difficult day for the strongest of us but watching Jimmy's daughter drape herself over the casket in the cold October rains wrenched my heart. I'd served this family for years now, though not Jimmy directly. I worked for Leo mostly, but I'd known of Elise. The love she had for her father, and he for her, was the stuff of storybooks.

There weren't many men who would attempt to get close to Ms. Franco. Jimmy would never allow it. She was untouchable as they come, and I had it bad. Everyone else was worried about finding Jimmy's murderer, shot down in cold blood on the side of the road after a gentlemen's meeting. I had one singular thing on my mind—Elise. If they came for Jimmy, they could come for her. She needed protection.

“Fuck, that's just heartbreaking.” Dante shook his head. I saw the slight motion out of the corner of my eye. “And she watched it happen too. Makes me want to slit that guy's throat, whoever did this.”

I grunted my agreement, keeping my jaw clenched. I agreed, watching Elise grieve her father was painful. The family would take care of her, so she had no need to be

concerned for her future, but losing a parent was hard. I should know; I buried my own mother when I was just 18, before life took me in a direction my father would be ashamed of.

“We’re going to catch him. No doubt in my mind.” Leo straightened his tie. He’d done that a dozen times since we arrived. The man had no formal bone in his body; the tie around his neck was out of reverence for the dead, not propriety.

“Do we have any leads yet?” I kept my eyes trained on Elise as I asked the question. One of her aunts was prying her from the casket. Her hair hung soggy and limp around her face, mascara streaking down her face. Her eyes met mine briefly and I conveyed every ounce of sympathy I could through my gaze, seeing only pain returned to me.

“Nothing. Jimmy was a killer; that’s why they called him The Shark. But no one has claimed the hit. He was a well-hated man. It’ll be hard to sniff him out, but we’ll find him.” Dante’s attention focused on a car arriving mid-ceremony. Leo and I joined him in his curiosity, turning to watch Isabella step out of the Navigator. A Bratva turncoat, she’d managed to snake her way into Dante’s life and had her talons sunk into him deeper than Jimmy was about to be buried.

She strolled across the wet grass carrying an umbrella to shield herself from the precipitation. Her black dress hugged her curves. Modest though sensuous, I had to admit, Dante had good taste. She wore black sunglasses despite the clouds overhead and a black, wide-brimmed hat and carried a tablet in her left hand. Leo whistled almost imperceptibly. He obviously thought she was hot too.

“Gentlemen,” she muttered as she passed, standing to Dante’s left. She stopped and handed him the tablet. I inclined my ear to listen to their conversation, which wasn’t overtly private. “Got an email from Nicky. You’ll want to watch the video he sent me, but you’re not going to like what I have to say.”

I didn’t see the expression on Dante’s face as he opened the tablet to view the video Isabella talked about, but I did see

the video. Clear as day, a black sedan rolled to a stop outside the restaurant. Gunfire could be seen coming from inside the car somewhere, and then it drove away as all hell broke loose. The next clip showed the car from a different angle, and two faces were clearly visible. I recognized one as none other than Mikael Nickles.

“Fuck...” I took the tablet, sliding the progress bar of the video backward to the start. Leo leaned over my shoulder as I watched it over again. My eyes memorized every single second of that video as we watched it at least four more times. Dante was in a heated discussion with Isabella, but I paid no attention to it. This video was all the evidence we needed to make those bastards pay.

At the tail end of Dante’s spat with his woman, I heard her ask him to not lay a finger on one of the men. That caught my attention, and she eyed me, then pulled him aside. I couldn’t believe she’d ask us to let one of these bastards off easy, but I knew Dante would put her in her place.

Only when the ceremony was over, and mourners started filing away, Dante pulled me and Leo to the side. Isabella left, heading over to comfort the mourners. Dante had serious eyes and a furrowed brow. As soon as he gave his full attention, I thrust the tablet into his hands.

“Did she just tell you not to hurt one of these assholes?” I chuckled, believing he was about to tell us how he put her in her place.

“She did.” Dante tucked the tablet under his arm after drying the screen of the rain droplets that had collected on it.

“She thinks she gets special treatment because she was Russian and we’re just going to let her family off easy since she’s here?” Leo grabbed his wrist and squared his shoulders.

“Well, we are going to respect her wishes.” Dante, too, squared his shoulders, staring Leo down as if he were already appointed the next underboss. He had a lot of nerve.

Leo puffed his chest out and I stepped back. As underboss in his own right, Leo would have more say. He ranked higher.

I kept my mouth shut, not getting into this pissing match. No one knew who would take Jimmy's place yet, and I didn't want to cross anyone prematurely.

"We aren't going easy on Jimmy's killer." Leo's tone was stern, his determination final.

"Well, we aren't going out guns blazing either. All she asks is that we make sure we know without a doubt who it was before we move. If it wasn't Dominic Genrich, then we don't kill him. Besides, it's good business. If we kill an innocent man, we'll just stir the hornets' nest. And with things as sketchy as they are right now anyway, we'd do well to just sit and wait for the proof before taking action."

Dante made sense, even if he did side with his Russian bitch. I didn't like it, but I'd respect that. And if I got a chance, I'd be the first one to pull the trigger when we know for sure. Elise deserved better than this.

ELISE

Rain pattered on the window. It had been raining over lower Manhattan for the past three days. It matched my mood. The three days of sunshine we had enjoyed after Daddy was murdered hadn't felt right. I hoped the sun never came back; it wouldn't feel the same without him here.

I hugged the floral throw pillow, curling myself around it and staring out the large picture window in the front room. The neighborhood was quiet, everyone tucked inside their homes to avoid the chilly death grip fall had on the city. I hid. Not from the cold or even the rain, but from the world. Life would never be the same again. This house felt like a tomb wherein I would suffocate and fade away, lost inside the maze of grief and heartache.

A car on the street slowed, pulling to a stop in front of the house. I watched as four people stepped out, all dressed in mourners' clothes. If I had a dollar for every person I'd ignored at the front door, I'd be able to buy a weapon for myself and hunt down the bastards who killed my father. Dad never let me have weapons; he said they weren't ladylike and he wanted me to remain innocent.

But these men could not be turned away. Leo Scarpelli, my father's best friend, followed a woman I didn't recognize. She carried a basket of fruit wrapped in cellophane. I could almost hear her heels clicking on the sidewalk. Dante and Adrian brought up the rear, walking shoulder to shoulder with somber expressions.

In days past, I'd have swooned at the sight. Before Dante met this new mystery woman, I had been smitten by him—the bad boy, handsome and rugged. And Adrian had been trying to catch my eye lately too, though right now the only thing my eyes were good for was crying. Any other day, I'd be scrambling for my makeup bag to cover the red blotchy skin and puffy nose. Today, I tucked my chin down farther into the pillow I hugged and wished they'd get back into Leo's car and leave.

They didn't.

And I didn't even bother getting up to answer the door. I knew they were there, standing on my sprawling front porch. Leo knew where the key was; he'd let them all in. So I waited, curling up into a smaller ball and turning my head on the pillow to watch the front door. When it swung open and Leo's face appeared, scanning the room, I saw the sympathy in his expression.

As much as I wanted to run to his arms and beg him to bring Daddy back, I knew it would never happen. There was no hope now except justice, and I secretly prayed they had come bringing me news of just that.

They filed in, one at a time, Adrian shutting the door behind them all. My eyes lingered on him. His expression was different than the others. In their eyes I saw pity; in his I saw pain, real pain, as if he felt what I felt. I couldn't tear my gaze away from him, even as Leo sat next to me and brushed my blonde hair out of my face.

“Elise, we have some news, okay?” Leo talked in calming tones. Normally he was a very bold man, strong and outspoken. I'd never seen the compassionate side of any of my father's business partners. I didn't even bother looking at him. My eyes stayed fixed on Adrian.

“We have a lead on who did this, and we're going to get to the bottom of it.” Dante stood with hands clasped in front of himself as the woman set the basket of fruit onto the table. She didn't speak, probably because I didn't know thing one about her. Now was not the time to make introductions.

“I’m going to put Adrian in charge of taking care of you for now. I knew your father well, and he would approve of this if you’re comfortable.” Leo paused, as if I were supposed to respond. I didn’t care. I just wanted them to leave so I could cry in peace. “And Dante and Isabella here are in charge of hunting down the man who did this.”

