



Savage
SAVIOR

DARK BRATVA ROMANCE

SONJA GREY

Savage Savior

A Dark Bratva Romance

Fedorov Bratva

Book 2

Sonja Grey

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Blurb

**To everyone else he's a killer, the man they run from in fear,
but to me, he's the only man who's ever made me feel safe.**

Riley:

They call him Death.

He's a scarred, tatted-up wall of muscle,

a highly trained killer that I should be running from,

but I'm lost to Artyom from the first moment I walk into his club and meet his sexy, grey eyes.

Everything about him is dangerous, raw, primal—a barely contained savage.

And now all his focus is on me.

He knows I'm in trouble, and he promises to protect me, to free me from my brother's quick fists and his vicious friend.

To everyone else, he's a monster.

To me, he's my fierce protector, the one who would do anything to keep me safe.

Artyom:

People call me Death.

It's a nickname earned in blood and one I fully deserve.

Everything I touch turns red, but I can't stay away from her.

She's a pawn in her brother's game against the Fedorov
Bratva.

Too innocent to be working in my club,
too innocent for me,
but I can't let her go.

She was mine the second I laid eyes on her.

And I'll happily kill anyone who tries to take her from me.

Because no one touches what's mine and lives.

Chapter 1

Artyom

The night isn't even halfway over, and I've already lost all my patience, torn a hole in my favorite pants, and my phone is almost dead because I forgot to charge it earlier, which means I can't play my favorite game while I wait for these stupid fuckers to show. It's safe to say I'm in a very, very bad mood.

"Two just showed up."

I perk up at the news and take the night vision binoculars Sergei's holding out to me. When I see the two men lean against one of the many deserted buildings in this area, I fight the urge to roll my eyes and instead say in Russian, "Can you believe these morons? They might as well hold up a fucking *I'm a drug dealer* sign and wave it around. They wouldn't last five minutes in Moscow."

Sergei laughs. "I especially like the trench coat on the first guy. Maybe we'll get really lucky and he'll be naked underneath."

"That would be the perfect ending to this shit day, and because I'm so nice, I'll let you frisk him."

We stop joking around when headlights appear around the corner. The car eases onto the dark side street and stops in front of our guys. The one in the trench coat pushes off from the wall and leans down to speak to the driver. They're too far away to hear, but I don't miss the exchange of money for a small baggie that trench coat hands over. That's all the proof we need. I turn to Sergei and give him a nod, both of us

reaching for our guns. I flick off the safety, waiting for the car to disappear around the corner, and as soon as it does, we both move from the darkened alcove we were standing in and fan out to cross the street.

The two dipshits are completely oblivious and nearly shit their pants when they see Sergei coming at them from their left and me on their right. In all fairness, we're an intimidating sight. Most of the Fedorov Bratva are trained *Spetsnaz* soldiers, Russia's most elite killers, and people are always a little shocked when they first see us. They're expecting old, out-of-shape mobsters with comb-overs and fat cigars. Instead, they get highly trained killers dressed all in black with Kevlar vests and more weapons strapped to our bodies than they can count.

The men in front of us hold up their hands and take a step back. They look like they're in their early twenties—old enough to know better, but still too damn young to die for their stupid mistakes. There's nothing I can do about that, though.

“You're not supposed to be here,” I tell them. “Douglas was warned to keep his men off our streets.”

“Who's Douglas?” the one not wearing a trench coat asks.

I point my gun at him and level him with a stare that usually gets my point across with a quickness. “Your boss was told that if he sent any more men into our territory, they would be killed, and yet he sent you two out tonight.”

Their eyes widen at my words, and it would be funny if it wasn't so damn pathetic.

“I'd say you should find yourselves a new boss, since this one obviously isn't worth serving, but you both have to die, so it doesn't really matter.”

“Wait,” trench coat says, starting to take a step towards me and then thinking better of it. “Take our stuff. We'll leave. We won't come back.”

“What the fuck, man?” the other guy says. He turns to me and spits, narrowly missing my black boot. “Fuck you and

your stupid fucking Bratva. These are our streets, and this is our city.”

“Well, you’ll be happy to know that you’re going to die on your streets and in your city,” I say before nodding at Sergei who immediately shoots him between the eyes. The silencer he has attached to his gun keeps it quiet, but trench coat ruins the effect by screaming loud enough to wake anyone within a mile radius.

I point my gun at him. “You need to shut the fuck up right now.”

He clamps his hands over his mouth, not trusting that his lips won’t part in another scream and nods his head quickly.

“Tell me where Douglas is.”

When he takes a step back, eyeing his dead friend, Sergei steps closer, making it clear that there won’t be a mad dash to freedom happening anytime soon.

“I don’t know.” His words are choked and frantic and slightly muffled because his hands are still lightly pressing against his mouth.

“You owe him nothing. He sent you to your death tonight.”

“He doesn’t tell us where he is. He’s always moving around, never stays in any one place for long. We get a text, letting us know where we can pick up the drugs and what streets we’ll be working. That’s it.”

“Where do you drop the money off at?”

“We text at the end of the night and then get an address. It’s different every time.”

“See what he has on him,” I tell Sergei in Russian.

The man yelps when Sergei starts to pat him down, pulling out shit from various pockets until his hands are filled with drugs, money, and the guy’s cell phone.

“You’re a walking pharmacy,” I say, looking through the bags. “Weed, some coke, ketamine, and,” I hold up one of the

bags of pills and shake my head in disappointment. “Roofies. Seriously?”

He holds his hands up in an attempt to not look like a low-life drug dealer peddling date rape drugs. “I just sell them, man.”

“I’m sure the women who get raped will appreciate that you’re clearly the good guy here.”

He doesn’t bother trying to defend himself again, just stays quiet while I look through his money. There’s close to ten thousand. I hand it to Sergei, who pockets it along with all the drugs before taking a step back. He knows what’s about to happen, and there’s no point in getting splattered with blood if you don’t have to.

Trench coat holds up his hands and shakes his head no over and over again. I raise my gun and quickly end his life. He’s dead before he hits the ground. We drag their bodies to the middle of the street and leave them as a message for Alex Douglas and the men who work for him.

On the way back to the car, Sergei asks, “Why didn’t you take the one who spit at you and let me finish trench coat?”

“Because I didn’t want to kill him.”

“You made yourself shoot him because you didn’t want to?”

“Yes.”

I don’t bother explaining myself any further. Weakness isn’t something I can afford to have in this line of work. Our job was to kill anyone we found selling drugs on our streets tonight. It doesn’t matter that they’re young or suddenly regretting their shitty life choices. That’s not how the world works. You let someone live because you feel sorry for them, and the next thing you know, they’re coming after you when you least expect it. I rub at the scar that covers half my neck, a constant reminder to never let my guard down.

I drop Sergei off at his apartment and then drive the short distance to the house I bought a few months ago. It’s on the small side with only two bedrooms and an open floor plan, but

it's more than enough for me. The house is right on the lake, and there's enough property around me to make it feel more isolated than it actually is. Walking into it and seeing the large windows that overlook the lake immediately makes my shoulders relax and the tension leave my body. The retired police dog I recently adopted lifts his head from the orthopedic bed I bought him. I get a half-hearted tail wag and a deep sigh before he lowers his head back to his paws. We're still fine-tuning our relationship. I'd seen him up for adoption and I've always had a soft spot for German Shepherds. Plus, the idea of adopting a police dog still makes me laugh.

"It's good to see you too, Beau," I say, squatting down to pet him. He's still learning Russian, but he's catching on pretty damn fast. It's nice to have someone to come home to, even if that someone drools and doesn't seem to really give a fuck whether I'm here or not.

Pouring myself a vodka, I sit out on the deck and think through everything that happened tonight while Beau runs out to investigate and relieve himself. Sergei and I already destroyed the drugs, and I told him to pass out the money to the rest of the guys tomorrow. They're used to getting random bonuses when money falls into our laps that we'd rather not waste time legitimizing. Tomorrow, I'll take the phone to Jinx, our *everything electronics* guy and see if he can pull up anything useful. I'm not holding out any hope. Douglas may be a coward who hides behind his men, but he's smart enough to know how to cover his tracks.

I finish my drink in one swallow and let out a heavy sigh. I need to go in and get some sleep or I'm going to be exhausted tomorrow. Going on a few hours of sleep in your twenties isn't that big of a deal, but at thirty-six, I'm not bouncing back quite as quickly as I'd like. I briefly think about calling one of the many women I have on my phone who I know would be thrilled to invite me over for a fuck, but I don't. I'd rather sleep.

I let out a harsh laugh at that sad truth and go inside to bed while Beau follows at my heels.

Chapter 2

Riley

The hard glint in my brother's dark eyes lets me know I'm not going to like what's about to happen. He paces the floor of my shitty apartment, taking up way too much space and making it feel even smaller than usual. His right hand clenches and unclenches in a rhythm that I'm all too familiar with. It's a nervous habit of his, and since I've been on the receiving end of those fists more times than I can count, it's one that always sets me on edge.

My mom married Alex's dad when I was only five, and my life has never been the same. I don't blame my mom anymore. I forgave her when I turned fourteen. That's what you do when someone dies. You forgive them for all the shit they made you live through. I'm not sure why. Maybe it's for the simple reason that they're no longer around for you to scream and rail at and demand restitution. With nothing but silence, forgiveness is really you're only option. Either that or go crazy. I opted for forgiveness. I don't want to be crazy at twenty-four. I'll save that for my thirties. Something to look forward to.

"The fucking Fedorov Bratva took out two of our guys last night," my brother mutters, still pacing the floor, still looking way more pissed than I'm comfortable with. "Took the drugs and money they had on them and left their fucking bodies in the street!" he yells, raising his hands in disbelief that someone would dare go up against him.

I keep still, only turning my head when Matt walks in. My brother and his best friend have always treated my apartment

as if they have every right to just come and go as they please. Alex helped me get this place when I turned eighteen by co-signing with me, and apparently that means he can do whatever the hell he wants.

Matt plops down on my couch, spreading his knees wide and resting his arms along the back cushions. His dark blond hair brushes his collar, and when I meet his hazel eyes, he gives me a wink that makes me want to vomit. Matt has a reputation for slipping pills into drinks and then videotaping the results. I've never been able to tell if they're just rumors or fact, but I don't let my guard down around him. Something tells me the rumors are true, and it makes me want to warn every woman within a twenty-mile radius.

Alex stops pacing and runs a hand through his dark hair. "We lost a lot of money last night."

"Fucking Russians," Matt says from the couch. "They think they can just come to our fucking city and stop us from selling drugs on the streets we've owned for the last decade. Fuck them!"

I stay quiet. I learned a long time ago that invisible is the way to go, especially when they're pissed. Sometimes it works; sometimes it doesn't. Alex turns his eyes to me, and my heart sinks when I realize it's not going to work tonight.

"We're taking our city back."

The steel in his voice sends my heart racing. I know that tone. Nothing good ever comes from that tone. He points his finger at me, and my stomach drops.

"They own The Sweet Peach, Ry, and they're hiring right now. You're going to get that job, and you're going to tell me every fucking thing you hear and see in that place."

"Alex," I say, too stunned to be cautious. "I can't work as a stripper."

Matt gives a harsh laugh from where he's still sitting. "She doesn't really fit the stripper profile," he says with another laugh.

I look down at the baggy sweats and shirt I'm wearing, knowing the body beneath probably won't pass muster. "He's right," I quickly say, never thinking I'd agree with Matt about anything.

Alex steps closer, fists still clenching and unclenching, and I suck in a quick breath, bracing for the hit. It doesn't come. Instead, he wraps one hand around my upper arm, squeezing hard enough to make me yelp before I can stop it. The sound of it makes his fingers dig in even harder. He doesn't like it when I make noise. I grit my teeth and keep quiet, knowing if I make another sound it will only get worse.

"I don't care what you have to do, Ry, but you will get this job."

The threat is evident in his tone and the hard look in his eyes. He doesn't need to say the words. We both know what will happen if I fail him. A cold sweat breaks out beneath my sweatshirt, and all I can do is nod, my voice taking flight with my backbone and my pride. Alex has always had that effect on me. He constantly brings me down to nothing, reminding me that I wouldn't have survived without him taking care of me after my mom died and his dad sped up the process of drinking himself to death.

He was all I'd had, and as shitty as he is, he did make sure I always had food to eat and a place to live. With no other family to take me in, I would've ended up on the streets or with a foster family who could've been way worse than the hell I was already used to. I nod my head, knowing I don't have much of a choice.

"Besides, you need a job. They let you go from the grocery store, so how the fuck else are you going to pay rent?"

I try not to show how worried I am about my funds. Every place around here seems to be laying off employees rather than hiring them, and I've already had to ask Alex for a loan to help with this month's bills. There's no way in hell I can ask for more.

Matt laughs and pats one spread thigh. He gives me a lecherous look and rocks his pelvis up. "Want to start

practicing your lap dancing skills?”

Alex waves a hand at him and moves past me, letting go of my arm and the bruise that I know is already forming. “Stop fucking around, man. We have work to do.”

Matt gets up and saunters over to me. His jeans and long-sleeve tee accentuate all the muscle he’s worked so hard to build. He’s intimidating and good looking and he knows it, but he’s also a massive asshole and perv who makes my skin crawl anytime he’s near.

“See ya around, little Riley,” he teases, pulling a strand of my hair as he walks by. “You might want to go out and buy a new outfit. I doubt they’ll hire you if you show up in sweats.”

I ignore him and his fading laughter, only relaxing when I hear the front door shutting behind them. With a groan, I sink down into the couch and rest my head in my hands. How the fuck am I going to do this?

Everything I know about stripping comes from movies. They were all crazy beautiful women with killer bodies and more confidence than I can even wrap my head around. I’m not even a good dancer. I groan and feel the beginnings of a panic attack brewing dangerously close to the surface. Grabbing my laptop from the coffee table, I look up The Sweet Peach, wanting to arm myself with as much info as I can. I’m not too surprised when a pretty basic website comes up with the hours of operation and address. Going back to the search results, I comb through images and reviews. After several minutes, it’s obvious they have a pretty stellar rating. The men who posted reviews said it was the best damn place in the city, and the images I scrolled through show a surprisingly nice looking establishment.

The women are showing so much skin my face heats up just from imagining walking around in so little clothing, and they’re all tall and very well endowed. I’m so screwed. My barely B-cups are not going to get me a job here. God, they’re probably going to laugh their asses off when I go in for an interview. My whole body cringes at the thought. I take a deep breath and set my computer aside. All I have to do is go in and

ask them about a job. If they don't hire me, there's nothing I can do about it. Alex will be pissed and I'll get banged up a bit if he's in a really foul temper, but there's really nothing else he can do. If they won't hire me, then they won't hire me. I can't help that the universe didn't see fit to bless me with big boobs and long, slim legs. I can only work with what I've got.

I've almost pep-talked myself out of the panic attack that's become more of a simmer instead of a raging boil, and before I can second-guess my decision, I head for my closet, determined to find something in here that's stripper worthy. Pushing aside all my sweats and yoga pants, which is the majority of my wardrobe, I dig around until I find a pink sports bra from when I swore I was going to start running and a black skirt from who the hell knows when.

Putting them on, I face the full-length mirror on the back of the door and die a little inside. My skin hasn't seen the sun in a very long time, and all I can see is a list of imperfections a mile long. On the plus side, the sports bra does manage to give the illusion that I actually possess cleavage. Shoving aside a shoebox of childhood possessions that I can't bring myself to throw out, I find what I'm looking for. Grabbing the black heels, I silently thank one of Alex's many former girlfriends for forgetting them in her speedy departure. I put them on and then wince at how uncomfortable they are, but at least they fit.

Turning in the mirror, I study myself from all angles and then experiment by rocking my hips a bit.

"Good God," I groan, too embarrassed to continue. "Rent," I remind myself and walk very ungracefully back to my laptop. I spend the rest of the evening watching videos on YouTube on how to dance like a stripper. By the time I finish, every muscle in my body aches, and I'm covered in sweat.

So fucking sexy.

Before I can lose all courage, I call the number that's listed for the club.

"The Sweet Peach, how can I help you?"

The sultry voice startles me, and after a couple of awkward seconds of just listening to the thudding music in the background, I say, “Hi, um, I was wondering if you could tell me when the best time is to drop off an application.”

Her voice immediately changes from *every man’s fantasy* to *helpful woman-to-woman* when she says in a much more normal tone of voice, “Honey, we’re desperate for some help around here. The best time to come in is around five on weekdays. The club won’t be open to the public, but just knock and they’ll let you in to speak to the manager. He’s usually in about that time to check on things.”

“Thank you so much.” Before I forget, I ask, “What’s the manager’s name?”

“Ask for Mr. Morozov. Tell him Sloane sent you, honey.” Then she laughs and adds, “Unless you’re terrible, then don’t mention my name.”

I laugh because it’s obvious she’s joking. “Thank you so much, Sloane.”

“No problem, honey. Good luck!”

I thank her and hang up, feeling a little bit better about this whole thing. Deciding that it’ll be better to get this over with as soon as possible so I can start putting in some real applications, I make plans to go in tomorrow at five. I can humiliate myself in front of Mr. Morozov and then spend the rest of the evening filling out applications online for some of the places that might still be hiring nearby. I push aside thoughts of strip clubs, embarrassing interviews, and Russian Bratva members and fall into a lousy sleep that’s over far too soon.

As soon as my eyes open, I start dreading the day. My dreams had been filled with one mortifying scenario after another, from me falling off the damn stage, to men laughing when I try to dance for them. I throw the covers over my head and curl into a ball, not quite ready to face the day. I manage to put off getting out of bed for another hour, tossing and turning and falling in and out of a gentle sleep until I can’t put it off any longer. My bladder demands that I get up.

I spend the morning practicing how to walk in heels, and then spend the afternoon with my feet resting so I'll actually be able to dance in them for the interview. I'd tried doing a search for Mr. Morozov, but nothing had come up. Judging from movies, which is apparently where I get all my info about life, he's probably old, fat, and gross. I decide that might be better. I can't imagine trying to dance in front of some drop-dead gorgeous man who probably only dates supermodels and no one bigger than a size two.

I think about this while I polish off a package of donut holes. I've always been a nervous eater, and I'm crazy nervous right now. When I can't stall any longer, I get up and shower, making myself look as good as I possibly can. I keep my long hair down and add a bit more eye makeup than usual before putting on the outfit I'd chosen last night. At the last minute, I pull on a white T-shirt, figuring I can just ditch it after I get there. There's no way in hell I'm walking around with my entire midsection exposed. The same goes for the heels. I slip on some black sneakers and put the heels in my bag.

When I leave my apartment, I'm as ready as I'll ever be. I hustle my ass to the bus stop on the corner, cursing myself for the donut holes I just had to eat when I get a stitch in my side. The bus shows up a few minutes later, and I climb on with everyone else, taking a seat near the front. The rocking motion of the large vehicle as we make our way deeper into the city mixes with my extreme fear, creating one hell of a cocktail inside me that puts a new fear in my head. I will not throw up, I tell myself over and over again. I will not fucking throw up!

By the time I get off the bus, I'm an absolute mess. If I didn't fear my brother more than I dread the humiliation about to befall me, I'd be running away without a second thought. I make the quick walk down the block and then look up at the large, black building in front of me. The large sign is off at the moment, but I know from the photos I saw that it'll be blazing the name of the club in bright pink neon as soon as the sun sets. The place looks deserted at the moment aside from a black motorcycle parked near the entrance.

Taking a deep breath, I walk to the door, surprised to find it unlocked. Stepping inside, I walk through the entryway and then through another set of doors.

“Hello!” I call out, looking around at the large room. There’s a bar all along the wall to my right and left and before me is a massive area with tables and chairs and three large stages. Stripper poles are everywhere, on the stage and also sprinkled all around the room itself. I’m still looking around with my mouth hanging open when I hear footsteps behind me.

“Who the fuck are you?”

The voice is deep with an accent that’s sexy as hell, and I’m already cringing in embarrassment when I turn around because I know on some instinctual level that no man with a voice like that can be ugly. I was right. The man standing in front of me looks like pure, wicked sin. He’s the kind of man the devil would use to tempt you into unspeakably sinful acts, and you’d do it. You’d sign your name in that fucking dark book without a second thought, pledging your life and soul to him just for the chance of getting to be near him.

He’s in jeans and a black T-shirt with black, sturdy-looking boots. Even in the casual clothing, there’s an aura of power about him that has my heart racing and my lungs feeling like I can’t get enough air. His dark hair is short, and the stubble on his cheeks is pulling my eyes to his chiseled jaw, and I can’t even remember why the hell I’m here.

“I asked you a question,” he says, sounding annoyed.

He turns his head slightly, and I suck in a quick breath at the sight of his neck. There’s a vicious looking scar on half his throat like someone had started the process of slitting his throat but couldn’t quite finish the job. If that wasn’t eye-catching enough, the other side is covered in a skull tattoo.

I scream at myself to get my shit together and speak, but all I can think is that nice guys don’t get neck tattoos. Dangerous Bratva members get neck tattoos and have scars from half-assed murder attempts. I’m in so fucking far over

my head, and I haven't even done anything yet except walk through the goddamn door.

"Are you lost?" he finally asks.

"Are you, Mr. Morozov?"

"Yes."

"Sloane told me you'd be here," I stutter out like an absolute jackass. "I'm here about a job."

He lifts a dark brow and runs his eyes over me. My face heats up, and I eye the door, seriously thinking about just making a mad dash for it. My brother flashes in my mind, fists clenching and unclenching, and I stand my ground. I will interview for this damn job or die from embarrassment trying. I square my shoulders and meet his insanely gorgeous eyes.

"I'd like to interview for a dancing position."

He meets my eyes, holding my stare before scrubbing a hand over his jaw and then looking at a large, black, military-style watch. "You have twenty minutes. Follow me."

Turning, he walks toward a hallway past one of the stages, and I have to practically run to keep up with his long strides. Even with the nerves thundering through me, I can't help but notice how broad his shoulders are and how damn good his ass looks. The man must be pure muscle. Everything about him is lean and hard. His biceps strain at the arms of his shirt, and I'd like nothing more than to be able to run my fingers over him, studying his tattoos and memorizing every line of hard flesh.

I'm so caught up in my fantasies that I bump into him when he makes a sudden stop to open a door on the right.

"I'm so sorry." I place my hands on his back to get my balance, nearly moaning at the feel of him.

He looks down at me, not looking even slightly amused. His face gives absolutely nothing away, and I can't tell if he's bored, pissed, or annoyed. Hell, for all I know, this could be his happy face. Turning the light on, the room fills with a soft glow, revealing a red, leather couch and a stripper pole with mirrors all around the room. My heart and stomach both drop

when it finally hits me that I'm going to be giving this gorgeous man a private dance.

He shuts the door behind us and takes a seat on the couch, filling the space with his powerful body. "Show me some ID," he says before I can do anything.

Reaching into my bag, I grab my wallet and step close enough to show him my license. He studies it, making sure I'm of age before handing it back. I use the arm of the couch for balance and change into the heels.

"I'd ask if you've ever worked in a strip club before, but I think it's fairly obvious you haven't."

I don't bother telling him he's right. We both know he is.

"So why do you want to work here, Riley?"

I like the sound of my name on his lips way too much. The way he slightly trills the R has me hyper-focused on his tongue.

"Um, I need money," I say, because it may not be the whole truth, but it is the truth, at least part of it.

"There are other jobs."

"None that pay this good. I don't have a college degree, and most places aren't hiring right now."

I use every damn ounce of courage I have and pull my T-shirt over my head, leaving me in nothing but the pink sports bra. His eyes run over me, but he doesn't say anything. I wish he was easier to read. I have no idea if he thinks I look terrible or good, and even though I just met him about ten minutes ago, I'm surprised by how badly I want him to think I look good.

He grabs his phone, and a few seconds later a song starts playing from hidden speakers. I don't recognize it, but it's seductive sounding and has a bass line that makes me want to rock my hips and do all sorts of wicked things with him in the dark.

"Don't be shy, Riley. Show me what you've got," he says, leaning back and resting his arms on the back of the couch. He

looks so unbelievably, so effortlessly sexy, and it makes me realize that I will never be given an opportunity like this again. Men like him don't look at women like me, but he's looking at me now, and I know damn good and well that this is the only time I'll have his full attention. The next time I see him, there will be a gorgeous, leggy blonde on his arm, and he'll have long ago forgotten about me.

I have him now, though, at least for the next fifteen minutes or so, and it makes me bold enough to start moving my hips, swaying to the beat of the music as I grab onto this once in a lifetime moment. His eyes run over me when I grab the pole and dance around it. For the first time in my life, I stop worrying and I just let go. I don't think about whether or not I look good or if my thighs look jiggy or my ass too big, I just dance, and it's absolutely liberating.

When I see the side of his mouth turn up in a soft smirk, I step away from the pole and saunter towards him, timing my footsteps to the beat of the music until I'm standing between his spread-apart legs. He arches a brow at me but doesn't say anything, just watches as I circle my hips and slowly turn around. When I meet his face again, I'm stunned by the heated look he's giving me. The look emboldens me. It makes me feel like a goddamn goddess, more powerful than anything I've ever known, and when I straddle him and start to rock my hips, I'm not sure which of us is more shocked.

I've never given a lap dance in my life. Truth be told, I haven't done much of anything. Aside from a very handsy boyfriend when I was twenty-two, who it turned out was also dating the girl in the apartment below me, I've not done anything. It was always easier to stay single and to not involve anyone in the shitstorm that is my life. Maybe that's why I'm grabbing this moment with both hands and treating it like the gift from the universe that it is. When will I ever get to grind against a man this damn gorgeous again?

This close to him, I realize that his almond-shaped eyes are a stunning grey color, the lightness of them such a vivid contrast to his dark hair. I run my hands down his chest, not at all surprised to find that his body is very much the wall of

muscle that I thought it was. Unable to resist, I sink down lower onto him, gasping when my pussy becomes flush with the hard length of him. Knowing that I caused this reaction in him has me grinning like an idiot. His face is back to the stony mask it was, completely unreadable except for the tightness in his jaw and the vein that's throbbing in his temple.

My thong is soaked, and when I roll my hips, grinding against him even harder, I can feel a coil of pleasure starting to build in my core. A voice inside my head screams at me to stop, but I'm way too far gone to listen. It just feels too damn good. My fingers dig into his shoulders, and when I feel my body start to tense, I realize the mess I've gotten myself into right before I come so hard I have no choice but to just go with it. I'm powerless to stop what I've already set into motion. I grip his shoulders tightly, throwing my head back with a gasp as my body rocks against his. Pleasure rushes through every cell in my damn body. My pussy pulses with my release, and the large cock beneath me taunts me with how damn close it is. A need that's so powerful it's impossible to fight overcomes me. I'd give anything to have him inside me, but I can't, and I know that this stolen moment I'm taking from him will have to last me a lifetime.

It's not until I start to come down that I fully realize what I've just done. I meet his grey eyes and then look down at the powerful thigh I've just made an absolute mess on. My jaw drops open and a mortification unlike anything I ever knew could exist settles upon me.

"Oh my God," I whisper, feeling my eyes start to water. I look behind him to the mirror, groaning when I see how red and guilty my face looks. "I'm so sorry."

The words come out in a choked whisper as the tears start to fall. What the fuck is wrong with me? This was supposed to be a professional interview, and instead I rode him like a damn horse and then came all over him.

"Well that was a first," he says, breaking the silence, and the amusement I hear in his voice makes me want to never show my face again. "Usually it's the men who bust a nut during a lap dance."

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Morozov,” I whisper, covering my face with my hands and wishing for a very early death.

“You just used my cock to get yourself off. I think it’s okay if you call me Artyom.”

“I’m very, very sorry, Artyom,” I say from behind my hands. “I need this job so badly, and I can’t believe I just did that to you.”

Keeping my face covered, I try to scoot off him, but he surprises me by grabbing onto my hips. Even though I’d just been grinding against his body, it’s the first time that he’s touched me, and I feel that touch in every part of my body.

“Look at me, Riley.”

His voice is low, but I can easily hear him over the music that’s still playing, the sexy rhythm a constant reminder of what just happened. I meet his grey eyes, feeling even more embarrassed when he runs his eyes over me and lands on the dark bruise that Alex left on my arm yesterday.

“Do I need to worry about an angry boyfriend showing up at the club and making trouble?”

“No, it’s nothing,” I quickly say, but then his words hit me, and I look up at him. “Does that mean I got the job?”

“Have you ever waitressed before?”

“Yeah, I used to work at Mickey’s over by the docks before he closed the place.”

“How would you like to waitress here instead of dancing?”

His hands are still on my hips, making it hard to think. Part of me wonders if I was such a lousy dancer and this is his *You’re so pathetic, and I feel so sorry for you* job offer. The other part of me knows I have no choice but to take it, and truth be told, I’d much rather waitress than strip.

He’s being kind to me, and I hadn’t expected that. It makes my deceit weigh even heavier on me. I’m going to have to spy on this gorgeous man and report back to my brother. Shame runs over me that’s a thousand times worse than how I just felt

after riding his thigh. Knowing I don't have a choice, I do the only thing I can do and give him a small smile.

“I'd love that. Thank you, Artyom.”

Chapter 3

Artyom

I've never seen anyone look so embarrassed in my life. Riley's face is still beet red, and her eyes keep darting around the room in an effort to avoid looking at me. When I first saw her, I thought there's no way in fuck this shy, beautiful woman is going to be able to strip, but she'd proven me wrong with a quickness. She may have kept her clothes on, but watching her morph from insecure and hesitant to the confident, sensual woman who just rode my leg was the sexiest goddamn thing I've ever seen.

She'd been so surprised to find me hard, and I swear it was like it was her first time grinding against a man. There's something sweet and innocent about her, something I haven't seen in a woman in a very long time. Most of the women I'm around are confident, selfish, and cruel. Riley doesn't strike me as any of those things.

I eye the bruise on her arm, knowing it's going to bug the hell out of me until I figure out what happened to her. It bothers me more than it should. Running my thumbs over her hips just once so I can feel her soft skin, I give her a pat, letting her know she should get up. Truth be told, she should never have been allowed to get on me in the first place. I do some of the interviewing around here, but usually Sloane or one of the dancers are with me, and it's much more professional, definitely no grinding up against your potential future boss.

Riley slides off my lap and quickly grabs her T-shirt and pulls her heels off. I stifle a groan when I see the wet spot she

left all over the outline of my cock. I'm uncomfortably hard and straining against my jeans. The scent of her arousal isn't helping matters. I don't want to embarrass her any more than she already is, so I stand and adjust myself, hoping she won't see how wet my pants are in the dim room.

Turning off the music, I wait for her to pull on her sneakers and then say, "Follow me," leading the way out the door and farther down the hallway. My office is the last door on the left, and once we're inside, I sit behind the large desk, grateful to hide the evidence of her little indiscretion, and grab the forms she needs to fill out.

"Have a seat and fill these out for me."

She sits in the chair across from me and takes the clipboard I'm holding out to her. I study her while she's distracted, noticing the way she lightly bites her bottom lip in concentration while she fills everything out. She's not my usual type, and I'm confused by why she's even catching my attention. I prefer tall, blonde, and big tits. Stereotypical, I know, but it is what it is. She's none of those things. She's short, brunette, and a B-cup at best. There's no explaining it, and I'm sure it'll go away once she walks out the door. It has to.

Once she's finished, she hands me the completed forms and smooths down her skirt, fidgeting with the hem while her foot taps out a nervous rhythm against the wood floor. I scan her info, immediately memorizing her cell number and address.

"Looks good," I tell her, setting it aside. "Welcome to The Sweet Peach, Riley Clare. When can you start?"

"Tonight," she quickly says. "I mean, whenever, as soon as you need me to."

I take a quick look at the schedule and pencil her in. "Tonight works. You can come back at seven. Amber's one of the waitresses on tonight. She can show you around, and you can get a feel for the place before the rowdy, late-night crowd comes in."

She fidgets even more. “What’s the uniform?”

I open the bottom drawer on my desk and grab one of the pink T-shirts with the club’s logo on it. I used to order a variety of sizes, but everyone always chooses small, even if that means their tits are busting out of it. One of the girls who used to work here had implants that were so big, I’d never seen anything like it. She was convinced she could fit them into a size small. I have to give her credit because she did manage it, and it was a real testament to the quality of the shirt company that the damn thing didn’t rip down the middle. She made a hell of a lot in tips.

“You can wear that with whatever else you want. Amber can walk you through the rules and all that. We pay twice a month. Your tips are yours to keep, and every girl gets walked to her car by a bouncer.” I meet her eyes and add, “No exceptions.”

My phone buzzes in my jeans, and when I pull it out, I see a text from Yuri. He’s sent me a photo of him holding a very happy Lev. Our boss’s son just turned one, and Yuri and I have been in a very healthy competition on who his favorite uncle is going to be. Obviously, it will be me, but the smug bastard in the photo is giving me a run for my money.

You’re late. Guess who’s super happy to see Uncle Yuri? You see that smile on his face? Clearly, I’m the favorite.

I respond that he’s a jackass and that I’m on my way. Riley watches me but doesn’t say anything, not even when I grab my leather jacket and stuff the beanie dog I bought earlier for Lev into the pocket of it.

“When do people start coming in for work?” she asks, standing when I do the same.

I look at my watch, realizing I’m fifteen minutes late. “Now.”

“Would it be okay if I just hung out here until my shift starts. I mean, not here in your office, but out there somewhere?” She points back the way we came and then nervously brushes back a strand of her long hair. “It’s just

easier if I stay. Unless you think I need to change,” she quickly adds, looking down at her skirt and black shoes.

“No, I don’t mind. You can hang out at the bar or walk around and familiarize yourself with the place.”

“Okay, thanks.” She meets my eyes for the briefest of moments, and I notice again how vivid her blue eyes are. “Thanks again for the job, Artyom, and I’m really sorry about earlier.”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s already forgotten,” I lie, knowing I’ll never forget the sight of her throwing her head back or the feel of her grinding against me. “I need to get going, but if you need anything, ask anyone who works here for help.”

“Thank you.”

I grab my helmet and lead her back to the main part of the club. I give her a quick nod before she walks to the bar and I head out the front door. Viktor, one of our bouncers, is just getting out of his car when I stop in front of my bike. Not everyone who works here is Russian, but most of the bouncers are and all of upper management is.

“I hired a new waitress,” I tell him in Russian. “She’s at the bar, waiting for her shift to start. Keep an eye on her tonight.”

He doesn’t ask me any questions, just nods before disappearing inside. Convinced I can just put all this behind me, I start the bike and race through the streets of downtown on my way out of the city. Our Bratva owns these streets, so I don’t worry about cops pulling me over for speeding. I weave my way through the busy traffic, earning me a few pissed-off looks from the men and a few winks from the women before I hit the bridge and really let it fly. The wind whips past me as the sun dips lower in the sky and the water crashes beneath me. I fucking love this city.

The drive doesn’t take long at all when you aren’t constrained by a speed limit, and soon I’m parking my bike next to Yuri’s black Audi in front of my boss’s huge garage.

I've been with Mikhail since he first took over the Fedorov Bratva when his uncle was murdered, and I've never regretted my decision. He's one of my oldest friends and one of two people that I trust with my life. The other one is inside trying to bribe a toddler.

I don't bother knocking since I know they're expecting me. Stepping into the kitchen, I follow the laughter through to the living room where Yuri is tickling a squealing Lev. I never thought Mikhail would ever get married, and I certainly never thought he'd have kids, but the minute he saw Charlie, I knew there was something there. Many women have tried to sink their claws into him over the years, but none of them made a lasting impression on him. His wife sure did, though. Breaking into a guy's house will do that.

"Hey," Charlie calls, walking over and giving me a big hug.

I hug her back and kiss the top of her head, noticing that she's about the same height as Riley. "Hey, Charlie." I ask her in Russian how she's doing, and she answers me in very broken Russian that makes me laugh and earns me a light punch to the arm.

"I'm trying to get better," she says with a laugh.

"Don't believe her," Mikhail says, stepping behind her and wrapping an arm around her upper chest. "She's constantly distracting me with sex every time I try to make her go over her grammar."

"I can't believe you just said that!" She laughs and then squeals much like her son just did when Mikhail picks her up and kisses her.

I laugh, glad that he's managed to create a family. He was alone and miserable for far too long. Every once in a while when I'm around them a tiny spark of jealousy ignites and threatens to consume me, but I always blow that shit out with a quickness. He's the Bratva boss. He needs a family and someone to take over after he's gone. I'm a trained killer with a body count that would make any sane woman run for the hills and never look back.

Lev finally notices my arrival and gives another excited squeal before trying to break free from Yuri's grasp.

"He wants his favorite now," I tell him, walking over so I can grab him. Yuri laughs and hands him over.

"He just sees the beanie dog you brought him." He shakes his head with mock disappointment. "You can't buy his love."

I hold up the dog and then laugh at the way Lev's dark eyes light up. His chubby hands reach for it as his legs kick out in excited bursts. I look at Yuri with a smug grin on my face. "Wanna bet?"

"Pathetic," he mutters, but I can tell he's trying not to laugh at how damn cute Lev is. I've never been the kind of guy who goes nuts around babies, but this little guy has me wrapped around his damn finger. It's been that way ever since the first time I saw him and Mikhail handed the little bundle over to me. He's the first baby I've ever held, and the feel of his small body in my arms and the way his dark eyes had stayed locked on mine had created a bond between us that I still don't completely understand.

I kiss Lev's head and tell him in Russian that I love him. He gives me a big, gummy smile and starts to gnaw on his new dog. I sit down with him and then watch as Charlie shows me how good he's getting at walking before she starts to get his supper ready and Mikhail leads me and Yuri up to his office. The real reason for the visit isn't just so Yuri and I can play with his son.

As soon as he shuts the door, we sit in the leather chairs opposite his desk while Mikhail sits down behind it.

"Tell me about the other night," he says, slipping straight into Bratva boss mode. This used to be the only side he had, but now he slips in and out of it so he can be a husband and dad without letting the stress of the Bratva touch them.

I sit back and rest my hand on the spot that Riley's pussy had been pressed against. The motorcycle ride here was enough to dry it out, but the memory still remains.

“Sergei and I took out two guys,” I tell them. “They were low-level drug runners, part of the Douglas crew. We left their bodies in the street as a warning and took what they had on them. They’re short two men, ten grand, and the fuckers were like a walking pharmacy. They had a few bags of weed, several grams of cocaine, and they even had fucking roofies and ketamine.”

Mikhail sighs and looks less than pleased. “I do not want those little assholes selling that shit on my streets.”

“They’re getting bolder,” Yuri says. “Branching out and coming further and further into our territory.”

We all know Alex Douglas is the one behind all this, but he’s proven to be a slippery little fucker. His men break easily under questioning, and he knows it. He’s been very careful to not give them any information that could be used against him. He keeps them in the dark, only telling them where to pick up the drugs and what streets they’ll be selling on. He constantly moves around. No one knows where he lives. He’s a ghost at the moment.

“I gave their cell phone to Jinx. He’ll let us know when he finds something, but I’m guessing Douglas is using burner phones to communicate with his guys, probably tosses them daily. We might get lucky, though.”

“I’m getting sick and tired of this fucker. He’s creeping further and further into the city. At this rate, he’ll be outside The Sweet Peach in a few weeks.”

“We’ll get him,” I say, knowing it’s true. “It’s only a matter of time. We’ve taken out guys way worse than him.”

“True enough,” Mikhail says, and judging by the haunted look on his face, he’s remembering the night his wife had been kidnapped and we took out an entire mafia family to get her back.

“Speaking of the Peach, are we still short a dancer?” Yuri asks, changing the subject.

“Yeah,” I groan. “I hired a new waitress before I came here. That’s why I was late.”

“We don’t need a new waitress,” he says like I don’t fucking already know this. “Why didn’t you hire her to dance?”

“She has waitressing experience. She’s never stripped before. We can always use new waitresses.”

Yuri looks at me, a smirk spreading across his face.

“I don’t know why the fuck you’re smiling,” I tell him.

“Did she apply for the stripper position?”

My silence is answer enough.

“Was she bad?”

A vivid image of Riley rocking her hips and grinding against me like a starving woman floats through my head, A muscle ticks in my jaw, and it doesn’t go unnoticed.

His smirk grows as he shares a look with Mikhail.

Yuri looks back at me and laughs. “I’ll have to make the time to go in there and meet our new waitress.”

I ignore him and ask Mikhail, “Do you want me out patrolling the streets again for more of Douglas’s men?”

“No, it’s covered. Do whatever you want tonight.”

“You going back to the club?” Yuri asks, still giving me that smug grin that makes me want to punch him.

“I don’t know. Maybe. I need to take care of a few things.”

“Like hiring a damn stripper?”

“Maybe if you didn’t keep them so busy when you’re in there, we wouldn’t have a shortage.”

He laughs and smacks my arm. “I can’t help it. They see me walk in, and they all come running to me, fighting for the chance to get in my lap.”

I can’t help but laugh, because as smug as he is, he’s not wrong. The regular customers hate him. They don’t stand a chance when Yuri walks in. Despite what happened earlier, and despite what my reputation might lead people to believe, I don’t mix business with pleasure. Ever since Mikhail put me

in charge of the Peach, I've been completely professional with the dancers. Many have tried to crawl into my lap, but I've always stopped them. I'm not sure why I didn't follow my own rules today. I don't waste time trying to psychoanalyze myself. I push it from my mind and stand up, knowing Mikhail is anxious to get back to his family.

Yuri and I spend a few minutes making Lev laugh before hugging Charlie and saying our goodbyes. The sun's already fully set when we walk outside.

"What's our new waitress's name?" he asks, stopping in front of his car to look back at me.

"I don't remember."

He laughs, knowing I'm lying. "I'll be in soon to check her out. She'll have to get in line if she wants to practice her lap dancing skills on this lap, though."

I tell him to fuck off before putting my helmet on and starting my bike. I give the fucker a wave before speeding out of the driveway with a loud rumble that would have Charlie ripping me a new one if I ever dared to do that while Lev is sleeping. Without really meaning to, I find myself back in front of the Peach. The parking lot is already filled even though it's not even seven. Since opening day, this place has been nothing but profit. We have zero competition. The other two clubs in town are shitholes, and we have the best-looking women around. They flock to us because our wages and benefits are great, and we employ enough bouncers to make sure they're safe. It's a winning combination that ensures the Bratva will always have plenty of money and a legitimate business to funnel all our illegal money into.

There's a line out front, but I skip ahead and nod to Viktor when he steps aside to let me in. The loud, rhythmic music hits me like a smack to the face, and I immediately want to turn the volume down like an old man. Most of the tables are already filled, and every stripper pole on the three stages has a woman performing on it. Men cheer and whistle, and every G-string in the place already has bills tucked into it.

Weaving my way through the crowd, I head to the bar and take a stool at the far end so I can keep an eye on things. Sloane gives me a smile and pours me a vodka. She's one of the first people I hired, and she's been an absolute godsend. Because she's in her early thirties, she's also the one I relate to most.

"What the hell, Artyom? I thought you needed another stripper."

She's also the only one who has the balls to talk to me like that, and I love her for it. The fact that she's in a committed relationship and has never tried to sleep with me is just icing on the damn cake.

"She has experience as a waitress," I say with a shrug, taking the drink she offers. "How's she doing?"

I look around and finally spot her over at a table in the corner, dropping off a tray of beers to a group of men. The way they're eyeing her has me gripping my glass tighter than necessary. She's wearing the T-shirt I gave her, and it's hugging her like a second skin. She may not be showing off as much skin as everyone else, but there's something magnetic about her, something that makes it hard to look away.

"She's doing good," Sloane says, taking another order before turning back to me. "Amber's showing her around, and she seems to be fitting in well. She's already working her own tables and keeping up with everything. We really need another dancer," she reminds me.

"Yeah, yeah, I'll hire one," I tell her. When she just stands there and looks at me, I laugh and add, "I promise. I'll hire a couple more dancers."

"Good, because the ones you have are exhausted."

"I'll go look through a couple applications right now just to make you happy."

"This is why I stick up for you when people say you're an icy cold bastard," she says, making me laugh.

"You're wrong, though. I am an icy cold bastard."

She laughs but doesn't disagree. A group of men come up to order drinks, and I watch her turn to them with practiced ease. She flirts and laughs and works her charm, keeping everyone in a good mood, because happy men are big spenders and that benefits us all.

I watch Riley for a couple more seconds, noticing the way she's pulled her hair back into a high ponytail and added some glitter to her skin, making her sparkle when she walks under the lights. When I realize I'm staring, I force myself to look away and go to my office. I've almost made it when I hear a voice that makes my whole body cringe.

I turn and brace myself for the tall redhead who's been trying way too hard to get me to notice her. She's in full stripper gear with five-inch heels, a silver G-string, and sparkly pasties. She makes a point of making her double Ds bounce as she takes a few steps closer. Ever the performer, our Candace. Her green eyes run over me in an obvious eye-fucking way that gives me a taste of what these dancers put up with every night.

She gives me a pouty smile. "When are you going to let me give you a lap dance, Artyom?"

"Never," I say, hoping this time the answer might pierce through her very thick skull. Even if I fucked the women who work for me, I sure as hell wouldn't fuck her. She's the kind of girl you put your dick in and then a couple days later you run into her and she has your name tattooed on some part of her body.

