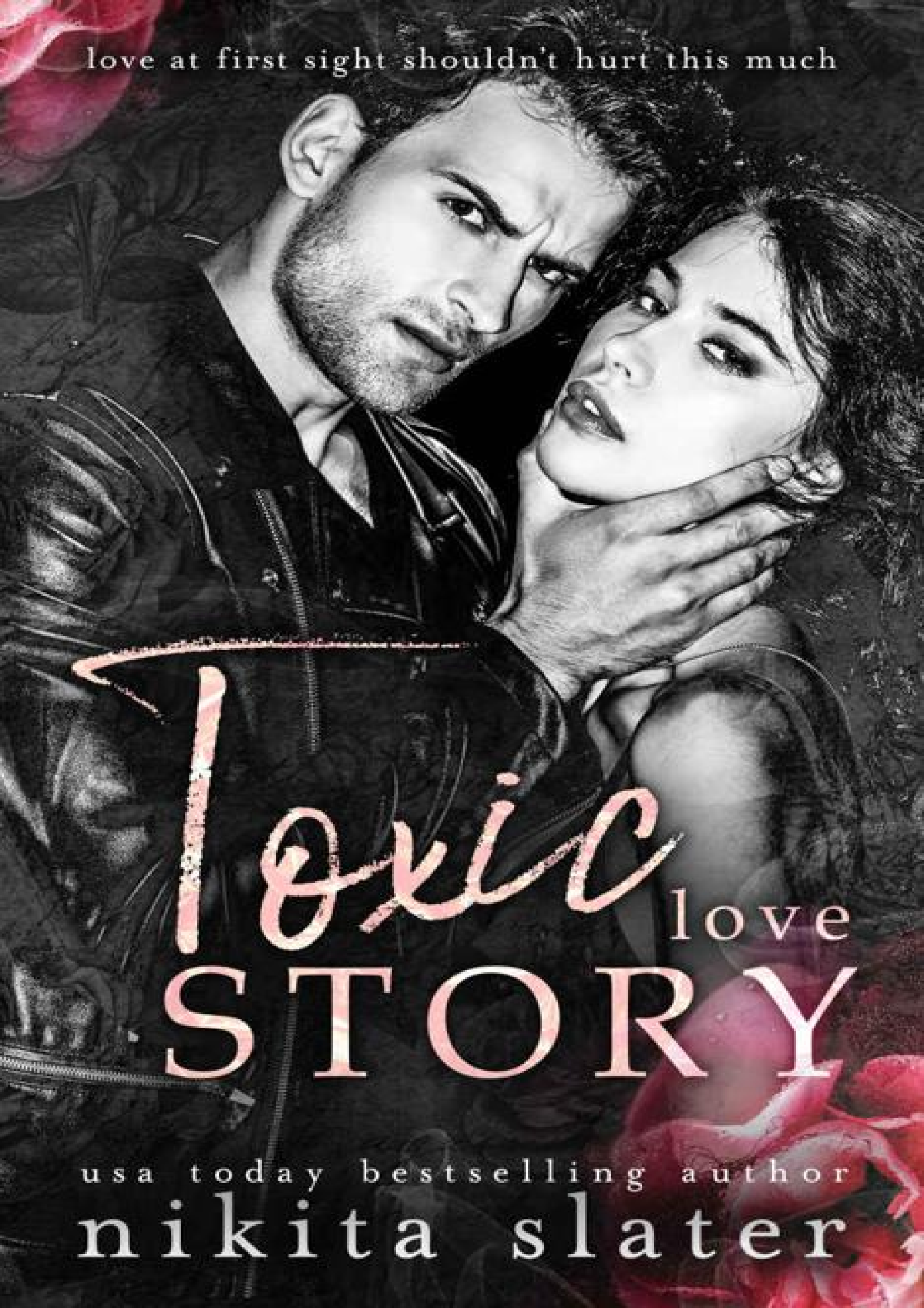


love at first sight shouldn't hurt this much



*Toxic* love  
STORY

usa today bestselling author  
nikita slater

# *Toxic Love Story*

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NIKITA SLATER



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Toxic Love Story.

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## *Chapter One*



**YASMIN HOISTED** the heavy bag of garbage and shoved through the back door of the kitchen and into the alley. As the door slammed shut behind her, she huffed in annoyance. The light was out again. Management kept replacing the bulb, but it was something else. The wiring maybe. She didn't know because she wasn't an electrician, but if she were, the darn thing would be fixed by now and she wouldn't be walking through a dark alley again.

The first indication she had that she wasn't alone was the smell of cigar smoke. Yasmin wrinkled her nose as it invaded her nostrils.

"Is there someone out here?" she asked cautiously, squinting through her glasses.

She should probably be more afraid of a dark alley in the downtown core of Toronto, but she'd taken this trip out to the garbage bin hundreds of times without incident.

She heard footsteps and the smell of cigar smoke got closer.

"You're not supposed to be out here," she said firmly. "Staff only out back of the hotel."

"How do you know I'm not staff?" His voice was a low rumble, but smooth, like river water over stones. He had an accent, but she couldn't place it. Definitely not Canadian.

Yasmin still wasn't afraid. Only curious. She'd only once run into someone out back when he'd climbed the fence and



was digging through the garbage bin when she threw her bag in. He'd popped his head up, startling her. She'd asked him if he found anything interesting and he'd shown her a couple of items hotel guests had thrown out.

The hotel was one of the most expensive in the city, catering to an exclusive clientele, so she hadn't been surprised at the guy's findings. She'd told him to be careful and left him to it.

Somehow, she didn't think this guy was a dumpster diver. She wished the light was working because she couldn't make him out.

"I know you're not staff because there were only three of us left in the kitchen and everyone was still inside when I left." She frowned at him. "Come to think of it, how did you get out here? I didn't see anyone come through the kitchen."

"Over there." She saw a hand come out of the shadows and point. A couple of rings glinted in the dim light coming from the street.

He was pointing at the discreet exit. A back exit from the hotel, used mainly for celebrities and escorts. Somehow, she didn't think this guy was an escort. A celebrity maybe?

"Who are you?" she asked bluntly.

She felt tension thrumming through him and nearly took the question back. She shouldn't be offending hotel guests. She already had one strike against her for telling a hotel guest she wasn't a pimp when she'd dropped off room service and he'd asked her to arrange an escort for the evening.

"I'll tell you my name if you tell me yours," he said, his voice a low rumble that sent shivers down her spine.

"Fair enough," she agreed. "My name is Yasmin."

"Volkan Kartel."

"Okay, Volkan, you can't be out here." She hefted her garbage bag and made her way down the ramp to the dumpster. "You'll have to finish your smoke and go back inside. Next time, use your room's balcony."

He chuckled, the sound warm and friendly. The cigar smoke followed her down the ramp. Before she could shove the metal top of the bin open, he reached up and did it for her.

Taking advantage of his help, Yasmin hurled the bag inside, then wiped her hands down her skirt. “Thanks,” she said, turning to look at him through the dim light.

He was tall... much taller than her 5’3”. Broad shoulders, broad chest, long limbs. He was bigger than average, but not a monster. If he attacked her, she *might* be able to take him. Besides being a little on the short side of life, Yasmin was pretty much average. She blamed her height for her slightly rounder-than-she-liked curves. If she were five inches taller, everything would stretch out.

The guy was wearing a suit jacket, tailored, she thought, from what little she could see. The jacket seemed to strain at the seams, his biceps outlined beneath the material. His white dress shirt was open at the throat where the strong cords of his neck were clearly defined. He wore his hair clipped short and his face, which was strong and rugged, was clean shaven.

“Do you make it a habit of bossing around hotel guests?”

Thankfully, he didn’t sound angry.

“No,” she said, then thought about it. “Okay, sometimes. But rules are rules and since I work here, it’s my job to enforce hotel rules.”

“Maybe I don’t like rules,” he said casually. “I like to make my own rules.”

“Then you must have a lot of money,” she countered. “Only rich people can get away with breaking rules whenever they like.”

She could feel tension thrumming through him and worried that she’d overstepped and he might complain to her manager.

“Do you always say what you think?” he asked, echoing her thoughts.

“No. Sometimes I keep things to myself.” She fidgeted, then said, “I’m going back in now. Have a good night. Remember to smoke on your balcony from now on.”

She walked back up the ramp toward the door, but his voice reached out through the shadows, stopping her.

“How old are you?”

Frowning, Yasmin turned around. “Twenty-two. Why?” She wasn’t sure why she told him, but she found herself drawn to the mysterious stranger. Fascinated by him. Why would a hotel guest smoke in a dirty alley when he could smoke on his fancy balcony?

“I’m trying to decide if you’re old enough.”

“Old enough for what?” She suspected she knew, given his interest, but wanted to be sure.

“Old enough for me.” She saw a spark as he dropped his cigar to the pavement and stepped on it. “What’s your last name?”

What was this? An interview for a date?

“I don’t give my name out to strangers,” she said, rubbing her hands down her arms. It was late March and the weather was warming up after a cold winter, but her shirt was thin and she was catching a chill standing outside in the dark.

He walked toward her, and when she stepped away from him, edging toward the door to the kitchen, he stopped.

“When do you consider a person no longer a stranger?”

His accent seemed stronger the more he spoke, but she still couldn’t place it. “I don’t know,” she said, thinking about it. “Maybe three meetings.”

“How long?”

“What?” she asked, confused.

“How long does each meeting need to be?”

This guy was an odd duck, but he was amusing, so she answered. “At least five minutes per meeting.”

“And then you will consider us no longer strangers?” he asked seriously. “We will be familiar with each other?”

“Sure,” she said, digging her keys from her apron pocket and fitting them into the back door.

“Until our next meeting then,” he said, the rumble of his voice following her as she slipped through the back door.

Their strange conversation was forgotten as Yasmin continued her shift. She worked the 8 PM to 4 AM shift on weekends, which allowed time to study for school. She was in her fourth and final year of an archaeology degree at the University of Toronto.

The night manager approached while she was finishing her room service order. “Yasmin, you’re up. Room 1202.”

She looked at him in surprise as she took the trolley he pushed toward her. He was sending her to the top floor, reserved for their highest paying customers. The executive suites.

Normally, her boss wouldn’t send her to the top floors because he didn’t want her getting the big tips. He hadn’t liked her since she’d refused to go on a blind date with his failure-to-fly thirty-year-old son. She thought she’d turned him down politely, but he’d banished her to the kitchen after that exchange and she’d been washing dishes and running room service for the lower floors ever since.

The elevator dinged, and she rolled the trolley into the hallway. There were four rooms on the floor. She pushed the food to the far end of the hallway and knocked on the door.

About thirty seconds passed before the door was jerked open.

Yasmin could feel her professional expression slipping as she faced a man who looked like he fell straight out of the pages of a magazine for professional security guards. He wore a black suit, but not an expensive one, and he was absurdly alert for the time of night. An earpiece and a buzz cut finished the look. He even had sunglasses sticking out of his suit jacket pocket.

“Name and business,” he said impatiently, his eyes on something past her shoulder.

“Yasmin Mahdi, room service,” she said just as succinctly as she suppressed the urge to roll her eyes. Tray, food, uniform. Duh.

“Let her in,” a familiar voice demanded from behind the man.

He stepped aside, allowing Yasmin to pass.

The man from the alley was waiting for her as she rolled the trolley into the room. She’d recognized his voice, but his appearance up close, without the shadows in the alley, was enough to steal her voice and her senses. She stopped short and stared at him for what could only be considered a rude amount of time.

“Uh...” She tried to speak, but it was impossible when faced with the presence of such a man. She totally got why he was ordering room service at 3 AM. Dude probably needed endless snacks to keep up with the men and women who would line up for his eyes alone.

He stood when she entered the room and came around the side of the couch to stand close to her. Too close. The odour of cigar still clung to him, giving the air a faint spicy scent. Up close, he was breathtaking. His frame was thick with muscle, but he was tall enough to carry the extra bulk with ease. His light grey suit was tailored to every part of him in an almost indecent way. She had a quick peek and... yup... his package was nicely outlined by the material.

His hair was clipped short, but slightly longer and styled on top. There was a shadow of coarse dark hair across his jaw, like he needed a shave. His bottom lip was fuller than the top and he had what looked like a permanent frown line between his dark, obsidian eyes. A faint scar slashed down across his lips and another, deeper scar, bisected his left eyebrow. One of his cheeks was pitted with small circular scars. They only enhanced his appearance, giving him a deeply handsome pirate look.

He held his hand up between them and curled two of his fingers and his thumb down to his massive palm, leaving two fingers aloft.

Yasmin frowned, trying to figure out what he was saying. Was he making a peace sign?

“Second meeting,” he said, smirking.

She remembered what she’d said to him in the alley. Three meetings and a person was no longer a stranger. A giggle erupted from her lips.

“Only if I stay for five minutes,” she said cheekily.

Despite his intimidating appearance and air of wealthy privilege, she was starting to like him.

“You’ll stay,” he said with confidence.

She shook her head, then asked, “Where do you want the food?”

He glanced down at the trolley as though he’d forgotten about the food. She suspected he’d called room service to engineer this meeting and the food wasn’t important. Which meant he would’ve had to ask for her specifically.

She shivered as she imagined him asking for her in that deep, cool voice.

“On the table by the window.”

She set the food out, careful not to clatter the dishes, though there was a slight shake to her hands. As she lifted the lids off each dish, she realized there was enough food for several people. Even with his size, he’d have to be starving to get through everything he’d ordered.

When she turned around, she found him standing directly behind her. She stared up at him and something sparked between them, sending a sizzle through the air.

“Will that be everything?” she asked, her words coming out in a breathless rush.

“Eat with me.”

“I can’t,” she said. “It’s against hotel rules. No fraternizing with guests.”

“I’m different,” he said insistently.

“You make your own rules,” she repeated what he’d told her in the alley.

A smile split his face, his teeth flashing in the light as he laughed. The grin was almost sinister, making his resemblance to a pirate even stronger, but she felt drawn to it... to him.

“Maybe you can break the rules, but I can’t,” she insisted. “I need this job. I have loans to pay.”

He frowned. “Loans?”

“Yeah, student loans, bills, that kind of stuff.” She was about to add – things normal people had to pay – but figured his and her idea of normal were probably wildly different. The cost of the suite, topped with his expensive suit and security detail, made her doubt that he’d have to worry about loans and bills.

“You’re a student,” he murmured.

“Yup.” She moved the trolley past him, careful not to touch his hulking form as she made her way quickly to the door. The other guy was standing in her way. He was as big as Volkan and had an air of casual boredom about him, as if he hadn’t seen action in a while and would love it if his client found an enemy for him to beat on.

She felt Volkan at her back and turned to look at him, her heart beating like there was a tiny drummer hammering away in her chest. She was really hoping he wouldn’t turn out to be a creep and try to trap her in the room. She’d read a click-bait story on the internet once about a woman who was murdered by a guest while cleaning his hotel room.

There was no chance she could take Volkan physically, but if he touched her wrong, she was going to make darn sure she left forensic evidence all over him, starting with teeth and nail marks.

She flinched when he reached for her, but he only took her wrist in a light grip, lifting it between them. She held her breath as he pressed a piece of paper into her palm.

“That was five minutes. I look forward to our next meeting.” He glanced past her to the man blocking the door. “Henry.”

Henry opened the door and she rushed through it, cart in tow. The door closed, leaving her alone and shaken in the hallway. She uncurled her fingers and looked down at the paper he’d given her. It was a \$100 tip.

As she boarded the elevator and headed back down to the kitchen, she wondered about their next meeting. There wasn’t a single doubt in her head that there would be one.

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## Chapter Two



**YASMIN WAS HAVING** trouble keeping her eyes open and was glad when her South American archaeology class finished. She stood and stretched, yawning widely, before packing her books in her bag and pulling it over her shoulder. She left the classroom with her friends, Vanessa and Lilly.

“You look like you’re about to fall asleep standing up,” Vanessa commented as they headed out of the building, stepping into the bright afternoon sun.

“I picked up a shift at the hotel last night,” she admitted. “I didn’t get home until after four.”

“Girl, you have to stop doing that,” Lilly said, shaking her head. “You snored your way through that entire class, and Dr. Holling said today’s material was going to be on the exam and none of it’s in the textbook.”

Darn it. “Can I borrow your notes?” Yasmin asked hopefully.

She hated picking up night shifts during the week, but the hotel paid well and she was trying to work herself back into the manager’s good graces so he’d give her better shifts in the future. Unlike Lilly, Yasmin had to pay for her education. Her father was a retired bus driver and her mother had stayed home to raise Yasmin and her sister. Her parents needed every penny they had for their retirement.

Yasmin didn’t mind. She’d been raised to work hard for what she wanted in life. She used a combination of student

loans and her paychecks to pay for university. She also lived in a tiny off-campus apartment with four other people, including Vanessa, to save on expenses.

Lilly handed over her notes and took off at a jog to catch a train at the subway station nearby. Yasmin and Vanessa headed in the opposite direction.

“Whoa, check out the rich guy.”

A wave of prickles swept across Yasmin’s skin and she knew who it was before she even looked. Volkan Kartel. She’d looked him up in the hotel guest registry after he’d ordered room service on the weekend. She hadn’t heard from him since and had filed him away as decent fantasy material, but nothing more.

When she looked up, she found she was correct. The man had somehow found her at a university of approximately 60,000 students. She’d told him she went to university, but she hadn’t said which university or what department she was studying in, so it was a bit creepy that he somehow found her.

The sight of him stole her breath. Even from across the courtyard, he was impossibly gorgeous. Everything about him was perfect, from his sleek hair to his chiseled jaw, the enigmatic expression on his face and his negligent pose, leaning casually against the back of the car, sunglasses shielding his obsidian gaze. He was wearing another suit, this one dark blue and tailored to leave nothing to the imagination. The white dress shirt under his jacket opened at the neck with no tie. He was staring in their direction.

“Holy mama,” Vanessa breathed.

As they watched, he lifted a hand, pointed at them, then held his hand up to show three fingers.

Yasmin laughed.

“Is he... pointing at *us*?” Vanessa asked, as if she couldn’t believe her eyes.

“He’s pointing at me,” Yasmin confirmed.

“Why?”

“No idea, but I’m going to find out.” Yasmin took off at a jog, heading toward Volkan. Over her shoulder, she shouted, “I’ll meet you at home!”

“Who is he?” Vanessa yelled back, cupping her hands over her mouth.

Ignoring her, Yasmin ran toward Volkan, excitement making her heart leap in her chest. She couldn’t help the stupid grin that spread across her face as she stopped in front of him.

