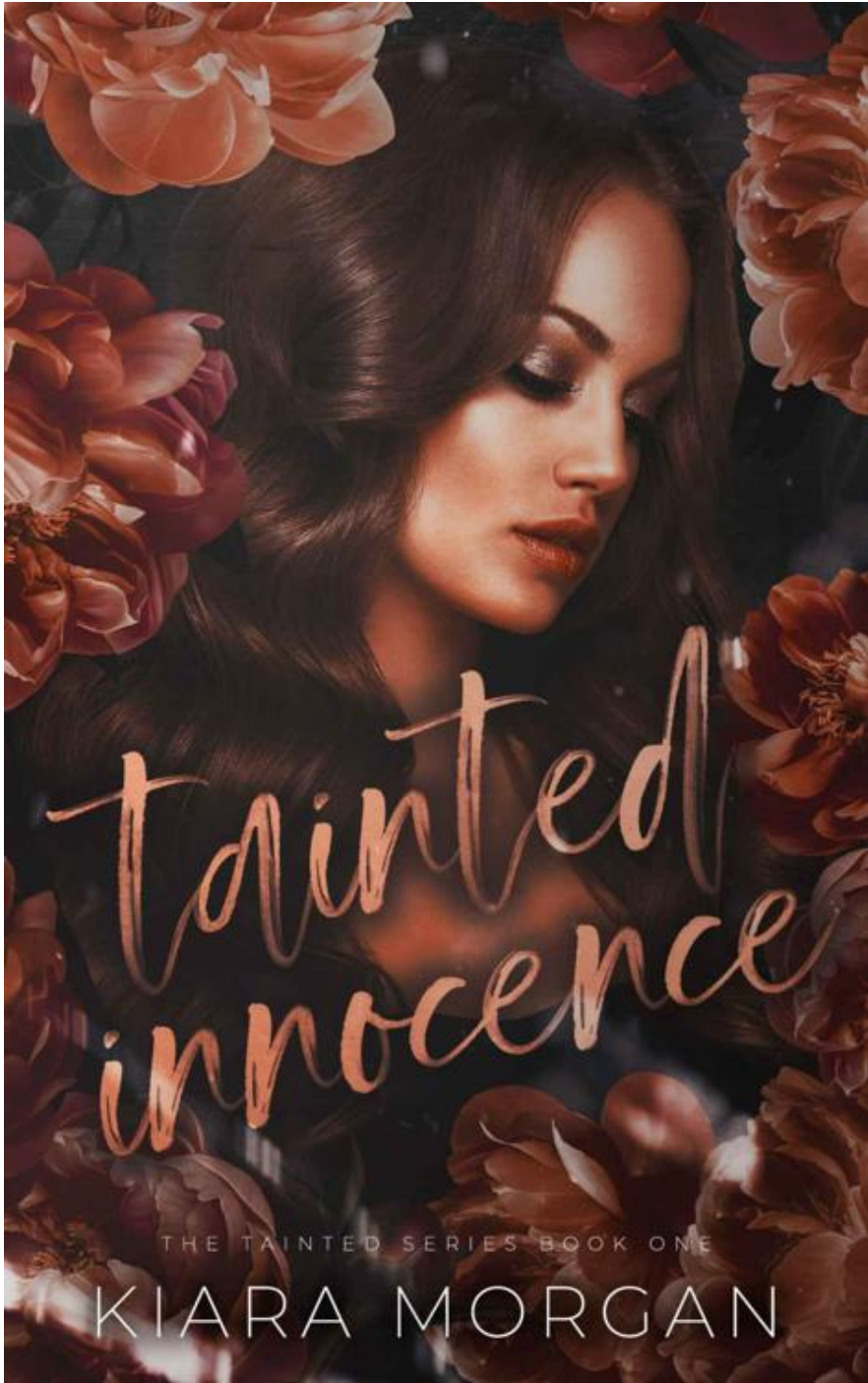




*tainted  
innocence*

THE TAINTED SERIES BOOK ONE

KIARA MORGAN



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# Blurb

My father sold me into trafficking, and now I've been captured by his most dangerous enemy.

He wants something from me, but I have nothing left to give.

Or so I thought.

He puts me back together, only for it to be all taken away from me again.

Will I be able to survive this time, or will I end up worse than I ever thought was even possible?

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## Chapter 1

### Katrina

I sit on the couch with my legs crossed at the ankles in the most beautiful living room of the most prominent house I've ever seen. The beautiful wall painting looks like it should be in a museum somewhere. I look towards my mama, sitting beside me. Her right leg is shaking, but she is trying to put up a brave face. I can tell she is afraid.

I didn't want to come here.

Last week on my sixteenth birthday, I was accepted into Julliard's ballet program.

Mama was so proud. She beamed joyfully and told everyone she knew her daughter would be a famous ballerina.

When the bill for the tuition came in, she was shocked. One semester cost more than she made in a year as a maid.

I told her I didn't need to go to an expensive school. I could continue to dance at the ballet school down the street from our tiny one-bedroom apartment.

But she insisted. She wanted to give me every opportunity she couldn't. I loved her for that, but I didn't want her to suffer for me.

Which is why we are in my father's enormous house, waiting to speak to him.

I've never met him. My mother got pregnant with me when she used to work for him. When she had told him she was pregnant, he told her to get an abortion and gave her a grand to take care of it.

She had me anyways in secret and never asked for anything from him.

I didn't want anything from him either. I don't need anything from a man who never wanted me or helped mama.

But I don't want mama to work herself to death for me either.

A guard dressed in a well-pressed suit comes into the living room. "Mr. Kozlov will see you now."

My mama turns to me, "remember what I told you. It will keep you safe and give you the life you should have received."

My eyes water at her words. "Mama, you know I don't need anything else besides you."

She smiles at me, "I know, Katrina, but I want more for you." She pats my hand with her soft, warm hand before she pushes to her feet and follows the guard out of the living room.

She has always felt guilty for not giving me more, but I know she did her best. She worked long hours to be able to provide for me and never complained how difficult things were for her.

I look around the room. It's beautiful. I wonder how much it must cost to have such expensive décor.

I had heard from neighbours that my father was part of the Russian mafia and wasn't a good man. From the looks of it, he must be a high-level member to live in such luxury.

A few minutes go by, and I start to get an uneasy feeling when mama doesn't return.

**BANG!**

My body reacts on autopilot, and I fall to my knees and cover my head with my hands. Then there is a deathly silence in the air.

*Mama.* I push to my feet and run towards where the noise came from.

I don't know where I'm going, but I run in that direction, hoping to find mama.

I run down a long hallway and round the corner when I hear voices coming from an office. In the middle of the room stands a man with light brown hair and grey eyes, like *mine*.

In front of him is a pool of blood, with my mama's body lying in the middle.

Her body is lying at a weird angle, with her face facing up.

I walk slowly towards her. Her eyes are wide open, but there is a hole in the middle of her head from a bullet wound.

"Mama?" My voice barely comes out.

I crouch down in front of her. I feel my denim jeans soak wet from the blood.

"Mama?" I gently touch her face. It's still warm. But she doesn't move.

My eyes sting with pain and become blurry with tears.

I hear a clicking noise causing me to look up in horror.

My father stands in front of me with a gun to my head.

I don't scream or beg. I want to die. I rather die than live without mama.

"Don't kill her," says a voice from behind me.

I turn to the voice and see a man in a grey suit.

"Why not," my father seethes at the man.

"It will be hard enough to explain to the Pakhan why I'm disposing of one body. If I have to get rid of two, he will have questions. Do you want to explain to the Pakhan why you killed a maid and her daughter for no reason?"

"I'll just tell him she was stealing."

"That would explain killing the maid, but why her daughter? Not to mention Nikolai and his fucking brothers have been sticking their noses in your business a lot lately. They will use this as an opportunity to get rid of you,"



My father growls, “What do you suggest I do with her? I can’t have her roaming around, can I now.”

“I’ll get rid of her another way. She won’t be able to come back here or to anyone again.”

My father drops his arm with the gun to his side, “fine, but if you fail me, Ivan, I’m going to put a bullet in your head instead.”

The man named Ivan comes towards me and grabs my arm. I yank my arm out of his hold. “Don’t touch me!” I scream. How dare he touch me after what he and my father did to my beautiful and caring mama? I give him a look of hate and disgust.

Ivan frowns at me as if I’m being unreasonable. He motions towards two other guards in the corner I hadn’t seen previously.

They each grab my arm and start to drag me out of the room.

“Let me go!” I try and resist, but they’re stronger than me. I bite, scratch, and kick, but it’s all useless. My petite frame does little damage to them.

As I’m being dragged out of the room, I can only scream and look at my mama’s lifeless body.

Please let this not be true. Please let this be a nightmare.

But it was true. My dreams vanished, and from that point on, I was living a nightmare.

## Chapter 2

### Four years later

### Katrina

I have the same horrible nightmare I’ve had for the last four years. I see my sweet and kind mama heading towards my monster of a father’s office. Like every nightmare, I want to

scream but can't speak or stop her from going. She walks towards his office, unaware of her fate.

BANG!

I startle awake. Gasping for air, I hold my chest at the sudden noise.

BANG!

I push the wooden cabinet door open and crawl out of my hiding spot in the kitchen. I look up and see master. He seems annoyed this morning. He is annoyed most mornings these days.

I overslept this morning, which is probably why he kicked the cabinet door to wake me.

Master takes a seat at the kitchen table. "Make me some pancakes this morning."

I slowly rise, my bones cracking as I approach the stove.

I can feel him watching me, waiting for me to mess up so he can punish me.

The kitchen is small and old. Every time I open a drawer, it creaks. The house is falling apart, but master doesn't bother to fix anything.

Master yawns and stretches his arms above his head. His white shirt rises, showing his large hairy beer belly.

He is also getting old. He retired early as a cop last year. Since then, all he has done is eat, drink beer, and torment me.

When he first bought me, I couldn't believe he was a cop. Cops are supposed to protect and save you. They do not purchase underage girls from an illegal sex trafficking ring. That was my false perception.

He wipes his forehead and receding hairline with the back of his hand. "Hurry the fuck up!" He shouts impatiently.

I make quick work of making the pancakes. The last one looks a little brown. A tremor runs down my spine at the thought of what master will do. He likes his food perfectly cooked.

The plate in my hand shakes as I walk over to master. I place it gently on the table. He looks at the pancakes, and I get ready for the inevitable. My body twitches for a hit.

But he doesn't do anything. He must've not noticed.

I take my place and sit on my knees next to master's chair.

I watch him eat his pancakes and drink his coffee as I silently sit. He is on his last bite, and I pray he gives me something to eat. He hasn't offered me food in over 24 hours. After I burnt the eggs yesterday, he decided I shouldn't eat for ruining his food.

He takes his last bite and rubs his large belly in satisfaction.

After he is done eating, he pushes his chair back and walks out of the kitchen.

It looks like there is no breakfast for me today either.

I stand and grab the plate from the table. Only some syrup remains on it. I'm tempted to lick a bit with my finger and savour the taste. I can taste the sweetness on my tongue at just the thought of it. But I know better. If I get caught, master will lock me in the basement without food for a week. I will just have to wait it out.

I walk over to the kitchen and wash the dishes clean. Once they are dried and placed back in their rightful place, I quickly survey the small area. I keep it spotless. I need to, or master would be angry.

I head to the living room and find master watching his favourite tv show. He sits on the worn-out brown recliner in the middle of the room, scratching his stomach. I walk over to

take my usual place. I fall to my knees and hang my head down next to his chair.

I sit there like a statue for hours waiting. During that time, master watched a number of tv shows, went to the washroom twice and drank 4 bottles of beer he keeps next to his recliner for quick access.

My stomach growls loudly in hunger. I suck in my stomach to stop it from making noise, to not irritate master. Master grabs the remote from the table and puts up the volume of the tv to silence my starving stomach. Once he gets it to a level he is happy with, he throws the remote at my head. The stinging pain hits my head, but I don't move or make noise.

More time goes by, and from the corner of my eye, I notice it's getting dark outside. Usually, only the faintest bit of light comes through the blinds. Master had all the windows in the house either boarded up or has the blinds closed at all hours. He doesn't want neighbours to see me.

I haven't stepped foot outside in years. Even if the doors weren't bolted shut, I still wouldn't even be able to go out. The black collar around my neck prevents me from even going near the windows or doors.

A few years back, when master was at work, I had tried to make a run for it, but as soon as I touched the window, the collar shocked me to the point that I passed out from the unbearable pain. When master came home, he was furious. He dragged me to the basement, beat me and locked me there for over two weeks. I still have a small white scar on my upper thigh from the chain he whipped me with.

Master switches the channel to the news. It's a segment about the number of deaths in the last few months. "Those fucking mobsters are killing each other slowly. Makes life easier for us cops."

He is speaking as if he is still on the job. I had heard him on the phone once with a friend, he retired early because

internal affairs were investigating him for taking bribes. Rather than wait around for them to find something, he retired.

When he worked, I would get at least 8 hours of peace, but now I barely get a few minutes.

“Make me chicken for dinner,” he says while he continues to watch the news.

I get up, my legs aching from sitting in the same position, and walk to the kitchen to start making him dinner.

I take my time preparing dinner. I know what’s to come once he has finished eating.

Once the chicken and salad are done, I make a plate and place it on the kitchen table. I walk back into the living room and stand there and wait with my head hanging down.

I’m not allowed to speak unless I’m given permission. I learned quickly that if I spoke out of turn, he would punch me in the face to shut me up.

“Is dinner ready?” master asks.

“Yes,” my voice comes out quiet. I barely speak these days. Some days I go without speaking at all.

Master turns off the TV and walks into the kitchen. I follow behind him and take my usual spot next to him on the ground.

As he chews his food, I can feel my stomach tightening with pain.

After eating most of his dinner, he stops.

*Please give me some food today.*

He looks down at his plate as if contemplating if I should be allowed to eat. I’ve been good. I haven’t caused any problems and followed all his rules. I pray he lets me eat again.

After a few seconds, he grabs his plate and puts it on the ground in front of me.

I don't touch it. He hasn't given me permission yet. I just stare at the savory chicken piece mocking me on the ground.

Master smiles wickedly, "go on eat."

I grab the piece of chicken so fast and take a bite. My mouth waters as the flavors burst on my tongue. It's only a few bites but I chew slowly to make the taste last as long as possible.

After I'm done eating, I do the usual routine of cleaning up. Master has gone back to his place on the incliner to watch some more TV.

While rinsing the plate, it slips out of my hand, and I panic and grab it before it hits the ground. I breathe a sigh of relief. I don't need Master to break another one of my fingers for breaking his plate.

Once I'm done, I head back to the living room to my spot next to him. He is watching the news again. My spine snaps straight when I read the headline.

*Bratva at war internally. Six dead in the last week.*

I wonder if my father is part of this war. A mugshot of a man killed is shown on screen. It's the man in the suit named Ivan who helped my father sell me. In the moment, I pray for my father's picture to come up next. I want nothing more than for him to die for what he did to mama and me. He should have just killed me that day. That would have shown more mercy than selling me.

Master turns off the news, forcing me out of my thoughts.

He starts to head upstairs, "let's go."

I follow him upstairs for the moment I hate most.

We get to Master's bedroom, and he takes off his shirt and pants.

I pull the oversized shirt over my head. Leaving me standing completely naked. Besides the old, oversized shirt, I'm not allowed to wear any other pieces of clothing. In the summer, I don't mind anymore, but in the winter, I feel like I'm going to freeze to death, especially if I make a mistake and I'm locked in the basement. The cement floors in the basement might as well be ice.

Master motions for me to get into bed. I crawl to the middle and lay on my back. I focus on the ceiling light fixture. One of the light bulbs is out.

Master gets on top of me and pushes himself inside me. I flinch at the pain but hold it in. Master continues to thrust in me painfully until I feel him release inside. He lands right on top of me as he tries to catch his breath. After a few minutes, he rolls off of me. Due to his age and lack of exercise, he can only go once, thankfully.