Isabella, well at least I knew her name now. I let my eyes float over to her for a moment, taking her in. She was pretty, dark blonde hair and full pouty lips. I could see her dark roots showing and wondered what she was hiding from. Or *who* she was hiding from.

“The boss has appointed me to take over your dad’s businesses, so you’ll see more of me until you’re ready to get back into the swing of things. You just need to take all the time in the world, until you feel better.”

Leo’s hand left my head as he rose. I hadn’t said a word. I didn’t intend to. What was there to say? Dad was dead. My life had come to a complete standstill. Even the heavens mourned with me. I’d never be ready to sing again. I didn’t think I even wanted to live right now.

“I can tell you’re not in the mood for company right now. So we will leave you be. Adrian will stay here. You need to eat something.” He turned his attention away from me and I listened as he gave orders. “Adrian, make sure she’s eating and drinking. We’ll keep you updated. If they came after him, they may try coming after her. You do anything you have to, to keep her safe. On my order...”

Leo brushed across my hair with his fingers. “We’ll find them, Elise.”

They left as quietly as they came. Only Adrian remained, stoic and silent as I turned my face into the pillow and cried softly. I wanted my dad back. I’d give anything to speak to him one last time, to tell him how much I loved him. My heart hurt, and no amount of vengeance would ease the pain, but knowing Leo was hunting Dad’s killer at least made the tears come again.

ADRIAN

Nine a.m. and I hadn't heard from Elise yet this morning, so I brewed a cup of coffee and grabbed the book from the coffee table. She'd been reading to pass the time, letting me stew inside my head as I sat in the silent house. I hadn't known Jimmy personally, just a business associate, but in the past four days of keeping an eye on Elise, I'd grown to know a lot more about him. When she slept, I scoured family scrapbooks and picture albums.

From what I'd seen of The Shark as a businessman, he was ruthless. He'd pull a gun and put you down faster than you could blink for even the smallest show of disrespect. But as a father, I could tell he was different. His love for his family ran deep, and every picture of him and Elise together depicted a new level of love I'd never thought him capable of—especially in the images where his wife lay dying of cancer.

I knocked on the door softly, pushing it open to find Elisa wide awake, curled in a ball, staring at the door. Her expression didn't change as I stepped in, moving toward her with the coffee and the book, but she did sit up. She looked rested for the first time since Jimmy's death. I'd given her a sleeping aid to help her fall asleep last night.

"Brought you some coffee." I set the coffee and the book on the nightstand and waited for her to adjust herself in bed. She wore a pink, silk nightgown, the tiny straps clinging to her shoulders as she wrestled with the blanket.

At any other moment, I'd have found her irresistible. I'd have examined the curves of her body, the way her nipples pushed through the thin fabric, the curve of her breast drawing my eyes downward. But this morning, I thought only of her heart and what she must be feeling.

"Thank you," Elise said, her voice timid and small. She picked up the mug and sipped. She didn't smile, but the way her face relaxed out of its mournful expression was the closest thing I'd seen to a smile in 11 days. As she set the mug down, she gestured at the foot of her bed, then pushed hair out of her face. Even the blue of her eyes was a mere dull gray today.

"How are you feeling today?" I sat gingerly, waiting for her to open up. She'd hardly spoken to me since I got here. If they guys saw me being like this, they'd take away my man card, but Elise needed a rock to cling to, and I was that rock. In fact, I hadn't realized how much I wanted to be that rock for her until this incident. When she sang in the club I was mesmerized, attracted to her, aroused even.

This was different.

"I'm okay. It's just hard to wrap my mind around him being gone. When I was sad about anything, he would let me rest my head on his shoulder and he'd put his arm around me and tell me things would be okay." She teared up. "Who's going to do that now? When he's not here, and I'm sad." She reached for a tissue from the box on her nightstand and let the tears fall.

As the tears dripped to her chest and streaked down between her breasts, I tightened my jaw. Anger rose up inside of me I had to cap off. She needed comfort, not a raging lunatic bent on avenging her father's death. That would come soon enough.

"I'm so sorry." I inched closer, resting my hand on her shin. "Listen, soon enough you'll get back to singing and you'll start to feel normal again."

Her eyes searched my face as her brow furrowed. "I'm not singing anymore. I sang for him. It just won't be the same."

My fingers itched to comfort her. To just hold her until her world was right. But what good would my touch do? I was not her father, the one she ached for and missed. I took a calming breath and asked, “Do you want me to do it?”

She looked at me with a puzzled expression. “Do what?”

“What your father used to do. Let you sit by me, lay your head on my shoulder while you cry.”

For a tense moment, I watched her expression oscillate between acceptance and fear. Her lip trembled as more tears sluiced across her cheekbones and downward. I thought she’d send me away, an unwanted intrusion into her mourning. But when she nodded, I didn’t hesitate. I pulled my boots off, leaving them lying on the ground, and crawled across her bed to sit next to her.

I leaned against the headboard as she snuggled under my arm. Her head on my shoulder, she splayed a hand on my chest and rested, crying. I held her tightly, one arm around her and hands clasped in front of us. It felt natural, though it was the first time we had really touched outside of the day I carried her away from the carnage to safety.

“Thank you...” she whispered.

“It really is going to be okay, Elise. And I’m not leaving your side until it is.”

Watching her hurt like this only served to harden my resolve. The bastard who killed Jimmy would pay. And I wanted to be the one to pull the trigger.

ELISE

My neck hurt and it felt like a brick was lying on my head. I blinked awake, finding the bright afternoon sun flaming through my window. Gone were the rain clouds that had kept me company for so long, and the sun had returned to gloat. I wasn't ready for sunny skies yet.

I pushed myself up, finding a few of my hairs tangled in the zipper of Adrian's jeans. When I moved but he didn't I assumed he had fallen asleep too, so I carefully plucked my hairs from his zipper and sat up. He sat with his head back, mouth open, snoring. We had fallen asleep after he held me and attempted to comfort me. I thought it was sweet.

The clock on the wall said it was after noon, and my stomach growled for the first time in days. I slipped from the bed and got my house coat, putting it on before picking up the mug of cold coffee I had only sipped from. Adrian looked peaceful, so I let myself out silently.

My feet were heavy, my thoughts down, but I headed downstairs to the kitchen to dump out the mug and find something to eat. Mourners had filled the entire freezer with casseroles and baked goods. Fruit baskets and floral arrangements lined every available surface. I found it annoying more than anything. There was only one of me, and the food would only clutter up my available fridge space until it went bad.

I could never eat that much. And the amount of trash I'd have from dying flowers and dried out foam blocks would cost

me more to get rid of than any amount of comfort they brought me.

I shuffled past them all, heading for the sink. The coffee sloshed, dripping onto the floor and I scowled as I poured the rest into the sink and rinsed the mug, setting it in the sink for washing later. Adrian must have done dishes too, because there were no dirty ones left from my snacks yesterday. It made me smile inside, thinking how he'd been taking care of me.

I knew it was just his job, but I appreciated a man who could do household chores and not balk at them. It touched a place in my heart that only my father had ever been able to reach. Adrian had done that a lot the last few days, and I didn't mind. It was easing the transition to being alone. Soon, I'd have to get used to doing this all myself all the time.

I pulled a glass from the cupboard, intent on having a glass of orange juice and some toast, but when I turned to head for the fridge, the glass slipped from my grasp. It crashed to the floor, shattering and sending broken shards skittering across the white, speckled linoleum. I growled in frustration, my bare feet planted firmly so as not to step on any stray pieces while searching for the broom.

When my eyes locked on the broom handle, I heard stomping on the stairs, then a hasty rush toward the kitchen. Adrian turned the corner, gun drawn and pointed right at me. I screamed, covering my face—as if that would stop a bullet. He looked shocked, then dropped the weapon, holstering it in his waistband.

“Fuck, Elise, I'm sorry. I thought you were in danger.” Adrian charged into the room, stopping as his feet hit broken glass. He winced and backed up.

“Sorry.” I grimaced and covered my mouth as a grin stretched across it.

Adrian picked a piece of glass out of the threads of his socks and

backed up. He went straight for the broom, sweeping the splinters out of the way and guiding me to sit at a chair so he could clean the rest of the mess. A bit shaken, I clung to him for a moment before sitting down, and he humored me, though I was certain he was only doing his job. But my adrenaline was still high. As he lowered me into the chair, I sighed, feeling like my comfort was being removed.