No fucking thanks.

"Oh, come on." She bites her bottom lip in a practiced move that I've seen her do a million times when she's out on the pole. "I think we could have a good time together."

"It's never going to happen, Candace, and I'm getting tired of having to repeat myself. Get back out there. You're still on the clock."

Her face is a mix of fury and indignation, but the part of her that still wants to keep her job wins. She smiles and blows

me a kiss before walking off, swaying her hips the whole way. With a weary sigh that makes me feel every single one of my years, I go to my office and prepare to spend the next hour going through applications. It ends up taking a lot longer because my mind keeps straying to the short brunette who keeps butting into my thoughts.

Chapter 4

Riley

By the time my first shift is over, my feet are killing me, and I have a massive headache from the loud music and cheering men. My pockets are stuffed with tips, though, and I enjoyed the work more than I thought I would.

“You heading out, hon?” Sloane asks when I bring my empty tray to the bar. She and Amber had helped me out a ton tonight. They’d given me a tour, helped me put my hair up and add some sparkle, and showed me where all the bouncers would be located and told me not to hesitate to get their attention if any of the men crossed the line. I hadn’t expected the women here to be so nice, but so far everyone’s been nothing but kind.

“Yeah, I’m about to leave,” I tell her. “Thanks for all the help tonight.”

She waves off my thanks and gives me a wink. “You’re a great worker, Riley. We’re happy to have you. Go put those feet up and get some rest.”

I laugh because even in sneakers my feet feel like they’re about to fall off. I wave goodbye to the other waitresses as I make my way to the private employee rooms in the back. The place is really stunning. There’s a huge area for the dancers and waitresses to get ready, and there are even showers so they don’t have to drive home with glitter and oiled-up skin. I go to the locker they assigned me and grab my bag.

I’m surprised by how quickly I’ve gotten used to seeing nearly naked women walking around. For one ridiculous

second I'm hit with a stab of jealousy knowing that this is what Artyom sees every day. God, he must've laughed his ass off when he left here today. Over the last few hours, it's become abundantly clear why he offered me the waitressing job instead of the dancing position. The fact he even gave me a job at all is a goddamn miracle.

When I'm leaving the changing room, I ask one of the dancers who's busy adjusting the tiniest pasties I've ever seen over her nipples if she knows where I can get a copy of the schedule.

"Ask Artyom for one. I think I saw him go into his office earlier."

I thank her and walk back to his office, torn between wanting to see him again and wanting to stay as far away from him as possible. I can't start feeling things for him. He would hate me if he knew who I really was, and developing a crush on the man I can never have is only going to cause me pain in the long run. Determined to protect myself, I take a deep breath and then give a soft knock.

"Come in."

I recognize the deep voice immediately, and when I open the door and step in, I'm a little upset to realize that he really is as gorgeous as I remembered. I'd been hoping my mind had exaggerated his good looks.

He looks up from his laptop to meet my eyes. "How'd your first night go?"

"It went really well. I was just hoping to get a copy of the schedule."

He groans and scrubs a hand over his jaw. "Shit. I haven't added you to it yet. I hate making the damn schedule," he admits, giving me the barest hint of a smile.

"I used to make them at my last job. I could take a look at it if you want."

"Are you serious?"

“Yeah, I kind of like doing it. It’s a bit like a puzzle,” I say and then inwardly groan, wondering if I could possibly make myself sound like a bigger dork.

He waves me over. When I’m standing next to him, I see his screen filled with applications before he quickly pulls up the schedule, confirming my fear that they do desperately need a dancer, just not me. I blush and avoid his eyes, not wanting to see the look of pity he’s probably giving me. He scoots the laptop towards me, and I lean in to take a closer look. If the applications hadn’t been clue enough, the work hours from some of these dancers would’ve screamed the truth at me.

“They work a lot of hours,” I say, scrolling down and trying to figure out how best to arrange this. When he stays silent, I turn to look at him, sucking in a quick breath when I realize how damn close he is. “You need to hire more dancers.”

“Many people have made that abundantly clear tonight.”

His grey eyes study mine, and I’ve never wanted to run my tongue over someone’s lips so badly in my life.

“I have my reasons for why I hired you as a waitress,” he finally says.

When it becomes clear he’s not going to fill me in on those reasons, I nod and turn back to the screen. It’s hard to concentrate with him so damn close. I don’t know what cologne he’s wearing, but I want to buy a bottle of it and spray it all over my bed. I force myself to focus on the list at the bottom of the screen, showing each employee and what days they’ve requested off. I put myself on the list, filling in any gaps I see with the waitresses, and after several more minutes I step back and scoot the laptop back to him.

“Damn,” he says, looking at what I’ve done.

“If you want to email me all the info, I can make them for you. I don’t mind doing it.”

“Thank you, Riley.” He gives me another faint smile. “You’ve just relieved me of one of my least favorite tasks.”

“You’re welcome. Can you email me a copy of that one so I’ll have it?”

“Sure.”

I thank him again and grab my bag, surprised when he stands and gets his jacket and a black helmet

“Thanks again, Artyom,” I say, not at all catching on to what’s happening.

When he starts to follow me out of his office, I stop and look up at him.

“I’m walking you to your car.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that.”

“I told you before there are no exceptions to this rule.”

“I can ask one of the bouncers.”

He shuts the office door and starts walking, knowing I’ll follow. “I’m leaving anyway. It’s not a problem.”

I walk next to him, and when we hit the main area, I notice the way all the dancers and waitresses follow him with their eyes. They look to me briefly, and I can see the brief flick of curiosity, but their eyes go right back to him, because there’s no way it can’t. It’s impossible to not look at Artyom when he enters a room. Your eyes are drawn to him, whether you want them to or not.

He stops to say something to the bouncer in Russian before stopping when we’re in the crowded parking lot. “Which one is yours?”

“I’m just over there,” I say, pointing off to the left, hoping he just assumes I’m waving at one of the many cars around me and not the bus stop at the far end of the road that I’m actually headed towards. He lifts a brow and waits. A group of men are laughing as they wait in line, and I can hear the muffled thud of music drifting to us in the parking lot, growing louder every time the door is opened.

“I take the bus,” I finally say, since it’s obvious he isn’t leaving until he sees me actually get into a vehicle. “Bye,” I

call out before turning and heading past all the parked cars. I almost think he's going to let me go, but then I feel a strong hand grabbing onto my upper arm, the same spot Alex bruised, and I wince before I can stop it.

Artyom jerks his hand away like he's been burned. "Fuck, I'm sorry."

"It's okay." I pull the sleeve of my shirt down, trying to cover the bruise. "I need to go or I'm going to miss the next bus."

He looks at me like I've lost my mind. "There's no way in hell I'm letting you walk the streets alone at two in the fucking morning."

I shrug my shoulders. "I don't have a car, and the buses are going to stop running soon. I don't want to have to walk the whole way home."

When he hands me his helmet, I realize what he has planned. I'm already shaking my head no before I've even spoken a word. "No, I can't let you do this. I'm fine walking to the bus."

"Come on, Riley. This isn't up for discussion."

He turns and walks toward the black motorcycle that's parked near the front. I wondered if it was possible for him to look any sexier than he already does, and seeing him on that black bike is my answer. I try not to drool when he starts the engine and motions for me to hurry my ass up. I put the helmet on and then can't figure out the damn buckle, so I just let it hang, but when he sees it, he motions me closer and carefully tightens the strap for me so it's nice and snug. His fingers brush along my neck in the barest of touches, and I'm hoping the dark visor is making it hard for him to see my face clearly. I don't want him to know how big of an effect he's having on me.

When the helmet is to his liking, he lets go and motions for me to get on again. I straddle the bike, trying like hell to not flash the men in line while I do it. I tuck my skirt under my ass and thighs as much as I can and then very lightly rest my

hands on his waist. He grabs my wrists and pulls my arms tightly around him, forcing me closer. He squeezes my hand, letting me know this is where I should be. I think all this is a little overkill for driving me down the block, but I don't argue because he feels too damn good. Ignoring the sane part of my brain, I press my body against his and enjoy the feel of his rock-hard abs beneath my fingers and the scent of him that's surrounding me thanks to his helmet.

He races down the road, and when we whizz past the bus stop, I shout, "Hey! You missed my stop!"

I can't tell if he didn't hear me or if he's ignoring me, but either way, we pass the bus stop and keep going. The streets are mainly deserted this late at night and at the speed limit he's going, it doesn't take long before he's pulling up in front of the shabby apartment building I live in. I'm embarrassed for him to see where I live and realize he must've remembered the address from the application I filled out earlier.

As soon as he pulls us to a stop, I'm hopping off and tugging at the helmet, but the damn thing is stuck, and I can't get it to come off. Feeling my face heat up, I drop my hands in defeat and step closer to him so he can help. One side of his mouth quirks up a bit, but he doesn't say anything, just loosens the strap and gently pulls it off my head.

"Thank you," I say again. "I really need to go."

This time when he grabs me, he makes sure to avoid the arm that's hurt and grabs my other arm instead. His grey eyes search mine before he asks, "Is he in there?"

"What?"

"The asshole who left that bruise on your arm," he clarifies. "Is he in there waiting for you?"

"No," I say, knowing there's no point in trying to come up with some stupid excuse like walking into a wall when it's obvious the bruise is a handprint.

"Did a boyfriend do that?" he asks.

"No," I say, starting to fidget because I don't know if Alex is going to come by, and I really don't want him to see Artyom

here.

Those piercing grey eyes study me for a few more seconds before he pulls the helmet on his own head. He uses his feet to back himself up before pointing the bike in the direction we just came from. Like I thought, the helmet is too dark for me to see a face, but it's pointed right at me, and my heart races at the sight of it. He doesn't drive away, just watches me, and when I can't wait any longer, I give him a quick wave and then turn and run for the main door. I don't bother waiting for the old-as-dirt elevator and instead take the stairs to the third floor, running as fast as my tired legs and feet will let me.

As soon as I unlock the front door, I turn on the light and then race for my bedroom so I can peek out from the dark room to the street below. Artyom's still right where I left him. His black helmet is looking right up at my apartment, and when he doesn't drive away, I turn on my light, letting him see me. I press my hand against the window and give a soft wave. As soon as he sees me, he lowers his gaze and drives off. I smile when I realize he'd been waiting to make sure I got inside safely.

When my phone gives a buzz, I know it's my brother, and I know that I need to kill whatever schoolgirl crush I'm starting to develop for my boss because nothing can come of it, and not just because I'm positive it's one-sided. There are a million reasons why I need to keep my heart out of this. The number one being the monster who just sent me a text. I grab my phone and groan.

What happened at the club?

I hurry up and tell him I got a job as a waitress. I also tell him I'm exhausted and that I can tell him all about it tomorrow. I'm not surprised when his next text is him telling me he'll be at my place in twenty minutes. I take a quick shower while I wait, cursing my sentimental heart when I hesitate to wash my hair because I know it still carries his scent from the helmet. Reminding myself that my brother will be here any minute and that I don't want anything to make him suspicious, I scrub the hell out of my hair and body, just

managing to pull on my pajamas and step out when he and Matt walk in.

“So you managed to pull it off,” Matt says, running his eyes over the flannel jammies I’m wearing. “Well, kind of,” he adds, giving me a wink. “Not stripper material, huh?”

“They needed a waitress,” I say. “I thought you’d want me to take whatever job I could get.”

“Did you meet any of them?”

“I don’t know,” I say, filling up a glass of water. “How will I know which ones they are? There’s a ton of guys in that place all the time.”

Alex levels me with a look that makes my blood run cold. “How many Russians hang out there on a regular basis, you think?”

“I don’t know,” I whisper.

“Did you meet Artyom Morozov?”

I force myself to calmly take a drink even though my heart is racing a mile a minute. Setting my drink down, I lie my ass off and say, “I was introduced to him after I got hired so I could fill out some paperwork. He wasn’t there very long, though.”

Alex comes closer, crowding my space, reminding me how much bigger he is than me. “You know what his nickname is?”

I shake my head no, not trusting myself to speak.

“They call him Death because he’s killed so many people, including several of my own guys. He fucking enjoys killing, Riley, and we’re going to put a stop to these fuckers.” He gives my collarbone a hard tap. “And you’re going to help us.”

I don’t care what Alex says about Artyom. I know evil when I see it, and right now it’s standing right in front of me. I don’t know Artyom’s story or what he’s done in his past, but I do know the way he made me feel better after I made a complete ass of myself earlier, the way he offered me a job when he didn’t have to, and the way he made sure I made it home safely. I’m not so naïve that I don’t realize there isn’t an

innocent side to this war being waged, but I do know that whatever side Alex is on is the guiltier one.

“Every second you spend in that damn club, I want you gathering information and reporting back to me. I want names, I want you to listen to the gossip among the women, and I want to know when Artyom comes and goes.”

I nod my head yes, knowing there’s no way in hell I’m giving my brother shit, or at least not anything he can really use. I’m going to have to feed him a long line of bullshit and hope like hell it doesn’t backfire.

“Did you see his scar?” Matt asks while he helps himself to the last ice cream sandwich I’ve been saving for myself.

“What scar?” I’ve gotten so good at playing dumb that I barely have to think about it anymore.

Matt slides his finger along half his neck. “The dude’s like missing half his neck. Fucker’s hard to kill, I’ll give him that.”

“Hard but not impossible,” Alex says, turning his cold eyes back to me. “And with your help, little sis, we’re going to get him.”

When my mom first married his dad, I’d been so damn excited about getting a brother. I imagined him as a best friend, someone I could go to who would protect me and keep me safe. I’d been five and desperate for a safe, loving family. Alex had been eight and already well on his way to becoming a psychotic asshole. I realized very quickly that my mom had just exchanged one abusive husband for another, except this time he had a son. The first time I dared to annoy him, he’d kicked me so hard in the stomach that I’d thrown up. It had just gone downhill from there. I learned how to survive. I learned to keep my real self hidden so he wouldn’t ever have anything to use against me. That’s the reason I never got a pet or a best friend or even a serious boyfriend. All those things would’ve been used against me, and I didn’t think I could survive that.

Alex takes a step back, putting some distance between us. “Text me your schedule. I want to know every day you’re

working.”

“I will.” I cross my arms in front of my stomach, completely exhausted and more than ready for them to leave.

Matt hangs back when Alex heads to the door, making every female instinct I have go on high alert. He tosses the sticky ice cream wrapper on the counter before invading my space just like Alex had, except this is worse in so many ways. My brother may be a monster, and he may only be a stepbrother, but he’s never once looked at me like Matt does. That one consolation is what’s helped me to stay sane all these years. The glint in Matt’s eyes is predatory and cruel, and when he leans down, he gets close enough so his lips brush my ear.

“The offer still stands if you want to practice on my lap, Ry, and get yourself a promotion at work.”

I’m holding myself so rigid that I start to shake, and when he feels it, he gives a soft laugh.

“Let’s go,” Alex yells from the front door.

Matt presses his body against mine, letting me feel how aroused he is before giving my hair a sharp tug and backing away with a laugh.

“Later, Ry.”

It takes several minutes before I can even move, and when I can, the first thing I do is lock my door, not that that’s ever done a damn bit of good. I’ve always wondered what kind of leash my brother has Matt on, but whatever it is, it seems to be getting looser. He’s becoming more aggressive around me, and I know it’s only a matter of time before he crosses the line. With that in mind, I grab my work outfit and pull out the stack of tips I’d made. Pulling out an old, wooden box I’ve had since I was little, I stuff the ones and fives in there and hide it in my nightstand drawer under some books. My paychecks will have to go towards bills and food, but every dollar of tip money is getting stashed away, and as soon as I have enough, I’m getting the hell out of here. I’ll move to a different state

and just start over, somewhere my brother and Matt will never find me.

Crawling into bed, I check my phone, surprised to see an email from Artyom. I click on it and see that he's already sent me my schedule and a half-made one for next week. I read the message he wrote and can't help but smile.

Riley,

Here's the schedule you wanted and the giant mess that I started to make of next week's. Thanks for offering to help. I'll bump up your pay so you're being compensated for the extra work.

Good job on your first night. Sloane said you did really well.

Artyom

Before I can second-guess myself, I reply and thank him for sending me the information and for the ride home. Wrapping myself up in the covers, I turn out the light and try to sleep, but all I can think about is how good it had felt riding on the back of his bike with my arms wrapped tightly around him.

Chapter 5

Artyom

I t's been a week since I hired Riley, and I keep waiting for her to get out of my damn head, but so far I haven't had any luck. Every night when she walks out of the club, I'm waiting on my bike to drive her back to her shitty little apartment. I'm exhausted because her shifts are over at two or three in the morning, but the thought of her walking to that bus stop alone at night makes it impossible for me to just stay home and sleep.

She had to work later tonight, so it's pushing four o'clock by the time she opens the door and walks past Viktor. We've fallen into a bit of a routine where she takes the helmet I give her and then steps closer so I can buckle it for her. I run my eyes over her like I always do, checking for any new bruises, but so far I haven't found any, not any I can see at least. She dresses modestly for a strip club, usually short skirts with the club T-shirt and the same black sneakers I first saw her in. I'm not sure what I'd do if she showed up in something that showed half her ass with her tits hanging out like the other girls wear. I'm guessing nothing good. It bothers me to think about other men looking at her. It's bad enough watching them ogle her with everything covered. Every bouncer has been instructed to keep a special eye on her, but so far the customers have behaved themselves.

"Busy night?" I ask her as she gets on the back, and I try not to think about how much I enjoy the feel of her pressed up against me. She'd been so damn timid that first night, but now she gets on and immediately wraps her arms around me,

closing the distance between us and ensuring I'll be going home yet again with an uncomfortable, raging hard-on.

“Yeah, it was crazy.” Her voice is muffled from the helmet, and she sounds just as exhausted as I feel.

The drive is a short one, and it always leaves me wishing it were longer because as soon as I stop, she'll get off and run inside, making sure to give me a cute wave from the window, and then I won't see her again for at least another sixteen hours. When I turn down the street she lives on, I feel her look up and then tighten her arms around me even more.

“Don't stop,” she yells at me. “Please just keep going.”

I hear the fear in her voice and look up to see that the lights in her apartment are on. There's no one hanging around on the street or by the main entrance when I drive by, and once I turn onto the next street, she shouts over the engine, “You can just drop me off here. I can walk back.”

I shake my head no and race down the street that will take us further out of the city. She's out of her mind if she thinks I'm going to just drop her off when someone's in her apartment and she's obviously scared to death. When we're almost to the bridge, she starts looking back, her hands fidgeting with my shirt, making her fingers dance along my abs in a distracting way. Not wanting her to freak out, I reach back and give her thigh a soft squeeze. Her body stills, and when I pat her leg, keeping my hand against her skin longer than necessary, I feel her start to relax. She rests the side of her helmeted head against my back, staying like that until I pull into my driveway several minutes later.

Parking in the garage, she gets off and I try not to smile when she waits patiently with her head slightly tilted up for me to undo the buckle that she just can't seem to get the hang of. Just like usual, I allow myself the briefest of touches, barely caressing her neck with my fingers before letting go.

“What are we doing here?” she asks, looking around.

“I brought you to my house for the night.” Her eyes widen a bit, and before she can jump to the wrong conclusion, I say,

“Someone’s in your apartment, and you didn’t seem happy about it. You can sleep over here tonight. I promise you’ll be safe here.”

“Okay, I guess.” She bites her bottom lip, looking nervous as hell and reminding me of the day I first met her.

I motion for her to follow me. She eyes the house and then looks out at the lake. The sky is light enough for her to get an idea of the view, but it’s nothing like what she’ll be able to see when the sun is fully up. Unlocking the door, I step inside and motion for her to follow. Her arms are wrapped around her chest while she worries her bottom lip. I shut the door and turn on some lights. She seems so shy and small in my house, and it takes all my willpower to not close the distance and wrap my arms around her.

When she sees Beau lounging on his bed, her whole face lights up. “Can I pet him?”

I can’t help but smile at how damn hopeful she looks and at the way her whole body is poised and ready to run to him as soon as I say it’s okay.

“Of course you can pet him.” As soon as the words are out, she’s on her knees next to him, petting him and loving on him in a way that makes me uncomfortably jealous.

“What’s his name?”

“Beau. He’s a retired police dog, and trust me when I say he knows it. He’s put in his time and is more than happy to just sleep all day now.”

“He’s so beautiful.” She scratches behind his ears, and Beau looks up at her like he’s in love. She laughs when he licks her cheek.

I wait until she stands back up and then say, “I’ll give you a quick tour, but I’m guessing you won’t need it. It’s kind of small.” I lead her down the hall, pointing out the spare room that I’ve turned into a gym and the downstairs bathroom. She follows me up the stairs to my bedroom, and when she sees it, her cheeks blush an adorable shade of red and she hugs herself even tighter.

“You can sleep here.” I point at the door across from the bed. “There’s a private bathroom through there. Feel free to shower or whatever.” I scrub a hand through my hair, very aware of the fact that I’ve never invited a woman into my home. I’ve always gone to other people’s beds to fuck. I trust very few people, and I’m sure as fuck not going to share my address with just anyone, although that is apparently what I’ve just done.

“I don’t have anything to change into,” she says, and her voice is so quiet I have to strain to hear her. “And I can sleep on the couch or the floor or whatever.”

I can tell she’s being serious and that just pisses me off if she thinks for one second I’d let her do that.

“Absolutely not. You’re taking the damn bed, Riley.” I walk over to my closet and search for something that might come close to fitting her. I settle on a black T-shirt and a dark grey pair of sweats that at least have a drawstring and fitted ankles.

She takes them when I hand them to her, pressing them against her body like a shield before taking a cautious step toward the bathroom.

“Do you like omelets?” I ask, knowing she must be starving.

“Yeah, I like just about anything.”

“Good. Meet me downstairs when you’re done. Bring your dirty clothes with you, and I’ll wash them.”

I turn to leave when she says, “Thank you,” and then quickly scurries into the bathroom and shuts the door.

Trying very hard to not think about her being naked in my shower, I let Beau out and then set to work on making breakfast. I’ve managed to distract myself with chopping vegetables and cracking eggs, but when Riley walks in wearing my clothes with her hair wet and her face scrubbed clean, all that hard work disappears as all my blood rushes right back to my damn cock.

“I’m almost done,” I tell her. “Go ahead and toss your dirty clothes in the laundry room and take a seat.”

She does as I ask and then sits down at one of the barstools right across from me. Her gaze runs over the place, looking around the open kitchen and living room before taking in the wall of windows that overlook the lake.

“This place is really beautiful.”

“Thank you. I’ve only had it a few months, but I’m already attached to it.” I look at the lake that’s still mainly in shadow. “It’s peaceful here.”

“You come from Russia?”

“Yes. I was born in Moscow.”

She doesn’t ask anything else, just watches me flip the omelet before sliding it onto a plate for her. Once she has everything she needs, I start to make my own. I’m surprised when I turn around and see that she hasn’t started eating yet.

“Something wrong? Do you want me to make you something else?”

“No, I was just waiting for you.”

I smile at how damn sweet she is and then pour myself some coffee and sit down next to her. We eat in comfortable silence for a few minutes before I ask, “So how do you like working at the club?”

“It’s great. I mean, my feet are sore, but it’s great. Everyone’s been really nice. I wasn’t expecting that.”

“Are the customers behaving themselves? Sometimes they can get a bit rowdy.”

“No, it’s been fine.” She gives a small laugh and sets her fork down onto her empty plate. “I’m pretty sure I’m invisible in that place.”

“Why do you say that?”

She turns to look at me like I’m crazy. “Because the place is filled with gorgeous, mostly naked women. I’m pretty sure

the men just think their beers magically appear, but I like it like that. I'd much rather be invisible."

I don't correct her and say that the club could be filled with hundreds of naked women, and I wouldn't notice any of them because I'd be too busy staring at her and that she could never be invisible, not even if she wanted to be. Instead, I stab the last piece of my omelet and finish it off.

"I'm glad everyone is being helpful. There's usually a little bit of drama, but so far it hasn't been too bad."

She laughs and says, "The only drama is in the changing room when the dancers start talking about you." Her eyes widen like maybe she shouldn't have said anything, but when I laugh, she relaxes and gives me another smile.

"Do tell," I say, leaning back in the stool to hear the juicy gossip.

She turns her chair so she's facing me. "Everyone's curious about you. You have a reputation for being dangerous and completely untouchable. They all think you're pretty cold and distant and," she cuts herself off and shakes her head. "Sorry, I shouldn't say anything."

"Oh, come on. You can't leave it at that. Spill it, Riley."

She rolls her eyes, her face heating up again before she says, "Okay, but you didn't hear it from me."

"I won't say a word," I promise.

"Well, some of them sort of have a bet on who will be the first to get you into their bed."

"Let me guess, Candace is in on that?"

"She's definitely the most vocal one," she says, letting out another laugh.

"I don't know how to make it any more clear to that girl that it's not going to happen."

"Yeah, she has not picked up on that," Riley says, confirming what I already knew.

"She'll figure it out eventually I guess."

Riley goes quiet, fidgeting with the string at her waistband. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure,” I say, curious to know what’s eating at her. I’m expecting a question about my scar or about my other work. I’m not sure if she even knows about the Bratva. I’m not expecting what comes out of her mouth.

“Why didn’t you hire me as a dancer? I know you need one. You hired three more dancers this week, but you and I both know that’s the position I interviewed for.” She looks away, her cheeks blushing an even deeper red. “Was it because I was so bad at it? I mean, I completely understand if it was,” she quickly adds. “I’ve never danced like that before, and I’m sure it was godawful.”

I’m so surprised that it takes me a second to answer. Leaning closer, I hook a finger under her chin and turn her face back to mine. Her blue eyes widen slightly when she realizes how close we are.

“Do you want to strip at the club?”

“No,” she whispers.

“Then why does it matter?”

“I’d just like to know how big of a fool I made of myself that day.”

“You didn’t make a fool of yourself, and I didn’t hire you because I didn’t want you dancing.” I run my thumb over her jawline, noticing the way her breath gives a small hitch. “Can we just leave it at that?”

She gives me a small nod, and I want so badly to close the distance between us, but I don’t. Instead, I ask, “Who gave you the bruise?”

“It’s nothing,” she quickly says, trying to turn away, but I grip her chin tighter and force her to keep her eyes on mine. I don’t know why I feel so damn protective of her, but I do. I’m not a knight in shining armor kind of guy. I stay out of other people’s business and I expect them to do the same to me, but every part of me is screaming that I need to keep her safe, and it annoys the hell out of me that she’s not letting me do that.

“I can help,” I finally say when it’s obvious she’s not going to be spilling all her secrets to me. “When you’re ready, I can help you.”

She gives a small nod, and I know this is the moment when I’m supposed to let her go, but my hand doesn’t move. Her full lips part in a soft gasp when I lean closer, but right before our lips can touch, she pulls away before I can kiss her.

“I’m so sorry,” she says, scooting down off the stool and backing up toward the stairs, more than ready to get away from me. “Thank you so much for everything, but I should get some sleep.”

She turns and practically runs out of the room, and I’m left stunned and hard and wondering what in the fuck just happened. Never in my life has a woman turned away from me. I can’t say I care for it. I know I didn’t imagine the desire in her eyes. She wanted to kiss me, but she’d held back, and not knowing why is going to drive me crazy.

I scrub a hand over my face and get up, wanting to wash her clothes so she at least has something to wear when she wakes up. Grabbing her skirt, I toss it into the washer with the pink sports bra and T-shirt, but when I get to her thong, my hand stills. I never thought in a million years that I’d be the pervy guy who smells a woman’s underwear without her knowledge, but nothing on earth could stop me from bringing her used thong to my nose and inhaling her scent.

“Fuck,” I groan in Russian when I fill my lungs with the smell of her pussy. It’s the most intoxicating thing I’ve ever smelled, and before I can even think about it, I’m undoing my pants and freeing my cock in the goddamn laundry room with her panties pressed to my face.

Fisting my shaft, I start to work myself, desperate to come and get rid of this aching hard-on I’ve had since she walked out of the club tonight. I’m covered in my own arousal, making it easy to slide my hand up and down the length of my cock. Images of Riley grinding against my lap flash through my mind, mixing with the feel of her when she presses her

body tight against mine on the motorcycle, and the shy grin she gives me when she meets my eyes.

The scent of her pussy consumes me, and when I run my tongue over the strip of fabric that I know was just nestled against her pussy, my balls tense, letting me know I'm only seconds away. Bringing her panties to my cock, I wrap the lace around my head and then come so damn hard my vision darkens at the edges. Pressing my hand against the washer, I bend over and gasp, coating her panties in my seed, and fuck if it doesn't feel like the most *right* thing I've ever done in my life.

When I'm finally empty, I let out a shaky breath and stare at the mess I've just made. What in the hell is going on with me? I'm Death for fuck's sake. I kill people for a living. I have women begging to be with me. I'm not the kind of guy who jerks off to stolen panties while hiding in the motherfucking laundry room, but evidently that's the kind of guy Riley is driving me to become.

With a frustrated groan, I toss the thoroughly used panties in the washer and tuck my cock back inside my pants. Telling myself it's just because it makes sense and not at all because I like the thought of our clothes mingling together in the wash, I throw in some of my dirty jeans and shirts before tossing in the detergent and starting it up. God, Yuri would laugh his ass off if he could see me now.

While our clothes wash, I let Beau in so he can resume his sleep schedule and then clean up the kitchen and have another cup of coffee. I doubt I'll be able to get any sleep anyway with Riley up in my bed. Checking my emails, I read the one from Jinx letting me know that he still doesn't have anything on Douglas, and then scan the texts from Sergei. Last night, we got two more of Douglas's men. If he's not careful, he's not going to have much of a crew left. You'd think the stupid fucker would take the hint. Some people are slow learners, though. I'm confident he'll eventually see reason. It might take killing all his men, but we'll get there.

After I throw the clothes in the dryer, I walk out into the kitchen and then freeze when I hear Riley scream. Fear runs

through me as I grab one of the guns I keep hidden around the house and race up the stairs with Beau at my heels. Every instinct I have tells me to bust through the door to get to her, but my training runs too deep to let me do something so reckless. I stop by the door and scan the hall before stopping to listen. Beau looks at me, waiting for my command. I hold my hand up, and I see the proud police dog he once was come out when he keeps his eyes on me and his body rigid and ready to strike should the need arise. I strain to hear anything, but the house is silent. Taking a deep, steadying breath, I open the door, aiming the gun and scanning the room, searching for anyone who might be hiding and waiting to surprise me. When I'm sure the room is empty, I lower my gun and turn to Riley who's in a deep sleep and completely oblivious to the fact that I'm standing over her with a loaded gun, so worried about her I can barely think.

She's kicked off the covers and is sprawled over my bed. Her shirt is bunched up, revealing the smooth skin of her stomach, and I have the sudden, insane urge to lean down and run my tongue over her. When she starts to thrash around and scream again, I set the gun down and lean closer. Not wanting to scare her, I kiss her temple and brush her hair aside.

"It's okay," I whisper. "You're safe here, *milaya*."

I call her honey like it's second nature, which it most definitely is not, and kiss the top of her head when she gives another whimper. She softens when I tell her again in Russian that she's safe. I'm about to pull away when she surprises the hell out of me by grabbing onto my forearm and hugging it tightly against her body. She turns on her side, taking my arm with her, and I'm forced to either risk waking her by pulling away or crawl in bed beside her. I choose the latter and carefully lay down next to her, trying my best to not wake her up. Beau jumps up onto the bed, keeping his ears perked up as he rests his head by her foot.

When she feels me behind her, she snuggles up against me, putting her ass right up against my quickly hardening cock and hugs my arm tighter. She makes it clear that there's no way in fuck I'm going anywhere anytime soon. She may have pushed

me away earlier, but sleeping Riley obviously knows what she wants.

I brush her hair aside, running my eyes over her, drinking in the sight of her, memorizing every detail, not wanting to forget a single second of this. Her eyes flick rapidly behind her eyelids. She has a death grip on my arm, and I wish like hell I could take the pain from her. I don't know what kind of nightmare she's having right now, but she should always be safe when she's with me, even while sleeping.

"I'm right here, baby," I tell her in Russian since she seems to like the sound of it. Her soft whimper has me tightening my arms around her, wanting her to feel safe, wanting her to know that I'm right here with her and that I'll die before I'll ever let anything bad happen to her.

My eyes fall to the yellowing bruise on her arm, a very vivid reminder that something bad is happening to her, and that I haven't stopped it. My first instinct is to demand answers and never let her out of my sight, but then I remember that she barely knows me and probably wouldn't appreciate my overbearing efforts.

She lets out another soft whimper in her sleep. Her fingers dig into my arm while her small body shakes against mine. I bring my face to hers and whisper to her in Russian again, comforting her on some level because her body instantly calms at the sound of my voice. It's a reaction that's completely at odds with how most people react to me. Usually the sound of my voice makes grown men piss themselves because they know that if I'm around, that means their death is too. I'm the end of the line, and they know it, but Riley doesn't see me that way. She feels safe around me, and it sparks some sort of protective, long-buried gene that I never knew I possessed.

I run my nose along her cheek, breathing in the scent of her, loving that she already smells like me. She used my soap and shampoo, and now she's wrapped in my blankets and cocooned against my body. I feel like I've marked her as mine in some small way, and I'm surprised by how damn happy it makes me, by how *right* it feels.

Telling myself that I'm just going to close my eyes for a second, I rest my head next to hers on the pillow and try to ignore how good her ass feels pressed tightly against my cock and the way her tits are snug against my arm. For the first time in my life, I fall asleep with a woman in my bed.

“Artyom?”

I hear Riley's voice from far away and wrap my arms tighter around her, burying my face in her neck and groaning at how damn good she feels. Something far in the back of my mind is telling me that I need to let go of her, but my brain is foggy as hell from sleep, and all I can think about is getting her closer.

I kiss her neck, giving her a soft bite when I hear her moan. The taste of her washes over me, consuming me and pulling a groan from my body.

“Fuck, I need you so badly,” I whisper in Russian against her skin, kissing and licking the nape of her neck. “If I don't get inside you, I'm going to lose my fucking mind.”

“Artyom,” she says again, reaching up and running her hands through my hair. “I think you're still sleeping.”

Her words are like a bucket of cold water being thrown on me. My whole body stills when I realize what the fuck I'm doing. My hand is cupping one of her tits, my hard cock is pressed against her ass, and my mouth is still on her neck. My only comfort is that I'd been speaking Russian so my humiliation isn't quite as absolute as it could've been.

I roll over with a groan, slowly disentangling myself from the body that I desperately want pressed against mine and scrub a hand over my face.

“God, I'm sorry, Riley,” I say, fully awake now with my cock just as hard as it was last night when I fell asleep.

“It's okay.” She sits up, being careful to avoid my eyes. “We really overslept. I need to be at work soon.”

I look at my watch and can't believe how much time has passed. “Fuck,” I groan, sitting up and grabbing my phone to check if I missed anything important. All I see are a few texts

from Yuri telling me that he'll be at the club tonight, but other than that, it looks like I didn't miss much.

Riley walks around the bed and then freezes in place. I look up and see her staring at the gun I set on the nightstand last night right before I made the crazy decision to lay down with her.

"You screamed in your sleep last night." I give a soft laugh. "Scared the hell out of me."

"I did?"

"I came up here to check on you, and you kind of grabbed my arm and wouldn't let go."

Her embarrassed blush is fucking adorable, and I can't help but remember the way she'd moaned this morning when I'd kissed her neck.

"I'm sorry," she whispers and then gives a small laugh. "I feel like I'm always saying that to you."

I look up and meet her eyes from where I'm still sitting on the bed. "Then stop. You have nothing to apologize for. I didn't mean to fall asleep. I can't even remember the last time I slept this long."

I know I should probably apologize again for what just happened, but I can't bring myself to say the words because I'm not fucking sorry, not in the slightest. If I thought she'd welcome me yanking her back into bed and ripping her clothes off, I'd be doing that right this second. She looks sad, though, and nervous, and I don't know what in the hell to do to change that.

"Do you have my clothes?" she finally asks. "I don't want to be late for work."

I stand, hoping she might not notice my stubborn cock that refuses to go down. "I'm sure your boss will forgive you," I say, giving her a wink. "I've heard he's a pretty reasonable guy."

She smiles and shakes her head. "I heard he's mysterious and standoffish and impossible to get into bed."

Her face heats up even more when she realizes what she just said. I laugh and grab my gun, tucking it in the waistband of my jeans next to the small of my back. Glancing at the bed, I say, “Looks like you managed to prove one of those wrong.”

Before she can say anything, I walk out the door and head downstairs so I can grab her clothes, smiling when I hear her soft footsteps behind me.

Chapter 6

Riley

Every time I think I've reached my embarrassment limit with Artyom, the bar is somehow miraculously raised.

Waking up in his arms had felt like a dream. It had felt so damn perfect that it had taken several minutes before I realized that it was real and that I wasn't just imagining the feel of his hard body pressed against mine. And when he'd started to kiss me, God, I'd nearly orgasmed just from that. His cock had felt impossibly big against my ass, and he'd been cupping my tit like he owned the damn thing.

But he'd been asleep, probably thinking he was with one of his past lovers, and I'd never felt so stupid in my life. He'd rolled off me quick enough, and now all I can think about is getting to work. I need space between us because I can't think when he's around. He consumes my every waking thought, and when I'm near him, nothing else matters. It's dangerous, and I'm going to end up paying the price for it.

I can't believe I'd grabbed onto him last night. I've had night terrors on and off my whole life, but I've never had anyone care enough to come check on me, let alone curl up next to me and stay with me the whole night.

He didn't really have a choice, I remind myself. I'd practically forced him to spend the night with me. I cringe at the idea of it and follow him into the laundry room. I don't ask about the gun. He doesn't know that I know he's part of the Fedorov Bratva, and I don't want to ask any questions that will give me information that Alex will try and get out of me and use against him. I want to stay completely and utterly in the

dark. If I don't know anything, then it can't be forced out of me.

Artyom empties the dryer, pulling out a mix of our clothes and dropping them into a hamper. I like seeing it more than I should, this brief glimpse of domestic bliss, a what-if moment that lets me for one second pretend that we're a couple and that everything is normal and happy, but that's not what this is, and we both know it.

I dig out my clothes, letting my fingers linger on his for a few precious seconds before pulling away. "Thanks. I'll just go hurry up and change."

"I'm going to grab a quick shower when you're done."

I follow him back to his room and slip into his bathroom. "Oh good God," I mutter when I see my reflection. My hair is a mess, and I've got a crease running down the side of my face from the blanket. Ignoring my reflection, I hurry up and pee and then run a brush through my hair. I don't have my makeup here, so there's nothing I can do about that.

"There's a new toothbrush in the top right drawer if you want it," Artyom hollers out to me.

"Thanks," I yell, grateful that I won't have to make do with just using my finger. After I've brushed my teeth, I'm not sure what to do with it, so I set it in the holder next to his. He'll probably throw it out, but it lets me pretend for a couple more seconds. I hurry up and change clothes, putting the ones he let me borrow in the hamper before walking out.

"I'll just be a minute," he says, walking past me. "I have some stuff for sandwiches if you want to make one."

"Oh, that's okay," I quickly say, but he cuts me off.

"You need to eat, Riley. You're scheduled to work all night. You'll be starving."

I'm surprised that he knows my work schedule but assume he glanced at it when he checked his phone after I woke him up.

"Okay. Do you want one?"

He smiles, and I'm once again stunned by how damn gorgeous he is. His stubble is thicker today since he hasn't shaved, and I want to touch him so badly it's like a physical need, far stronger than my desire for food or water.

"Sure, thanks. Beau's eating his breakfast, but can you let him out if he wants to go?"

"Yeah, of course."

He thanks me again before shutting the door. I hurry up and check my phone, groaning when I see all the missed texts and calls from my brother and even a few from Matt. They're super pissed, and I know I'll pay for it later, but I don't want to deal with it now. I send a quick text to Alex, telling him that I ended up working extra hours and was so exhausted that they let me sleep on a cot in the back room at the club. I have no idea if he'll buy it or not.

Not wanting my brother to intrude on these last few moments with Artyom, I push him from my mind and walk back downstairs, wanting to take a few seconds to investigate a little bit. I'll never be here again, and I want to know every detail about him, not his Bratva business or the club or anything to do with his work life, but *him*. I want to know everything about the man who took me into his home because he knew I was scared and then held me all night long.

The wall of windows along the back of his house is jaw-droppingly beautiful. The sun is starting to set, making the lake look golden, and a crazy image of us sitting out on the balcony one day, having a drink and watching the boats go by flits through my mind before I push it away because it's too painful to think about. He'll share all this with some other woman, but it won't be me. It *can't* be me. I roll my eyes at my own ridiculous thoughts. It's not like he declared his love for me or anything. He just felt sorry for me and let me stay the night. I thought last night he was leaning in to kiss me, but I've gone over it so many times in my head that now I'm even doubting if that was what I thought it was. He probably just leaned forward to get comfortable in the barstool, and then I freaked out and left like a moron.

I let Beau out when he whines and then quickly scan the room, taking in the lack of personal items and leather furniture. The only thing that speaks to the man who lives here is a bookcase in the corner filled to overflowing. Walking closer, I smile at the worn paperbacks. I run my fingers over the cracked spines, seeing a mix of Russian and English titles. I feel like I'm getting a private glimpse of the man that's so damn intriguing and unreadable. There are a lot of Russian classics, but there are other genres mixed in. It seems he has a soft spot for classics, mysteries, and horror. I allow myself one more second to touch his books before hurrying back to the fridge so I can start the sandwiches.

I'm surprised to find the fridge stocked with tons of fruits and vegetables and some kind of fancy-looking jug of lemonade. I grab the lunchmeat, cheese, and some condiments before finding the bread in a cabinet with actual oats and granola and shit. I guess that explains his killer physique. I laugh when Beau suddenly appears at the backdoor when I open a package of lunchmeat. Letting him in, I give him a good pet and then snap a couple of photos because he's just so damn cute. I quickly make him my lock screen photo and then kiss the top of his head.

"You're one lucky dog, Beau," I tell him, envious of all the time he gets to spend with Artyom.

Standing back up, I study the food in front of me. I have no idea how he likes his sandwiches, so I just make him what I like and hope for the best. I'm just adding the lettuce and tomatoes when he walks in looking so damn sexy with his wet hair and freshly shaved face that all I can do is gawk at him. I nearly moan when I get a whiff of his cologne. He's in jeans and a black T-shirt again, and he looks so damn delicious. I'd much rather have him for a meal.

"I hope this is okay," I say, handing him a plate.

He eyes the cucumber I cut up and put on the side and smiles. "Thanks, Riley. This is great."

"Do you mind if I get a glass of your fancy lemonade?"

He laughs and sits down. “Not at all as long as you pour me a glass too.”

I hunt down the glasses and pour us each one before sitting next to him at the counter like I did last night. It’s comfortable being with him. Even though I’m still embarrassed and intimidated by him, I feel safe with him in a way that I never have with anyone else. With his reputation and with the things that Alex told me about him, I guess maybe I should feel nervous sitting next to a man who’s killed so many people, but I don’t. He’s shown me more kindness than anyone else ever has, and I have the sudden urge to tell him everything I know.

When he turns his beautiful, grey eyes on me, I know I can’t do it. I don’t want to see those eyes change to anger when they’re directed at me. I couldn’t bear to have him look at me like that. If he knew who my stepbrother was, he wouldn’t want anything to do with me. I’m sure it’ll happen one day, and I dread that moment like nothing else on earth, but I can’t do it now. Today can’t be that day.

“Thanks for making me lunch.”

“Thanks for letting me stay and for taking care of me.”

His eyes run over me before he says, “You can come here anytime you need to. I hope you know that.”

I nod, not trusting myself to speak, and then get up to put our dishes in the sink.

“I guess we should get going.” He stands up and grabs his leather jacket before coming up to me and holding it up for me to step into.

When I hesitate, he says, “You shouldn’t be on the back of a motorcycle with so much skin showing. Plus, it’s a little chilly today.”

“Don’t trust your driving skills?” I say with a smile.

His face turns serious as he looks down at me. “You’re safe with me. Don’t ever doubt that. It’s everyone else I don’t trust.”

I slip into his jacket, closing my eyes briefly when I'm surrounded by his scent. When I open them, he's studying me, but his face is unreadable, a mask that I can't even begin to decipher. He hooks a finger under my chin for the briefest of touches before letting go and stepping back.

I give Beau another good pet, hoping like hell I get to see him again and smile when he wags his tail and licks my arm. When I turn back to Artyom, he's studying me with a sexy grin on his face.

"I'm pretty sure he likes you more than me."

"That's impossible," I say, making him laugh as he opens the door for me. We leave his house together, walking down the cute, rocky path to the garage that matches his house. They're both slate grey with white trim, looking like something you'd see along the coast of Maine. I love it. I love everything about the place he's chosen to make his home, and I hate to leave it. My stomach knots up at the idea of driving away and never seeing it again.