“Stalker.” The breathless eagerness in her voice took the sting from her accusation.

“I admit to asking around the hotel about you.” He pulled off his sunglasses and looked her up and down, a warm glow in his eyes. “Found out where you take your classes. Archaeology. An interesting choice.”

“I’ve always loved history and digging in the dirt for artifacts,” she admitted, wondering who’d blabbed about her at work. She didn’t mind this time since whoever gave up the goods on her had sent Volkan her way.

“You’ll have to tell me about it,” he paused, then added, “Over dinner.”

“Smooth,” she said with a laugh.

He inclined his head. “Your answer?”

She thought about it for all of two seconds. “Yes, I would love to have dinner with you.”

“Excellent,” he said, turning back to the car and opening the door.

Disappointment rushed through her, but then he stepped back and waved her towards the back seat.

“Uh... we’re going for dinner now?”

His dark eyes were enigmatic. She didn’t think she’d ever seen eyes quite that colour. They were black, only a shade or two lighter than his pupils. They gave him an eerie, almost

unreadable look. If she believed in the devil, she imagined he would have the exact same eyes.

“You have other plans?” Volkan asked, a slight edge to his voice.

“No,” she admitted. “But I want to shower and change before we go out. I didn’t have time this morning after working another late shift at the hotel.”

He frowned, the groove between his eyes deepening. “You weren’t on the schedule to work last night.”

Whoever had told him what she was taking at school had apparently also informed him of her work schedule. She should be annoyed, but she couldn’t quite bring herself to be truly upset. Somehow, she’d captured this man’s attention. He was rich, gorgeous and interesting. How often in life would she get to spend time with someone like him?

She was under no illusion that this flirtation would go anywhere. She wasn’t going to be the princess in some fairytale who got swept off her feet and whisked away into a life of luxury. She was an ordinary student who would go on to do ordinary things with her life. But for this moment in time, she was going to bask in the glow of this man’s attention. The niggling doubts creeping in to ruin her good time could just go away.

“Someone called in sick and I picked up a last minute shift,” she explained.

“You look tired,” he said, still frowning as he searched her face.

Not wanting him to break their dinner date, she rushed to say, “No, I’m totally fine. My class on... ah...” She wracked her brain about the class she’d just slept through. “Incan settlements in pre-Spanish times was an eye opener.” He looked skeptical and she laughed, then shook her head. “I’m lying. I napped through the entire class, but I’m feeling refreshed now.”

He stared down at her, as though trying to see into her head. “You shouldn’t lie.”

“I only lie to the people I like.” She inserted an airy note into her tone. “Maybe I like you.”

“Good,” he said, taking her hand and gesturing for her to get in the car. “Because I very much like you, Yasmin Mahdi, and would like to get to know you better.”

She hesitated for a second, glancing around campus before climbing into the car. She shouldn't ride with strangers, but Volkan didn't seem like a stranger to her. Even though they'd only met a couple of times, she was eager to be near him, to learn more about him.

He slid in next to her, his big body taking up more than his own seat, his thigh pressing against hers. He leaned towards the driver. “Take us to Ms. Mahdi's home.” He looked at her expectantly, and she gave the driver her address. The driver didn't put her address into a GPS but pulled the car onto the road. Maybe he was local?

She settled into her seat and looked at Volkan who was watching her steadily.

“We'll drop you off and wait in the car while you get ready.”

She knew the polite thing to do was invite him up to the apartment where he could chill while she showered and got ready, but there was no chance she was going to extend that invitation. She had four roommates, all of whom were weird and wonderful in their own way.

Marshall was a fourth-year veterinarian medicine student who studied non-stop and rarely came out of his bedroom. When he did, his head was in the clouds, and he rarely spoke to the others. Judd was opposite. He smoked a lot of weed and sat on the couch playing video games when he wasn't at work and half-assing his way through his classes. Vanessa was the most normal of the bunch, but even she could be a handful. She loved sex and loud music. She loved them together and she loved them separately, and she did a lot of both. Yasmin wasn't judging, but she didn't want to subject Volkan to that litany of sounds right before their first date.

Hailey was their unofficial fourth roommate. No one knew exactly who she was friends with, but she showed up one day with a backpack full of clothes and a sob story about how she'd left her boyfriend and had nowhere to else to go. She paid rent, ate her own food and slept on the couch, so no one had the heart to ask her where she'd come from and when she was leaving.

When they arrived at her apartment building, Yasmin turned to open her car door. Volkan took hold of her hand before she could leave. She looked back at him, and he said, "Don't keep me waiting long."

The pressure of his hand on hers, the way he looked at her like he was going to devour her made her heart pound harder. It made her want to lean over and touch her lips to his. To give into the blazing chemistry that started swirling between them in that alley, before they even got a good look at each other.

"I'll be right back," she promised breathlessly, pulling her hand away from his and leaving the car.

Her legs wobbled as she made her way across the street and let herself into the building. She was glad to see that she'd beat Vanessa home. She didn't want to deal with questions while she was getting ready. She wanted her brain to be free to fantasize about her evening to come.

Never in her life had she clicked this hard or this fast with a guy. Sure, she'd had crushes, had gone out on other dates, but none of those other guys made her heart race the way Volkan did. His touch, the way he looked, everything about him was perfect.

As much as Yasmin wanted to rush her shower so she could get back in the car with Mr. Right, she refused to forgo the requisite hair removal. She ran a quick razor under her armpits, over her legs, and through her bikini area. There was no time to get fancy down there, so she finished up, rinsed the razor and hopped out of the shower.

She swiped the mirror with her towel and stared at herself, trying to decide what to do with her face. It was heart-shaped with round cheeks, golden brown eyes, a small, round nose,

full lips, a widow's peak, and a pointy chin. Her skin was a few shades darker than her eyes. She was cute, but not drop dead gorgeous. Not someone who turned heads.

She went with simplicity, and added only a light dusting of blue eyeshadow, some mascara and lip gloss with a peach tint. There was no time to do a full face, anyway. She put on her pink framed glasses, wishing she'd ordered more contact lenses. She'd run out months ago and hadn't wanted to spend the money to get more.

She hurried from the bathroom, a towel wrapped around her, shielding her from Hailey and Judd who were on the couch playing Call of Duty. Rushing into her room, she slammed the door shut and flung her closet open. Reaching into the back, past all her practical clothes, she grabbed one of the few dresses she owned.

She'd known from the moment Volkan asked her out that she would wear this dress. It was a hand-me-down from her sister, but it was perfect. Volkan wouldn't be able to resist her in this. It was black with a golden splash at a diagonal angle across the front. There was a cutout in the side and back of the dress, baring her skin. It was a daring dress, but not inappropriate for the type of restaurant she suspected Volkan would choose. She chose a thong for underwear, though she hated wearing it, and pulled the dress down her thighs.

She ran a brush through her damp hair, leaving it to flow down past her shoulders. Sliding her feet into a pair of black strappy heels, she snatched up an evening purse and transferred her wallet from her backpack. Taking one last look in the mirror, she rushed into the living room.

Vanessa came through the front door before she could leave.

"Can't talk, gotta run!" Yasmin announced, hugging her friend on her way out the door and into the hallway.

Vanessa stared after her in shock, then stuck her head back through the doorway and yelled, "I expect a full explanation from your hoe ass when you get back."

“I promise!” Yasmin blew her a kiss before pushing her way through the fire doors and onto the stairs.

Volkan was standing outside the limousine when she stepped from the building. He straightened away from the car and watched her cross the road. His appreciative look made her feel like a million dollars.

“That dress is...” He didn’t finish the sentence, but reached for her, sliding his hand along her waist where the cutout bared her skin. Goosebumps erupted across her skin as his flesh touched hers. He leaned down and touched his lips to her cheek. “You look beautiful.”

She smiled and slid into the car. She couldn’t wait to see what sort of fun their date would bring. Her first proper date in a long time, and with someone like Volkan! There was no telling where the evening might end.

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## Chapter Three



**VOLKAN TOOK** her to an upscale restaurant in the downtown core, not too far from the hotel where she worked. Yasmin had never been inside but had occasionally facilitated delivery from the restaurant for hotel guests.

Volkan held the door for her and they were greeted by the host who addressed Volkan as Mr. Kartel before he could ask for a table. A thrill went through Yasmin. They knew Volkan on sight.

“I’ve never been here before,” she murmured, looking around as they were shown to a table by the window. The room was spacious, the tables set far enough apart that diners could have an intimate experience. The serving staff wore black dress shirts and trousers with long white aprons. They moved with the ease and confidence, carrying their trays with effortless skill.

“I come here frequently when I’m in the city.” He waved the host away.

Stepping toward her, Volkan reached for a chair and held his hand out to her. “Please, sit.”

Yasmin held her breath as she slid her hand into his. She hoped her palms weren’t sweaty. For a moment, as he lifted and squeezed her hand, she thought he might bring it to his lips, but he merely guided her into the seat he held out for her.

She was excited to have dinner with him but also nervous. The last date she’d had took her to a mall food court before they went to see the latest horror movie in a nearby cinema. It

had been fun, but super casual. With Volkan, she wanted to seem sophisticated and worldly, which meant not saying or doing anything stupid.

She slid into the chair, her entire body thrumming with energy. He leaned over to push her toward the table and she looked down at his hand where it was wrapped around the chair. It was strong and masculine, like him. His fingers were long and thick, the nails cut short. There was a smattering of faint scars across the back along with crisp dark hairs.

Her heart beat like crazy as he took his place across from her.

“Thank you for agreeing to see me tonight,” he said, his serious gaze meeting hers. “I don’t enjoy dining alone.”

She felt herself drowning in his obsidian eyes and had to remind herself to respond. “Thanks for inviting me.”

To ease the tension thrumming between them, Yasmin broke eye contact and looked around the restaurant again, glancing at the other diners before reaching for her water glass and taking a hasty sip.

“Do I make you nervous, Yasmin?” The way he asked the question, the way his deep, rich voice caressed her name, sent a shiver straight down her spine.

“No,” she blurted.

His lips compressed and he gave his head a slight shake. “You need to stop lying to me.” His tone had a harsh edge to it, but his next words softened the statement. “Even if you do lie to the people you like. Presumably to preserve their feelings.”

She wished she hadn’t told him that tidbit. It was the second time he’d brought it up. He must be a stickler for lies. She honestly didn’t consider what she’d said a lie. It was a social nicety not to admit that someone made her nervous. She liked the guy and wanted him to think well of her.

“Okay then, you freak me out a little,” she admitted. If he wanted the bald truth, she’d give it to him.

“Good girl,” he said with a slight smile, then turned his head and said, “We’ll have a bottle of the 2018 Le Vignoble du Ruisseau Chardonnay.”

Yasmin looked up in surprise and realized their server had approached the table. He looked somewhat shocked as well at the abrupt delivery of their drink order, but quickly recovered.

“Of course, Mr. Kartel,” he said, bowing his head slightly before turning away from the table.

Yasmin didn’t know how to feel about Volkan ordering their drinks without consulting her. No one had ever done that to her before. It was overbearing, but also masterful. Was it a red flag? Maybe. She hoped not since she was enjoying his company so far.

“I took the liberty of ordering our food,” he said, as if reading her mind. “In case you feel the need to argue, do it now so we can get it out of the way.”

Her mouth fell open, but no words came out. She had no idea what to say to something like that. Was this guy really telling her he’d taken the deeply sexist step of preemptively ordering her food for her?

“What if I want to order for myself?” she challenged.

“No,” he said simply.

“Just... no?”

He smirked at her. “Just no.”

She bit her lip, trying to decide the appropriate course of action. Should she storm out in a huff? Or should she let him order the food and allow their evening to progress? She knew which direction her heart and her girl parts wanted her to go in, but her brain was lighting up with worry.

“I don’t like when people make decisions for me without consulting my wishes first,” she told him, hoping she sounded mature rather than petulant. “I was raised to advocate for myself.”

He reached across the table and took her hand, then slowly... slow enough that she could pull away if she

wanted... leaned forward and kissed her fingertips. "It's my intention that you enjoy this place enough to want to come back with me, and I know the best they have to offer. The dishes I chose are not from the menu, but the chef will accommodate my requests."

She didn't have it in her to argue given the intensity of his gaze and the faint accent that rolled off his tongue like pure liquid sex.

"Trust that you will enjoy what I have chosen for you." He released her hand and leaned back in his seat.

She felt bereft at the loss of his touch and had to remind herself to put her hand down when she left it hovering over the table long enough to look ridiculous.

"Okay," she said in a whisper, then repeated it in a stronger voice so he could hear her.

The way he told her to trust his choices for her sounded more long-term than a meal. It was odd, but she had a sudden premonition of a future without choice. A beautiful, comfortable future, but also dark and sinister.

Only if she continued dating Volkan, she told herself. And only if he was interested in her beyond this one evening. She was happy that their server chose that moment to bring the bottle of wine.

He showed it to Volkan, then removed the cork at the table, pouring a small amount into Volkan's glass. Volkan picked it up by the stem and took a sip before nodding at the server, who then poured the wine into both glasses. He left the bottle in a bucket filled with ice.

Yasmin took a sip of her wine. She wasn't a wine person, but she liked this one. It had a crisp fruit taste with a hint of something smoky. She set the glass down and looked at her date, who was watching her with a steady, unmoving gaze.

"Where are you from?" she asked brightly, hoping she didn't sound as rattled as she felt.

"That is a complicated question," he told her, rolling the stem of his wineglass between his fingers. "I'm from many

places.”

“Talking to you is a bit like talking to a sphinx,” she told him. “Like trying to solve a riddle.”

He chuckled. “A sphinx. Interesting.”

“Where were you born?” she tried again to find out where he was from. “Where do you live now?”

She thought for a moment he wouldn’t answer, and if he didn’t, she was out of there. He was throwing up enough red flags that, rich or not, she wasn’t going to continue an evening with a man who refused to tell her anything about himself.

“I was born in Turkey,” he finally told her. “And I currently have four homes. The first is the home of my birth, in Istanbul. Another is in London, and another in New York. The fourth is on an island my family owns in the Mediterranean.”

She laughed out loud, then realized from the steady look he was giving her that he wasn’t joking. She covered her mouth with her cloth napkin. He owned an island. A whole freaking island.

If he wasn’t lying.

She watched the Tinder Swindler; she knew what people were capable of.

When she’d recovered enough to remove her napkin, she asked, “What’s the island called?”

“Isla Narina.”

“Did you name it when you bought it?”

“No, my father renamed it after my mother when he purchased it.”

“What does your family do that you can afford an entire island?” She didn’t know if it was rude to ask, but she had to know. Maybe islands weren’t as expensive as she thought? Then again, Volkan also owned property in two of the most expensive cities on the planet, London and New York.

“Do you disbelieve me, Yasmin?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“It’s just so…” She searched for the right word and could only come up with, “Unbelievable.”

He nodded, but didn’t seem offended.

“You fear I’m… what’s the term? Catfishing you?”

She laughed and he smiled at her amusement. The word was so incongruous with his personality that she couldn’t imagine him even knowing what catfishing meant. He had an old-world charm that made him seem older than he was. She eyed him, realizing she didn’t actually know his age.

“Something like that,” she admitted. “But the more you talk about yourself, the less I feel like I’m being catfished. How old are you?”

“Thirty-seven,” he answered. “I would prefer to talk about you.”

He was fifteen years older than she was. That was a lot. Or at least, it was a lot for her. She’d only ever dated guys her age. She wanted to know so much more about him, but she’d grilled him enough. Fair play meant it was his turn.

“What do you want to know?”

He studied her for a moment before saying, “Tell me about your family. Do you get along with them? Do they support your studies?”

Yasmin loved her family and had no problem talking about them. She told him about how her parents had immigrated to Canada from India before she was born. She talked about her happy childhood and her sister, Aisha, who was older than Yasmin. Aisha was vibrant and fun to be around. As a child, Yasmin had been jealous of how easily her sister moved through whatever crowd she happened to be in, while Yasmin often felt awkward and out of place.

As an adult, Yasmin had grown into herself and could admire her older sister without feeling jealous. They were

good friends and texted daily, often going for meals and shopping trips on the weekends.

“You love your sister,” Volkan said thoughtfully.

“Of course,” she told him, finishing the wine in her glass. “We’re several years apart, but we get along really well. Aisha is great. She has a good job and sometimes takes me shopping when I’m running low on money.”

“Loyalty is an excellent trait,” he said, then frowned. “What do you mean low on money?”

She laughed. “I suppose someone like you might not understand the concept.”

“Don’t make assumptions about me, Yasmin,” he said sharply.

She swallowed hard. He was right, she shouldn’t have assumed he was rich. Or at least she shouldn’t assume he’d always been rich. He could’ve had a rough childhood for all she knew. But he’d said his dad had bought the private island, which seemed to imply that Volkan had never known a lack of money.

“I’m sorry,” she told him sincerely, then attempted to explain her situation. “I have a job and I work more in the summer, but I save most of my money for living expenses when I’m in school. I use student loans for tuition and books. There isn’t enough left over for things like shopping trips.”

“Your family doesn’t pay for your education?” he asked, frowning.

“They would if they could,” she replied defensively. She didn’t want anyone questioning her family’s dedication to her. They loved her and would absolutely pay for her to go through university if they could. “They can’t afford it.”

“I see.” He glanced at the waiter who stopped by to refill her wine glass.

She noticed his was still mostly full. She wondered why he wasn’t drinking more since he’d ordered the bottle and he wasn’t driving.

The food came shortly after, ending their conversation. Yasmin was relieved. As much as she was attracted to the man sitting opposite her, there was an intensity about him that frightened her. Just a little, but enough that she felt wary whenever his sharp gaze landed on her. When he asked her a question, big or small, it felt like he was memorizing each word that came out of her mouth as she answered.

They finished their meal and left the restaurant. The food was absolutely amazing. Possibly the best she'd ever had. She forgave Volkan for making the grave error of ordering for her and even told him so.

He chuckled and took her hand in his before crossing the street to the waiting limo. "You have learned to trust me."

"Not entirely," she teased. "But if you keep feeding me like this, I'll happily submit to your dining choices."

When they reached the car, she thought he would open the door for her as he'd done before, but instead, he whirled her around and swung her back against the car, cushioning her with his arm.

Yasmin gasped and brought her hands up to his chest. He tightened his grip, holding her trapped between his body and the car.

He looked down at her from his greater height, his eyes glittering in the streetlight. "One day soon you'll learn to trust me completely."