He finished cleaning the mess, talking softly to me about how I fell asleep on him and he hadn't the will to move and wake me. He was thoughtful; I liked that. I didn't have anything to say except a thank you. And he made me toast and juice.

Maybe it was because I was mourning, or maybe there was something more there, but I felt like Adrian wasn't just here because of his job. Dante would have been all talk and awkward at that. The same tasks would have been done with a much colder aura about them. But Adrian moved slowly, spoke softly, lingered as if he were seeking my approval.

"I'm sorry you got this boring job. I know it's boring." I accepted the plate of toast and glass of juice he set in front of me.

"There is no other place I'd rather be right now, Elise—" Adrian stopped short, as if he had to cut himself off from saying something else. He hovered by me as I sipped the juice, an awkward tension between us.

Before my father's death, Adrian had given every indication he was interested in me. I hardly believed that had changed, but I could see why he might think it a poor time to reveal any secret desire or affection toward me. In my heart, I knew it wasn't a good time to start a relationship either, though I had an interest in him.

"I'm going to take my juice and toast in my room. I'm going to read a bit. Feel free to enjoy whatever food you want from the stockpile of dishes brought by the neighbors." I rose, picking up the plate and glass, then padded over to him. "Thank you, Adrian." I rose up on my tiptoes and placed a soft kiss on his cheek.

Though it was nice to have another body in the house with me, I still missed my father. Adrian would never serve as a replacement for everything my father was to me, but I liked him, and him being her comforted me.

I'd have to thank Leo for sending Adrian to protect me.

ADRIAN

“Oh, come on!” I tossed the remote across the room to the lounge and took a long swig of my beer. The Jets were losing again, and it made me want to start cheering for the Patriots. The damn refs weren’t even calling the game fairly.

I sank back into the couch cushions and tuned my ear to the sounds coming from upstairs. Elise was in a shower, the high-pitched squeal of water through the old pipes of the craftsman was steady and uninterrupted. So I had another drink and focused on the game. Sunday afternoons were always slow, and I enjoyed that, though life with Elise right now was about as slow as it could get. She hadn’t left the house since the funeral.

The phone rang, but I ignored it. It wasn’t my house, and whoever it was probably either hadn’t heard about Jimmy, or they wanted Elise, and she was screening calls. There had been so many friends and family members calling to offer condolences that she had shut the phone off entirely for a while.

But when my cell started buzzing in my pocket, I pulled it out and checked the caller ID. It was Dante, so I answered.

“Yeah, D. What’s up?” I only half listened to him as the Patriots scored yet another touchdown, boosting their score and draining my hopes of making it to the playoffs. He rambled on about Isabella this, and Isabella that but when he said the name Mikael Nickles, I froze.

I stood and picked up the remote, pointing it at the TV and hitting mute. “Wait, what?” I closed my eyes so I’d have no distractions because my brain instantly went into overdrive the minute I heard the name.

“I said, Isabella and I went to Nicky and he analyzed the video. We got it crystal clear. The driver was definitely Dominic Genrich, but both of his hands were on the wheel when the shots were fired. It was not him. He did not do the shooting.”

“He was driving the fucking car!” I scowled and looked up the stairs, hoping Elise had not heard my shouting. “You know Leo will just tell us to take the whole team out.”

“Right now our target is Nickles. He was the passenger and he’s the bigger player.” Dante’s voice was firm. “And what’s more is that we know Nickles was just calling in some debts. Apparently, Jimmy did him wrong at some point. So what we know now is that Mikael is at the bookstore and we need to go while he’s out, or he’ll go into hiding again and we’ll never find him.”

I glanced up the steps and sighed. “You know everyone in that car is just as guilty.” I didn’t see how he could justify letting that prick off just because he was related to Isabella.

“You’re not to touch Genrich. Got it? I’ll deal with him.”

Before I could protest, Dante hung up. Angry, I rammed my phone into my pocket and took the steps two at a time. I had to get Elise tucked away in a safehouse so I could meet up with the guys and hunt down Nickles. I reached the landing and knocked on the door but there was no answer, so I opened it.

Elise stood with her back to the door drying her hair with the towel. She was nude, her creamy skin a shock to my system, but I didn’t look away. I took in the sight, enjoying the curve of her ass as it met the backs of her thighs, the way her hips rounded out perfectly. It made me aroused thinking of what it would be like to touch her. She turned slowly, placing the towel over her breasts. It hung in front of her, hiding her from me and I swallowed hard as our eyes met.

“Something wrong?” She didn’t seem startled or embarrassed that I’d walked in on her. She was calm, her eyes searching my expression.

“News about your father’s killer. I’m going to meet Dante and Leo now. I need to take you to a safehouse while I’m out, just in case they’re watching you.” I licked my lips, fighting with my distracted thoughts to stay on topic. She seemed to understand my struggle and smiled softly before her smile faded to concern.

“I should get dressed. You need to get to business.” Maneuvering the towel carefully, as to keep herself covered from view, she wrapped it around her body and tucked it into itself. She collected a pile of dirty clothes off the counter, and moved closer to me, but I was still in shock. “Adrian?”

Elise nodded at the door and I backed up but bumped into the doorjamb. Her concern deepened as she hugged her clothes to her chest. Why hadn’t she immediately covered herself or shrieked in surprise? Maybe I had read more into the situation than was intended, but could she have been standing there naked for so long on purpose? Just so I could look at her?

“Sorry.” I mumbled, struggling not to fantasize about what was under that towel. Elise squeezed into the doorway with me awkwardly, pausing when our bodies brushed against each other. She sighed and turned toward me, biting her lip.

“When Dad went out like this... you know, on a hunt. Well, when he did, I’d always given him a kiss on the cheek and tell him to be safe.” I could see the hesitation in her eyes. “You need to come back to me, to stay safe so you can be here tomorrow to make my coffee.”

An unspoken request passed between her and me, as if she were acknowledging some deeper secret between us. I’d been caring for her for more than two weeks now, and maybe she’d grown used to me being here. It wasn’t at all an unpleasant thought, that she would need me to stay, though we hadn’t done much more than pass like ghosts in a cemetery.

It was unlikely that after today she’d even need me. If Jimmy’s killer was taken out, Elise would be safe to do as she

pleased, not needing a babysitter or bodyguard. So maybe this was her way of telling me she *wanted* me to stay. But why? We hadn't even approached the topic of anything developing between us, only the mere flirtatious glances at her shows or in passing at gentlemen's meetings.

I opened my mouth to speak and she shook her head. She rose up on her tiptoes and pecked me on the cheek, then whispered, "Please don't get hurt. I can't lose another person." Her hand rested on my chest as she balanced, and she lingered closer to me than she ever had. I braced her, placing my hand on her hip as she swayed.

"Elise... We should go." It took everything I had in me not to let my body respond to her closeness. The sadness in her eyes cut me to my core. I could see that she was afraid, like she had bonded to me.

"Not before I do this." Her eyes fluttered shut, her lips pressing against mine. I was surprised but not unpleasantly so. I kissed her back, welcoming the advance. I was certain this was not what she meant when she said she gave her father a kiss before he left to hunt. This kiss made my dick wake up and I had to restrain myself a bit.

My phone rang, breaking the moment and she stepped away. "You should get that while I dress. I'll be ready in a few minutes."

I pulled my phone out as she walked down the hallway with her head hanging. I felt confused by the kiss. I looked at the phone; it was Leo. He probably had info about our meeting spot, but I needed to know why she'd done that.

"Elise..."

She stopped and turned in her bedroom doorway to look at me. "Yeah?"

"Why did you do that?"

Her face turned down and when she looked back up at me she had tears in her eyes. "My father told me once that you should never leave anything unspoken. If you think or feel something, you tell whoever needs to hear it—in *that* moment

that you feel it. I didn't get to tell him I loved him before he died. I just needed you to know what I was feeling about you before you go out. You know, in case you don't come back."

Her somber expression didn't quite match the words she shared, but a heart heavy with grief can't express anything but pain. I nodded, understanding what she was trying to communicate, and she shut herself into her room.

If only I had kissed her harder... Because maybe I should be living by that rule too.