The first time he forced himself on top of me, I felt as though I was being ripped in half. I didn't expect I would lose my virginity that way. I spent most of my childhood and teenage years doing ballet, I never had time for guys. I wish I did.

I would have loved to have dated someone and lost my virginity to my boyfriend. Not being chased around the room until I'm knocked out, and my clothes ripped off of me. In the first few weeks, I resisted and fought back, but he always won. He would beat, break me and force himself on me each time. Eventually, I gave up and let him take what he wanted from me to lessen the pain.

"Go clean yourself up and then go back to your place," master barks while wiping his sweaty face with the pillow.

I roll off the bed and grab my discarded shirt from the ground, and put it on. I make my way to the bathroom across the hall to clean myself up.

I can't wait to go back to my small cabinet in the kitchen. Most people might find it odd that I sleep there, but

I feel safe and protected there.

I close the bathroom door behind me and grab some toilet paper and start to wipe the semen dripping down my legs. Master gives me a birth control shot every 3 months that he bought online. It is the only thing I am grateful for.

I don't condemn anyone to this life, let alone my child.

As I'm finishing up, I hear a loud noise.

**BANG!**

The entire house shakes from the thundering noise.

I fall to the ground. Unlike my dreams, the noise sounds more like when master kicks my cabinet doors but stronger.

"Who the fuck are you!" I hear master shout from outside.

Then another loud noise.

**BANG!**

This time it's the same metal sound I heard four years ago. My body shakes at the memory.

I need to get to my safe spot but it's not safe to go outside.

I turn towards the bathroom cabinet and quickly open it up. There is a number of shampoo bottles and cleaning supplies inside. I start pulling the items out to make room for myself and shoving everything to the floor.

I hear heavy boots, lots of them. They're getting closer.

**BANG!**

The bathroom door flies open. Wooden pieces from the door fly in every direction.

I look up at a tall, blonde-haired man with icy blue eyes.

I try and crawl inside the cabinet, but he grabs hold of my arm and pulls me out. I try and pull away, but I'm weak



compared to him. The man just pulls me up to my feet and looks at me.

“Are you Katrina?” He is waiting for an answer, but Master hasn’t given me permission to speak.

He narrows his eyes at me.

Another man with short dark brown hair comes from behind him. He is holding a picture in his hand. “Maxim, that’s her.” He looks back at something before turning back at us. “We need to go before the police show up.”

The blonde man, whose name is Maxim, nods. “Tell the team we’re leaving.”

He pulls me towards him as he makes his way down the hallway.

I’m trying to pry my arm away, but I feel like a ragdoll in his grip. We get down the stairs, and I gasp at what I see. Master is lying on the ground in a pool of blood. Just like mama was four years ago. My heart drops at the sight of blood.

They killed him.

Maxim pulls me towards the door to lead me out. I flinch and grab the front door at the thought of getting shocked. He stops walking and looks back at me in confusion.

He cocks his head to the side as if studying me. He looks towards the door and then at me again until his eyes land on my collar. He grabs hold of the collar around my neck with his fingers. “Dima, do you have a knife on you?”

The brown-haired man from before pulls out a knife from his back pocket and hands it to Maxim.

Maxim presses the knife to my neck. If he sliced me and killed me now, I would consider it a blessing. Instead, he cuts the collar until it falls to the ground with a low thud.

My neck feels bare and naked from the sudden missing material. I haven’t taken that collar off since the day I was

brought to this hell.

Maxim tugs onto my arm once again and out the door. I still can't help but wince out of habit, but nothing happens.

When I take a step outside, my body shivers at the cold air. It smells fresh and feels cool against my skin. I forgot how the air felt. All I knew is how to feel pain.

I don't know where I'm being led, but I can't be bothered at the moment. The dark night sky looks beautiful. I can't remember when the last time I actually really looked at the sky and saw how mesmerizing it really was. I never knew how much I took simple things for granted until it was taken away from me.

The little specks from the stars almost look unreal.

I'm pushed into a large black SUV. Maxim climbs in after me, but I don't pay him any attention. I'm focused on how good the cool leather of the seats feels on my bare thighs.

The SUV goes into motion, and I press myself against the window to look out. The houses pass by as we get onto a large road.

My heart tugs at the thought of losing this simple gift all again.

As we continue to drive, we pass by houses and buildings until we get to a secluded area. It reminded me of the path we took to my father's place. A sharp pain hits my chest at remembering that night.

A few minutes later, we pull up in front of a large gate that slowly opens. We drive up a long path until we reach an enormous 3 story mansion.

I thought my father's house was huge, but this place is made for a king.

My face is still pressed up against the window when the door opens, and I fall out. I'm caught by the man named Dima just before my face hits the cement.

Once he sees I'm standing on my own two feet, he moves away from me. Maxim comes around the SVU and grabs my arm once again.

We pass by two guards at the door as we walk into the large mansion.

I don't get the chance to look around my surroundings as I'm being pulled but I can tell whoever lives here is extremely wealthy.

We get to double wooden doors, and I'm dragged inside.

Only when we are inside am I finally let go.

I drop to my knees in the middle of the room out of habit. I peek up, and a shudder goes through my body at the sight in front of me.

Sitting on a chair behind a desk is a man with blonde hair and piercing blue eyes. One glance at him, and you can tell he is in charge. The aura around him is deadly lethal.

*He is my new master.*

He leans back in his leather chair as he observes me. "So, this is Katrina?"

Another blonde man comes around me and squats down to my level. He looks similar to my new master but younger.

He raises an eyebrow and turns to my new master, "Nikolai, I think she's broken."

My new master's name is Nikolai.

Nikolai pinches his nose bridge. "Fucking great. Alek, have Yulia clean her up and settled into a room for the night until we figure out what to do with her."

The younger blonde stands and walks away. I hear the door open, but I don't turn to look.

An older woman in a black dress appears in front of me. She reminds me of my mama. "Come with me," she says with

a thick Russian accent.

She looks at me confused, and sticks out her hand for me to grab. I want to grab her hand so badly. I wonder if it would feel warm like mama's hand did.

I look at Nikolai for permission.

He furrows his brows at me. "Go with Yulia."

Slowly I place my hand in Yulia's. It's warm, just as I thought it would be. My heart tugs with pain at the memory of mama. She helps me up, and I follow her out of the room.

Maybe living here with my new master won't be so bad, as long as Yulia is here.

### Chapter 3

#### Nikolai

"I don't understand why Sergei is searching for her." I stand from my chair and look out the window behind me. I'm trying to make sense of everything. Nothing makes sense.

"She's his daughter," Alek says.

I turn and face my youngest brother, "he sold her to traffickers. I doubt he gives two fucks about her. There has to be another reason he is searching for her."

Alek turns and faces Maxim, our other brother, "what happened to the fucker who bought her? He was a cop, wasn't he?"

"I killed him," Maxim admits with no remorse in his voice.

"Should have let the fucker live so I could have some fun with him. He died too easily."

"You can have some fun with Sergei before I kill him," I interrupt.

I should have killed the fucker a year and a half ago when I killed my father, the Pakhan, but I let him get away. It was a mistake. Since then, Sergei has been approaching high-level bratva members and important contacts of ours to try and take over. Usually, it wouldn't be a problem, but Sergei was my father's right-hand man. He knows all our secrets and weaknesses. He is using that to his advantage.

A contact of ours had informed us that Sergei had been secretly searching for his daughter. I had assumed he had a secret daughter hidden away, but I soon found out he had killed her mother and sold her to some traffickers a few years back.

My father was a monster as well, he had sold my baby sister, Anna, to the Italian Mafia. It may not have been through an underground sex trafficking ring but instead through marriage, but she was sold for money and power, nonetheless.

However, Anna was lucky since the Italian Capo, her husband, seems to care about her. Katrina, on the other hand, seems to have suffered a lot. If the bruises on her legs and the dead look in her eyes is any indication, she is broken as Alek said.

"For now, we will keep her here. I'm sure Sergei will come for her, and when he does, we will kill him once and for all," I tell both my brothers.

Alek shrugs, "fine, but remember, I get first dibs on Sergei. It's bad enough that you killed daddy dearest without me."

Alek will never let us live that down. He was institutionalized when Maxim and I killed our father. We couldn't get him out in time. We had to move fast in order to kill our father and take over the bratva without letting anyone know. We had planned this for years and waited for the right time. After our first failed attempt, we couldn't risk waiting again and not when Anna was at risk.

“Fine, but if you get yourself locked up again, don’t blame me.”

Alek rolls his eyes, “great, so that means I can’t have any fun in the meantime.”

“Have all the fun you want, just try not to get caught this time.”

“Is it a good idea to have Katrina stay here?” Maxim interjects.

“Why wouldn’t it be? Having her close by will make it easier to catch Sergei.”

“She clearly has problems. Who knows what she has been through? We don’t know her state of mind or what she might do.”

“She seems to listen to what you tell her.”

“She listens to *you*. I had to physically drag her here.”

I consider what Maxim has said. Katrina didn’t move from her spot until I told her she could go with Yulia. “Either way, she stays. I doubt she can do any real harm to any of us anyways.”

Maxim nods, “You’re the Pakhan now.”

Since killing my father, I have taken over, and I’m now the Pakhan of bratva and CEO of Petrov Industries. Of course, my brothers are right beside me to help, but I have the final say.

Once Sergei is dealt with, there will be no one left to argue my position. Or at least no one is stupid enough to try to. Sergei was always stupid. That will be his downfall.

## Katrina

The nice lady named Yulia helped me bathe. She cleansed my body clean and washed my hair for me. It

reminded me of my mama when she would take care of me when I was a child.

After a quick bath, she gave me soft pyjamas to sleep in. They were so soft. I felt like I was wrapped in a cloud.

She left me in a large room and told me to sleep with a gentle smile.

But the room doesn't feel comfortable. It's too big. I walk over to the walk-in closet and hope to find a more comfortable spot, but it's all too big. The closet is twice the size of my old master's living room. I see some shelves and try and crawl in, but it's open. Not safe.

I crawl back out and make my way to the bathroom. It's four times the size of my older master's bathroom. My eyes land on the cabinets under the sink. I open and find some shampoo, toothpaste, and other items. I push them all to one side of the cabinet and crawl in. I don't need much space.

Finally, I feel comfortable. I close the cabinet doors, enclosing myself in darkness. I feel safe. Protected. There is no monster in here who can hurt me.

## Chapter 4

### Nikolai

I'm in my office finishing up some reports for the business before breakfast when Maxim walks in.

"We have a problem."

When do we not have a problem? "What now?"

"Katrina is missing. Yulia went to grab her this morning and couldn't find her."

I stand from my chair. "How?" I know Sergei has been approaching a number of bratva members and having them

shift loyalty to him, but I made sure those guarding the house are loyal to me. Unless one slipped by and got to her.

“I’m having Dima look at the surveillance footage now to try and figure out where she went. But it might take some time to go through the entire property’s footage. I have him starting with the video footage from outside the guest room where she was staying.”

I walk around my desk and out of my office. “If Sergei got to her, we lost our only leverage against him. He wants her for some reason.”

I walk up the stairs and into the west wing. If I can backtrack her movements, I might be able to find her before he takes her too far. I get to the guest room Katrina was staying in and look around. Nothing seems out of place.

Maxim walks up from behind me. “What are you looking for?”

“Did Yulia clean this room?”

“No, not yet.”

“The bed is perfectly made. Katrina didn’t sleep there.”

Maxim’s phone rings, he picks it up and after a few seconds hangs up. “That was Dima, he said after Yulia dropped Katrina here last night, no one came in or out.”

“So, she must still be here somewhere.” I walk over to the bed and crouch down and look underneath. Nothing.

“Wait, when I found Katrina, she was trying to climb into the bathroom cabinets.” I look at him confused. Why would someone want to hide in a cabinet? He walks over to the bathroom, and I follow behind him.

We get to the bathroom and it’s quiet. Not a peep. Maxim opens the cabinet door under the sink and to our shock there she is. Katrina balled up into herself while silently sleeping.



“Why the fuck would she be sleeping there?” I ask Maxim as if he has the answer.

“Maybe she was scared.” He lightly taps her shoulder to wake her. She startles awake and pushes herself back further into the cabinet. “It’s okay, I’m not going to hurt you. You can come out.” He raises his hands in front of him to show Katrina, he won’t touch her. But she doesn’t move. She stays inside.

Her grey eyes are wide and full of terror. She reminds me of a startled kitten—a little *kotenok*.

I wonder if that’s why her mother named her Katrina. She has the eyes and appearance of a soft kitten.

Maxim turns around and sighs, “maybe you should try.”

“Why me?”

“Because she listens to you.”

Maxim moves out of the way, and I crouch down and take his spot. “Little *kotenok*, come on out now.”

Katrina slowly moves forward and crawls out of the cabinet. Interesting.

I stand to my full height as she stands in front of me and looks up at me. She fiddles with the hem of her top while silently waiting, not sure for what though.

Tempted I decide to see how far she will listen. “Go back inside the cabinet.”

“What the fuck are you doing?” Maxim enquires.

My little kitten flinches at Maxim’s harsh words but listens to me. She slowly goes back inside the cabinets under the sink.

I turn back to Maxim, “I wanted to see if you were right and if she would listen to me.”

“Well, if you’re done experimenting with her, get her the fuck out of there before Yulia finds out.”

Yulia is our housekeeper, but to us, she is more than that. She raised us, took care of us, and loved us more than our own father ever could. She is the only other person besides my siblings who isn't afraid to speak up to me.

“Kotenok, you can come out now.”

As if she is hypnotized, she crawls back out and stands in front of me. Good thing too because Yulia walks into the bathroom at that moment.

“Ah, there you are.” Yulia grabs Katrina's hands and warmly smiles at her. “Let's get you dressed and fed.” She tries to pull her out of the bathroom, but Katrina resists her.

“It's okay, do as Yulia says,” I tell my new pet. I internally smile at the thought of having her as my pet.

Katrina listens to me and follows Yulia out of the bathroom.

I shouldn't be getting entertained by this, but I am. Katrina has been through hell, and now here I am, wanting to play around with her. This is why everyone calls me and my brothers monsters. Despite knowing I should leave her alone, I don't plan on it.

The monster inside me is telling me to see how far I can take this.

## Katrina

Yulia helps me get ready. She brushes my hair softly and helps me into a light pink summer dress. I look in the mirror and I don't recognize myself. The bruises on my legs and arms are still visible but I feel as though I am looking back at my past self.

“So much better. Now that your hair doesn't have any tangles, your loose waves frame your beautiful face.” She puts

down the hairbrush on the vanity table in front of me. “Come now, it’s time for breakfast.”

I follow behind her, as that’s what I was told to do by my master.

We get to a large dining room with a massive chandelier in the center. In the middle of the room, there is a large dining table that could fit over 30 guests.

In the dining room is Nikolai and the two other blonde men from yesterday. I think their names were Maxim and Alek.

Nikolai sits at the head of the table with Maxim and Alek on each side of him.

I stand in the middle of the room unsure of what to do. Yulia has gone to the kitchen. I wonder if I’m supposed to follow her.

My stomach fills with knots at the thought of getting punished for messing up.

“Come sit kotenok,” Nikolai says from the other side of the room.

I walk over to where he is sitting. Once I’m a few inches away from him, I take my place. I fall to my knees beside his chair.

“Broken. I told you she was broken,” the young one Alek says while shaking his head.

“Alek move a seat over.” Nikolai says to Alek. Alek shifts down a seat. “Kotenok, sit in the seat Alek has vacated for you.”

Is this a trap? A trick to get me to take a seat so he can punish me. But I have to do what my master says.

I hesitantly get up and sit on the now empty chair on the right of Nikolai.

I hang my head low. It doesn’t feel right sitting at the table. That is not my place. My butt feels weird sitting on the

feathery cushion seat. I fidget with my dress hem to distract myself.

Yulia comes into the dining room and places a plate of food in front of me. The smell is strong that my stomach growls in response.