I stay quiet as he tightens the helmet for me, giving my neck the same brief touch he always does before I get on the back of his bike and wrap my arms around him. It's the one time I have an excuse to touch him, and I take full advantage of it. Scooting closer, I tighten my arms around him, softly moaning at the peaks and grooves of his gorgeous body. He gives my hand a soft squeeze before starting the bike and driving us away from the only place I've ever felt at peace. I can feel his gun resting against the small of his back, but it doesn't scare me like it probably should. Knowing he'd grabbed it before running up the stairs to check on me makes me feel safe. He's the only person who's ever come to my defense, even if it was just a nightmare he was protecting me from.

He speeds up as I rest the side of my helmet against his back, smiling when he reaches back and gives my thigh a soft squeeze like he'd done the other night. I pat his firm stomach, letting him know I appreciate it. The wind picks up, and when his shirt whips up a bit, my fingers hit bare skin, and it's like a jolt of pure ecstasy racing through me. I press tighter against

him while my fingers explore the peaks and grooves of his abs. I'm so lost to the moment, that it takes me a second to realize he's pulled off onto a side road.

When he stops the bike, he reaches around and grabs me, pulling me around so I'm straddling him before my brain can even catch up to what the hell is happening. His fingers make quick work of the helmet, and as soon as it's off, his mouth is on mine. One strong arm is wrapped around my back, holding me tightly to him, and his other hand cups the back of my head.

His tongue parts my lips, coaxing my mouth open before delving inside with a hunger that pulls a deep moan from me as my heart races and my poor thong gets soaked yet again. I run my hands over his shoulders, wishing I could explore every inch of him. His kiss is possessive and hungry and dominant, and when he gives my bottom lip a soft bite, I swear I have a mini orgasm. When he feels my body shudder, he smiles against my lips and lets out a soft laugh.

“Why did you turn from me last night, *milaya*?”

He's so close I can feel the breath of his words against my wet lips, and it sends another rush of pleasure all through me, making it hard to think.

“I didn't think it was possible that you could want me,” I admit.

He looks at me like he thinks I'm joking. When I don't laugh, his eyes soften. He caresses my cheek with his thumb. “How can you not know how badly I want you? Ever since you walked into the club, you're all I can fucking think about. You think I wait to give rides home to all my employees?” he asks with a smile playing at his lips.

“I just thought you felt sorry for me, that you were just being nice.”

“Yeah, I'm not that guy, Riley.” He laughs and caresses my cheek again. “I'm sorry if that disappoints you, but I'm not the kind of guy who goes around doing random acts of kindness just for the warm fuzzies it gives me.”

“You don’t disappoint me. I’m glad you didn’t just do it because you felt you had to.”

He rests his forehead against mine, and the moment is so intimate that I completely forget we’re parked on the side of a street and in full view of anyone who may be passing by. Artyom has always been able to make everything else disappear. Nothing else can exist when he’s near me.

“I didn’t hire you as a dancer because I couldn’t stand the thought of anyone else getting to see you like that,” he confesses. He sighs and lets out a soft laugh. “God, Riley, watching you come on my lap was the sexiest goddamn thing I’ve ever seen.”

My face heats up at the memory. He smiles and cups my reddened cheeks.

Before I can stop myself, I blurt out, “Did you know it was me this morning?”

“What do you mean?”

“When you were still asleep, you kissed my neck and tightened your grip on me. You said something in Russian.” I pull back so I can get a better look at him. “Did you know it was me?”

“Who the hell else would I think it was?” He raises a dark brow at me, waiting for my answer.

I shrug and try to look away from his intense stare, but he moves his head with my gaze, keeping his hands on my face and staying in my line of sight.

“No, no, you’re not looking away from me now, *milaya*. You thought I was thinking about another woman?”

“It crossed my mind,” I say, and he gives a small smirk at my sarcasm.

“I knew it was you. There wasn’t any moment when I wasn’t fully aware that it was you in my bed, Riley.”

I smile and fist his shirt, pulling him closer. He runs his hands under my hair and along my scalp, fisting the long

strands hard enough to pull my head back. Keeping me held in place, he brings his mouth to my neck.

“I like that you smell like me,” he murmurs against my skin.

I grab onto his shoulders, digging my fingers into the hard muscle when he starts to kiss and lick his way up my neck, stopping to give me small, soft nips along the way. By the time he gets to my jawline, I’m breathing heavily and about two seconds away from stripping my clothes off and begging him to fuck me right here in the street.

“Artyom,” I whisper right before he catches my bottom lip between his teeth and gives me a hard enough bite to make me gasp. He lets out a soft laugh before running his tongue along mine, already kissing me like he owns me, like every part of me belongs to him. My body responds to every touch, every lick, every soft bite, and I’ve never wanted to be consumed by someone as badly as I want to be devoured by him. I want him to claim me until there’s nothing left, until he’s left an indelible mark on me that will never leave me so that I’ll always be his. I never want to be anyone else’s.

He pulls back with a groan, and when he looks at me, the desire in his eyes matches exactly how I feel. We both want more. We both *need* more, but now isn’t the time.

“This isn’t even close to being over,” he says, loosening his grip on my hair and giving me one last kiss before grabbing the helmet and carefully putting it back on me. Once the strap is buckled, he lifts the visor long enough to give me a quick kiss on the nose before slapping it shut and helping me to scoot back behind him.

The ride is different this time. Every chance he gets, he touches me, whether it’s a quick squeeze of my thigh, a caress of my calf, or just resting his hand on mine. Some part of him is always reaching for me, and I love it. When we pull into the club, my arms tighten harder around him, not quite ready to let him go. He pulls into his usual spot up front, and as soon as the bike is off, I give him one last squeeze before hiking my leg over and standing up beside him. I’m not sure if he wants

to make this known or not, so I keep some space between us and wait for him to help me with the helmet.

He sees what I'm doing but doesn't say anything, just arches that dark brow at me and unclasps the strap, pulling the helmet off my head.

"Afraid to be seen with the boss?" A grin plays at his lips, and I wonder yet again how anyone can be so damn sexy.

"I was thinking more of your reputation," I say, making him laugh.

"You're a little late to save that, I'm afraid." He pulls me close and kisses me. It's a slow, deep kiss, a *You're mine, and I don't give a fuck who sees it* kind of kiss, and it nearly knocks me on my ass. I know this is a dangerous game, and I have no desire to play it. I owe my brother nothing, and I can't keep the truth from Artyom. I thought I could hide it longer, but I can't. It's not right, and it's gnawing at me and making me feel guilty as hell.

"I need to talk to you later about something. Will you be around?"

I can tell he's curious and wants me to just spill it now, but I don't want to rush this conversation, so he just nods and says, "Of course. I'll be waiting for you."

When I turn my head, I see Candace glaring at us. She's standing by the front door with her arms crossed over her ample chest. Artyom follows my gaze and groans at the sight of her.

"She doesn't look happy," he whispers close to my ear and wraps an arm around me, leading me into the club.

I expect her to go back inside, but she doesn't. It's too early for a line outside, so for the moment, we're the only ones around, and she looks angrier than I've ever seen her.

As soon as we're close enough, she hisses, "Are you fucking kidding me, Artyom?"

His whole body stiffens beside me, and when I look up at him, I see his face has completely transformed. I'm no longer

looking at the Artyom who just cupped my face and kissed me sweetly as I almost came on his bike. This is the Artyom that everyone's afraid of, and for one horrible moment I imagine him giving me that same cold look when I tell him the truth about who I am. The thought makes me feel sick.

"Go inside, Candace," he says, and I barely recognize the hard tone of his voice.

"You're choosing her?" she yells, pointing a long, manicured nail at my chest. "Over me?"

I want to say, *hey, I'm just as surprised as you, Candace*, but I don't. I keep my mouth shut as Artyom gently cups the back of my neck and kisses the top of my head. His thumb strokes my skin in a light caress that instantly calms me. It's in such sharp contrast to the way he's looking at Candace.

"Yes," he tells her, the hard tone of his voice making it clear he is not happy with her. "I'm choosing her."

"She has small tits and can't even fucking dance," she yells, making my face turn a bright shade of red. I mean, I know it's true, but she doesn't have to call me out like that in the fucking parking lot.

Artyom's fingers tighten for the briefest of seconds before they relax and he goes back to stroking my neck with his thumb.

"You're fired, Candace. Get the fuck out of my club and don't ever fucking come back."

Her mouth drops open. "You can't fire me."

He lets out a harsh laugh. "I just did. You have five minutes to get your shit and get out, or I'll have one of the bouncers throw your ass out on the street. You're done here. I put up with your pathetic attempts to get me to fuck you, but I will not tolerate you insulting Riley."

Candace glares at me with more hatred than I thought she had in her, and I realize how much I've underestimated her. Artyom sees it and steps between us, blocking me from her view.

“Don’t fuck with me, Candace. Stare at her like that again, and I’ll make sure the only job you’ll ever be able to get in this city is as a truck-stop whore out on the interstate.”

I can’t see Candace’s face, but I can guess what it looks like. I’d be terrified of Artyom if all that anger was directed at me, but even as he’s threatening her, he’s reaching back and grabbing onto my hand, giving me a reassuring squeeze that’s so at odds with what’s happening in front of him.

“Go,” he tells her, and this time she keeps her mouth shut and runs inside to clean out her locker.

He turns to me and cups my face. His eyes are soft again, running over me to make sure I’m okay. “I’m sorry you had to hear that.”

“I mean, she’s not wrong,” I say, and immediately wish I hadn’t when I see the look he gives me.

“Explain,” he says, giving me that intense stare that always makes me squirm a bit.

“It just makes sense that you’d be with someone like her.” I shift my weight and drop my eyes before adding, “And not someone like me.”

“That’s insulting, *milaya*. She’s an absolute ass, and I’ve never wanted to fuck her. Is this because of what she said?”

He strokes my cheek with his thumb. “Look at me, baby.”

The term of endearment has my eyes jumping to his.

“I love your body. I thought that was painfully obvious this morning when you woke up with my cock digging into your ass, but I guess I’ll need to be a bit more vocal about that in the future.”

My breath hitches when he slides a hand down to cup one of my tits and gives a deep groan. I still can’t believe that this gorgeous man is staring at me like he wants to rip my clothes off and fuck me right here in the parking lot. I gasp when he runs his thumb over my hard nipple, sending a shock of pleasure straight between my legs.

“I love your tits, Riley. You have no idea how much I fucking love them.” He gives me a squeeze and then smiles when I moan and lean into the hand that’s still cupping my cheek. “You drive me crazy, *milaya*.”

Leaning closer, he gives my bottom lip a soft, teasing bite. “I can’t wait to wrap my mouth around one of your small, perky tits. I wonder how much I’ll be able to fit in my mouth. Do you think I’ll be able to get it all in?”

He doesn’t wait for an answer, probably because he can tell there’s no way in hell I’ll be able to form words at the moment. His tongue runs over my bottom lip, pulling another breathy moan from me.

“I can’t wait to find out what you like, sweetheart, what makes you writhe and moan.” He drags his teeth along my lip before giving it a suck. “What makes you beg.”

He pulls back and gives a soft laugh at my dazed expression. Running his thumb over my achy nipple, he says, “Someday very soon I’m going to get the answers to all those questions, little one.”

I nod my head, making him smile. He pulls me in for one more kiss. It’s hungry and deep and filled with promises of what’s to come, and it’s over far sooner than I’d like it to be. Stepping back, he gives me a wink and grabs my hand, leading me into the club and making me wonder how in the hell I’m going to walk this tightrope I’ve managed to get myself on.

Chapter 7

Artyom

I lead an adorable, blushing Riley into the club and then reluctantly let her go so she can get ready for her shift. I'm not sure what in the hell has gotten into me, but I don't want to let her go, and I sure as hell don't want to let her go so she can serve drinks to a bunch of horny men all night long. Considering we haven't even fucked yet, it seems a bit premature to demand she quit her job, but it's coming. I'll have a stroke if I have to sit here night after night worrying about her.

It should freak me out that I'm actually making plans for a future, but it doesn't. Before Riley, making two dates with a woman was way more commitment than I was willing to give, but now I'm turning my schedule upside down to drive her home after work and already deciding she's not going to be able to keep this job.

"You look like you could use one of these," Sloan says, pouring me a vodka when I take a seat at the bar.

"Thanks." I swallow it down and motion for another.

"Candace looked a bit pissed when she walked through."

I laugh because I know she's fishing for details but doesn't want to come right out and ask. "I fired her."

"I picked up on that," she says, resting her hands against the bar and waiting for me to say more.

"I got tired of her constantly trying to fuck me."

“Please,” she says with a laugh. “They all try to fuck you, Artyom. They always have.”

“It’s the neck tattoo. Makes the girls go wild.”

She rolls her eyes at me. “Fine, don’t tell me, but bartenders see all. I can guess what it’s about.” She smirks and gives a pointed look to the door Riley is just now emerging from.

I keep my face blank, but my eyes drift over to Riley, unable to resist looking at her. Sloane laughs and goes back to serving drinks while I sit back and keep an eye on the woman who’s so quickly consumed me in a way that no one else ever has. The club is starting to get busy, and I know it’s just going to get rowdier as the night goes on. Several dancers are on stage, others are positioned at the poles near the tables, but I don’t see any of them. The short brunette with big, blue eyes effortlessly manages to hold my full attention.

When she spots me, I give her a wink and then smile at the blush she gives. She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear and ducks her head, a shy smile playing at her lips as she drops off another round of drinks. I notice the guy closest to her checking her ass out and my hand tightens into a fist. Yeah, she’s definitely quitting this fucking job as soon as possible.

She ignores whatever the hell they’re saying to her and goes to take the order of some jackass who’s hollering and waving her over. His eyes are glassy from too much alcohol, and I’m already standing and making my way towards her because a lifetime of trusting my instincts tells me I’m not going to like what comes next.

I weave a path through the tables, ignoring everything and everyone except the fucker who’s very unwisely decided to grab onto my girl. The yell she gives is swallowed up by the sultry music blaring from hidden speakers. She pushes him away, but he’s not letting go. By the time I reach him, I’m angrier than is safe, and it takes every ounce of willpower I possess to not kill him. I compromise and grab onto his arm hard enough to make his whole body still as he turns his drunken eyes up to mine.

“What the fuck, man?” he slurs at me.

I lean closer so he can hear me. “You don’t get to touch her, jackass.”

Keeping a tight grip on his arm, I grab one of his fingers. “This is to help you remember,” I say before breaking it.

The scream he gives manages to rise above the music and catches the attention of the crowded tables next to us. He holds his bent finger up with tears in his eyes like a fucking pussy and then looks at me like he can’t believe I just dared to do that.

“Need another reminder?” I ask him, reaching for the next finger.

“No!” he yells, tugging his arm back to cradle it against his chest.

I point to Riley, whose mouth has dropped open as she takes in what’s just happened. “You don’t get to touch her,” I say. “Ever.”

He nods his head rapidly, still cradling his arm with his bent finger swelling more with each passing second.

“Say it.”

“I don’t get to touch her,” he quickly says, and then he looks at her and adds, “I’m sorry.”

“Get the fuck out of here before I decide to remind you of that nine more times.”

He jumps up from his seat and runs for the door. I see Viktor laughing as he runs past him and out of the club. I turn back to a stunned Riley and grab her hand, leading her back to my office. She follows me, nearly tripping on her own feet as she speed walks to keep up. I’m so hard I can barely think, and as soon as I pull her into my office and shut the door, I’m pressing her against the wall and kissing her like I’ll never be able to get enough of her.

She whimpers and opens her mouth for me, and when I give her tongue a suck, her whole body shudders. Her hands run through my hair, making a shiver run down my spine and

my balls tense. My need to bury myself inside her is all I can think about. My cock strains against my jeans, but I don't want my first time with her to be a quickie at the club. I want all night with her. I want days with her, weeks, months, years, and that's when I realize how far gone I really am.

"Fuck," I groan against her lips. "What the hell are you doing to me, *milaya*?"

She gives my bottom lip a suck that has me rethinking my position on quickies at the club. Before I lose all control and rip her clothes off, I break our kiss and drop to my knees. Grabbing onto her hips, I look up at her as I slowly bunch her skirt up until it's only her soaked thong separating me from what I need.

She looks at me, a perfect mix of desire and shyness, and when I bring my face to her lace-covered pussy and give her a kiss, she lets out a gasp and reaches for my head. I nuzzle my face against her, breathing her in until nothing else exists. Her fingers run through my hair, and the soft pants of her breath have me growling and roughly yanking her thong down.

"Fuck, baby," I groan when I see her pussy for the first time. She's not shaved, but her hair is trimmed so it's not hiding anything from my view, and the poor thing is soaking wet.

"I'm sorry if it's not how you like it," she whispers, and the worry in her voice has me lifting my eyes to hers. She looks so damn nervous, like she's never had a man's head between her legs before. I quickly push that thought away because thinking about another man with her is not something I can handle right now. "I mean, if you'd rather I was shaved or whatever. I can do that, if that's what you want," she quickly says.

"You're perfect," I tell her, meaning every word of it. I nuzzle her again, breathing in the scent that I've quickly become addicted to. "So fucking perfect."

I watch her as I run my tongue along her wet slit, groaning at the soft gasp she gives and the way her eyes go heavy-lidded. When I wrap my lips around her clit and give a soft

suck, she whispers my name, and the intimacy of it is what makes me lose all control. She's not screaming at me to get her off or using me like so many other women have or trying to perform for me in some over-the-top way that's all for show and means absolutely nothing. She's moaning my name like it means something, like I'm the most important person to her, like she's trusting me with a part of herself that she doesn't give away easily, and fuck if that doesn't turn me on like nothing else ever has.

Her nails scrape my head as she tightens her grip on my hair, trying to get me closer, even though it's impossible for me to get any closer to her than I already am. I love that she's trying, though. I give her clit a flick of my tongue and smile at her whimpers. When I slide a finger into her pussy, she clenches around me so tightly that for one horrifying moment, I'm afraid I might actually bust a goddamn nut in my pants.

"Artyom," she moans, rocking her hips against me when I start to finger fuck her tight little cunt.

"I've got you, *milaya*," I growl against her clit before giving her another suck that sends her over the edge.

She lets out a sexy, surprised gasp, and then quickly clamps a hand over her mouth to stifle the scream that comes next. Her pussy clenches even tighter around me as she bucks her hips, riding her orgasm out while my tongue works her, coaxing her body into another one before she's even come down from the first. Her juices drip down my hand, and I'm lightheaded from a pure, raw desire that's threatening to completely undo me.

When her legs start to shake, I let go of her hip long enough to quickly free my cock before bringing my hand back to her. Fisting my shaft, I groan against her sated pussy. My own arousal makes it easy to stroke myself, and I know it's not going to take me long at all. Her fingers run through my hair, sending little sparks of pleasure all through me, and when I'm close, I don't even have to think about it, I just stand and bring my lips to hers, wanting to feel connected to her as I let go and shoot my seed all over her exposed pussy.

She moans when she feels the wet heat of my cum hit her, covering her, marking her. She swallows my feral-sounding groans while pleasure courses through me, permeating every damn cell of my body, leaving me gasping and stunned at how damn good this feels.

I smile against her lips and let out a soft laugh. “I can’t seem to control myself around you, *milaya*.”

“What does that word mean?”

Her pupils are still blown, her face is flushed, and she looks so damn beautiful that it takes me a second to answer her.

“It’s similar to sweetheart or honey.”

“I like it,” she says with a cute smile spreading across her face.

“I’m glad you do.” I know I can’t stand here with my cock hanging out of my pants and her thong by her ankles, but I’m hesitant to step back. Instead, I give her another kiss. It’s a slow, lazy kiss that makes me feel drunk on her by the time I pull back.

She eyes me with a hungry look when I tuck my dick back in my pants, and when I lift her skirt and see the mess I made all over her, I groan and cup her pussy before I can stop myself. I smear my seed all over her, and in a moment of pure insanity, I push some of it inside her. I’ve spent my life ensuring that my sperm doesn’t go anywhere near a woman’s pussy, and now I’m on purpose shoving it up in there. I’ve completely lost my fucking mind, but when she tightens around me again and lets out a soft moan, I know this is where it belongs.

Before I can say anything, there’s a loud bang on the door. Riley jumps and looks guilty as hell. I smile and kiss her forehead. “Relax, baby. You’re not going to get in trouble for being in here with me.”

I lift my head and yell, “I’m busy. Fuck off!”

Yuri hollers back in Russian, “Yeah, I bet you are, but we’ve got work to do. Get your ass out here!”

“Fuck,” I groan, looking down at Riley. “I’m sorry, but I need to go.”

She reaches out for me when I slowly slide my finger out of her, looking worried as hell. “I really need to talk to you later.”

“I know, baby. I’ll do my best to get back here in time.”

I kneel down and gently pull her thong back up, sighing when she’s covered. She moans when I press the pad of my thumb against her clit, giving her one last rub before standing back up. She fidgets with the bottom of my shirt, and I can tell she’s dying to say something.

“What is it, Riley?” I cup her face and tilt it up to me. Smiling, I say, “Spit it out, baby.”

“Did this mean anything to you?”

Her voice is a whisper, and her eyes look dangerously glassy, and I hate that she’s worrying about this, and I wish like hell I had more time to comfort her and push all her worries aside. While Yuri yells at me to hurry up, I ignore him and focus on the pair of big, blue eyes that are threatening to overflow.

“Yes, *milaya*, this meant something to me.” I smile and add, “More than I’m comfortable admitting since it would probably make you run screaming from the room.”

She cups my face, pulling me closer. “I would never run from you.”

I smile and give her one more kiss before pulling away with a groan. I run my eyes over her, making sure she’s fully covered and then thread my fingers through hers as I open the damn door to a very impatient Yuri.

“About fucking time,” he grumbles in Russian. As soon as he sees Riley next to me with her hand in mine, he gives me an annoyingly smug grin and suddenly has all the time in the world. He leans against the doorway and eyes Riley.

“I don’t believe we’ve met,” he says, giving her a cutesy wave that has me rolling my eyes. “I’m Yuri, Artyom’s oldest

and dearest friend.”

“Hi, I’m Riley.”

I smile when she scoots closer to me. She’s the only person on the planet who’s ever looked to me as their safe haven.

“The new waitress?” he asks me in Russian. “The one who’s not allowed to dance?”

“Yes.”

He laughs and tells Riley, “Sorry to steal him away, but I’m afraid it can’t be helped.”

“How long will this take,” I ask, switching back to Russian.

“We’ve got a lead, so I’m guessing all night. Were you just fucking her in here? How very unprofessional of you.”

“Give me a second,” I tell him, ignoring his question and shutting the door on his smug face. “Let me see your phone, baby.”

She pulls it from some hidden pocket in her skirt and hands it over. When I see the lock screen photo of Beau with his tongue hanging out, I start to laugh.

“I’m a little jealous.”

She smiles and unlocks her phone for me. I add myself as a contact and hand it back to her.

“That’s my personal number. Text or call anytime. If I don’t answer, I will as soon as I’m able to.”

“Do you want mine?”

I laugh and say, “I memorized it the day you filled out your application.”

She blushes and looks at me like she doesn’t quite believe me, so I recite it to her and then her address and then her birthdate because I might as well go all in and show her how crazy she makes me. She laughs and kisses me as soon as I’m close enough, and the temptation to push all my work responsibilities aside and just stay lost in her is overwhelming.

“I’m sorry,” I say, giving her one last kiss. “I really have to go. I’ll text you later, *milaya*. Be careful, and I’m going to ask Viktor to keep an eye on you. Go to him if you have any more problems with customers.”

“I will.” She squeezes my hand one last time before I have to pull away.

I take one last look at her and then open the door. Yuri’s still standing there with that same grin playing at his lips. “You’ve got it bad,” he says in Russian before hollering over my shoulder, “Nice to meet you, Riley.”

“Nice to meet you, too.”

I look back one last time to see her standing there with a worried look on her face before I turn to Yuri, putting all my attention on what needs to be done. If I don’t, then I’ll never be able to walk away from her.

“What lead?”

Yuri eyes the dancers as we walk through the club, and it doesn’t escape my notice that they all stop to smile at him. He winks at a few and gives Sloane a wave at the bar before answering my question.

“Douglas has been busy. He’s got men at three different locations tonight.”

“Bold little fucker.” I stop when we reach Viktor. “Keep a close eye on Riley, and if I’m not back when her shift is over, then I need you to drive her home.”

He nods his head. “Sure thing, Boss.”

I look at him and add, “Don’t fucking touch her.”

Yuri laughs while Viktor pales a bit.

“I won’t touch her,” he quickly says, holding up a hand and ignoring the line of men waiting to get in.

Satisfied that he understands how serious I am, I nod and get on my bike, following Yuri’s Audi as we make our way further into the city. The cops know not to stop us, so we don’t hold back. Racing through the dark streets, all I can think

about is how empty the bike seems without the feel of Riley's body against mine. I miss the way she wraps her arms around me. She's always hugged me tighter than necessary, and the first time she'd rested the side of her head against my back had made something loosen inside me. I should be worried about how quickly she's changed everything, but I'm not. Instead, all I can think about is getting back to her. Once we take out this Douglas shit, she's getting all my attention.

I follow Yuri down a side street that takes us into the nastier part of town. It's too early for it to be busy down here, but we pass a few guys leaning against an abandoned building. They take one look at us and quickly start walking in the other direction. They know who we are, and they're smart enough to stay the fuck out of our way. After a few more side streets, I pull my bike next to Yuri's car when he parks in front of an old warehouse. The windows are boarded up, and the whole street smells strongly of piss.

"How many are here?" I ask, watching him grab some weapons from his trunk. He grabs one of the handguns and then slides a few extra clips into his pockets.

"Two as far as I know. Then there are two more on the east side of town and two more on the south side by the docks." He shuts his trunk and points up the street. "Our guys were last spotted up here on the left. They're all selling tonight. I don't know what in the fuck Douglas is thinking."

"He's a low-level thug with a very inflated ego. His men are about to pay for it."

"They are," Yuri agrees. "We have orders to take everyone out." We start walking down the street as he turns to me. "So, what's up with this Riley chick?"

At face value it looks like Yuri is just casually strolling down the street with me, gossiping like some old lady, but I know better. We've both already memorized everything on this damn street, and our ears and eyes are focused solely on possible threats. We've just done this so many damn times that we can hold a conversation while we do it.

“I’m not sure yet,” I tell him, knowing that answer won’t appease him.

“Have you fucked her?”

“I don’t see how that’s any of your damn business.”

He laughs. “Yeah, you’ve got it bad if you’re so protective of her you can’t even answer that question.”

I don’t disagree.

“Well, you were definitely doing something in that office. Her flushed face was enough to give that away.”

When he’s met with nothing but silence, he elbows my arm. “I’m definitely going to be Lev’s favorite now. The little man knows he’ll always come first with me.”

I laugh and elbow him back. “We’ll see.”

All conversation and joking around stops when we get close to the corner. Switching fully into soldier mode, we press against the brick building. Yuri and I have always worked well together. He and Mikhail are like brothers to me, and years of working together have made it to where we can read each other without even having to think. He peeks around the corner and then gives my shoulder two taps before we both step out, guns drawn and ready to go.

The two dumbasses standing on the corner never had a chance. They turn and take one look at us, and immediately take a step back. They’re in dark hoodies and jeans, blending in as just a couple of guys on their way to somewhere, but I recognize the hard glint in their eyes and the tense way they’re holding their bodies. These two are a step up from the guys Sergei and I took out. Looks like Douglas is stepping his game up a bit. The one wearing a baseball cap has the nerve to reach his hand up to the waistband of his jeans where he no doubt has a gun.

“You sure you want to do that?” I ask him, a grin already spreading across my face, because despite how tiresome it can be, this is my job, and I’m fucking good at it. “Last warning, dumbass.”

He surprises me by making a wise decision and slowly lowering his hand. He's still going to die, but this way he gets to live a few more precious minutes.

"What the fuck are you guys doing on our streets?" Yuri asks, stepping to the right and leveling his gun on the man closest to him while I keep mine trained on the idiot in front of me.

"We're just doing what we're told," the man who was smart enough to not reach for his gun says.

"You were told to stop selling your fucking drugs in our city," Yuri says.

"It was ours first," the guy with the baseball cap says.

I step forward and grab the gun tucked into his waistband before he can do anything stupid. "Then you should've been smart enough to keep it."

I give him a quick frisk to make sure he doesn't have anything else within easy reach while Yuri does the same to the other guy. His pockets are stuffed with drugs, the same shit the last guys were carrying, and when I tilt my head and he gets a good look at my scar, he sucks in a quick breath.

"Fuck, you're him."

"I am," I say, glad that my reputation has preceded me yet again.

"Fuck," he says, repeating himself, and that single word holds a world of emotion. He finally understands how close his last breath is. I meet his eyes, seeing the fear, the frantic scrambling for a plan, anything that will get him out of this mess.

"It's done," I tell him. "It'll go easier on you if you tell us what we want to know."

"What do you want?" the other man asks. "We'll tell you anything we know."

Baseball cap glares at his friend. "They're going to kill us no matter what. We're not telling them shit."

I laugh and look at Yuri. “Oh to be young and naïve again.”

“I kind of miss those days,” Yuri says with a grin.

“It’s true, isn’t it?” baseball cap asks. “We’re dead either way, so why should we rat out our boss?”

“Because I can make your death last for days, you stupid fuck. A quick death or hours of misery, hours that you’ll spend begging me to kill you. I won’t, of course, but you’ll still beg for it. They all do.”

“Fuck this, man,” the other guys says. “I’ll talk. We sell on these streets for Alex Douglas, but I’m guessing you already know that. We were told to be out here tonight. Some other guys are working the other streets, but they have the same instructions as us.”

“Where can I find Douglas?” I ask. “I’m very anxious to meet the man.”

I can tell by the panicked look on his face that he’s running out of info to share. He flounders around, stuttering over his words before finally dredging up some old forgotten tidbit that he spits out with a quickness.

“He has a stepsister.”

Yuri and I perk up at this. Information has been hard to come by on Douglas, and we thought he didn’t have any family.

“Who is she?” I ask, keeping my gun trained on baseball cap, who’s not looking thrilled at his friend’s eager confession.

“I don’t know. He’s very private. I don’t even know where he lives, but I know she lives somewhere in the city, some apartment around here.”

We wait a few minutes to see if his brain can unearth anything else of use, and when it’s obvious he’s all tapped out, Yuri shoots him in the head, giving him a quick death for his cooperation.

“Fucking hell, man!” baseball cap yells when he sees his friend fall to the ground.

I give him a big smile. “Your turn.”

He scrubs a shaky hand over his face. I see Yuri pull his phone out and start to text, no doubt asking Jinx to see if he can dig up something about a stepsister.

“Okay, so Matt is like Alex’s second,” baseball cap says, finally starting to understand the trouble he’s in. “They’ve been together from the beginning, and others have heard Matt bragging that Riley’s been promised to him.”

My whole body goes still at the name. “Riley?”

“That’s Alex’s stepsister’s name. She has a different last name than him, though. No one’s ever seen her except Matt.”

“Let me take over,” Yuri says in Russian from beside me.

“Why?”

“Just let me handle this fucker.”

I hear the worry in his voice, and I know I’m not going to like whatever the fuck Jinx has told him. My brain refuses to accept that Riley, the shy, sweet girl that I’d just been eating out in my office is Douglas’s sister and that she’s been lying to me this whole fucking time.

“Is Riley a part of all this?” I ask.

“How the fuck should I know? Probably. I mean she is his sister, but she’s also just some dumb bitch that he’s using to keep Matt in line.”

He’s been so focused on my gun that when I run my knife across his throat, his eyes widen in surprise before he falls to his knees and terror takes over. He grabs his throat, trying to stop the inevitable before his eyes fade and he collapses on top of his friend.

“I’m going to assume he had nothing else of use to say,” Yuri says, reaching down to empty the rest of their pockets.

“What did Jinx find?” I ask, ignoring him.

“You already know the answer to that.”

“She’s his fucking sister?” I’m so pissed I can barely think, but underneath all that anger is a hurt that I’m not about to allow to surface. I shove that shit so far down I can barely feel it and let the anger take over.

“We don’t know the whole story yet,” Yuri reminds me. He stands up and fills his pockets with the drugs and money he took off their bodies.

“It’s not a coincidence she came to our club looking for a job.”

“No, probably not.”

I think about her nightmares and the dark bruise on her arm, and my head is spinning with too many fucking things for me to keep up with. When Yuri’s phone gives a buzz, I brace myself for more bad news.

“Sergei needs help. Douglas sent extra men, and they’re closing in fast.”

Putting my weapons away, I run for my bike, grateful for the distraction. If I’m killing, then I don’t have to think about Riley, but it’s impossible to shove her completely from my mind. With blood on my hands and the taste of her pussy still on my tongue, I follow Yuri to where Douglas’s men are waiting for us, more than ready to end a few more lives tonight.

Chapter 8

Riley

I can't stop smiling for the rest of my shift. All I can think about is how damn good Artyom had felt. I swear I can still feel his mouth on my pussy, the way he'd left a trail of lingering, soft kisses all up my slit. I never would've believed that someone who has a reputation for being so brutal could be so damn gentle. There had been a reverence to his actions, a sweetness that's so at odds with how he presents himself to everyone else. He makes me feel special in a way that I hadn't thought possible, and I know I'm telling him the truth about who I am as soon as I see him again. I just hope that he can forgive me for hiding it from him.

When my shift is finally over and Artyom still hasn't come back, I check my phone again in case I missed a message from him, but there's nothing. I'm still trying my best to not worry when Viktor walks over to me.

"Artyom asked me to take you home if he wasn't back in time."

"Oh, you don't have to do that. You can just walk me to the bus stop."

Viktor puts his large frame behind me and motions for the front door. "That's not going to happen. Artyom would not be happy if I did that, and I value my life too much to risk it."

I've only talked to Viktor a handful of times, and although I wouldn't say he's the friendliest guy in the world, he's never made me feel uncomfortable or unsafe around him. He's the guy Artyom told me to go to if I needed help, so I'm assuming

it's okay to take a ride with him. The look on his face makes it clear that he's either going to drive me home or follow right behind me the whole way, but no matter what, he's seeing me to my apartment.

“Okay, thanks,” I say, giving in and walking out of the club with him.

He leads me to a black truck and even opens the door for me. I notice he's careful to not touch me, and I'm dying to ask him what exactly Artyom said to him. My mind keeps drifting back to earlier when Artyom broke that asshole's finger for groping me. It's obvious the man has a mile-wide possessive streak, and maybe that should freak me out, but it doesn't. I've always been on the receiving end of that kind of anger, so it's a nice change to be the one getting protected. I smile in the passenger seat of Viktor's truck and let myself believe that maybe this fading bruise on my arm will be the last one I'll ever have. If anyone can protect me from my brother and Matt, it's Artyom.

Viktor turns on some music, and a Russian rap song starts playing. I don't understand a word of it, but I like it and ask him to turn it up. He smiles and hits the volume button. We listen to the song with me occasionally telling him which way to turn until he pulls up in front of my building.

“Thanks a lot, Viktor. I really appreciate it.”

He looks up at the dark, depressing building. “You want me to walk you up?”

“No, I'm good.” I open the door and start to step down, but I can tell by his worried expression that he's about to change his mind. “Artyom just drops me off here,” I say, knowing that'll help put him at ease.

He turns to me and scrubs a hand over his light beard. “I'm going to tell Artyom you told me that if he gets pissed at me.”

I smile and start to shut the door. “I promise I will take full responsibility. Thanks again.”

He watches me run into the building, and when I give him a wave from inside the main door, he returns it and drives off.

Before taking the stairs I check my phone again, but he still hasn't texted. I decide to send a simple, *Viktor just dropped me off. Thanks for asking him to drive me. I missed you tonight. ;)*

I wait a few seconds for a response, but when it's obvious I'm not going to get one, I put my phone away and try not to worry. Heading for the stairs, I take my time since my feet are sore and I'm in no hurry to get up to my empty apartment. Digging my keys out, I've just managed to unlock the door and get in when a hand clamps around my mouth, stifling the scream before I have a chance to let it out.

“One of my men saw you today, Riley.”

My heart races at the sound of my brother's voice. It's the low, dangerous tone, the one that always ends in pain for me. His hand is still tight against my mouth, making it impossible for me to argue or play dumb.

“He said you were standing outside the club with Artyom and that you two were looking awfully comfortable together.”

I close my eyes briefly in relief. We could've easily been seen doing a hell of a lot more than that. There's still a tiny shred of hope that I'll be able to bullshit my way out of this. When he relaxes his hand, I have just enough time to suck in a breath of air before he's slamming me against the wall and pinning his arm against my chest so I can't go anywhere.

He leans down, locking his brown eyes on mine. Anger radiates off him, and I've seen him like this enough to know that he's seconds away from losing all control.

“Are you fucking him, little sister?”

“No,” I quickly say, because that part is true, no matter how much I wish it wasn't. “He was just being kind to me. One of the dancers was pissed and kind of took it out on me, and he stuck up for me.”

A soft whimper escapes when Alex brings the gun up that I hadn't realized he was holding.

“I think he just felt sorry for me,” I say, and the quiver in my voice is all too real.

Alex presses the muzzle of the gun against my temple, and I feel my bladder threaten to empty. I bite back a scream and do the only thing I've ever been able to do with my brother, I shake and cry and suffer through it.

"You're my only family," he says, pressing in closer so our faces are almost touching. "But don't think for one second that I won't put a bullet in your head if I think you've betrayed me."

"I didn't," I whisper. "He doesn't even know I'm your sister."

"And you're sure you just slept at the club last night?" He studies me with his cold eyes. "All by yourself?"

"Yes, I swear. There's a cot in the back that the dancers sometimes use," I say, lying my ass off and hoping my nerves will cover up how bad of a liar I am.

I'm too scared to even turn and look when Matt walks in. It never even occurs to me that he might intervene and help, and I'm not at all surprised when he lets out a soft laugh and steps closer. He gives me a wink and leans in close enough to kiss my cheek. I try to back away, but Alex still has his arm pinned to my chest and there's nowhere I can go.

"Oh come on, Riley, that's no way to treat your fiancé."

I look at Matt like he's lost his mind which only makes him laugh again.

"You didn't tell her the good news, Alex?"

Alex smirks at me and lowers the gun, standing back up to his full height and letting go of my chest. "Very soon you're going to be Matt's problem."

"I don't understand. I can't marry Matt."

"You can and you will," Alex says, making it clear I will not be having a say in this. He turns to Matt and adds, "Once he's killed Artyom, you're the reward he wanted."

"What?"

They both look at me, studying my reaction, and it takes everything I have to not show how much my heart is breaking or how consumed with worry I am.

“How’s Matt going to manage that one?” I ask with a forced laugh. “From what you’ve said, Death isn’t going to be so easy to get rid of.”

“Everyone can be killed, sweetheart,” Matt says, stroking a finger along my cheek. “I’ve set a nice trap for him tonight, so who knows? Maybe we’ll get lucky and our wedding will happen sooner than I thought.”

Alex tucks his gun back in the waistband of his pants and smacks Matt on the back. “Why don’t you have a word with your fiancée and make sure she understands her part in all this?”

Matt smiles and grabs onto my arm, pulling me toward my room.

“Don’t fuck her!” he yells at Matt. “That only happens after you’ve taken down that Russian fucker.”

I try to fight Matt, but he grips my arm tighter and drags me the rest of the way. When I become too annoying for him, he punches me in the stomach, sucking the breath out of me and making me collapse to the floor. Alex laughs as Matt scoops me into his arms and carries me the rest of the way.

“I told you she’s a handful,” Alex mutters right before Matt slams my bedroom door shut and throws me on the bed.

I scurry as far away from him as I can get, but he’s already grabbing onto my ankle, making sure I can’t get too far.

“Matt, please,” I beg. “You don’t want to do this, and we both know there’s no way in hell you want to marry me.”

He hovers his body over mine, reminding me just how powerless I am. Tears blur my vision, and when I try to punch him, he smacks my face hard enough to whip my head to the side and make the whole side of my face ache. Grabbing my wrists in one hand, he pins them above my head, digging his erection into my stomach.

“I’m marrying you because you’re the boss’s sister, and it will ensure my position with Alex. I don’t love you, and I’ll never be faithful to you, we both know that, but I’ll fuck a couple of babies into you if that’ll make you happy.”

I let out a sob at his words, envisioning this hell of a future where I’m tied to Matt forever. I’d rather die than marry him, and the thought of carrying his baby makes me want to vomit. I scream as loud as I can, bucking up against him in a useless attempt at freedom that earns me a punch to the face that kills my scream as everything starts to fade away. Darkness threatens to cover me, but I fight it, knowing there’s no way in hell I can pass out now, not with him on top of me.

He brings his mouth to mine and kisses me hard. I keep my lips pressed in a line, determined to fight him, but he forces his tongue in, making fresh tears fall down my cheeks when I think about how sweetly Artyom had kissed me, as if I were something precious, something worth cherishing.

When I hear the unmistakable sound of a zipper coming undone, I flail and start to scream again. He stops so he can wrap his hand around my neck, proving how helpless I am.

“Stop fighting me,” he growls.

I think about all the rumors of Matt and his love of roofies, and I know my refusing to lay still is really pissing him off, but I can’t not fight. Every instinct in my body is screaming at me to get him off me, even though we both know it’s useless. The only thing keeping him from raping me is my brother’s presence in the other room. He won’t always be there, though, and we both know that too. He tightens his grip on my neck until spots dance in front of my eyes, and I know I’m only seconds away from passing out. Part of me wants to, part of me welcomes the darkness that would come, but I’m too afraid of what he’ll do to me if I’m unconscious, so I fight with everything I have to stay alert and not give in to the welcoming oblivion.

His fingers dig into my neck so painfully that I know I’m going to be walking around with a ring of bruises tomorrow,

but he doesn't let up, not even when I claw at his hands, desperate for the air that he's slowly cutting off.

"Are you ready to stop acting like a little bitch?" he growls, releasing his hand at my neck as I suck in a huge lungful of air. Nothing else matters in that moment except my next breath. I gasp and cough and gasp again. All my focus is on getting more, and it takes me a second to realize his hand is moving.

"No," I moan when I realize he's jerking himself off while he keeps me held down.

His breathing picks up, and when he lets go of my wrists long enough to yank my shirt up, I claw and smack at him. He lets out an angry growl and pulls my sports bra up, exposing my breasts to him. The next punch he gives me is hard enough to make my hands fall to my face in an effort to protect myself. I feel blood trickling down from my eyebrow as nausea rises in my throat, threatening to spill over.

He paws at my tits, roughly squeezing me as he works himself harder, and I know in this moment that I'll kill myself before I let this be my future. I will never again be forced to lay beneath this fucking monster. When he lets out a deep groan and I feel the heat of him hit my stomach, I dry heave and turn my head just in time to throw up all over my bed.

"God!" he growls, pulling back so he doesn't get vomit on himself.

I tug my shirt down and curl into a ball. Blood drips into my eye from the cut on my eyebrow and every part of me hurts. Everything is so different from earlier, and my brain can't make sense of it. What Artyom and I had shared in his office had felt loving and safe and the sexiest thing in the world, but what Matt just did to me makes me feel dirty and sick and used.

"You cut my orgasm short, you bitch," Matt yells at me, giving me another hard punch that has me curling even deeper in on myself. He grips my hair hard enough to make me scream and forces my head back so I have no choice but to

look at him. “Don’t worry, Riley, I’ll teach you how to be a good little wife to me.”

He lets out a harsh laugh and gets up, tucking his limp dick back in his pants before leaving my room. I don’t dare move. I stay huddled up on my filthy bed until I hear the front door slam shut, and then I still don’t allow myself to move until several minutes have passed. I wait and wait and wait until I’m sure they’re gone. Only then do I pull my phone out from the hidden pocket inside my skirt and find Artyom’s name. I’m scared to death for him. I have no idea what kind of trap Matt set up for him, but I have to warn him, even if that means he’ll hate me when he finds out who I am.

It’s a trap, I quickly type out. My hands are shaking and my vision is clouded from the blood that’s still dripping into my eye. I ignore the typos and add, *I’m so sorry. I didn’t know.*

His response is immediate. *Did he hurt you?*

I tell him I’m fine and again try to explain that I didn’t know. My mind isn’t even processing the fact that he’s not acting surprised or confused by what I’m saying. Even as I type out that I’m okay, I’m pretty sure I’m not, especially judging by how my texts are coming out. They’re jumbled, and I can’t get my brain to make sense of things.

Unable to keep my phone up, it falls to my bed as another wave of nausea hits me. I try to struggle up, but I just fall right back down. I keep trying until I can’t remember why it’s so important to get up. Sleep is sounding like a great idea, anything to make this pain go away, so I stop fighting it and just give in.

Artyom’s voice cuts into my sleep, and I moan at the sound of it. At first I think I’m dreaming, but then I feel his hands on my face, so gentle and tender and at such odds with the way Matt had been touching me.

“Baby, can you hear me?”

I’ve never heard him sound anything less than confident before, but his voice is thick with worry now.

“Artyom?” I whisper, afraid that this is a dream and that I’m still alone on my bed, lying next to my puddle of vomit.

“I’m here, *milaya*. I’ve got you now.”

I stay curled into a ball, and when he gently rests a hand on me and sees the vomit on the bed next to me, I feel the tension in the air.