ELISE

I waited in that tiny, dark apartment for more than an hour for word from anyone of what was happening. I tried to stay relaxed, reading the book I brought with me, but I was tense. I had already lost my father to this squabble between families. I didn't want to lose Adrian before we even had a chance to start something.

Every time I heard footsteps or talking in the hallway outside the door I hopped to my feet and stood expectantly. But each time I was disappointed. When the clock passed the hour and twenty-minute mark, I started pacing. Adrian didn't even have a police scanner in this dump for me to see if any cops had been called or reports of gunfire had been called in. I was so lost inside my head with worry and anxious anger that I didn't even hear him approach.

Keys jingled and the doorknob turned and I rushed over to greet him as he staggered in, soaked in blood.

"Oh my god!" I rushed to his side and peeled open his leather jacket, exposing more mess. He winced when I touched him and I drew back. "Sorry!"

"It's not bad, okay..." Adrian pushed my hands away, but I didn't believe him. I pulled out a chair and raced to the kitchen sink for a bowl of water and a wash rag. Adrian shrugged out of his coat as I pulled out a pair of scissors, and just like I'd done for a few men my father had brought home, I set to work.

"Sit down." He didn't protest, though he did roll his eyes at me. "And hold still."

I knelt between his legs, cutting the shirt right up the middle. I exposed the wound and the blood caked and dried across his entire torso. He hissed and gritted his teeth when I put the hot rag over his skin, wiping away blood little by little until his chest was cleaned up and the long, scrape-like wound was exposed. He was right; it was just a flesh wound, but he could have been killed.

“Fuck, Adrian. Two inches closer and this would have been sunk in your side... your heart or lungs.” I used the scissors to cut down his sleeves and remove the rest of the ruined shirt.

“Yeah, well the bastard is dead, and I’m alive. I’ll take that as a victory.” He allowed me to take care of him, though the wound looked like it should be stitched in a hospital. He’d have a story to tell I was certain, but the amount of relief flooding through me was enough to put me out of my misery.

“He’s dead? You’re sure.” I put the rag back into the bowl of now-soiled water. My hands shook with adrenaline still, so to keep Adrian from seeing, I rested them on his thighs, still kneeling there between his legs.

“Positive. A hole in his chest and one in his head. He’d have to be Superman to survive that.”

I felt so many emotions at once that I didn’t know what to feel first. Relief that Adrian was here with me, and though hurt, he in fact was alive. Justice, that the man my father had been murdered by was dead. Anger, that my father had been taken from me, and sadness that he would never come back.

And desire.

“Adrian...” It felt foolish to me, to be kneeling there in front of this man I hardly knew, thankful he was alive after avenging my father’s death. We had no real connection, only passing flirtation up until two hours ago. When I had kissed him before he brought me here, it had come out of a well of overwhelming emotion. I was foolish to think he would reciprocate, especially given what had happened to my father and how he was assigned to protect me. I couldn’t even think clearly half the time.

“Yeah.” He scraped his hand across his face and sighed, obviously in pain. I pleaded with him to see me, but I didn’t know how to say the words. He sat forward, closing the gap between us and I didn’t flinch.

“It’s over?”

“It’s over...” He took my hands in his and offered a comforting expression. “I can take you home now.”

Our eyes met and I had no clue what he was thinking, but all I could think was how mixed up my emotions were. I wanted the chaos inside my head to calm down for a minute, to give me peace. And I wanted to feel a connection in this world again. The intimate safety I’d had with my father, where he knew me and how my heart handled situations, and he just protected me. It had been stolen away from me, and for whatever reason, I wanted Adrian to be the person to give it back to me.

“Can you kiss me? Is that too much to ask you?” My request was soft spoken. He studied my face for a moment before responding.

“It’s not too much to ask.” When his lips brushed over mine, it was overwhelming, like the floodgates had been opened or a dam burst. The longer he kissed me, the stronger my craving to feel his comfort grew.

I plucked my hands from his grasp and hooked them around his neck. He wrapped his arms around me and pulled in me, kissing me deeper than before. His lips parted, his tongue searching my mouth, and suddenly I wanted more. As if he could read my mind, Adrian rose, taking me with him. Our bodies melded together as he slowly walked me backward across the small apartment.

“Elise,” he whispered hot against my mouth, “are you sure this is what you want?” Each step toward the bedroom made me want it more.

I broke my lips away from him for a moment to answer. “Yes, please?”

I felt his hands on my hips, his fingers teasing the skin exposed around my waistband because my arms were up around his shoulders. He pushed his hands higher, taking my white sweater with them, and pulling it over my head. He pawed at my jeans, attempting to remove them, but we bumped into the wall, lost in a flurry of kissing and undressing.

His clothes went to the floor and I danced out of my jeans and panties only to crash into him before we toppled onto the bed. The weight of his body on top of me took my breath away. It had been almost a year since I'd felt this. My ex was the last person I'd had sex with and he had been gone a long time.

Adrian unhooked my bra with one hand, exposing my breasts to his touch. His hands searched me, finding every sensitive place and exploring it.

“How many times have I imagined this moment...” He kissed me again, his hips slowly grinding his cock against my moisture. “Except, I didn't think it would go quite like this.”

“Be patient with me.” I slid my hand down his side, taking his dick in my hand and stroking. I could feel the mess from my cum slicking my grip. I wanted him. “I promise I won't always be this boring.”

He lifted his hips, allowing me space to guide his cock into my body, and when I had lined him up, he thrust forward. I opened to his methodical pulses, the way his greedy hands couldn't get enough. Each time he pushed into me I dug my nails deeper into his back.

When I moaned, he covered my mouth with his, swallowing it up. And when my body burst with orgasm, he met me there, convulsing and devolving into a mess of tangled limbs and body fluids.

Afterward, when he had pulled out, he rolled off of me and pulled me into his chest, unashamed. There was no place else I'd rather have been.

ADRIAN

As the cash and the painting exchanged hands, I kept my eye out for unwanted guests to our little rendezvous. Though we happened to be in an art gallery, I never could be certain that there wouldn't be cops around, so I always looked over my shoulder. The buyer was satisfied with the painting, and I was satisfied with my payment, so I shook his hand, picked up the briefcase of cash, and weaved through the easels and exhibits toward the front entrance.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, but I didn't pull it out until I was safely situated in my car, briefcase locked in the trunk. When I did, I saw Leo's number and that I had missed the call, so I shot him a text.

Adrian 3:27 PM: Sorry... fencing. What's up?

Within seconds I got a reply from him.

Leo 3:27 PM: Meet us at the safehouse on 89th. Important news.

Frustrated by the sudden change of plans to my day, I started the car and pulled into traffic. It had been over a week since I had alone time with Elise. Since the threat to her life was over, my life had returned to normal. That meant I wasn't at her house constantly anymore, and Leo had given me double duty on things that had fallen behind while I was watching out for her. We'd talked on the phone daily, and when Leo stopped by two times this week to check on her, I insisted that I be present.

But we were supposed to meet his afternoon for lunch, and that had gotten delayed by this fence. Now this?

I drove to the safehouse and headed in, leaving the money stashed in the locked car. If I hurried through whatever it was Leo needed from me, there was a chance I would still be able to have time with Elise. I took the steps two at a time and didn't bother knocking when I got to the door.

The old brownstone was inconspicuous, nestled amongst the wealthy homeowners of the upper west side. Far out of the range of Bratva territory and safe enough to hold our highest-priority assets, I knew this meeting had to be important for Leo to call me here.

I shut the door behind me and strolled into the den to my right, the pocket doors open and voices wafting out toward me as I approached. The room was packed: Dante, Leo, Isabella, our arms guy Luke, and a roller, Liam.

"Adrian, we have news." Leo stood as I walked in. "It's not over. We found the real gunman."

"Real gunman? What do you mean?" My pace slowed as the news hit me, like a wave of resistance urging me not to go farther. "I got the guy."

Isabella offered me a look of sympathy, and I could have smacked it right off her face. The way her lip trembled made me wonder if it really had been her brother.

"You got *a* guy." Liam, the cop with the penchant for snow, joined Leo in standing. He pushed the aviators off his face upward and left them perched on his forehead. "Not *the* guy."