There is so much food. Eggs, toast, fruits, and muffins all placed in my plate.

After pouring me a glass of orange juice she heads back out of the room.

The one named Maxim turns to Nikolai, “tell her to eat. It’s weird just having her stare at.”

Nikolai looks at me and watches me. I hope he lets me eat. Before the food was at a distance but now it sits right under my nose. So close. I swallow the saliva that is forming inside my mouth.

“Go ahead and eat,” Nikolai finally gives me permission.

I slowly pick up the fork in front of me and stab the scrambled eggs. I keep thinking he will say no at any second now. I slowly bring the food to my lips and take a bite. It’s warm and soft.

I chew on it and peer up at Nikolai. He doesn’t look my way or tell me to stop.

I finally swallow the eggs. It goes down my throat slowly. Even my throat has become custom to not getting food often. My own body is rejecting the idea of eating.

I take another bite and continue to take small bites. I only eat about 10 percent of the food on my plate but I’m already full. I’m not used to getting this much food. I consider eating more. I don’t know if I will get this opportunity again, but my body is having a hard time pushing it down.

I finish eating and put my fork down beside my plate and wait for further instructions.

The rest of them eat as I sit there quietly. They occasionally talk to each other in Russian. Despite knowing Russian, they seem to be speaking code. They must not want me to know.

After they are done eating, Maxim and Alek are the first to get up and leave. I'm about to get up and clean the dishes but two women come in and start clearing the table.

Nikolai pushes his chair back and gets up. I follow his lead since he hasn't given me any instructions.

He leaves the dining room and starts to walk down a hallway. I follow behind him until he stops and turns around. "Kotenok, I have some work I need to do. Why don't you explore the house?"

Panic erupts inside me. That sounds like a bad idea. I don't know where I'm allowed to go or not. He hasn't explained it to me in detail. What if I go somewhere I'm not supposed to? Also, it wasn't a command but a question.

He starts to walk down the hall again, and I follow behind him. It's better that I just do as he says exactly instead of trying and figure things out on my own. He turns back towards me, and his lips thin in a line.

He's mad. I've made him angry.

I recoil my body tightly, waiting for a hit.

After a few seconds, he sighs, "I guess you can sit in my office while I work. But I need it to be quiet. No distractions."

This time I understand him. Do not make a single noise.

I won't fail this time.

## Chapter 5

Nikolai

I'm sitting in my office trying to work, but it's hard to get anything done when I have a little kitten sitting on the ground on her knees next to my chair.

I never told her to sit that way. When I said sit in my office, I assumed she would take a seat on one of the chairs in front of my desk or the couches near the fireplace to the right.

I told her I didn't want any distractions, but her presence alone is a distraction.

She sits quietly, not making a peep, but my thoughts keep wandering back to her. I wonder what she is thinking. What goes on inside her pretty head? How far can I push her?

Alek is right, she is broken.

It's hard to believe she is Sergei's daughter. She looks nothing like him. Aside from the light brown hair and grey eyes. Sergei is a slimy snake, whereas Katrina is soft and gentle. She must have taken after her mother in that regard.

I drum my fingers on my desk and look down at my newly acquired kitten.

She peers up from beneath her long lashes and goes rigid.

She must think she distracted me somehow. She did. But I won't blame her for that. She followed my instructions perfectly. She hasn't made a single noise.

I wonder how her voice sounds.

"Tell me kotenok, what do you like to do?" She looks up at me in confusion. "Do you like to watch tv shows?" She shakes her head. "Speak kotenok."

She swallows before slowly licking her full pink lips. "No." Her voice is soft and gentle like her. She speaks barely above a whisper.

"Do you like to read?"

She nods her head slightly.

“Words kotenok. Use your words.”

“Yes,” again quietly.

“Grab any book from the shelves that interests you and read it.”

She pushes to her feet and walks over to the shelves lining an entire wall in the office with books.

My father loved to fill his office with books but never read anything. It was all a show for him.

Katrina slowly skims the shelves and pulls out one book. She comes back to her spot and gets back on her knees. I should tell her to sit on the couch, but the twisted part of me likes her sitting next to me.

She slowly opens the book and flips to the first page as she begins to read. I wonder if she wants to read or is just reading since I told her to. I didn't ask if she wanted to pick out a book and read. I told her to. And that is precisely what she is doing.

Despite waking up early, I'm still nowhere near done. I turn back to the pile of paperwork on my desk and try to focus on finishing the reports. My father was a shitty businessman as he was a human being. He slacked off and left Petrov Industries in a mess. Now I have to be the one to clean it up.

Every few minutes, Katrina will flip a page to read the next. She is getting further along in the book than I am in my work.

“Kotenok, what book are you reading?”

She looks up at me surprised, “To Kill a Mockingbird.” Her voice is once again so quiet, you could miss ever hearing her.

She goes back to reading her book when I don't follow up with another question.

She is intriguing.

## Katrina

I sit in Nikolai's office and read my book. I don't remember the last time I read a book. I think it was a few weeks before my sixteenth birthday for a school paper.

I would never have thought I would have missed reading and studying. All I cared about back then was doing ballet.

I flip the page and can feel Nikolai's eyes on me.

I'm trying my best not to make any noise, but despite my attempts, he will look down at me every few minutes. His gaze feels as though it can burn right through me.

It has been a few hours, and the sun has started to set. I noticed the window earlier and wanted to look out but was afraid to anger Nikolai. He hadn't permitted me to look out. But I'm happy just feeling the sun on my skin through the window.

A knock is heard at the door. Nikolai calls the person in.

Yulia walks in and informs Nikolai that dinner is ready.

He looks down at me, "come kotenok, it's time for dinner." He pushes back on his chair and stands.

I gently close the book and head towards the shelves to place it back where I found it.

I speedwalk to follow Nikolai out to the dining room.

Even from behind, I can feel the dark, immense presence radiating off him. Unlike my old master, he is taller, stronger, and more powerful. The thought of being punished by him sends a shiver down my spine. He could easily break me with his bare hands if he wanted to.

We get to the dining room, and Nikolai takes his seat at the head of the table again.



I go to take my spot next to him on the ground when he stops me. “No kotenok, while in the dining room, you will sit at the table from now on.”

He motions at the chair I had sat in earlier.

I take my seat and look down. This still doesn't feel right.

“Do you understand me, kotenok?”

I nod, letting him know I understand.

“Words, kotenok.”

“Yes,” I respond. I'm not supposed to speak this much. In the last four years, this is probably the most I've said in one day. I don't like it. It doesn't feel right.

Maxim and Alek enter the dining room.

“Finally, I'm starving,” Alek sits beside me.

His close presence makes me feel uncomfortable. They all do except Yulia. I would prefer to eat with her, even if it's on the floor and on my knees.

“Did you ask her any questions?” Maxim asks Nikolai.

They're speaking about me.

“No, not yet but I will.”

I wonder what kinds of questions they want to ask me. I doubt I have any answers for them. I don't even know today's date, let alone anything of value.

Dinner is served, and a plate full of food is placed in front of me. I peer up at Nikolai and wait for him to give me permission.

“Go ahead, kotenok.”

I grab hold of the knife and fork to cut the steak. I'm just about to take my first bite when Alek speaks. “Do you think if you tell her to stop eating, she will?”

A sadness washes over me. I slowly put down my fork and wait to be told to stop eating.

*Please don't tell me to stop.*

“Did I tell you to stop eating?” Nikolai directs toward me.

I balk at his tone and pick up my fork again to take a bite. I messed up, I didn't follow his direction. I'll probably have to pay for this later but at the moment I don't care. The food is too good. It's juicy and watery in my mouth.

Nikolai sends a glare toward Alek who just shrugs before cutting up his own steak. The three brothers have a conversation with code words once again. They must own a business as I hear the word package and shipments used a lot.

After dinner is finished, I know what's to come. I expect Nikolai to head upstairs to bed but instead, he goes back to his office.

He stops in front of his office doors and turns to me. “Go to your bedroom and rest. If you need anything find Yulia.”

None of this makes sense to me but I do as I'm told.

I head upstairs to find the room I slept in last night. But the house is massive. Every time I turn a corner, I find myself in a new area.

The terror slowly forms inside me. My master told me to go upstairs and rest in the same room as before, not wander the halls of the house.

He's going to be mad and will punish me.

My panic has gone from 10 to a thousand in a few seconds. My heart beats rapidly in my chest at the thought of what will happen to me. Will he break one of my arms with his strong arms, or take away the delicious food away from me?

I round another corner when I walk into a hard body. I look up in a frenzy and find Alek standing in front of me.

“Are you lost?”

Unable to answer him, I stare at him in silence. Will he tell Nikolai about me not following his orders?

“Are you really not going to answer me unless Nikolai gives you permission?” He shakes his head in disbelief at me. “Follow me, I’ll take you back to your room.”

I follow him as he guides me back to where my room. After dropping me off, he turns and leaves. I want to thank him, but I can’t get myself to get the words out.

He was right when he said I was broken. I am broken.

## Chapter 6

### Nikolai

It’s morning now.

I took a nap for a few hours before waking up and getting back to work.

My father never worked this much. He had others do all the work for him while he took the credit, but from the mess left behind, they didn’t do a very good job. I, on the other hand, want to know what is happening within the company and organization.

It’s only 6 am, but the sun has already risen.

My office door swings open, and Maxim walks in. “When are you going to ask Katrina about Sergei?”

I haven’t asked her anything because I suspect she wouldn’t know anything. I did an extensive background check on her. She was raised solely by her mother until a few days after her sixteenth birthday when she was killed, and Katrina disappeared. From what I’ve learned, before that night, she had never even met Sergei.

“She probably doesn’t know anything.”

Maxim crosses his arms across his chest, “yet Sergei wants her back. There must be a reason. Maybe she saw something she wasn’t supposed to that night. You need to ask her. Not like she would respond to anyone else but you.”

I slowly smile at Maxim’s last comment. The twisted part of me likes that I control her. “Fine, I’ll ask her.”

I push to my feet and leave my office to find my little kitten.

When I get to her room, of course, I find it empty. I walk over to the bathroom and open the cabinet door underneath the sink.

Laying peacefully asleep inside is Katrina.

I don’t understand why she insists on sleeping in there. It’s clearly not the most comfortable spot.

I gently shake her awake. She slowly peels open her eyes and rubs her eyes with the back of her hand. Even her actions remind me of a kitten.

After a few seconds, she realizes where she is, and her eyes fill with fear.

“Come on out, my kotenok.”

She slowly moves forward, and I move out of the way to give her space. She climbs out of the cabinet and looks up at me. Her eyes are big and large.

“Follow me to the bedroom.” Not wanting to have a conversation in the bathroom, I walk out. Of course, my kitten follows me out.

“Tell me about your father.”

Katrina widens her eyes at me in shock.

“Sergei Kozlov, is your father correct?”

Katrina’s lip wobbles but she answers, “yes.”

“Why did he sell you?”

Her eyes get watery, and she looks down at the ground. I wait for her to answer. She always does as I say. After a few seconds a drop of a tear lands on the floor.

“I don’t know.”

“Why does he want you back?”

She snaps her head back at me and furrows her brow in confusion. “I-I don’t know.”

As I suspected, she doesn’t know anything.

I decide to end the questioning. The past is a delicate subject for her. “Get ready for breakfast and come downstairs.”

She nods her head, letting me know she understands.

I head back downstairs to finish my work.

I’m halfway to my office when Alek comes running towards me, “one of our shipments was set on fire this morning.”

“Which one?”

“Don’t worry, it wasn’t anything important. Just supplies for Petrov Industries. But Dima thinks it was Sergei’s doing.”

Of course, it was. There is no one else stupid enough to dare attack us. Sergei also knows our trade routes and shipping schedule from working alongside our father.

“We need to re-arrange our entire schedule and routes.”

“That would put a delay on our shipments while we are sorting all that out.”

“Better than our shipments getting set on fire again. In the meantime, let’s use our newly formed connection with the Italians and use their routes to move our illegal shipments. Sergei wouldn’t have any knowledge of that since the Vitales never trusted Sergei from the beginning.”

“I’ll get in contact with the Vitales and keep you updated.” Alek heads back in the direction he came from.

I head to my office to figure out what the fuck Sergei is up to.

Katrina

I wore another summer dress, but this time in the color yellow.

Usually, yellow is meant to be cheerful and filled with happiness, but the dining room is filled with anything but that. I can feel the tension in the air. Something is wrong.

I sit in the same seat as yesterday, today it doesn’t feel as uncomfortable as it did previously. I still can’t eat more than a few bites but for once I’m not starving.

The three brothers are taking about someone they hate. They don’t mention the person by name but the number of profanities Alek has used, I can tell they don’t like him very much.

At one point during breakfast, Alek gets giddy at the thought of cutting the person up. The food in my stomach starts to roll inside me at the conversation.

After breakfast, I follow Nikolai back to his office and he has me pick out another book from the shelf to read.

I’m sitting on the ground on my knees reading my book when the office door opens. It’s Alek. I’m hoping he isn’t here to finish the conversation from breakfast because I don’t know if my stomach can take it, and I know master will not be happy if I vomit on his rug.

“The Italian Capo Alessio Vitale and his brother Nico Vitale are here to see you,” Alek says to Nikolai.

“Let them in.”

Alek glances towards me briefly before looking back at Nikolai. “Okay.”

Maybe I shouldn’t be here. But Nikolai hasn’t told me to leave.

A few seconds later, two tall, dark-haired men walk into the office. The larger one of the two gives me the same feeling Nikolai gave me when I first met him.

Nikolai leans back in his chair, “Alessio, what do I owe for this visit?”

The larger one responds, “Your brother contacted me and said you need to use our routes for some shipments. I heard of the unfortunate circumstances of your last shipment. I want to make sure it won’t interfere with my business.”

“Don’t worry, I will take care of my problem. Considering we have helped you in the past, I hope you can help us while we sort out a pest problem.”

The second man locks his eyes on me. “Who the fuck is that?” I recoil at his words. I really shouldn’t be here. They are clearly speaking of illegal business.

“Don’t worry about her,” Nikolai waves the topic of me off. “Will you help us or not?”

The larger one responds, “we formed an alliance. We will keep our end of the bargain. But whatever mess you’re in, I don’t want my wife to be part of it.”

Nikolai suddenly stands from his chair, causing me to jump in shock. “I would never harm *my* sister.”

“Just making sure we are on the same page regarding Anna. Nico will coordinate the shipment schedule with you later this week.”

They talk some more about shipment routes before the two men finally leave.

“This alliance with the Italians is hanging by the thread,” Alek says once the door closes shut behind the two

men.

“Well, we have to make it work for Anna, at least.”

I don't know who Anna is, but she seems loved. I was once loved by my mama, but now I have no one to love me.

Alek leaves the office, leaving me with Nikolai.

Nikolai goes back to reading the document he was before Alek interrupted him regarding the two visitors.

Despite not saying a word, I can feel the anger radiating off of Nikolai.

I slowly flip my page, trying not to make a noise, but my heart feels like it's pounding as loud as a hammer, knowing his fury could be aimed at me any second.

Nikolai turns and looks down at me. Now my heart is racing at an abnormal speed. All my blood rushes to my head.

After a few seconds, he goes back to his work.

He shows no wrath towards me.

My new master is different. I knew what triggered my old master and what not to do, but not with Nikolai. He confuses me. I don't like to be confused. I need to understand him in order to protect myself.

I need to learn more about my master as quickly as I can to survive.

## Chapter 7

### Nikolai

The Vitales have soured my mood. From Alessio mentioning Anna and Nico giving me that judgemental look, I wanted to stab them both in the chest. But Anna would never forgive me if I killed her husband and brother-in-law. If it wasn't for my sister, I wouldn't have put up with either of those bastards.



Nico Vitale, of all people, has no place to judge me. He kidnapped his wife!

I hate those fuckers.

Aside from making Anna happy, the only benefit of the alliance with them is that it has helped our business.