Her heart hammered and her mouth went dry. A primal shaft of fear went through her at his physical proximity and size, but he also exhilarated her. He made her feel things she'd never felt before, and they barely knew each other.

"I'm going to kiss you," he told her, his voice deepening and his eyes dropping to her mouth.

Before she could say anything, he lowered his head and took her lips. His mouth was warm and firm against hers, and when she opened hers, their breaths mingled. Her arms crept around his neck and she clung to him, savouring the crazy sensations flying around inside her.



Rather than deepen the kiss though, he pulled away. “Let’s get you home,” he said huskily.

She was disappointed, but decided it was a good thing. She’d never had a one-night stand before and if she was going to start, it would definitely be with Volkan. Given where he lived and his globetrotting lifestyle, she didn’t think they would be a good fit. Better to not get attached and risk being hurt.

Still... she wasn’t ready to say goodnight and found herself blinking away unexpected tears as she slid into the back seat of the car.

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## Chapter Four



**VOLKAN DROPPED** her off at her door, insisting on walking her up to her apartment where he pulled her into his arms and bent down to bury his face against her neck. The sensations were exquisite, and she melted into him, her breaths coming out in quick gasps.

“I’m leaving,” he said.

“Okay,” she whispered.

“Yasmin, I’ve leaving the city.” He pulled back enough to look down at her, cupping the side of her face with his hand, his thumb brushing the edge of her lips. “My business here is done.”

“Oh.” A shaft of hurt burrowed its way into her heart.

But what right did she have to feel hurt? Of course he was leaving. He was staying at the hotel because he didn’t live in Toronto. He might like her, but he couldn’t stay just to see where their budding romance might go.

“I have to leave,” he said, regret in his voice. “I have business in Turkey.”

“Yes, of course.” She tried to pull away, but he refused to relinquish his hold.

“I’ll be back, Yasmin.” The way his words caressed her name eased the hurt. “You must trust me.”

She nodded.

“Say it.”

“I trust you,” she whispered.

The moment felt surreal. Like a step out of time. They were locked into each other while the world revolved around them. Was this love? She’d never felt anything like it before. They barely knew each other, but the way she felt for him was stronger than a passing crush. His leaving felt like he was tearing her heart in two. She shouldn’t feel this way so soon, but she did.

He nodded and released her, turning away. Before he could reach the stairwell, her apartment door opened and Marshall and Judd spilled into the hallway.

“Hey, Yaz,” Marshall said cheerfully, then grinned as he looked her up and down. “Looking good, babe.”

Volkan turned abruptly and in two steps was back by Yasmin’s side, sliding his arm around her waist. “Pardon me?” he said in a low voice that sent a chill up her back. “Say that again.”

“Uh...” Marshall took a quick step back, bumping into Judd. His expression would have been funny except for the lethal tension thrumming in the air. She didn’t know Volkan well enough to know what he would do, but she could feel the barely leashed violence vibrating through his body as he touched her. He stared at her roommates like he was going to tear them apart with his bare hands.

“It’s okay,” Yasmin said quickly, placing her hand lightly on his chest. “These are my roommates, Marshall and Judd.”

He narrowed his eyes. “These men are your roommates? You live with them?”

Oh god. Instead of defusing the situation, she seemed to have made it worse.

“Yes,” she said. “I have four roommates.”

“All men?” he growled, clearly angry.

She frowned. “Why does it matter?”

“Uh... we’re going to take off,” Judd said, trying to ease past the pair. “It’s cheap night at Webster’s. Yaz, you can join

us later if you're bored."

"She will not be joining you," Volkan snapped, taking a threatening step toward Marshall and Judd who were backing toward the stairwell.

Yasmin grabbed Volkan's arm, trying to stop him from going after her roommates. Rather than stop, he dragged her with him. She stumbled over her heels and would have fallen except he gripped her arm and pulled her against his side, his burning gaze still on the two men.

"Please, Volkan."

Some of the desperation in her voice must've gotten through to him because he finally stopped moving and transferred his gaze to her face. She wanted to shout at her roommates to just go, but they hesitated, clearly not wanting to leave her alone with a crazy person.

"Yaz, you going to be okay?" Judd asked hesitantly.

"She's fine," Volkan snarled, refusing to look away from her.

Yasmin's heart hammered in fear and she wanted nothing more than to escape the look Volkan was giving her. It was terrifying and possessive. Though she barely knew him, something inside her told her he could and would kill her roommates if she said the wrong thing.

"I'm fine," she repeated, her gaze going past Volkan's broad shoulder and begging Judd and Marshall to just leave.

Marshall nodded and jerked his head at Judd. "C'mon, man. We're going to be late."

They left, pounding down the stairs faster than Yasmin had ever heard them move before. It would've been laughable if they hadn't left her behind to deal with the big, angry stranger still gripping her arm.

"You're hurting me," she whispered. He looked at his hand on her arm and frowned, as if only now realizing he was still gripping her arm.

He let her go immediately. "Sorry."

“Sorry?” she said incredulously, taking a step back and rubbing her arm where he’d been holding her. “You’re sorry? You just terrorized my friends and scared the life out of me. Sorry isn’t good enough.”

She reached for her door, wanting nothing more than to escape into her apartment, cry out her fear, then hate this man in peace. Why did she always have to pick such losers? She’d been so certain she’d finally found a good one. He was fun and exciting. They had chemistry. And he went and screwed it all up by confronting her roommates in a frightening display.

She paused, her hand on the doorknob, anger vibrating through her. “What was that?” she demanded as she turned towards him. “You had no right to threaten my roommates.”

“If I was threatening them, they’d have known it,” he said in a level voice, his dark eyes giving nothing away. “I was expressing my displeasure at the way they spoke to you.”

“Marshall complimented my dress!” she snapped, disgust in her tone. “That wasn’t worth what you just did.”

Shaking her head, she jerked her door open, stepping inside. She turned to close the door, keeping her eyes on the floor.

“Yasmin.” She looked at him, and he said, “I’ll see you again.”

She shook her head. “No, I don’t want to see you.”

She closed the door on him and locked it. Stepping back, her gaze remained on the wooden panel as if she expected him to come charging through. The lock looked flimsy. She’d never thought much about their apartment security before. They were all students. They didn’t have much of value and with five of them sharing the same space, there was usually someone around.

“Are you okay?”

Yasmin jumped and whirled around.

Hailey gave her a concerned look from where she was reclining on the couch.

Yasmin heard footsteps on the other side of the door and sighed her relief when she realized Volkan was leaving. She rushed to the window, peeking out as he strode into the street. She wouldn't feel safe until his car left.

Before he climbed into the back, he looked up at the building, right to where she was standing. She took a quick step back but knew he couldn't see her. The curtain hid most of her and the only light in the apartment was the glow from the TV.

Volkan opened the car door and slid inside. Moments later, he was gone.

Yasmin collapsed onto the couch.

She tried to explain what'd happened in the hallway, but as the words came out, she wasn't entirely sure what exactly *had* happened. "I think he was jealous that I live with a couple of guys, but he didn't say much. Maybe I'm overreacting?"

Hailey shook her head and pushed herself up on the couch so she was sitting instead of slouching. "Naw, you need to go with your gut on this. If the guy is giving you red flags and creepy vibes, keep your distance."

Yasmin nodded. Yeah, that was exactly what she thought, too. Though she and Volkan seemed to have incredible chemistry, they hadn't done more than go on one date and share a kiss. She could walk away from this guy.

"I don't think that'll be a problem." He was leaving the city and she would hopefully never have to see him again. She pushed herself off the couch and stood. "I'm going to bed now. Have a good night."

"G'night," Hailey called after her.

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Yasmin had every intention of throwing herself into school and work and forgetting completely about her nightmare date with Volkan.

Unfortunately, he had other ideas.

He may have left the city, but he made his presence known in other ways.

For the fifth day in a row, Yasmin walked into her bedroom to find a new and elaborate display of flowers.

“Darn it,” she muttered, but with little heat. It was hard not to melt a little when the guy was spending hundreds of dollars on flowers. She leaned over to smell the roses he’d sent. There must be at least three dozen of them in the vase. They were red, white, pink and yellow. Gorgeous and bright.

“More flowers,” Vanessa noted from behind her.

Yasmin nodded without turning around. “From Volkan.”

“Obviously,” Vanessa said drily, dropping onto Yasmin’s bed. “What’re you gonna do?”

She shrugged. “Maybe take them to the hotel and leave them in the break room.”

“Not the flowers, idiot.” Vanessa rolled her eyes. “Your stalker.”

“He’s not my stalker!” Yasmin defended. She eyed the flowers. “Maybe he’s apologizing for what happened after our date.”

“I don’t see an apology anywhere in those notes.”

It was true. She assumed the flowers were an apology, but the only thing written on the cards that came with the flowers was two words: Love Volkan.

The word ‘love’ sent a thrill through her. She tried to remember that the man had frightened her. That he’d raised several red flags during their date. That she absolutely shouldn’t see him again when he was in town on Saturday.

She’d been keeping a closer than usual eye on the hotel registry, so when his name popped up, she knew exactly when he was coming back and what dates. She tried to be cool about it, but since the flowers started coming, her anticipation at seeing him again grew.

Flopping onto the bed next to Vanessa, she sighed. “What am I going to do?”

Vanessa shrugged. “Your homework? Don’t you have an exam in Old World Prehistory on Monday? Forget your stalker for a few days and concentrate on the one thing that matters to you.”

“My education,” Yasmin said, nodding.

“Exactly.” Vanessa stood and headed for the door. “Of the bunch of us, you’re the one who works the hardest. Wants it the most. Don’t fuck it up now, just because some guy can’t take no for an answer.”

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## *Chapter Five*



### **“WHAT DO YOU MEAN, NO?”**

Yasmin flinched as Gary’s voice got louder. She looked around but didn’t see anyone else in the hallway. Glad there weren’t any witnesses to the manager berating her, she turned back to him with narrowed eyes.

“I have an exam on Monday,” she explained what she’d already explained in the detailed note she’d left on his desk. “I can’t work a night shift tomorrow.”

“You’re already on the schedule. You have to work.”

“You put me on the schedule without asking first! I don’t work Sundays and you know it.”

“You worked last Sunday,” he pointed out.

“Cheryl asked if I could cover her shift. That’s different from you scheduling me without permission on a day I don’t usually work. You know I’m going to school. When I work the night shift, I’m too tired to concentrate the next day and I can’t do that this week. Too much going on.” She tried to sound reasonable, tried to keep her voice calm, but he was making it very difficult.

“If you don’t work your scheduled shift tomorrow, then I’ll write you up,” he said coldly. “That’ll be two strikes. The next one means you’re out.”

The gleam in his eye told her he’d be happy to see the back of her. She wanted to throw her job in his face and storm out

of the hotel, but she couldn't. The job paid well, and she needed the money.

"Fine," she capitulated, lowering her eyes to the floor so he wouldn't see the hate reflected there. She consoled herself with a mini fantasy where she was rich beyond her wildest dreams and chose this hotel to stay in just so she could torture Gary with endless requests that could only be fulfilled by him. No, she would buy the hotel, then spend a lifetime making Gary pay for his pettiness.

"I'll expect a better attitude when you clock in for work tomorrow." He moved past her toward the elevator bank. She glared at his back as he disappeared, then pushed the room service cart she'd been in the process of delivering down the hall.

She pasted a polite smile on her face and knocked on the door.

Her evening was uneventful, but she was exhausted by the end of it. It took a lot of effort to hate someone as much as she hated Gary. She cursed her luck when one more order came in fifteen minutes before her shift was over.

"I can't catch a break," she complained, collapsing into a nearby chair while the cook completed the request.

When the meal was placed on the cart, she checked the order ticket. Huh. Same room Volkan had been staying in the weekend before. It couldn't be him, could it? Her heart sped up and she contemplated running to reception and checking the name of the person staying in the room.

Never mind. She'd find out when she knocked on the door.

She told herself she absolutely wouldn't feel a thing if it was him. He'd behaved badly in her apartment building hallway and she wasn't willing to forgive him. Still, she checked her uniform on her way up in the elevator. She breathed into her hand, fogging up her glasses, then rolled her eyes. Even if her breath was bad, there wasn't much she could do about it at this point. She wasn't hiding a toothbrush in her apron.

Rolling the trolley off the elevator, she made her way down the hallway, pausing when she realized there was a man standing outside of the room she was delivering to. She recognized him. She'd seen him when she brought room service last time.

She slowed as she approached. He looked just as fierce in a black suit with a crisp white shirt and a tie. She could see the bump of a gun holster beneath his jacket.

“Hi... uh... Henry?”

A slight softening around his lips told her he liked that she remembered him. He moved to the side of the door, reaching for the knob. “Ms. Mahdi.”

He opened the door for her and she rolled the trolley inside, her heart speeding up.

She didn't see him at first, but the scent of cigar smoke drew her to the balcony.

“Mr. Kartel?”

It took a moment for him to acknowledge her presence, but when he did, his smooth voice wrapped around her like a blanket she hadn't realized she'd missed. “It was Volkan last weekend.” His cigar sparked when he stubbed it out.

“That was before you threatened my roommates.”

“I don't like you living with those boys,” he said, stepping through the balcony door and into the suite.

She'd forgotten exactly how imposing he was and took a quick step back. Unfortunately, the service trolley was directly behind her and she bumped it with her backside. It moved, and she started to fall. Before she could hit the floor, he was in front of her, wrapping his arms around her. The tips of her hair brushed the carpet, but she did not. His arms bulged and his scent invaded her nose, messing with her equilibrium. She was both dizzy and breathless as her body remembered his and warmed to his touch.

“You can let me up,” she whispered.

He set her on her feet but didn't step away from her. Each time she breathed, the tips of her breasts grazed his chest. It took her a moment to remember what they'd been talking about. Oh yeah, her roommates.

"It's none of your business who I live with," she snapped, stepping away from him, careful to avoid hitting the cart again.

He followed, closing the space between them again. "I'm making it my business."

"I don't want you to." She lifted her chin in defiance.

He leaned down, his face coming toward hers. Slow enough that she could've moved if she wanted to. She didn't. His nearness was dissipating her anger. She could barely remember what she was angry about. The heat coming off him warmed her and his scent of spice and cigar made her mouth water. His beautiful, enigmatic eyes remained locked with hers as he lowered his mouth to hers.

The only thing that touched was their lips in a chaste kiss, yet her senses went haywire. She was frozen, unable to move, her heart hammering in her chest. Her breath locked in her throat.

When he broke the kiss, it took her a second to realize he'd moved away. She blinked and half lifted her hand to touch her mouth but stopped. She gave herself a mental shake.

"Uh... where would you like me to put the food?"

His brows lowered. "I don't care about the food. I ordered it to get you up here."

Of course he had.

Still, he'd ordered the food, so she moved the food from the trolley to the table. She'd only moved half the dishes when he grabbed her wrist.

"Stop." He frowned at her. "I don't enjoy seeing you do menial work."

She laughed nervously. "It's my job."

Still, he didn't let go of her hand. She didn't know what to do or say. She should be pissed at this guy, but she wasn't. She wanted him just as much as she had when they'd gone on their dinner date.

More, actually. His week away, the flower deliveries, had served to make her think about him constantly. Now that she was with him, the attraction between them flared red hot, sucking the oxygen from the room and leaving her giddy.

"I need to leave," she mumbled, tugging on her wrist.

He didn't release her.

"Why do you need to leave, Yasmin?"

God, she loved the way he said her name with his beautiful accent.

"I like your accent." Darn it, she hadn't meant to say that out loud.

He grinned at her, flashing his teeth. "My native language is Turkish."

She remembered him saying that he had a home in Istanbul.

"Oh." She didn't know what else to say.

"I like your accent too," he said, running his hand up her arm, setting off a wave of gooseflesh in his wake.

"My accent?"

He grinned again. It was stunning. It transformed his face, the creases around his eyes and mouth deepening, and dimples teasing his cheeks. His scars were less stark and he was less frightening when he smiled.

She didn't know where that thought came from. He wasn't frightening... was he? Maybe a little. A man of his size and wealth held a certain amount of power. She kept finding herself alone with him. He hadn't harmed her, but a part of her sensed he could.

"I need to get back to the kitchen," she said, hurrying to the trolley. She took hold of the handle and pushed it toward

the door.

“Stay with me.”

She froze at the door, then turned to look at him. “What?”

He approached, but he didn’t step into her space. “Spend the night with me.”

Her mouth went dry and pornographic thoughts raced through her brain. She’d seen enough and had a good enough imagination to know that she liked the image of his big, naked body tangled with hers.

“I can’t stay,” she said quickly, reaching back to grip the cart like it was a lifeline.

“Why?”

She cast her brain for an excuse and landed on the most obvious and honest one. “My boss would fire me.”

“No, he won’t,” he said firmly, in a tone that suggested absolute confidence. But he was wrong. Her boss would kill her if she spent the night in a suite. Gary would use it as an excuse to fire her.

“I can’t,” she whispered.

“Why?”

“I have to go home and go to bed.”

“Stay with me,” he insisted. “You can sleep here.”

The air between them vibrated with tension. Volkan refused to take no for an answer, but she couldn’t imagine staying with him. They’d only gone on one date and it had ended badly.

“I can’t,” she gasped. “I don’t know you well enough.”

He took her hand and held it to his chest. “You know me.”

She couldn’t think when he touched her. She tried to pull away, but he tightened his grip. “I won’t... I can’t...”

“We can sit on the couch,” he said, pulling her inside and toward the couch. “I want to be near you. To see you and hear you.”

She blushed. “You’re not going to touch me?”

“Just hold your hand.” He pressed his palm over his heart.

What was it with this guy? She knew what he was saying was insane, but he was so hard to resist.

“I shouldn’t.” But she would.

They both knew she was capitulating when her legs folded beneath her and she sat on the couch. He sat next to her, picked up her hand and laced his fingers with hers. A thrill ran through her and she began to relax. Then she sat up straight.

“The kitchen!” she gasped. “If I don’t take the trolley down, they’ll worry.”

“Henry will do it.”

“But they’ll worry if it’s not me.” She wasn’t lying. The kitchen staff was tight. They had to be to survive Gary’s authoritarian regime.

Volkan cradled her face in his hands. “Do you trust me, Yasmin?”

She nodded, though she didn’t know why. She shouldn’t trust him. They barely knew each other, and too often he acted in ways she didn’t like. She believed he could be volatile and unpredictable, but a part of her believed he wouldn’t hurt her. So, she agreed.

“Good, that’s settled.” He leaned back on the couch, then lifted her and set her on his lap.

Yasmin yelped at the unexpected move and sat stiffly on top of him.