“Did he?” he asks, not even able to get the rest of the sentence out. The pain and anger in his voice is enough to get me to find the strength to grab onto his arm.

“He didn’t rape me.”

The relieved sigh he gives is short lived when he starts to run hands very carefully over me, checking me for injuries. When he lifts my shirt and sees the bruises and the evidence of what Matt did, he growls something in Russian that has my body instinctively starting to curl in again.

“You’re safe, baby. I would never hurt you,” he says, softening his voice. “Did Matt do this?”

I don’t have the strength to wonder how he knows about Matt. I just nod my head and whisper, “He said I have to marry him.” I fling my arm out, desperate to grab onto some part of him. “I won’t do it. I can’t marry that monster.”

“Easy, baby,” he says, gently wrapping his hand over mine. “Don’t worry about any of that right now.”

“But he’ll kill me,” I sob. “He’ll kill me before he ever lets me go, so will my brother. He said he would shoot me if I ever betrayed him.”

Artyom cups my cheek and gently turns my face to his. He winces when he sees what Matt’s done to me. Very carefully, he runs his fingers over my eyelid, helping to clean off some of the blood so I can see better.

“I swear to you that you won’t have to worry about them ever again. They will never get close to you or even fucking see you again after tonight.”

I start to cry when I realize how much danger I’ve just put him in. “They’re going to come after you now.”

“Let them fucking try.”

His hands are so gentle when he fixes my sports bra and pulls my shirt down. He leaves me to walk over to my closet before coming back with a pair of sweats and a hoodie.

“Let’s get you in something warmer, baby, but we need to hurry. I want you out of here before they decide to come back.”

I lift my butt when he starts to slide my pants up and wince when my stomach contracts, reminding me of Matt’s angry fists.

“I’m going to fucking kill him,” Artyom growls, unable to fully hide his anger even though he’s trying his damndest to remain calm.

He helps me pull my sneakers back on and then helps me sit, watching me when I start to sway and look like I’m going to be sick again.

“You okay?”

“I’m fine,” I whisper. “I really want a shower.”

“I know, baby. You can take one as soon as we get to my place. Do you want me to pack anything? Anything you can’t live without?”

I look over at my closet door. “There’s a pink shoebox I’d like to have, but it’s okay if we can’t take it, and the small, wooden box in my nightstand.”

He goes to get it and comes back with a backpack filled with the pink shoebox and some clothes that he’s also shoved in there. He looks around and grabs my laptop, the book on my nightstand, and my phone charger before getting the wooden box I’ve been stuffing my tips into.

“Okay, *milaya*, let’s get the fuck out of here.”

I look around my sad bedroom and the vomit that’s starting to dry on my blanket and can only think *good fucking riddance*. I have no idea what’s going to happen to me. All I know is I never want to step foot in this room again.

Artyom puts my backpack on and then leans down to scoop me into his arms. I rest against him, too sore and exhausted to do anything else. The steady beat of his heart and the scent of his cologne comforts me in a way that I can't explain. I clutch at the collar of his shirt, needing something to grab onto.

"I'm so sorry," I whisper. "I'm so sorry I didn't tell you."

"Shh, *milaya*. Don't worry about that now. Just relax, sweetheart, and let me take care of you."

He carries me out of my apartment, scanning the hallway and stairwell as we make our way to the bottom floor. Before he walks out the main door, he stops and eyes the empty road outside, waiting until he's satisfied that we're alone. I see his motorcycle, and I'm just about to tell him that I'm pretty sure I'll just fall off the back, when he sits down and then positions me in front of him so I'm straddling him. It's exactly the position he'd put me in to kiss me for the first time, and the memory has me crying all over again.

"I'm afraid to put the helmet on you with your face so swollen, baby, but I need you to hang onto me. Can you do that?"

I shake my head yes and wrap my arms around him, resting the side of my face against his shoulder. I manage to hike my legs up so they're wrapped around him and not in danger of being in the way. "I'm pretty sure this is illegal," I say, my voice shaky from too much crying and exhaustion.

He lets out a soft laugh and kisses my forehead. "Since when has that ever stopped me from doing what I wanted?"

I smile against his neck as he starts the bike. The drive back is much slower than he usually goes, and I'm guessing we're getting some funny looks from the few drivers that are still out on the road this late. Every chance he gets, he wraps his arm around me, holding me close and shielding me from the wind. I let out a relieved sigh when he pulls into his garage, parking next to the black Porsche that I've yet to see him drive.

He doesn't let me walk. He just stands up and takes me with him, carrying me up to the house I never thought I'd see again. Beau starts whining and sniffing the hell out of me as soon as we get inside.

"It's all right, Beau," Artyom tells him and then says something in Russian.

"Does he understand you?"

"He's learning." He leans down to give him a scratch. "He's a smart dog. I don't hold it against him that he used to work for cops."

I smile at the irony of a retired police dog being adopted by a Bratva member, but Beau seems pretty damn happy with his new owner. I can't say I blame him.

Without letting me go, he carries me up to his bathroom and sets me on the counter. He cups my face, tilting me up so he can inspect the damage. His grey eyes run over me, taking in the cut on my eyebrow, the swollen cheek and then finally brushing my hair aside and finding what's no doubt a string of bruises along my neck. His jaw tightens and his eyes turn dark as he lightly brushes his fingers over my skin just like he always did when he'd buckle his helmet for me.

"Please don't be mad at me," I whisper, knowing I won't be able to tolerate it if he turns his back on me.

His eyes soften when he meets my eyes again. "I'm not mad at you. We have a lot to talk about, Riley, but I'm not mad at you, sweetheart. Any anger you see on my face isn't directed at you. It's for that fucking coward who dared to lay his hands on you. Was he the one who left the bruise on your arm?"

"No, that was my brother."

Artyom doesn't say anything, just gives a tight nod and turns to start the shower. I ease myself off the counter and grab the toothbrush I used this morning. God, that feels like a lifetime ago. I slowly brush my teeth as steam starts to fill the bathroom. When I'm finished, and he still hasn't left, I turn to look at him.

“I’m really sorry I don’t have a bathtub for you to soak in.”

I eye the large walk-in shower. “It’s fine. I just need to wash him off me,” I say, cringing at the memory.

“I’m not comfortable leaving you alone.”

I look up at him, finally understanding why he hasn’t left yet.

Chapter 9

Artyom

Riley looks so small and scared and fragile, and I want to burn the whole fucking world down and kill everyone in it, but I can't go after the bastards that did this to her, not yet anyway. Her face is swollen and a large, dark bruise is already spreading across one of her cheeks, matching the ring he gave her around her neck. The only thing keeping me sane right now is knowing that I'm going to give Matt a very slow, very painful death. I can't allow myself to think about the dried semen on her stomach. Fucking jackass.

She's still giving me a wide-eyed look, so I say, "You're still dizzy and shaky, and you could really use a couple of stitches above your eyebrow. You're still bleeding. I'm going to help you get washed up."

I pull my shirt off and notice the way she sucks in a quick breath and runs her eyes over me. I'm used to this reaction from women when they see my scarred, tattooed chest, but it's different coming from her. I push all thoughts aside of how badly I want her, because I know that's not what she needs right now, but I'm guessing my cock is going to betray me with a quickness.

"Please let me help you so I don't stand outside the door terrified that you're going to get dizzy and fall and crack your head open."

She gives me a soft smile and nods her head, lifting her arms when I step closer to help her undress. After carefully pulling her sweatshirt and T-shirt off, I help her out of her sports bra and bite my tongue to keep from letting out a groan

at the sight of her bare tits. I can't believe she's insecure about them. They're not huge, but they're fucking perfect—perky with a rounded fullness to them and the prettiest rosy shade to her nipples and areolas that I've ever seen.

Her cheeks are flaming red, even with the bruise. She crosses her arms over her chest and drops her eyes. I carefully strip her the rest of the way until she's naked before helping her into the shower. I make quick work of my own jeans and boxers, cursing my stupid cock for not understanding that now isn't the time.

When I step in and her eyes land on the hard length of me, they go comically wide and she turns away so quickly that she makes herself dizzy and has to brace her hand against the tiled wall as I wrap an arm around her to keep her steady. My cock digs into her side, and all I can do is apologize.

“I'm sorry. I know it's not what you need.”

“It's okay,” she whispers.

I slowly guide her under the water and run my fingers through her hair, helping to make sure it all gets wet. Grabbing a cloth, I hook a finger under her chin and lift her face to mine.

“You know I'd never do anything to hurt you, right? That I'd never make you do something you didn't want to do?”

“I know,” she whispers. “I trust you, Artyom. I know you'd never hurt me.”

I wonder if she'll feel the same way after she learns the truth of who I am. If she knew how many men I'd killed tonight, would she still be looking up at me with all that trust, or would she be turning away in disgust? I push the thought from my mind and bring the wet cloth to her face, slowly cleaning away the dried blood. She's still bleeding, but it's slowing down at least.

When her face is done, I lather up the cloth with body wash and prepare myself for what's going to be a very painful process in more ways than one. She watches me as I run the cloth up first one arm and then the other before running it over her chest. Her breath hitches when I drag the cloth over her

breasts. My thumb slides over one of her taut nipples, and my cock gives an eager twitch. Bringing the cloth lower, I scrub that bastard's semen from her skin, being careful to not scour her clean like I want to because I can already see the bruises forming on her stomach from where the fucker must've punched her.

Gritting my teeth, I lower down so her pussy is level with my face. Memories from earlier race through my mind, and I wish like hell I could go back in time and insist she wait at the club for me instead of asking Viktor to take her home.

"I'm sorry," I say, looking up at her. "I knew something was wrong, and I should never have let you go back to that apartment."

"It's not your fault." She grabs onto my hand and presses the cloth tighter against her stomach, scrubbing her skin until I'm the one holding back because I don't want her to hurt herself.

I lean closer and kiss her stomach, letting her know that she's clean and that it doesn't change how I see her or how badly I want her. She runs her hands through my hair, holding me close to her as she starts to cry again. I stand up and wrap my arms around her, holding her as she cries and clings to me with all her strength. Cupping her head with one hand, I stroke her back with the other, rocking her gently until she's all cried out.

When she's ready, I finish washing her body, hating that I'm also scrubbing off my own seed from earlier but knowing there's nothing to be done about it. My need to come all over her again is ridiculously strong. I want to mark her as mine, to reclaim her body as mine, but I'm guessing she wouldn't welcome that right now. Instead, I keep myself in check and wash her hair.

Once she's scrubbed clean, I switch places with her and hurry up and wash myself. She tries not to make it obvious that she's staring, but she definitely is. By the time I finish, her face is beet red and her breaths are coming a little faster.

Grabbing a couple of towels, I run one over myself and then secure it around my waist before carefully patting her dry.

“You don’t have to do all this,” she says, but I ignore her, because there’s no way in hell I’m going to deprive myself of the joy of taking care of her.

I wrap one towel around her and then give her another so she can dry her hair a bit. Sitting her back on the counter, I grab the first-aid kit and get some ointment and bandages.

“I’m sorry. This might sting a bit.”

“It’s okay,” she whispers and then hisses when I run the medicine over the open cut.

I’ve never been sensitive to blood or wounds of any kind, but seeing her in pain is proving to be harder than anything else I’ve had to deal with.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, dabbing at her cut again to make sure it’s properly cleaned and disinfected.

She reaches up and slowly drags a finger over the scar on my neck, causing a small shiver to run down my spine. I never let anyone touch me there, not since it happened, but I don’t push her hand away like I would normally do. I stand still and let her explore the raised, ugly scar as much as she wants.

“I shouldn’t be complaining about pain when you’ve endured far more than I could ever imagine.”

“Yeah, it hurt a bit,” I say, making her smile at my dry tone. “But that doesn’t mean what happened to you wasn’t just as bad or worse. Sometimes the most painful things don’t leave any obvious scars.”

She gives a soft nod, and surprises me by not asking how I got my scar. Her fingers leave a trail of whisper-soft touches along my neck until she’s tracing the lines of the skull tattoo that covers the other side of my neck.

“I like your tattoos,” she says.

I smile and kiss her forehead. “I’m glad you like them.”

“You’re a very scary man, Artyom, but you don’t scare me.”

Her blue eyes search mine, and I can’t look away. I feel like she’s seeing me, really seeing me, beyond the scars and tats and reputation, all the way down to the real me, and when she gives me another smile, I easily return it.

“Let’s get you bandaged up.” I grab some small butterfly bandages and use them to close her wound.

“Now I’ll have my own tough-looking scar,” she says, making me laugh.

“That you will, *milaya*, but I think one’s enough. No more scars for you.”

“Sounds good. I think I can be happy with just the one.”

“I’m very happy to hear that.”

I grab her backpack and look at the clothes I shoved in there. I’d been so worried about her that I’d just grabbed whatever shit my hands landed on, and now it’s painfully obvious that I didn’t pick well.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t do so hot packing your runaway bag. I’ll get you what you need tomorrow.”

“It’s fine. I’m just glad you got me out of there.”

I give her hand a soft squeeze and go to get her something she can wear to sleep in. I come back with another pair of sleep pants and a black T-shirt that will be way too big for her just like last night.

“I like wearing your clothes,” she admits with a smile.

“You can wear them anytime you want.”

I help her put her shirt on and then lift her off the counter and hold the pants up so she can slip a foot inside. She lets the towel drop, giving me one quick glimpse of the pussy that’s permanently seared into my brain before the pants are pulled up, blocking her from my view. I tighten the strings at her waist, being careful to not pull it too tightly and then help her into a pair of warm socks.

Wanting to keep an eye on her, I carry her to the edge of the bed and sit her down while I grab a similar outfit for myself. I bite back a grin when I look over and see her watching me as I drop the towel. I've managed to get my erection down to semi-hard instead of aching ramrod straight, and I'm guessing that's as good as I'm going to get it.

“Do you think you could eat anything?”

She quickly shakes her head and then winces from the effort.

I cup her face and look at her eyes, trying to determine what the chances are that she might have a concussion. Her pupils seem fine, but her nausea bothers me.

“Okay, no food, but I want you to stay awake a little bit longer to make sure your head is fine.”

She watches me as I pull back the covers and stack a couple of pillows up for her before lifting her and setting her down so she's propped up.

“Comfortable enough?”

“Yes.”

I whistle for Beau, and as soon as she sees him come running in, her face lights up. She pats the bed and then quickly turns her eyes to mine.

“Is it okay if he gets up here?”

“Of course.”

I watch her pet him, laughing when he gives her cheek a lick.

“I've always wanted a dog, but I could never get one.”

“Why not?”

She runs her hand through Beau's thick fur, her expression turning sad again. “I knew they'd just use it against me, and I couldn't risk them hurting an innocent animal just to cause me pain.”

I have so many questions I want to ask her, but I don't want to risk upsetting her. She grabs my hand, squeezing it tightly. "I was so scared for you tonight."

"For me?"

"Matt said he'd set a trap for you. Alex told him he couldn't have me until after he'd gotten rid of you. I was so scared they'd hurt you."

If she didn't look so damn scared, I'd laugh at the idea of a little fucker like Matt getting the best of me. We'd spotted their so-called trap from a mile away and killed every single one of their men. So far, they've managed to lose men, drugs, and a shit ton of money, but Alex is too stupid to realize he's already lost. This was a fight he was never going to win. Everyone knows it but him, and apparently his idiot sidekick Matt.

"I don't want to get into this tonight, *milaya*, but I know you know who I work for. I've been doing this a long time, and I'm not as easy to kill as they seem to think I am."

She nods but keeps a tight grip on my hand.

"Will you stay in here with me?"

I smile and grab the remote with my free hand, sliding in next to her when she scoots over and opens the covers for me. When I open my arm, she cuddles up against me, resting her head on my chest like she was always meant to be there.

"Try to find something that won't put you to sleep," I say, handing her the remote.

She scrolls through the streaming channels and finds an old comedy from the '80s. While she settles in to watch it, I pull her closer, smiling when she hikes a leg over mine and makes herself even more comfortable. I kiss the top of her head and play with her hair, not paying the slightest bit of attention to the movie because I can't take my eyes off her.

She starts to yawn when the movie's almost over, and I don't bother trying to keep her awake. I'm convinced she doesn't have a concussion, so I let her drift off to sleep. Her body softens even more against mine before the credits even

start to roll. Grabbing my cell phone from the nightstand, I send Mikhail a text, explaining everything that happened tonight. The sun hasn't even risen, so I'm not surprised when I don't get an immediate response. There was a time when I would have, but that was before Charlie came into his life. The man was consumed by his job, never taking even a moment off. He still takes his responsibilities as *pakhan* seriously, but he's allowed himself to have a life on top of it.

When I send a text to Yuri, I'm not at all surprised when he texts me right back, asking for more details. I explain everything as best I can and then tell him we can talk more tomorrow, suddenly weary of the whole damn thing. My stomach growls, reminding me that I haven't eaten since the sandwich Riley made for me earlier today. God, that feels like a lifetime ago. When I'm sure she's in a nice deep sleep, I carefully slide out from under her and give Beau a pat, telling him to stay put. I kiss Riley's head and quietly leave the room.

After heating up some leftovers, I take it to the couch and eat without really tasting anything. I'm exhausted but my mind won't quit replaying the sight of Riley, bruised and bleeding and curled up into a tight little ball next to her own vomit. Forcing the image from my mind, I grab the newest mystery book I bought the other day and try to immerse myself in that instead of the reality that I really don't want to think about right now.

Stretching out on the couch, I start the book, and the next thing I know, the morning sun is streaming in through the wall of windows and I'm sitting up so quickly I feel lightheaded as I try to orient myself. My first thought is of Riley, and then I curse myself for falling asleep down here and leaving her all alone upstairs, especially after she'd asked me to stay with her.

When I put my feet down, instead of the hardwood floor, I hit something soft. Looking down, I let out a groan when I see Riley curled up on the floor beside the couch. She must've pulled Beau's dog bed over, because she's in a tight ball with one of the blankets from my bed tucked in around her. Beau is laying on it with her, his back leaning against hers. He lifts his

head to look at me, giving me a *What the fuck did you expect?* look that I really don't appreciate.

I feel enough guilt without him giving me the stink eye.

"Riley," I say, reaching down to scoop her into my arms. She moans and then her whole body goes rigid with fear. "It's okay. It's just me." She softens again and then rests her head on my shoulder when I sit back down on the couch, keeping her in my lap.

"What are you doing on the floor, *milaya*?"

Her voice is thick with sleep when she whispers, "I woke up and you weren't there."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to fall asleep down here. Why didn't you wake me up?"

"I didn't want to bother you, but I also didn't want to be alone." She sighs and toys with the hair at the nape of my neck. "I feel safer when I'm close to you."

I smile and cup the back of her head, running my fingers through her hair. "You're the only person alive who's ever run to me for comfort, *milaya*."

"It's their loss, Artyom, because there's nowhere safer than right next to you."

"For you," I say. "For others, I'm the end of the line."

I will be for Alex and Matt, but I don't say it out loud because I don't want to risk upsetting her. Instead, I gently pull her back so I can see her better, wanting to examine her face to see how it's looking today. I keep my expression neutral, even though a murderous rage threatens to take over when I see how dark the bruises are today. The cut on her forehead seems to be doing okay, and it doesn't look infected. The ring of bruises along her neck look even more painful in the sunlight, and I wish I could take it all from her.

"I'm so sorry this happened to you. I'm sorry I wasn't there to protect you."

She starts to argue with me, to shake her head at my words, but I cup her face softly and run my thumb over her

swollen cheek.

“All I can do is promise you that no one else will ever hurt you again. You are safe with me, *milaya*. That I can promise you.”

“What about work? I’m supposed to be in at seven tonight.”

I can’t help but laugh. “Sweetheart, you’re not working there anymore, for two very key reasons. One, I can’t protect you there well enough, and, two, if I have to see another man hit on you or look at you like he wants to fuck you one more time, I’m going to lose my goddamn mind.”

She blushes, but it’s hard to tell with all the bruising. “I don’t have that much money.” Her voice is barely more than a whisper, and she’s so embarrassed she’s avoiding my eyes. “I don’t want to be a burden or anything. I can maybe get a hotel room or something, at least for a little while.”

“You’re staying with me, Riley, unless you don’t want to.”

“No, I do,” she quickly says. “I just don’t want you to feel like you have to take care of me.”

“I want to take care of you, and you’ll never be a burden.”

Her fingers fidget with my shirt, and before my cock can fully wake up, I grab onto her hips and gently stand her up.

“You need to eat some breakfast. We can worry about everything else later, and for fuck’s sake, no more sleeping on the damn dog bed. Wake me up next time or crawl on top of me.”

“Okay,” she says with a small laugh. “Beau was very gracious about sharing with me. I told him I’d talk to you about giving him a special treat for his selflessness.”

I laugh and look at Beau who’s taken advantage of the fact that he now has the bed all to himself. He’s sprawled out with his head cocked to the side, giving me a hopeful look.

“He has earned it,” I agree. “All right, Beau, come get your reward.”

He hops up and follows me to the cabinet that he knows I keep his treats in. I grab him the biggest bone I can find, and as soon as he has it between his jaws, he's running for the back door to be let out. With a laugh, I open it for him, watching him run down to the water where he does some pretty impressive leaps, splashing at the water's edge before finally laying in the grass to gnaw on his new treat.

Riley laughs at him and then follows me upstairs. I brush my teeth, smiling to myself when she shyly walks up beside me and grabs the toothbrush that's still in the holder waiting for her. I knew as soon as I saw it this morning that there was no way in hell I was going to throw it out. I liked seeing it too damn much. We brush our teeth together, something I've never done with a woman before, and I can't help but think about how perfect it feels to have her here with me.

Once I'm dressed and heading downstairs, I check my phone and get a dose of reality when I read Mikhail's text. With a sigh, I pocket my phone and start breakfast. Riley comes down a few seconds later, having no choice but to stay in my pajamas, and scoots onto a barstool.

"My boss is coming by to talk with you," I say, seeing no reason to put off telling her. Her face pales at the news. "I take it you know who my boss is?"

"I've heard my brother mention Mikhail Fedorov, but I don't really know anything about him."

"Despite what you might have heard, Mikhail is a fair man, and he will not like seeing what's been done to you. Men who beat women are the lowest fucking kind of coward." I lean over the island and kiss her forehead. "I promised you I would keep you safe, and I meant it. No harm will come to you, baby."

She nods and lets out a shaky breath. "I trust you. I don't mind meeting him. I'm just a bit nervous about it."

"I'll be with you the whole time."

"Okay, good."

I grab a piece of paper and a pen and hand it to her. “Write down anything you need and your sizes. I’ll have someone pick you up some stuff.”

She takes the pen and starts writing while I finish mixing the granola and yogurt and cutting up some fresh cantaloupe. When I put the food in front of her, she looks up at me and laughs.

“What’s so funny?”

“I just never pegged you as a health nut.”

“I’ll eat anything, but if I have a choice in the matter, I prefer to eat healthy. I can cook you whatever you want, though, if you’d prefer something else.”

“No, I like it.” She spears a piece of cantaloupe and pops it in her mouth.

We finish breakfast, and once her list is done and I’ve waived off any offer of her paying, I text the list to Sergei, adding on a bunch of things and smiling as I imagine the look on his face when he gets his new assignment. He’s still pissed at me for telling him his only option for an English tutor when he first joined the Bratva was a very old, very foul-smelling woman who made him sit around and watch reruns of *The Beverly Hillbillies*. When Mikhail told him about the list of beautiful college students we have on the payroll to tutor our new recruits, he’d been livid. It still makes me laugh when I think about it.

“You should have some stuff to wear in a couple of hours,” I tell her, walking over to where she’s standing by the wall of windows, looking out at the lake.

“It’s so beautiful here.”

“Yeah, it still takes me by surprise sometimes. I grew up in a large, concrete apartment building in the middle of Moscow. My family was poor, and we never had much of anything. We certainly didn’t have anything pretty to look at outside our windows.”

“I grew up poor, too,” she says, and then gives a soft laugh. “Who am I kidding? I’m still poor.”

I don't bother telling her that everything I have is hers. She'll learn that soon enough. She rests a hand on her stomach, and I immediately kneel down to take a look. I lift a brow at her, waiting for her to stop me, but when she doesn't, I slowly lift her shirt up enough to expose the smooth skin of her belly. The bruising is dark but should fade in a few days. I lean closer and kiss the injured skin as she brings her hands to my head, running her fingers through my hair and letting out a soft sigh. I gently cover her in kisses, knowing I could easily spend the rest of my life discovering and worshipping her body, but I'm forced to stand when I hear a car door shut right before Beau lets out a warning bark.

I give a very worried-looking Riley a quick kiss on the lips. "Don't worry, *milaya*. I'm right here with you."

She turns when she hears the heavy footsteps on the deck outside and takes a step closer to me when Mikhail appears outside the window.

Chapter 10

Riley

I'm not sure what I was expecting in a Bratva boss, but Mikhail isn't it. When Artyom opens the door, Mikhail steps in with Beau close at his heels, filling the doorway with his powerful build. His handsome face is an unreadable mask that has me fidgeting and taking a step back. His dark eyes run over my battered face before he turns to Artyom and says something in Russian. Artyom answers him and then shoots me a reassuring smile, wrapping an arm around my shoulder as Mikhail steps closer.

"Hi, Riley. I'm Mikhail Fedorov." He holds out his hand to me, and I shake it like we're just two regular people meeting for the first time and not like I'm the sister of the guy who's been trying to go up against this man's powerful Bratva. God, Alex is such an idiot for ever thinking he had a chance against a man like this.

"Hi, Mikhail," I say, trying to not make it obvious how badly I'm shaking and how stupid I feel meeting him in jammies.

Artyom squeezes my arm gently and leads me over to the couch. Once we're seated, Mikhail takes the chair opposite us. I force myself to not squirm as the Bratva boss stares at me. Artyom is just as intimidating, maybe even more so because of the scar and tattoos, but I feel safe with him. As strange as it sounds, I know Artyom, and I know he'll never hurt me. I don't know this stranger in front of me, and when I can't take a second more of the silence, I clutch my knees and lift my eyes to his.

“I’m sorry about my brother. Well, stepbrother, actually, but I guess that doesn’t make much of a difference.”

“What’s your role in all this?” Mikhail asks.

The idea of trying to lie to this man never even occurs to me. I have a feeling he’d immediately know anyway, so I don’t even bother. Besides, I owe nothing to Alex and Matt. They can go fuck themselves.

“I don’t really have one. A couple of weeks ago, Alex told me I had to get a job at the Peach as a stripper. He said he wanted me to spy on you guys and then report back to him. I managed to get a job as a waitress, but I kept telling Alex that I didn’t know anything, that no one was talking about anything at the club.”

“What do you know about his organization?”

“He doesn’t talk to me about his plans. He’s very careful about that. The only other person in his group that I’ve ever been around is Matt. Alex is very vague. He really hates you guys and is convinced he can get rid of you and take back the streets that have been his for so long.”

Mikhail doesn’t bother to shout angry threats or to spout off about how his Bratva is going to destroy my brother, and his calm, confident silence on the matter is far more impressive and intimidating. It’s the difference between low-level criminals and professionals. He and my brother might both be involved in illegal activities, but there’s a world of difference between them, and it’s never been more apparent than right now.

“Where did he think you were the other night?” Artyom asks.

“I told him my shift ran late and that you have a cot set up in the changing room for anyone who needs to stay there overnight. I can’t believe he bought it, but he did.” I turn my head so I can see him better. “He did say that one of his men saw us outside the club and that we looked very close to one another. I told him that you just felt sorry for me because

Candace was acting like an ass and that you were trying to comfort me.”

“Why did he beat you?” Mikhail asks. He’s leaning back with his ankle resting on the opposite knee, his arms on the sides of the chair. His body is deceptively relaxed, but his eyes tell a different story. They’re not missing a damn thing.

“Matt did this. Apparently Alex promised me to him after he kills Artyom. I dared to disagree with that plan.”

Mikhail thinks for a minute, says something to Artyom in Russian, and then looks back at me. “Can I see your cell phone, please?”

“Sure.” I turn to Artyom. “I left it upstairs. I didn’t want to look and see the messages that are probably waiting for me.”

“I’ll grab it for you, *milaya*.”

Mikhail quirks a brow at *milaya* but doesn’t say anything. When Artyom leaves the room, I pet Beau’s head. He’s sitting on the floor by my legs, looking up at me with his amber eyes.

“He likes you,” Mikhail says, and I’m not sure if he’s talking about the dog or Artyom.

I smile at Beau and say, “He’s a sweet dog.”

Mikhail surprises me by laughing. “He is, but I was talking about Artyom.”

I give a soft laugh, feeling my face heat up.

“He’s my oldest friend. We’ve been through a lot together, and he’s not a man who gives his trust away lightly, if at all, but he trusts you.”

“I’m glad he does. I know this looks bad for me, but I hope you believe me when I say that I didn’t have a choice in the matter and that I went out of my way to protect Artyom and not give my brother anything. I was going to tell him the truth about who I am last night after I got off work, but he was busy and then all this happened,” I say, waving a hand at my face.

He nods and turns to Artyom when he steps in the room, reaching a hand out for my phone.

“Your passcode?”

I give it to him, and he types it in and then starts scrolling through my messages. I wait, knowing he needs to see for himself that I haven't been lying and that I don't have anything to hide. There's no reason for him to trust me. It would be unbelievably naïve if he did, and Mikhail strikes me as the type of man who doesn't make foolhardy mistakes.

He says something in Russian that has Artyom walking over to look at the phone in Mikhail's hand. They have a conversation that I'm completely excluded from as Mikhail's thumb keeps scrolling. Whatever it is that they're reading, Artyom doesn't look pleased about it.

“Did Alex message me? Does he know I'm gone?”

Artyom's face softens as he gives me a smile. “Nothing to worry about, *milaya*. You'll never have to see him again.”

“Did Alex give you this phone? Has he had access to it at all?” Mikhail asks.

“No, I bought that for myself, and he's never used it. He doesn't know my passcode or anything.”

“Any photos of them on here?”

I shake my head yes and take my phone when Mikhail holds it out to me. “I took a photo of my Christmas tree last year, and I think I have one where they're in the background.” I scroll through my photos trying to find it, my hand stilling when I catch sight of it. I tap on it and hand it back to Mikhail, not wanting to see it myself. “I always meant to cut them out of it but forgot.”

Mikhail zooms in, examining the photo before sending it to his own phone. Satisfied, he hands my phone to Artyom. I sit waiting while they have a conversation in Russian. Artyom keeps looking over at me, making sure I'm okay, and when I meet his eyes, he gives me a quick wink that sends a flicker of lust through me, despite how worried I am and how sore my body is today. There's never a second when I don't want him. Even last night in the shower, as sore and scared and angry as I was about what had happened with Matt, I still wanted Artyom

to take me in that shower, to erase every damn memory of Matt, and to remind me that I'm no one else's but his.

“Okay,” Mikhail finally says, standing up and looking down at me. “Artyom assures me that I can trust you, and I have no reason to doubt him. I'll give you the protection of my Bratva, but you are not to be in contact with your brother or anyone else involved with your brother ever again. No reaching out to them, no texting back, nothing. You will be expected to cut all ties. Can you do that?”

I think about what he's asking, and I know my answer even before I voice it. Alex has been my brother since I was five, but he's never been anything to me but pain and misery. I long ago gave up the fairytale that I would ever have a loving family, a sibling that I could count on and who would love and be kind to me. What he allowed Matt to do to me last night was the last straw, so when I meet Mikhail's dark eyes and say, “I can do that,” I know with absolute certainty that it's the truth.

“I'll get you a new phone, *milaya*. I want to keep this one for now,” Artyom says, pocketing my phone.

I stand when Mikhail says, “It was nice meeting you, Riley. I look forward to getting to know you better when all this is taken care of.”

“Thank you,” I tell him and then give him a small smile, “for everything.” I'm not sure what it means exactly to have the Bratva's protection, but it sounds like a damn good thing to have, and I'm certainly not going to turn it down. I need all the help I can get.

Mikhail smacks Artyom on his back and says something that makes both men laugh before he leaves the house without a backward glance.

“That was intense,” I say with a soft laugh, meeting the grey eyes that are quickly becoming as familiar to me as my own.

“You did great, baby.” He walks over to me and wraps his arms around my back, pulling me in for a hug. “You're under

our protection now, which means it's not just me that Alex will have to get through, but all of us. He has no idea what he's just gotten himself into."

"He said he was going to kill me, didn't he? When you looked at my phone?"

Artyom kisses the top of my head. "He's never going to hurt you again," he says, completely ignoring my question, which is an answer in and of itself.

I lift my head up and look at him. "Why are you doing this for me?"

His grey eyes study mine, and I've about convinced myself he's not going to answer when he shocks the hell out of me by saying, "Because I've fallen in love with you, *milaya*."

"What?" I say and then mentally kick myself for not saying something more romantic.

He smiles and kisses my forehead. "Trust me, I'm just as surprised as you are." He laughs and quickly adds, "That's not what I mean. I'm not surprised that I fell in love with you. I'm just surprised that I fell in love at all."

The shy smile he gives me is so fucking adorable that I can't help but reach my hands up to cup his face.

"I've never fallen in love before," he admits. "I'm a bit terrified, to be honest."

His fingers brush over my bruised cheek. "I've never had a weakness before."

"Just think how I feel. Do you know how many women are going to despise me because I'm the one you picked? You saw how well Candace took the news. Women are going to shoot daggers at me everywhere we go."

He laughs and brings his mouth close to mine. "You're killing me, *milaya*. Tell me what you're feeling, but don't lie to me, sweetheart. I'll protect you with my life no matter what."

The heat of his breath hits my lips, making me suck in a quick breath as my heart starts to race. "I love you too,

Artyom. As soon as I saw you, I felt drawn to you, and every minute since then, I've just fallen more and more in love with you."

He lets out a soft groan and picks me up while running his tongue over my lips, gently parting them as he deepens the kiss. He sets me down on the back of his couch so he can cup my face, and when he runs his tongue along mine, I let out a moan and wrap my legs around him, pulling him closer. The kiss is sweet and slow, and I know he's going easy on me because he's afraid of hurting me.

One of his hands slides through my hair to cup the back of my head while his other hand runs down my spine to press against my lower back. I feel completely enveloped by him. When I bring my hands under his shirt and run my fingers over his back, he lets out a deep groan and gives my lower lip a bite before pulling back with a pained look on his face.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"Not all pain is bad," I say, pulling him closer again. "I like how rough you are, because underneath it you're so damn sweet. I never feel scared when I'm with you. I know you'd never do anything to really hurt me, Artyom. I trust you." I give him a soft kiss. "Completely."

I give a soft laugh and add, "And we both know that big cock of yours is going to hurt."

He laughs and gives me a wink. "Big cock, huh?"

"Oh please, you know it is."

He shrugs like it's no big deal, but I can see the proud grin he's trying to hide.

"At least you're not a virgin. I imagine it would really hurt then."

The look on my face has his body tensing and his arms tightening around me. "*Milaya?*" he says, his voice so low it's almost a whisper.

I'm so embarrassed I can barely think, but I manage a lighthearted, "Surprise," while giving an awkward laugh. I'm

painfully aware of how many gorgeous women this man has probably slept with over the years, and in every way possible, I'm finding myself falling short when I start to make comparisons in my head.

"I wonder how much I can embarrass myself in front of you. I've got to tap out at some point, right?"

He gives me a soft smile and brings his hands up to cup my face. "There is nothing to be embarrassed about, and as selfish as it is, I can't tell you how fucking happy I am that you've never been with anyone else."

"But I know you have been with lots and lots of other women, and I feel so pathetic compared to all of them. I could very well end up being terrible at this whole sex thing, you know?"

He laughs and then shakes his head. "I'm sorry. It's just the idea of you being bad at sex is insane. Don't forget it was my lap you were grinding on when we first met. God, sweetheart, you have no idea how close I was to coming in my damn pants. Plus, it's you, baby. Everything you do drives me crazy. Don't think about the past. I know I don't. I'm not the kind of guy who's ever cuddled or invited women over or, hell, even bothered to see a woman more than once. I know that makes me sound like a dick, but I just didn't feel anything for any of them."

"I'm glad you show me a side of yourself that you kept from them."

"You're the only one who's ever seen me, *milaya*. You're the only one I've ever shown my true self to. You're the only one I've ever trusted enough to do that with."

He thinks for a second and asks, "In the office yesterday when I buried my head under your skirt, was that a first too?"

"Yes," I admit, and then bite my bottom lip when I try to recall if I did anything that would make it painfully obvious I'd never done it before.

"You were perfect," he quickly says, reading the worry on my face. "So fucking perfect, beautiful. I only asked because

you seemed so shy and surprised by your body's reaction."

He gently palms my neck, being careful of the bruises and lets out a soft sigh. "I can't tell you how much it means to me that you would trust me with this part of yourself." He gives me a sexy grin and says, "I've never been anyone's first, *milaya*, so this is new for me too."

I smile, happy that we'll be sharing something together, something that will just be ours. Before we can take this any further, we both turn at the sound of heavy footsteps climbing up the stairs of his deck. I stiffen in his arms, my mind immediately going to Alex and Matt.

"Easy, baby," Artyom whispers against my skin. "It's just Sergei with the stuff I asked him to get for you."

He gives me one more soft kiss before setting me back on the ground and lacing his fingers through mine, taking me with him when he opens the door. The man standing on the other side is carrying more bags than I can count. He's dressed all in black with a buzz cut and dark eyes that run over me with open curiosity. Artyom says something to him in Russian that makes him quickly turn away, but not before I see the soft smirk playing at his lips.

We step back as he brings in the huge load, and when I see a familiar striped bag, I cringe at the idea of this stranger picking me out lingerie. It's bad enough I had to give him all my sizes.

"Wow, you really didn't need to do all this," I tell Artyom.

"You need clothes. As adorable as you look in my pajamas, you actually need things you can wear. Besides, Sergei was happy to do it. Weren't you?"

I laugh because it's obvious that there's only one acceptable answer he can give. Sergei gives me a smile and says in a very thick Russian accent. "Yes, and women in lingerie store were very beautiful and helpful."

"I'm glad you had fun with it," I say with a laugh, imagining that all the beautiful women were more than happy to help this good-looking, muscular Russian make a few

purchases. “And I hope you at least got a few numbers for your trouble.”

He laughs and gives me a big grin. “I did.”

Artyom laughs and takes the bags, digging around until he finds the small box he was looking for. “Here’s a phone to replace the one I’m keeping,” he says, holding it out to me.

I take the box while he talks to Sergei in Russian. When they’re finished, Sergei gives me a small wave and says, “I hope you like everything.”

“Thank you so much for doing all this. I’m sure I’ll love it all.”

He says something to Artyom, laughs, and then walks toward the door, giving Beau a quick scratch behind his ears before leaving us alone again. I look at all the bags and the brand-new phone in my hand.

“Let me pay you for this, please. I have my tip money. I should be able to at least cover some of it.”

“Not a chance in hell,” he quickly says, digging into the bags. I smile at the excited look on his face as he starts taking out the clothes and setting them out for me to see.

“I bet you’re a lot of fun at Christmas,” I say with a laugh.

He gives me a wink and grabs another handful of clothes. “I will be with you. I can’t wait to spoil you rotten.” Stepping closer he pulls me into a hug. “You’re going to come down on Christmas morning, and the tree is going to be stuffed with presents.” He gives me a wink and adds, “If you’ve been a good girl, that is.”

A warmth spreads through my body at his words and at the way he’s looking at me. I know I should be worried about my brother and a million other things, but Artyom has a way of making all that disappear. He makes me feel so safe and loved. Everything else fades away when he’s around. He’s like an instant dose of calm while also lighting every cell in my body on fire with lust. It’s a heady mix that constantly overwhelms me.

He leans closer, brushing his lips over mine in the barest of touches.

“Stop me, *milaya*, or I’m going to carry you upstairs and give us both a first we’ll never forget.”

I let out a soft moan at his words. “I don’t want you to stop,” I whisper against his lips.

His grey eyes search mine. “Are you sure, baby?”

“Yes.”

I’ve barely gotten the word out before he’s scooping me up and carrying me up the stairs, telling Beau to stay put so he doesn’t follow us. He shuts the bedroom door and sets me down, running his eyes over me with an obvious hunger that has my heart racing and my body so aroused I can feel how wet I am on my inner thighs.

He runs his fingers under the bottom of my shirt and slowly pulls it over my head, letting it fall to the ground as his eyes run over me. It takes all my willpower to not raise my arms to cover my chest. I know he saw me naked last night, but this feels different. Last night he wasn’t about to fuck me, but right now he most definitely is, and we both know it.

“God, you’re so beautiful, baby.” He brings his hands up to cup my breasts and lets out a deep groan when his powerful hands are against my skin. “I’ll never understand why you thought I wouldn’t like your body.”

He opens his fingers wide enough so my nipples can poke through before squeezing them together again, pinching them between his fingers and making me gasp from the pure ecstasy of it.

“I hope you’re a patient woman, *milaya*, because there’s no way in hell I’m rushing this.”

I don’t answer. I just watch as he pulls one of the strings on the sleep pants I’m wearing, untying the bow and loosening them enough so they start to fall down my hips. He takes a step back, watching the pants slide down my legs until they’re puddled at my feet and I’m completely naked.

I reach for his shirt, trying to pull it off him. He smiles and grabs onto my wrist, stopping me.

“No fair. I’m not going to be the only one naked here. I feel self-conscious enough as it is. Not that seeing your perfect body is going to help with that.”

“Stop, *milaya*,” he says, running his eyes over my body again. “Your body is so fucking perfect, baby, and I’m more than happy to show you what you do to me.”

He pulls his shirt off and then makes quick work of his jeans and boxer briefs. My mouth parts in a breathy sigh when I’m reminded of how unbelievably gorgeous he is. His body is tan and hard and tattooed, and when my eyes drop to his impressive cock, another sigh of pure appreciation slips out.

“You’re so beautiful,” I whisper, stepping closer to him, needing to close the distance and feel his body against mine.

“You’re the beautiful one, baby, and I’ve never wanted anyone as badly as I want you.”

My fingers dance along his chest, feeling the peaks and grooves and also the rough, raised scars from past injuries that decorate his skin along with the tattoos he’s chosen to mark himself with. When I lean closer and run my tongue over one pec, he runs his fingers through my hair, roughly fisting it as I tease him with my tongue and teeth. I nip his skin, letting my teeth graze over him before kissing and licking a line across his chest. When I flick one of his nipples with my tongue, he groans and fists my hair tighter, not hard enough to hurt, but hard enough for me to feel a slight sting and to know I’m not going anywhere unless he allows it.

I smile against his skin, loving that I’m the one causing this reaction. I want to see this powerful man come undone beneath my touch. His cock is pinned between us, pressing into my stomach, a constant reminder of what’s to come. I run my finger over his thick head, coating my finger in his arousal before bringing it to my lips.

“Fuck, baby,” he groans, watching me suck my finger clean.

Before I can explore him some more, he picks me up and lays me down on his bed.

“I need to taste every fucking inch of you, *milaya*.”

I moan and arch up to him when he starts to kiss and lick a line down my neck. His cock is teasingly close, and when I let out a whimper of frustration, he laughs against my skin and presses the hard length of himself against my pussy, rubbing along my soaking wet slit as he kisses his way to one of my breasts. I moan and arch up to him, grinding against him as best I can, knowing this is more than enough to send me over the edge. Each stroke is hitting my clit, and when I feel his tongue run over my nipple before giving me a hard suck, my whole body tenses right before I’m moaning his name and bucking against him.

He growls around my breast, filling his mouth with my tit while his other hand cups my face. His thumb parts my lips, and I gladly suck him in while the orgasm races through me. I’m drunk on pure ecstasy, never wanting it to stop. I whimper and moan, sucking his thumb while my body shudders and my clit becomes so sensitive that I’m squirming away from the thick cock that’s still sliding over my bundle of nerves. He stills his hips, keeping himself pressed tightly against me. Giving my nipple a soft bite, he pulls back, sucking my tit the whole way until I’m released with a wet pop.

He growls something in Russian before turning all his attention to my other breast. By the time he lets go, I’m breathing heavily and my whole body is shaking with need. He keeps his hips still, refusing to give me what I want, even though my clit is more than ready to be touched again.

“Please,” I beg, running my hands through his hair and along his broad shoulders.

He gives me one more hard suck before scooting down and kissing a path down my stomach. Taking his time, he licks and kisses every inch, replacing yesterday’s memories with something beautiful, and I fall in love with him even more for giving me this and for knowing how badly I need it.

Threading my fingers through his thick hair, I watch him kiss a line even lower, and when his face is between my legs, he grabs my thighs and spreads them wide, letting out a groan at the sight of me splayed open for him.

“You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen, *milaya*.”

He nuzzles his face against me, hitting my clit with his nose and making me suck in a quick breath.

“Please, Artyom,” I beg, needing so much more. My body feels too tight, like I’m going to burst from my skin any second. It’s impossible to keep still, and I keep squirming beneath him, anxious for what I’ve never had before. He tightens his grip on my thighs, keeping me held tightly in place and arches a dark brow at me, looking way sexier than any man has a right to.