"What? How do you know?" I scanned the faces in the small room, some of them seated on the leather sofas, some standing. Each of them offered me more information. What I thought was fear from Isabella over her brother being guilty mixed with the anger on Leo's face and the determination on Dante's.

"There was a car bomb this morning, outside of Elise's gym. She's okay, just a minor scrape, which the EMT's treated

on the site. But the guy who did this is still targeting us, specifically anything to do with Jimmy.” Leo put both hands on the back of a chair and leaned, dropping his head.

“And one of my safehouses was hit.” Dante wrapped an arm around Isabella.

“Do we have a name yet?” I gritted my jaw. “And where is she? I need to see her.”

Liam held his hand up and protested my questions. “One thing at a time.”

“Fuck you. You don’t know how we work around here. You get paid to give us information, that’s it.” As I spoke I strutted over to him and we stood toe-to-toe with chests puffed out.

Luke grabbed my elbow and forced me back. “Listen, Adrian, you got feelings for her, we get it. You can’t fly off the handle right now. Calm down and listen to Liam. Tito and Kira are with Elise at Jimmy’s place. She’s safe.”

My eyes were locked in a death stare. I wanted to smack the smug look off his face. “Was it her brother? Genrich— Did he do this?”

“No!” Isabella’s sharp tone drew my ire. I turned to glare at her. “My brother only drove the car. I’ll deal with him. Got it?” She seemed panicked.

“We’ll deal with that another day.” Leo’s cold tone proved that Isabella was on thin ice, which helped me relax a bit. I rolled my neck and turned back to the dirty cop.

“So who did it?”

Liam shoved his hands into his pockets and shook his head. “His name is Xander. We suspect him as having been seated in the back seat and being hidden from view. Isabella asked her sources in the family and he’s the one taking credit.”

I scrubbed my hand across my face and turned away. I wanted to punch something, but the wall of this old building would break me before I broke it. I didn’t know what to think except that I had to get to her, see her. I needed to make sure

she was okay, because even if the explosion hadn't gotten her, maybe her heart still needed me.

"I need to go to her. Where is she?" I kept my back to them, face turned downward. "We need to get this bastard. He can't be on the street. If he goes after her again, he could kill her. For Jimmy's sake, we can't let that happen."

I felt a hand on my shoulder. When I turned Isabella was there. "I know you care about her Adrian, and I'm not going to stop you from taking revenge on the family for this. I know my brother was messed up in this. I'm just asking you that you leave him to me." Her eyes sparkled with moisture. "I know Xander, and he doesn't talk shit. He's your guy."

Isabella reached into her pocket and pulled out a slip of paper. "I put together a list of places he's likely to be." She handed it to me as Leo spoke.

"We all want this guy dead. I'm just giving you the honor of pulling the trigger."

I looked up at him and nodded. "Nothing would give me greater pleasure."

As I turned to go, I felt the eyes of the entire room on my back. Was it that obvious that I was falling in love with Elise? Had Jimmy known that too? I let myself out and hustled to my car. Before I did anything else, I needed to see her.

ELISE

I walked through the elevator doors into the penthouse on the top floor. Adrian had a ritzy place, complete with a patio on the roof of one of the tallest buildings in the Upper West Side. The view through the large pane glass windows was astonishing, but it didn't hold my attention long. I pried my eyes away from the cityscape and found Adrian right behind me.

“Thank you for coming to get me.” He had burst into my house like he owned the place, ordering Tito and Kira out. He helped me pack and when I told him I never wanted to leave his side again, he agreed, telling me I was staying with him now.

“You're welcome. I'm not letting you out of my sight again. Not unless I'm certain you're safe.” He hugged me to his chest and kissed my forehead. I missed him. He had been so busy the only way we could even talk was to send messages or have short phone calls. Leo had him running ragged, sleeping in his car a few nights this week even.

“You'll find him? The guy who was really in charge?” I hugged him and looked up at his stubbled face. His dark wavy hair fell in tired eyes, gazing down at me with compassion. He nodded curtly.

“I won't stop until I do, Elise. They stole from you and I'm going to make them pay. And they almost stole from me—that's worthy of something worse than death.”

I shuddered at the way he said that. It was scary enough to think that I was in this dangerous world, where at any moment I could be the next one gunned down. But now my heart clung to my sleeve, and everyone knew it. If Adrian was hurt in all this mess, I'd never forgive myself.

"You have to be careful." I tried to press my ear to his chest, but his hand slid up my back and grabbed a handful of hair. He tilted my head back, exposing my neck, which he kissed gently. I whimpered at the tight hold he had on my hair, but the way his lips trailed over my skin was exquisite.

"I know what I'm doing. Okay?" He kissed me, long and hard, not letting go of my hair. "Now, I've missed you, and you told me to be patient with you. So can I stop being patient now?"

Adrian's grip on my hair tightened as he sank his teeth into my neck. The past 24 hours had been a whirlwind of feeling elated that we'd finally get to spend some time together, followed by discouragement when his appointments all day got delayed. So I went to the gym only to walk out just as my car exploded. I was emotionally overwhelmed again, and his touch seemed to ease my soul.

His teeth traveled up my neck to my earlobe and his tongue lightly brushed over it. Fuck, I was done waiting. I didn't know what it was, maybe his too-tight hold on my hair or the embrace he had me in. Adrian's hand gripped on my thigh, running up my leg across my jeans. I could feel his fingers pushing against me. My pussy ached to be penetrated but he continued to tease.

"How wild do you want to be Elise?" he asked, whispering in my ear.

"Give me a stiff drink, and I will do whatever you want," I murmured, rubbing myself up against his fingers. I don't know what came over me, if it was the emotion or the excitement.

Adrian pushed me across the room onto the recliner then with a smirk he grabbed my shirt and ripped it open, sending the buttons flying across the room. He climbed on top of me,

and pressed his knee against my pussy, allowing me to grind against it and leaned down to kiss me.

“Wait right here,” he said, then climbed off me and headed for the bottle of Bacardi 151 sitting on the shelf on the opposite side of the room. He disappeared into the kitchen for a moment then returned with the bottle and the glass, full of ice. I wrestled out of my jeans, tossing them to the floor before he offered me the drink.

“Stiff enough for you?”

I simpered and rubbed my hand against the bulge in his pants. He smirked and handed me the glass, and with one quick swig I had set it down, ready and waiting. My shirt hung open, my breasts still covered by my bra and my pussy ached to be filled. His hand reached between my legs once again, his fingers hooking around my wet panties and pulling them free.

“Ditch the bra and shirt, let me see you.”

I reached in front of my chest and released the clip on my bra, then popped the last button free from my shirt, and he pulled them off. “What about you?” I asked, ready to climb on top of him.

“Oh, you will get me, but I have something special for you, close your eyes.”

I didn't know what to think, but I waited, anticipating what was going to happen. Was he going to climb on top of me? Slide himself into me?

It was neither. I heard the glass, the ice cubes clinking together and the exhales of his breathing as he stood over me. Then I felt his lips, first my right nipple, then my left. He kissed them gently, his tongue cold, and then lightly pressed over them with the ice. I almost couldn't hold still. I wanted him more now than ever.

My nipples stood erect as he trailed the ice down my body and I inched toward the edge of the recliner. Adrian's tongue flicked over my clit then, frigid and causing a shiver. He had the ice in his mouth, and he proceeded to work at me, teasing me with the ice. He pressed the ice cube into me, the texture of

the ice combined with his tongue made me clench. I wanted to cum there and then.

I grabbed the recliner with my hands, binding them into fists as he ate me. “Fuck, more!” I cried out. I could hear the glass clatter again. That wasn’t what I meant, but fuck I didn’t expect him to fill me with the ice. The cool water of the first cube melted inside me and the chilled ice water, draining from my pussy and ran over my ass.

He pulled away, letting the ice melt inside and kissed me. The sweet toasted but sugary taste of the Bacardi mixed with the bitterness of my cum sent me wild.

“You like that?” he asked, pressing two fingers into my pussy. I didn’t know what to say. I let out a pleasure-filled moan then he put his fingers to my mouth. “Taste yourself.”

So I did. I sucked his fingers then opened my eyes and looked at the smirk on his face. His fingers disappeared from my mouth, and he pushed them back into me. I bucked as he folded them around inside me, playing with my insides. I hadn’t even noticed him removing his pants until just now.