I look down at my little kitten, who is sitting silently next to me on the ground.

I don't think I've treated her unfairly or horribly. She is Sergei's daughter. I could have easily punished her for her father's crimes. Most men in my position would have, even if they haven't done anything wrong themselves. That is how our world works.

She startles when I look at her. She startles easily.

I try and get my work done, but I'm too annoyed to concentrate.

I push back from my chair and stand. I need to get out of here for a couple of hours and blow off some steam.

I head towards the exit and find Katrina following me. I could take her to the gym with me. She might even enjoy it. From her file, I remember she used to be a ballerina, a good one too. When I asked her what she liked to do, I thought she would've said ballet.

I turn towards her, and she flinches and takes a step back. Maybe I shouldn't take her to the gym. It's filled with other bratva soldiers. I don't know how she will react around a group of men, or worse, I don't know how men will respond to her.

"Kotenok, stay here and do whatever you like. Go outside for a walk, eat if you're hungry, or read some more books. Just don't leave the premise. Do you understand?"

Katrina looks down at her feet and nods.

"What did I say about using your words?"

She quietly answers, "I... understand."

“Good, I’ll be back for dinner.”

She nods but winces when she realizes what she has done before speaking again, “okay.”

I head for the door, and for a second, I’m tempted to look back at my pet but keep going. I don’t need any more distractions right now.

## Katrina

Nikolai said I could do whatever I like, but I don’t like that. Just because he says I can do whatever I like doesn’t mean I can *actually* do that. If I wanted to burn the house down, I’m sure he wouldn’t be happy if I actually did that.

I wanted to burn my old master’s house down multiple times. I think he knew that, which is why he kept the knives, lighter, and cleaning supplies locked away. Anything I could use to kill him or myself with, was kept locked up with a padlock.

I stand in the same spot Nikolai left me. I will just wait for him here. I can’t get into trouble or make him angry if I don’t move.

I stand in the hall for a while, and my leg muscles begin to ache. I’ve done ballet since I was 4 years old, but even though I may be out of practice, I’m used to dancing through the pain. This is nothing, I can wait as long as I need to.

Alek walks into the hall and stops when he sees me. I look down, trying to avoid eye contact. He may not be as scary as Nikolai, but he scares me just as much. He helped me last night but that doesn’t mean he is a good person. There are no good people in this world.

“What are you doing here?” He asks me and then waits for me to respond. “Ah right, you won’t answer me. I keep forgetting. You can wander around the house if you want. We don’t mind. Nikolai won’t mind either if that’s what you’re

worried about.” He tilts his head to the side as he watches me. “Will you really not speak to me?” He leans forward towards me, “this seems like a challenge.” He smirks, “I love a good challenge.” A shiver runs down my spine, I look away from him and hope he leaves. “Oh, this will be fun. Sooner or later, I will make you talk to me.” Alek finally leans back putting some space between us. “Talk to you later.” He walks around me, as he laughs and heads down the hall.

After a few minutes, my legs start to give in, so I crouch down against the wall and wait.

I’m not sure how much time has gone by when Nikolai arrives. “Have you stayed here the entire time?” He looks at me with shock before quickly masking it.

I stand up and answer him with words as he likes, “yes.” I don’t like using words, but he keeps making me talk. I feel vulnerable when I speak. When I didn’t speak, I felt almost invisible, and when your invisible, no one can hurt you because they can’t see you. I want to be invisible again.

Nikolai sighs, “I guess I really have to be careful with my words then. Go for a walk outside for an hour until dinner time. Go on now.”

I take careful steps away from Nikolai, to gauge his reaction. He doesn’t react to me walking towards the door. He must really want me to go outside. I keep walking until I reach the front door. I turn the doorknob and wait. When he doesn’t stop me, I open the door.

Light hits my face. It’s so bright and beautiful outside. I can feel the summer sun on my skin and smell the fresh air.

I look back but find Nikolai is gone. He must have gone back to his office.

I stand at the threshold for a few minutes. I place my hand around my neck and remember that the collar is gone, I can go outside now.

I take one small step outside, and when I’m not electrocuted, I fully step out. I’m not wearing any shoes, but I

don't mind. The cement feels warm under my feet from the sun.

I step further out and look around.

All around the mansion is nothing but trees at a distance. I go to the grass and sit down. The summer air lightly pushes back my hair over my shoulders.

I lie down on my back and look at the sky.

It's clear blue with soft white clouds. The longer I look at the sky, the more scenic it looks. I could lay here and look at the sky for hours at a time.

A shadow falls on my face blocking the view. I look up and startle to a sitting position. It's a man I've never met before. He has chestnut hair and brown eyes.

"Sorry, didn't mean to frighten you," he says. "Look, I don't have much time. I'm a friend of your father's. He sent me to get you." The mention of my father stabs my heart, reminding me of the last memory I had of him. He killed my mother and sold me off.

He grabs my hand and pulls me up.

I pull away from him, wanting nothing to do with him or my father. I don't know who he is, but I don't trust him and if my father sent him, he's dangerous.

"What the hell are you doing? Don't you want to go home? Now is your chance." He grabs my arm painfully and begins to drag me.

I dig my ankles into the ground, trying to get away from him. There is no home for him to take me back to. My father took that away from me four years ago when he killed the only family I had.

The irritated man yanks me hard, causing me to tumble forward, landing on the cement driveway on my hands and knees. He grabs me around the waist and picks me up. I kick my legs back, hitting him in his balls. He drops me on the

ground, and I land painfully on my side. I yelp in pain and grit my teeth together.

“What the fuck is going on,” Maxim runs out of the house towards us.

The unknown man backs away from me, “no idea, she fell. I was just trying to help her up.”

Maxim looks at me, “is that true.”

I stand to my feet but don't answer him.

“See, I told you,” says the man with a huge grin.

Maxim narrows his eyes at the man, clearly not believing his lie. He pulls out his phone and types something. “Well, we will find out soon enough unless you want to admit to anything now.” Maxim slides his phone back into his pant pocket.

The man swallows loudly as his adam's apple bobbles.

A few seconds later, the front door opens, and Nikolai walks out.

My heart is thumping all the way into my ear. I'm going to be punished for making trouble. I knew I shouldn't have come outside.

Nikolai stands next to Maxim. “What's going on?” He looks at my now scrapped and bleeding palms and knees. He grabs my right hand to get a closer look, “what happened?” He looks at my palm and gently caresses the cut with his finger, sending a bolt of sparks down my spine.

“Ask Katrina what Yegor was doing before I got here,” Maxim says to Nikolai.

The man, who I now know is named Yegor, shifts uneasily, “boss, I saw her trip and was helping her, that's all.”

Nikolai looks into my eyes, his blue clashing against my grey. For a second, I wonder if he can read my mind. I hunch my shoulders in due to his strong presence.

“What happened, and don’t lie to me,” Nikolai asks me.

I would never lie to him. “He said he was going to take me to my father and tried to forcibly take me when I wouldn’t go.”

Yegor goes for his gun in his holster, but Maxim grabs his arm, twists it behind his back and pulls his own gun with his free hand and places the barrel of the gun to the side of Yegor’s temple.

Nikolai stands next to me, not even flinching or bothered at the scene unfolding in front of us, while I on other hand go to hide behind Nikolai.

When I shift back, I notice my hand is still in Nikolai’s hand. I lightly pull and then realize I wasn’t given permission, so I stop and wait. How could I carelessly act without my master’s permission? I know better. I’ve learnt better. I don’t think Nikolai has noticed as he is still staring at Maxim and Yegor.

“You traitor, you work for Sergei? How long?” Maxim questions Yegor.

“Fuck you,” Yegor seethes back.

Nikolai slowly smiles in a chilling manner that frightens me. “Maxim, call Alek, let him know he can finally have his fun now.” He lets my hand finally go as he walks forward toward Yegor. “You will tell us everything, doesn’t matter if you tell us now or later. We won’t go easy on you either way. You will die a slow, painful death for betraying us.”

Maxim starts dragging Yegor inside.

Nikolai turns to me, “have Yulia look at your cuts.” He turns and heads inside in the direction of Maxim.

I look down at my cuts and then back at the sky. I wish I could stay out here longer. My eyes water at the thought that I might not be able to come outside for another few years. It was taken from me once, it could be again. But I do as I’m

told. I head inside despite the painful tug in my heart telling me to stay and look at the sky some more.

Once inside, I wander into the kitchen and find Yulia preparing dinner with two other women.

She turns and sees me standing at the doorway of the kitchen. She gives me a warm smile, and the tug in my heart hits harder. Her smile falters when she sees my knees. “What happened?” She dries her hands on her apron and comes over to me.

I stick out my arms, palms up, to show her the cuts on there.

“Did you fall?” Yulia asks me in confusion. She is waiting for me to answer, but I can’t. She is so much like mama, and I feel like I’m hurting her by not responding. My eyes water, and a stray tear falls down my cheek.

“Don’t cry, I will get the first aid kit. Come sit here,” Yulia pulls me towards an empty stool at the kitchen island. I take a seat as she grabs a first aid kit from the cabinet. She takes out an ointment and starts to dab it on my palm and then my knees. “In a few days, they will all heal. Would you like some dessert to make you feel better? I’m sure I have some cookies imported from Russia here somewhere.” She goes towards the cabinets to grab the cookies.

I jump off the stool and walk out of the kitchen.

Without Nikolai’s approval I won’t be able to eat them anyways and if I have to watch her get disappointed again, I don’t think my heart will be able to take it.

Instead, I go back to the hallway outside Nikolai’s office and stand in the same spot I had been waiting for him earlier.

It’s the safest and best option.

I will wait here for Nikolai.

## Chapter 8

### Nikolai

The little fucker betrayed us. When Maxim texted me and told me to come outside ASAP, I didn't expect to find Katrina with cuts all over her knees and hands.

"She is lying!" Yegor bellows as Alek stabs him in the ribs. He is hanging from a chain from the ceiling in our basement.

"Earlier, you told me to fuck off. What happened to that?" Maxim asks Yegor.

"I knew you wouldn't believe me. But I'm not a traitor. That bitch is lying. She is Sergei's daughter. Of course, she would lie. You have to believe me," Yegor pleads.

I don't believe him. Katrina might be Sergei's daughter, but she is nothing like him. Not to mention she wouldn't dare lie to me. The sick bastard who had her before has conditioned her to listen to his every command, which includes telling the truth.

"Tell me, Yegor, who else has betrayed me?" I interrogate Yegor. He is someone I handpicked and was sure loyal to me. It's hard to tell how many more around me are working for Sergei. I need names now before they cause real damage.

"I don't know."

I look at Alek. He grabs a thin knife and begins to skin Yegor. After 15 minutes of crying in pain, he finally talks. He admits to working for Sergei and being approached by him a few days ago. He had promised him a captain's position once he takes over bratva.

"Why does he want Katrina?"

"He made a deal with the Chicago Pakhan. Katrina will marry him, and in return, he will support Sergei on his claim



to be Pakhan in New York.”

I balk at the thought of Katrina marrying the Chicago Pakhan. He is in his late 60s and is rumoured to be at odds with his son who has more support within his organization. He must want to marry Katrina, in hopes it will gain New York’s support once Sergei takes over.

“Don’t make his death easy,” I say to Alek as I walk out.

Alek gives me a wicked smile, “I didn’t plan on making it easy.”

I get back upstairs and find Katrina standing in the hallway. Her cuts are bandaged but she seems lost in thought.

“Kotenok, what are you thinking about?”

Katrina bites her bottom lip before answering, “why does my father want me back?”

“Doesn’t matter, he isn’t getting you.” I don’t have much of a heart but in this moment, I can’t get myself to tell her about Sergei’s plan to now sell her off to yet another man, this time a man 3 times her age.

Katrina looks up at me with those innocent eyes of hers.

“Do you want to read another book?” She needs a distraction and so do I. I’m pissed that Sergei got one of my men and almost Katrina, and right now she’s the perfect distraction for me while I work on figuring out who else might be comprised.

Katrina nods her head in agreement but quickly stops before answering, “yes.”

I smile at her reaction. She remembered I wanted her to use her words, and she’s trying so hard to do just that. My little pet is learning and doing as I like.

Katrina follows me back to my office. As I pull up my laptop to review a list of my soldiers, she grabs another book from the shelf before taking her spot next to me on the ground.

Every few minutes, the anger inside me rages back, but I look down, and for a second, it dissipates at seeing my kitten.

She has a way of making me forget my troubles in the moment.

Alek barges into my office with blood soaking his face and shirt. “Find me another fucker to kill!” He rages with excitement and adrenaline from the kill. He’s clearly on a high from killing.

I feel something light near my leg and find that Katrina has shifted towards me out of fear from seeing Alek.

“You’re scaring Katrina. Go shower,” I point towards the door for Alek to get out.

Alek smiles, “I’ll leave if she tells me to leave.” He walks over to the desk, and I can see Katrina go stiff at his approach. “Come on, Kat, tell me to leave, and I’ll leave. After all, you started this challenge between us.”

I’m just about to tell Alek to fuck off when I feel a small hand wrap around my leg as Katrina moves closer towards me. My little pet is seeking comfort from me.

“Come on, Kat, tell me to leave,” Alek, at this point, is begging Katrina to speak, and the sickness in me is proud she won’t speak to him without my consent.

Suddenly Alek is pulled back by his neck by Maxim. “You’re ruining the rug. Yulia isn’t going to be happy about having to wash out blood stains.”

Katrina relaxes against my leg, and without thinking, I brush the back of my fingers down Katrina’s soft silky hair. She tenses for a second before calming back down again. I almost wished she would purr like a cat. I’m sure I can make her purr another way.

I’m taken out of my dark thoughts with Maxim and Alek bickering.

“Nikolai, tell Maxim he can’t snitch on me to Yulia about the stains!” Alek sounds the same as he did as a ten-

year-old. When he was younger, he always loved causing trouble for our father but never for Yulia.

“Next time, don’t scare Katrina.”

“She gets scared over everything,” he whines. “Plus, she’s the one who challenged me by refusing to speak to me.”

Maxim shakes his head, “you are always looking for trouble.”

Alek gives a boyish smile, “only when it’s fun.”

Yulia walks into the office. “Dinner is ready.” She stops when she sees Alek, then looks down at the ground. “My carpet!” She shrieks, “I should kill you, boys, for all the messes you create!” Yulia starts to swear in Russian at having to remove the stains.

I look down at Katrina and notice a slight smile on her lips. It was only for a second, but I know I saw it.

I rub my hand down her soft brown hair again, she looks up at me with such innocence, and that is when I decide I’m going to make her smile again.

## Katrina

Dinner was terrific, as always. I just hope it doesn’t get taken away from me one day.

I didn’t even hesitate before sitting at the table next to Nikolai to eat today. I’ve gotten used to having food, which isn’t good. It can all be taken away if I make the wrong move or do the wrong thing.

I need to be more cautious.

I follow Nikolai upstairs, but he stops mid-way in the hallway and turns to me. “Go sleep in your own room.” As I shift to move, he stops me. “Wait. I want you to sleep in your bed tonight, not under the sink.”

My stomach sinks at having to sleep in my bed. The cabinets are my safe place, I can't sleep anywhere else.

Nikolai turns to leave, and I want to beg him to let me sleep in my safe spot, but I can't get the words out of my mouth. He might get angry for speaking without being told to.

After watching Nikolai leave towards his room, I'm left standing alone in the hallway.

I can't sleep in the bed, it's not safe. But I was given orders by my master, I need to follow them.

Hearing Alek down the hall, I decide to run to my room before he tries to make me talk again.

Arriving in my room, I look at the plush bed. I can't disobey his order, I don't have a choice.

Changing into a pyjama top and pants, I slide my hand across the soft fabric and get into the bed. It feels like a cloud of warmth.

I close my eyes and try to sleep, but I can't. Despite it being dead silent, I can't help but listen for any sound. If a pin dropped, I would hear it. Shifting in bed, I feel exposed in the open. Anyone can come in and hurt me.