“I meant what I said, sweetheart. I’m not rushing this. I feel like I’ve waited my whole life for you, and now that I have you, I’m going to savor every damn second of it.”

If my body wasn’t so on fire with need, I’d cry over how damn sweet his words are, but with the heat of his breath hitting my aching core, all I can think about is grinding my pussy against his face.

“Maybe you could give me an orgasm while you savor me,” I say, making him laugh.

He kisses my inner thigh before giving me a soft bite. “Maybe I will, *milaya*. Maybe I will.”

I think about demanding he give me one, but he starts kissing his way back to my center and all thoughts fly right out of my head. His fingers dig into my skin, lifting my thighs up to my chest and then spreading them wide so I’m completely exposed to him and my hips are slightly tilted up. I’ve never felt so on display in my life. I’d be embarrassed if it wasn’t for his hungry growls and the stream of Russian he’s murmuring against my skin in a strained voice.

He runs his tongue up my slit before plunging into me, pulling a surprised gasp from me. He fucks me with his tongue until I’m breathless and needy and clawing at his head and

shoulders for more. He pulls out and gives one of my pussy lips a soft suck before kissing and licking his way to where I really want him.

“Fuck,” I moan when he swipes his tongue over my swollen clit. He gives me soft flicks and licks, teasing me until I’m shaking beneath him. “Please, Artyom,” I beg, and I’m so far gone I barely recognize the sound of my own voice.

He takes pity on me and wraps his lips around my sensitive skin, sucking hard enough to push me over the edge. The orgasm takes my breath away, making me give a throaty scream as my whole body is consumed by a fierce pleasure that shocks the hell out of me. His mouth keeps working me, prolonging my climax until I’m shaky and breathless, but even then he doesn’t let up.

“Artyom,” I gasp, not sure I can withstand any more.

“I’m not done with you yet, *milaya*,” he whispers against my pussy.

He keeps his mouth pressed against me, softening his movements, so his tongue is running around my clit instead of directly over it. He slides his hands up my body, cupping my tits in his hands. Each gentle lick sends aftershocks through me until I’m gripping his hair and rocking my hips up against him in a shameless attempt to get myself off again. With my head propped on the pillow, I can see him between my legs, and the sight of his tongue running over me has me sucking in a quick breath. Hearing it, he looks up, locking his beautiful, grey eyes on mine as he teases my clit between his lips, sending me spiraling out of control once again.

I keep my eyes on his, not wanting to turn away even though it exposes myself to him in a completely different way. I want to share this with him. I want him to see what he’s doing to me.

When I can finally speak again, I let out a breathy “Please” and try to pull him up to me. I’m half delirious and drunk on the orgasms he just gave me. The feral part of my brain takes over, and all I can think about is getting him inside me. He gives my pussy one last kiss before lifting up and positioning

his body on top of mine again. His stubbled face is coated in my juices, and the sight of it triggers something deep and possessive inside of me. I cup his face and pull him closer before running my tongue up his cheek, licking my own arousal off him.

“Mine,” I say, kissing my way to his lips. “I won’t share you, Artyom, not ever. If you can’t promise me that, then we need to stop right now, because I can’t do this and then have you toss me aside.” I don’t add that I wouldn’t survive it, but that’s the truth of it. I’ve already fallen dangerously in love with him, and my heart aches at the thought that he might not be willing or wanting to give me all of himself like I need him to.

“I’m yours, *milaya*, and only yours. There will never be anyone else for me, baby.”

The kiss he gives me is sweet and deep. His tongue runs along mine, teasing me as he claims every inch of my mouth as his. I open wider for him and rock my hips up, wanting him inside me in every way possible. The thick head of his cock presses against my slit, pulling a whimper from me as I wrap my arms and legs around him.

“I love you,” he whispers against my lips. “I love you so fucking much, baby.”

“I love you too.” I cup the back of his head, wanting him as close to me as possible.

With a groan he starts to slide into me, and when I hiss out a breath at the pain, he immediately stills.

“I’ve got you, *milaya*. Just relax, baby.”

I nod as tears prick at my eyes. I try to force my body to just fucking relax, but he’s so big, and I swear it feels like he’s going to split me in two when he starts to slide in a bit more.

“Fucking hell, Artyom,” I groan. “You’re so huge!”

When I feel him smile against my lips, I give his shoulder a soft smack. “Now is not the time to gloat.”

“Sorry, baby. You’re so tight, sweetheart, but don’t worry. You’ll be taking my big cock in no time.”

A shiver of pure pleasure runs through me at his words. He gives me a sexy smile and pushes himself inside me a little bit more.

“Time to get you loosened up, *milaya*.”

Chapter II

Artyom

Seeing Riley beneath me with her eyes glassy and heavy-lidded and her lips parted in a soft gasp has me using all my willpower to not just slide fully into her. She's clamped down on me so damn tightly, though, and I don't want to hurt her any more than I have to. Giving her one more kiss, I lift up and sit back, letting out a groan at the sight of her pussy wrapped around the head of my cock. It's the first time I've ever been with a woman without a condom, and the feel of her wet heat wrapped around me is almost more than I can take.

I tell her how fucking beautiful she is, not even realizing that it's in Russian. Gripping her hip with one hand, I tighten my fingers around her and bring my other hand to her soaked pussy.

"Artyom," she moans when I start to rub her slippery clit, and it's the sexiest damn thing I've ever heard. My name on her tongue threatens to send me over the edge, but there's no way in hell I'm going to let that happen so soon.

"I've got you, *milaya*." I pinch and roll her clit between my fingers while I fuck her with just my head, letting her get used to the feel of me as her body slowly starts to open up for me. "That's my good girl," I say when I'm able to feed her another inch.

She whimpers and cups her own tits, giving her nipples a pinch that pulls a growl out of me like a fucking caveman. I work her harder, needing her to let go so I can slide in the rest of the way. When I feel her body tense, I give her a couple

more firm rubs that send her over the edge. She moans my name and closes her eyes, completely lost to her own pleasure, but they pop open as soon as her body relaxes enough for me to slide in the rest of the way.

When I'm fully seated inside her, I bring my chest to hers, needing to feel her skin against mine. I cup her face, kissing her hard as I gently fuck her through her orgasm. When I feel tears on my fingers, I groan and break our kiss so I can run my tongue up her cheek, wanting to devour every damn inch of her. The salty tears fill my mouth, giving me one more piece of her, but it's not enough. It will never be enough. I'm greedy for her in a way that defies all logic.

"Fuck, I love you, baby," I whisper against her skin, kissing a line back to her lips.

"I love you too, Artyom." Her words come out in a breathy rush before she lets out a soft laugh. "I'm so glad you fit."

I smile and give her bottom lip a soft bite. "I knew I would, sweetheart. Your body was made for mine. Your little pussy is so fucking tight, but I knew you'd spread so good for me."

She runs her tongue over my lips and wraps her legs even tighter around my waist.

"I've waited a long time for this." The mischievous smile she gives me is equal parts sexy and adorable. "Show me what you've got, baby."

I laugh and slowly slide out of her before slamming back in hard enough to make her gasp.

"You sure you can handle it, *milaya*?"

"I can handle anything you want to give me." She rakes her nails down my back, sending a shiver of pleasure down my spine before settling right in my balls. "Don't go easy on me, Artyom. I want to be sore tomorrow."

"Fucking hell," I growl, picking up the pace and giving her everything she's begging me for.

She clings to me as I pound into her. Her nipples scrape over my chest and the hungry way she's kissing me just further ignites the primal, raw desire I have to bury myself inside her as deeply as possible and never leave. When I start to circle my hips, hitting her exactly where she needs me, she pulls back so she can look into my eyes as she comes undone around my cock. She pulses around me, her body doing its damndest to take me with her, but I grit my teeth and resist. I watch her as she moans my name and rocks her hips up to me, meeting my every thrust. All those worries that had plagued her about not being good at sex float right out the goddamn window, because, my god, she's fucking amazing.

"Holy hell," she pants, making me laugh despite how badly I need to come.

I kiss her again, smiling at the loopy grin on her face. She's drunk on her orgasm and looking so beautiful it takes my breath away. Knowing I can't last too much longer, I grab onto one of her legs and pull it up, tilting her pelvis so I can slide in even further.

"Damn," she moans, eyes rolling back in pure ecstasy at the different sensations running through her. I know exactly how she feels. I may not be a virgin, but sex has never felt this damn good. I've never experienced a joining of body and mind like this. My emotions never played a part in sex before, but the love I feel for Riley mixed with sharing this intimate moment with her adds to the pleasure coursing through my body in ways I hadn't known were possible.

"One more, baby," I whisper against her lips. "Come around my cock one more time."

She moans and cups the back of my head, pulling me in for another kiss. Her mouth is hungry and needy, and I happily return it, getting lost once again in the taste and feel of her. When I feel her body start to tense before she lets out another sexy moan, I don't even try to fight it. I let her take me with her. Her perfect, tight pussy clenches hard enough to pull a deep groan from me as my cock pulses inside her, filling her with everything I have until I'm completely empty and my damn ears are ringing.

I soften the kiss, and keep myself buried inside her, wanting our bodies to stay locked together for as long as possible. When I finally pull back, she gives me the sweetest smile and cups my face, running her thumb over my cheek.

“Thank you for giving me the best first time that anyone could ever ask for.”

I kiss her thumb when she runs it over my bottom lip. “I’m the one that should be thanking you, sweetheart. You’ve just given me the most beautiful gift in the world.”

I rest my forehead against hers as we both catch our breath and our bodies come down. When I do finally slide out of her, it’s just so I can lay down beside her and pull her into my arms. I lift up on one elbow so I can look down at her. Her skin is flushed, and her eyes are still a bit heavy-lidded. She looks good and properly worn out, and I can’t help but smile at how beautiful her *I just got fucked* look is.

She looks at me and suddenly looks shy. Lowering her eyes, she worries her bottom lip and asks, “Is it always like this for you?”

I hook a finger under her chin and lift her face back up. When her blue eyes lock on mine, I lean closer and say, “No, *milaya*. It’s never been like this for me. I love you, baby, and sharing this with you,” I run my hand down her stomach to cup her used, soaking wet pussy, “being inside you, my god, sweetheart, that was fucking incredible. Please don’t ever doubt how much this meant to me.”

She nods her head and wraps her arms around my neck, pulling me down for a hug.

“Come here, baby.” I roll onto my back and take her with me, smiling when she curls her body against mine and rests her head on my shoulder.

With one of her hands resting on my cheek, she leans closer and kisses the scar on my neck. The gesture is completely unrehearsed and natural, and it’s so damn sweet that all I can do is turn my head so I can kiss the palm of her hand.

“I got that when I was twenty,” I start to say.

“You don’t have to tell me, Artyom. I know it must be painful to talk about.”

“Yuri and Mikhail are the only two who know the story. I don’t tell it to people,” I admit, “but I want you to know me, Riley.” I sigh and kiss her hand again. “I also don’t want you to run from me in disgust or fear.”

“I would never,” she quickly says, giving my scar another kiss.

“I had just started working with Mikhail, and I was young and cocky and naïve, if you can believe it.”

She gives a soft laugh but doesn’t say anything, just lightly strokes my shoulder and waits for me to continue.

“I’m guessing your brother told you my nickname.”

“Death,” she whispers.

“This was before I had earned that title. I was still learning my job, and when I was told to go and take care of a man who was still giving us trouble after repeated warnings, I didn’t think much of it. I met up with him at a club in Moscow that he often frequented and pulled him into an alley. I explained who I worked for and told him he’d been given too many warnings about racking up debt and harassing people who were under our protection.”

I stop to let out a harsh laugh and scrub a hand over my chin.

“He begged me not to kill him, swore to me that I’d never see him again, that he had a family and children who depended on him, and I bought every damn bit of it. I felt sorry for him, so I broke his nose and told him to get the fuck out of the city and never come back. I didn’t think much of it after that, not until he jumped me a few weeks later and did this.”

I run my hand over the scar, remembering every damn detail of that night. The pain and fear and so much fucking blood.

“He almost succeeded in killing me, but I managed to grab his wrist and gain the upper hand. I ended his life with the same knife that he’d tried to kill me with, and then I called Mikhail and told him I was sorry I’d failed him and that I was pretty sure I was dying, or at least I tried to. It was mainly wet gasping at that point, I think. I passed out and woke up in the hospital with Mikhail sitting in a chair next to my bed.”

“I’m so sorry,” Riley whispers, lifting up to kiss my cheek. She cups my face and keeps herself pressed close to me.

“It’s okay. It made me who I am and taught me a valuable lesson. You can’t afford to make mistakes in this line of work. That’s how I earned my nickname. I don’t let people live anymore. I can’t afford to take the risk.”

I rest my hand against hers before moving it to my mouth so I can kiss her palm. “You should run from me, Riley, and never look back.”

She actually has the nerve to snort out a laugh, even though I’m being deadly serious.

“Yeah, that’s not going to happen.”

“I’m not able to tell you everything about my work, but I’ve killed so many people, baby, and I’m not going to stop. You don’t quit a Bratva and just walk away. This is who I am.”

She lifts up so she can meet my eyes. “I love you, Artyom, and I know the man you are. You’re not Death to me. You’re the gentlest, kindest man I’ve ever met.”

“To you, *milaya*, only to you. To everyone else, I’m a monster.”

“I kind of like that,” she admits, making me laugh. “Just don’t ever direct that cold look at me, please. I don’t know how Candace withstood it.”

“Never, baby,” I promise her. “I could never look at you like that.”

“You’re not going to be short-staffed at the club now, are you? I’ll probably be fine just going in for my shift.”

I look at her like she's lost her mind. "No way in hell. You're not leaving this house without me until I'm sure you're safe, and the club will be fine." I laugh and add, "We didn't even need a waitress when I hired you."

She laughs and kisses me again before meeting my eyes. I run a finger between her eyebrows, massaging away the tension that's just appeared.

"What is it, milaya?"

"I was just thinking about my interview. I hate thinking about you interviewing dancers. I don't want anyone else in your lap but me."

Her brow scrunches up even more when I start to laugh. "Sweetheart, I don't let them give me lap dances when they're interviewing for a position."

"You don't?"

She seems so surprised by this that I start laughing again.

"No, baby. You're the only one who's ever done that, and there was no way in hell I was going to stop you. I couldn't have even if I'd wanted to. I rarely do any interviewing anymore, and I was planning on turning it over to Sloane or one of the dancers. I don't have any desire to watch any other woman but you."

I pull her into my arms and stand up, carrying her to the shower. She laughs and tightens her grip on me. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going to wash you and then I'm going to feed you."

She squirms in my arms, making my cock spark back to life. I have to remind myself that she's sore and needs a damn rest, but the look she gives me lets me know she's as ready for round two as I am. I try to give her body a break, I really do, but as soon as we're under the warm water, she's grabbing onto my ass and running her tongue over my chest. I compromise by picking her up and fucking her very slowly against the tiled wall. No matter how much she begs me to give it to her hard, I resist, not wanting her to be any more sore than she's already going to be. By the time I let go with a deep

groan, I'm wondering how in the fuck I'm ever going to be able to get anything done. All I want to do is stay buried inside her, making her orgasm as many times as her body can take, and the rest of the world can go fuck itself.

Forcing myself to slide out of her, I give her one more kiss and then get her washed up before quickly doing the same for myself. When she's all wrapped up in a towel and looking so beautiful it makes my head spin, I bring up all her new stuff so she can find something to wear. The way she runs her hands over everything and the worried way she's biting her bottom lip when she notices some of the price tags that I forgot to tell Sergei to get rid of has me more determined than ever to spoil her for the rest of her life.

When she looks like she's about to say something, I cut her off, knowing what's coming. "Don't you dare offer to pay or tell me I didn't need to do this. I wanted to do this for you, so please let me. I've never had anyone to spoil, and it's a lot more fun than I was expecting. It makes me happy to do this for you, *milaya*."

"Thank you," she finally says, even though I know she wants to keep arguing with me about it. She'll get used to me buying her things, eventually.

She grabs a pair of jeans and a light, long-sleeve tee. The pink color of it immediately making me think of her pussy when I spread her wide and reveal her sweet inner lips. She reaches inside the lingerie bag, and when she pulls out a handful of delicate, lacy things that I can't wait to peel off her, I make a mental note to give Sergei a bonus. While she chooses a black lacy bra and matching panties, I get dressed with a smile on my face.

"Nice choice," I say, walking over to her after she's put them on. I run a finger over one of her perky tits, smiling even bigger when her nipple hardens beneath my touch. I love how responsive her body is to me. With a sigh, I give her one last stroke and step back.

"Get dressed, baby. You need food, and I'm about two seconds away from ripping those panties off and fucking you

until neither one of us can move.”

The soft moan she lets out has me arching a brow. “I’ve created a monster.”

She smiles and presses the palm of her hand against my quickly hardening cock. “You have no idea, Artyom.” She gives me a wink that has my cock straining even harder against my pants. “I hope you can keep up with me.”

I laugh at this new, spunky side of her and lean down to kiss her. “I can keep up with you, *milaya*, don’t you worry about that.”

After I’ve gotten her downstairs and she’s eaten enough for me to be satisfied, she plays around with her new phone. I groan when she snaps a million photos of me and pull her into my lap.

“At least get in here with me,” I tell her.

She takes one of us and uses it as her wallpaper, but I notice she’s taken a new one of Beau and used it as her lock screen background. It’s clear I’m never going to earn that coveted spot.

“What do you think Alex will do?” she asks, setting her phone aside and turning to face me.

“I think he’ll try and come after us, and I know he’ll fail.”

“I’m sorry I can’t give you more information about him. He never trusted me with any of the details, and, honestly, I never wanted to know any of it. I never asked questions or spied. I wanted as far away from him as I could get.”

“I’m glad you did. The less you know, the better.”

She thinks for a second and then grabs onto my hand. “What about one of his ex-girlfriends? I was around some of them. Most were just flings that didn’t last long, but there was one that lasted longer than the others. She was nice, and I was so happy for her when she finally left him.”

“What’s her name?” I try not to show how important this could be, but if we could get information from someone who was close to him, someone who might be able to tell us where

he spends most of his time or the names of those closest to him, it would help us to get rid of him all the quicker.

“Mandy Stokes.” She hesitates and adds, “She was always nice to me, Artyom. I don’t want to cause her any trouble.”

“*Milaya*, she won’t be hurt by us. We want to know what she can tell us, but we’re not going to torture her to get the info. She’ll be offered a large sum of money in exchange for everything she knows about Alex and his work.”

“Okay, good.”

I grab my phone from my pocket and text Mikhail to let him know about Mandy. The response is what I expect. He’ll put Jinx on it and let me know when I’m needed. I’m just about to get up and let Beau out when I see Yuri step onto the back deck. I groan when he looks in and sees Riley on my lap and gives me a huge, shit-eating grin. I don’t bother getting up since he has a key and has never had a problem using it.

“Hey, Riley,” he says when he walks in and makes himself at home by sitting in the chair that Mikhail had used.

“Hi, Yuri.” She gives him a smile and leans in closer to me.

“That looks painful,” he says, gesturing at his own neck and face to show he means the dark bruises that still cover her cheek and neck.

“It’s okay. It feels better today.”

I give her thigh a squeeze and kiss her forehead. Yuri looks at me and switches to Russian.

“So what the fuck’s going on?”

“I told you most of it last night, but Mikhail came over a few hours ago and gave her the protection of the Bratva. I have her old phone, and the two of them have been texting her threats pretty much nonstop. She’s just given me the name of an old girlfriend of Alex’s. Jinx is trying to get us an address so we can pay her a visit and hopefully learn something useful.”

“That’s great, but you know it’s not what I’m talking about.” His green eyes study me, the same cocky grin I’ve seen a million times before playing at his lips. “You’re bailing on me. We were supposed to remain unattached bachelors for life, and you’ve gone and fallen in love.”

“I have,” I admit, giving Riley a smile, even though she has no idea what we’re saying.

“I can’t believe you’re leaving me with the burden of trying to sexually satisfy all the beautiful women in this city. Do you have any idea how fucking exhausted I’m going to be?”

I laugh and say, “Boo-fucking-hoo. Sergei will be more than happy to help pick up my slack.”

“It’s not the same,” Yuri pouts. “You have that scar they all go crazy for, but you also scare a lot of them, which makes it so easy to slide right in and comfort them. Plus, Sergei is a lot younger than me, so I feel like an old man when we go out. It’s disheartening.”

“Women love a silver fox.”

“Fuck you,” he says, but he can’t hold back his laugh. “I’m not a fucking silver fox, not yet anyway. One day, yes, but right now I’m still a sexy-as-fuck, thirty-five-year-old who only has the occasional grey hair.”

Switching to English, I tell Riley, “Yuri’s pissed because I fell in love and refuse to go clubbing with him anymore.”

“I can’t believe you just ratted me out.” Yuri smiles and turns to Riley. “I’m very happy for the two of you, even if Artyom did promise me long ago that we’d remain bachelor buddies for the rest of our days.”

“I’m sure you’ll manage,” Riley says. “From what I heard in the changing room at the club, you keep very busy all on your own.”

Yuri laughs and holds up his hands in mock defeat. “It’s possible I have a little bit of a reputation. They’re all so intimidated by Death here,” he says, waving a hand at me. “It’s only natural they’d come to me for some comfort. That’s

why he's the best wingman ever. It was really the perfect system, and now you've gone and ruined it, Riley. I hope you're happy."

Riley laughs because it's obvious he's joking around with her. She gives me a big grin when she turns her face to mine. "I am pretty happy, actually."

I give her a wink and then grab my phone when a text comes in. After I read it, I look at Yuri and switch back to Russian. "Jinx found the ex-girlfriend. Mikhail wants us to go talk to her."

Yuri nods and stands up. "It was good seeing you again, Riley." He turns to me and adds in Russian, "I'll meet you outside."

"What's going on?" Riley asks before he's even fully out the door.

"I need to go for a little bit." Her body tenses at my words, making me tighten my grip on her and pull her closer. "I'll be back soon. I promise, Riley, you'll be safe here."

She nods her head, but her hands are still clutching at my shirt like she'll never let me go. Cupping her face, I pull her to me and kiss her until I feel her body start to relax, reassuring her in the only way I can. I know she'll have a hard time trusting just words, but I'm hoping my lips and tongue can convince her that everything is okay and that I will always keep her safe and come back to her.

She lets out a soft moan, and I pull away, wishing I didn't have to. Resting my forehead against hers, I let out a sigh and try to ignore how badly I want to pick her up and carry her back to bed.

"I'll be back as soon as I can, *milaya*. Stay inside with Beau and keep your phone close to you, okay?"

"Okay," she whispers.

I give her one more kiss and then scoot her off my lap. She's not safe until we get rid of her brother, so I need to do whatever the fuck it takes to make that happen.

Chapter 12

Riley

I try not to show how worried I am when Artyom stands up to go and get his gun. He tucks it against the small of his back before coming over to give me one more kiss goodbye. I don't want to let him go, but I also don't want to be a needy burden who's constantly dependent on him to get through life. So as hard as it is, I give him a smile when he pulls back from our kiss and looks down at me.

“Stay inside, baby. I love you, and I'll be back as soon as I can.”

His grey eyes search mine. The last thing I want is him worrying about me when he needs to put all his attention on work, so I give him another smile and say, “I'll be fine, Artyom. Beau can nap while I work on the schedules and raid your bookshelves.”

He smiles and kisses the tip of my nose. “Help yourself to anything. Everything I have is yours, *milaya*.”

“I love you,” I tell him, standing on my tippy toes so I can kiss his neck.

“I love you too, baby.”

He squeezes me in a tight hug before walking out to join Yuri on the deck. They both wave before disappearing from view—Yuri with a goofy grin and Artyom with a worried one. I walk to the window and stare at the lake. A few seconds later I hear the rev of a car followed by the familiar sound of Artyom's motorcycle. I watch the choppy water of the lake until the rumbling engine is too far away to hear.

“Looks like it’s just you and me.”

Beau looks up at me, head cocked to one side, and then goes to stand in front of his treat cabinet. The look he gives me over his shoulder makes me laugh. I swear he’s reminding me that he gave me a place to sleep in my time of need.

“I see how it is,” I say with a laugh. I reach in and grab him a big bone. “I guess it’s okay if you get a few extra treats today.”

He wags his tail and gently grabs the bone from my hand before taking it to his bed. While he makes quick work of his snack, I grab my laptop and pull up the work schedules, knowing it’ll help take my mind off things. I fill out the next three months’ worth for Artyom before finally giving up and deciding to scan his books again. I grab a murder mystery that’s set in Iceland and snuggle into one corner of the couch. After about an hour, my eyelids start growing heavy. I try to focus on the story, but I quickly lose the battle and fall asleep with the book on my chest.

I jerk awake a few hours later, my heart racing and my mind struggling to make sense of what’s going on. The room is dark, making me realize I’ve been asleep for far longer than I initially thought. I scan the room, trying to see by the thin light streaming in the window from the moon. My ears strain for any out-of-place sounds, and when I hear a faint thud, or at least what I’m pretty sure is a faint thud, I jump up from the couch and call Beau over to me. I see his dark form wander closer, and as soon as I feel his soft, reassuring fur, I start making my way towards the stairs.

“Come on, boy,” I whisper, not caring that I sound like a lunatic. My eyes keep scanning the room, my body so tense with nerves I can barely move. I keep expecting to see Matt or Alex’s face appear out of the dark, and by the time I get to Artyom’s bedroom, I’m shaking and panting like I’ve just run a mile. My brain refuses to stop racing, making it impossible for me to think beyond the idea that I need to hide.

Knowing it’s ridiculous and that I’m probably overreacting doesn’t stop me from opening the closet door and scurrying

inside with Beau at my heels. I'm glad it's too dark for me to see the condescending look the brave police dog must be giving me.

"Don't judge me too harshly," I whisper, sitting down next to Beau. He licks my cheek and leans into me, letting me feel his weight against my shoulder. It's ridiculously comforting. We sit like that for several minutes.

"I forgot my damn phone," I tell him, feeling stupid, but not so stupid that I'm going to risk going downstairs in the dark to get it. "I'm sure Artyom will be back soon anyway," I tell Beau, but it's clearly more for my benefit than his. "He can find me hiding in his closet with his dog like a complete dumbass. Won't that be nice?"

Beau's a sweet dog, so he remains quiet, letting me stew silently on my upcoming humiliation all on my own. After what feels like forever mixed in with several heavy sighs from Beau, I finally convince myself that this is ridiculous and that I need to get my ass up and save what little pride I have left when I hear the distinct sound of a door being shut. I wait for the sound of Artyom's voice, but it never comes. The silence is so heavy it makes my ears ring as I grip Beau and struggle to hear something that will let me know how scared I should be.

"Oh shit," I whisper when several minutes later, I hear the bedroom door open. I see the light pop on, streaming under the closet door, and I've never been so fucking scared in my life. I can't let Alex or Matt take me, and I can't let them hurt Beau. I very quietly scoot around, putting my body in front of Beau's when the closet door is yanked open. I let out a squeal of pure terror when I see a gun aimed at me.

I'm so terrified that not even the loud Russian can penetrate my scared brain. It's not until Artyom bends down and cups my face in his hands that I understand it's him and that I'm safe. I fling my arms around him, shaking and crying and long past caring that I've probably just humiliated the hell out of myself. He wraps me in his strong arms and holds me.

"Shh, it's okay, *milaya*. I've got you, baby."

His deep voice calms me, reminding me that I'm safe because nothing can hurt me when I'm wrapped in his arms. I'm sure of it. He's the safest place in the world to be. No one can touch me when I'm in Death's arms. With that knowledge firmly in place, I suck in a deep, shaky breath and wipe the tears from my eyes.

"Are you okay? Why didn't you answer your phone, baby, and why are you in the closet?"

"Because I'm an idiot," I say, my voice still shaky. "I fell asleep on the couch, and when I woke up, I thought I heard something, so I ran upstairs with Beau to hide. It was really stupid. I'm sorry."

He runs the back of his finger over one tear-streaked cheek. "Don't ever apologize for being scared, baby. I'm sorry you were and that I wasn't here when you needed me." He looks over at Beau and gives his head a scratch. "Just promise me that if something like that ever happens again that you won't put yourself in front of the highly trained dog who could save your life."

I look over at Beau who gets up and saunters off like he's in need of another nap after our grand adventure. "I didn't want him to get hurt."

"He recognized my scent. Otherwise, he would've gotten in front of you anyway."

I start to feel even more stupid when I think about how relaxed Beau had been the entire time. I hadn't thought about him being able to smell whoever was on the other side of the door. My face heats up with embarrassment.

"Don't," Artyom says, reaching down to pick me up. "Don't you dare start beating yourself up about hiding. You did the right thing. Next time grab the gun I keep in my nightstand on your way to the closet."

"I don't know how to shoot a gun."

"I'll teach you."

I don't say anything, but I'm pretty sure it's safer for everyone if I don't have a gun. I shudder at what might have

happened tonight if I'd had one. Artyom's instincts are spot-on. He never would've accidentally shot me. I'm not so sure I can say the same about myself, especially when I'm terrified and shaking and beyond rational thought.

My arms and legs tighten around him when I see the worried look on his face. "When I came in that door to a dark house with no sign of you," he stops and gives his head a soft shake. "You scared the hell out of me, sweetheart."

"I'm so sorry. Why didn't you holler out to me?"

He gives me a soft smile. "Because I'm trained to not do stupid things that might get my ass killed."

I can't help but laugh. "I guess that makes sense. No point in announcing yourself to the bad guys."

"I think it's really cute that you say 'bad guys,' but you're not talking about me."

"I can't think of you that way." I lace my fingers behind his neck and look into his grey eyes. "You'll never be the bad guy to me."

"You're so sweet, *milaya*." The hungry look he gives me has my heart racing for a whole new reason. "In more ways than one."

I'm all set for him to lay me down on the bed again, but he surprises me by saying, "Let's go grab some food, baby. Do you like pizza?"

"I do, but is it safe?"

"We'll take my car, and the place we're going to isn't a place that your brother is likely to go."

I nod my head, excited to go someplace with him. He sets me down and gives my ass a soft smack. "Pick out a pair of your new shoes while I let Beau out."

He gives me a quick kiss before giving a whistle to Beau as he heads down the stairs. I look through my new bags until I find a couple of shoeboxes. I ignore the black heels, even though they are gorgeous, and grab the pink and grey running shoes. It's been so long since I had a new pair of shoes, I'd

almost forgotten how damn good they feel. When I slide my foot in, I sigh at how luxurious it feels. This is something rich people will never understand. They'll never know the pure joy of putting their foot into a brand-new shoe or experience the sheer giddiness at putting on a new piece of clothing after wearing nothing but second-hand pieces. To them it's nothing special, just another day in the life, but how can you truly appreciate something if you've never had to go without it?

When I hear Artyom and Beau come back inside, I take a quick look in the mirror and apply a bit more makeup to hide the bruises that are still painfully obvious before running down to join them. It's weird not getting on the back of Artyom's motorcycle, but I have to admit he looks sexy as hell driving his Porsche.

“Where are we going?”

“It's a small pub on the other side of the city. They have great pizza, and it's pretty laid back.”

“Do you go there a lot?”

He reaches over and gives my thigh a soft squeeze before shifting gears again. “Don't worry, *milaya*, we won't be running into anyone.”

I'm about to protest that I wasn't fishing for info, but I kind of was, so I don't bother. Instead, I rest my hand on his thigh and watch him drive, which is far more pleasant than worrying about running into any past lovers of his.

“So how did it go tonight? I'm assuming you found Mandy.”

He gives a soft laugh and shakes his head. “That's not how this works, baby. I can't talk about what I do. All you need to know is that you're safe and we're taking care of it.”

“And Mandy's okay?”

“She is, baby. I promise.”

“Okay.”

He reaches over and runs a finger under my chin, that one small motion sending a spark of pleasure down my spine.

When he hears my breath hitch, he keeps his focus on the road, but I see his lips quirk up in a grin. He knows exactly what he does to me. Sliding my hand up his thigh, I smile when my fingers hit his thick head. I massage him through his pants, feeling him quickly grow beneath my hand. It means the world to me that I have the same effect on him that he has on me. Knowing it has made me far bolder than I'd ever be otherwise.

“You’re turning into quite the tease, *milaya*,” he says, groaning when I keep working him.

“Am I tease if I follow through?”

He laughs and pulls into a parking lot next to a hole-in-the-wall sort of place that I'd never dare venture into all on my own.

“Since you can't follow through right now, then, yes, I'd say you're being a wicked tease and driving me nearly insane with the need to be inside you.”

As soon as he's parked the car and turned it off, I lean over and bring my mouth close to his. “But what if I want to do something about it right now?”

He lifts a dark brow at me when I run my hands down his hard chest and abs, stopping at the button on his jeans. He doesn't stop me when I undo it and start working on his zipper.

“Just what did you have in mind, sweetheart?”

“I want to taste you, Artyom.”

I think about all the experiences he's had with other women, and even though he says they meant nothing, it still grates on me that he has memories of things we've never done before. I tug on his zipper and give his bottom lip a soft suck.

“I want to suck you off in this parking lot, and I want to erase every memory you have of other women. I want to replace them all with memories of us.”

“I've already forgotten them, *milaya*. You don't need to do this.”

I give his lip a hard enough bite to make him groan and cup the back of my head. “I want to do this,” I tell him. “Now help me get your cock out because I need you to teach me what to do.”

“Jesus Christ, baby,” he groans while he reaches down and frees his cock for me. “Is this what you want?” he asks, fisting his shaft and lightly stroking himself.

I eye the thick head and the bead of arousal that’s already forming. Watching his hand work himself, I know there’s most likely no way in hell I’ll be able to take him all the way in. I bite my bottom lip and meet his eyes.

“What if I’m terrible at it?”

He quickly cups my face with both hands, forgetting about everything else except me and my insecurities. “*Milaya*, you could never be terrible at anything, and you don’t have to do anything that you don’t want to do. You will never disappoint me, no matter what.”

He waits until I nod my head.

“Please don’t ever do anything just because you think I want it or you think you should.”

“I won’t. I want to do this. I just don’t want to be bad at it in comparison to others.”

“There is no comparison, sweetheart. There’s only you and the overwhelming love I feel for you.”

“Will you help me?”

He grins and runs his thumb over my lips, smiling when I wrap my lips around him and suck him in.

“Just like that, baby. You’re a natural.”

I run my tongue over him and give him another suck, smiling when his eyes go heavy-lidded. Wanting to give him even more pleasure, I pull my head back, sucking his thumb the whole way before letting go with a wet pop. I give the parking lot a quick look, making sure no one’s around us before lowering my head. He lets out a deep groan when I run

my tongue over his slit, lapping up his arousal with a moan of my own.

Suddenly all my nerves and worries fade away. I don't have to be the most skilled lover, because let's face it, that's just not possible. All I have to do is love him with my body, show him with my lips and tongue how crazy he drives me and how badly I want to do the same to him. I may not be able to deep throat or have some killer techniques up my sleeve, but I have unconditional love and enthusiasm and a willingness to learn.

When I wrap my lips around his head and suck him in, he groans and runs his hands through my hair, gently fisting it as he murmurs something in Russian. I run my tongue over him and slide down his shaft until my mouth is stuffed full of him. My fingers dig into his strong thighs as I suck hard enough to hollow out my cheeks and slowly raise my head back up.

“Goddamn, baby,” he growls, not caring that I'm only able to work the top half of his cock.

Spit slides down his shaft, and when I try to take him in even more, I start to gag and have to pull back up. Without stopping, I keep working him with my mouth while I bring a hand to the bottom half of his shaft. I work him in tandem, sucking and gently twisting my hand as I slide up and down his spit-soaked shaft. He fists my hair even tighter, making me moan around his cock. The car is filled with our deep breaths and groans. The sound of it so damn erotic that it has me rocking my hips as I suck him harder.

He surprises me by letting go of my hair to roughly unbutton and unzip my jeans. As soon as the zipper is down, he's plunging a hand under my panties and sliding three fingers into me.

“Fuck, baby,” he growls. “You're so damn wet.”

I moan and rock against his hand, sucking him harder as I chase my own release. Each thrust of his fingers hits my clit, making my whole body light up from within. He brings his free hand back to my head, fisting my hair again just like I've grown to like it.

“I’m close, baby.” His voice is strained and his accent much thicker. I love it when he gets like this. Hearing it pushes me closer and closer to the edge. I’m so drunk on my own pleasure, making it easier for me to take more of him in. My hand is quickly replaced by my lips, and when I’ve almost managed to get all of him in, he slides his fingers over my clit again, sending me spiraling out of control. I scream around his cock, bucking my hips as my pussy clenches tightly around his fingers.

“Fuck!” he growls right before his cock swells even more, feeling impossibly huge as my lips stretch around him. The wet heat of him hits the back of my throat, causing another shudder of pure bliss to run through me. He keeps pulsing inside me. Each swallow has my throat constricting around him even more, pulling groans and grunts from him that sound downright feral. By the time he’s empty, my body is shaking and my mouth feels numb. I slowly slide off him, giving his still semi-hard cock one last kiss before sitting back up. He gives my pussy another stroke, making a shiver run through me. He brings his soaking wet fingers to his mouth and slowly sucks them clean. Seeing it has me leaning closer. He smiles and cups my face, watching me as he runs his tongue over my bottom lip.

“Do you want to taste how sweet you are, baby?”

“Yes,” I whisper before pressing my lips to his.

I run my tongue over his, moaning when I taste my pussy on him. I give his tongue a suck, loving that we taste like each other, and I get so lost in the kiss that I jump in surprise when a car near us starts up, the engine cutting through the fog of lust that’s completely consumed me. Artyom’s lips turn up in a smile, and I pull back with a laugh.

“Forget you were in a parking lot, *milaya*?”

“Yes.”

He laughs and brushes my hair behind my ear. “That was amazing, baby.” His finger runs over my bottom lip again. “Everything you do is perfect.”

I kiss his finger and start to button my pants. “I need some of that pizza you promised me.”

“Work up an appetite?”

“Yes.”

He smiles and tucks himself back in his pants. “You’ve definitely earned it, *milaya*.”

We get out and walk to the discreet door on the side with only a small sign above it. Bella’s is written in red, and despite the complete lack of advertising, almost like they’re actively trying to keep people away instead of bring them in, the parking lot is full and when Artyom opens the door, we’re met with classic rock and raucous laughter.

Artyom puts his arm around me, leading me in. The inside is almost too dark, but there’s more lighting further in where there are several tables lined up along the back wall. Several of them are already taken, and the smell of pizza is heavy around us, making my stomach growl. There’s a long bar off to our right and a bunch of cocktail tables spread out before us. Most of the men here look like bikers, and I notice a few of them dart their eyes over to Artyom and then quickly look away. There aren’t as many women, but the ones that are here do the exact opposite of the men. They stare openly, and I try to not think about how much it pisses me off. I watch Artyom scan the crowd, his eyes hard and focused until he’s satisfied it’s safe. When he is, he gives me a smile and rests his hand against the nape of my neck, leading me over to the bar.

There are a couple of barstools open on the end, and I laugh when he grabs my waist and puts me on one. Waving the bartender over, Artyom orders a vodka and asks me what I want.

“I’ll have what you’re having,” I say, making him smile.

“Make that two,” he tells the older man who’s already grabbing the bottle of vodka. Once he’s paid, he turns to me and says, “I’ll be right back, baby. Don’t move.”

He kisses my head and disappears down a dark hallway beyond the bar that I’m assuming the bathrooms are down. I

quickly decide that I'll pee my pants before I venture down that dark tunnel on my own. Our vodkas sit untouched in front of me while I watch the bartender pop the tops off several beers. His beard reaches his chest and is mainly white with a little bit of black still hanging on, a sharp contrast to his shaved head.

"Hey."

I turn my head right as a man sits on the barstool next to me, flashing me a big smile. He looks like he's around my age, average build with shaggy, brown hair. I can tell by the glassy look to his eyes that he's probably had one too many tonight.

"Hi," I say and then look back at the drinks in front of me, not wanting to encourage him.

"I'm Jason," he says, not taking the hint.

At least the bar is dark enough to hide my bruises so I won't get any curious questions. I look over at the hallway Artyom disappeared down, but there's still no sign of him. Jason orders another drink, and I'm just about to grab our vodkas and go find a table when I see Artyom appear from the dark hallway. His eyes lock on mine before he cuts a quick look to the man sitting next to me. I see the way his whole body stiffens at the sight of him, and I'm just about to jump up and spare Jason the ass kicking I'm sure he's about to get when Artyom appears at my side.

Without a word, he cups the back of my head and leans down, pulling me into a deep kiss that instantly sets my body on fire. I'm usually a pretty shy person, but Artyom brings out a dangerous, sexy side of myself that I never knew existed. Instead of trying to get the kiss onto more PG-rated grounds, I open my mouth wider and let out a moan. His other hand grabs onto my hip, keeping a tight grip on me as he runs his tongue along mine. He gives my bottom lip a soft bite before pulling back with a smug grin on his face. He gives me a wink and grabs his vodka, downing it in one gulp.

I'm not surprised when I see that the stool next to me is now empty. Jason has apparently taken the hint.

“I should probably be offended at that obvious caveman display of ownership.”

Artyom laughs, not looking the slightest bit offended or chastised. “It worked, didn’t it? And no one had to get bloody.” He leans in and gives my top lip a soft suck. “Make no mistake, *milaya*, you are mine, and now every one of these fuckers knows it.”

He smiles when I lean closer and do the same thing to him, running my tongue over his bottom lip before sucking it in. I grab onto his waist and pull him closer, loving how damn good he feels.

“Now all the women know you’re mine too,” I whisper against his lips.

“Always, *milaya*. I’m no one else’s.”

I grab my own vodka and down it in one go like he did. I’m just about to congratulate myself for pulling off that kick-ass move when I start to cough. I rarely drink, and I hadn’t counted on that being so damn strong. Artyom laughs and pats my back.

“Come on, killer, let’s get some pizza in you.”

Chapter 13

Artyom

By the time Riley and I leave Bella's, we've managed to go through two pizzas and another four shots of vodka for her. Seeing her beautiful, flushed face helps me forget about that asshole who thought he could try to make a move on my girl. As soon as things calm down, I'm putting a diamond on her, a big enough one so that even drunk motherfuckers will be able to see it.

"Come on, baby," I say, picking her up and laughing at the squeal she gives. "You don't usually drink, do you?"

"No." She giggles and adds. "Never."

Opening the car door, I set her in the passenger seat, smiling at the serious look she's trying to give me. "You're a bad influence, Artyom."

"You think so?"

She tries to keep a straight face, but her eyes are dancing with amusement. "I'm now sexually active and drinking. Who knows what's next for me?"

I give her a wink that makes her blush. "I can't wait to find out."

She snorts out a laugh before smacking a hand over her face. I laugh and shut the door on her. The drive back shows me a new side to Riley, a carefree, goofy side that makes me love her even more. She finds some music she likes and then sings along to several of the songs, and it's so bad that I honestly can't tell if she's goofing around or actually trying to

sing them well. I don't have the heart to ask her because I suspect that she's truly giving it her all.

After we get to the house and we're walking up the path to the back deck, she looks out at the lake and gets a mischievous look on her face. Grabbing onto my arm, she starts to pull me toward the water.

"Do you ever go skinny-dipping?"

I laugh and shake my head. "Fuck no, the lake is cold at night."

She drops my hand and takes off running to the edge of the water, letting out a squeal when I start to chase her. I groan when she rips her shirt off and then makes quick work of her bra. I realize my ass is going to be getting wet tonight because there's no way in hell I'm letting her go in alone.

Turning around so she can see me, she keeps walking backwards and slowly starts to unbutton her jeans. The sight of her bare tits in the moonlight has my cock waking up again. I watch as she kicks off her shoes and then bends down to slide her jeans and panties off. The socks are the next to go, and soon she's completely naked and looking so damn beautiful it freezes me in place.

"Better get those clothes off, Artyom," she purrs, hooking her finger at me in a beckoning motion.

I sigh and run my eyes over her again. She has no idea how damn sexy she is, not a fucking clue. She lets out a triumphant whoop when I pull my shirt off.

"You're drunk, sweetheart," I say with a laugh, already working on my pants. The night is warm enough, but I know the water's going to be chilly, and I'm not looking forward to it. By the time I'm naked, she's already taken a few steps into the water, completely ignoring the dock I had built that juts out into the water next to us.

She laughs and reaches down to splash some water at me. "Better hurry up and get in here so you can keep me warm."

I look down at my impressive erection, knowing it's about to go bye-bye. With a heavy sigh, I step into the water, hissing

out a creative curse in Russian when the cold water covers my feet. Riley laughs and runs up to me, grabbing my hand and pulling me into the water after her. When we're deep enough, I wrap my hands around her waist and pull her against me.

"I'll have to remember that alcohol makes you crazy," I say with a laugh.

She turns and wraps her arms and legs around me, pressing her lips to mine in a hungry kiss that catches me completely off guard.

"And horny," I try to say, but it comes out muffled and then turns into a groan when she gives my tongue a hard suck, reminding me of the blowjob she'd given me in the car. God, just the memory of it has my cock defying all odds and sparking back to life in the cold water.