I was speechless. I didn’t know what was happening. I was in stimulation overload, knowing I was going to cum at any moment. His fingers left my pussy and then his shirt hit the floor. He knelt in front of the recliner, and I slid his dick into my pussy and started thrusting. The contrast of hot and cold—my cum and ice water running out of me—I couldn’t take it and my coil snapped, but he didn’t slow down.

Adrian continued to pump me as my first orgasm subsided and a second quickly took its place. He kept pumping into me until I felt one deep thrust, right against my back wall, and he collapsed on top of me. He lay there for a moment then kissed me before climbing to his feet and gathering his clothes.

I lay there watching him dress, and as I did, something Isabella said to me one day when she came to visit came to mind. She told me of a small bookstore owned by her family. I’d heard of the infamous bookstore and knew it was a hub for a lot of Bratva activity. If I could go there, scope the place out

and see what was happening, there was a chance that I could get information on the man who killed my father.

“What are you thinking about?” Adrian studied me as he buttoned up a clean shirt. The scar across his chest disappeared beneath the white fabric, and I shrugged.

“Nothing. I just want you to be safe.” If I told him what I had planned, he’d never allow it. But I was not a fainting violet. I could take care of myself.

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll handle things. You just stay here and let me do my job.” He leaned down and kissed me again. “That was really hot, you know?”

I smiled the first happy smile since my father died weeks ago. I was done feeling helpless, waiting on people around me to make me feel safe again. I’d take things into my own hands and help end this if it was the last thing I did.

ADRIAN

The stillness in the room felt off, like something was missing. It took me a moment after waking in the wee hours of the morning to fully come to my senses and realize what was going on. I reached for where Elise should be, only to find the bed cold.

I blinked a few times, thinking about our lovemaking last night and how good she felt. I was a lucky man to have her, but it came with a huge responsibility for me to protect her and keep track of her. With the new threat still looming, I wasn't taking any chances with her safety. It was possible that she had just slipped out to have a snack or a shower. Maybe she couldn't sleep, but if she couldn't sleep then I wouldn't either.

"Elise." I threw back the covers, slipping into my jeans and taking my Glock in hand as I walked out to the living room. I fully expected her to be eating a snack in front of the TV. But when she wasn't, I started a room-by-room search, beginning at the bathroom. She wasn't in the apartment anywhere, which had my heart racing as it was, and when I checked the rooftop patio and she wasn't there either, I started to panic.

"Elise!" I called her name several times as I headed back to the bedroom for my phone. She was under strict orders not to leave the penthouse, but I didn't think she even needed to be reminded. After the car bomb, she'd told me she didn't want to leave my side. How could she be so foolish as to leave. This place was heavily guarded, top-notch security, and no one

could get in without my biometrics. So she had to have just left by herself.

I perched on the edge of the messy bed and typed a message in to send to her. I was frustrated with her, but that frustration came out of a place of worry, and the words I had typed were too harsh for her. So I deleted it all and typed a new message.

Adrian 3:12 AM: Hey I woke up and you're gone?

After a few minutes and no response, I got up and continued dressing. I had no interest in chasing her around the city, and the only place she could possibly be going this time of night was back to her house, which was dangerous. After I had donned a shirt and hoodie, I sat to put on my sneakers and rubbed the sleep from my eyes. I checked my phone and saw no messages so I sent another few.

Adrian 3:17 AM: El please message me.

Adrian 3:17 AM: This isn't funny. Where are you?

I dropped the phone to the bed and slid my shoes on, bending to tie them up. When I heard the phone buzz, I immediately picked it up.

Elise 3:18 AM: I'm checking something out. I'll be back soon.

Adrian 3:18 AM: No. What? What are you checking out? Where are you?

Several long minutes passed as I loaded my clip up all the way and snapped it into my Glock, then headed for my car keys. If I had to, I'd send Liam her number and ask him to trace what tower the last messages she sent had pinged off of. It wouldn't get me a perfect GPS lock, but it would be within a few blocks, so I could narrow it down myself.

The buzz of my phone felt like it took forever to get to me.

Elise 3:23 AM: It's a bookstore in Brighton that Isabella told me about. I'm watching some sort of deal go down.

My heart lurched. The Bratva owned the only well-known bookstore in Brighton, and Isabella having been Bratva meant

she had just sent Elise into the fucking lion's den. I grabbed my spare gun, sliding it into my boot, and punched in a message to Elise as I ran to the elevator.

Adrian 3:24 AM: I'm on my way. Get the fuck out of there and don't let anyone see you.

The lack of cops on the street in the wee hours was a good thing for me, because I drove like a bat out of hell. I got clocked by several red-light cameras and speed traps and I didn't give a single fuck. Elise was in the most dangerous place she could possibly be, and I had no idea what had possessed her to go there.

I parked the car a few blocks away, hoping to not draw attention to myself on the mostly dark block. I heard voices a short distance away, my first clue that something was off. Pulling my weapon, I moved faster, keeping to the shadows. My body hugged the side of each building, their storefronts dark too.

As I approached, I heard a female voice and a male voice. I recognized Elise's voice, and rushed closer. And when I peeked around the corner of the building and saw the man dressed in all black, holding her against his chest with a gun to his head, I stepped out, my own gun raised.

ELISE

“Well, well...” The man tightened his choke hold on me, pressing the barrel of the gun into my temple harder. I whimpered, feeling like I would pee my pants if he scared me any more. “Look who came to follow the pretty little princess around again. Don’t you learn your lessons, Russo? This bitch is all but dead now.”

I felt like I was losing air, my fingers clawing at his denim jacket. I saw Adrian’s eyes flicker with hatred and compassion. He was scared for me, but his gun hand didn’t even quiver. The fingers on his left hand curled and uncurled, as if deciding whether to turn to a fist. He stood 20 paces away, beneath the dim glow of the streetlamp.

“Let her go, Xander.”

My heart lurched at the man’s name. I hadn’t realized this was the one they were looking for. When Adrian told me my father’s murderer hadn’t been killed that night, which is why the bomb had been planted in my car, I had so many question. After we had sex, we lay there talking. Adrian had told me the name, but it didn’t compute until the cold steel of the man’s gun pressed into my skin harder.

“Fuck you, Russo. You and your Italian trash start moving in on our territory and we start losing money. You know how this game works. You never get attached.” He yanked me to the side, deeper into the shadows. I watched Adrian follow, stepping out of the ring of light on the pavement around him.

“I said, let her go.” He took a few steps forward, keeping his gun on aim. “Now.”

“Or what? You’ll kill me? I’m dead either way. I kill her and at least my boss get’s his dying wish, to finish his unfinished business.”

I whimpered again, and he squeezed harder, choking me. My heart raced in a panic. I could only hold my breath so long, and in a heightened state, that amount of time was drastically shorter. I tried to speak, to call Adrian’s name, but no words would come out, only a squeak. So I conserved my oxygen and pleaded with my eyes for him to save me.

Adrian took a few more steps, plunging into the darkness which my eyes had grown accustomed to. He was just a silhouette of a man shrouded in blackness, backlit by the rage that drove him to violence. He had come for me because I had foolishly put myself in this position believing I had what it took to face my father’s enemies. I wasn’t trained for this, but it didn’t mean I didn’t have the heart for it.

“So Nickles put you up to it? To kill Jimmy and his daughter too? What value is she to you?” Adrian again stepped closer, and Xander backed farther into the alley. My air was running out. If Adrian didn’t do something quickly, I’d be dead from suffocation rather than a bullet.

I tried to calm myself, closing my eyes. I thought of my father, his laugh, the way he smiled when I was singing. I thought of the times I’d seen him stare down men twice his size with weapons that would take down an elephant, all with the calmness of a large predator watching an enemy approach. He never showed fear. He was fearless in the face of danger.

I opened my eyes, seeing the same bold determination on Adrian’s face. Not a hint of sweat on his face, he was focused, unmoving. He stalked closer still, now only 10 paces from us. I knew how he felt about me. Though he hadn’t said it, I’d felt it. He loved me. And if he was like my father, there was no way he’d ever let this bastard hurt me. That thought gave me courage, but not air, which is what my body screamed for. My lungs burned, my head began to grow dizzy. I blinked my eyes

a few times, trying to get his attention, but his gaze fixed on the man holding me.