“Relax,” he instructed, tracing his fingers down her spine.

She shivered, but gradually allowed herself to relax, leaning back against him.

“This is good,” he murmured in her ear, sending a shiver through her.

She soon found herself cradled in his arms, her head against his shoulder and her feet up on the couch. He slid his

hand down her lower leg to her foot, wrapping his fingers around her running shoe. “May I?”

She nodded, though her cheeks burned, and she silently hoped her feet didn’t smell. She’d worked an entire shift before coming to Volkan’s suite.

He took her shoes off one at a time, followed by her socks, then asked, “Are you comfortable?”

She was surprisingly comfortable considering she was sprawled across another human and a little worried she was about to be ravished. She was even more worried she’d enjoy it.

She nodded against his shoulder and he lifted a hand, smoothing it down the back of her head, before wrapping his arm around her shoulders and holding her tight.

“Sleep, *küçük olan.*”

“What does that mean?” she asked, smothering a yawn.

He smiled down at her, his face a few inches from hers. “It means ‘little one’.”

She frowned. “I’m not little.”

“You are to me.”

Fair enough. And then she did as he told her and fell asleep in his arms.



## Chapter Six



**YASMIN WOKE SLOWLY** to the warmth of the morning sun caressing her back and the side of her face. She was on her stomach, her head turned to the side and when she opened her eyes, she could see Volkan. Well, sort of. He was fuzzy.

Volkan must've moved them to the bed after she fell asleep. The blanket was half thrown across their lower bodies and his arm was laying across the top of her pillow, like he'd tucked her against his side then she'd rolled away from him in the night.

She reached behind her, patting the nightstand until she found her glasses, then shoved them onto her face. Now she could see him properly. His face was less harsh when it was relaxed in sleep, the lines bracketing his mouth less pronounced, and the skin surrounding his eyes smoother. He wasn't wearing a shirt and the slabs of muscle in his back were defined, even though he was relaxed in sleep. Her fingers itched to reach out and trace him, to memorize the incredible wealth of male flesh in front of her.

Oh god, she'd slept with this man. Well... technically, they hadn't done anything, but it still counted.

Morning sunlight spilled across the bed signaling that she'd slept later than she should have. Biting her lip, she pushed herself up in the bed as quietly as possible and crept toward the edge. She needed to leave, gather her things from

her locker and head home to study before coming back to work her unexpected night shift.

Before she could leave the bed, Volkan grabbed her wrist, chaining her in place.

Gasping, she swung around to look at him.

His eyes glittered with watchfulness. Though he'd just been asleep, he now looked wide awake and alert. She blushed at his deep scrutiny, curtaining her face with her hair. It was her first time sleeping overnight with a guy. They hadn't had sex, but she felt like she was about to do the walk of shame. Especially since she had to stop by her employee locker before leaving the hotel.

"Where are you going?" His voice was husky from sleep.

She tried tugging her hand away, but he held tight, forcing her to stay in an awkward half-in, half-out of bed position. Finally, she crawled back onto the bed to relieve the pressure on her shoulder. He sat up, pulling her closer and running a hand over his face, erasing the last vestiges of sleep.

"I have to study," she said. "I have an exam tomorrow."

"Study tonight," he ordered. "I'll take you out for lunch and shopping, then drop you off at home with plenty of time to study. You can't work on an empty stomach."

She shook her head. "I can't. I have to work tonight, which means I need to study this afternoon."

He frowned. "Why would you work when you know you have school tomorrow? That seems irresponsible."

She frowned back at him, annoyed at his assumption. Who was he to tell her what to do with her life? Again, she tried to pull her wrist away, and again, his grip tightened until she was forced to stop. "I rarely work on Sundays, but I took an extra shift last week as a favour and the hotel's night manager decided I could do it again this week."

"Without your permission?" His voice became deeper, angrier.

Yasmin hesitated, then said, "Yes."

“No.”

“Uh... what?”

“No, you will not work tonight. You’ll stay home to study and sleep.”

Wow, did she ever wish the world worked the way he apparently thought it worked. “He’ll fire me if I don’t show up for my shift.”

“He won’t.” Volkan finally released her, threw back the blanket, and rolled off the side of the bed, reaching for his jeans. Only then did she notice he’d taken his trousers off. She looked away, but when his back was turned stole another glimpse. Holy heck, did he ever have a nice butt. Perfectly rounded, tight, his underwear cupping each cheek in loving tribute.

Her mouth watered and she slapped a hand over her lips to stifle the nervous giggle that threatened to erupt. *Come on, Yaz! You might not get out much, but you know what a naked man looks like.*

Despite her little chat with herself, she couldn’t help but glance again when he turned around. This time her jaw dropped, though her hand covered her now open mouth. Holy. Freaking. Heck. Either his underwear designer was a genius, or this man was built... down there. The bulge was everything.

He caught her gaze and grinned at her, showing her the dimple that made her heart flutter. Dragging his jeans up his legs, he zipped and buttoned them. He didn’t bother with a shirt, and she didn’t have the decency to look away from the treasure trail that led from his chest to his ripped abs.

He picked up his cell phone from the nightstand and scrolled through a contact list until he found the person he was looking for. He hit the number and waited. A few seconds later, someone answered.

“Andrew, I need a favour.” No preliminaries, nothing. Apparently, the guy on the other side of the call felt there should be pleasantries first, because Volkan said impatiently, “I’m fine, but I need you to do something for me. I’m staying

at your hotel in Toronto, and I have an issue with one of your employees.”

“What are you doing?” Yasmin hissed when Volkan paused, listening to whatever Andrew was saying.

Volkan covered her mouth with his hand, pushing her back until she was laying down. His hand clamped over top of her mouth didn't hurt, but it was weird and uncomfortable. “The guy's been harassing my girlfriend, Yasmin Mahdi. He put her on the schedule when she can't work and is now threatening to fire her if she doesn't show up. I don't appreciate my girl being treated this way, Andrew. This isn't how a successful business should be run.”

He paused again while Yasmin tried to remove his hand. What the hell was the guy made of? Rebar?

“Appreciate it,” Volkan said after a few seconds. “I thought I would give you the opportunity to deal with him before I stepped in. My methods are harsher than yours.” Apparently, Andrew replied with something funny because Volkan chuckled. “Yes, exactly.”

Another pause, then Volkan looked down at Yasmin and asked, “Is his name Gary?”

Yasmin glared at him, but he simply stared back, his obsidian eyes gleaming as he waited. He didn't remove his hand, so finally, she nodded.

“Yes, that's him,” Volkan said into his phone. “Thanks for your help. I will return the favour when you need one.”

Volkan ended the call and removed his hand from Yasmin's mouth. She sat up on the bed, spluttering. “Don't ever do that again!” She shoved off the bed and stood on wobbly legs, looking around for her shoes, finally spotting them by the closet.

“Do what?” Volkan asked, standing.

His tone was mild, but he was watching her like a bird of prey about to swoop in on its unsuspecting meal.

“Don’t speak for me!” She shoved her feet into her running shoes before turning back to him, her hands on her hips. “And don’t you ever hold me down again. In fact, never mind, it won’t happen again because I never want to see you again.”

“What if you gave me permission?” he asked.

The question was so bizarrely unfitting with what she’d said that when she opened her mouth to snap at him, nothing came out. Finally, she shook her head. “What?”

He flashed her a grin. “What if you give me permission to hold you down? There’s a certain amount of pleasure in feeling your smaller body struggle beneath mine.”

The erotic image he conjured between them sucked all the air out of the room and she suddenly felt dizzy. His bigger, heavier body, naked, pressing down on top of her. The image was exciting and sexy as heck.

She had to swallow before she could speak again. “What’s wrong with you?”

He approached her slowly, as if to show that she could run if she wanted to, but the predator look still hung about him, suggesting he would catch her in a heartbeat if she tried.

He touched a fingertip to her forehead and gently swept her bangs aside, tucking them behind her ear where the sensitive flesh tingled from his touch.

“I’m falling in love with you,” he admitted. “That’s what’s wrong with me.”

She gaped at him for several long seconds until she could answer. “That’s crazy, we barely know each other.”

“Time means nothing when fate brings lovers together, *küçük olan.*”

She shook her head, but the look on his face suggesting he was serious, the heat of his body so close to hers, drew her. “Nothing gives you the right to make decisions for me,” she insisted. “Especially after only a few dates.”

He looked thoughtful, then nodded. “Please accept my apologies. I come from a different place where the men are protective of their wives. Where I’m from, it would be well within my rights to step in and make your life more comfortable.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. His words were meant to make her melt, to make her feel protected, but she resented them. “Coming from another country isn’t an excuse. You’ve been here enough times to understand the way this country works. Even if you haven’t dated here, all you have to do is glance around to see that men are equal to women.”

“There is no such thing as equality, no matter where in this world a person lives.” He smirked, and added, “I see you’ve been checking the hotel registry. You know how often I’ve visited.” He sounded so pleased with himself she couldn’t bring herself to continue arguing.

“Sure,” she admitted. “I was curious about you.”

“As I am curious about you.” He leaned toward her, intent on a kiss.

Yasmin moved quickly away. “I need to get home.”

He shook his head. “You don’t. I had your schedule changed.”

Yasmin pushed back the flare of temper that threatened. “I still have to study for my exam tomorrow.”

He nodded thoughtfully, then said, “Your studies are important to you, which makes them important to me, but you still have to eat.” When she shook her head, he took her chin in his hand and held her still. “You will not argue with me. For your health, you must eat, and I insist on making sure that you get fed.”

She couldn’t help herself. Despite her annoyance, she laughed. The man was determined to spend time with her. She didn’t think she could come up with an argument to deter him and, to be totally honest, she didn’t want to. He might occasionally do or say the wrong thing, but his enigmatic,

exciting personality drew her in. His immense wealth didn't hurt either.

“One meal,” she said, warning in her tone. “Then I go home.”

“One meal,” he agreed, grinning his pleasure before he leaned down and captured her lips in a consuming kiss.

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## Chapter Seven



**BY THE TIME** Volkan dropped Yasmin off at her apartment, she realized he'd tricked her. Not about bringing her home to study. Only a few hours had passed since he promised to have her home early. No, he'd tricked her into a lot more than lunch.

She piled her packages on top of her bed, shaking her head in stunned disbelief then stepping aside as Volkan and his driver strode through the apartment, their arms laden with purchases. She'd tried to say no. *She really did.* Multiple times she'd insisted that he couldn't just buy her things. Not after only knowing her for a little over a week.

Yet somehow, she now found herself the owner of several new outfits, two pairs of shoes, a purse, and a jeweled hairclip. The golden barrette was shaped like an elephant with jade eyes and a pattern of tiny diamonds on its side. She suspected it had cost a fortune. The high-end jewelry shop he'd pulled her into hadn't displayed any prices. He'd simply pointed and paid.

"I... thank you," she said breathlessly as the driver left the room, closing the door behind him. "You didn't have to do all this, Volkan."

He'd run roughshod over her protests while they were out shopping. As much as she'd wanted to summon anger, she'd been too enamoured with his enthusiasm. He was like a boy in a candy store when he was choosing gifts for her. And if she was being honest with herself, it felt good to own some things



that were new and expensive. She rarely indulged herself, instead saving her money for things like rent, phone, and food.

Ignoring her comment, he glanced around with a frown. “This room is too small. Where are the others? Are they bigger?”

Yasmin stared at him. What was he going to do if they were? Force her roommates to change rooms with her? Yes, she realized, that was exactly what he would do. She was rapidly realizing that this man liked to have his own way.

“I like my room the way it is,” she said defensively.

And it was true. She loved her bedroom. In an apartment shared with four other people, her bedroom was the one place that was entirely hers. Her family had helped her decorate it when she moved in, painting the walls a light yellow colour and hanging pictures of her family and friends. Her bed was piled high with pink and yellow pillows and a thick flower-patterned bedspread. Her childhood dresser added another splash of colour to the room.

Volkan’s face softened when he caught sight of the yellow dresser and he ran a finger over one of the hand-painted daisies. “I don’t see a desk. Where do you study?”

Yasmin pointed at her bed. “I pile the pillows up and lean back. I also study in the University library.”

He grunted, then turned to look at her.

She stepped into his arms when he reached for her, as if she’d been doing it her whole life. It felt natural and she fit perfectly against him, her soft curves moulding to his hard body.

She lifted her face, and he took her lips in an exploratory kiss that sent little sizzles of pleasure through her. By the time he lifted his face from hers, she was in a daze.

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay with me for the rest of the day?” he asked, his voice deepening.

Yasmin shook her head, both in denial and to shake away the spark of lust he’d ignited. “I can’t. I really do have to

study.”

He lifted her hand to his mouth and placed a lingering kiss on the back. It should've been a cheesy move, but he made it look sexy. His lips caressed her skin, then he moved away.

“Until tomorrow, then.” He turned to leave.

“Wait, we're seeing each other tomorrow?” she asked in bemusement.

“Of course,” he said with a quick grin that turned his rugged features into a display of masculine beauty. “We'll spend more time together when you're not feeling pressure over your exam. I'm leaving town again on Wednesday and I want to talk to you about something.”

She nodded, not telling him that in her fourth year of university, she felt pressure pretty much all the time. There was always an exam, paper, or study session she had to prepare for. “Okay, I'll see you tomorrow then.”

“I'll pick you up at the University.”

“That reminds me,” she said. “How did you know where to find me that first day you picked me up?”

He gave her another smile, then left. It didn't matter that he didn't answer the question. She liked him and wanted to see him again. As long as he behaved around her roommates, she was satisfied with their dating situation. Though he was intense, she didn't feel any sexual pressure from him. He'd been a perfect gentleman the night before when she'd slept in his bed.

She pulled her books out of her backpack, queued up a playlist on her phone and pulled on her noise-cancelling headphones, a birthday gift from her parents so she could study without being disrupted. She climbed onto her bed and turned her mind to her upcoming exam.

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Volkan didn't leave right away but watched from the street as twenty minutes later a van pulled up and two men got out. He nodded at Henry who'd been in charge of this particular task. He suspected Henry wasn't pleased, but nothing was too small for Volkan's girl.

The two men carried a beautiful desk, guaranteed to be ergonomically correct, out of the van and through the front doors of the apartment building.

Volkan wished he could see Yasmin's face when she received her gift. He knew he was overwhelming her, but he couldn't stop. She deserved the best in life and from what he could see, she lived in poverty, or next to it. Soon, he would change that. She would never again know what it was to go without. All he had to do was convince her to become his wife.

And if he couldn't do that, he'd make it happen anyway. He wasn't an extremely successful and wealthy man for nothing. He knew how to get the things he wanted, and Yasmin was the one thing he desired most.

His phone dinged with a message and he glanced at it.

**Yasmin:** Too much, Volkan! But thank you. I love the desk ♥

Satisfied, Volkan slid into the back of his city car and told the driver to take him to the hotel. He didn't want to leave Yasmin, but he would respect her boundaries for now. He would give her all the things she wanted in life, and right now, she wanted her education.

Volkan didn't care about her studies. She wouldn't need her degree once they were married, but it seemed important to her that she finish. She would be done in a few short months anyway. Then he could move forward with his plans. Until that time, he would do his best to please his pretty princess.

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It was late afternoon when Yasmin's phone rang. She looked at it and rolled her eyes. Why couldn't Aisha get it through her head that people didn't call anymore, they texted. Honestly. Maybe she should quit answering her sister's calls and force her into using messaging instead.

"Aisha, why can't you be normal?" Yasmin said, smiling as she answered her phone.

"I am normal!" her sister defended.

"Oh yeah, what are you doing right now?" Yasmin rolled off her bed and walked to the new desk, running her hand over the smooth white surface. She traced the intricate hearts carved onto the wooden legs.

There was a long pause before Aisha answered. "I'm cleaning out litter boxes in the cat cafe downtown."

"Uh... what?" Okay, Yasmin had suspected her sister was doing something outside of the societal boundaries that dictated what was normal, but this was bizarre, even for Aisha.

"But you're a lawyer," Yasmin stated. "Did you get a second job? One that, I have to say, is pretty far beneath what you're educated for and capable of."

"Cats are never beneath me!" Aisha defended herself. "I need an easy job so I can destress from my lawyer gig, so I'm volunteering at an animal shelter."

It was Aisha's ability to look and sound like a ditz that made her so deadly in a courtroom. She was one of the smartest women Yasmin had ever met and absolutely no one suspected she was a shark underneath her adorable, easy-going exterior. Yasmin, for darn sure, never wanted to be on the wrong side of a courtroom while her sister was working.

"You know cat cafes aren't animal shelters, right?" Yasmin pointed out. "They're like, for-profit, regular businesses, only they also have cats."

“Not these ones,” Aisha insisted. “Most of these fluffy beauties are up for adoption. Hey, do you need a cat?”

“I do not need a cat,” Yasmin said quickly. “And neither do you. You already have like six.”

“Five,” Aisha defended herself.

Yasmin rolled her shoulders back, loosening some of the stiffness from sitting on her bed and studying. Volkan had included an office chair to go with the desk, but she hadn't used either yet. She enjoyed sitting across the room where she could admire them while she studied. Tomorrow, she'd give them a whirl.

“Is there a reason you're calling?” Yasmin asked.

Not that her sister had to have a reason, but Aisha always had something going on and she loved to share with her younger sister. She rarely called without a reason.

“I was hoping you'd have dinner with me. I know you're busy, but it's been ages and we need to catch up. We can call mom and dad and give them an update.”

Their parents lived about an hour outside the city in a smaller town where retirement was cheaper. They were happier being out of the hustle and bustle of city life, but they worried about their daughters. It made them feel better when Yasmin and Aisha made time to see each other.

Yasmin hesitated for a few seconds, glancing at her binder, which was stretched open on her bed and surrounded by papers. She'd put in a few solid hours of study and could use a break. She had a good handle on the subject matter and if she did a few more hours before bed, she'd be golden for her exam.

“Yeah, works for me,” she said, glancing at the time. “Where and when do you want to meet?”

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Volkan glanced at his phone as it chirped. Picking it up, he checked the message, hoping it was Yasmin. He was back in his hotel room, sitting on the couch, the doors to the balcony wide open. In his hand, he held a crystal tumbler filled with the best scotch the hotel offered.

The message was not from Yasmin, but from Henry who was tasked with keeping an eye on her. Another job the man didn't want but knew better than to complain about.

**Henry:** Your girl is on the move.

Volkan frowned at his phone and hit the icon to call Henry. Henry picked up on the first ring.