"I'm always horny when I'm around you," she murmurs against my lips. "You drive me crazy, Artyom. You always have, ever since the first second I saw you looking dangerous and sexy as hell in your club."

I smile and pull back to get a better look at her. "You need to sober up if you want me to fuck you, baby."

She barely has a chance to register what I'm doing before I lift her up and toss her a few feet away. She manages one sharp scream before the water swallows her up. I'm still laughing when her head bobs back up and she shoots me a scathing look.

"Oh, you're going to pay for that," she growls, but there's a huge smile on her face, and when she lunges for me, I'm ready. She comes at me hard, but her style is more maul and cling, and there isn't really any skill behind it, so she's easy to evade. I finally take pity on her and let her take me under. When we come back up, we're both laughing, and I'm satisfied that the cold water has sobered her up enough.

This time when she brings her lips to mine, I wrap my arms around her, sliding one hand down to cup the ass I'll never be able to get enough of. Without breaking the kiss, I walk us over to the ladder that's attached to the dock. She

moans and rocks her hips, grinding against my quickly hardening cock. She feels so fucking good, slippery and soft and perfect in every goddamn way.

I grab onto the ladder and step onto the bottom rung, lifting us out of the water, watching as her perky tits slowly rise above the water line. As soon as one of her cherry-red nipples clears the surface, I wrap my lips around it and give her a good suck, filling my mouth with her. She moans and runs her fingers through my hair, arching her back and encouraging me with her body to keep going.

Squeezing her ass even harder, I play with her nipple, sucking and nipping at her until she's panting and squirming against my cock like the wild woman she is.

"Please, Artyom," she begs, clutching at the back of my head. I smile around her tit when she lets out a frustrated growl and bites on my hair, tugging it between her teeth like a fucking savage. She drags her nails over my back. "I need you inside me right fucking now."

My cock swells even more at her words. I give her tit one last suck before letting go. Climbing up the last few rungs, I step us onto the deck and quickly lower her down, hovering my body above hers.

"No, no, no," she says with a laugh, pressing the palms of her hands against my chest. "Roll over, Artyom. It's my turn to ride you."

I smile and give her what she wants. As soon as I've rolled over, she climbs on top of me, straddling me with a sexy grin playing at her lips. She looks so damn beautiful with the moonlight hitting her skin. Her eyes run over me before she drags her nails down my chest, hard enough to sting. I grab onto her hips, lifting her up and hovering her right above the head of my cock. She whimpers and tries to lower herself down, but I dig my fingers in harder and keep her just out of reach, teasing her with my head until she throws her head back and growls my name in frustration.

When I laugh, she shoots me an angry look. "I'm supposed to be in control in this position. Stop being so damn stubborn."

“Okay, *milaya*. You want to be in control, baby?”

“Yes,” she says in a breathy rush when I start to fuck her with just the head of my cock.

I can’t help but tease her a little bit longer, lowering her down even more, groaning when she clenches even tighter around me. I raise and lower her until she’s panting and scratching at my chest like a feral little cat, begging me for more. With a growl, I pull her down at the same time as I rock my hips up, slamming into her hard enough to make her gasp. The wet heat of her pussy completely envelops me, making my head spin with how fucking good she feels.

“Take your pleasure, *milaya*. Let me see you ride my cock, baby.”

She smiles and rests her palms on my chest as she starts to rock her hips, sliding along the length of me and driving me crazy with the need to empty myself inside her. I’ve never wanted to claim any woman before, but I want to claim every damn inch of Riley. A ring on her finger and the same last name isn’t enough. I want more. I want her smelling and tasting like me, and I want her pussy to always be full of my seed. I want to mark her in every way possible.

“Artyom,” she moans, riding me hard enough to make her tits bounce in a hypnotizing way that makes it impossible to look away. Every inch of her is my idea of perfection, and when she starts to moan, I bring my eyes to hers and watch her come undone. Her whole body tenses, and I have to grit my teeth to keep from joining her as she pulses around my cock, her tight pussy urging me to join her.

Her hips slow down, savoring the aftershocks. Watching her reminds me of the lap dance she gave me, except this is a thousand times better. Before she didn’t know me, so it lacked the intimacy I’ve come to crave from her. I run my hands up her body, cupping her tits and giving her nipples a pinch that pulls another moan from her.

“Come here, *milaya*,” I groan, needing to taste her, to feel her body on mine.

She lowers down, resting one hand on the deck beside my head and cupping my face with the other. I wrap my arms around her, both our hips rocking in a rhythm that threatens to make me lose control. I thread my fingers through her hair, cupping the back of her head and sliding my tongue between her parted lips. She moans and kisses me hard, filling me with the taste and feel of her. My other hand grabs onto her ass, grinding her even harder against me until she's moaning and rocking her round ass in a fast rhythm that's going to push us both over the edge.

"Fuck," she whimpers against my lips right as her body tenses. Her pussy tightens even more around me, making it impossible for me to resist any longer. With a groan I let go, emptying myself inside her with each pulse of my cock. Like it always is with her, pleasure overwhelms me, darkening the edges of my vision as my entire world narrows down to just her. I wrap my arms around her and kiss her gently as we both slowly come down. The night is quiet around us, and I've never been so happy that I don't have close neighbors because fucking Riley outside is quickly becoming my new favorite thing.

"I love you," I whisper against her lips, giving her ass a playful smack. "And I really like seeing your wild side come out when you've had too much vodka."

She laughs and gives me another kiss. "I love you too." She rests her head on my shoulder and lets out a sigh. "I'm too tired to move. We might have to just sleep out here."

"The early morning fishermen would love that, especially if we roll over so my ass is the first thing they see when they come around the bend."

"They should. You have an amazing ass."

I laugh and roll us over, keeping myself inside her. "I hate to pull out of you, *milaya*. You've turned me into an obsessed romantic. I can't get enough of you."

"Good. I'd hate it if I were the only one."

I brush a strand of wet hair off her forehead. “You’re definitely not the only one.” Looking into her blue eyes reminds me of how much I have to lose now, and it’s terrifying. I tell myself that nothing is going to happen to her and that the safest place she can be is right here with me. With the information Mandy gave us, we’ll be able to catch Alex as soon as the coward comes out of hiding, and then I’ll kill him and Matt. Problem solved.

With that reassurance firmly in my mind, I give Riley another kiss and slowly slide out of her. I miss the feel of her immediately. The light breeze coming off the lake is warmer than usual, but with her hair still wet, she starts shivering as soon as I lift my body off hers. I slide one arm under her legs and the other under her upper back and pick her up bridal style.

“Time for a hot shower, baby. You’ve definitely earned it.”

She smiles and rests her head against my shoulder. By the time I get her washed up and into one of my T-shirts that she insisted she wanted to wear despite the new pajamas Sergei brought her, she’s already falling asleep. I wrap my arms around her, pulling her body in close to mine while Beau jumps up to lay by her feet. For the first time in my life, I feel like I have a home, not just a house that I sleep in and occasionally spend time in, but an actual home.

Two days later I get the phone call I’ve been waiting for. Alex has been spotted, and Mikhail wants all of us geared up and ready to go. It’s time to end this fucking thing once and for all. A familiar spike of adrenaline rushes through me at the news while a smile plays at my lips. Rarely do we get to go all out in a street war. All the guys are going to be revved up, and I can’t wait to join them. My only regret is how worried it’s going to make Riley. Her blue eyes are already studying me, wondering what’s going on.

“I need to go, *milaya*.” I stand up and give her a quick kiss before running up to the bedroom, taking the stairs two at a time. I’m already changing into my tactical gear when she walks in the room. I slide the black pants and shirt on that are designed to accommodate several weapons while giving me

ease of movement before stepping into my black boots. Riley bites her lower lip and watches me holster two handguns and then sheathe my favorite knives.

“It’s going to be okay, baby,” I tell her, grabbing a black duffel bag from the closet and heading back downstairs to the bedroom that I converted into a gym. Hidden away in the closet is the gun safe where I store my larger weapons. I put my AR-15 in the bag and extra ammunition before zipping it up and turning to a scared-looking Riley who’s hovering in the doorway.

“I’m sorry, but I have to go.”

“I know.” She pulls me in for a fierce hug and then stands up on her toes and wraps her arms around my neck. The kiss she gives me is hard and hungry, but there’s a sadness to it as well. I can feel it in the way she holds part of herself back and in the way she’s clutching me like she’s afraid she’ll never see me again. When I pull back, her eyes are glassy, but they’re not spilling over yet.

“Be safe, Artyom, and come back to me.” Her voice is soft and shaky, and I can tell how hard she’s trying to be brave for me.

“I will, *milaya*. Always. I love you, baby. I’ll be back as soon as I can. Keep your phone close this time,” I say, giving her a wink.

“I will.”

I cup her face and give her one last kiss before running out the door. Throwing the duffel bag over my back, I grab my helmet and start my bike. Racing through the dark streets, it doesn’t take me long to get to the abandoned warehouse Mandy had told us about. We’ve had people watching it since we learned of it, and it looks like Alex finally decided to show himself. I park a block away like Mikhail instructed, parking the bike between Yuri’s Audi and Mikhail’s Aston Martin.

Taking my gun out, I adjust the sling attached to it and position the strap across my body so the rifle is positioned snugly against my chest with the muzzle pointing down and

then fill my pockets with extra ammo before walking to the edge of the building where I can see a few of the others waiting. Yuri spots me and gives me a big grin.

“Ready to kill some things, Death?”

“Always,” I say with a laugh. “Especially these motherfuckers.”

Sergei and a few of the others smack me on the back while Mikhail gives me a nod and motions me over.

“What have we got?” I ask, looking at the blueprint he’s pulled up on his phone.

“Jinx just sent me this. It’s the layout of the warehouse. We’ve got three stories, several exits, and not to mention a shit ton of busted windows they can fire from.”

“Good thing they’re not expecting us then,” I say, looking over the layout again.

“Not yet anyway. If we split into two teams, then one can go in the north while the other’s going in the south, and we should be able to slowly work our way up the levels.”

“Sounds good. Mandy said he operated out of the top floor, maybe we’ll get really lucky and we’ll get to him before he even realizes we’re here.”

Mikhail gives me a grim smile. “Yeah, I’m not going to hold my breath on that one.” He taps the screen again, pulling up another photo, this one an aerial photo that looks more recent than the others, and points to a fire escape on the west side. “Fuck, we’ll have to split into three groups. We need another team to go up there in case there’s a way for them to escape to the roof. That thing looks rickety as fuck.”

Mikhail’s dark eyes scan the group of men he’s assembled. He’s called in twenty of us for tonight’s fun. I look around at the familiar faces. I’ve trained and fought with these men, spilled blood with them, and had more shots of vodka with them than I can count or remember. I bump Volodya’s shoulder and whisper, “Angela called in sick after she spent the night with you. You’re not allowed to fuck the dancers if they’re going to be too damn sore to work the next day.”

Volodya gives me a huge grin and shrugs his shoulders. The sorry he gives me is way too smug to be sincere. I laugh and shake my head, shouldering my way back over to Yuri. Mikhail starts pointing at people, splitting us up into groups.

“You seven take the north entrance,” he says to the first group. He points out five of our smallest guys. “You six take the fire escape and watch the roof. It looks like that thing is hanging on by a thread, so watch yourselves.”

Counting Mikhail, there’s seven of us left. “We’re taking the south entrance,” he says.

We all stop to check our weapons while Mikhail says, “Use knives if at all possible. A silencer for the rest. The cops won’t be showing up, but that doesn’t mean we want to announce what’s going on to the whole fucking city.”

Mikhail looks at me and adds, “If at all possible, save Matt for Artyom. He has a debt to repay.”

“Poor fucker,” someone behind me says with a laugh.

I nod my thanks to Mikhail and look around. I can feel the tension and excitement in the men around me, and it’s fucking contagious. There are last-minute slaps on the back and several voices speaking fast Russian to either joke or to place bets on who will score the most kills before Mikhail raises a hand and it all goes deadly still and serious.

“I better see all you bastards standing at the end of this,” Mikhail says, and that’s the closest thing to a hug we’re going to get.

Under cover of darkness and without a sound, we split into our groups and head toward the warehouse. After we leave the dark alley and see the decrepit warehouse in front of us, our team veers to the right while the others go to the left. My eyes run over the three-story building, noticing the dim light coming from some of the busted-out windows on the third level. Remembering how Matt and Alex had left Riley bruised and terrified on her bed next to a puddle of her own vomit has me more than ready to go inside and kill every one of these bastards.

When we get close to the back door, I test the gun sling to make sure everything is still where I want it, but it's my knife that I keep in my hand. We want to go in as silently as possible. Mikhail holds up a hand, and we all freeze. There's a window near the door, and I watch as he peeks around the edge of it, making sure it's all clear. When he gives a slight nod, we keep going, opening the door and entering the lower level until we're all in. The warehouse is empty, but it's big enough to easily hide a threat in one of the darkened corners.

Reaching into one of the pockets on my thigh, I get out my night vision goggles and take a look around while the others do the same. I give Yuri a soft elbow when I spot two men in the far right corner having a cigarette by one of the broken windows. I look over at Mikhail who's trained his binoculars on the other team that's waiting on the opposite end of the warehouse. He signals that we'll take these two and then looks back at me and Yuri, giving us a nod.

We immediately separate from our group, keeping close to the wall, and silently make our way to the two oblivious men. Yuri and I have worked together long enough for us to not have to spell everything out. He knows I'm going to veer off and take the man on the left, just like I know he's going to sneak up behind the guy on the right. The two men are still smoking and laughing, proving that they're very lazy, untrained guards, but they won't live long enough to fully realize their mistake. As soon as I see Yuri move, I come up behind my guy, fisting his hair and yanking his head back while my other hand comes up to swipe the blade across his neck. The cut is deep and fast. All he has time for is a startled, wet gasp before his hands go to his throat, the cigarette falling to the floor completely forgotten. Both men crumple, bleeding out quickly since Yuri and I both made sure to hit the carotid artery. It's messy, but it gets the job done.

"And it's a tie," Yuri whispers, reaching out to smack my arm. "One to one."

"Not for long," I say with a grin.

We rejoin Mikhail and the others who are already headed for the stairs while the other group falls in behind us. The next

level has a few lanterns set up so the night vision binoculars aren't needed, but Alex has put more men here, making it a lot more difficult for us to sneak up on them. Mikhail looks through the small window on the stairwell door and whispers that there are nine of them split up throughout the room. There's no way to do this quietly, and we all know it. Sheathing my knife, I grab the rifle strapped to my chest, not bothering with the smaller handguns. Everyone else is doing the same, and when Mikhail opens the door, we're ready. Guns drawn, we fan out and start shooting, giving Alex's men zero warning. I quickly take down two men by the window and see several others fall around them.

Gunshots ring out as some of Alex's men return fire before they're quickly cut down. As soon as it's clear, we rush to the stairwell but stop short when some of Alex's men start firing down from above.

I step up next to Mikhail. "I'll take the fire escape."

"I'll do it," he says, and I shake my head no.

"Not a chance, Boss. I'm the best shot, and I'm nimble as fuck."

"And humble, don't forget that."

"You don't need to be humble when you're as good as I am."

He fights a smile and loses.

"You need to stay here and lead the others. I'll get up there and take out as many as I can."

Yuri walks up, having overheard us. He turns to me and shakes his head. "You just want to get the highest kill count again, you fucking showoff."

"Don't be jealous," I tell him with a laugh. "It's an unattractive quality."

He smiles and gives my shoulder a squeeze. "Try not to get your ass killed."

"Yeah, you too." They walk with me to the window, and when I eye the rust ladder that's supposedly a fire escape, I

turn back to them. “Take care of her if this goes to shit.”

They both nod, and I push the worries from my mind, knowing they’ll make sure Riley is safe and looked after if something goes horribly wrong. Grabbing onto the rusted, metal railing, I give it a shake and grimace at how flimsy it seems. I don’t see any dead bodies on the ground, so I know the five others made it up okay. Whether it was because they weigh less than me or because they just used the last of this rusted, piece of shit’s strength, I’m about to find out.

Hiking my leg out of the broken window, I put my boot on one of the wobbly stairs and hope for the best as I step out. The damn thing sways a bit, but I let out a sigh of relief when I don’t immediately go crashing to my death.

“Lucky bastard,” Yuri says with a laugh. “Go kill some of those fuckers so we can get through.”

“Will do,” I tell him, climbing up the stairs as fast as I dare. I smile at the amount of ammo those idiots are wasting since they’re still firing down the empty stairwell.

When I’m almost to the third floor, Pyotr looks over the roof with his gun drawn, as soon as he sees it’s me, he lowers it and backs off when I wave him away. The last thing I need is more weight on this rusty death trap. The fire escape is built so that you can take the stairs the whole way and bypass the windows, but each floor has a rickety-looking ledge that you can step onto, making it easy for you to get to the stairs from the windows. Climbing onto the small landing on the third level, I stay low until I’m right next to the building. Slowly peeking over the ledge, I see the group of idiots firing into the stairwell and beyond that are several armed men looking around like they’re scared shitless. Tables are lined up in the center with half-filled duffel bags of drugs. I search for Alex and Matt but don’t see them.

Raising my rifle, I keep myself low and start aiming at the group by the stairwell. I get five shots to the head in quick succession, eliminating that threat before aiming my gun at the others. I’ve managed to take out three more before the others come out shooting from the stairs. I pull back, letting them

finish the rest as I climb into the building and off that damn fire escape.

By the time I get in, every single one of Alex's men is dead. I do a quick head count, relieved to see that we're all still standing. Volodya's gripping his upper arm where a bullet grazed him, but other than that, the Bratva's unharmed.

"Where the fuck are Alex and Matt?" I look around at the half-stuffed duffel bags, some of them full of money and others stuffed with an assortment of drugs. It's the same shit we found on his men, a little something for everyone, and it's obvious we interrupted them when they were trying to gather it all up.

"I don't know where they are," Mikhail says, eyeing the drugs, "but they were here not that long ago. We had eyes on them. They were both here, and then they fucking ran, leaving their men to be killed."

"The fuckers escaped," Yuri says, looking out one of the windows on the other side of the room. He leans over and grabs onto what looks like a freestanding rope ladder, the handles of it hooked over the window ledge. "They fucking climbed down and left their men to die."

The group comes down from the roof, and when Pyotr sees the ladder, he shakes his head. "No way in hell they climbed down that while we were on the roof. They must've done it when we were climbing up the fire escape on the other side of the building."

I'm too pissed to speak. Mikhail steps beside me and squeezes my shoulder. "We'll get them, Artyom. They're completely on their own now."

With the two of them still alive, all I can think about is getting back to Riley. Sensing it, Mikhail hollers out, "Grab the bags, and let's get the fuck out of here." He points at Volodya. "Get your ass to my place and Jack can stitch you up."

Jack's our personal doctor, and he's one of the most valued men on the Bratva's payroll. He's sewn all of us up at one time

or another. Yuri, Mikhail, and I walk out together, leaving the others to grab the bags. The cops can worry about the bodies. They'll make up some story about a drug deal gone bad or whatever shit story they want to spin. I don't give a fuck. I just want to get back home to Riley.

Chapter 14

Riley

I'm pretty proud of myself for keeping my cool for as long as I have. I've even managed to stay out of the closet this time. Beau eyes me from his bed, watching me pace the living room yet again. I tried to read but had quickly given up when my mind kept wandering to Artyom and the danger he was in. Now, I'm back to pacing and fidgeting and trying like hell to not think about what it would feel like if Artyom never comes back.

I've just about worked myself up into a full-blown panic attack when I hear the unmistakable sound of a motorcycle. Beau perks his ears up and gives a soft whine while I run to the window. It's too dark for me to really see anything, but as soon as I pick out a dark shape coming towards the house and recognize the familiar build and gait, I run for the door and throw it open. He's just stepped onto the back deck when he sees me. I freeze in place when I see the dark look in his eyes and the dried blood on his hands and arms. His shirt and neck are splattered with it, but I'm relieved to see that it doesn't appear to be his.

Both of us remain frozen, staring at the other, and the predatory, feral look he's giving me has my heart racing, my nipples tightening, and a familiar warmth spreading to my core. When I take a step back, it's not out of fear. It's because I want him to chase me. I want to see his wild, uncontrolled side. I want every part of Artyom, and the bloody man standing in front of me with the wild glint in his grey eyes is a big part of who he is. He's the part that Artyom protects me from, but I don't want him to hold back anymore. If we're

going to be together, then I need to embrace this part of him. I should be scared, but I'm not. I feel alive, fully alive and lit up with adrenaline. I take another step back.

“Careful, *milaya*,” he warns. “I will chase you, and I don't know how gentle I can be right now.”

A small smile plays at my lips. “Good,” I say before bolting inside the house with a giddy laugh. I hear him behind me, but I don't dare look back. I'm surprised when my brain starts panicking on where to go. Because I'd started this, I thought I'd remain calm and in control, but that's not what's happening. The stairs seem too far away, and the kitchen will just get me trapped, so I race for the hallway, knowing he's just inches away from grabbing me. I've made it about halfway down the hall when I feel his strong arm wrap around my waist and pull me back against him.

His mouth is on my neck a second later, kissing and nipping as he presses his erection into the small of my back. He drags his teeth over my skin, making me moan and press harder against him.

I hear a knife being unsheathed right as he whispers in my ear. “You shouldn't have run, sweetheart.”

My heart races even faster when I see the deadly looking blade he's holding. He brings it closer, pressing the flat edge of it against my lower stomach.

“Don't move, *milaya*.”

I nod a quick yes, unable to take my eyes off the sharp blade. He slips the knife slowly under my T-shirt and then presses the blade against the fabric, tearing a line up it with terrifying ease, letting me know just how sharp the damn thing is. My skin is bare from right below my breasts now, and I'm breathing so fast that my stomach and chest are heaving with the effort.

“Easy, baby,” he whispers, bringing the knife back up to slit my shirt the rest of the way. I'm not wearing a bra since I was dressed for bed, and as soon as my shirt is cut in two, it falls from my body, making him let out a deep groan at the

sight of my bare tits. Next, he makes quick work of my sleep shorts, slicing through one side and letting them drop to my feet, leaving me in nothing but a red pair of lacy panties.

“I liked those sleep shorts.”

“Tough shit,” he murmurs against my skin with a soft laugh. “This is what you get when you run from me.”

I suck in a quick breath when he carefully drags the edge of the knife along my panties before hooking the tip under one thin string at my hip. With a soft flick of his wrist, the knife cuts through. The lace slides down my thighs, falling away to join the other torn pieces at our feet. He sheathes the knife right before I hear the sound of his zipper. A soft gasp escapes when I feel his thick, bare cock pressing against my ass. His hands slide up my body, cupping my tits and pinching my nipples hard enough to make me moan and squirm against him.

Turning my face, I grab onto the back of his head and pull him toward me, capturing his bottom lip between my teeth. I give him a hard enough bite to pull a growl from him before he roughly turns me around and picks me up. I wrap my arms and legs around him, feeling the guns and knives he still has strapped to his body, an intoxicating contrast to the smooth, powerful cock that’s now pressing against my soaking wet slit and the wet heat of his tongue as it plunges into my mouth.

I whimper when he slams into me, giving me all of him in one fierce thrust that has my eyes rolling back in my head. His fingers dig into my ass, holding me firmly in place as he fucks me like a man possessed. Deep, feral grunts fill the hallway, and the sound of it, the sound of Artyom coming completely undone sends a thrill through every cell in my body. I give myself over to him completely, letting him do whatever the hell he wants and welcoming every bit of it. My tits scrape almost painfully over his shirt, and one of his guns is digging into my thigh, but I welcome every bit of this. His cock is unrelenting, pounding into me until I feel a familiar coil of pleasurable tension deep in my core, building to the breaking point. I moan against his lips and run my fingers through his hair, grateful to have him back, grateful for every hard stroke

of his cock and every swipe of his tongue, reminding me that he's alive and safe and mine.

He swallows my screams when I start to come and fucks me harder. He keeps up the brutal pace, throwing me right into another orgasm before I've even come down from the first. I bite his lip hard enough to draw blood, forcing a growl from him right before he slams into me again, burying himself inside me as deeply as possible as his cock pulses, filling me with everything he has. I keep kissing him, tasting the salty tang of his blood, completely lost to the moment until he's empty and we're both gasping for air.

Resting his forehead against mine, his body gives one last shudder as his grey eyes meet mine. "I told you not to run, *milaya*."

"I wanted to." I trace my fingers down his stubbled cheek. "I love every part of you, Artyom, including the wild, dangerous side that you try so hard to keep hidden. I don't want you to hide any part of yourself from me. I want all of you. I want the sweet Artyom who fucks me slowly and looks at me like I'm the most precious thing in the world, but I also want the part of you who looks at me like you'll tear the whole fucking world down just to get inside of me, the part of you that wants it rough and primal so that every single part of my body knows that it belongs to you."

I give him a smile and kiss the lip I bit. "I want it all."

"You have it all, sweetheart, every single part of me."

He slowly slides out of me and carries me upstairs. After a shower, we crawl into bed, and only when I'm nestled up against his powerful body do I ask what happened tonight. I'm not expecting a detailed play-by-play, so I'm not disappointed when I don't get one.

"Alex and Matt escaped, but they're alone now, and it's only a matter of time before we get them."

I nod my head and squeeze the arm he has wrapped around my chest. I know Artyom will get them. I just hope it's soon. I don't like knowing they're still out there.

“I promise it will be over soon, *milaya*,” he whispers in my ear.

“I know it will.”

I kiss his hand and drift off to sleep feeling completely safe, even if my brother and Matt are still out there. The next couple of days are spent laughing and fucking and taking Beau for walks along the water. It’s perfect. It’s the exact kind of life that I never thought in a million years I’d ever have but that I’ve always secretly hoped for.

On the third night after Artyom came back covered in blood and we’d fucked like animals, we’re just about to sit down to watch a movie when the large window overlooking the lake shatters into a million pieces around us. I barely have time to register the rapid sound of gunfire before Artyom is pulling me down to the floor and shielding me with his body. The shooting feels like it’s never going to end. I squeeze Artyom’s hand, so scared I can barely think.

“Are you okay?” he shouts close to my ear.

I give a quick nod but keep my eyes squeezed shut.

“We need to crawl down the hall, baby. Okay? I need you to stay as low as you can and head for the spare room.”

“Where’s Beau?” I ask, lifting my head to try and find him.

Artyom gently pushes my head back down. “He’s fine. He’ll follow us, but we need to move now.”

I hear the urgency in his voice and know with absolute certainty that if we stay where we are, we’re dead. With that thought firmly in place, I keep my ass low and start shimmying along the floor as best I can, wincing as I cut my hands on shattered glass as I go. Movement out of the corner of my eye has me turning my head, and as soon as I see Beau scooting over towards us, I let out a sigh of relief.

“Good boy,” I whisper, moving even faster.

Artyom keeps touching my leg to let me know he’s right behind me. I hear him yelling something in Russian and know he’s on his cell, calling for backup. As soon as we turn the

corner and hit the hall, I raise up a bit more so I can speed crawl the rest of the way. Artyom runs over to the closet and opens up his gun safe while I keep my ass down and crawl the rest of the way. Beau and I wait while he grabs a large gun and some ammo. He holds out a handgun to me.

“The safety is off, so be careful, baby. All you have to do is point it and squeeze the trigger.”

I nod, still more scared of the gun than anything else, but also knowing it would be insane to not take a weapon right now. Grabbing onto his arm, I look up at him and ask, “You’re not going to make me hide and wait are you?”

He cups my face, looking ridiculously calm for someone who’s currently having his house shot up. “No, *milaya*. The safest place you can be is right next to me.” He gives me a quick kiss. “I love you. You’re going to be okay. The others will be here soon. Just stay close to me.”

“Okay.” I jump when another round of shots rings through the house. “Be careful.”

He gives me a wink. “Always, beautiful.”

“Riley, I know you’re in here!”

Matt’s voice sends a jolt of fear straight through me. Artyom sees it and grits his teeth. We hear crunching glass and know they must be in the living room. I stay close to Artyom as he walks to the door, positioning himself so he can see anyone as soon as they turn the corner. His gun is aimed and steady, and there’s a downright eerie calmness about him. It hits me that I’m seeing Death in action, the one side of him I never thought I’d ever get to see.

The air is thick with tension, with only the crunching of glass to occasionally break the silence. I’m not sure how much longer I can stand it when Matt calls out again.

“We have unfinished business, Riley. After I kill your fucking boyfriend, we’re going to finish what we started.” He lets out a harsh laugh that has the vein in Artyom’s neck bulging along his scar. “How do you like that, you Russian

piece of shit? I'm going to fuck the hell out of your girl. Maybe you'll still be alive when I make her scream my name."

I know it's nothing but years of training that's keeping Artyom still right now. Matt's hoping he'll run out in a rage and get himself killed, but Artyom's too damn good for stupid mistakes like that. I place my hand on his back, enough to let him know I'm okay without distracting him or getting in his way.

He cuts his eyes to mine just long enough to give me a wink before putting his focus back on the hall. I would never have believed it possible to get turned on in a situation like this, but somehow he's managed to do it. I'm not so far gone that I'm about to rip my clothes off or anything, but there's a definite flush to my skin when I run my eyes over him and think about the wink he just gave me.

The sound of squealing tires and doors slamming shut has me letting out a sigh of relief. There's no way Matt and Alex are getting out of this. I nearly bite my damn tongue off when Artyom fires off three shots when Matt peeks around the corner. My ears ring, but the sounds of Russian being shouted from the living room still come through.

"Stay close," Artyom says, slowly walking out of the bedroom, taking a quick look behind us before putting his attention back to the front. The gun is heavy in my hand and unfamiliar as I follow Artyom down the hall. When someone yells something else in Russian, I feel Artyom's body relax and know that Matt's no longer a threat.

I'm just about to ask him about my brother when I hear Beau let out a soft growl. I turn to look behind us and see Alex step out from the bathroom, aiming his gun at Artyom. He must've climbed in through the window while Matt was shooting up the back of the house. There's no way in hell Artyom will be able to turn around fast enough, so I do the only thing I can do. I step in front of Artyom, bumping him out of the way as best I can, and aim my gun at my brother, squeezing the trigger right as he does the same. The bullet hits my chest and the pain is so intense that I can't even scream. Artyom does it for me.

He's kneeling beside me without me having any memory of hitting the floor. He rips off his T-shirt and presses it against the right, upper side of my chest, while yelling something in Russian before looking down at me. I've never seen him look so scared before, and if I had the strength, I'd reach a hand up to comfort him.

When Yuri's beside him, they gently roll me on my side and look at my back. I want to ask what's going on and how bad it is, but the pain has me clenching my jaw shut. Artyom says something in Russian, moving the bunched up shirt to my back, pressing it firmly against the exit wound.

"Fuck, baby," he groans, and his voice is strained and thick. I hear Beau whining and feel his tongue on my hand. My eyes start to close, but they snap back open when he yells, "No, *milaya*, don't you fucking go to sleep on me. Keep your eyes on me, baby. Stay awake."

Yuri and Mikhail come over and help Artyom to pick me up. Yuri keeps pressure on my back, walking alongside Artyom while Mikhail looks down at me. He rests a hand on my forehead and leans closer.

"You did good, Riley. You saved his life today, and I won't forget that. They're going to take you to my house. Jack will take good care of you."

"Thanks," I whisper.

He pats my head and steps back, shouting out more commands in Russian before disappearing from my limited view. Artyom carries me to one of the cars in the driveway. Yuri opens the door and keeps pressure on the exit wound until Artyom can take over. Beau refuses to be left behind, whining until Yuri opens the back door and lets him in. As soon as I'm settled, he slams the door and runs to the driver's side. He peels out of the driveway so fast I wince as I'm slammed even harder against Artyom.

"Sorry, Riley," Yuri says, shifting quickly through the gears until I'm pretty sure we're going faster than I've ever gone before. "We'll be there in just a few minutes, and then you are going to have yourself one bitching scar."

I can't manage a laugh, but I do give him a half smile.

"Hang on, *milaya*," Artyom whispers, leaning closer to kiss my forehead. "Don't you dare leave me, baby. I can't go back to a life without you."

Resting my hand on his, I give him the hardest squeeze I can, which isn't much at all. I've lost so much damn blood, and things are starting to get fuzzy. I want so badly to just close my eyes and sleep. The pain in Artyom's eyes is the only thing keeping mine open. I would do anything to take that worry away from him.

"I can't believe you stepped in front of me. What the hell were you thinking, baby?"

"I love you," I whisper.

He lets out a pained groan before a tear slips out and hits my face. "I'm not worth that, *milaya*. I'm certainly not worth you."

With the last of my strength, I say, "To me you are," before everything goes black.

I fade in and out of consciousness, barely coherent enough to understand what's going on. Instead of the mind-numbing pain that I'd initially had, now I don't feel anything except cold, and I suspect that's not a very good sign at all. I'm jostled back awake when they bring me into Mikhail's house and then immediately down a flight of stairs. A man is waiting for us who gives me a kind smile before everything goes black again. When I wake back up, I'm on a hospital bed with Artyom beside me, his bare chest covered in my blood and looking like he's hanging on by a damn thread.

"Riley, can you hear me?"

I nod at the stranger on the other side of me.

"I'm Jack, and I'm going to get you fixed up, okay?"

"Okay," I whisper, and then add, "Thanks," because it seems like the right thing to say to the person who's about to save your life.

He smiles and gets me hooked up to an IV. “It’s okay to go to sleep now,” he tells me, and I know I couldn’t stay awake even if I wanted to.

Artyom leans over and kisses me gently. “Come back to me, *milaya*,” he whispers against my lips. “I love you.”

“I love you,” I whisper as my eyes fall shut and everything disappears.

Chapter 15

Artyom

I watch Riley's eyes close and feel like my whole world has fallen apart. That bullet was meant for me, and all it did was graze my arm. I can't believe she put her own life at risk to save mine. Most people would happily agree that I deserve death, but she stepped in front of me without a second thought.

"You need to wait outside, Artyom," Jack says, already getting to work. He cuts her shirt off, and I wince when I see how damaged her body is. "I promise I'll take good care of her." He quickly eyes my arm. "I'll take care of you when I'm done with her."

I wave his words away, not giving the slightest fuck about me. "Is she going to be okay?"

Jack meets my eyes and says, "I'll do everything I possibly can."

I nod, wishing he'd just lied and told me she'll be fine. When I shut the door, separating myself from Riley's unconscious body, it takes all my willpower to stay where I am. I stand outside the door, covered in her blood as my world spins out of control. Beau whines at my feet before laying down in front of the door and resting his head on his paw. Yuri's arm around my shoulder jerks me back to the present.

"Come on, man," he says, guiding me back up the stairs. "Charlie has Lev in his room so he won't see us like this."

I look down at the blood all over us and shake my head no. "I need to stay with her."

“Jack will call as soon as he’s done. There’s nothing you can do but wait, and if you stay here, you’ll lose your fucking mind.”

“What if she doesn’t make it?” I ask, voicing the fear that’s threatening to consume me, and once it does, I don’t know that I’ll ever be able to find my way out of it.

Yuri meets my eyes and tells me what I need to hear, knowing I’m on the cusp of completely losing it. “She’s going to be fine, Artyom. She’s strong and she loves you and Jack’s the goddamn best there is. She’s going to survive and the two of you will get married and have a shit ton of babies and be one of those annoyingly perfect couples that makes everyone else want to vomit.”

I can’t manage a smile, but I squeeze his shoulder and nod my head, clinging to his words like the fucking lifeline they are. He starts to lead me back up the stairs. I look back at Beau, but he’s still on guard duty and not budging.

“Where are you taking me?” I’m so out of it that I’m barely registering anything that’s going on.

“To get some fucking revenge,” he says, saying the one thing that he knows will kick my ass into gear. He sees my eyes clear a bit and smiles. “She killed her brother, but we saved Matt for you.”

I scrub a hand over my face and nod. I need a distraction, and killing Matt is just about the best one I can get. Someone needs to pay for what’s happened, and I can’t think of anyone better to take the brunt of my rage.

“Let’s go,” I say, speeding up and taking the stairs two at a time.

“There’s the Death I know and love,” Yuri says, smacking my back. “Let’s go make a grown man piss himself.”

Getting back into his car brings back memories of Riley’s pale, bloody body, and I have to force them from my mind and instead focus on how badly I want to hurt Matt.

“Mikhail and the guys have him at the building down by the docks.”

“Sounds good.”

We have several buildings throughout the city that can be used for situations such as this, but the building by the docks is a favorite of ours. Many men have met their end there and then been dumped at the bottom of the lake. It's damn convenient and the perfect place for what's about to happen. Yuri races through the streets, getting us there in record time. We don't need any information from Matt. Their pathetic attempt at an organization died the other night when we killed all their men. Matt has nothing we need. He's just waiting to be killed.

Yuri parks beside the line of cars in front of the building, and when we walk in, the rest of the guys greet us, asking about Riley and smacking me on the back. The blood covering me doesn't faze them. They're used to seeing me like this. I let Yuri answer their questions while I walk over to Mikhail. He's standing in front of a very angry-looking Matt, whose wrists are tied behind his back.

Mikhail turns to me, and I see a thousand things in the look he gives me. It wasn't that long ago when it was the woman he loved who'd been bloody and battered. He knows exactly what I'm going through, so he doesn't say anything to try and make me feel better. He just waves a hand at Matt and says, “He's all yours.”

It's the best damn gift he could give me.

Matt eyes me when I step closer. Switching to English, I say, “You're going to wish you'd died back at my house.”

“Fuck you,” he yells, but I hear the fear behind the words. He runs his eyes over my bloody chest and abs before finally landing on the scar that always draws everyone's attention. He's not fooling me or anyone else in this room with his fake fucking bravado.

Stepping behind him, I pull the phone from his back pocket and use his thumb to unlock it. I walk back around, swiping and looking through his texts. There's nothing groundbreaking on here, just texts that are no longer of any importance to us and a few texts from women who were unfortunate enough to have run into this scumbag.

“Riley told me you like to roofie women and then videotape them.” I pull up his photos and then immediately wish I hadn’t. His phone is full of photos and videos of women he’s raped. I don’t bother clicking on any of them.

“I’m going to fucking kill you,” Matt yells at me.

“Yeah, yeah, you’re a real tough guy,” I say in a bored tone. I put his phone away and then motion for Sergei and Yuri to come up.

“Hold him for me,” I say in Russian. “He’s really not going to like this.”

“What the fuck are you doing?” Matt asks, eyeing the two men coming towards him.

“Trust me, you don’t want to know,” Yuri tells him, making Matt pale a bit.

When Yuri and Sergei are on either side of him, I unsheathe my larger knife and point it at him. “I saw what you did to Riley. I came and got her that night, you sick fuck.”

“I’m a sick fuck?” he yells at me. “People call you Death. If anyone’s a sick fuck, it’s you!”

I give a small shrug. “True enough, but I don’t hurt women, and I sure as hell would never rape one.”

When I step closer, Sergei and Yuri lock him in position with their bodies, ensuring that Matt’s not going anywhere.

“What the fuck?” Matt says when I start to undo his pants. I ignore him and pull his pants and boxers down, and then laugh because the guy really isn’t sporting anything down under.

“I hope fear has made you shrink, Matt, because that is truly pathetic.”

The men behind me laugh while Matt yells and cusses and thrashes around to no avail. When he’s tired himself out, I step back in front of him.

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to cut your dick off.”

“Fuck,” he groans and visibly pales.

“I told you you didn’t want to know,” Yuri says.

I lower the knife, and he panics and thrashes around some more, making it nearly impossible to get ahold of his pathetic little dick.

“For fuck’s sake,” I grumble. “Hold him still.”

“He’s panicking,” Yuri says with a laugh. “He doesn’t want to lose his tiny penis.”

He’s shrinking even more with his panic, making this a frustrating endeavor, but I’m committed to seeing it through.

“Damn, hurry up, man,” Yuri growls at me when Matt struggles even harder.

I look over at him and let out a frustrated sigh. “It’s like trying to sever an unruly cocktail weenie. I’m doing the best I can.”

“Oh fuck,” Matt wails when I finally manage to pinch him between my fingers. With one quick swipe of the knife, I’m holding Matt’s tiny penis and he’s wailing like a goddamn baby. I’d feel sorry for him if I didn’t have a phone filled with rape victims and the memory of Riley’s bruised body covered in his dried, filthy cum.

“About fucking time,” Yuri says, as he and Sergei let go so Matt can slump at their feet.

I throw the penis on the floor and wave one of the newer guys over. Handing him the phone, I say, “Take a photo of his dick and then send it to all those women. I think they’ll be happy to see it.”

“Just fucking kill me,” Matt cries from the floor.

“Stop being so dramatic,” I tell him. “It’s not like you lost a big piece of yourself. It’s really more like losing a pinkie finger, isn’t it?”

“Fuck you,” he yells, making us all laugh.

“We’re going to wait until Riley’s out of surgery. If she lives, I’ll put you out of your misery. If she doesn’t, then I

guess I'll take your balls next and see where that leads me.”

Matt groans and curls in on himself on the concrete floor.

“Nicely done, Death,” Mikhail says when I walk back over. “That even made me cringe a bit.”

I check my watch and lean against the pillar he's resting his shoulder on, wondering how long the surgery's going to take. The guys continue to talk around us while Matt bleeds onto the concrete, letting out a self-pitying moan every now and then. Mikhail texts his wife and then lets me know that the surgery room is still closed. When I'm seconds away from losing what small grip on sanity I still have, my phone buzzes in my hand.

She's out and fine, Artyom. She'll be asleep through the night, but she's going to be OK. The bullet went through and did a minimal amount of damage. I've sewn her up and given her something for the pain. She's damn lucky.

I have to read the text three times before it makes sense. I hand Mikhail my phone with a relieved sigh so he can read it while I walk back over to Matt. I fist his hair and pull his head back, slicing his neck without a word. He's not worth a second more of my time. When the others see what I've done, they let out a cheer, knowing it means Riley's going to be okay.

Mikhail yells for a couple of the guys to get rid of the body while the rest of us head back out. Yuri and I follow Mikhail back to his house. Lev is still being kept upstairs to protect him from the sight of us when we walk in and head straight for the basement. As soon as I see Jack, I surprise the hell out of him by giving him a big hug. He laughs and pats my back, politely ignoring the fact that I'm filthy.

“Thank you, Jack. If you ever need anything at all from me, just ask and it'll be done.”

He pulls back and nods his head. “I'm glad I could help. I wasn't so sure she'd make it when you first brought her down,” he admits, making me fully appreciate the fact that he'd kept that knowledge to himself. “If that bullet hadn't

gone in right where it did, this would've ended very differently. She got very, very lucky.”

I feel sick at knowing how close I came to losing her.

“She stepped in front of you to take this bullet?” he asks.

Guilt washes over me again when I shake my head yes.

“Judging by where the bullet hit her and your height difference, she saved your life, Artyom. You would not have survived the shot.”

My heart clenches painfully at the news. She saved my life, but I'm not at all surprised. She's already saved me in every other way, and stepping in to take a bullet for me is exactly the kind of thing the selfless, stubborn woman I love would do.

“Can I see her?”

“Of course.” He runs his eyes over me. “But I suggest you make it quick and then shower. I'm guessing you're covered in quite a bit of germs. Also, your dog refuses to budge, so I've just given up trying.”

Before he lets me go, he grabs my arm and takes a better look at where the bullet grazed me. “You need stitches.”

“I'm fine,” I tell him, trying to jerk my arm free.

He ignores me. “I'll stitch you up after your shower. It's not so bad it can't wait a little longer.” He hands me a roll of gauze. “Wrap it up when you're done. I'm guessing the shower will make it start bleeding again.”

I take the gauze and give Beau a pet and follow Jack into the room, my chest tightening when I see how small and pale Riley looks in the hospital bed. Beau whines and lays down on the floor next to her. She's still connected to an IV and a blood pressure monitor, and all I want to do is take all this from her. I'd give anything to be able to switch places with her. Not wanting to make things worse and cause an infection, I walk over and kiss her forehead, being careful to touch her as little as possible.

“I love you, *milaya*,” I whisper against her skin. “I’ll be right back, baby, I promise, and then I’m never leaving your side.”

I take the black workout pants and T-shirt Mikhail hands me and use their downstairs bathroom, scrubbing Riley’s blood from my skin until I’m sure she’s not at risk from getting some sort of infection from me. Jack was right about my arm. Blood’s running freely down my bicep again, so I wrap the gauze around and pull my shirt over it. When I step out, Mikhail and Charlie are waiting for me. She steps forward and wraps me up in a hug. She takes her duties as the Bratva boss’s wife very seriously, and mothering all of us is a big part of that.

She pats my arm. “I’m so glad she’s going to be okay.”

“Me too. She’s as stubborn as you are, Charlie, taking a damn bullet for me.”

“I like her already.” She grins and leans back against Mikhail who quickly wraps his arms around her.

“You’ll be staying here until you figure out what to do about your house,” Mikhail says, leaving no room for argument.

“Lev will be so happy,” Charlie says with a laugh.

I smile and add, “And Yuri will be so jealous.”

“Yuri will be jealous about what?”

I look over and see Yuri coming down the stairs, toweling his hair dry and wearing an outfit similar to mine.