What is it that Nikolai wants? Could he want to catch me off guard and hurt me? Did I make a mistake today that I wasn't supposed to?

That man that tried to grab me earlier, did I make a mistake. Am I in trouble for that?

I've spoken more than I should lately, but it's only because Nikolai told me to use my words. Maybe he didn't mean to use them so often, and I've angered him now.

I lay awake listening to any sound in the night, waiting for someone to come, but no one comes. I don't know how long I stay awake, but I refuse to sleep. I can't when I'm out in the open, unprotected.

After hours of waiting in fear, the light from the sun rising and starts to appear through the curtains.

I hear a soft knock on the door, and Yulia enters the room. Seeing me in bed, she looks shocked but smiles. “You slept in your bed today.” She walks towards the bed, and her smile drops, “did you not sleep well?”

Wanting her not to worry, I want to tell her I’ve slept well, but I don’t say it.

She helps me out of bed and walks me toward the bathroom. I see myself in the mirror and realize my lie wouldn’t have worked. My eyes are bloodshot red and filled with exhaustion.

Looking down at the ground at my failure, my insides turn at what Nikolai will do when he sees me. He told me to *sleep* in my bed, not lie in bed.

I’ve failed to follow his commands.

Yulia hands me a toothbrush with toothpaste on it for me to brush my teeth, but all I can think about is what’s to come.

Will Nikolai take away my food, will he lock me up in the basement, will he beat me bloody?

After getting ready and dressed, I follow Yulia downstairs to the dining room.

Nikolai and his brothers are already there.

Slowly walking towards my usual seat, I slide in.

“What happened to her?” Alek points at me with his fork.

Nikolai and Maxim both look at me, and I hang my head down in hopes they won’t see my eyes, but nothing gets past them.

They aren’t like my old master, they are faster, wiser, and quicker than anyone I’ve met.

Nikolai sighs, and I push my shoulders in, waiting for him to hit me or yell, but he does neither.

“I thought having her sleep in her own bed would make her more comfortable, I guess I was wrong.”

“Most people would pick a bed over a hard stuffed cabinet,” Alek says. “Kat, why do you prefer sleeping in a cabinet?” Alek leans forward towards me, “Come on, tell me.” I look down and refuse to acknowledge him. Finally, he leans back into his seat. “You’re enjoying this way too fucking much.” Alek says to Nikolai.

Nikolai shrugs, “you’re just pissed she won’t talk to you.”

“I’ll make her talk, don’t worry.”

“Don’t you do anything to hurt her,” Nikolai snaps at Alek with a harsh voice that causes me to flinch.

“I wasn’t going to! Hurting Kat is like kicking a puppy, there are some things even I wouldn’t do.”

“That’s a first,” Maxim huffs.

Yulia walks in and places a plate of food in front of me. I wait for Nikolai to say something or take the plate away, but again he doesn’t do what I expect him to.

He looks at me, “Eat kotenok.”

Grabbing the fork next to the plate, I stab the eggs and slowly bring it to my lips, and when Nikolai still doesn’t stop me, I finally take a bite.

Looking from the corner of my eye, I watch as Nikolai reads something off his phone.

He is nothing like my old master.

No, he is full of surprises.

## Chapter 9

### Nikolai

We're driving towards Brooklyn, where Yegor claimed Sergei is hiding out. I had a small group of men survey the area last night but was told it was empty and no one came or had gone.

Either Sergei was tipped off or he moved before we could arrive.

I'm hoping it's the latter, but I can't risk assuming we don't have another mole within my men.

I can't trust anyone besides my brothers and my closest and longest friend Dima.

We arrive in front of an old brick building. Alek jumps out first, ready for action, while me and Maxim follow behind.

Two of my captains, Boris and Anatoly, follow behind us with their men.

Barging through the doors, we go room by room with our guns drawn, but the entire building is empty.

Alek walks in with his gun to the side, "I don't think Sergei was ever here. This place is too run down for his taste."

This might be a good hiding spot, but Sergei isn't the type to get his hands dirty. As long as I've known him, he saw himself above everyone and everything. He wouldn't stay at a hotel below five stars or drink wine that was below \$10,000. He was a materialistic fucker who only looked at the number instead of the quality.

"Are you sure Yegor wasn't lying to you?" My captain Anatoly asks Alek.

Alek's eyes flash with anger, "He wasn't."

Alek might act irrationally, but that's what it is, an act. He knows exactly what he is doing and does it on purpose. He knows what needs to be done and when it needs to be done. He would have made sure to get the correct information from Yegor before killing him.

“Enough, circle the building to make sure we didn’t miss anything,” I tell Anatoly and Boris.

They motion their men to follow them out as they survey the entire area again.

“I didn’t fuck up,” Alek says to me.

“I know. Sergei must have lied to Yegor. He must not have trusted him.”

“Makes sense, fucker was a moron. He couldn’t even kidnap a fragile little girl. She probably weighs less than a feather and doesn’t speak or scream. He could have just picked her up and ran off with Kat, and we wouldn’t have even known.”

Realizing Alek is right, I get an unsettling feeling in the pit of my stomach. My kitten is vulnerable, anyone can hurt her, and she wouldn’t even be able to fight back. Katrina is a fighter, but she is also tiny and delicate.

“Investigate the neighbourhood for any information that can help us, and let me know if you find anything as soon as you do.”

After doing another search, we end up heading back home with no information.

There isn’t even a single piece of evidence of Sergei ever being there.

Upon entering the home, I head straight to my office, not to work but in search of Kat. As always, I find my pet waiting for me outside my office door.

She is crouched down and gently tracing the marble design of the floor with her finger.

“Kotenok?”

She startles at my voice and looks up at me with her grey eyes. I just realized now that they are the same as Sergei but with one significant difference. Katrina’s is filled with pain



and innocence, whereas Sergei's were filled with greed and hate.

"Follow me," I tell her and without waiting a second she rises to her feet and follows me upstairs to her bedroom.

Heading straight to the closet, I rummage through the clothes Yulia bought for Katrina until I find what I'm looking for.

"Here, change into this," I hand her a pair of black yoga pants and a white cropped tank top.

I'm thrown back when she pulls down her dress and drops it to the ground. For some reason I expected her to go to the bathroom and change, not just take off her clothes right in front of me.

As she changes into the clothes I handed her, I take a quick look at her body.

If I were a gentleman, I would have looked away, but I never was, and never claimed to me.

She has a few bruises around her ribs and marks between her thighs, but they seem to be healing well.

After changing into the clothes, she looks at me for direction.

Once changed, you can't see the marks and bruises, but you can't miss the bubble butt and curves from her hips to her waist showing from the tight clothing.

Note to self, don't ask Katrina to change while others are around. I can't risk someone else seeing her naked. For some reason, it already annoys me that others will be able to see my pet's body with clothes on.

After having Katrina change into socks and a pair of sneakers, I head downstairs to the gym and she follows behind me silently.

We arrive at the gym within the house and find a few of my men training inside. Since the gym is part of a locked wing

that others can't get into the main part of the house from, I let my men train there but now I'm regretting that decision.

"Stay here, I'm going to change, and I'll be out in a few minutes." I turn to head towards the changeroom when I notice some of the men glancing toward Katrina. "Actually, come with me." They might be the men I once trusted with my life but I can't trust them with Katrina. I don't want her out here alone.

A revelation hits me, Katrina is my pet. She is mine.

And I won't let anyone near her or take her from me.

### Katrina

Nikolai changes into a t-shirt and sweatpants while I'm pressed against the wall trying not to look up.

I knew that appearance-wise, he was nothing like my old master, but he looks like Michelangelo chiselled him without clothes.

He is all muscle and full of strength.

He could have crushed my old master's skull easily if he wanted to.

The thought of what he is capable of doing to me sends a shiver down my spine.

He hasn't hurt me yet, which I don't understand why, but he could if he wanted to and if I anger him, he just might.

"Kotenok, let's go."

I follow behind him. Looking at his back, I can see the muscles through his t-shirt.

We stop in front of some gloves, and Nikolai grabs a pair.

"Have you ever boxed before?"

I shake my head.

“Kotenok, what did I say about using your words?”

I cringe, realizing my mistake. I messed up again.

I tighten my body waiting for the hit, but Nikolai thins his lips, “I’m waiting.”

Realizing he is waiting for me to answer his question, I respond. “No,” I say quietly while having my muscles still coiled, but he just nods his head once he gets an answer.

“I’m going to teach you some self-defence moves.” He helps me into the gloves. “If anyone ever tries to kidnap or hurt you again, I want you to fight back. Do you understand?”

I nod but quickly answer, “yes.”

I’ve been trying to follow Nikolai’s rules, but my body and mind are conditioned to the rules of my old master.

Nikolai has given me several passes, but eventually, he will stop.

He walks over to a large black punching bag. “Hit this with all your strength.”

I hit the bag, but despite trying to use up all my strength, I barely even touch the bag, and my arm muscles ache from the sudden action.

“Harder,” Nikolai commands.

I try again, but the hit is weaker this time than the first.

Nikolai sighs, “Okay, let’s try and build your physical strength first.” He steps forward, and my body tightens. It’s used to expecting hits, but Nikolai helps to remove the gloves off me.

I look to the side and notice several men staring at me. I don’t like their stares. Some have an inquisitive look, while others have something more vulgar in them. I’m curious to know who they are and want to ask, but I can’t get the words out despite opening my mouth.

“Is there something you want to ask?” Nikolai asks.

I shut my lips tight at his words. Nothing gets past him. I’m sure he has noticed my mistakes, but he still hasn’t punished me.

“Go on ahead and ask,” Nikolai says.

I nibble on my bottom contemplating if I should ask.

“If you ever want to ask me anything or say anything to me, you can. You need to wait for me to ask.”

Nikolai is giving me the freedom to speak. I hadn’t had that option for over four years.

“Go on ask,” he says again but with a small smile that shocks me.

Despite my head telling me not to, my heart is saying you can believe his words.

Opening my mouth, I push out the question I wanted to ask. “Who are those men watching me?” My voice comes out quiet and slow but once they are out, I feel relief. For years I was tied down from doing certain things but for once I feel free.

Nikolai smiles at my question. “They’re my men. They work for me.” He stops speaking before beginning again. “That doesn’t you can trust them. They have to earn that.” Earn trust. “If you ever need anything you can trust my brothers and Dima. That means you can speak to them if you want too as well.” He’s giving me freedom to speak freely. “Expect Alek, don’t speak to him unless your danger or it’s an emergency.” Nikolai now has a mischievous smile.

I want to ask why I can’t speak to him freely, but I don’t want to push my limits. Nikolai has given me more freedom than I’ve had in a long time.

Nikolai throws the gloves to the side. “Okay let’s try and do some strength exercises.”

He has me doing a number of exercises that I used to do as a child in school but now feel impossible to do. My body has become so weak and frail. I can't even do simple exercises that an elementary school kid can do.

My muscles ache due to exertion.

Nikolai's phone rings, he goes to answer and a few minutes later he turns to me. "There is something I need to take care of. After you shower and change, you can explore the house or the grounds." Again, he gives me permission to move around freely but I still can't get myself to do it.

Nikolai takes me back towards the main house. I notice that he needed to enter a code to get to the main part of the house away from the gym.

Once he leaves, I head upstairs to shower and change into a summer dress.

I decide to wait for Nikolai near his office in the hallway. I crouch down and trace the lines of the marble floor to kill time.

I look up when I hear footsteps. Expecting Nikolai, I'm surprised to find Alek. Remembering Nikolai told me not to talk to him I look away and try to make myself small in hopes I will be invincible.

Sadly, I couldn't.

Alek squats down next to me. "Hey Kat, I have a surprise for you." My body recoils at his words. Not all surprises are good. If anything, they have always been bad for me. "Come with me, I need to show you something." He stands and waits for me to follow him, but I don't move. Crossing his arms against his chest he looks down at me. "Come on Kat, do me this one favour. I promise it will be worth it."

Nikolai did say I can explore the house and I can trust his brothers. I'm hesitant too in case I do something I'm not supposed to, but the temptation becomes too strong.

I stand to follow Alek, who gives me a smile. “Good choice.”

I follow Alek and after a few minutes, I’m left bewildered at how large this house is. Every time we round a corner, we are in a different part of the house.

We get to a large dark room. I can’t see anything, and panic rises through me. Is he locking me in here? Is this some torture room? I shouldn’t have followed him.

Alek heads to the side and I contemplate running while he is distracted but that will make things worse. It’s best to get the punishment or torture over with.

Alek turns on a light switch and the entire room glows alive.

It’s a large room with wooden floors and an entire wall of mirrors.

“This used to be my stepmother’s ballet practice room before she passed away and then my sister Anna used it for a while before our father forced her to quit.” Alek comes to stand next to me, “you can use this if you want. I know you used to do ballet before.”

My eyes well up with pain. I used to love ballet. It was my life. It was the reason my mama died. She wanted me to follow my dreams and was willing to risk going to my father for help.

I suck in my bottom lip and bite it hard to prevent myself from letting out a cry. The pain is too intense and raw still.

“I mean if you want to,” Alek shrugs his shoulders. His phone rings and he pulls his phone out of his pocket. “Shit, I got to go but you’re free to stay here if you want.”

I want to thank him for this gift but I remember Nikolai’s words. Don’t speak to Alek unless it’s an emergency and this doesn’t seem like one.

He walks out of the room, leaving me alone.

Stepping towards the mirrors, I look at myself.

My bruises have lightened and my face has some colour to it again. It used to be ashy and pale to the point of death but now my cheeks are rosy again. Like my mama's.

The tears I've been holding in finally pour out of me.

I never thought I could have so much of myself back until now.

## Chapter 10

### Nikolai

The Chicago Pakhan is here in New York.

Dima stands in front of my desk while I look over the surveillance pictures he has taken.

The first few pictures are of the Chicago Pakhan Dimitri outside of his hotel, and the last few are of him having drinks with businessmen at a lounge on the upper east side.

If it weren't for the information from Yegor on Sergei reaching out to the Chicago bratva, most would think it's just a businessman having drinks. But the fact that he is in my city and hasn't notified me shows his disregard for me as the Pakhan in New York.

Alek walks into the office. "I heard Chicago has entered New York."

"They have, and they're not being sly either," Maxim responds.

"They must have some balls to come to New York and not notify the New York Pakhan."

"Or they must be desperate," Dima interjects.

"What do you mean?" I question where he is going with this.

“Everyone in our world knows that Dimitri’s son Mikhail has more support within the bratva in Chicago than he does. Maybe it’s more than we thought, otherwise why would he be desperate enough to align himself with Sergei.”

“The young bride he will own,” Alek points out.

Dima rolls his eyes, “if he wanted a young bride, he could have one from within bratva in Chicago. I’m sure his captains and soldiers are more than willing to throw their young daughters at the Pakhan to gain more status and power. He doesn’t need to marry Katrina for that.”

Dima is right. “It must have to do with the power and support he will gain if Sergei were to become Pakhan,” I point out.

Alek laughs. “That is never going to happen. He would have to take us all out and even if he succeeds somehow, Alessio Vitale will probably go after Sergei to gain our territory for himself.” And for Anna. Anna would be heartbroken if anything happened to us. She was shattered after our brother Damien was killed. Despite not liking the fucker Alessio, I can tell he cares about Anna. She would be safe and protected.

“Arrange a meeting with Mikhail,” I tell Dima. “Make sure it’s kept on the low. I don’t want Sergei to get word of this.”

Dima nods in understanding before exiting my office.

Looking to my side, my kotenok’s spot looks empty.

I didn’t see her in her usual spot when I returned home.

“Where is Katrina?” I ask my brothers.

Maxim shrugs his shoulders.

“I took her to Alina’s ballet practice room,” Alek answers.

I did tell Katrina she could explore the house but I’m a little bummed she didn’t wait for me near my office like she usually does.