“I want to know everything,” Volkan growled into the phone. “What she’s wearing, where she’s going, and how she’s getting there? Don’t leave out a single detail.”

There was a long pause, then Henry said, “White dress with pink flowers on it. She’s waiting at the bus stop up the street from her house. You want me to pick her up?”

Volkan thought about it. Yes, he wanted Henry to pick up the girl and bring her to the hotel where she could explain herself. She’d told him she wasn’t going out, that she had to stay home and study. Now she was dressed up for a date and standing at a bus stop. She’d lied to him and he wanted an explanation.

But he also wanted to give her the extra few months she needed to graduate and if he pushed her now, she might become angry. She might try to break up with him and if she did that, he’d have to move up his timeline. She wouldn’t get to graduate. After the years of hard work she put in, she deserved her degree, even if he wouldn’t allow her to put her education to use once they were married.

He had to keep his temper. As much as he could anyway.

“Don’t pick her up,” he said in an even voice. “Follow her and text me the location.”

“Yes, boss.”

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## Chapter Eight



**“YOU'RE GOING** to have to get a third job as a sex worker if you keep this up,” Yasmin said, dipping her chopsticks into her noodle bowl and taking a messy bite. “Six cats are a lot of mouths to feed.”

Aisha tipped her head to the side, a serious look on her pretty face. “What kind of sex work would I do? Professional Dominatrix?”

Their eyes met and they burst into laughter. Aisha was soft and sweet on the outside and a killer in the courtroom. In the bedroom? Yasmin had no idea and she didn't want to know. Maybe her sister enjoyed control in the bedroom. She was an enigmatic, multi-faceted person, which was something Yasmin adored about her.

Yasmin tended to be an open book, a what-you-see-is-what-you-get kind of girl. She thought maybe she could do with a bit more mystery but had no idea how to achieve it.

The two sisters ate, talked, and laughed together, the tensions of a long week unravelling as they enjoyed themselves. When they finished their meals, Aisha pulled out her phone and called their parents, turning on the video chat feature. She set the phone on top of the napkin holder and leaned it against the menu.

After a couple of rings, the phone was answered, and the two women watched the blur of movement as one of their parents scrambled to right the phone to bring their daughters' faces into view. Yasmin muffled a laugh under her hand as her



father's nose finally popped into view, the screen tilted at an odd angle.

“Give me that,” their mother said impatiently, sending the screen spinning again as she snatched it from their father.

Yasmin and Aisha waited patiently for their parents to sort themselves out. Finally, everyone was in view of everyone else and their parents were peppering them with questions. Aisha and Yasmin took turns speaking, reassuring their parents that they were doing great, that school was fine, that the law office was busy but good, that the grand-cats were healthy and well-fed.

After twenty minutes, Yasmin told her parents that she had to get back home to her studies. Her parents kept her on for another five minutes as she described her class in detail, patiently explaining what she was studying for. One thing that she absolutely adored about her parents was their unwavering support. When she'd announced that her degree would be in archaeology, rather than lamenting that her degree was useless, or a waste of time, or trying to get her to change her mind, they'd excitedly researched everything they could about her intended degree and the classes she would need to take. They'd always been the picture of perfect support in her life and she didn't know what she would do without them.

Finally, they let her go, wishing her luck on her exam and extracting a promise that she would request time off from work for a visit home soon. Aisha assured them she would also take time off and accompany Yasmin home.

Content, the family said their I-love-yous and hung up.

Aisha and Yasmin met each other's eyes and burst into a fit of giggles.

“I love our parents, but it's the same every time,” Aisha said, pushing out of her seat. “They have to know every detail of our lives. I'm surprised they didn't ask if our periods are regular and if we need a care package with extra tampons.”

Yasmin laughed and stood with her sister. “They just worry, that's all.”

“I know,” Aisha agreed. “It’s a bit terrifying. That’s why I don’t date. Can you imagine some guy going through the gauntlet of our parents and surviving intact?”

An image of Volkan jumped into Yasmin’s head as she nodded vaguely at her sister. She could see him handling her parents as easily as he handled everyone else, but would they be charmed by him or offended? Somehow, she knew she didn’t want to find out. Another red flag. She was worried about introducing the guy she was dating to her family. Maybe once she got to know him better, she’d feel more secure in making an introduction. For now, she would keep him to herself and see where things went.

The two women made their way to the cash register where Aisha pulled out her wallet to pay their bill. She always paid and Yasmin didn’t argue. Aisha had a lawyer’s salary, whereas Yasmin had to cover university, food, and housing on the meagre part-time income she collected at the hotel.

They chatted as they made their way out the door and into the sunny evening. It was a beautiful night and Aisha suggested they go for a quick walk through a nearby park before Yasmin got back to her studies. Yasmin was about to agree when something caught her eye.

Not something... someone.

Volkan was standing across the street next to his car. His arms were crossed over his broad chest and his suit-clad body was stiff; the set of his jaw and the drawn eyebrows visible over top of his sunglasses told her he wasn’t happy.

Had she done something wrong?

Wait, why would she even think that? Of course she’d done nothing wrong.

And how had he found her in a city of three million people? It couldn’t be a coincidence. A shiver slid down her spine as she stared at him. It was like at the University. He seemed to pop up out of nowhere with no explanation. His idea of romance was starting to feel creepy.

He didn't make any move toward her, but she sensed she wouldn't get far if she tried to leave. His unwavering stare told her he was there for her and no other reason.

Turning to her sister, Yasmin said apologetically, "I really need to get back to my books. I want to do well on this exam. It's important for my overall grade in this class."

If Aisha could understand anything, it was the importance of education. She'd aced her way through her undergraduate studies, then law school, passing the bar exam like it was an insignificant spelling bee.

Still, Aisha frowned down at her younger sister. "Is everything alright? You sound different. Like you're worried or something."

It was times like this Yasmin regretted how close they were. Aisha could always sense her moods. Luckily, her older sister was focused on Yasmin and didn't look around or she would easily spot the hulking figure of Volkan as he stared at Yasmin from across the street.

Yasmin smiled wanly and shook her head. "No, I'm just tired. It's been a long week and I worked the late shift again last night. I'm looking forward to some days off."

Aisha's shoulders relaxed and she nodded, smiling. "When you're finished the semester, we'll take a mini vacation and go see our parents. They'll baby you until you're back to 100%." She folded Yasmin into her arms and gave her a long, hard hug.

Yasmin soaked in her sister's affection, turning her head toward the street and looking at Volkan.

The expression of fury that crossed his features shocked her. She could see it, even through the sunglasses obscuring half his face. It was like he hated that Aisha was touching her, but that made no sense. Why would he care about two sisters hugging?

Yasmin jerked back and to cover her sister's surprise, she squeezed her arm. "I'll call you, okay?"

Aisha looked into her face suspiciously. “Okay. Call me tomorrow after your exam and tell me how it went.”

Yasmin agreed, then watched as Aisha headed for her apartment, which was a few blocks away. She waved and her sister waved back as she reached the corner, disappearing from view a few seconds later.

Taking a deep breath, Yasmin turned toward the street, intent on confronting Volkan and demanding to know why he was there. Before she could check for traffic, hard hands reached out to grip her. She gasped and looked up. Volkan was staring down at her, his eyes burning with anger.

“Volkan!” she said, her voice high with anxiety. “What are you doing here?”

“I think the better question is, what are *you* doing here?” His voice held a sharp edge to it. “You said you would be studying all day.”

She felt her face flush with guilt and annoyance. The annoyance was because she had nothing to feel guilty about, and she hated that he could make her feel as though she had to explain herself.

“I ate supper with my sister,” she said, glancing around. The sidewalk was bustling with people, but only a few cast curious glances their way. “We see each other often and she wanted me to take a break from studying.”

“I wanted you to take a break from studying,” he said, his hands tightening on her arms. “But you told me you were busy all evening. If I’d known you needed a break, I would have taken you out myself.”

Yasmin wasn’t sure what to say. He was jealous of her sister, which wasn’t cool. He needed to back off, but she didn’t know how to tell him. He’d given her all those gifts. Did she owe him? No, of course she didn’t. She hadn’t asked for any of them. He’d insisted.

Yasmin tried to take a step back, tried to break his hold, but he refused to let her go. Suddenly, she felt vulnerable, realizing he could easily hurt her. It was a strange feeling since

she was standing on a busy sidewalk in broad daylight. Yet she sensed that he didn't care. That he would do whatever he wanted to do, regardless of their surroundings and the potential consequences.

"Look, Volkan," she said. "I didn't mean to mislead you. I had no idea Aisha would call. I'd put in a few hours of studying and I was hungry. It made sense to meet her. I didn't think to let you know." She stopped short of apologizing for hurting his feelings. She didn't owe him anything. They were barely dating and after this, she was pretty sure they weren't even doing that. He had to have been watching her apartment to know she'd left, and the thought freaked her out.

"You lied to me," he growled, ignoring her explanation.

Yasmin jerked her arm, finally freeing one of them from his too-tight grip. She wanted to rub away the pain where he'd held her, but he was still gripping her other arm.

"I didn't lie," she said impatiently. "I didn't know I would leave the house when I said goodbye to you earlier."

"You shouldn't have left the house," he said insistently.

Yasmin frowned, anger rushing through her. "You did not just say that to me! No one, and I mean no one, gets to tell me where I should be. I get to decide for myself. There's no room in my life for someone who thinks they can dictate my schedule."

His stare was heated, but the anger was melting into something else... something more visceral. Lust. He wanted her. It was like he was enjoying her anger on some level.

"Is that what you think?" he drawled.

Fury spiked through Yasmin, which was unusual. She was generally a level-headed, cheerful person. She didn't indulge in anger often. Red flag number three. She'd had enough.

"You know what, Volkan? I'm done," she announced, glaring up at him. "You followed me here and ruined what was previously a wonderful day. I don't understand why you think you have the right to tell me what to do and I don't like that

you're jealous of my sister." She paused, waiting for him to deny her charge.

He didn't. He stayed silent, his gaze pensive, as though he was listening to what she was saying, but his thoughts were somewhere else.

She lifted her chin and stared back at him. "I don't like the way I feel around you, and I... and I don't want to see you anymore." There, she'd done it. She'd broken up with the man she'd barely started dating. She's only seen him... what... four or five times? They'd gone on two dates. She'd been on an emotional rollercoaster, and she was ready to get off.

"Let go of my arm," she said in a low voice.

Instead of letting her go, he did the opposite. He jerked her against him, his arm coming around her body, crushing her. He lifted his hand to her face and held her head still as he plundered her lips in a kiss that was both painful and exhilarating. Her heart beat like crazy, sending blood rushing to her head. Her world shrank to a pinpoint, her entire being enraptured by the kiss.

Finally, her brain kicked in and she started fighting him. She shoved her hands against his chest to push his face away from hers. He was immovable.

When he finally released her, she was dizzy and breathless. Her legs would have collapsed beneath her, but his arms around her kept her upright.

She stared up at him, stunned fear striking her. He was telling her something with that kiss; he wasn't going to let her go.

"Volkan..." she whispered, covering her swollen lips with shaking fingers.

"Uh... ma'am... are you alright?"

It took Yasmin a moment to realize a stranger was talking to her and she turned her face to look at him. He'd probably witnessed their kiss, seen the way Volkan had grabbed her and watched as she'd tried to fight him off.

Volkan's face hardened and his eyes gleamed with a deadly light as he released Yasmin and turned towards the stranger. His look alone made the man take a hasty step back.

"Leave," Volkan said, steel running through his voice.

The man did indeed look like he wanted to bolt, but being the good Samaritan he was, he stayed, his gaze firm on Yasmin's pale face. "Ma'am?"

Yasmin sensed the tension thrumming through Volkan and knew he was seconds from violence. It had been the same with her roommates. She hadn't witnessed him hurt anyone, but she believed he was capable of it. She felt it on a visceral level. She couldn't be responsible for this man getting hurt on her behalf.

"I'm fine," she said, forcing a smile to her trembling lips. "We're... we're practicing for a play we're in."

The guy's expression dissolved into relief. "Wow, you guys are great. Really! Very believable. Keep up the good work." He walked away, shaking his head.

Volkan's gaze returned to her face, his frowning expression thoughtful. "Lies seem to spill easily from your lips, my love. I don't like this particular aspect of your personality."

"And I don't like any part of your personality," she snarled, jerking away from him. "This isn't working, Volkan. I don't want to see you again."

She took a quick step back afraid he would grab her again, but he let her go, his gaze following her.

"You're right," he said, his voice enigmatic. "This isn't working."

Her mouth fell open and she stared back at him. He was letting her go? That easily? After acting so jealous? After all the gifts he'd gotten her?

"Goodbye Volkan," she said, backing away from him.

He didn't speak or try to stop her. He just watched as she turned her back on him and walked away.

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## Chapter Nine



**“MOTHER.”**

Volkan approached Narin Kartel where she was sitting elegantly in a chair on the patio next to the pool, her legs crossed at the ankles and tucked under the chair, a porcelain teacup with a delicate rose pattern next to her lacquer-tipped nails. The backdrop of the massive, white-painted, glass-windowed house behind her looked like it could be a postcard. The Black Sea, which was at the back of the property, sparkled a spectacular blue, finishing the image.

“Volkan,” she said, pleasure at seeing her eldest son clear in her voice. “You’re home early.”

“Yes, I finished my business in Canada and wanted to discuss something with you.”

He leaned down to kiss her cheek and she kissed him back before he dropped onto the outdoor sofa next to the chair his mother occupied. Spreading his arms across the back cushion, he breathed in the scent of salty sea air and the sweet fragrance of the estate’s hibiscus bushes, while simultaneously enjoying the sunshine on his face. He didn’t mind travelling, but his heart lay in his home country.

Narin gazed at her son with pride. “It’s always a good day when my son is in residence. What did you want to discuss?”

“I’m getting married.”

She stilled, but her expression didn’t change. Her face was smooth and pleasant, but Volkan knew his mother, knew she

had her opinions. He could sense her worry at the prospect of him getting remarried.

He pushed forward. “She’s Canadian, from Ontario. A student of archaeology. When she graduates in a few months, she’ll come here to live and we’ll have the wedding shortly after. Do you think you can have everything ready in time?”

At the mention of a wedding, her eyes lit up with anticipation. “Of course I can put together a wedding on short notice. Who do you think you’re talking to?”

Volkan chuckled and leaned back in his seat, relaxing. Mention the prospect of planning a large, elaborate party and his mother instantly forgot all her previous reservations.

“What is your soon-to-be bride’s name?” Narin asked, pulling out her phone, opening her notes app, and looking at him expectantly.

Volkan grinned. “Her name is Yasmin Mahdi.” He spelled it for her.

“What does she like?” Narin asked, typing out Yasmin’s name. “What is her favourite colour? What’s her family like?”

“Her favourite colour is yellow.” He’d made the deduction after seeing that it was the dominant colour in her bedroom. “She has a mother, father and sister, all living relatively close to her, though her parents reside outside the city where she and her sister live.”

Narin frowned. “And Yasmin is unmarried?”

“Of course.” Volkan had to swallow the bolt of jealousy that hit him when his mother suggested his future wife might already be married. “Neither sister is married yet. It’s common in a place like Ontario for young women to move away from home to pursue a career before a family.”

Narin’s expression told Volkan what his somewhat old-fashioned mother thought about young unmarried women living away from their families. His father had held similar beliefs. Volkan’s first marriage had been semi-arranged, though the couple was given a chance to get to know each other and the option to back out if a wedding wasn’t what they

desired. They'd both been eager though, and very much in favour of a union by the time the marriage took place.

Volkan was more progressive than his parents. He had to be if he was going to run a multi-national transport company worth billions of dollars. He had to be willing to set beliefs aside to meet potential clients and partners across a globe filled with political tensions. His father had sacrificed a lot of business due to outdated principles. Volkan wouldn't make the same mistake.

"Well, I wish you every happiness, my son," Narin said with a smile. "You deserve it."

Volkan gazed past his mother, his thoughts on Yasmin, as he said, "Fate brought her into my path, and now I will take control of the outcome to ensure Yasmin becomes my bride."

The smile faded from Narin's lips and she looked at him speculatively. "How long have you known this girl?"

Volkan shrugged. "Not long. A few weeks."

She looked worried. "And she's agreed to marry you? Because a woman who wants to marry after such a short time might only be after your..."

"Money?" Volkan said with a laugh, conjuring an image of an angry Yasmin, putting him in his place after her dinner with her sister. He didn't blame her for objecting to his jealous rage, but he wasn't going to let her anger stop them from enjoying a long life together.

She was perfect for him. Young, attractive, studious, serious, but also kind and compassionate. He'd dated plenty of gorgeous and sophisticated women, but none could compare to the way he felt when he was with the no-nonsense student who didn't give one rip about his pocketbook.

He shook his head. "She doesn't care about the money."

"How do you know?" Narin pushed.

"Because she broke up with me." A smile continued to tease his lips. It was a novel idea, the thought of someone dumping him. Women usually fought for his attention, but

Yasmin had rejected him. Not once, but twice. It was an unusual sensation, but not unpleasant.

Volkan was very much like his father. Karim had been stubborn, independent, and ruthless in business. He knew his business inside out, but when it came to the softer emotions, he was often a cold man. Narin had been the perfect complement to her emotionally unavailable husband, bringing him out of his shell and enticing him to join family life. As a result, Volkan had a hands-on upbringing with his father, often going to work with him and learning the ins and outs of shipping.

His father had only ever shown softer emotions to his immediate family, saving the cold and ruthless side of himself for everyone else.

Volkan hoped Yasmin could be that person for him. Pull him from the darker instincts that urged him to do whatever it took to win. To be the best, no matter who he had to push out of the way.

“What makes you think she’ll marry you if she broke up with you?” Narin asked. “Has she forgiven you?”

Volkan shook his head. “No, but she will. With every interaction, I learn something new about her. I’ll use everything I know to make her fall in love with me and accept our marriage. She won’t have a choice.”

Narin looked alarmed. “You can’t be thinking of forcing her into a marriage?”

Volkan nodded. “Yes, mother, that’s what I’m thinking.” His gaze softened. “It worked out for you and father.”

“Oh, my son.” She leaned forward in her seat and took Volkan’s hands in hers. “What happened between your father and me was unique. We were lucky to eventually fall in love, despite our circumstances, but what are the odds of replicating our story?”

Narin hadn’t loved her husband when he first pursued her. She’d preferred a local pearl diver and the two had been making wedding plans when Narin’s father told her she would

instead marry into the Kartel family. When she refused, Karim kidnapped her and took her on an illicit excursion on his yacht where he compromised her innocence. When she was returned to her family, she'd had no choice but to break her engagement with the pearl diver and marry Karim.