“Lev and I are going to be roomies. I’m already his favorite, but this will really help tighten our bond, especially since I’ve got Beau with me. He’ll probably forget who the hell you even are.”

“Yeah, that’s not going to happen. I might have to invite myself over for a sleepover.” He looks at Charlie. “Can I buy him a puppy?”

“Don’t you dare,” she says with a laugh. “No pets until he’s potty-trained. My sanity can only take so much.”

Yuri nods and throws his towel over his shoulder. “Okay, okay, no pets. I’ll just have to win his affection back the old-fashioned way.”

“With bribery?” Mikhail asks.

“Exactly,” Yuri says with a grin.

“I appreciate you letting us stay here,” I tell them, wanting to get back to Riley. I turn to Mikhail. “The crew that renovated the Peach, do they also do houses?”

“Yeah, I’ll text you their number.”

“Thanks. They’re going to have their damn hands full with my house.”

“Are you going to fix it or just call it a loss and find something else?”

“We both love that house. I want to fix it up.” I think about the memories we’ve already made there and know there’s no way in hell I want to give it up. “This will give me a chance to improve on it a bit.”

Charlie’s face lights up. “You’re going to add in room for kids, aren’t you?”

Mikhail laughs and kisses the top of her head.

“I’m going to make some changes,” I say, not wanting to reveal too much. “But that’s a secret. I want to surprise Riley.”

“I won’t say a word,” she promises.

“Okay, go check on her,” Mikhail says. “I know you’re dying to. Come up if you get hungry. Valentina made a ton of food earlier.”

I smile at the mention of their cook. Valentina’s been like a grandmother to all of us. She refuses to accept Mikhail’s very generous retirement offer, but he has managed to convince her to only come in three times a week.

“Thanks, I will,” I say, already walking back to the room Mikhail had built especially for this purpose.

Beau's in the same spot I left him in, and I'm guessing he's not going to move until Riley does. Jack is waiting for me, but I go over and kiss Riley's forehead before I sit down to let him do his thing. He removes the gauze and then thoroughly cleans the long gash across my bicep before he starts stitching it up. I ignore the pain. I'm so used to it by now that it barely registers. I keep my eyes on Riley's still form, willing myself to hold it together for her sake, even though I just want to collapse under the weight of all the guilt I feel.

"All done," Jack says before applying a new bandage over my freshly stitched skin. "You're no stranger to stitches so I'm guessing you remember how to take care of this?"

"Yeah, I got it. Thanks again, Jack."

"I'll be upstairs if you need me."

I nod and then walk over to cup Riley's face, resting my forehead against hers and breathing in the scent of her. I watch her chest rise and fall, so fucking grateful for the sight of it. Her upper chest is bandaged, and I know there's one on her back as well, covering the much larger exit wound.

"I love you, I love you, I love you," I murmur against her skin, kissing her and hoping some part of her can sense my presence and how much I love her.

I give her one more kiss and break away just long enough to pull a chair over. There's not enough room for me to get on the bed with her without risking disturbing her, so I sit in the chair and lean my body over her lap, resting my hand on top of hers and the side of my face on her thighs. The cuts on her hands from crawling through the broken glass are bandaged, and she feels so damn small and breakable. I watch her until I finally crash from all the adrenaline that's been coursing through me and my eyes shut.

When I wake, it's to the feel of her running her fingers through my hair. At first I think I'm dreaming, so I tighten my arms around her and keep my eyes shut, not wanting to wake and have her disappear. I feel her fingers run over my cheek, pulling a pained groan from me at how badly I miss her and want this to be real.

“Artyom,” she whispers, and it’s the sound of her parched voice that finally makes me realize I’m not dreaming.

I open my eyes and see her looking down at me with a soft smile on her lips. Her blue eyes look a bit glassy from all the painkillers in her system, but she’s awake and alive and so fucking beautiful that all I can do is stare. I kiss her hand and lift up so I can see her better. Needing to touch her, I cup her face and bring my mouth to hers, kissing her gently.

“Don’t ever scare me like that again, *milaya*. My heart can’t take it.”

She rests her hands on mine and gives me a soft nod.

“You saved my life, baby.”

“You would’ve done the same for me.”

I smile at the trust in her voice, the absolute certainty at knowing I’d risk my life to save hers. “I would give my life for yours in a second, sweetheart, but please don’t ever put yourself in danger for me again. I can’t survive without you.”

“No promises,” she says, making me laugh at her stubbornness.

“I’ll just have to make sure you’re never given the option again.”

“Did Alex survive? What happened to Matt?”

Thinking about them has her getting upset, and she winces when she tries to sit up more.

“Relax, baby. They’re both gone. You don’t need to worry about them ever again.”

She sighs and settles back against the bed, smiling when Beau jumps up to lick her hand. She pets him, and I can tell by her slow movements that she’s in pain. When she sees my bandage, she sucks in a breath and looks up at me, her eyes wide with worry.

“Your arm. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, *milaya*. Just a scratch.” I smile, reassuring her that I’m okay and say, “Let me text Jack and let him know

you're up. Beau's refused to leave your side. I think he's fallen in love with you too."

She smiles and scratches behind his ears. "He's a good dog."

Jack always stays over in a spare room when he's needed, so in just a few minutes he's walking in to check on Riley right as she's finishing up a glass of water.

"Hey, Riley, good to see you awake."

"Thanks for saving me, Jack."

Jack smiles and pats her leg before reaching up to examine her wounds. "It was my pleasure. You got very lucky, Riley, but please don't stand in front of any more guns."

"We've already had this discussion," I tell him, giving Riley a very pointed look. "She's going to keep her ass out of danger from now on."

"I don't think that's quite what I said," she mutters softly, making Jack laugh.

"How's the pain going?"

"It's pretty sore," she admits.

"I'll leave you with some good pain meds, and I'll show you both how to take care of the wounds and keep them clean. Stick to sponge baths for the next few days, and I'll take the stitches out in a couple of weeks. You can call me anytime, though, if you have questions or need me to come check on things."

Riley thanks him again and then takes the pain pills he gives her, downing them with a quickness that lets me know she's in way more pain than she's letting on. I quirk a brow at her. She gives me an innocent smile and sets her glass down.

I give her a kiss and tell her I'll be right back before walking Jack out. After he's left, I go into the kitchen and smile when Valentina gives me a big hug. She asks about Riley in her fast Russian and then fusses around the kitchen, filling a large tray with enough breakfast for several people. I thank her and head back downstairs, not wanting to be away

from her any longer than I have to be. She doesn't know it yet, but I'm going to be glued to her damn side.

Chapter 16

Riley

After the massive breakfast Artyom brings down, I fall asleep again for several hours. When I wake, he's sitting in the chair next to me, watching me while he pets Beau.

"You know you don't have to babysit me every second, right?"

He smiles and leans over to kiss me. "You're not getting rid of me that quickly, *milaya*."

"Well, since you're here, I could use your help."

"Anything, baby. What can I do?"

I smile at how damn excited he looks to be put to work. "I feel really gross. Can you help me get cleaned up?"

He smiles and kisses my forehead. "Of course. I called some of the guys while you were sleeping and asked them to bring us over some stuff. We have to stay here while the house is getting fixed."

"Oh, I don't want to be a bother," I say, trying to sit up and feeling like I've already put way too many people out, especially since it was my brother that caused this mess. I expect to feel a slight twinge of guilt at having shot him, but I don't. I'm just happy I actually managed to do it without anyone else getting hurt and that I no longer have to live in fear of him and Matt. I'm curious about what ended up happening to Matt, but I know Artyom will never tell me. Maybe it's for the best that I never know.

“You’re not a bother, *milaya*. You’re my future, you’re my whole world, and I always want you close to me.”

My heart speeds up at his words and at the way he’s looking at me. “You’re my whole world too, Artyom, and I can’t imagine my life without you.”

His grey eyes are filled with love when he reaches down to carefully lift me up. He carries me through a huge basement that’s decked out in the fanciest home gym I’ve ever seen and down a side hall where there’s a room off to the left.

“We’ll be staying in here, unless you’d rather be upstairs.”

“No, this is perfect.”

The room is big with a king-size bed that Beau quickly jumps on and a flat-screen TV mounted on the wall, a small seating area with a bookcase that’s stuffed full of books, and a large attached bathroom. He carries me to the sink and gently sets me down on the counter. I notice my toothbrush is already here as well as some new shampoo and lotion.

He starts to fill the tub while I work on brushing my teeth. My right arm is still too sore to move, and I’m surprised by how insanely difficult it is to brush with my left hand. When the bath is filled up to about waist height, he comes over to me and carefully takes my toothbrush.

The look I give him makes him smile. “Let me baby you, *milaya*. It’s my fault you’re in this mess.”

I try to argue, but he starts brushing my teeth, cutting off my words with a smug grin on his face. I sigh and let him finish because I’m tired and sore and I do need his help. I do arch a brow at him, though, when he tells me to lean over and spit.

“You’re enjoying this way too much,” I tell him after I’ve done what he’s asked.

He gives a small shrug. “I like taking care of you.” Grabbing onto the shirt that Jack must’ve put me in, he gives me a wink and says, “Now comes the fun part.”

I laugh and then wince when I have to raise my right arm. His hands are gentle, far more gentle than most would believe he's capable of, and soon I'm naked and sitting in a foot of warm water. I keep my hands out of the water since I still have bandages on them from all the annoying, stinging cuts. Artyom grabs a sponge and some body wash and starts to slowly clean me. Jack removed most of the blood when he'd stitched me up, but I'm still filthy and grateful for the bath. I smile when he takes a ridiculously long time to wash my breasts and then sets the sponge down so he can finish the job with his hands. He laughs at the look I give him.

"What? You had a lot of blood on your tits yesterday. I'm just thinking about germs. Better safe than sorry."

"I didn't have any blood between my legs yesterday, and you still spent a hell of a lot of time down there."

"Perks of the job," he says with a wink.

I laugh as he works on my left arm and then starts on my back, being careful to not get my bandage wet.

"Sorry, baby," he murmurs when he has to raise my right arm to clean underneath.

"Have you been shot before?" Besides the scar on his neck, he has several others across his body, and I'm suddenly reminded of how much I still have to learn about him.

"I have, so I know how bad it hurts. You're going to be on bed rest for a long time."

"I bet you weren't on bed rest," I mutter, making him laugh.

"No, because I didn't have you to force me to take care of myself."

"I'm sorry I wasn't there when you were hurt."

He surprises me by laughing. "I'm glad you weren't. You would've been about fifteen the last time I was shot. I love you, baby, but no fucking thanks."

I laugh and cup his face with my good hand, leaning closer to give him a kiss. "I love how much older you are than me,

but you're right. Meeting now is much better."

He smiles and kisses me back. When he's satisfied my body is clean, he wraps me in a towel and puts another folded towel on the floor beside the tub for me to kneel on.

"Will you be comfortable enough leaning over so I can wash your hair?"

"Yeah, I'll be fine."

He stacks another towel on the edge of the huge garden tub as I lean over. Grabbing the handheld nozzle, he sets to work. The feel of his hands on my scalp is absolute heaven. I close my eyes and, thanks to the painkillers, nearly fall asleep.

"You still with me, baby?" he asks, his voice soft and close enough to my ear for me to feel the heat of his breath. I give a tired *mm-hmm* before he kisses my ear and wraps a towel around my head. He carries me back to bed and then helps me into some comfy pajamas before tucking me into bed.

"Don't go," I slur with my eyes still closed.

"Never, *milaya*."

I feel him crawl into bed beside me and then the comforting weight of him against my back. He kisses my cheek and rests his hand on my hip. I'm asleep in seconds, and when I wake later, he's beside me reading a book with one hand lightly stroking my forearm. He makes me feel completely safe. Even after I'd been shot, knowing he was there with me, I'd felt a strange sort of peace. He's where I feel safest. As long as he's with me, I know everything's going to be okay.

The next week goes by in a painkiller-induced blur until I wake up on the seventh morning and say, "I'm switching to aspirin."

"Tired of sleeping?" He kisses my forehead and gives me a sexy grin.

"If I don't get out of this bed, I'm going to lose my damn mind." I look around for the German Shepherd who's been

sticking as close to me as Artyom but don't see him anywhere. "Where's Beau?"

"I finally convinced him it was okay to go play by the water for a bit." He throws the covers off and looks down at me. "Feel well enough to go up and get some breakfast?"

"Yes. I feel so rude. Mikhail and Charlie have been kind enough to let us stay here, and I've just been holed up down here."

"They knew you needed your rest." He gives my ass a soft smack. "I'm glad you're feeling well enough to move around, though. I'm dying for you to meet Lev."

I smile at his obvious excitement. "You're going to be such a good daddy," I say, the words slipping out before I can stop them. Embarrassed, I clap a hand over my mouth. "Shit. Just forget I said that."

He leans his face close to mine, amusement written all over him. "You want kids, *milaya*?"

"Yes." I search his eyes, looking for any signs that I'm completely freaking him out, but all I see is love and a healthy bit of playful teasing in them. "Do you?"

He smiles and brings his head lower, nuzzling my neck and leaving a trail of soft kisses that have me squirming beneath him. I'm still sore, but I've missed him so damn much. He slides my T-shirt up, exposing my stomach. He runs his eyes over me, drinking in the sight of my bare skin.

"Yes, baby, I want kids." Bringing his mouth to my stomach, he kisses and licks a line along my belly. "You have no idea how badly I want to see your stomach swollen with our baby." He laughs softly and gives me another kiss.

"What's so funny?"

His grey eyes meet mine while he grips my hip and strokes my skin with his thumb. "I never thought in a million years I'd say those words to someone. When Lev was born, I was surprised by how quickly I took to him, but I never once thought I'd want a baby of my own." He gives me another kiss. "Not until you, and now it's all I can think about."

I run a finger along his chiseled jaw and slowly start to part my thighs. “We could easily make that happen.”

He laughs and hooks a finger under my pajama bottoms. “Don’t you think maybe we should let you heal first and get those strong painkillers out of your system?”

“Ever the voice of reason,” I grumble with a smile. I know he’s right, and I also know we’re damn lucky that I wasn’t pregnant when I got shot.

“Yeah, that’s definitely what everyone calls me.”

I laugh at his sarcastic tone and then smile when he slides my pants off, leaving me in a pair of lace panties that I have no memory of putting on. Positioning himself between my legs, he brings his face to my pussy, pressing his nose against my clit as he nuzzles against me, breathing me in.

“God, I’ve missed you,” he murmurs before running his tongue over my panties.

I gasp and clutch at the sheets next to me. “Please,” I beg, arching up to him.

“Please what?” He gives my clit a flick of his tongue that sends a shock of pure bliss through me.

“I want to feel your mouth on me. Please, Artyom. Let me feel your tongue.”

With a groan, he slides my panties down and buries his face between my legs. I thread my fingers through his hair, grateful that I no longer have to wear the bandages on my hands so I can feel him against my skin. I close my eyes when he slides his tongue into me, reminding me of how badly I’ve missed this, of how badly I’ve missed *him*. His hands cup my ass, tilting me up even more as he claims me with his mouth. Each stroke of his tongue pushes me closer and closer to the breaking point, and when he wraps his lips around my clit, all it takes is one good suck, and I’m clamping a hand over my mouth to stifle my screams. My hips rock against him, my body chasing every damn second of pleasure I can get. He softens his touch, keeping me right on the edge of pleasure and

pain as he licks and sucks and teases my overly sensitive clit until I'm coming again and gasping for air.

By the time he lifts his head, I'm completely drunk on pleasure and wearing a loopy grin that has nothing to do with all the pain meds that have been pumped into me and everything to do with the gorgeous Russian between my legs. He kisses my inner thigh and gives me a wink.

"Time for breakfast, baby."

"What about you?" I try to pull him up to me, but he doesn't budge.

"Don't worry about me, *milaya*. Just focus on getting better."

"I think your cock would help me get better a lot faster," I pout when he starts pulling my panties back up.

He laughs and helps me out of bed. "Let's see how you do today without your pain pills."

I grumble some more, but when it's obvious he's not going to budge on this, I use the bathroom, throw on a bra, and let him lead me upstairs. I haven't left our basement bedroom since getting here, so I eye the house with open curiosity. The place is huge and gorgeous, but there's a comfy, lived-in feel to it that puts me at ease. I see Charlie's touches throughout the parts of the house that we walk through on our way to the kitchen. Family photos are everywhere along with a healthy sprinkling of toys. It makes me like Charlie even though I've never met her. She could easily make this place feel sterile and stuffy, but instead it's warm and welcoming.

When Artyom leads me into the kitchen, he kisses the top of my head and keeps an arm wrapped around me, knowing I'm nervous. There's an older woman flipping pancakes and making faces at Lev who's sitting in a highchair and squealing with a big grin on his face. A beautiful woman standing beside the highchair looks over at me and smiles.

"It's so good to see you up, Riley," she says, quickly walking over to us. "I'm Charlie, well, Charlotte, but everyone calls me Charlie."

She squeezes my hand and gives Artyom a big smile.

“Thanks so much for letting us stay here. I’m sorry I was so out of it and didn’t get up here to thank you sooner.”

She waves my apology away. “You needed your rest, and you’re welcome to stay here as long as you need.” Her hazel eyes are lit up, and when she eyes the way Artyom is gently caressing my shoulder, I realize that a large part of her excitement is in seeing us together. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m doing better. Still a bit sore, but I’m sick of sleeping and lying in bed.”

She gives me a sympathetic smile. “I completely understand, and I’m glad you’re feeling better today.”

“Hey, look who’s up,” Mikhail says, walking in. He gives me a smile and then quickly pulls his wife in for a hug. His face changes when he looks at her. Everything about him softens, and it’s obvious that Mikhail is a man who’s completely smitten with his wife. He laughs and turns to his son when Lev lets out a loud “Da-da!”

While Lev is preoccupied, Artyom introduces me in Russian to the woman making pancakes who gives me a big smile and then hands us both a couple of plates, pointing at the huge amount of food she’s prepared. I turn to Artyom when she lets loose with a fast string of Russian.

Artyom laughs and shakes his head good naturedly at her. “She wants you to know that she’s very happy you’re here and that I better not do anything to screw this up.”

I smile and say, “Tell her not to worry. I won’t let you do anything to screw this up.”

She likes my response and pats my hand before going back to the pan of bacon that’s sizzling on the stove. As soon as Mikhail steps back and Lev catches sight of Artyom, he lets out another squeal. He yells something that sounds a lot like *Ar-yom*, and when Artyom hears it his whole face beams with pride. He looks at me and winks.

“He said my name before Yuri’s.”

I laugh at how damn competitive the two of them are for Lev's affection and follow him over to the highchair to where the most beautiful little boy I've ever seen is waving his arms and showing us a gummy grin with one small tooth coming in.

"He's so beautiful," I tell Charlie and Mikhail who grin and look at their adorable son.

"Yeah, he's a cutie," she says. "He's like Mikhail's little twin."

"Except for his stubbornness," Mikhail says, looking down at Charlie. "He gets that from his mommy."

"Yeah right," Charlie says with a laugh.

I turn back to Artyom, watching him lean down to kiss Lev's head and then baby talk to him in Russian. It's the cutest damn thing I've ever seen, and it sparks a deep longing inside me. I resist getting all teary-eyed and really embarrassing myself, but it comes close. When Artyom turns his head, his grey eyes study me, and I swear he can read everything I'm feeling. He pulls me against him and brings his mouth close to my ear.

"Soon, *milaya*," he whispers, and all I can do is nod my head and rest against him. I know it's insane to even be thinking about kids this soon, but everything about Artyom just feels right. I don't have the slightest doubt that he's who I'm supposed to be with. I feel like my whole life was leading me to him, and now that I have him, I'm just so damn eager to experience everything. I don't want to waste a single second.

He kisses the top of my head and reaches over to run a finger along Lev's chubby cheek. "Lev, say hello to your Auntie Riley," he says, making me laugh and Charlie smile up at Mikhail while she not-so-subtly elbows him in a *Holy shit! Are you seeing this?* sort of way. Mikhail laughs and shakes his head.

"I told him I'd laugh at his wedding," Mikhail says.

"Yeah, yeah," Artyom laughs. He looks at Lev again. "Your daddy is laughing at me, little man."

Lev squeals and reaches for another piece of cut-up pancake. The rest of us fix our plates, and I'm having so much fun with them that I have to remind myself that this is a Bratva boss and one of his top men that I'm sitting with. It's a surreal moment, and I know Charlie and I are seeing these men in a way that very few people get to. They show a very different side to the rest of the world. When we're done eating, I take some aspirin while Artyom eyes me, trying to decide how much pain he thinks I'm in.

"Okay, time for a rest," he declares when I evidently don't pass his test.

Charlie laughs and looks at me. "They're insanely stubborn, aren't they?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Mikhail says. He turns to Artyom. "Do you?"

"Not a clue," Artyom says, picking me up and already walking back to the basement.

"Come up and visit whenever you want," Charlie yells after us.

I tell her I will and then rest my head against Artyom, because as much as I hate to admit it, the man's right. Breakfast wore me out more than I thought it would. The sexy, smug grin he's wearing when he carries me back to bed says it all.

"You're not always right, you know," I mutter against his chest, making him laugh.

"Just when it comes to you." He sets me back in bed and braces his hands on either side of me before pressing his lips to mine. The kiss is slow and deep, pulling a moan from me when I taste the maple syrup on his tongue. Hungry for a whole new reason, I fist his shirt and try to pull him closer. He gives my bottom lip a soft suck before pulling back.

"I had no idea you were such a tease."

He smiles and gives me a wink. "Be a good girl and rest up and maybe I'll give you another orgasm later."

I huff out a breath but settle back into the pillows and take the remote he offers.

“I’m going to check on Beau and then I’ll be right back.”

“Okay, I’ll be here. My ass is going to make a permanent mark in their memory foam mattress.”

“They should be so lucky. Your ass is amazing.”

I smile because it’s impossible to stay grumpy with him, especially when he looks so damn sexy and he’s doing things like complimenting my ass. He gives me one more kiss before going to get Beau while I scroll through all their streaming services, trying to find something to watch.

The next two weeks pass by far quicker than I thought they would, and soon Jack’s walking into my room to remove the stitches that I’m more than ready to get rid of. He’d removed Artyom’s last week, which I’d unknowingly slept through since I’ve been napping as much as Lev.

“You look like you’re doing much better,” Jack says, giving me a big smile and pulling on a pair of gloves.

I roll my eyes and point to Artyom who’s hovering over me like a sexy, overprotective bodyguard. “That’s because he won’t let me do hardly anything. I’ve slept more in the last few weeks than I have in years.”

“I think what she means is that I’m doing a great job of taking care of her and she’s feeling much better now thanks to all that rest,” Artyom says, giving me a wink.

Jack laughs and gets his tweezers and a pair of very pointy scissors. “Rest is very good for you, Riley.” Before Artyom can get too cocky, he adds, “but I think you’re okay to start resuming your normal activities as long as it doesn’t cause you pain.”

I shoot Artyom a smug grin of my own. He arches a brow at me, still looking worried.

“What about long-term issues?”

Jack looks up at him after removing a couple of stitches. “She really shouldn’t have any. Maybe some stiffness every

now and then, but she's young and healthy, and I don't see anything to be concerned about."

Artyom looks slightly appeased, but he still watches Jack remove my stitches with his mouth in a hard line. I reach out and take his hand, giving him a squeeze to let him know everything's okay. His mouth softens into a smile when he meets my eyes.

When Jack's done, I look down at the small scar on my upper right chest and then look in the handheld mirrors they hold up for me so I can see the much larger scar on my back.

"Looks like I'm getting a collection of tough-guy scars."

Artyom runs his finger over the small scar above my brow. Memories of how gently he'd taken care of me that night flood through me.

"You weren't supposed to get any more scars, remember?"

"You must be getting sick of taking care of me."

"Never, *milaya*. I just hate seeing you in pain."

Jack spreads some more ointment on them and then pulls his gloves off. Before he can leave, I ask, "I haven't been on those painkillers in weeks, so they're out of my system, right?"

His eyes run over me, and I can see his doctor brain quickly deciphering what I'm asking. He smiles and pats my hand. "You're in perfect health, Riley. Nothing to worry about."

Artyom's much more blunt than me when he asks, "A pregnancy won't put too much strain on her after all this?"

"The bullet went straight through, and although I'm sure it hurt like a son of a bitch, it truly did do the least amount of damage you can ever hope for with a bullet wound. You'll still be sore for a bit, Riley, but there's no reason to think that nine months from now you can't have a perfectly healthy labor and delivery."

"Thanks, doc," I say.

Jack laughs while I shoot Artyom a very obvious *I told you so* look. He's been insisting we not have sex until we get the all-clear from Jack, and we're both about to go crazy from it. We've been doing everything aside from sex, and it's been amazing, but it's just not the same.

I thank Jack again before Artyom leads him out, and as soon as he steps back into the room, I motion him over. He smiles and scrubs a hand over his stubbled face, and I swear if I didn't know any better, I'd say Death was looking a little nervous.

"I know what you want, *milaya*, and believe me when I say I want nothing more than to slide into you, but do you think you could wait just a little bit longer? There's something I want to show you."

He leans closer and cups my face, bringing his lips to mine and kissing me so damn sweetly. It never ceases to surprise me how gentle he is with me. When he pulls back, I let out a whimper of protest, but he just smiles and lifts back up to his full height.

"You are such a tease," I tell him, making him laugh.

"I promise I'll make it up to you."

He holds out his hand, and I take it, curious to see what he's so nervous about.

Chapter 17

Artyom

I've never been so damn nervous in my life when I pull onto the road that will lead us to the house that's just been rebuilt. I'd thrown a shit ton of money at the construction company, and they'd come through in record time and refrained from asking questions about why there were a million bullet holes in the house. The place looks amazing, but doubts start creeping in. What if Riley's too traumatized by the shooting? What the fuck was I thinking rebuilding the house that she was shot in, the house where she was forced to shoot her damn brother?

"What's wrong?" Riley asks, reading me so easily.

I reach over and squeeze her thigh. "I'm just afraid that maybe I've done a monumentally stupid thing."

"You mean because you denied me sex for almost three weeks? You're right, that was monumentally stupid."

I hear the laughter in her voice, even if she is still a little miffed about my self-imposed cock block. "I promise I will make up for that. I just wanted to make sure the stitches were out and everything was looking great. I'm overly protective. I admit it, but that's not the stupid thing I was talking about."

Before I pull in the driveway, I stop the car and turn to her. "There's no pressure here. If you hate it or you don't want to live here after what happened, I completely understand. We can easily sell it and buy something else." I trace a finger down her cheek, amazed at how soft her skin always feels. "I just want you to be happy."

“I knew they were fixing the place up,” she says, grabbing my finger and kissing it. “I love this house.” She laughs when Beau whines from the backseat. “And so does Beau. We have so many great memories here.”

She looks over, even though she can't see the house yet and bites her bottom lip. “Unless there are memories here that you don't want to be reminded of.”

“Like what?”

I get a soft shrug and a noncommittal noise that could mean all sorts of things.

“Look at me, *milaya*.”

She turns her eyes back to mine. The blue of them looks even more vivid with the sunlight streaming into the car. “You're the only woman I've ever brought to my home, baby.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. I love this house because it's filled with memories of you, but I want you to see it before you make up your mind.”

She nods, and I slowly drive up to the garage while she lets out a soft gasp and looks out the window. The surprise in her voice makes me smile when she turns to me and says, “It looks different. Is it bigger?”

“Maybe.”

The excited grin on her face is damn adorable, and I hurry up and open the door for her, eager to watch her reaction to the changes that've been made. Beau takes off running to the water, barking excitedly and chasing every squirrel he can see in the yard. Riley laughs and threads her fingers through mine as we walk to the back deck that's been expanded on and now has some comfy patio furniture and down closer to the water are a few red Adirondack chairs and a fire pit.

She claps her hands and turns to me. “This is amazing,” she practically squeals.

I laugh and kiss her smiling face. “You haven't even seen inside yet.”

Grabbing onto my arms, she pulls me to the back door. “Wow,” she whispers when she sees the new, bigger windows that look out over the lake from the living room. I’ve already walked through the house, so I don’t pay it any attention. All my focus is on Riley’s beautiful, expressive face as she takes it all in.

Her eyes run over the newly remodeled living room and kitchen. It’s slightly bigger than it was with new leather furniture, freshly polished, hard-wood floors and a big shag rug in a shade of blue that I thought she’d like. Everything that could be saved was, but most of what was down here had to be replaced. I follow along beside her as she stops to touch and ooh and aah over everything. The big changes are upstairs, and as soon as we get up there, she gives me a surprised, confused look.

We walk into our bedroom, and she lets out a soft gasp when she sees the French doors and deck that have been added.

“Artyom,” she whispers when she walks over and opens the doors, taking in the view of the lake and the hammock chairs and small table.

“Do you like it?”

She wraps her arms around me in a tight hug. “I love it so much. It’s so gorgeous.”

I cup the back of her head and tighten my grip on her. “I’m so glad you do, but there’s more to see, *milaya*.”

She laughs when she sees the large tub and walk-in shower. “Oh, I’m going to enjoy the hell out of that.”

I give her a wink. “That’s the plan.”

I lead her out of our room and watch as she walks through the two new bedrooms that were added across the hall. She stops in the one directly across from our room, and when she turns back to me, her eyes are glassy.

“You made us a nursery?”

“I did.” I step closer and cup her face, tilting her up to me. I run my eyes over her before I do something I never thought I’d ever do and get down on one knee while taking out the ring box that I picked up from the jeweler’s yesterday. Her eyes widen when she sees it, tears already falling as her mouth parts in a gasp.

“Artyom,” she whispers, her voice shaky and soft.

I take her hand and kiss it. “I love you more than I ever thought it was possible to love someone, Riley. Ever since the first second I saw you, I knew you were mine and that you were always meant to be mine. I don’t deserve you, I’ll never deserve you, but I promise I will love you and be faithful to you for the rest of my life, and I’ll do everything I can to make you happy. Will you marry me, *milaya*?”

I open the box, showing her the emerald-cut diamond ring I picked out for her. It’s surrounded by smaller diamonds on a platinum band, and it immediately made me think of her when I saw it. It’s beautiful and elegant, but it’s nothing compared to the woman standing in front of me with tears streaming down her cheeks who’s whispering out a breathy “Yes,” and making me the happiest I’ve ever been.

Sliding the ring on, I quickly cup her face and kiss her. “Thank you,” I whisper against her lips. “Thank you for wanting to marry me and for loving me and for saving my damn life, baby.”

“I’m the one who should be thanking you, Artyom. You’ve changed my life and made me happier than I ever thought possible. I still can’t believe you want to marry me,” she says with a soft laugh.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart. I’ll happily spend the rest of my life convincing you over and over again of how much I love you.”

When I pick her up and start to carry her to bed, she smiles against my lips and kisses me harder, just as hungry for me as I am for her. The last couple of weeks have been an exercise in willpower unlike anything I’ve ever known. My fear of hurting her is the only thing that’s kept me in check, but now

that we have the green light, nothing's going to stop me from burying myself as deeply inside my fiancée as I can get.

I lay her on the bed and then laugh when she starts clawing at my shirt, desperate to get it off me. Pulling it over my head, she tosses it aside and then runs her fingers down my chest before reaching for the button on my jeans. As soon as the zipper is down, she's palming my cock and pulling a deep groan from me.

"I've missed you so much," she moans, gripping my shaft and making me grit my teeth at how damn good she feels.

"Not as much as I've missed you, baby."

I look down, admiring the sight of her diamond ring against my cock before I pull back enough to tug my jeans off. When I'm naked, she runs her eyes over me, looking at me with the same raw desire that was in her eyes when she gave me that lap dance, except now it's mixed with so much love that it makes my chest ache to see it. It's terrifying and exhilarating to love someone as much as I love her. It consumes me and overwhelms me, but it could also so easily destroy me. When I slip her shirt over her head, the scar I see marking her perfect skin is proof of that. I know with absolute certainty that I wouldn't survive without her. She's my whole life.

"I'm fine, Artyom," she whispers, seeing the look on my face. "No more worrying. We're going to have an amazing life together and raise a family and grow old together." She cups my face and runs her thumb over my lips. "And we're not going to waste a second of it worrying about stupid shit."

I smile at the tone of her voice. "You're right. Life is too short, and I've already spent way too much of it without you."

She pulls me closer and grabs onto my ass. "What was this about making it up to me?"

Laughing, I lean down to kiss the tip of her nose. "Look who's being all feisty," I tease, reaching down to slide her pants off before unclasping her bra. When I toss the lace aside, I run my tongue over one of her hard, rosy-red nipples, loving

the soft whimper she gives. “I’m going to fuck you until you can’t move, *milaya*.” I give her nipple a soft suck, pinning her body down with my own weight when she tries to squirm and arch up for more. “You’re going to come so many times for me, aren’t you, baby?”

“Yes,” she moans, running her hands through my hair when I give her another suck.

Running my tongue over her, I suck in as much of her tit as I can, filling my mouth with her, gorging on the body that I’ll never be able to get enough of. She moans my name and writhes beneath me. The feel of her naked body against mine is pure heaven. When I lift up enough for her to move, she quickly wraps her legs around my waist, trying her damndest to get at my cock.

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you only loved me for my dick.” I smile and kiss a line to her other tit.

“It is definitely a perk,” she says, making me laugh.

Refusing to slide into her just yet, I start to tease her other nipple while I drag the head of my cock over her clit. She’s already soaked, making it easy for me to slide over her sensitive skin, and the moan she gives lets me know her first orgasm is only seconds away. A soft bite to her nipple while I circle my hips to hit her right where she needs is all it takes to make her moan my name and cling to me as her body tenses with her release. She bucks up against me, riding her orgasm and using my cock for every second of pleasure she can get.

When she’s sated, she lets out a sigh, her body softening again beneath mine, her fingers loosening their grip on my hair. I kiss her nipple and lift my head, smiling at the loopy grin on her face.

“I hope that wasn’t all you wanted, because I’m nowhere near done with you.”

She gives me a *drunk on ecstasy* giggle and shakes her head.

“Good girl.” I kiss my way down her stomach until my head is between her legs. “Get comfortable, sweetheart. I’m

going to be here awhile.”

Gripping the backs of her thighs, I spread her wide and savor the view. She’s soaked from her orgasm with her pussy lips parted in invitation, and when I swipe my tongue up her slit, she moans and rocks her hips for more. I wasn’t kidding about her getting comfortable. I take my time, licking and sucking and kissing her sweet pussy until I’ve lost track of her orgasms and her whole body is shaking.

“Artyom,” she pants. “Too much.”

I smile and run my tongue around her clit in a wide circle, giving her overly sensitive bundle of nerves a quick break.

“You think so, *milaya*?”

“I don’t think I can come again,” she whispers, her voice hoarse from screaming my name.

I give her clit a soft kiss and hover my body above hers, smiling at my sweaty, dazed fiancée.

“I think you can, sweetheart.” I nudge her slit with the head of my cock. Her eyes widen in surprise as a soft moan escapes from between her parted lips. “I want to feel my fiancée come around my cock.”

I slowly start to slide into her, spreading her wide. Her eyes roll back in her head as she digs her fingers into my shoulders, arching her back up to me.

“Can you do that for me, sweetheart?” I ask when I’m fully seated inside her. “Can you give me one more?”

“Yes,” she moans, already rocking her hips up for more.

“That’s my good girl.”

I groan at how damn good she feels when I slowly start to fuck her.

“God, I’ve missed you,” I whisper against her lips before sliding my tongue in to meet hers, needing to be inside her as much as possible.

She runs her tongue over mine, wrapping her arms and legs around me, clinging to me as I slam into her in an even

harder rhythm. Knowing I can't hang on much longer, I break our kiss and tell her in Russian how much I love her and how badly I need her to come for me right fucking now because my ability to speak English is long gone. She may not understand the words, but she gets the meaning. She breathes my name in a whisper-soft moan right before her pussy clenches around me, quickly pushing me over the edge.

With a growl, I fuck her harder, drunk on pure ecstasy as my cock pulses with my release, filling her with every damn drop I have. She whimpers and clings to me. I give one more hard thrust before burying myself inside her, keeping us locked together while the last of the aftershocks run through us.

Resting my sweaty forehead against hers, I look into my fiancée's eyes. "I love you, *milaya*."

She gives me a lazy smile and runs her fingers over my face. "I love you too." She laughs when she starts to yawn. "That was a lot of orgasms."

"Do you need more?"

"Yes, but not right now."

I smile and give her another kiss before slowly sliding out of her and laying down next to her, pulling her body against mine. She snuggles into me and kisses my chest. Sliding my hand down her side, I run my fingers over her stomach, already picturing it swollen and beautiful. She kisses my chest again and brings her hand down to join mine.

"Do you want a boy or a girl?"

"Both," I say, making her laugh. "At least one of each."

"Let's start with one and then take it from there." She pats my hand in a *calm down* kind of way. "We can't rebuild the house every few years."

I smile because I sure the fuck can. "You want to stay here then?"

"Yes, I love it here. It would break my heart a little to have to leave."

“Then we’ll never sell it,” I promise her.

I hold her while she takes a nap and then we get cleaned up and make sure Beau is happy in his new, extra-large, orthopedic dog bed before going back to get our stuff from Mikhail’s. When Charlie sees the ring, she pulls Riley in for a big hug and yells for Mikhail to come see. He smiles at his wife’s excitement and then congratulates us on the upcoming wedding I swore I’d never have. Lev claps his hands and smiles, not having the faintest idea what’s going on but super happy about it anyway. I pick him up and give him a big hug goodbye, telling him in Russian that I’ll be back soon to see him.

Riley and I grab our things from downstairs and thank them again before making our way outside. Once the car is loaded, I ask, “Do you mind if we make a quick stop at the club? I really need to check on a couple of things. Sloane and Yuri have been picking up a lot of slack since I haven’t been around.”

“Sure.”

When we get to the club, the parking lot is full, and there’s a long line of men waiting to get inside. I park up front in one of the reserved spots and eye the men out front. Riley notices and laughs.

“I used to work here. Remember?”

“Yeah, and I didn’t like it then either.”

“Well, it’s not like it makes me crazy happy to see you surrounded by a bunch of half-naked, gorgeous women.”

I lean over and cup the back of her head, pulling her closer to me. “You’re the only woman I want to see, *milaya*. I don’t ever plan on just hanging out here. We’re here for work, and that’s it.” Grabbing her hand, I bring it to my cock and give her bottom lip a soft suck. “This is only for you, sweetheart. No other woman will ever have it.”

“Okay,” she whispers before I pull back because the last thing I want is her walking past all those guys with her adorable *I’m super horny* look.

We walk up to the entrance with my arm securely around her. As soon as the men by the door see the look on my face, they quickly turn away from blatantly ogling her. Riley, completely oblivious to the stares she gets, smiles up at Viktor who's checking IDs.

“Hey, Viktor,” she says.

Viktor smiles down at her. “Good to see you up and around, Riley.” He looks up at me and says in Russian, “It's packed tonight, Boss. Yuri's already inside.”

I thank him and lead Riley inside. The music is thumping and aroused men fill the place with their over-eager stares and loud cheers. Some nights the only thing that keeps me sane is thinking about all the money they're happily throwing into my pockets. I find them unbelievably tiresome, and seeing the way they eye Riley when we walk past doesn't make me think any better of them.

When one young guy who's clearly had too much to drink gives her a leering look that has my hand clenching into a tight fist, I step in front of her and wait until he brings his eyes up to mine. The smile quickly drops from his face.

“She's not part of the entertainment, fucker.” I point behind him. “The stage is that way.”

“Sorry, man,” he mutters and turns with a quickness I wouldn't have thought him capable of.

I turn back to Riley who's trying not to laugh. Hooking a finger under her chin, I lean down and say, “The next time we come here, you're wearing a goddamn snowsuit.”

She rests her hands on my chest and leans in closer. “Try not to break any fingers.”

“No promises, *milaya*.”

I pick her up, wrapping my arm securely around her ass and cupping the back of her head with the other, pulling her closer and not giving the slightest fuck at the looks we're getting. She cups my face, opening her mouth for me and giving me what I need. The music pulses while the crowd moves around us, but I'm oblivious to everything except the

feel of Riley's body against mine and the sweet taste of her mouth. When she starts to rock her hips, I squeeze her ass in warning and force myself to pull back.

"No one gets to see the way you grind your little pussy but me, *milaya*."

She smiles and nips at my bottom lip. "I love how possessive you are."

I laugh and kiss her once more. "Good, because that's never going to change. I'm guessing it will only get worse."

Carrying her to the bar, I see Sloane smirking as she pours a new round of drinks while Yuri sits at the bar with a smug grin of his own.

"I take it she said yes," he says, eyeing the big smile on Riley's face.

"I did," she says, answering the question for me and then holding up her hand so he and Sloane can see the ring when I set her down on the stool next to his.

"Congratulations," Sloane says, beaming at us. She levels her gaze on Riley. "I knew he was smitten with you since day one when he wouldn't let you dance and then watched you like a damn hawk while you waitressed."

Riley laughs and grabs onto my hand. "He's a little overprotective."

"A little?" Yuri laughs. "He could give Beau a run for his money." He turns to Riley and holds up his drink. "In all seriousness, congratulations to the two of you. I never thought in a million years I'd see Artyom in love, but he loves you, Riley, and it's obvious you feel the same way. All I ask is that you name your firstborn after me." He gives me a pointed look. "It's really the least you can do."

I laugh as he pulls Riley into a hug. "Welcome to the family," he says before downing his drink and giving Sloane a wink when she immediately refills it.

Smacking my best friend on the back, I take the glass Sloane hands me and drink with Yuri. We may have thought

we'd be bachelors together for the rest of our lives, but there's no doubt in my mind that a future with Riley is going to be a thousand times better. I'm confident Yuri will find the right woman and be the next to marry, but I'm sure as hell not going to tell him that because he'd just laugh and tell me I'm crazy.

After joking around at the bar while several of the waitresses come up to offer congratulations, I feel Riley stiffen when I look over and see two dancers walking over to us. I don't recognize them, so they must've been hired after Riley was shot. They're wearing the world's tiniest thongs and pasties and both have a hungry look in their eyes that I recognize all too well.

Turning my back to them, I face Riley and look down at her. "You're the only woman I care about seeing, *milaya*."

She nods, but I can still see the worry in her eyes, the old insecurities that she tries so hard to fight, and it pisses me the fuck off that these women have made her feel this way.

"I heard someone just got engaged." The high-pitched voice coming from behind me makes me want to claw my own eardrums out. "How about a dance?"

The other one chimes in with a "If you think you can handle us," which I guess is supposed to insult my manhood enough to make me agree to it.

I don't even bother turning around to look at them. I keep my eyes on Riley and run my finger down her cheek, smiling when she grabs my hand and kisses the palm.

"You do realize that's your boss, right?" I hear Yuri ask them. "And that he's so in love with his fiancée that he's not even going to waste the time to turn around and answer you?"

One of them laughs and says, "Well, how about you then? You want a private lap dance with the two of us?"

"For fuck's sake," I hear Sloane mutter before turning away to serve another customer.

I'm not at all surprised when Yuri gives a harsh laugh and says, "You just insulted a woman who I happen to have a great deal of respect for. Be happy your asses aren't getting fired

and get the fuck out of here. Go do your job, you know, with the actual fucking paying customers in here.”

Yuri may fuck a lot of women, but he’s loyal to the Bratva above all else, and Riley’s now a part of that. Yuri laughs, so I’m guessing the women walk off to do as they’re told. Riley grabs my shirt and pulls me closer.

“Thanks, Artyom.”

“I love you, *milaya*. No other woman exists for me.”

She smiles and then peeks around me to Yuri. “Thanks for sending them away.”

“You saved my best friend’s life, Riley, and the two of you are about to be married and name your firstborn son after me, so sending away those idiots is the least I can do.”

I laugh and look back at him. “We’re not naming our son Yuri. You can do that with your own son.”

He smiles and shakes his head. “Never going to happen. Fine, it doesn’t have to be the firstborn. It can be like your fourth. I’m not picky.”

“How very kind of you,” I say, lifting Riley off the stool but keeping my arm firmly around her.

“I’m an insanely generous guy.”

I laugh and smack his arm. “We’re getting out of here after I grab some stuff from the office.”

“Go make a little Yuri,” he says in Russian, making me laugh while also wanting to punch the presumptuous fucker.

I tell him to fuck off and then wave a goodbye to Sloane before leading Riley through the crowd again. I’m done coming into this place when it’s open. I can easily do all my work during the afternoon. The club has lost all the appeal that it once had, and all I can think about is getting Riley out of here so I can have her all to myself again.

Chapter 18

Riley

The last three weeks have passed by in a ridiculously happy blur. Every day I wake up in Artyom's arms with Beau at our feet, and it's so perfect that it overwhelms me. I wonder if I'll ever get used to it. A large part of me hopes I never will. I never want to take any of this for granted. I went from a life of fear to feeling completely safe and loved in a way that I hadn't even known was possible.

When I step out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around my chest, I smile when I see the fresh flowers on the small table by the French doors. The large, pink roses and calla lilies smell amazing, and it always makes me laugh when I think about him walking into these local flower shops that he's always frequenting with his neck tattoo and scar, looking every bit the trained killer he is and then walking out with these elaborate, delicate bouquets of flowers.