Standing from my chair, I round my desk. “Let me know once Dima has gotten in touch with Mikhail.” I head towards the wing with Alina’s old practice room.

When I arrive, I find Katrina sitting in front of the mirrored wall, completely zoned out.

“Kotenok?” I step closer to her.

She jumps in shock and turns around to face me. Her eyes are bloodshot and tired.

“What’s wrong?”

She looks down at the ground, refusing to make eye contact. Which isn’t abnormal for her, but I don’t like it.

I force her to look up at me by placing my finger on her chin. I don’t miss her flinching when I touch her.

“Don’t hide from me, kotenok,” I tell her. “What’s wrong?” I ask again.

She sucks in a breath before finally answering me. “I didn’t think I would get it back.” I don’t understand what she is trying to say.

“Get what back?”

“Me. I thought I lost myself long ago, but I got some of myself back.”

I’m still not sure what she is trying to say, but I have a feeling that being in a ballet room after a long period is bringing back memories.

“This room is yours to use.”

Looks up at me with big innocent eyes. “Really?”

“Yes, kotenok.”

Her eyes get teary, and she gives me a small smile. “Thank you.”

Katrina’s thanking me shocks me. I didn’t give her anything of great value, but from the look in her eyes, she seems to think I’ve given her the most valuable item in the

world. Would she still thank me if I she knew I was using her as bait to get her father?

“I have work to do, but dinner should be ready for you in the dining room.” I turn and leave the practice room. There is a weird feeling inside me that I can’t shake off. Katrina shouldn’t be thanking me. Not for taking her and not for keeping her either. I decided she was my pet to keep, and just because I’ve been gentle with her now, doesn’t mean I plan to keep it that way.

No, she won’t be thanking me later.

### Katrina

I had dinner alone. Nikolai nor his brothers came to the dining room. As much as I preferred that, considering Alek’s continued prevalence to get me to speak to him and Maxim, well, he just scares me. But somehow, I missed them as well.

I felt almost lonely without them.

When Yulia picks up my dishes in front of me, I decide to use my freedom to speak to her finally.

“Thank you,” I say to her as she heads to leave the room with the dishes. She freezes on the spot and turns around to face me.

“Did you just speak to me,” she asks with wide eyes.

I nod to her, unable to speak again as emotion rises through my throat. She puts the dirty dishes on the table and walks over to me. She embraces me in a big hug, “oh, I’m so happy you’re speaking to me.” I hug her back, loving the warmth and comfort I get from her hold. My throat tightens further at remembering mama and the hugs she used to give. I still remember her perfume scent that would enclose me every time she was near.

When Yulia breaks away from me, I feel a sense of coldness. I don't want to lose it again. She grasps my hands into her soft ones. "Speak to me anytime you want. I will always be here to listen," she tells me with a gentle smile.

I nod before she finally lets go of my hands and goes back to cleaning.

I consider going back to my room and to my safe spot in the bathroom to sleep, but I don't know if that's what Nikolai wants. He said to have dinner but not what to do after.

I could explore the house, but instead, I find myself back in my usual spot near his office in the hallway, waiting for him.

I told him I found a part of myself, but I think, at best, I will only ever find parts. I didn't just lose myself, I died. Certain elements cannot come back to life, no matter how hard you try. I will never fully be me again.

Squatting down, I look at the white marble floor. I can see a faint reflection of myself on them.

At times I still feel as though I'm looking at someone else and other times, I see a glimpse of my old self. But only for a few seconds before it's gone again.

When I meet mama again in death, will she recognize me?

Hearing footsteps I look up and expect to find Nikolai but instead it's a young woman. I've seen her in the kitchen with Yulia before. Occasionally she assists with the clean-up but rarely does she look at me.

"Hi, I'm Mindy."

I want to say back but it's still hard for me to speak for some reason. Maybe it's because I'm unfamiliar with this person. *Trust must be earned.*

She bends down in front of me. "Do you want to see the garden? It's incredibly beautiful."

The garden? I didn't know there was a garden here. Of course, I haven't left the house aside from that one time or explored the house despite being allowed too.

However, going with Alek, I learned of that practice room.

Standing up, I nod to Mindy, letting her know I would like to see the garden.

She gives me a smile, "follow me."

I follow behind her as she leads me to a large family room. On one end of the room are two large French doors leading outside.

We head out through the doors, and I suck in my breath at sweet smell of fresh air.

Arriving in front of large flower bushes, I kneel down and gently touch the petals of the flowers.

"There is more," Mindy says as she motions for me to follow her.

She starts walking towards a section full of trees. It looks as though there it's a small forest within the property. Following behind her, as we walk deeper into the property, the harder it gets to see the house from all the trees.

I don't see any flowers or gardens. An uneasy feeling fills me at the unfamiliar location.

I stop walking and consider turning around but I'm unsure how to get back to the house. In every direction I look, the only thing I see is trees and more trees.

The summer sun has set, and darkness clouds me.

Mindy turns around and walks over to me and grabs my arm. "We are almost there." She pulls me forward and I let her. I tell myself she's a female and wouldn't hurt me. She has no reason to. It's all in my head.

Eventually, we get stone walls.

“Shit it’s supposed to be here somewhere,” Mindy says.

Is she lost as well? I wouldn’t be surprised considering how large this property is. I want to say we should go back but the words are still not able to come out of me.

Mindy lets my hand go and walks towards the right. “I’m sure it was here,” she murmurs to herself. Finally, she stops, “there it is!”

Walking towards her, I see there is a small metal door. Unlocking the door, she grabs my arm and shoves me through it. I trip over myself and land on my knees. When I turn back around, Mindy locked the door.

I look around my surrounding and don’t see a garden.

Terror runs up my spine. She left me and locked me out.

Jumping to my feet, I try and unlock the door, but it won’t budge.

I open my mouth to scream for help but again, nothing comes out.

Why am I so messed up?

My eyes sting with pain and frustration at myself.

Banging on the door, I hope Mindy will hear and let me back in but she doesn’t.

Hearing leaves rustling behind me, I freeze my hand in mid-air.

The hairs on the back neck stand on edge, as fear fills me. I slowly turn around and find a man in black clothing running in my direction.

My body goes into flight mode, and I run. Not looking where I am going, I run through the trees but continue to follow the length of the wall in hopes of finding another door to get in.

My body aches in pain and I can feel it strain in exhaustion. I haven’t run in years. But I push myself to keep

running. My weak legs start to give in and I trip over a rock. Falling to the ground, my palms sting from sharp rocks prickling my skin.

The man grabs my ankle and pulls me back, as more rocks scratch my forearm and legs.

I try and kick the man but my action was so slow, he just grabbed my other leg and dragged me on my back.

He suddenly stops and his eyes go wide. I look down and find my summer dress as crumpled up to my waist.

The look on his face changes in an instant and I recognize that look right away. My old master had it before he chipped away at me.

Dropping my legs to the ground, he pounces on me.

My body stiffens knowing what's to come.

I hear the man loosen his belt and unzip his pants.

Nikolai's words from earlier echo through me. *If anyone ever tries to kidnap or hurt you again, I want you to fight back.*

Fight back, Katrina.

I dig my nails into the man's eyes he screams in agony. Grabbing my wrists, he pushes my hands away and before I can attack him again, he punches me in the face.

Things get blurry before darkness encompasses me.

## Chapter 11

### Nikolai

I'm sitting in my office having a meeting with Maxim, Alek and Dima regarding our next steps against Sergei when our phones go off.

Looking at my phone, I find that someone has tripped the permitter alarm.

“What the fuck,” Alek stands from his seat.

We all grab our guns and head out. My head of security, Lev, comes running in our direction. “Someone has tripped the alarm on the north end of the property.”

“Have you checked the permitter?”

Lev nods, “everything is secure except the north end. Someone had opened the hidden door there.”

“We should have got rid of that door a long time ago,” Maxim says.

He’s right. My father had built that hidden door as a precaution if we were ever attacked and were unable to escape from the front. Over the years, my brother Damien would use it to get away from the house and our father. After our father murdered him, I couldn’t bring myself to get rid of the door.

Walking down the hall, I notice something missing. “Where is Katrina?” I ask my brothers and Dima.

They all shrug.

Fuck. Running out of the house, we head towards the north end.

Hearing a noise, I stop running and aim my gun in the direction of the noise. A few seconds later, Mindy, one of the maids, appears.

Startled, she quickly puts her hands up. “I didn’t do anything! I swear!”

Narrowing my eyes at my response, “is that so?” Turning to Dima, “take her inside and keep an eye on her until I find Katrina.”

Mindy’s eyes widen as she takes a step back. Dima grabs her arm before she run. “Don’t even try it,” he warns.

Maxim, Alek and I continue towards the north end when we arrive at the hidden door.

Unlocking the door, I round the wall to see if I see anything.

Stepping out I glance around for Katrina.

Did she run away? From me? An unfamiliar feeling settles in my chest at the thought.

“We should have the guards recheck the perimeter,” Alek says from behind me.

If Katrina ran away, we need to expand our search.

I’m just about to tell Alek to have the guards search the surrounding area when I hear a mangled cry.

We all look in the direction of the sound. Walking carefully with our weapons drawn, the noise gets clearer the closer we get.

Then my blood goes cold before getting to a searing boil.

A man is on top of Katrina with his pants down and dick out.

Katrina is knocked out with blood on her chin.

He pushes her dress further up, and I don’t even think. I aim my gun in his direction and pull the trigger.

He screams in pain as the bullet pierces through his kneecap.

I should have put the bullet through his head, but that would be too easy of a death.

The man falls to his side while he grabs his wound with both hands.

Walking over to him, I hover above this pest that thought he could put his hands on my pet.

He wails in pain, but little does he know. That’s music to my ears. I enjoy his cries and screams. Pulling the trigger, I



put another bullet through his other knee.

He bawls in pain, “please stop!”

“Oh, we are just getting started,” Alek says as he kneels in front of the man. Looking up at me, “do you want me to get started?” he asks with eager eyes.

Clenching my jaw, “just don’t finish him off, that’s mine.”

Maxim steps up, “don’t worry, I’ll watch him.” I look at Maxim and he looks pale as a ghost.

Alek pouts, “I don’t need a babysitter.” He stands and pulls the man up by his arm, causing the man to screech in pain.

Maxim grabs the man’s other arms and helps Alek drag him up.

Looking down, I see my little kotenok is injured.

Pulling her dress down to cover her, I gently pull her into my arms.

“We got this,” Alek says. “You can take care of Katrina.”

“Keep me informed,” I tell Alek and Maxim.

They nod before they begin to drag the man back to the house. He continues to cry loudly but my thoughts are preoccupied but my little kotenok.

Getting back to the house, I take care back to my bedroom instead of her own. Due to Katrina’s habit of sleeping in the bathroom cabinets, Yulia emptied it to give her more space, including taking out the first aid kit.

There are other kits in the house, but I don’t want to take the risk of Yulia seeing Katrina like this. She seems to have grown a fondness for her.

Getting to my room, I lay Katrina on my bed.

After grabbing the first aid kit from the bathroom, I start off by cleaning her cuts and wounds. She has multiple cuts on her palms but luckily, they don't look deep.

On the other hand, the wound on her lip will need to be stitched. I place my finger on Katrina's lower lip to get a better visual of the injury.

As I'm grabbing the needle and thread, I feel a soft plush touch from Katrina's tongue against my finger.

She shifts in her state and again gently grazes the tip of her tongue against my finger.

The sensation sends a pulse of excitement making me hard. Fuck. This is a first. Shifting my bulge, I try and concentrate on the task but my kotenok has other ideas. When I push down on her lip she moans softly.

My kotenok is playing with my head. No one has ever been able to do that. Yet, she can, without even trying to.

Taking a deep breath, I force myself to push her out of my head. I prick the inside of her lip with the needle and she whimpers in pain.

I try and make quick work at stitching up her wound, to end the pain but every time she whimpered, I felt like my heart was the one being stabbed.

Once I was done, I finally let out a heavy breath.

Noticing Katrina's dress has dirt and blood on it, I go into my closet and grab one of my t-shirts.

When removing her dress, I force myself not to look at her body. My dick is already painfully hard and that's just from her actions.

Once the dress is removed, I throw it to the side and pull my t-shirt over her. It ended up being more challenging than it should have been. After getting her head through the collar, bringing her arms through was the most difficult since I was trying to avoid looking at her body.

After getting the t-shirt on her, I go to pull it down, when I see semen in between her legs.

My blood boils at the visual of that man on top of her again.

Grabbing I towel from the bathroom, I wipe that fuckers stain off my innocent kotenok.

After pulling the blanket over, and tucking her in, I change my clothes into black pants and t-shirt.

I don't want to scare my kotenok when she wakens by having my white shirt soaked in that fucker's blood.

And I plan on bleeding him dry.

Heading downstairs to the basement, my pulse speeds up at the thought of making the fucker pay for daring to touch Katrina.

Getting to the basement, I open the torture room door and the metallic scent of blood in the air electrifies my senses.

The sweet sound of the man's cries is music to my ears.

"Please, I didn't mean to," the man cries.

I close the door behind me. "It's pointless to beg. You touched what's mine and now you will pay for it."

## Katrina

*"Mama, don't go into the room!" I shout out loud for once, but she still heads to her death. I want to stop her. I have to stop her.*

*My bones shiver from the coldness that's to come.*

*I step back, and suddenly, the coldness is gone. Instead, I feel the warmth.*

*I stand there and let the warmth take over me, hoping it will save mama and me. But it doesn't. Suddenly the familiar*

*sound of a loud bang ricochets the room, and darkness appears.*

I blink once and then twice.

I make out a window in the darkness.

It was just a nightmare again.

I breathe out to try and eliminate the heaviness in my chest from the nightmare.

It was just a nightmare.

Wait. Snapping back towards the window, I realize I'm not in my safe spot.

The warmth against my back can still be felt.

My body becomes rigid in the unfamiliar environment.

The memory of the man attacking me comes rushing back.

Slowly I shift to get a glance at my surrounding.

I'm in a large room, with grey walls and large windows.

I slowly shift toward the warmth radiating onto my back, and the tightness in my heart unravels when I realize it's Nikolai, not the man who attacked.

I sag back into the bed until I realize I'm in a bed with Nikolai. My body tightens at not knowing how I got here and what happened, but my mind is shocked at my reaction to relaxing when I realized it was Nikolai.

I consider my options and decide to wait until Nikolai wakes up.

Despite trying to stay still, his body heat distracts me by warming the side of my arm. Slowly, I slide to the side to put some space between us, but my modification in positions causes Nikolai to shift.

He flips over, facing me. I suck in my breath to prevent any sort of noise.

One second passes, then two and then three. He doesn't wake up.

Finally, I let out a slow exhale.

Nikolai doesn't look as terrifying as he does when he's awake.

His blonde eyebrows are thick and soft, while there are faint freckles on his nose that I never noticed before. But then again, I have never really looked at Nikolai. I don't look at anyone. Eye contact frightens me.

Without thinking, I gently brush my finger onto his eyebrows. Nikolai flutters his eyes. I panic and stop my finger mid-touch. When I'm sure he has fallen asleep, do I remove my finger.

"What are you doing?" he asks with a rough voice startling me. Opening his eyes, he looks at me with a dazed look before yawning and perching onto his back.

"Nothing," I respond quickly.

He gives me a narrowed look, and terror runs down me.

I acted without thinking. I never received permission. I shouldn't have touched him, but I did. I've been acting careless lately.

Nikolai stretches his arms above his head before grabbing his phone off the nightstand and looking at it. "It's four in the morning." He pushes the comforter off himself before pushing himself into a sitting position at the edge of the bed. "You can sleep for a couple more hours if you want. I need to get work done."

As long Nikolai gets out of bed, I follow his lead.

He looks at me, confused. "You should rest. You had an.... eventful day yesterday."

"I will," I tell him. I will do as he says from now on, and hopefully, I won't get into any more trouble.

He looks at me for a few more seconds. His gaze makes me feel uneasy.

“Ah, right. You probably want to rest in your spot.”