“Nickles’s kid was murdered in cold blood. Anyone who had a part in that has to pay. Genrich, Scarpelli... Scarpelli’s daughter.” His grip around my neck loosened as I used my feet to push myself upward a bit. I sucked in a gasp of air before he started backing up again and plunged me back into the throng of suffocation.

“Elise did nothing.”

“Ah, so she’s a first-name kind of girl. What are you two fucking? How sweet. The big bad boss gets whacked and as soon as he’s gone you move in on his daughter. Well say goodbye, Russo, because this is the last time she’ll get to hear you say you love her.” The gun pressed into my temple harder, and I winced.

“Let her go.” Adrian began walking now, heading straight for us.

“Jimmy’s daughter needs to pay the way Mikael’s son did. There’s nothing you can do about it now. It’s as good as done.”

A gun went off and for a moment, I thought it was the one pressed to my head. The sound was deafening. My ears felt like they exploded; I felt like I was falling. I *was* falling. My body crumpled to the ground about the same time my eyes shut and the world went black.

I didn’t know how long I was out, but when I woke, Adrian was hoisting me to my feet. He had draped one of my arms around his shoulders. I looked down at the man who held me at gun point and saw the pool of blood beneath his body, a single bullet hole in his forehead. Sirens in the distance seemed to be drawing closer.

“You... but...”

“We gotta get out of here. We got company.” He started moving quickly in the direction he came from, and I didn’t fight him. My legs didn’t seem to be working very well, and after a few struggling steps, he just picked me up. “What the fuck were you thinking coming out here by yourself?”

“I... I wanted to get information. I knew this place existed. Isabella—”

“Could have cost you your life. You had no gun, no practice. There is a reason why men have to work up to this level, Elise.” He jostled me around as he carried me, starting to almost jog.

“Put me down.” I pushed at his chest until he set me on the ground and I started to walk-run beside him. “I’m fine, okay?”

My hands shook. I was clearly not fine. Until I’d seen the blood on the ground and the hole in the man’s head, I thought I was the one that had gotten shot. I would have nightmares for weeks.

“Get in.” Adrian opened the door for me and I took refuge in the SUV, lying across the back seat trembling.

He said no more as he drove us back to his penthouse. He didn’t have to say any more. My father’s killer was actually dead this time, and I had learned something very valuable about myself. I was not just a singer, made for stages to be a pretty voice someone listened to. I was my father’s daughter, and now I had a thirst for that adventure.

Knowing this changed everything.

ADRIAN

“I’ve always liked being the little spoon,” Elise said as I held her. Our bodies lay under the sheets in the crisp morning air. I felt the coldness of her foot pull back under the covers and brush against mine.

She rolled over and straddled me, then slid my morning wood inside herself, and grinned playfully, and I lay there looking up at her beautiful body, and she slowly raised her hips, sliding me in and out of her pussy. She pulled off and licked her cum from my dick. “Want to try something fun, Adrian?”

“What do you have in mind, sweet girl?” I responded, intrigued by her actions. She grinned and lay against me once more, pressing the tip of my dick against her ass. Leaning toward me, she whispered, “I want you in me.” With that she slid down my length slowly. I could see the look on her face of shock and slight pain, followed by a big cheeky grin.

“Fuck,” Elise gasped then started to rock on me.

“You like being the little spoon?” I asked with a smirk. She nodded coyly, so I gestured for her to spin around.

She painstakingly maneuvered her body against mine, the sensation of her ass grinding on me was intense. I wrapped my arms around her body, grasping her breasts and pulling her against myself. I nibbled on her ear, and I began to pump inside of her, slowly at first but getting faster. I guided her hand across her stomach and placed her fingers against her clit. She cried out with a moan as I continued to fuck her ass.

“Yes, please don’t stop!” she called out, as I felt her clench around me. Moan after moan escaped her lips as she grabbed for me. So I replaced her fingers with mine, massaging her clit to a frenzy. Her hands reached up above her head, grabbing handfuls of my hair, and when she let out her loudest cry, I knew her climax had come. Her body tightened around my cock.

“Adrian, please... deep inside of me!”

Elise’s words were like a drug. I struggled to hold myself at bay, enjoying every moment. I felt the pressure in my groin building, and as I hit the edge I thrust hard and deep inside her. One of her hands rushed to her stomach and pressed just below the ribcage and she grinned with a pleasure-filled smirk.

We lay there, panting, and I rolled us both to our sides, still inside my little spoon. I pulled the covers back over us, in an attempt to keep us both warm. Holding her, I kissed the back of her shoulder and waited until my heart rate returned to normal.

“You were really stupid.” I didn’t want her to be discouraged or upset with me, but she had to realize the danger of what she’d done.

Elise shrugged. “I know.” I expected her to be penitent, but her voice was bold. “I should have had a gun.”

I chuckled at her grit. I could tell she was Jimmy’s daughter. The problem was, she was my world now, and I couldn’t have her going of doing stupid shit tempting fate. I had always been a firm believer that anything a man could do, a woman could do too. Including organized crime in whatever form that took. I just wasn’t prepared for the woman I dated or married to be that type of woman.

“You sound like you weren’t scared.”

“I was terrified.” She pulled away from me, forcing me to pull out of her body. Then she sat up and slid to the edge of the bed. The sun peeked through the window. We needed to get to Leo’s and report on everything that happened. When it was over, we came back and crashed because we were both too

exhausted to do anything. And why wake Jimmy in the wee hours before sunrise when the deal was done?

“So you learned your lesson? No more going out after assholes alone?” I scooted to the edge of the bed and wrapped my arm around her waist, kissing her side.

“I mean, if I’m going to follow my father’s footsteps and keep this family together the way he did, then I just need a gun and some practice. But first I need to go home, shower, eat something. You know...” She bent and picked up her shirt, discarded there before falling asleep. She’d taken one of mine after I had torn her button-up off her body yesterday, ruining the buttons.

“You want to do what Jimmy did? Be an underboss?” The thought didn’t surprise me as much as it frightened me. If Jimmy could do what he did in the short amount of time he was boss, what would Elise do? She was a powerhouse no one even dreamed of meeting.

She turned and smiled at me. “Yes. And I’m going to do it. And you’re going to help.”

I rested my head on my hand and pulled the back of her shirt down as she pulled her hair out of the neck hole.

“You know, you don’t have to leave, right? You can stay here. This can be your home now?” I brushed some of her red hair over her shoulder so it hung down her back as she gazed at me. “We’d make a pretty great team. Your father would be proud of that.”

“You would really support me becoming a capo? Ranking up?”

“Yeah, I would. I don’t know any man with balls enough to go up against the Bratva without a weapon in his hand. You got my vote.” I tickled her side and she laughed, then leaned down to kiss me.

“I think we might just have something here, and I want to find out what it is.”

“Then stay here,” I whispered, “don’t go home. Let’s find out what it is.” Her soft pecks turned into something deeper

and she pulled her shirt back off, nestling her body beneath the covers with mine. I felt my groin stirring again. Only she could do this to me.

“Okay, but we have to tell Leo that Xander is dead.” Her leg wrapped around my hips and pulled me into her body.

“After...”

EPILOGUE - ANYA

The lemon cake melted in my mouth. Delectable and almost too sweet, but just perfect after the warm bisque. For a November day, lemon seemed a contrast, reserved for the heat of summer, not the dregs of a cold fall. But I liked what I liked, and for the past two years I had liked things that reminded me of a life I once had, before Dad got sick and my best friend vanished.

“More water?” The waiter hovered with his pitcher in hand, ready to pour.

I held my hand out resisting him. “No thanks.” When I was finished with the cake, I had to return home to see that Dad got his medicine again. His cancer, very treatable, was taking its toll on everyone. After the rounds of chemo and the slew of medications, the doctors promised him a complete remission, citing cases where men lived to be a hundred. They’d caught it early, but that didn’t mean zero suffering.

I stared down at the cake, the thought of Dad’s illness almost ruining it for me. The waiter walked away, and I was alone again, plunged back into my thoughts and fears. Life was lonely like that sometimes anyway, but recently, since Dad’s diagnosis, I’d found it even more so. Mom was avoidant, compartmentalizing the issue away and pretending it wasn’t happening. I understood it was her way of dealing with the pain, but it left me feeling like the parent, not the child. I was nearing 21, but still a baby practically. I shouldn’t have had to deal with this.