She'd been bitter about the forced marriage for many months, but eventually became pregnant with Volkan. Motherhood changed her thoughts on her marriage. She wanted a happy home and did her best to make it so and then one day, she realized she loved her husband. She'd opened up to Volkan about her experience when he was introduced to his first wife. His parents had wanted him to give marriage with Caria a chance.

Volkan shrugged at his mother's words. "I'm confident that Yasmin will learn to love me, too."

"Volkan, my child, you could end up in another loveless marriage."

Narin had been the first to admit she was wrong about Caria, to encourage Volkan to dissolve the marriage. But, like his father, he was a jealous and possessive man and hadn't wanted to let Caria or their unborn child go. By the time he realized they couldn't save their marriage, both she and his son were dead and he was left to pick up the pieces.

"Yasmin isn't Caria," he said, a hard edge to his tone. "I won't allow history to repeat itself."

Narin squeezed his hand. "I just want you to be happy."

He moved his hand out from under hers and set it on top, taking the dominant position. "Your blessing is the only thing I require. Once I have it, I will move forward with my plans."

She stared into his eyes, then nodded. "Of course, you have my blessing."

"Blessing for what?" Volkan's sister came breezing through the patio doors. Defne wore a floaty blue and white patterned sundress that hid the frailness of her body. "What are you planning now, big brother?"

She dropped onto the couch next to Volkan and threw her arms around him, hugging him tight. He hugged her back, holding her unnaturally thin body to his. He'd spent years and thousands of dollars hiring the best doctors and nurses in the world, but she was slowly wasting away with very little explanation as to why.

The current belief of her medical team was that she had an unknown congenital disorder, similar to fibromyalgia that was as yet undiagnosed, or undetectable, with their current knowledge and level of technology. Defne had a host of secondary issues including anemia, vertigo, nausea, headaches, and general aches and pains. Her doctors encouraged her to get a lot of rest, eat healthy, and take moderate amounts of exercise when she was up to it.

Volkan's worry for his sister caused him to spend more time at home than he might otherwise so she wouldn't feel lonely or frustrated at being trapped in the house for long stretches when her illness flared up.

"Your brother is getting married again," Narin said in a bright voice, picking up her teacup and sipping, her gaze on her daughter's face.

For the briefest moment, a flash of fear showed on Defne's face, but she quickly replaced it with a big smile. She grabbed her brother and hugged him, saying, "She's a lucky girl, whoever she is."

No, Volkan was the lucky one, because he made his own luck. And soon, he would have the perfect wife to fit into his perfect life.

## Chapter Ten



**YASMIN WAVED** at her family as she took to the stage, walking nervously across to the dean of her department. *Don't fall down. Don't fall down. Don't fall down.* She spoke the mantra over and over as she accepted her degree and took his proffered hand, turning to the audience and smiling as her father took pictures from beneath the stage.

Yasmin counted the seconds in her head until she reached five, then thanked the dean and took her place with the rest of the graduates at the back of the stage.

As she cheered on the other graduates, her senses prickled with awareness. The smile slid from her face and she scanned the auditorium to figure out what had set off her spidey senses. She didn't get feelings like this often since she was a nose-in-book-ignore-the-outside-world kind of girl.

A gasp flew from her lips as she spotted him. He was unmistakable, with his broad shoulders, above average height, and the intense look about him. He was staring at her like she was his favourite meal and he was going to devour her whole at the first opportunity.

Volkan.

Her heart skipped a few beats, then started racing like it was trying to leap out of her chest and run for safety. She felt dizzy and hot. Looking around, she searched for a way off the stage without drawing notice. There was no help for it, she'd just have to stand there and wait for the ceremony to finish.

Her gaze swung back to the audience, seeking the man who'd come to watch her graduation ceremony, despite her dumping him a few months earlier. She half expected him to disappear like he'd been a figment of her imagination, but there he was, his gaze unwavering, his arms crossed in front of him, his biceps straining his suit jacket.

He didn't take his eyes off her, didn't look away once.

She was strangely happy to see him, despite the bad ending to their last meeting. She pushed the elation aside though and forced her logical brain to prevail. It didn't matter how he made her feel, the guy was toxic. She'd been lucky to escape her relationship with him unscathed, heart intact. She hadn't known him long enough to fall in love, but she suspected it wouldn't have taken long had she allowed the relationship to grow. All the red flags he'd shown in their brief time together were still valid. The man was no good and she refused to date someone like him.

Yasmin jumped as her classmates shouted, clapped, and threw their hats in the air. Belatedly she flung her hat as well, then, during the chaos, stepped out of the crush of students and ran for the edge of the stage. She wasn't the only one to head off the stage to talk to their family, so it didn't look weird when she plowed into the audience.

"Be right back," she said breathlessly as her mother reached out to embrace her.

Shocked, her mother watched her as she ran through the audience toward where she'd last seen Volkan. Everyone was standing and moving and she lost sight of him. Frustrated, she stopped and turned on the spot, searching the crowd. She hoped to see his head above everyone else's but was disappointed.

Giving up, she turned back to her family, but Volkan stepped into her path, taking her by the arms and stopping her.

"Yasmin," he said in his smooth, deep voice, sending a cascade of shivers down her spine.



“Volkan.” The world around them disappeared and she was transported back to the moment they first met. The scent of his cigar, his voice as they spoke, his intriguing shadowy presence. “What are you doing here?”

“Today is a special day,” he says enigmatically. “I wouldn’t miss it.”

It surprised her that he even knew the date of her graduation. Or perhaps she wasn’t. During their brief time together, she’d noticed he had an eye for detail, especially where she was concerned.

“I have to get back to my family,” she said, her voice low and regretful. Though she knew better, part of her wanted to stay with him. To absorb the heat from his big body, hear the deep throbbing words of romance as he spoke to her.

God, she was an idiot.

His eyes moved past her, then narrowed. She knew her parents and sister were making their way over. He released his grip on her.

“Enjoy your time with them.” Though the words seemed like normal well-wishes, there was an ominous edge to his tone. It was like he silently tacked, *while you can*, onto the end of the sentence.

She stepped away and turned to search for her family. They were several feet away and closing in. She felt safer with them at her back and turned to confront Volkan again, but he was gone. She searched for him and saw him melting into the crowd.

“Volkan!” she called, but seconds later he disappeared.

“Is everything alright, Yaz?” her mother asked, coming to stand next to her. “Who was the man you were talking to?” Her mother’s tone was curious, with a hint of hopeful.

Yasmin spent most of her life focused on her studies, the opposite sex rarely interesting her enough to pull her away from her books. Her sister was more outgoing than Yasmin, but similar in that she didn’t date often. Their mother feared she would die without grandchildren.

“Someone I met a few months ago,” Yasmin murmured, staring at the spot where she’d last seen him. “He wanted to congratulate me.”

“He’s very handsome,” Aisha said, appearing on Yasmin’s other side.

“Yes, he is,” Yasmin agreed.

“I don’t like the looks of him,” her father grumbled from next to his wife. “A polite man would’ve stayed to meet your family. Stay away from that one, daughter. He’s nothing but trouble.”

Yasmin laughed, though she agreed with him. Volkan *was* trouble.

While her mother desperately wanted grandchildren, her father would die a happy man if his daughters forsook dating in favour of a tranquil life of study and spinsterhood.

Yasmin linked her arm with her sister’s and forced a smile onto her lips. Though Volkan’s sudden appearance had rattled her, this was her graduation, and she was going to enjoy it. “Where are you taking me for supper? I’m starving.”

Her parents took her and her sister out to a fancy restaurant where they shared a bottle of sparkling wine and toasted the graduate. They wrapped up their mini family reunion early since her parents had a long drive home.

Yasmin hugged her parents goodbye and she and Aisha waved as they drove away. When their car disappeared around the corner, Aisha turned to her. “Okay, graduate, where’s the real party at?”

Yasmin laughed and told her sister that she was meeting her roommates and a few friends at a nightclub. Aisha perked up, and Yasmin invited her along. Aisha was always a good time, even if she stole the attention with her beauty and quirky personality.

“What are you wearing?” Aisha asked, passing a critical eye over her sister as Yasmin opened her coat. Shaking her head, Aisha rejected Yasmin’s leggings and cardigan sweater.

“Absolutely not. You’re a grownup now. It’s time to set away the girlish things and embrace your sex appeal.”

Yasmin laughed but agreed to the short walk back to Aisha’s place where the two women shared a few glasses of wine and went through Aisha’s wardrobe, which was much more extensive than Yasmin’s.

In the end, Yasmin chose a leather miniskirt and a cherry red cropped sweater that showed off a swath of her tanned belly. Her feet were smaller than Aisha’s so she had to wear her Mary Jane’s, which didn’t quite go with the outfit.

Aisha chose a pair of low-riding jeans with rips in the thighs and a black and gold bustier with a wealth of gold necklaces ringing her throat. With her long black hair falling in ringlets around her shoulders, Aisha was stunning. She paired her outfit with three-inch heeled calf boots.

“Let’s go, baby sister,” Aisha announced, locking up her apartment and leading the way down to their waiting cab.

Yasmin’s roommates met them with a chorus of shouts and waves. All except Hailey had graduated and were there to celebrate their success. They indulged in shots and danced up a storm. It was a rare night that found Yasmin in a nightclub. The sights, sounds and moving bodies were overwhelming for her, but on her graduation night, she truly enjoyed herself.

“When are you leaving for London?” Marshall shouted in her ear, dancing next to her, his body occasionally brushing against hers.

“Tomorrow morning,” she yelled back. “I have to be at the airport early.”

He made a face and placed his hands on her hips, pulling her closer to his sweaty body. “I’m going to miss you. I’ve really enjoyed being your roommate.”

His words and his touch surprised Yasmin. Their friendship had always been platonic without a hint of romance. Then again, she wasn’t one to pay attention to subtle hints when it came to boys having crushes on her.

“You’re drunk,” she said with a laugh, pushing gently against his chest to put more space between them.

“Yeah, but I’m saying what I’ve been thinking for months.”

“How come you never said anything then?” she asked impatiently. Why tell her on the eve of her departure for a new adventure?

“I knew you’d turn me down,” he admitted. “You don’t date.”

“That’s not true,” she defended herself.

She opened her mouth to say that she’d dated Volkan when suddenly he was right there in between them, shoving Marshall so hard he stumbled backwards into the crowd which immediately absorbed him. Yasmin gasped and took a quick step back as Volkan swung around to face her, his expression a mask of fury.

He dragged her off the dance floor, his steel grip bruising. Yasmin was so shocked she allowed him to pull her toward the back door of the club and out into the cool night air without resistance.

Once they were outside, the shock of cold air woke her from her stupor and she yanked her arm. “Let me go!” she snapped at him. “Volkan, what the hell are you doing?”

He turned back to her, lifting her arm and shaking it. “*Şu anda üzerinde ne var,*” he snarled.

Though she didn’t understand the words, the tone was spoken with derision.

“I don’t understand,” she said bewildered, tears starting in her eyes. “Volkan, you’re scaring me.”

“I said,” he spoke from between gritted teeth. “What the fuck are you wearing? You look like a whore.”

She gasped and a tear escaped. She swiped at it with her free hand and said defiantly, “I don’t care what you think. We aren’t together, Volkan.”

He ignored her as his eyes landed on a car turning into the alley. As it came closer, Yasmin spotted Henry at the wheel.

“No, I’m not going with you,” she said insistently, still trying to free herself.

“You don’t have a choice,” he said grimly.

Yasmin looked around frantically. There was no one in the alley outside the nightclub except for them. “Help!” she called. “Someone help me!”

Volkan swung her around, pushing her back against the alley wall. He covered her mouth with his hand. “Shut up, you little idiot.”

She mumbled ‘fuck off’ against his hand and he narrowed his eyes at her.

“I’m not kidnapping you, Yasmin,” he said, giving her a shake before removing his hand from her mouth. “I’m sending you home where you will remove this offensive outfit and go to bed. You have a long flight tomorrow and need your rest.”

“Oh,” she said, deflating. Wait, did he say long flight? “How do you know about my flight?”

“Same way I knew today was your graduation day,” he replied, his dark eyes on Henry as he rounded the car to open the back passenger door open for Yasmin. “I know everything about you.”

“But we’re not together. Why do you care what I’m doing or how I’m dressed? How do you know so much about me? I don’t like this, Volkan.”

“Right now I don’t care what you like or don’t like.” Volkan marched her toward the car. He put one large hand on her head and pushed her down into the dark interior. He hunched down to look into her face, taking her chin in hand and running his thumb over her bottom lip. “But there will come a day when I will care very much.”

“I don’t like when you say things like that to me,” she whispered, then leaned away from him, setting her back

against the seat and staring stonily forward. “You’ve ruined what should’ve been a celebration. I just want to go home.”

He said nothing for a moment, then he said, “Soon, *küçük olan*, soon you will be home.”

His words were ominous, like the ones he’d spoken after her graduation ceremony. He closed the door and stepped away from the car. She wondered why he wasn’t coming with her. After all, this was his car and Henry was his... whatever Henry was. Bodyguard, driver, shadow puppet.

Yasmin pressed the button to open the window and called out, “Where are you going?”

“To have a chat with your handsy friend,” he said grimly, turning his back on her.

“No!” she gasped, reaching for the door handle to stop him. Before she could get the door open, the locks engaged, and her window rolled up.

She turned her glare on Henry who met her eyes in the mirror. “You’ll be home soon, Ms. Mahdi.”

## *Chapter Eleven*



**THE AIRPORT WAS CHAOTIC,** but Yasmin made it to her gate with more than enough time to spare. Yawning wide, she collapsed into her seat and rubbed a hand over her eyes. She was exhausted from a mostly sleepless night of waiting for either Volkan to show up or her roommates. Oddly, neither of them had appeared, and she'd eventually fallen asleep.

The next morning she was up at 6:00 AM and discovered a text on her phone saying that Marshall had been injured at the nightclub and was taken to the hospital for a crushed hand. Guilt shot through Yasmin and she nearly called Vanessa, who'd gone with him. But what was there to say? That her jealous sort-of-ex-boyfriend had stormed back into the club and done something to Marshall to teach him a lesson?

She chewed her lip and finally settled on a text asking after Marshall's injuries. If they were bad, she'd find some way to let them know her suspicions so they could pass the information on to the police. Still, she thought Volkan was too wily, too rich and powerful to face any consequences for his behaviour. A chill snaked down her spine. Men like him were dangerous and she was happy she was flying half a world away from him.

Wait, didn't he say he owned property in London?

Still, what were the odds of them running into each other? Good, she decided, considering the way he continually crashed

into her life. She'd have to keep her eyes open and if there was any hint of him, find a way to cut him out of her life.

Boarding for her flight was called and she stood with her carry-on bag. She found her seat and watched as everyone else found theirs. There was one other person in her row but no one between them, so she could stretch out.

As the plane took off and she watched the city of Toronto fall away below her, her excitement for her coming adventure grew. Reaching into her carry-on, she pulled out the offer letter from her contact in London.

Dear Ms. Mahdi,

We are pleased to invite you into our summer archeological internship program. You can expect to travel to different dig sites within the United Kingdom and Europe. You will join a team of dedicated archaeologists under the care of Dr. Susan Ward, who will head the team. Please let us know as soon as possible if you intend to accept this position and we will make arrangements for your travel and accommodation.

Sincerely,

Marcus Hunter, BA, MA

The Archaeological Society of London

Yasmin had applied for several internships and was beyond excited to receive an acceptance letter. She had immediately taken the offer. After, at her parent's insistence, she did a little digging and made sure the people she was corresponding with existed and were who they said they were.

Sure enough, she found a bio for Dr. Susan Ward on the London Archeological Society website. Her main area of study was Viking pre-history and she'd conducted several important digs, unearthing information that changed the archaeological landscape forever.



Yasmin was surprised she'd never heard of the women before, since the field of archeology wasn't a huge one and the most prominent professors in the field tended to pop up in textbooks and papers. Studying her picture, Yasmin decided the woman had a quietly intelligent look about her.

She folded up the letter and put it in her backpack. She'd been corresponding with Dr. Ward's graduate student, Marcus Hunter, and he'd repeatedly assured her that they were excited to have her as part of the team and that everything was taken care of. There would be a car waiting for her at the airport, which would take her to a flat that she would share with two other interns.

She was excited and nervous. She felt like she hadn't slept in days. Worry had kept her up. Did she miss packing something; did she pack too much? She'd ripped apart her suitcases so many times that Vanessa finally moved them into her room so Yasmin would stop fussing over them.

Her parents were the same; excited for her, but also nervous. They'd wanted to talk directly to the professor who would mentor her, but Yasmin managed to convince them not to hunt down the woman's contact information. Yasmin was twenty-two; her parents had to let her fly on her own sometime.

Despite being tired from too many sleepless nights, Yasmin was too energized to fall asleep. She couldn't wait to get to London and explore a brand new city in a brand new country before going on her first dig, which would be in Scotland at a Viking burial site discovered in the mountainous highlands region.

She was served a meal on the plane, which she ate and enjoyed more than she thought she would, having heard about generic airline food from other people. Then she chose a movie and settled back in her seat to watch.

Several hours later, the plane landed in London.

Standing, Yasmin stretched, twisting the kinks from her back before getting off the plane. She walked slowly, following the rest of the passengers through customs where

she dutifully answered the questions asked by a border official before heading toward the baggage area.

She smothered a yawn and blinked, looking around. Excitement was giving way to bone-deep exhaustion, and she still had to get to the flat before she could collapse. She spotted a man holding a sign that read ‘Yasmin Mahdi’ and headed toward him. She slowed as she approached, taking in his large, muscular body in a black suit. He looked more like Volkan’s bodyguard, Henry, than a town car driver.

Now, where had that thought come from?

She’d managed to go the entire flight without once thinking of Volkan. When her thoughts started to stray his way, she shoved them forcibly aside. She was wasting too much time thinking about a man she never wanted to see again.

Yes, he was super hot, with a scorching body and eyes that seemed to delve right into a woman’s inner thoughts. He had money and charisma. Everything a young woman should want... but that wasn’t all there was to him. There was a frightening side; the side that kept coming out when he was with her, particularly when she was paying attention to someone else.

There she went, thinking about him again. She would have to dig him out of her brain and toss him to the wind. She was half a world away from him. The likelihood of ever seeing him again was extremely low. She was safe.

Yet, somehow, that thought didn’t make her feel better.