"What are you laughing about?"

I turn around to see him leaning against the doorway and looking so damn sexy in his jeans and long-sleeve black tee that my brain freezes for a second. I can't believe this gorgeous man is going to be my husband in a week.

"I was just thinking about what a secret softie you are," I say, making him smile as he walks toward me.

His eyes run over me, the heat in them making my breath hitch and my heart start racing. I back up, carefully making my way to the closet. He follows me, slowly stalking me until my back is pressed against the shelves in our large, walk-in closet.

“I just showered,” I remind him.

He smiles and runs his fingers up my inner thigh. “Time to get dirty again.”

Since we decided we want to start a family as soon as possible, Artyom has been taking baby-making duty very, very seriously. Some days I’m amazed my body can keep up with him. He may be twelve years older than me, but the man is tireless when it comes to sex. Today is no exception. When he slides two fingers into me, I let the towel drop and pull his mouth down to mine. He kisses me slowly while he works my pussy, teasing me until my thighs are quivering and it’s only his hand between my legs that’s keeping me upright. When he finally frees his cock and lifts me up, he slides into me so slowly that I can’t help but throw my head back and moan his name.

He fucks me in that same slow rhythm while he kisses me everywhere he can reach. When he gets to my scar, he lets out a small moan and runs his tongue over the damaged skin while I give his earlobe a soft suck.

“I love you,” I whisper against his skin.

“I love you, *milaya*.”

With a groan, he brings his mouth back to mine and thrusts into me even harder, speeding up until we’re both close to the edge. When I let go, he growls and buries himself inside me as deeply as he can, locking us together in the most intimate way possible. I kiss him while the orgasm is still thundering through me, and I never want to stop, not even after we’re both spent and he’s slowly growing soft inside me. He doesn’t rush me, just keeps hanging onto me and kissing me back until I finally pull away with a smile.

“I will never get tired of kissing you, Artyom.”

“I’ll never get tired of anything with you, *milaya*.”

I wrap my arms around him, burying my face against his neck and kissing the scar that I’m so familiar with now. Every time my lips touch the ravaged skin, I think about how damn grateful I am that he didn’t die that night. Just thinking about

how close he came to dying has me clinging to him even tighter.

He rubs a hand over my back, caressing my skin and returning my tight hug, knowing exactly what I'm thinking. We've both lived through way too many bad things to be able to just jump into a belief that all will be well, but together we're slowly learning to trust in our happy ending. Every time he gets called away for work, I panic that he won't come back. It's getting better, but I'm not sure that deep-seated fear will ever truly go away. I've learned to not let it consume me, and for now, that's enough.

With one last kiss, he slowly lowers me down and tucks himself back in his pants while I get dressed in a post-orgasm daze that makes my limbs feel loose and relaxed.

“Are you ever going to show me what's in this?” he asks, pointing at the pink shoebox that I'd completely forgotten about.

“It's not much, just a few things from my childhood that I wanted to keep.”

“I'd love to see it.”

I pull on my shirt and grab the box, bringing it into the bedroom with us. Artyom sits next to me on the bed, so close our bodies are touching, and watches me open the lid. His face spreads into a big smile when he sees the photos on top.

“That's you when you were little?”

“Yeah.” I hand him the stack of photos. There aren't many, but there's several of me as a baby and then several more of me at various ages, but it stops when I turned fourteen. He pauses at one of me and Alex. It's the only photo I have of us. I'm five and he's eight. We're building a snowman in the front yard. I'm in a red snowsuit, and my cheeks are just as bright. I feel a pang of sadness at the sight of my younger, smiling face.

“I'm sorry it makes you sad to look at them. We don't have to.” He starts to put the photos back, but I shake my head.

“No, it's okay. Everything changed shortly after that photo. I thought I was getting the brother I always wanted, someone

to play with and to protect me when I got older, but it wasn't long after this photo was taken that I learned what a monster he was."

"He hurt you when you were this little?" The anger in Artyom's voice has me turning my head to kiss his shoulder.

"I learned to survive it." I study the dark-haired boy in the photo, not feeling the slightest twinge of guilt at having ended his life. He was never going to stop being the monster he was. People like that don't ever change. They just find new victims to hurt.

Artyom rests his hand on my thigh and kisses the top of my head. "I'm sorry I wasn't there to protect you."

"You're here now. That's all that matters."

"After my mom died when I was fourteen, his dad drank himself to death not too long after, and then it was just the two of us, well, and Matt. I learned to stay out of their way, but as shitty as Alex was, he made sure I had food and a place to live, so I guess there's that."

"I'm glad he at least did that for you," Artyom says, but I can tell by his tone that he's sparing me from what he really thinks about Alex.

He kisses me again and then laughs when I show him a few Christmas tree ornaments I made in school, a picture of a giant dog sitting beneath a rainbow I drew in first grade, and a small stuffed elephant that I'd loved when I was little. Artyom runs his finger over the threadbare, much-loved toy.

"Thank you for showing me all this. I love learning about you." He picks up one of my baby photos again and smiles. "You were so beautiful. I hope our baby looks just like you."

"What about you? Do you have any photos from when you were little?"

"Not much at all. Hang on, and I'll get them."

He laughs at the excitement on my face when he comes back and I reach for the small album in his hands. When I

open it and see a smiling baby with almond-shaped, grey eyes, I let out a squeal that makes him laugh again.

“You were so stinking cute!” I gush. I point at the beautiful woman holding him. “Your mom?”

“Yeah.”

“Are your parents still in Russia?”

“No, they died a few years ago.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay, *milaya*. You are my family, and the Bratva is my family. I wasn’t close to them. I left home when I was young.” The right side of his mouth quirks up in a half-smile. “They didn’t approve of my life choices.”

“I’m still sorry.” I kiss his cheek and then flip through the photos, stopping on the last one when he looks about sixteen or seventeen. The Artyom staring back at me has a perfectly smooth neck with no scar or tattoo, and it’s like looking at a stranger in a way.

“So you’ve always been sexy as hell,” I say, making him laugh. “It’s so infuriating that you didn’t go through an ugly stage. It’s very unfair.”

“I didn’t see an ugly stage in your photos.”

“That’s because I don’t have any photos past the age of fourteen. Believe me, there was an ugly stage.” My cheeks heat up at the memories of all the bad haircuts and acne and some of the godawful clothes I had to wear because everything we got was secondhand and sometimes the selections were pitiful at best.

“I never would’ve found you ugly, *milaya*.”

“I’m so glad we can’t go back in time and put that to the test.”

He laughs and pulls me in for a kiss. “You are beautiful to me, every single part of you, inside and out, and I can’t wait to marry you.”

“One week,” I whisper against his lips.

“One week,” he repeats, making me smile.

* * *

“You look amazing,” Charlie says, fixing the veil that trails down my back with a huge grin on her face. “Artyom’s going to go crazy when he sees you.”

I smile at the woman who’s quickly become a good friend and give her arm a squeeze. “Thanks for everything, Charlie. I never could’ve done all this without you.”

“Are you kidding? I’m so excited to have you in the family. I hoped someone would marry soon, I just never in a million years thought it would be Artyom.” She laughs and shakes her head. “Yuri’s next, even though he refuses to admit it.”

The laugh dies in my throat when I step in front of the full-length mirror in our bedroom. The dress I picked out is more on the simple side, an A-line, white, satin gown that hits me at my ankles, but it’s the most *me* of all the wedding dresses I looked at. My nerves are already going crazy at the idea of being the focal point today. The last thing I want is to be in an outfit that’s also outside my comfort zone. The dress is beautiful, though, and I can’t help but admire it for a few more seconds. It’s elegant and makes me feel like a damn princess. Charlie adjusts the sparkly headband at the top of my veil until everything looks perfect.

“I’ll let Artyom know you’re ready,” she says, pulling me in for a quick hug.

I nod and thank her again before turning back to the mirror. She’s barely left the room before I’m fidgeting again, worrying that I’ll trip in my heels and make a complete ass of myself in front of everyone. We decided to get married at the house we both love so much and only invited those closest to us, but I’d still really rather not humiliate myself in front of them or embarrass Artyom.

The sound of the door opening pulls my eyes up to the corner of the mirror, and when I see my soon-to-be husband

walk in, all the air leaves my lungs at the sight of him. He's wearing a black tux and looking so unbelievably sexy that all I can do is gawk.

"My god, *milaya*," he says, stepping up behind me. His eyes run over my reflection, taking in the sight of me. "I can't believe you're about to be my wife."

"I was just thinking the same thing about you." I turn to get a better look at him. He's freshly shaved and smelling amazing, and when he gently cups my face and tilts me up so he can see me better, I'm overwhelmed by the love I see in his grey eyes. "You look sexier than any man I've ever seen."

He smiles and caresses the skin of my cheek with his thumb. "You look so beautiful, baby." His hand lowers to my neck where he lightly dances his fingers over my skin. "You're just missing one thing."

I watch as he pulls a box from his pocket and holds it up for me. When he opens it and I see the strands of diamonds and pearls, I let out a soft gasp and reach out to touch it.

"It's so beautiful," I whisper, running my fingers over the delicate necklace. "It's too much, Artyom. You didn't have to get me anything."

"It will never be too much, and I love buying you things, Riley, so you might want to get used to it."

He takes the necklace out and tosses the box on the bed. I lift my hair and veil for him as he clasps it around my neck. I look in the mirror and have to admit that it is the perfect touch. It pulls everything together and raises the dress to a whole new level. I rest my hand on it and then wrap my arms around him.

"Thank you. I really love it."

He holds me close, calming me in a way that only he can.

"Stop worrying, *milaya*. Forget about everyone else and just focus on me."

"How can you read me so damn easily?"

"Because I love you and you're my whole world."

“I feel the same way about you,” I tell him, clinging to him even harder.

He gently raises my face and kisses me softly. My heels put me higher than usual, and I take advantage of it and wrap my arms around his neck while I slide my tongue into his mouth. He groans and presses his palm against my lower back, holding me tightly against him while his other hand wraps around my neck, softly caressing my skin with his thumb. The kiss turns hungry fast, and soon the hard length of him is pressed against my stomach and I’m two seconds away from ripping the buttons off his tux.

With one last suck of my bottom lip, he pulls back and rests his forehead against mine. “Jesus Christ, baby,” he groans. “I should’ve known better than to kiss you.” He adjusts his cock and laughs. “Good thing all eyes will be on you.”

I smile and run my hands down the front of his suit. “Let’s get married, Artyom, because I’m going to need my husband to fuck me very soon.”

“Already such a handful and we’re not even married yet,” he says with a smile.

“I hope you can keep up.”

He laughs and gives me a wink. “Oh, I can keep up, *milaya*. My wife will always be satisfied.”

I smile, not doubting his words for a second. He leans down to kiss the scar on my chest before standing back up to his full height and offering me his arm. I thread my arm through his and we walk downstairs and outside to where everyone is waiting. The music starts up as soon as we appear, and all of our closest friends turn to look at us while the photographer starts snapping a million photos. I smile back at them, eyeing the crowd of obvious Bratva men in black tuxes, but there’s also Sloane with her boyfriend, the two of them looking thrilled for us, and when I see Beau sitting at the front next to Mikhail, I can’t help but laugh. Artyom squeezes my arm and smiles down at me.

Leaning close to me, he whispers, “He refused to sit the wedding out and insisted on being in the front row.”

I’m still smiling about Beau when we get to the front and see Lev in the tiniest tux I’ve ever seen, sitting on Charlie’s lap. As soon as he spots Artyom, he lets out a loud squeal that makes everyone laugh. Yuri’s beside them with a big grin on his face, and everything feels exactly as it should be when Artyom and I turn to face each other in front of everyone. Even though the ceremony is short, I know I won’t remember anything about it except for the way Artyom’s looking at me and the feel of his hands in mine, grounding me to the moment and giving me soft squeezes throughout so I don’t start getting nervous.

We slide the platinum bands we picked out on each other’s fingers, and then everyone is cheering as we’re announced husband and wife and Artyom leans down to kiss me. He cups my face and is so damn happy he can’t stop smiling. The kiss is sweet and just this side of being indecent, and when he pulls back the raw hunger is easy to see in his eyes. Judging by the wink he gives me, my desire for him is written all over my face and just as easy to read.

“Mrs. Morozov,” he whispers against my lips.

Neither one of us can stop smiling, and when he picks me up, I laugh and wrap my arms around him. Everyone comes up to congratulate us, and he reluctantly sets me down so he can return the hugs and slaps on the back. Yuri’s grinning in a way that makes me think he probably started on the vodka a few hours ago, and when he gives me a big hug and then spins me around, I laugh as Artyom growls at him to set me the fuck down. Yuri gives me a wink and kisses my cheek.

“Congratulations, Riley,” he says before he sets me down and then steps aside so Charlie can hug me right before Mikhail does.

He surprises me by kissing my cheek and saying, “Welcome to the family, Riley. You’re one of us now.”

I look around at the Bratva that’s become my family. I went from having nothing to having everything, and all I can

feel is grateful.

“Thank you, Mikhail.”

He smiles and pulls Charlie closer to him. Lev is currently being held by Sergei, and I bet his little feet won't touch the ground all night.

The caterers start bringing out the food while the DJ we hired gets set up. The weather is perfect today, and even though the sun's about to set, it's still nice and warm. Artyom does a few shots with the guys and then waves away the next one as he grabs my hand and pulls me close to him, swaying us to the music. He's a surprisingly good dancer, and I follow his lead, laughing when he spins me around and then pulls me back against his chest.

“I had no idea I could be this happy,” he says, looking down at me.

“Neither did I. It still surprises me every day,” I admit.

“Me too, *milaya*.”

We spend the next couple of hours dancing, eating, and laughing with our friends. Someone lights the fire pit at some point, and Beau immediately lays down next to it and falls asleep. Artyom stays close by me, his fingers run over my bare shoulders before he settles his hand at the nape of my neck. He ditched his tux jacket long ago, and the sight of him in his white dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up, revealing his tanned, tattooed forearms has been slowly driving me crazy. The looks he keeps giving me are getting hungrier and hungrier until he finally grabs my hand, picks me up bridal style, and carries me inside the house.

Aside from Charlie, I think Artyom and I are the only two sober people left, so no one notices us slip away. The caterers left earlier, and we don't run into any of the guests as he carries me up the stairs.

I lean in closer and kiss his neck. “Do you think it's rude to leave our guests?”

He laughs and steps into our bedroom, kicking the door shut behind us. “Are you kidding? I think they're all amazed I

lasted as long as I did. I was ready to carry you back up here right after you said I do.”

Setting me down, he runs his fingers along the top of my dress, dipping a finger under the fabric and making goosebumps bloom on my skin.

“You look amazing in this dress, *milaya*, but I need you out of it right fucking now.”

My heart speeds up at the tone I recognize all too well. It’s the same one he had the night he chased me and fucked me up against the wall with blood all over his clothes, and my pussy clenches at the sound of it. Running my fingers down the buttons of his white shirt, I bite my bottom lip and take a step back. He eyes me and unbuttons his shirt, tossing it aside without a second thought. His entire focus is on me. I look at his left hand, amazed that the sight of a wedding band can turn me on so much, but it looks damn good on him, and knowing that he’s officially mine now is an aphrodisiac unlike anything I’ve ever known.

Music still filters up from outside, and when a slow, sultry beat comes on, I smile and start to unzip my dress. He lets out a soft groan when the dress falls to the floor, and I’m left in nothing but a strapless, white, lacy bra and matching thong with a garter belt and thigh highs.

“Holy fuck,” he groans. “I had no idea you had all that on under your dress, baby, and it’s a damn good thing I didn’t.”

Keeping the heels on, I walk over to him, matching my steps to the beat of the music, and the look of pure delight on his face makes me laugh.

“I’m trying to be sexy here,” I remind him.

“You’re always sexy, *milaya*.”

He lets me lead him to the bed, and when he sits on the edge, I turn around and sway my hips to the music. Grabbing onto his thighs, I lower my ass closer, grinding against the hard bulge in his pants that I can’t wait to get inside me.

Running his hands over me, he groans and kisses my back before unclasping my bra. When it falls free, I turn around and

straddle him.

“I’m not so sure you’re allowed to touch.” I rock my hips, teasing him while his eyes run over me.

Bringing his grey eyes back to mine, he leans closer and runs his tongue over my nipple, pulling a gasp from me that makes him smile. “No touching, huh?”

I run my fingers through his hair, pulling him back to my tit. “I changed my mind.”

He laughs and lightly brushes his fingers along my spine from the nape of my neck to the top of my ass, sending a shiver of pleasure through every cell in my body as he wraps his lips around my breast, sucking me in and filling his mouth with as much of me as he can. He teases me while I grind against him and drag my nails over his muscled back and chest.

“Please,” I beg. “Artyom, please.”

He gives my nipple one last soft bite before lifting his face to mine. When he sees the look in my eyes, he lets out a groan and quickly lays me on the bed. He gets rid of his pants and my heels and then runs his hands up my legs, dipping a finger under the white ribbon of my garter belt.

“You need more of these because you look fucking amazing in them, and I can’t promise they’re going to make it through the night.”

I part my thighs even more for him, and then let out a surprised yelp when he grabs onto my lace panties and roughly rips them off me, tossing the torn pieces aside before sliding three fingers into me.

“Fuck,” I moan, rocking my hips up to him.

“My sweet wife is so wet for me,” he murmurs against the skin of my inner thigh, slowly kissing his way to my pussy.

“Always,” I moan.

He fingers me slowly while he kisses and licks closer and closer to where I need him. By the time he runs his tongue over my clit, I’m so close my body is already squirming with

the coil of tension that's about to burst inside me. One more lick sends me over the edge. I moan my husband's name and rock up against him, riding my orgasm until I'm gasping and my ears are ringing. He slowly slides his fingers out of me and gives me one more kiss.

"I could easily spend the whole damn night with my head between your legs, *milaya*, making you come again and again, but I need to be inside you now."

He hovers his powerful body above mine and looks down at me, pressing the head of his cock against my slit. "I need to be inside my wife."

I cling to him when he starts to slide into me. No matter how many times we've done this, the size of him always takes me by surprise. He slowly feeds me his cock, inch by thick inch, never taking his eyes off mine, and when he's deeply seated inside me, he lets out a groan and presses his lips to mine. I open wider for him, running my tongue over his and digging my fingers into his back when he starts to speed up. Every stroke of his cock sends a rush of pleasure through me, making me nearly lightheaded from the sheer joy of it.

I get lost in Artyom's body, oblivious to everything else except the feel of his body against me and in me, the sweet taste of him on my tongue, and the scent of his spicy cologne. Pulling my mouth away, I kiss a line down his neck, running my tongue over his scar and breathing in the smell I love most in the whole world. Underneath his cologne is his own unique scent that always makes me feel like I've come home. When he pushes me over the edge again, I let go, feeling like I'm completely enveloped by him. He cups the back of my head, holding me tighter as he pulses inside me with his own release.

"I love you," I whisper against his skin.

He groans something in Russian and holds me tighter as his cock gives one last pulse inside me before his body stills. He gives a soft laugh and shakes his head to clear it. Tilting my face to his, he gives me the sweetest smile.

"You always make me forget my English, baby." He kisses me gently, keeping himself buried inside me just like I like. "I

love you so much, *milaya*.”

I lock my legs around him. “I love you too.”

I run my fingers through his hair, memorizing every detail of his face because I don’t want to forget a single second of this moment. When he does slide out of me, I immediately roll onto my side so I can cuddle against him when he lays down. Before he can raise his arm for me, I kiss the scar on his bicep where the bullet grazed him and then rest my head on his chest. He kisses the top of my head and wraps his arms around me.

Threading my fingers through his, I lift his hand and kiss his wedding band. “I didn’t think you could look any sexier, but there’s something about seeing this ring on you that drives me crazy.”

“I know exactly what you mean. I thought the same thing when I slid your engagement ring on, but nothing compares to seeing that wedding ring on your finger.”

I lift up and give him another kiss. “Think we should go check on the guests?”

He reaches down to cup my ass. “No. The guys will make sure everything is picked up and Charlie will let Beau in before they go. I’ve got my wife in nothing but a garter belt and thigh highs. There’s no way in hell I’m leaving this bed, *milaya*, until we absolutely have to.”

I laugh and lean down to kiss my husband, more than happy to spend the night tangled up with him.

Chapter 19

Artyom

“**K** eep your eyes closed. No peeking, *milaya*.”

Riley laughs and keeps her face buried in my neck while I carry her into the private beach bungalow I reserved for our honeymoon. The heat of her breath hits my neck, and when she runs her tongue over my scar like she loves to do, I let out a groan and tell her to behave. She laughs and gives my neck a kiss. I carry her to the back of the cute, tropical bungalow, to the large deck with the lawn chairs and hammocks and the amazing view of the sea, the crystal-clear water only a few feet away.

“Okay, *milaya*. Open your eyes, beautiful.”

I smile at the gasp she gives when she turns her head and looks out at our private paradise. “Artyom,” she whispers. “It’s so beautiful.”

“So beautiful,” I agree.

When she turns her head and sees me staring at her instead of the view, she smiles and cups my cheek, bringing her mouth to mine. Her kisses are always the perfect mix of sweet and sexy, so much love but also so much passion, and they always take my damn breath away. I wake up and fall in love with her all over again every second of every day. She’s only been my wife for a few days, but it already feels like there was never a time before her. My life started the day she walked into my club, looking so shy and adorable, and now all I can think about is how grateful I am to have her.

She grabs my hand when I set her down and pulls me toward the water with a laugh. I follow her, watching her excitement and loving every second of it. Her whole face lights up when she turns around, taking in the long, sandy beach that's all ours and the cute bungalow behind me with the open-air bedroom and large, king-size bed.

"It's perfect," she says, stepping closer and wrapping her arms around me. She rests the side of her face against my chest while I hug her tightly and kiss the top of her head.

"It's also completely private, so you can skinny-dip to your heart's content."

"Oh, we're definitely skinny-dipping," she says with a laugh. "In fact, I think you should just stay naked for the whole trip."

"I will if you will."

She runs her hands up the back of my shirt, gently dancing her fingers along my spine, giving me a smirk when she feels me start to grow hard.

"I need a tour of the bungalow first."

"Such a tease," I say with a laugh.

I follow behind her, smiling at her excitement as she inspects and gushes over everything. Neither one of us grew up with money, so I completely understand her awe of the place. I've been wealthy for a very long time, but a part of me still remembers what it was like to go without, to see others buying whatever the fuck they wanted while I walked around in threadbare, secondhand clothes and ill-fitting shoes. It makes me immensely proud to be able to provide for my wife and to give her everything she could possibly want, and I don't feel even the slightest twinge of guilt about how I've come by my money. I am who I am, and there's no changing it.

When she's satisfied with her inspection, she disappears into the bathroom and comes out wearing a tiny, white bikini that makes my brain stop working for a few seconds. All I can do is stand and stare. She laughs and gives me a cutesy wave before telling me to throw on some swim trunks and join her. I

hurry up and do as she says before running to join her on the beach. She's already in the water when I get there, and we spend the rest of the day relaxing and enjoying one another as our bodies try to cope with the massive jet lag. We end up taking a nap at some point, and when I wake and see her still asleep next to me, I kiss her shoulder and sneak out of bed. The fridge is stocked for us, so I start the grill and have just about finished with the chicken when she comes up behind me and wraps her arms around my waist, kissing my back and whispering that she loves me.

“I love you too, baby. Supper's almost ready.”

She yawns and nods her head as she walks over to the hammock on the patio. My eyes run over her, drinking in every beautiful inch of her. I wonder for the millionth time if she's pregnant. We're both fully aware that her period is late, and I know her body well enough to recognize that her breasts are a bit fuller. She also seems more tired than usual and has been eating a bit more. She packed a pregnancy test. We're both just too nervous to actually get the damn thing out and test our theory.

After supper when she's curled in my lap and we're swinging in the hammock, I dance my fingers along her tanned, warm skin and say, “Even if it says you're not pregnant, it doesn't matter, *milaya*. We have plenty of time, and as much as we fuck,” I say with a laugh, “it's not going to take long at all before you're beautifully swollen with our baby.”

She lifts her face and kisses me softly. “Okay, I'm going to take it, and no matter what it says, we're going to enjoy the hell out of our honeymoon. If it's negative, then we'll just have to have twice as much sex than usual.”

“You're trying to kill me, woman,” I say with a laugh. I let out a heavy sigh and cup one of her perfect tits. “The things I do for you.”

“I know, right? I'm so damn mean to you.”

Laughing, I give her ass a soft smack. “Go take the test, *milaya*. I'm dying to know.”

When she comes out of the bathroom, I hold her as we wait the three minutes that feel like a goddamn eternity. As soon as I see that second pink line pop up, I laugh and pick Riley up, stunned that I can even manage to be any happier than I already am.

Her cheeks are wet with tears when she rests her forehead against mine and smiles. “We’re going to be parents, Artyom,” she whispers.

“I’m so happy, baby.” I laugh and walk her over to the bed. “I knew you were pregnant.”

I lay her down on the bed and kiss the tears from her cheeks before slowly working my way down her chest. Untying her bikini top, I pull it off, groaning at the untanned triangles of flesh. Running my tongue over her rosy-red nipple, I lift up and give her a wink. “Your tits are definitely bigger, *milaya*.”

“I bet you love that,” she says, rolling her eyes.

“I love every part of you, and every phase your body is going to go through, I’m going to love.” I bring my hand to her stomach. “I especially can’t wait until you’re so swollen you can’t see your feet.”

She laughs and runs her hands through my hair. “You can’t be serious.”

“Oh, I’m very serious. It’s the caveman part of my brain, sweetheart. Seeing you pregnant with our baby, knowing I’m the lucky bastard that got to fill you with my seed and create this life, fucking hell.” I shake my head at the very idea. “I’m not going to be able to keep my hands off you.”

She smiles and then lets out a soft moan when I give her nipple another suck before kissing my way to her stomach.

“Hello, baby,” I murmur against her skin, amazed and completely in awe of the life that’s slowly forming inside the woman I love more than life itself. “I wonder if it’s a boy or a girl.”

“Do you care which one?”

I give her stomach another kiss. “Not at all. I just want them to be healthy.”

“Me too.”

She watches me slowly pull the strings on her bikini bottoms, and when she’s naked, I strip out of my own swim trunks and then carry her to the sea. The water is still warm from the heat of the day, and when it’s up to our necks, I stop and kiss my wife. Her naked, wet body is pressed against mine, and I smile against her lips when she immediately starts to grind against my rock-hard cock, sliding her pussy up and down the length of me. I kiss her slowly, savoring every second of this moment as I squeeze her ass, groaning at the feel of her rocking against me. Her nipples slide along my chest, driving me crazy with the need to be inside her, but I like watching her take her pleasure too much to stop this.

I kiss her through her orgasm, giving her bottom lip a soft bite when she digs her fingers into my shoulders and her whole body tenses with her release. I feel her body start to relax right before she smiles against my lips and then lets out a soft laugh.

“You just can’t help yourself, can you, sweetheart?” I say with a smile. “Anytime my cock is out, you just have to grind against it.”

“I do,” she admits, not looking the slightest bit embarrassed about it.

“You’re so perfect, *milaya*.” I keep one hand firmly on her ass and wrap the other around the nape of her neck as I walk us out of the water and over to the little bed of towels and cushions we’d made earlier on the beach. When I set her down, she surprises me by getting on her hands and knees and looking at me over her shoulder. She bites her bottom lip and wiggles her ass at me.

With a groan, I drop to my knees and grab onto her hips, pressing the head of my cock against her soaking wet slit. “Is this how you want it, baby?”

“Yes,” she moans, rocking her hips and showing me that sexy dip in her lower back.

I palm her ass cheeks, spreading her, grateful that there’s enough light coming from the bungalow to let me watch her pussy spread for me, taking every thick inch I’m giving her as I slowly slide in. When I’m buried balls deep inside her, I take a few seconds to appreciate how fucking good it feels to be enveloped by the wet heat of her before I grip her hips again and start to fuck her like I know she wants it.

She moans my name and clenches her fists around the towels beneath her, rocking her hips and meeting my thrusts with her own so the sound of our bodies smacking together fills the night air around us. Wanting to feel her against me, I hook my arm under her, cupping one of her tits and lifting her up so her back is against my chest.

“Artyom,” she moans, wrapping her arms behind my neck.

“I’ve got you, *milaya*.” I press my mouth to hers and bring my other hand to where we’re joined together. While I pinch her nipple, I start to play with her clit, rubbing my soaked fingers over her swollen bundle of nerves until she’s whimpering into my mouth and bucking against me in a hungry rhythm. There’s nothing sexier to me than watching my wife chase after an orgasm. All the shyness and insecurities fall away until there’s nothing but a raw, primal need that she fully embraces, and god does it turn me on like nothing else ever has.

Her fingers grip my hair, and she lets out a sexy moan right as I feel her clench even tighter around my cock, leaving me no choice but to join her. I thrust into her even harder, growling against her lips as pleasure races through every part of me. I empty everything I have into her, drunk on pure ecstasy. I keep working her clit until I’m completely empty and her body is shaking against mine.

“I love you so much, baby,” I murmur against her lips, giving her clit one last soft rub before resting my hand against her lower belly, already imagining fucking her in this position when she’s very, very pregnant.

“I love you too.” Her voice is low and husky like it always is after she comes, and I smile at the sound of it. She rests her hands on top of mine and relaxes against me. I hold her for several minutes, just enjoying the feel of her in my arms before picking her up and carrying her inside to the large clawfoot tub.

* * *

Eight Months Later

I look down at Riley’s sweaty, flushed face and kiss her forehead when the doctor places our beautiful baby girl on her stomach.

“Artyom,” she whispers, the awe in her voice matching exactly how I feel when I look down at our daughter for the first time. She barely has a chance to enjoy the moment before her face tightens in pure agony, another contraction ripping through her body as she gives one last push and brings our son into the world. I look down at her, knowing she’s far braver and tougher than I’ll ever be. She’s my goddamn hero.

She gives me an exhausted smile and then looks down at our babies, her eyes spilling over just like mine are. When the doctor had first told us we were having twins, we’d both been shocked and then elated. Riley had joked that maybe we’d tried a little too hard to get pregnant, and Yuri had called me a show-off. Now that they’re here right in front of us, I’m so overcome with love that I can’t speak. I kiss Riley and run my fingers over their soft heads. They both have dark hair, and our daughter’s eyes are the same blue as her mommy’s, but our son’s are more grey like mine. They’re the most beautiful little things I’ve ever seen. I lean down to kiss their heads and whisper to them in Russian. “Daddy loves you, Luka and Anya.”

“They’re so perfect,” Riley whispers, stroking their cheeks and small hands.

“They are. *Milaya*, you did so good.” I kiss her again and wrap my arms around my family. “I’m so proud of you, baby.”

She smiles and gives each of our babies a kiss before the nurse helps show her how to breastfeed them both at once. We both laugh at how quickly they latch onto her, already so hungry, and how it immediately calms them down. I run my fingers over them, unable to stop touching them.

Riley smiles up at me. "I'm going to be so tired."

"I'll help you, baby. I'll do anything you need me to."

I kiss her and watch our babies eat until their eyes drift closed and the nurse comes to take them to get their weights and clean them up. Falling back against the hospital bed with a sigh, she squeezes my hand and says, "Go with them. Make sure they're okay."

I lean down and kiss her. "I love you, *milaya*. I'll be right back, okay?"

"I know you will," she says with a soft laugh. "They're going to want to eat again soon, I bet."

I smile and brush a sweaty strand of hair off her forehead and kiss her one last time before following the nurse out. I watch them get cleaned up, which they really don't care for, and then weighed and bundled into diapers and blankets, and I still can't stop staring at them. When I wheel them into Riley's room, I can tell she's eager to have them back in her arms.

"How do you feel?"

"Sore," she says with a laugh. "But so incredibly happy."

I grab Luka and put him into her arms, and then pick up Anya and hold her as I sit on the edge of Riley's bed.

"She's so small." I meet her blue eyes and laugh when she gives a big yawn.

Riley laughs. "They sure felt big enough."

"I'm so sorry, baby. You're my hero, *milaya*. That was the most amazing thing I've ever seen."

She grabs my hand and kisses it. "Thank you, Artyom."

When I lift a brow at her, she adds, "For everything. For marrying me, for saving me from a horrible life, for giving me

a family that I never in a million years thought I could have. I love you so much.”

She starts crying again, making my own chest tighten up. I cup her face and lean closer to kiss her.

“I’m the one who should be thanking you, *milaya*. You’ve given me so much more than a man like me could ever deserve. You and Luka and Anya are my whole world. You are everything to me.”

She smiles and looks at our son. “He looks just like you.”

I laugh and look at Anya. “She looks just like you.” I kiss Anya’s head. “Don’t be mad at me when I don’t let you date until you’re thirty.”

Riley laughs, but I’m not kidding. She smiles down at Luka. “Don’t forget she has a brother to protect her too.”

“She does, even though technically he’s her younger brother.”

Luka sucks on his pacifier and looks around for his sister. I scoot her closer, and as soon as his arm hits hers, he closes his eyes and drifts off to sleep. Riley and I keep holding them, neither one of us wanting to let them go just yet.

I look up at her, thinking she’s never looked more beautiful to me than right here in this moment.

“I know I look terrible,” she whispers, giving me a soft smile. “I should probably warn you that I’m probably going to look terrible for several months.”

“I was just thinking that you’ve never looked more beautiful to me.”

She rolls her eyes and gives a soft laugh.

“I’m being completely serious, *milaya*. You’re glowing. Motherhood suits you, sweetheart, and it’s hot as hell.”

She laughs again, but I’m being completely serious. I lean over to kiss her, so damn excited for every second of the rest of our lives. With my daughter in my arms and my wife and son right next to me, I have everything I could ever need or

want, and I know that I'll spend the rest of my life making sure they know how loved they are, and I'll do whatever it takes to make sure they're always safe. They're my family, my life, my everything.

Epilogue

Riley

Six Months Later

“I’m pretty sure she just said da-da,” Artyom says, making me laugh. “And I swear I heard Luka say it earlier while you were taking a nap.”

I smile, sitting down next to him and kissing his stubbled cheek. Luka is already asleep in my arms, but Anya’s fighting it as usual. She’s enamored with her daddy and would happily sit here for another hour just staring at him and gnawing on her hand between big, gummy smiles and laughs.

The last six months have been the most exhausting and amazing of my entire life. The Bratva has been insanely supportive, offering help in any way they can, and Yuri’s made it his life’s mission to be the world’s best uncle. He pretended to be miffed about Luka’s name, but it was obvious from the first time he met them that he was completely smitten with both of them. Mikhail and Charlie have been a tremendous help as well and have even babysat for a few hours here and there so Artyom and I could get a break. Lev is already trying to share his toys and teaching them Russian in his baby talk. It’s been perfect, and even Beau has taken to the two new additions to the family. When we first brought them home, he’d sniffed them, and then quickly curled up into a ball beside their crib and proclaimed that his sentry post. He’s the best kind of dog with them—extremely patient and gentle and fiercely loyal and protective.

“Go to sleep, little one,” Artyom says, leaning down to kiss Anya’s head.

“She can’t take her eyes off you. I can’t say I blame her.”

Artyom smiles and gives me a wink that still manages to make my breath catch in my throat and a flush creep up my cheeks. He just seems to get more handsome every damn day, and there’s something about seeing him hold our babies that always drives me wild. The six weeks after I had them had been pure torture in more ways than one. My hormones were all over the place, and every time I turned around he was holding a baby, making everything look crazy sexy. There’s just something about seeing his tattooed, powerful body with a little bundle in his arms that apparently makes my pussy go into overdrive.

“How is it possible that I can still make you blush, *milaya*?”

“You’re a man of many talents,” I say, running my eyes over him.

He laughs and kisses my hand. “Come on, let’s put these two to bed. I recognize that look in your eyes, sweetheart, and I’m more than happy to give you what you need.”

I could play dumb, but I don’t. I’m too busy grinning like an idiot. He puts Anya against his chest, kissing the side of her head and rubbing circles on her back as we carry them upstairs. She babbles happily for a few steps, but the movement soon has her giving up the fight. By the time we lay them in their crib, they’re both asleep and happily sucking on their pacifiers. We watch them for a few minutes, smiling when they reach their arms out in sleep for one another, calming as soon as they feel each other.

Satisfied that they’re safe and comfortable, we step back and give Beau’s head a scratch when he walks in and settles himself on the dog bed beside the crib. When Artyom turns to me, I grin at the raw hunger in his grey eyes and take a step back. He arches a brow at me and shakes his head no in warning.

It’s a warning I pay no attention to. Instead, I turn and bolt from the room, knowing I’ve got a few precious, extra seconds because he’s forced to go slower than usual so he doesn’t wake

our sleeping babies. I run down the stairs, letting out a soft squeal when I hear his footsteps behind me. Turning to the living room, I've almost made it to the couch when I feel his strong arms around me. He tightens his grip, pulling me against him while one hand fists my hair and pulls my head back, exposing my neck to him with the perfect amount of pressure. Artyom always knows exactly how rough to be with me, and I love it. He knows I want to feel his power and control, that sometimes I need to feel him dominating me, but he's never hurt me, at least not more than I've wanted.

He kisses my neck, nipping and licking my skin until I'm squirming against him, already feeling my panties grow wet. When he slides his free hand up my shirt to cup one of my tits, he groans and sucks on the crook of my neck.

"You drive me crazy when you run, *milaya*," he murmurs against my skin. "You feel how hard it makes me?"

His erection digs into my ass, a very powerful reminder of what's about to happen.

"Yes," I moan, pressing harder against him, desperate to feel him inside me. "Please, Artyom."

I feel him smile against my skin. Keeping a tight grip on my hair, he gives my nipple a soft pinch and slides his hand down my stomach.

"You're so beautiful, baby," he whispers close to my ear, knowing I'm still sensitive about the changes to my body.

Having twins was rough, and I'm still working on getting things back to how they were, but there's not much I can do about the stretch marks. When I'd told him how embarrassed I was of them, he'd laid me down and kissed all of them, ending with the scar from the bullet wound. "Your body has gone through so much for me, *milaya*." He kissed the scar from the bullet once more and said, "This was for saving my life, and these," he ran his fingers over the marks the pregnancy left on my body. "These are from bringing our children into the world, for giving me a family and making me a daddy. There's nothing on earth sexier than that, sweetheart."

It was the last time I'd complained about the stretch marks.

His hand slips beneath my panties, cupping my pussy in a possessive grip that sends my heart racing.

"I love how you're always so wet for me." He kisses my neck and slides two fingers inside, sparking my body to life so easily, so effortlessly, like only he can. He fists my hair tighter, making it sting just enough to pull a moan from me as he pinches my clit between his fingers and sends a rush of heat all through my body.

"Artyom," I moan, already feeling the orgasm start to build.

"That's my good girl," he whispers in my ear. "Come all over my hand, *milaya*."

He gives me another pinch before sliding his fingers back into me. Each stroke hits my clit, bringing me closer and closer until my body tenses and he quickly covers my mouth with his to stifle my scream. The kiss is rough and hungry, and I open up to him even more, grinding my pussy against his hand as I clench tightly around his fingers, greedy for every last second of pleasure I can get. I'm pinned between his hand and hard cock, completely drunk on ecstasy and never wanting it to stop.

I smile against his lips when I start to come down. My body is still humming from the orgasm, my brain still fuzzy around the edges. He cups my pussy one last time before sliding his hand out of my pants. Turning me around, he keeps his eyes on mine while he sucks his fingers clean. Watching him, I slowly start to undress. He lets out a groan and runs his eyes over me, that one heated look making me feel so desired and loved that it makes it impossible to feel self-conscious.

I arch a brow at him and smile. "Your turn."

He grins and pulls his shirt off before starting on his pants. I drink in the sight of him, every peak and groove and scar and tattoo, until I'm desperate to have him touch me again. When he's fully naked, all I can do is let out an appreciative sigh because the man is truly breathtaking. He's fully hard, the

girth and length of him making me bite my bottom lip in anticipation. I bring my eyes back to his face and then smile at the smirk he's giving me.

"I hope you always look at me like that," he says, stepping closer.

"I always will," I say, knowing with absolute certainty that it's true.

He stops to roll on a condom, even though we both hate it. I know my body can't take another pregnancy right now, though, so it's a necessity. He lowers me down to the shag rug and brings his lips to mine, dipping his tongue between my lips and kissing me slowly while I wrap my arms and legs around him. When he slides into me, he does it slowly, spreading me wide and filling me with the size of him until he's as deep as he can get and we're locked together. I moan against his mouth and cup the back of his head. This is what my body is always craving, always yearning for, this feeling of my husband being buried inside me while I cling to him.

With a groan, he slowly starts to fuck me, kissing me harder, both of us lost in one another. No matter how many times we do this, it always surprises me at how damn good it feels. Artyom's good at everything, but he's a goddamn master when it comes to sex. He knows exactly how to move his hips to hit the deep, hidden places inside me that I never even knew existed. I give his bottom lip a suck and tighten my grip on him, rocking up to meet his every thrust.

He keeps one hand on my face, stroking my skin with his thumb while he kisses me, bringing me closer and closer to the breaking point. I clutch at his back, feeling the powerful muscles move beneath my fingers with every hard thrust he's giving me, and when I start to come, I clench around his thick girth, wanting him to follow me. With a deep groan, he lets go, joining me as our bodies tense and writhe with the pleasure that's slamming through us.

When we're both completely spent, he gives me one more soft kiss before lifting up to look down at me. He smiles and runs his fingers down the side of my face.

“I love you, *milaya*, more than you can possibly know.”

“I love you too.” I turn my head to kiss his hand. “More and more every day, which seems impossible, but every day it happens.”

He smiles and runs his thumb over my lips. “I feel the exact same way about you. You’re my whole world, sweetheart, and I couldn’t survive without you. I wouldn’t even want to try.”

I pull him closer and kiss him. My life is so much bigger and happier than I ever dreamed it could be, and I wake up every morning so damn grateful for every second of it. I can’t wait to see what the future holds for us. As long as I have Artyom and our beautiful babies, I have everything I could ever need or want. Instead of fearing the future like I used to, I open my arms and happily embrace it.

Yuri’s story is coming soon!

If you haven’t read Mikhail and Charlie’s story, then you can get it here:

[Caught by the Bratva Boss](#)

Keep reading to find out how to get a free bonus scene!

Thank You!

Thank you so much for reading! I hope you enjoyed Artyom and Riley's story. I can't wait to hear what you all think of it!

If you have the time, I'd love to hear what you think. Every review helps my books get seen by more people, so even if it's just a star review, it really means the world to me!

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More stories are on the way!

Caught by the Bratva Boss

A Dark Mafia Romance

Caught by the Bratva Boss!

**Mikhail Fedorov is the most powerful Bratva boss in town,
and I've just broken into his house.**

Charlotte:

This was supposed to be an easy score.

In and out.

No harm, no foul.

But when Mikhail catches me red-handed and wraps those strong arms around me, telling me in his sexy accent that I picked the wrong damn house to rob, I know my goose is cooked.

I expect the police and a future behind bars,

but this Bratva boss has other plans for me.

Locked in his house with no way to escape, the tension between us builds to the breaking point.

He taunts me, pushes all my buttons, and leaves me wanting so much more.

The only question is which one of us is going to break first.

Mikhail:

No one steals from me and lives, but the beautiful thief I've just caught has me rethinking that credo.

She's a scared little rabbit before the wolf, but I can't let my sweet bunny just walk away, not after she realizes who I am and what I've done.

And especially not after I get a taste of just how sweet she really is.

No, I'm keeping her, whether she likes it or not.

Grumpy Bratva Hitman

A Stand-Alone, Spicy, Holiday Read!

Grumpy Bratva Hitman

**Instead of a stocking full of coal,
this year my grumpy ass is getting a wife.**

I hate Christmas.

I hate everything to do with the holiday.

So why am I suddenly obsessed with the Christmas-caroling,
little ball of winter cheer that's found her way into my life?
She likes candy canes and hot mugs of cocoa, and I kill people
for a living.

These two worlds were never meant to collide.

But all that changes when she sees me taking out my latest
target.

I don't leave witnesses—not even cute ones in reindeer-
decorated, knitted caps.

Now, I'm left with a choice: take her out of the equation
permanently or make her my wife and give her the protection
of my name.

The last thing I'm expecting is the raw desire between the two
of us or the fact that I'm falling so hard and so fast for her.

This Christmas just got a whole lot more complicated.

Russian Boxing Club Series

If you'd like more age gap, steamy romances, then please check out the Russian Boxing Club series! It's an interconnected series, but they can be read in any order.

Forbidden Age Gap!

[My Russian Obsession](#)

Enemies-to-Lovers Age Gap!

[My Russian Temptation](#)

Second Chance Age Gap!

[My Russian Salvation](#)

About the Author

Just like her last name, Sonja loves morally grey characters and alphas with a hidden heart of gold. She loves strong men with mile-wide soft spots for the women they love and who will stop at nothing to keep them safe.

She writes mainly age gap, steamy romances where the lines between good and bad blur into a beautiful, sexy shade of grey.

Zero cheating and HEAs are always guaranteed!