I nod, “yes.” I hope he doesn’t make me sleep on my bed again. Despite not being tired, I rather go somewhere I’ll be safe.

“Why do you like sleeping in the cabinet over a bed? I never understood that. It can’t be because it’s more comfortable.”

“It’s safe. No one can hurt me in there. Outside, it’s unsafe.”

Nikolai doesn’t respond. Instead, he observes me with an unrecognizable look. Like he’s trying to read my mind, little does he know, there isn’t a lot that goes on in my head.

Finally, he breaks the silence. “You’re safe as long as you’re with me.” He turns and heads to the bathroom, leaving me alone with his words.

*I’m safe as long as I’m with him.*

I’m on my way to my room, but I don’t think I can sleep. I’m wide awake, and sleeping only brings back the nightmares of my past.

Taking the stairs to the main floor, I walk around the house but find all the lights still turned off. It’s still very early in the morning.

Deciding to go back to the ballet practice room, I head down the same hallway Alek had taken me. I must have turned in the wrong direction, as I’m in an unfamiliar part of the house.

I’m about to turn around and head back when I notice a door open with the lights still on.

Going towards the door, I open it completely and find a set of stairs leading downstairs.

I contemplate if I should go downstairs or head back for a few minutes, but the reckless part of me that has shown up

lately convinces me to go downstairs.

Taking slow steps, I head down until I arrive at a large room. There are two doors at each end of the room. I take the one on the right and open it.

It opens up to a long corridor with a number of doors lining each side of the room.

Walking into the corridor, the door behind me slams loudly, startling me.

An odd feeling goes through me, telling me to head back upstairs.

As I'm heading towards the door, I hear a female voice. "Is someone out there? Please help me!"

I walk over to a door on the left side of the corridor where the voice is coming from and press my ear against the door.

"Someone, please help me!" the female begs from the other side of the door.

Pushing myself off the door, I step back.

Someone is behind the door and needs help.

I know I shouldn't unlock the door. Nikolai will be furious. He gave me permission to explore the house but not to let someone out. Not to mention, I'm pretty sure he or his brothers are the one who locked that person in there.

But I can't turn my back on them.

When I was locked away by my old master and would scream for help, no one came to help me. Even when I knew his friends were over and I know they could hear me pleading, they never came to help me. They ignored my cries. After my old master would beat me for trying to get help.

I can't just walk away from someone who could be hurting. Not when I know how it feels.

Walking over to the door, I slowly turn the lock on the steel door. With a loud click, the door unlocks.

I open the door and peak inside.

In the middle of the room, is Mindy tied to a chair.

“Katrina! Please help me! They’re going to kill me!” She begs with tears running down her face.

Looking to the side of the small cement room, there is a table with a number of tools, including knives.

I grab the knife off the table and walk over to Mindy. Cutting the ropes around her ankles first before cutting the ones tied to her wrists. “Hurry!” She pleads.

Once the last of the rope is cut off, she sighs in relief before her face transforms with terror from seeing something behind my shoulder.

I turn to see what she is looking at and the terror I saw on Mindy’s face is now running down my spine.

Standing in the doorway is Nikolai.

## Chapter 12

### Nikolai

Anger rages through me as I see my little pet untying and freeing the maid who betrayed me.

Katrina drops the knife onto the floor when she sees me.

Fear is prevalent on her beautiful face.

Mindy seeing Katrina freeze, jumps out of her chair and grabs the knife from the floor. “Don’t come near me!” She shouts while waving the knife around like some crazed person.

Stepping into the room, I close the door with my foot to prevent her from running out. “Drop the knife before you



make things worse for yourself.”

“Fuck you!” she seethes with irrational eyes.

Katrina slowly stands from her position, and Mindy, seeing an opening, runs towards Katrina with the knife pointed out.

I jolt forward and grab Mindy’s wrist and twist it hard before she can get to Katrina. Mindy screams in pain and finally drops the knife. Using my foot, I kick the knife to the side.

I see from the corner of my eye that Katrina looks towards the knife as if she is considering grabbing it. My anger hits a new high from Katrina’s action.

The door swings open, and one of my guards Yeva runs in. “Pakhan, I’m sorry! I just went to the washroom for a second!”

“Tie this bitch back up now!” I sneer at Yeva.

Yeva bulks before grabbing more rope from the table and walking over to me. Mindy is wailing loudly, but Yeva grabs her and begins to tie her up again.

Now on to my next problem. Turning towards Katrina, she begins to tremble. I go to grab her arm, and she pulls back in shock.

My kotenok is fighting me. I’ve given her as much freedom as I could and now she fighting against me, helping my enemies.

I tug Katrina out of the room, and she continues to pull away from me as I take her back upstairs. I can’t have her going against me. Mindy could have hurt her if I didn’t stop her.

Now she needs to be punished for her what she has done.

Katrina

My master is furious. I've never seen him like this. I've made him angry. If looks could kill, it would be the one he gave me earlier in the basement.

He drags me to his office and slams the door shut behind us.

My heartbeat is beating rapidly in my chest and ears.

I know I shouldn't have helped Mindy, but how could I not?

Nikolai walks over to a table on the side with glasses and alcohol bottles and tosses them against the wall in fury. "Do you understand what you've done?" he asks me.

My throat tightens, and I can't speak.

He walks over to me, and I step back to try to put space, but he gets into my face. "Now I have to punish you!"

I flinch at his words. *Punish.*

He paces the room like a ferocious animal caged in. Then he stops and snaps his head towards me. "Lay face front first onto my desk." I hesitate. "Now!" he snaps.

I walk over to the desk and lay the top half of my body on the desk while the bottom half dangles.

I can feel my heart painfully pounding against the wooden desk. I concentrate on the cold wood pressed against my cheek.

Hearing Nikolai unbuckle his belt, little sweat beads form on the back of my neck. When he raises the oversized t-shirt, I'm wearing up, my pelvis tightens, waiting for the irrupt entrance.

A swishing noise is heard through the air before a painful strike hits my butt, followed by a searing burn. I yelp in shock from the hit, but my punishment is long from over. Nikolai hits me again with his belt, and I bite down on my lower lip from screaming out in pain.

“You will do as I say. Do you understand?” Nikolai asks me, but his voice is zoned out from each hit. “I need an answer, kotenok,” he asks again.

I’m about to answer when the belt tip strikes my vulva, sending a bolt of sensation up my spine. Nikolai hits me again and again, the hit creates a weird sensation in the pit of my stomach. I tighten my muscles to try and push the feeling down, but my insides feel like jelly while my outside is burning from each hit.

“Kotenok,” Nikolai growls near my ear.

I bite down hard on my lower lip, and the stitches in my lips rip apart as blood drips down my chin. “Yes,” I breathe out.

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, I understand!”

I need him to stop, or I might just rip apart from the seams. I’ve never felt this feeling before. It feels peculiar and foreign.

Once Nikolai has my response, does he finally drop his belt and let it fall to the ground. I sag on to the desk in relief.

Then I feel Nikolai’s fingers trace the burn marks on my butt and thigh.

With each trace, the sensation ignites to a new height. Slowly he traces from my butt and makes his way down my thigh until he reaches my most sensitive spot at the moment.

I feel wetness in between my thighs, and I think I must be bleeding from the hits. That is until I look over my shoulder and find Nikolai’s finger glistening with a milky liquid.

“My little kotenok is turned on,” Nikolai gives me a frightening smile that sends a cool shiver down my heated body. Slowly he takes the tip of his finger up to his mouth and sucks on the liquid on it.

My eyes widen with shock.

“Oh, my little pet is so innocent.” Nikolai takes the same finger that was just in his mouth and trails back up my thigh. My thighs shake uncontrollably. He gently traces my lips and the tightening feeling in my stomach gets painful.

Nikolai leans forward, and I feel his suit jacket gently caress my delicate thighs. I feel like my entire body is on fire.

“You don’t deserve a reward, but it doesn’t seem fair to me to be punished for your actions, does it?”

I don’t understand what he is saying. I just need this feeling inside to stop.

“No, I guess not,” he breathes into my ear.

I turn my head to the side to get a better look at what he is doing, but before I’m able to shift my body, Nikolai pushes his fingers inside me.

I squeak and push my body up further onto the desk from the sudden intrusion.

He curls his finger inside me, and the tightness continues to build. I dig my nails into the desk to try and get a grasp of what is happening.

Then he flicks my labia, and as if he pulled a trigger, my insides explode into a million pieces, and I feel myself flying before darkness hits.

## Chapter 13

### Nikolai

My kotenok is more innocent than I thought.

I watch her as she is passed out on my desk.

I pull down the t-shirt she is wearing down her body. I’m tempted to leave her exposed and lying on my desk, but I would never get any work done if I did.

I was supposed to punish her, but instead, I found myself being punished. Perfect and ripe on my desk, and I couldn't even touch her. It didn't seem fair to me. Despite getting off on watching her orgasm, I still want more. *More of her.*

Pulling her into my arms, I head back upstairs to my room. I know she hates beds, but I'm not about to stuff her into a cabinet in a bathroom after this.

Getting back to my bedroom turns out to be a bigger struggle than I expected due to the painful hard-on I have.

I should wake up Katrina and punish her again for leaving me in this state.

She broke the rules and was punished, and I still end up losing.

I had no intention of punishing her, but after she let Mindy loose, I couldn't look the other way. Katrina needs to know that there are consequences to her actions. She has already gotten injured twice now and could have again from Mindy.

I get to my room and place Katrina on my bed. Her chin is covered in blood again. Grabbing a wet towel and the first aid kit, I clean up her chin and re-stitch her wound. I also rub healing balm on the red marks left from the belt.

No, it looks like I can't wake up Katrina and play with her some more. Not until the wound on her lips doesn't heal. Thankfully injuries inside the mouth heal faster than those on the body. Then she's all mine again.

## Katrina

I wake up in Nikolai's bed again.

Turning onto my back turns out to be a bad idea when a stinging pain enflames the memory of what happened before I

passed out.

I've never felt anything like that before—a mix of pain and euphoria.

Pushing into a sitting position, the ache forces me to slide off the bed on my stomach. My foot knocks something to the ground.

Turning around, I find a small black box wrapped with a black ribbon.

I grab the box to pick it up and put it back on the bed when I notice my name written on a piece of paper on it.

I grab the piece of paper with my name and flip it open.

*My kotenok, a gift for you. Nikolai.*

Why would he get me a gift? I made him angry, and I deserved the punishment, not a gift. I shouldn't have released Mindy, but the thought of her still downstairs hurts. Is she being tortured? Is she still alive? The last time someone betrayed Nikolai, I'm pretty sure they butchered him if Alek's bloodstained clothes were any indication.

I gently peel away the ribbon and open the box.

Inside is a pair of pink ballet slippers.

My heart clenches tightly.

I haven't practiced ballet in years. Not since that night.

Mama was so proud of me when I got into Julliard.

I slide my foot into the ballet slippers and tie the around my ankles.

My old ones were worn out, but they moulded perfectly to my feet after years of practice. These feel stiff compared to my old ones, but I can't help but stretch my feet into them.

"Do you like them?"

I snap my head up and find Nikolai standing in the doorway.

I wonder how long he has been standing there.

“If you don’t like them, I can return them?”

“No, I like them,” I quickly respond. The idea of them being taken away hurts more than receiving them. Ballet is tied to my past and my mama, but it is something I loved and want to love again.

“If you want, you can practice with them in the practice room Alek showed you last time.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll be in my office if you need anything.”

Nikolai turns to leave, and I follow behind him when he suddenly stops.

“You’re not going to the practice room like that, are you?”

I look down at myself and I’m confused by what he means.

Nikolai sighs, “new rule, you will always wear proper clothes when walking around the house and underwear. You can’t go around without underwear anymore.” He looks at me, “I can tell you want to ask me something so go ahead and ask.”

Looking down at myself I ask the question that first came to my mind. “Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why do I have to wear proper clothes or underwear?”

Nikolai raises his eyebrow, “before you were kidnapped, did you walk around in only a long shirt and no underwear?”

“No, but my old master preferred me like this.”

A look I don’t recognize crosses his face. “Don’t compare me to that fucking bastard.”

I flinch at his tone. “Okay.”

His jaw clenches tightly. “If you want to dress in only a shirt, you can in front of me only but not others. Do you understand?”

“I understand.”

“Good, now go put on some proper clothes.”

After he leaves, I head back to my own room and go straight to the closet. I find some underwear, and it feels awkward. The bra underwire pushes my chest up in an uncomfortable way, and the underwear feels suffocating. I grab a grey crop top tank and black ankle leggings. The fabric feels soft and lightweight. It doesn't even scratch up against my wounds.

I remember wanting outfits similar to these in the past, but a basic tank top would cost \$50, and that was half of mama's salary for one day's work. I couldn't justify asking mama for something like this in the past. I told myself I would work hard and be able to afford simple things like this for mama and me one day. Now she is gone because of me.

My sting with pain, and I push it back. I let out a painful sigh. Everything reminds me of mama. Even a stupid outfit. Will the pain ever go away?

I head downstairs to try and find the practice, but like earlier, I turn at the wrong corner and find myself at the same door that led to the basement to Mindy.

I stand in front of the door, and I contemplate my choices.

I could try and free Mindy again but will most likely get caught again, or I could leave her down there. Despite knowing I will face the consequences again, I can't turn my back on Mindy.

Leaning against the wall, I slide down to the floor. As soon as my butt hits the marble floor, the burning sensation from the belt wounds sends a reminder of what will happen if I get caught, or it could be worse the next time.



The basement door flies open, and I balk, expecting Nikolai, but instead, Alek walks out and into the hallway.

He gives me a smile. “Kat, what are you doing here?” He looks me up and down. “Where did you get those ballet slippers?” He kneels down to my height, “still not talking to me, even though I showed you an awesome room? Fine, your loss.” He pouts before standing up. “Are you lost again?”

Without thinking, I nod at the excuse, and he gives me a smile.

“Well, that’s progress, I guess.” He sticks out his hand for me to grab, “here, I’ll show you where the practice room is.”

Ignoring his hand, I stand up. I feel bad when he drops his hand, but I’m just not used to touching others yet.

He guides me down a hallway, and I begin to recognize the area.

Once we get to the practice room, he leaves after saying goodbye. Again, I don’t say anything back. Not even a thank you, despite him helping me find my way for the second time now.

After switching on the lights, I stand in the middle of the room and look at myself in the mirror.

I can’t force myself to move. Every time I lift my foot up, I drop it back down.

The image of me in the mirror is like an anchor, holding me down—a reminder of what I used to be and what I’ve lost.

Closing my eyes, the darkness calms the emotions that I see in the mirror.

Lifting my leg, I dance from memory.

My muscles ache and stretch painfully. The muscle in my foot tightens painfully, forcing me to fall to my knees.

Opening my eyes, I catch myself in the mirror—on the ground, with a busted lip, and tired eyes.

I'll never dance like I was able to in the past. That part of my dreams is gone. But maybe I can find a new dream. A dream where I dance for the enjoyment that I used to get when I first started and not to be at the top of my class to become a star one day.

I can build new dreams.

## Chapter 14

Nikolai

I'm in my office going over the accounts of Petrov Industries with Maxim and Alek when I hear a knock on the door.

"Come in," I shout out.

Dima walks in a few seconds later and I catch myself a little disappointed it's not Katrina.

"Mikhail has not responded back to my message, but Dimitri has reached out," Dima says.

"What the fucks does he want?"

"He wants to come by for dinner to discuss business tonight."

Alek smirks, "the fucker dares to come into our territory without informing us and then invites himself to dinner at our home. Who the fuck does he think he is?"

"The Chicago Pakhan," Maxim points out.

"This isn't fucking Chicago," Alek retorts.

"No, it isn't."

"We should tell him to fuck off and go back to his own territory before we send him back in a body bag," Alek says with a crazed look.