“Hello, I’m Yasmin,” she said, approaching the man in the dark suit.

He nodded and tossed the sign in a trashcan. “Let’s get your bags.”

Yasmin trailed after him as he went toward the conveyor belt that would circulate the luggage from her flight. She pointed out the bag as it came down, and he hefted it over his shoulder. It weighed exactly fifty pounds, the weight limit for her flight, and he lifted it like it was nothing.

“This all?” He took her carry-on from her as well.

She nodded and then followed him as he strode through the other passengers. She noticed a couple of other guys dressed like him that seemed to follow them, but she assumed they were probably other drivers picking up their newly arrived passengers.

“Here.” The driver led her to a car and opened the back door.

She slid inside, grateful to be seated again. Despite the long flight, her body felt like it was working against her. She desperately needed to sleep. She felt a thump from behind her and turned to watch as the driver slammed the lid to the trunk after tossing her bag inside.

The windows were tinted but she could easily see out.

As he climbed into the car, she asked, “How long will it take before we arrive at the flat?”

“Nearly an hour at this time of day.”

Yasmin almost groaned out loud. She didn’t think she could stay awake that long.

“Here.” The driver reached for something and handed it back to her. “You’ll be thirsty after your flight.”

She noticed a small cooler in the front seat of the car and wondered if he offered drinks to all his passengers. It was a good way to get a five-star review. He was right, she was thirsty. She twisted off the cap and drank deeply, feeling slightly better after she’d downed half the bottle.

“Thanks,” she said. “I needed that.”

“Why don’t you sit back and close your eyes,” he said, his eyes meeting hers in the rearview mirror as he started the car. “I’ll wake you up when we’re there.”

She smiled at him and murmured her thanks, but a feeling of vulnerability washed over her. She was in a strange country, in a car with a stranger. What if he was a serial killer and she’d just fallen into his trap? But no, he had that sign with her name on it. How would he have known who she was if Dr. Ward hadn’t hired him? Or maybe Dr. Ward accidentally hired a

serial killer. How would she know? It probably wasn't on his resume.

Yasmin giggled at her dark thoughts as they left the parking garage and then perked up when they headed into London. She was awed by the sights they passed and eagerly absorbed everything while trying to ignore the creeping exhaustion.

They'd been driving for about fifteen minutes when Yasmin realized something was wrong. She lifted her hand and tried to brush her hair out of her face but ended up smacking herself in the nose. Her hand, her entire arm, felt rubbery. Like it belonged to someone else.

She tried to lift her other hand and focus on it, but it swam in and out of her vision. The car spun around her as she blinked several times. She was tired, but this was ridiculous. Never in her life had she been so tired that she couldn't work her own hands.

“Uhhh...” Had the driver told her his name? She couldn't remember. “Ummm sir? I'm not feeling very well. Can we pull over? I think I need to get some fresh air.” In her mind, her words sounded just fine, but to her ears they were slurred and almost incomprehensible. Was she having a stroke?

Panic pricked at her brain as she realized something was very, very wrong. Even if she sounded muddled, the driver should still have heard her attempting to speak to him, but he hadn't responded.

“Help!” she said as loud as she could, flailing her arm toward him.

It fell uselessly and her body slumped down. It was getting harder and harder to focus. Oh god, was she being kidnapped?

She reached for the doorhandle, which was next to her arm, sliding her fingers in and waiting for an opportunity. The world continued to swim around her, but when the car stopped, she yanked on the door handle with as much strength as she could muster. Nothing happened.

“The doors are locked, Ms. Mahdi.”

Oh god! Her kidnapping theory had just become a reality.

“Please...” she slurred right before the world went dark.

She didn’t know how long she was out for, but eventually she felt a rush of air over her prone body as the door next to her opened. She tried to see who was unbuckling her seatbelt, but she couldn’t seem to pry her eyes open.

Then she was being lifted into the air and settled against something warm. It was solid and she could rest her cheek against it. She felt safe, though her brain screamed at her that she was definitely being kidnapped and should probably do something about it.

A garbled, unintelligible plea left her lips as she tried to call for help.

She felt movement and realized someone was bending their head to hers.

“Please... help...” she whispered, trying to be as clear as possible.

“I have you, my love,” the voice floating above her said. “Welcome home, Yasmin.”

## Chapter Twelve



**YASMIN'S HEAD FELT FUZZY.** She tried to lift her hand to touch it, but her arm was trapped. Frowning, she tried to extricate it from the covers, but the covers wouldn't move. She cracked an eye to see what the problem was and the room swam in her vision.

“Take it easy, *aşkı*m.”

She froze. Why was there a masculine voice in her bed? There shouldn't be a man anywhere near her bed.

“Who... where...?” The words felt stuck in her mouth, coming out in a slurred mess. She didn't even know what she wanted to say.

Images began coming to her in flashes. An airplane, a car, London, a bottle of water, and... Volkan!

“No, no, no!” she mumbled, trying to scramble up the bed and away from the voice.

“You're safe, Yasmin.” Hands gripped her arms to stop her frantic movements.

It was *his* voice and *his* hands! Volkan!

She did her best to focus, blinking several times until she could see clearly.

Finally, she could see his face hovering over her, a sympathetic smile stretching his lips. She wanted to slap it off his face, to scream at him to get away from her, but she was too sluggish.

She needed to use her head and think her way out of this... whatever *this* was. Unfortunately, her head felt like it was filled with cotton balls and she couldn't think straight.

"Where am I?" she asked, trying to sort out what information she needed most to survive this ordeal.

"You're in my London penthouse," he told her, his hands sliding up her arms to grip the sleeves of her shirt.

She looked down and gasped. The buttons of her shirt were undone and it was gaping open, her bra exposed to Volkan's heated gaze. She tried covering her breasts, her movements clumsy, but he took her wrists and pushed them away.

"You're too beautiful to hide," he murmured, his gaze on her exposed skin. He pushed the sleeves of her shirt off her arms.

She slapped at his hands and tried to move away, but he easily knocked her efforts aside and stripped the shirt from her body.

"Stop it!" she cried out.

He took her chin in his hand and forced her to look at him.

"It's time to stop fighting what we have between us. I've wanted you from the first moment I saw you outside by that trash bin and my desire for you has only grown stronger since then." He slid his hand into the front of her shirt and cupped her breast over her bra. "We're meant to be together, and I will do whatever it takes to keep you, to make you fall in love with me."

She stared at him in horror. He was crazy. He was a crazy rich person who believed he could do anything he wanted. He'd kidnapped her!

"No!" she gripped his wrist and tried to shove his hand away, but he refused to budge. "I don't love you and I don't want to be here!"

His hand tightened and his eyes reflected a manic glow, like some demon was driving him. "You may not love me now, but you will."

His fingers clenched into the soft tissues of her breast, driving a gasp from her lips. It didn't hurt, but the threat was clear. She stopped trying to pull his hand away.

“You'll see how much I love you when I lay the world at your feet. I'll give you everything your heart can possibly desire and you won't have a choice but to love me back.”

His once sexy accent became sinister to her ears, and she wanted nothing more than to get the hell out of there.

“You kidnapped me.” She stated the obvious, still in shock. Maybe she just needed to be sure they were on the same page. That this was indeed a kidnapping. It seemed so fantastical that she was having trouble wrapping her mind around the concept.

He sighed and slid his hands up and down her arms in what she suspected he thought was a soothing manner, but right at the moment his touch made her feel sick. She wanted to push him away, but she also wanted to know what was happening to her and he was the only one available to answer her questions.

“I've temporarily taken control of your life because you weren't going to come to me any other way,” he said in a reasonable tone. “You made it clear that you couldn't be with me on your terms and I respected that. I allowed you to finish your education before removing the obstacles between us. Now you're free to be with me.”

She stared at him, her mouth open. “You're delusional.”

He shook his head. “There's nothing more real than being with the woman I love. In time, you'll come to see what I mean and appreciate the lengths I've gone to ensure our future happiness.”

She shook her head. “No, Volkan. I don't want to be here with you. You're wrong, I won't change my mind.”

“You will,” he said matter-of-factly, his gaze dropping down her body. “Let's get you out of these clothes. You've been travelling in them and will want to freshen up.”



“No, I don’t want to!” She tried to move away from him, but the drug he’d given her was still in her system. He took hold of her like she was nothing more than a doll, maneuvering her easily as he removed her jeans, stripping them down her legs and leaving her in her underwear, bra, and socks.

She fell onto her back with him on top of her.

Lust ignited his gaze into a dark fire as he touched her. He didn’t acknowledge that she was fighting him, pushing frantically on his shoulders to get him off her.

He pinned her wrist over her head, burying his face in her neck where he kissed her, sucking her skin into his mouth. He groaned at the contact, shoving his hips between her legs and spreading them before settling himself against her, his denim-clad lower body pressed against her. She felt his cock straining to be free as he pressed it into the thin cotton panties covering her pussy.

“Stop!” she yelled, pushing against him.

It was like trying to remove a boulder.

“Been waiting so long for this,” he groaned against her, kissing his way up to her ear and dipping his tongue inside.

“Oh!” she gasped as sensation slammed into her.

It was an involuntary reaction, but it woke her up even more and she began fighting him in earnest, shouting to get his attention. “Volkan!”

His head snapped up and his gaze cleared. He didn’t get off her, but he stopped kissing her and running his hands over her body.

“Please stop,” she said, meeting his gaze. “I don’t want this.”

“You will,” he insisted.

She shook her head. “We barely know each other. I’m not ready for this.”

“We have the rest of our lives to get to know each other,” he countered. “I want you, Yasmin. This is the moment I’ve been waiting for. I have shown more patience than I thought I was capable of, and now it’s your turn to give me what I want.”

“Please, Volkan,” she whispered, holding his gaze. “I’m scared.”

Something in what she said, or how she said it, finally caught his attention. He rolled off her and dragged the blanket up her body, covering her nudity.

“You aren’t feeling well after your flight,” he announced, pushing himself off the bed. She cringed back against the pillows. “You have your reprieve, Yasmin, but I won’t allow your resistance for long. You need to accept that we’ll be together.” He strode to a door and opened it. “You can take a shower in here. Freshen up and meet me in the dining room for supper.”

It was supper time? When had she arrived? Her flight landed at 2:00 PM. She twisted on the bed and looked toward the window where the sky was rapidly darkening. She gathered the blanket around her, steadying herself against the headboard as she stood.

When she was sure her legs would hold her weight, she made her way to the window. Her mouth fell open when she realized exactly how high up Volkan’s penthouse was. An unfamiliar city sprawled below, cars whizzing through narrow lanes and a train making its way steadily through the city centre. It felt so weird that on the other side of the glass, far below, a world was going on without her. It was like she was in an alternate universe, trapped in a prison high in the sky.

Shaking away her grim fantasy, she turned back to the room and debated what to do, her head clearer now that the drug was wearing off. She saw her suitcase and moved toward it, finding comfort in the familiar.

If she tried to leave, Volkan would stop her. She assumed that since he put so much effort into bringing her here, he had things in place to keep her. She’d seen enough movies and

read enough books to know that if she tried to escape without a plan, she'd be tipping him off about her intentions and he'd watch her that much harder.

But if she pretended to play Volkan's game until she could find a way out, she might trick him into lowering his guard. Volkan believed he was in love. Maybe his feelings for her would blind him to her true intentions.

The man was unhinged. There was truly something wrong with him. She'd sensed it months ago when he'd started pursuing her. During the few dates they'd had, he proved himself unstable. Now she was certain he was insane. Why else would he kidnap her, declare his love and tell her she would love him too?

She opened her suitcase and dug through it until she found a fresh T-shirt and pair of leggings. Her gaze caught on the button-up shirt and jeans he'd stripped from her and, shuddering at the feeling of violation, quickly shoved them into her suitcase. She pulled out her toiletry kit and went into the washroom.

Closing the door, she engaged the lock, hoping Volkan wouldn't try to come in. No part of her trusted him. He had no boundaries, and she was certain he would think nothing of breaking into the bathroom while she was in there. She decided against the shower, unable to bring herself to get naked, wet, and vulnerable while Volkan was nearby.

Instead, she used a washcloth to clean her face, then changed her panties and pulled on fresh clothes. Then she paced the washroom until she thought she could handle seeing Volkan again without falling to pieces.

Taking a deep breath, she made her way into the main part of the penthouse, looking for Volkan. A big part of her hoped he'd be gone. That he had to leave for something and had conveniently left the front door unlocked. No such luck. He was preparing food in the kitchen, pulling what smelled like Thai food from takeout containers and arranging it on a couple of plates.

He looked up when he heard her and his eyes glowed with that look she was beginning to recognize; burning possession. She took a step back.

“You didn’t shower,” he commented.

How did he know?

“Your hair isn’t wet and I didn’t hear the water.”

“I don’t always wash my hair when I shower,” she countered.

He ignored her argument and said in a disapproving tone, “You need to do as I tell you, Yasmin.”

She felt a flair of resentment at his bullying. “I’m not used to following orders.”

“I’m responsible for you now,” he said in a reasonable tone. He came around the counter toward her. “If you won’t take care of yourself, then I’ll have to do it for you.”

She gasped and took several steps away from him. “Wh-what do you mean?”

“I mean, I will take you into that bathroom and wash you myself.” He stopped in front of her. “Now, do you plan on showering, or do you need my help?”

## *Chapter Thirteen*



**YASMIN SHOOK HER HEAD.** “No, I don’t need help.”

“Good,” he said pleasantly, going back to dishing up the Thai food. “It’s important that you learn to follow orders early in our relationship. I will always have your best interests at heart, so you don’t need to worry that I’ll lead you into harm.”

Yasmin nodded, once again getting the feeling that she was in an alternate universe. Or that she’d stepped back in time a few hundred years. Volkan wanted her to obey his every command? He only had her best interests at heart? No chance. Any man who thought kidnapping was the way to a woman’s heart couldn’t possibly have her best interests in mind. Volkan only cared about one person. Himself.

“Come sit.” He waved her toward the table.

Yasmin edged around him and slid into the chair he was holding out for her. He bent to smooth a cloth napkin across her lap, sending a chill of fear through her. He was much bigger than her, stronger and faster. She would have to incapacitate him if she wanted to get away.

Volkan took the chair next to her, sitting and placing his own napkin across his lap. He nodded toward her dish. “Go ahead and eat.”

Yasmin lifted her fork and touched it to the food, then stopped. Volkan was watching her intently. She dropped the fork and stared down at the food, blinking as it swam in front

of her. Her heart hammered like a drum and her palms felt damp.

“What’s wrong, *aşkim*?”

She shook her head, but the blood was rushing through her, making her dizzy. She was afraid of the food. More than afraid. She was petrified. What if it was drugged?

Volkan took hold of her hand. He felt warm and firm and, despite her fear of him, reassuring.

“Talk to me, Yasmin.”

“I’m scared,” she admitted, the words coming out in a rush. “Is it drugged?”

“I see the problem.” He looked at her steadily and said, “Your food isn’t drugged.” He gave her plate a pointed look. “Now eat.”

Still, she refused to pick up her fork. She couldn’t possibly believe his claim about the food. She would be stupid to ingest anything he gave her.

He set his own fork down and leaned forward, his expression darkening. “There’s no point in starving yourself. The drugs are not in your food.” He reached into the pocket of his jacket and pulled out a syringe, placing it on the table between them. “This is the drug I will use on you if you refuse to cooperate. It’s not a sedative like the last one, but something to paralyze your muscles, so you’ll be aware of me and everything around you.” He leaned closer until his breath touched her face. “But there’ll be nothing you can do because you won’t be able to move.”

His words were sinister, disgusting and evil, but his tone was soft, as though he were speaking the words of a lover.

Her gaze flicked to the syringe. She couldn’t let him use it on her.

She reached for it, hoping to grab it and either throw it across the room or smash it and break it open. It wasn’t a good plan because he could easily have more of the drug, but she was freaking out. She couldn’t think past her fear.

Her hand landed on the needle first, but his landed on top of hers. He gripped her hand, tightening her fingers around the syringe.

Then he stood, dragging her out of her chair. He was so big standing next to her. It had been foolish challenging him so soon after she'd decided it was safer to play his game. But he was creepy and terrifying! How could she just sit here and listen to him explain how he was going to drug her and do whatever he wanted to her?

“Wh-what are you going to do?” she gasped, trying unsuccessfully to pull her hand away from him.

“I’m going to give you this drug,” he said calmly, using her own hand to lift the syringe and move it toward her neck. She tried to flinch back, but he moved with her, using his body to crowd her until her back hit the window next to the table. “I’m giving it to you for two reasons. First, you need to learn that I will always do as I say. And second, you need to see that any and all defiance will be dealt with swiftly.”

“Please, don’t!” she gasped, shoving at him with her free hand.

Ignoring her struggles, he pushed her face to the side, squishing her against the glass. She was forced to look out across the London cityscape as he pushed the needle into her neck. Seconds later, he released her.

She would have collapsed to the floor, but he gripped her under her arms and moved her back to her chair. Everything swam around her as the drug took effect, rushing through her system and weakening her muscles. With each passing second, she lost more and more motor function.

She tried to lift her hand, but her arm flopped against her side. Slowly, as each muscle shut down, her body slid in the chair until her head was lolling against the back and her arms hung at her sides.

Volkan crouched next to her, brushing the hair from her face. “I suspected we were going to have to do it this way, so I prepared for your lack of cooperation.”

*I hate you!* she screamed at him in her head. *You're a monster. This isn't love. This is some twisted, disgusting, perverted way of taking control of my life.*

Yasmin hated him with every fibre of her being. She was completely helpless and the monster who trapped her in her own body could do whatever he wanted to her.

A whimper escaped her lips as she imagined the scenarios. He could rape her and she couldn't fight back. He could kill her and there was nothing she could do.

Terror and rage hit her so hard she thought if she had the use of her arms, she would pick up the butter knife and slam it through his eyeball.

Volkan reached out to catch a tear as it trickled from her eye. He brought it to his lips, sucking it off his finger. He continued to crouch next to her, studying her, running his fingers through her hair. His gaze held manic triumph.

After a few minutes of mindlessly petting her, he stood and walked away.

She watched as he strode into the kitchen and opened the fridge, then returned to the table holding what looked like a chocolate shake. He bent over to pick up the napkin that had fallen off her lap. Then he set the cup against her lips and, gripping her jaw in his other hand, tipped the liquid into her mouth. Unable to close her throat against the invasion, she had no choice but to allow the liquid to slip down her throat.