And to make matters worse, Dad had started asking me to do business for him. It started with little things, phone calls, errands, now and then I'd send a package or letter. But he was talking like he'd need time away, and someone to take his place.

I scanned the small restaurant hoping for anything to distract myself with. A few older couples ate pie and drank coffee. One table had a lonely looking middle-aged woman, her frumpy sweater and disheveled hair giving away her cat-lady lifestyle. A very handsome man in a suit sat reading the paper, a glass of wine perched in front of him. And in the back a table full of guys talking in hushed tones drew my attention. This was Brighton; I knew who they were. I just didn't know if they were for us or for our enemy.

Frustrated by the ever-present monstrosity that was Bratva and its enemies, I looked back at my plate and pushed the lemon cake away. I wasn't interested in it anymore. My family had been at war for years to keep their position in this area of the city secure. I found it to be overwhelming and frightening. I understood the businesses my father ran—well, the legitimate ones anyway. The other more depraved things that went on I tried not to pay attention to, but it was difficult given my position as daughter of the Pakhan.

My life as a Bratva princess had been anything but normal, private tutors, incognito trips out of the house. Dad took my privacy and safety much more seriously than I did. Even when my best friend Lia had been here, we were only allowed short trips to the small shops a few blocks away from our house. Even then, I had a tracker on my wrist at all times. Dad didn't take chances with me.

The waiter returned, this time to slide a small tray holding the check onto the table. "You can pay this when you're ready." He smiled, hovering for a moment before the most deafening sound rang out. Glass shattered, and I thought something had exploded. I heard screams and shrieks, and I cringed, hunching forward. The waiter hit the ground and I quickly slipped out of my chair, falling to my knees and covering my ears.

Despite having my ears covered I continued to hear the *pop, pop* of weapons unloading into the restaurant. I tried to count, but after 10 I lost track. My hands trembled. I sobbed, crawling under the table and screaming. My voice was one of the dozen that rang out, and eventually the sound of firearms discharging stopped. I didn't even realize that I had shut my eyes, so I pried them open, hands still on my ears, and blinked a few times.

Glass lay sprinkled around the waiter who lay perfectly still. I lowered my shaking hands, hugging my knees and watched his chest. It didn't rise and fall at all. No movement, not even breath. I heard men shouting things, some in what sounded like Italian, some in Russian, some English. Then another few shots rang out in the restaurant and I shuddered with fear again.

I sat huddled beneath that table until the room fell silent except for voices and the occasional sound of a chair being uprighted or glass crunching. I watched the pool of blood spread out on the red tile floor beneath the waiter. I heard the din of the ovens in the back of the restaurant, and then the wail of sirens approaching.

I couldn't move. My ass stayed glued to that floor until someone in a gray suit stopped next to the waiter. I could tell it was a man by the shoes he wore. He crouched next to the waiter and pressed two fingers to his neck. It was the man who had previously sat at the table alone reading his paper. He was checking to see if the waiter was dead. I could tell him as much. I'd watched him drop.

Then the man turned to look at me. His eyes were soft, compassionate. His stubbled face looked weary, the way my soul felt—though I also felt afraid. I had heard of the violence raining down over our beloved city, but I hadn't been in the direct line of fire, not until now at least. I didn't know who was to blame here, or what their target was, but it was terrifying.

“Are you okay?” The man had a smooth warm voice. He took the trilby off his head and set it on the table, probably

right next to my lemon cake that likely had glass shards in it now.

I didn't respond. It was like I couldn't. Fear had gripped my tongue and shoved my words right back into my lungs where they cut me deeper than the glass in my lemon cake. He reached a hand out to me, and I looked at it, still in shock. I knew I was supposed to take it, but my body was not obeying my mind. All I could do was sit and tremble.

"Please, it's okay. It's over." He reached farther, snaring one of my wrists, which I had hugged around my knees. As I emerged from my cave against the wall under the table, I looked around. My neck and shoulders were so tight it was difficult to move, and when he helped me stand, my knees gave out. He cradled me, helping me sit in the chair opposite my cake.

"What's your name?"

Awestruck by how calm this man was, I looked around at the other people, then down at the dead waiter. This man was so calm, I knew he had to be part of the business—which business I was uncertain of. He had a New York accent, not distinctly Italian, not Russian, just American. And he wore no colors, bore no tattoo or marking that I could tell. The other patrons had either left or were hysterical.

I remained catatonic.

The man pulled a chair up and sat next to me, so close his knee touched mine. He grabbed my glass of water, almost empty, and held it out, taking my hand and wrapping it around the glass. "Drink," he ordered, lifting it to my lips. I peered into the glass, thankful it had no glass shards that I could see. I sipped it, but it turned my stomach, so I set it down.

"Anya." I choked my name out for this handsome stranger. He had such a calming effect on me. "My name is Anya."

His smile devastated me. I forgot where I was, what had happened. "My name is Leo. It's nice to meet you, Anya." Leo let go of my other hand and sat up. "I'm sorry you had to be a part of all of this. I'm thankful you knew what to do and didn't

end up like this guy down here.” He pointed a thumb at the waiter as if he were a stunt double in a movie or something.

My attention perked up as the police entered, heading straight to the hysterical couple who remained, surrounded by other waiters and the cooks who had come out to see the damage. But here was Leo, sitting calmly with me. He studied my face as if mesmerized by my reaction. I could barely think straight at the moment. I wasn’t sure what he wanted.

“I want this all to end, Anya.” He gestured with his hand at the mess. “The violence, shootings, war. There has just been enough of it lately. People like you shouldn’t have to live in a world where this happens. I need to put an end to all of this.”

People like me? Did he know who I was? That I was the daughter of the most powerful man in the Bratva? There was no way he could. My father kept my identity a secret from everyone so that I could have as normal of a life as possible. What did Leo mean by “people like me?”

“I hate it too. I’ve seen it, heard of it, but I’ve never been there when it happened. Until now.” I dropped my gaze to my hands, folded in my lap. “I want it to end too. I hate it.”

Truer words had never been spoken. If only I could get my father to renounce his grip over this part of the city and just set up business elsewhere, there would be no warring. Shootings like this wouldn’t occur anymore. It almost brought me to tears, and maybe it would have in that moment, except Leo lifted my chin.

“You’re not alone. Lots of people like you want this to end. Okay?”

I nodded, blinking back my tears. I knew I was uniquely positioned to help make it stop. I just had to convince my father to let me make some decisions that would bring peace. Maybe not the kind of peace for the record books, but at least enough peace to stop the incessant warring, fighting, and killing.

“Now, you need to go tell the police what you saw, then go home where it’s safe. Okay, Anya?” Leo stood, taking my

hand again. I rose to stand next to him, overwhelmed by how safe he made me feel. The confidence he exuded was magnetic. I found myself not wanting to leave his side for fear that whoever had shot the place up would come back. And as I did leave his side, something in me ached to return. Every step away from him made my heart feel less and less at peace. He possessed a strange power over me I couldn't understand.

When I glanced back at him, I saw him disappearing into the kitchen area, the dead waiter still lying in his own blood on the ground. Who was Leo? And why did he take the time to sit with me and help me stay calm? I had to know more, but when I started for the kitchen to follow him, a police officer stood in my way, notepad in hand ready to ask questions.

Whoever he was, I would find him again. If he wanted what I wanted, and he was in the business like me, fate would draw us together again. And if it didn't, I'd use my father's resources to hunt him down. A magnetism like that couldn't be stopped.

I hope you enjoyed reading the forth book of the "Mafia Vows Of Deception" series.

[Click Here](#) to read the next book "*A Love That Binds*" in the series.

A Love That Binds book description:

I live in a world where the Bratva reigns and from my first breath I've been a pawn in someone else's power play.

But now I'm cut to the heart, a divided heart...

Loyal to my father

And reaching toward the man who captured it.

Like a fresh summer breeze, Leo Scarpelli, enemy of my father stormed into my life, sweeping me off my feet.

I fell in love before I knew how dangerous this game was, and now I can't get out.

Infatuation, lust, and a war to end before anyone gets killed

My mission is singular

Choose who I love more, my family, or my future.

Only, when real war begins, I won't be risking my heart.

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