“That would cause a bloody fucking war,” I state the obvious. “We can’t just go around killing the leader of another organization without the proper backing.” I was hoping Mikhail would agree to an agreement, but his silence might be his answer. “Let him know he is more than welcome for dinner,” I tell Dima.

“The fuck he is!” Alek stands from his chair. “You can’t seriously be considering inviting that fucker into our home?”

“I am,” I lean back in my chair. “I want to hear what he has to say about his disrespectful actions and his involvement with Sergei.”

“And what if you don’t like his answer,” Alek asks.

Turning to Alek, “killing him is not an option. You will behave at dinner. I won’t have you making things harder than it needs to be. If we can persuade him to abandon Sergei and join us, it will serve us.”

Alek slouches back in his chair in annoyance. “Fine, I’ll behave but what about Kat?”

Tapping my finger on the desk, I consider locking Katrina in a room until Dimitri is gone but get a better idea. “She will join us for dinner.”

Dima’s eyes widen in shock but doesn’t argue against my decision. “I’ll make the arrangements.”

After Dima has left, both Maxim and Alek stare at me like I’ve lost my mind. Maybe I have but that fucker will learn that Katrina is mine.

## Katrina

After I’ve showered, I find Yulia in my room waiting for me.

“I put out some clothes for you to wear tonight,” she says as she grabs a hairbrush from the vanity.

Looking at the little black dress and heels on the bed, I'm confused about the sudden need for me to dress up. Nikolai told me I needed to wear proper clothes and underwear but not that I needed to dress up.

I don't bother asking why, I'm sure Yulia is only doing what she has been told too.

I sit on the chair in front of the vanity as Yulia brushes out my hair. I've started to enjoy this part of the day. Despite being more than capable of doing my own hair and dressing myself, I like that Yulia is here to help me. It gives me time to spend with her.

After brushing my hair, Yulia applies a little makeup on me and helps me into the dress and heels.

My stomach growls loudly reminding me I haven't eaten in hours. Another new thing I've gotten custom to, eating regularly.

After arriving downstairs, Yulia heads to the kitchen and I don't miss the number of staff buzzing around than usual.

Something is happening.

The dining room and living room are empty.

I head down the hallway toward Nikolai's office and find the door closed.

Kneeling down, I decide to wait for him in the hallway instead of bothering him.

An unsettling feeling is stuck in the back of my head at the sudden change in my outfit and the actions of the staff.

Hearing the door open, I turn and find Nikolai standing above me.

Looking up, I recall his words, I'm safe as long as I'm with him.

I'm safe.

## Chapter 15

### Nikolai

Opening my door, I'm surprised to find my innocent kotenok sitting in the hallway waiting for me. When she looks up at me, she looks so small yet her big grey eyes remind me so much of a kitten.

Katrina slowly stands and I glance at her outfit. Yulia did an excellent job at dressing her. I needed Katrina to look presentable but more importantly, I need her to show Dimitri she is mine.

"My kotenok, I need you to do everything I say during dinner. No messing up or you will get punished severely."

Fear flashes across Katrina's eyes. Good, she needs to be afraid. If she fucks this up, I might just lose it.

"But if you do as your told, then I'll reward you." That catches her attention.

She looks at me with a puzzled look. "Reward?"

"Yes, kotenok. I'll give you anything you want as long as it's within my power to give it to you."

Katrina chews on her bottom lip with furrowed eyebrows, as if she thinks I might be lying but I'm not. I'll give her anything she wants as long as she does as she is told tonight. This dinner is important. Not only is Dimitri a Pakhan in his own right but he is also my enemy and could just be as good as an ally.

Maxim rounds the corner, "Our guest has arrived."

I lean forward to Katrina's ear, "remember do as your told or your punishment won't be as pleasurable as last time."

Katrina's cheeks redden and looks at me with shock. I can't help but smile. My kotenok is so innocent.

I follow Maxim to the living room where Alek is already waiting with a glass of dark amber liquid in a glass.

When Katrina walks into the family room, Alek whistles. “Kat didn’t know you had it in you to look like that. If I did, then-”

“Then what,” I interrupt and give Alek a deadly look.

Alek laughs, “oh this is going to be fun.”

“Behave,” Maxim reminds Alek.

Lev walks into the living room and following behind him is a tall man with blonde hair mixed with grey. *Dimitri Lenkov*.

After escorting Dimitri in, Lev quietly exits.

Dimitri smiles wolfishly, “Petrov, it’s a pleasure meeting you in person.” He sticks out his hand for me to shake and I take it without hesitation.

“The pleasure is all mine. If I were made aware of your visit earlier I would have extended an invite much sooner.”

Dimitri gives me a smug look. “It was a last-minute trip. I had some business I needed to take care of here in New York and of course, I couldn’t miss the opportunity to meet the Pakhan’s son.” The Pakhan’s son, not the Pakhan.

Alek glares at Dimitri at his disrespectful words but I don’t let him get under my skin so easily. I don’t need this fucker to recognize me as the Pakhan in New York, I am the Pakhan.

Giving Dimitri a giant smile back, “it is unfortunate you weren’t able to meet my father the previous Pakhan before I murdered him. I had heard you had done business dealings in the past.”

Dimitri clears his throat, “yes we did. He was a good Pakhan.”

I have the urge to scoff. My father was not a good Pakhan, he was shit as they come but from what I hear Dimitri

isn't any better.

Dimitri's eyes gleam as something behind me catches his eye. I turn to see what he is looking at and find him gawking at Katrina.

Katrina steps back and looks down to the ground, while her hair falls down her face, hiding her.

"My apologies, let me introduce you to Katrina, and these are my brothers, Maxim and Alek," I point out my brothers, but Dimitri's gaze is locked on Katrina. I want to rip out his eyes from his sockets for staring at Katrina the way he is.

Maxim sensing the hostility interjects, "can we get you a drink? We have several authentic Russian Vodka."

Dimitri finally shifts his gaze off Katrina, "of course. One drink won't hurt."

Maxim makes a drink and hands it to Dimitri, but I don't miss the quick glance toward Katrina before taking a sip.

Yulia walks into the living room, "dinner is ready." Just in time, or I might have broken the glass and jammed into Dimitri's eyes if Yulia was a second late.

As we all head towards the dining room, Alek runs up next to me, "so what happened to we can't kill the Chicago Pakhan, huh?"

Note to self, punch Alek in the face at the end of the night for being a pain in my ass.

"Make sure you sit next to Katrina like you usually do," I growl back at Alek.

I don't need Dimitri sitting next to Katrina or Alek might just get his wish.

One wrong move and this could become a bloody dinner.

## Katrina

I don't like the guest Nikolai has invited. He reminds me of my older master. Slimy and conniving.

I stick by Nikolai and try not to cause any problems.

When Nikolai said he would reward me, I couldn't even think of what I could want but now I just want to finish to night without screwing anything up.

Nikolai heads to the head of the table and I follow behind him to take my usual seat next to him.

As I pull out my chair to take a seat, I notice Dimitri walking in the direction of the empty chair next to me.

Panic erupts at the thought of sitting so close to me, but Alek beelines around him and sits beside me.

"I hope you don't mind, this is my favourite chair," Alek says with a cheeky smile.

Dimitri does look like he does mind though. His eyes look as though they are about to shoot fire out any second.

"Dimitri, please take this seat," Maxim says from across the table.

Dimitri scowls at Alek before making his way to the chair across from me, while Maxim takes the one beside him.

I never thought I would be happy having Alek sit next to me but today I am.

Dimitri takes a huge gulp from his drink before placing the glass hard on the table. "Is this how you treat the Pakhan?"

"Don't forget you are in *my* territory. I am the Pakhan of New York, something you seem to forget," Nikolai says.

Dimitri and Nikolai are giving each other a death glare when finally, it is broken when the servers bring in the food.

The sweet smell of steak and potatoes, causes my stomach to grumble.



The food is placed in front of us and despite my jumping stomach, I don't eat. No one seems to be eating.

Nikolai grabs his fork and knife and cuts into his steak. "How is your son?" he asks Dimitri, "I hear is *very* favoured by your men."

Dimitri narrows his eyes at Nikolai but doesn't respond to his question. He grabs the knife and fork in front of him and cuts his steak. "I remember when I had dinner with your father, he had his chef make a delicious steak." He takes a bite of the steak and swallows it. "I guess you fired him."

The room feels tense and but everyone is pretending to ignore it. They continue to cut into their food so I decide to do the same. If I hold off on eating any longer, I might pass out from hunger.

Nikolai and Dimitri continue to make small talk, or should I say small digs from what I can tell at each other while I try and concentrate on my food. Occasionally I'll get distracted by Alek's harsh cutting of his food. Every time Dimitri says something, Alek cuts sharply into his plate. I'm sure he is leaving scratches with how much pressure he is putting on it.

I'm finishing the last of my steak when Dimitri says something that catches my attention.

"The girl, she's Sergei's daughter isn't she?"

I try and swallow the steak, but my throat dries up at the mention of my father. I force down the steak piece painfully.

"Katrina is none of your business," Nikolai responds.

"Oh, but she is. Sergei promised her to me," Dimitris says with a devilish smile.

My head goes light and I feel like I'm about to faint again. My father who once sold me has sold me again.

Why does my father hate me so much? What have I done to him to deserve this? Does my life mean so little to him?

Nikolai puts his knife and fork on the table with ease and gives a Dimitri a firm look. “Katrina is mine. Whatever Sergei has promised you, doesn’t mean shit. Sergei is a desperate snake trying to find a lifeline and I didn’t take Chicago to be so weak to align themselves to such a coward.”

“How dare you!” Dimitri stands from his chair. “You should be begging me to side with you but you dare insult me instead!”

“I don’t need to beg for anything. I killed my own father because he was in my way and I have no problem killing you to get what I want. You can align yourself to the winning side or pay the consequences.”

I look to the side and find Alek staring in amusement at Nikolai and Dimitri’s exchange. Maxim has a bored look but from his stance, he is ready for anything.

Dimitri cackles, “what makes you think you will win against Sergei?”

Nikolai smirks, “I don’t think, I know I will.”

Dimitri’s face stonies as he takes in Nikolai’s words. “Give me Katrina and I will support you in your war with Sergei.”

I look to Nikolai and pray he doesn’t give me to him. The thought of being given to Dimitri makes me physically ill.

Nikolai stands from his chair, “Katrina is mine,” he growls. “Now get the fuck out of my house.”

Dimitri looks stunned before huffing, “you will regret this!” He turns and walks out of the dining room. I notice a guard whom I’ve previously seen, walks after him. Most likely to show him out.

“You should have killed him,” Alek says.

Nikolai gives him a look. “I told you, we can’t kill a Pakhan. Chicago would declare war on us, and we can’t afford one at the moment. Not while Sergei is still out there causing

problems. It would have been different if Mikhail would have supported us but we don't have that. Not yet anyway."

Alek gives a dangerous smile. "So that means killing him is still an option. We just need to wait for Mikhail Lenkov to sign off on it."

"I doubt he will," Maxim interjects. "He may not get along with his father but considering the amount of support he has and still refuses too, he must have his reasons for wanting Dimitri alive."

"Maxim is right. Mikhail could have easily taken over the Chicago bratva if he wanted but has chosen not to. Loyalty? Honour? Who the fuck knows but I have a feeling this won't be the last time we see that fucker."

Alek pushes his chair back and stands, "either way, I'm going to practice my knife skills. Maybe I'll test it on that traitorous bitch in the basement." Mindy!

Alek and Maxim leave, leaving me in the dining room with Nikolai.

"I need to get some work done. I'll be in my office if you need anything," Nikolai says to me as he walks out of the dining room.

I need to find a way to save Mindy. She doesn't deserve to be tortured, let alone cut up into pieces by Alek. I just don't know how.

## Chapter 16

### Katrina

I hover outside Nikolai's office, trying to figure out how to save Mindy. Then I remember what Nikolai said before dinner. If I behave, I can be rewarded. He didn't ask anything of me during dinner, but I don't think I did anything that would warrant a punishment either.

Walking over to his door, I gently knock on his door and press my ear against the cool wood waiting for an answer.

“Come in,” he shouts from the other side of the door.

For some reason, his voice alone makes my heart beat uncontrollably.

Opening the door slowly, I pop my head in first to see if he would be receptive to me coming into his office.

He doesn't look up from the papers he's reading so I risk it and go in.

Finally, he looks up and finds me standing in front of the door. “Kotenok, what can I do for you?” his voice smooth and steady. I take it as a sign he's angry or annoyed which is a good indication.

Playing with the hem of the dress, I can't get myself to look at him when I ask. “You had said earlier that if I do well I can get a reward.”

“Are you here to collect your reward?”

I nod, “yes.”

“And what is that you want?”

“I want Mindy to be freed.”

There is a deathly silence and I know I've made a mistake in asking for that.

“That's not an option. I said I would give you a reward that is in my control. Letting Mindy go free is not.”

“Why not?” He is the one who has her locked up and can easily let her go.

“She betrayed me and my family by working for my enemy. If I let her go, those within my organization will take it as a sign of weakness. I can't have that, not right now. If there is anything else you want, I can give that to you.”

I never understood this world that Nikolai or my father lived in but I know it to be cruel and heartless. Nikolai can't

let someone live because his organization warrants it as weak. That is something I can't ever understand or wish to do.

"Don't hurt her," I beg. "Just don't hurt her anymore."

I hear Nikolai getting up from his chair and walking toward me. "Is that what you really want for your reward? I can give you anything but you want that?"

"I do."

"Fine," he says finally. "If that is what you want, I won't hurt her anymore."

Looking up, I stare into his eyes to see if he actually means it. There isn't a hint of deception in them. He will not hurt Mindy anymore. "Thank you."

The heavy feeling in my chest lightens.

There is nothing else I could want than to be able to breathe more easily. That gift is the most valuable gift I could have ever received at this moment.

Nikolai

Heading downstairs to the basement, I find Alek in Mindy's cell, laying out his knives.

Mindy's muffled screams can be heard even through the gag on her.

Alek turns to face me, "have you come to join the fun?"

"No, I'm here to kill your fun?"

Alek drops the knife on the table in annoyance. "What now?"

"Katrina doesn't want us torturing the bitch."

Alek gives me a suspicious look. "Why do you care what Kat wants? Plus she betrayed you by working with Sergei. Not to mention she put Kat in danger and got her

injured and almost raped. I think it's only fair that the traitorous bitch gets what she deserves. She doesn't deserve to live."

"I never said she gets to live. I said Katrina doesn't want her hurting." Walking over to Mindy's whose eyes widen in terror. "You're lucky that Katrina has a better heart than you. In bratva, it doesn't matter if you are a male or female, you would receive the same damn punishment for the same offence. Lucky for you, Katrina has pleaded for you and rather than offer you a long painful death, you will get a short and painless one instead."

Mindy begins to cry and shake. She doesn't know how lucky she is. I wasn't going to let her off so easily after what she did. As pissed off as I was at her for working with Sergei, I was more pissed at the situation she put Katrina in. She doesn't deserve mercy but for my kotenok, I will give it to her.

Alek takes out his gun, "tell me, I at least get to kill her."

Giving Alek a smirk, "the honours are all yours." I leave the cell and hear a loud bang echo through the cement walls.

No more rewards to Katrina, not until I kill Sergei. I can't risk her asking for mercy for that fucking bastard. I don't think she would after everything he has done to her and her family but Katrina has a kind heart, something she inherited from her mother.

Getting back upstairs, Dima comes running toward me with a large file. "I got what you asked for." He hands me the file and I open it to the first page. Jason Danvers.

"What are the chances he will be willing to meet me?"

"Not good. He likes to consider himself honourable and law-abiding."

"Honourable? Law-abiding?" I mock. "Find a way for me to cross paths with him if he isn't willing to meet me."

“That I can do.”

I continue to skim through the papers in the file and it lands on a picture of a young Katrina with her mother.

The smile on her face seems genuine and bright. Something that she has also lost because of Sergei.

No, I won't show mercy to Sergei, not even if God himself asked me.

To be continued.

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