She swallowed automatically, then choked, spitting some of it out. It tasted fine, like a chocolate shake with strawberries or something, but being force-fed anything was a terrible feeling.

Volkan calmly wiped the spilled liquid from her chin and continued to feed her. "You need to get something in you, and this is the only thing I can safely give you while your muscles are paralyzed." He gave her a chiding look. "You'll have to do better tomorrow. I don't want you to lose weight."

*Then don't paralyze me, you absolute freaking psycho!*



“Ah, I can see the defiance in your eyes, Yasmin.” He set the empty cup on the table and used the napkin to clean her face, then leaned in close and pressed a kiss to her lips. It was a weird feeling. His lips were warm and soft as they brushed hers. She could feel everything, but she couldn’t respond. “As much as I enjoy those beautiful flames that ignite every time you think something nasty, I need you to see how serious I am about your obeying me.”

He reached down and picked her up out of the chair, holding her to his chest. Once again, she found herself in his arms after he’d drugged her. Twice in one day. That had to be some kind of record.

He strode through the penthouse and back into the master bedroom where he laid her on the bed and reached for the hem of her shirt.

Yasmin’s brain had a significant, but silent, meltdown as he stripped her naked, lifting each limb as if she were a doll, removing her clothes with quick efficiency. The only thing left on her was her glasses, and she suspected it was so she could watch everything that he did to her. She screamed and cried, she pleaded and threatened, but none of it came out.

When he was finished and she was laying sprawled out completely naked, unable to move or cover herself, he stepped back to look his fill.

He took his time, his gaze travelling up and down her body.

Yasmin wanted to curl up and hide, to deprive him of the sight he so dearly seemed to want. She hated him more than she thought it was possible to hate another human. She wanted him dead, but first she wanted him to suffer for stripping away her dignity and stealing her ability to fight back.

At her first opportunity, she was going to find a big, sharp knife and gut her tormentor.

He crawled onto the bed, climbing over top of her, pressing himself into her soft, naked flesh. She could do nothing but watch.

This was it. He was going to do what he'd always intended. He was going to rape her.

Except he didn't.

He took her jaw in his hand and held her face up to his.

"I control everything, *küçük olan*," he said, his voice low and intense as he called her 'little one'. "Including you. Never forget." He was right. She would never forget; it was the worst moment of her life. He continued, "I would rather have a willing woman in my bed, but with you, I'll take whatever I can get. Remember this moment. Remember what happens when you defy me."

Yasmin wanted to nod, wanted to tell him she understood. That she would remember. But she couldn't do anything except stare up at him.

He kissed the tip of her nose. "I'll take that as a yes."

He climbed off her, then gripped her under her armpits, hauling her off the bed and into his arms. Carrying her into the washroom, he held her as he turned on the shower, running the water until it was steaming.

A cruel smile touched his lips. "Since you were unable to shower on your own."

He pushed her into the shower, holding her under the spray.

Panic set in hard as the water went into her mouth and up her nose. She thought what he did to her on the bed was the worst thing that had ever happened to her, but she was wrong. This was worse. So much worse. She was slowly drowning.

She imagined people being thrown into rivers with cement blocks on their feet. There was nothing they could do about the inevitable. Knowing they would die but having to wait for each agonizing second to tick by. It was hell.

Volkan dragged her out of the spray and ran his big hand over her face, clearing her eyes. Water streamed from her mouth and nose and she gasped for air, imagining that she

must look like a fish pulled out of the water and tossed onto a riverbank.

He held her up as he used a soapy washcloth on her, running it over her body, touching her everywhere, pressing it into every intimate part of her. The cloth sent sparks of pain through her as he used it roughly against her vagina, scrubbing at her clit.

He didn't seem to care that his clothes were getting soaked. He just stared at her with those eyes, wild with excitement and triumph. She hated that look. Wanted to wipe it off his face. Or better yet, freeze it in place as she killed him. Sliding a knife between his ribs and piercing his heart, killing him before he even knew what happened.

Yasmin was not a bloodthirsty person but imagining all the ways in which she could kill her kidnapper kept her sane as he cleaned her in the shower, violating her with his fingers as he left nothing untouched.

Finally, he turned the water off and dragged her from the shower. He propped her against the sink, holding her like a lifeless doll as he wiped the moisture from her body. Again, he was careful to touch every part of her, leaving nothing alone. He slid the towel down each limb, then under her arms, then between her legs.

When he was satisfied that she was finished, he carried her back into the bedroom. Laying her on the bed, he walked away from her. She couldn't turn her head to watch, but she could hear him opening and closing drawers. When he returned, he held a white satin nightgown. He pulled it over her head, then maneuvered her arms through the armholes. Smoothing the material down her body, he stepped back to look at her.

His gaze seemed critical, and she wanted to scream at him that it was his fault if he saw something wrong, but he nodded then walked away. Seconds later, he came back holding a hairbrush. He ran it through her tresses, careful not to tug as it caught on the knots in her hair. He smoothed the strands away from her head, creating a halo on the bedspread.

When he finished, he stood and stripped off his clothes before climbing into the bed next to her. He pulled her into his arms, forcing her to rest her head on his chest where he ran his fingers through her hair.

Yasmin wondered how long the drug lasted and if she could stay awake long enough for it to wear off while she was still conscious. She had a plan. It was no longer running away. Nor was it doing what Volkan wanted and giving in to his psychotic courtship. No, the second she gained control of her muscles again, she was going to murder the man who'd kidnapped and tortured her.

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## *Chapter Fourteen*



### **"TIME TO WAKE UP, AŞKIM."**

Yasmin squinted at the face hovering over hers, wondering why there was someone in her bedroom. Then the truth hit her and she gasped, scrambling away from him.

She'd fallen asleep! Volkan's fingers running over her scalp had lulled her and she'd missed her opportunity to murder him.

"Ah ah," he said, holding up a syringe. "I see the defiance in your eyes."

"Oh god!" She fell off the bed trying to get away from him and landed hard on the floor where she quickly righted herself and turned to stare at him. "Please don't drug me again." The words sounded desperate to her ears, but then, she felt desperate. She never again wanted to go through what he'd done to her the night before. It had been as close to rape as he could get without actually penetrating her. "I feel sick."

His gaze turned to concern. "Where does it hurt?" He reached for her, but she flung herself away from him. "Is it your head? I was told the drug might give you a minor headache."

She stared at him incredulously. After everything he'd done to her, he was worried she might have a slight drug-induced headache? "No, you monster, I'm sick to my soul! How could you do this to me?"

His gaze turned knowing as he realized she wasn't actually sick. "I've explained to you why I've done this, Yasmin, and I don't like to repeat myself. Now, it's time to get ready for the day."

She was in hell, stuck with a madman who had no boundaries. She glanced at the syringe still held in his hand and her shoulders slumped. She had no choice but do as he wanted until she found a safe way to escape.

"What do you want me to do?" she asked dully.

He smiled, a smile that had once set her heart fluttering in response, but now made her feel nauseous. "Good girl," he said, as if praising a dog. "You'll need to get ready for some company."

People!

People who could help her if she could find a way to tell them.

As if reading her thoughts, he said, "They won't help." He walked toward her and she backed up until she was against the wall. He touched her face and she held still, though she badly wanted to slap his hand away. "I'm bringing in a few shopkeepers to fill out your wardrobe. They're well paid to sell their wares and not question their clients."

Over the next several hours, Yasmin was given a crash course in how much corruption money could buy.

When the first shopkeeper came to the penthouse, pushing two racks of clothes into the living room, Yasmin had thrown caution to the wind and yelled at him that she'd been kidnapped and to go get help. He'd ignored her while Volkan, who was on the phone, shook his head disapprovingly at her.

The man pushed his clothing racks into place before turning to snap his fingers. Two women walked through the door and began modelling the wardrobe choices that had been picked out for Yasmin.

Still, she couldn't give up. "You have to listen to me!" Yasmin begged them to take her seriously, to leave and call the

police, but it was like they couldn't hear her. Like there was a glass wall between her and them.

Yasmin sat down, shock inundating her system until her legs no longer held her. She'd expected a scene. She'd expected the man or his assistants to run from the penthouse and call the police, who would then bust down the door and arrest Volkan. None of that happened.

The models displayed each item of clothing for Yasmin, all while the shopkeeper calmly explained the details of their design, fabric, and creation. Yasmin couldn't move, couldn't speak. She could only watch in horror as her former life was stripped from her one designer outfit at a time.

Still on the phone, Volkan came to sit next to Yasmin, wrapping his arm around her waist and pinning her. She tried to move away, but his grip tightened. When she refused to choose any of the clothes, he made choices for her, going between whoever was on the phone and the shopkeeper.

Bitterly, she noted that all his choices matched her style, only these clothes were fancier than she was used to. No one mentioned any prices, so she assumed Volkan didn't care what anything cost.

When the man and his assistants left, Yasmin thought they were done choosing clothes, but she was wrong. Volkan didn't want to get her just a few things, he wanted to replace her entire wardrobe. Three more clothing representatives and several more models paraded through the penthouse, followed by a shoe person and then someone with every high-end brand of purse imaginable.

The shopping spree reminded her of her morning spent with Volkan while they were dating. The day he'd bought her a new desk so she could study. He had been so sweet. She could never have imagined things turning out like this.

What drove him to decide he loved her enough to kidnap her? She hadn't given him any false hope, had she? That night at the club, she'd made herself clear. She hadn't wanted to see him again. He seemed to accept that she was breaking up with him.

“Now for the jeweller.”

“I don’t want jewellery, Volkan,” she said in a pleading voice. “I don’t want any of this. Why are you doing this?”

He pinched her chin between his finger and thumb and tipped her face up. He was looking at her with an expression of pleasure. “I’m spoiling the woman I love. I’ve been planning this since we met.”

“But I don’t want to be spoiled.” Especially not by him.

He gave her an indulgent look. “You’ll enjoy having a new wardrobe with all the accoutrements.”

“I won’t.”

“And you’ll be grateful for it.” His voice dropped into a sinister growl so only she could hear.

She looked away from him, her gaze landing on the jeweller who was spreading his wares out across the dining room table. When he finished, Volkan took her elbow and stood with her, leading her to the table.

There were several black velvet-lined trays filled with jewels. Despite her fear and anger, Yasmin was awed by the spread before her. It was a beautiful sight. And she was being asked to choose from among the incredible, expensive, and gorgeous items.

She couldn’t do it.

She couldn’t bring herself to play along with Volkan’s fantasy.

But... she didn’t want him to drug her again.

She was in an impossible situation.

She stared listlessly at the jewellery, and Volkan once again stepped in, choosing pieces for her. He held them up against her hair if they were clips, or her ears if they were earrings. He wrapped strings of pearls, rubies, and diamonds around her neck, declaring that he would take them all. Finally, they reached the last tray on the table. It was filled with engagement rings.



“No,” she said, horror lacing her tone as she backed away.

His big hand landed on her back as he urged her closer.

“Yes,” he said mildly, leaning over the tray. Then he straightened and turned to her. “Choose one.”

She shook her head, desperation rushing through her. She didn't want to get engaged this way. She was normal and she wanted normal things. She was not the kind of person who got kidnapped and forced into a relationship. She wasn't beautiful; she wasn't tall and willowy or petite and cute. She was average. Average body, average looks, average brain. Okay, she was pretty smart, but apparently not smart enough to avoid falling into Volkan's trap.

She turned to him, arms wrapped protectively around herself. “Why, Volkan?”

He looked down at her, his dark eyes shadowed. “I've told you why. I love you and want to make you happy.”

She shook her head. “No. I mean, why me? I'm nothing special.”

He looked genuinely baffled for a few seconds, then he said, “You're wrong about that.”

“Why me?” she insisted.

Ignoring the jeweller, who kept his gaze on the widows, rather than the couple having what looked like an intimate moment, Volkan took her arms where they were crossed over her chest and drew her closer. The heat from his big hands warmed her, though she wanted to feel disgusted by it. She didn't need or want his warmth.

“I want you.”

As if that explained it all.

“That doesn't make any sense, Volkan.” She tried to move away, but his hands tightened. “You can't just go around taking people from their lives and forcing them into some kind of twisted fantasy.”

Anger darkened his expression, but he quickly smoothed it and explained in a calm voice, “It doesn’t have to make sense. You’re here with me and you aren’t leaving.”

She shook her head, but he turned her back to the table and wrapped his arm around her middle, trapping her against his body. “Choose a ring, Yasmin.”

The way he said her name, like a threat, sent a shiver racing down her spine. She reached blindly into the tray and pulled out the first ring she touched, holding it up.

Volkan pulled the ring from her fingers and placed a chaste kiss on her lips before releasing her. He turned to the jeweller. “You’ve noted the items I want. Have them delivered tomorrow before noon.”

The jeweller packed his wares and left the penthouse.

“Why do we need the jewellery before noon?” Yasmin asked when they were alone.

“We’re going to Turkey tomorrow.”

“Oh,” she replied, surprise and panic stealing any further conversation. Somehow being taken to another country against her will seemed even more despair-inducing than her current situation. How the heck was she supposed to get away from Volkan if she couldn’t get any sense of her surroundings? Couldn’t go out in public? Then it hit her. Maybe that was his plan. Keep her confused and guessing, vulnerable in countries she had no experience with. Turkey was worse than Britain. She wouldn’t be able to speak the language, couldn’t communicate if she did manage to escape.

“May I go to the bedroom?” she asked Volkan, the words burning like smouldering ash on her tongue. She despised asking him for anything.

He nodded. “Yes, you’ve had a long day. Get some rest.”

*I hate you more than I’ve ever hated anyone!* She screamed at him from the safety of her head before turning and heading for the bedroom, closing the door behind her.

She sank onto the bed, her head in her hands and shoulders slumped.

Turkey.

Of course, she knew of the region as it was of significant archaeological interest. She'd hoped to visit one day. Now, she didn't have a choice. She would go there with her so-called fiancé to face whatever fresh hell he had in store for her.

She lay back on the bed, curling onto her side and allowing the tears to fall. They dripped down her cheeks and rolled off her nose and chin.

What was she going to do?

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## Chapter Fifteen



**“WIPE YOUR TEARS,** Yasmin. They aren’t needed and I won’t tolerate them.”

Yasmin gasped and sat up. She hadn’t heard Volkan enter the bedroom. Hadn’t felt his presence at the end of the bed. He looked imposing and grim. He wasn’t happy with her.

“Need I remind you that your cooperation is necessary for our happy future together?” He spoke to her like he was speaking to a child, as though a bit of stern discipline could make her smarten up. The depth of his delusions astonished her.

“I don’t want to have a happy future with you.” She wiped the tears from her cheeks. He was right about one thing, there was no use in tears. They wouldn’t get her out of her current situation.

Volkan sighed heavily and reached for her, dragging her off the bed and forcing her to stand in front of him. “Need I remind you what happens if you don’t do as I say?”

“You don’t need to remind me of anything,” she shot back. “But I won’t go along with this disgusting charade, so go ahead and drug me. Enjoy your drugged out shell of a girlfriend.”

His grip tightened until she cried out in pain. He hauled her up onto her toes until she was face to face with him, his dark visage twisted in anger. She almost wished she’d watched her words more carefully, but she’d been taught to stand up for

herself. She'd grown up in a family that encouraged everyone to speak their minds.

"You think drugging you is the only way I can make you comply?" he asked in a surprisingly calm voice, considering his murderous expression.

"What else is there?" she hissed, trying unsuccessfully to pull away from him.

"Your family."

She froze, barely breathing as the word family echoed through her panicked brain. "What will you do to my family?"

"Nothing," he said, pushing her back until her legs hit the bed, forcing her to sit. He stepped back, staring down at her. "I will do nothing to them if you quit fighting me. However, if you don't, I will have to hurt them, Yasmin. I don't want to do it because hurting them will also hurt you, but if you give me no choice, I'll do what I have to."

He was Satan.

That was the only plausible explanation. Volkan was the devil, she was Persephone, and he wanted her for his bride. Nothing was going to stop him.

"I'll try to listen, but sometimes I get angry," she finally said in a small voice. She looked up at him pleadingly. "I don't want my family to get hurt because I lose my temper. Please don't hurt them, Volkan."

His face softened and he sank to the carpet on one knee, taking her hands in his. "I know you can be trouble, Yasmin. Your independent spirit is part of what I love so much about you. You say what you think and you live life in a way that makes you happy. I want that in my life."

She stared back at him, seeing him more clearly through the haze of fear and anger that had guided her every action since he'd kidnapped her. Volkan wasn't happy. Maybe he'd never been. Though she had responsibilities, she chose them. He'd seen her living a mostly carefree life, happy with her existence, even when things weren't perfect, and he wanted to be part of that.

She didn't agree with his methods, but she could understand the way he felt. "If you love my independence, then why do you want to crush it?"

He shook his head. "I don't want to crush you, but I need you to do as I ask. For your own safety. We'll find a way to make it work."

"I don't know how unless you let me go."

He ignored her, instead saying, "I won't hurt your family."

A rush of gratitude went through her and she whispered, "Thanks."

She shouldn't be thanking him. He was the reason she'd feared for her family in the first place, still she was glad he was taking hurting them off the table.

"But..." That one word sent a chill through her. "If you ever want to talk to them again, you will reconcile with your situation."

She nodded, still grateful that he wasn't going to hurt her family.

"Come, let's go out for supper," he said, pushing to his feet and giving her a slight smile. "You can wear something new."

Her heart leapt in anticipation. He was going to take her out! Maybe she could find a chance to escape.

Then she caught his watchful expression. As psychotic as he was, Volkan wasn't stupid. He fully expected her to try to escape, which meant he had a plan. But if he expected her to rebel, then why was he taking her out?

Then it hit her. He was giving her the opportunity to prove that she could be a good little captive. She thought of her family and how worried they must be about her. She was supposed to text them the moment she arrived in London, and it was now almost 30 hours later. They must be frantic. If she could get Volkan to see that she was willing to cooperate, at least a little, maybe he would let her call her parents.

"Alright," she said, standing. "Give me an hour and I'll be ready."

He nodded and said, "I'll give you some privacy."

An hour later, Yasmin found herself in front of the standing mirror in the bedroom. She looked... beautiful. Well, as beautiful as she was going to get. She'd chosen a floor length dress with an empire waist, the low-cut spaghetti-strap top hugging her curves with loving perfection. Long multi-coloured stripes in rose, light pink and burgundy gave her body more length than it had. The dress was more glamorous than anything she's ever worn, but it appealed to the bohemian in her.

She brushed her hair out and clipped it to the side, allowing the black waves to flow freely over her shoulders. Placing her glasses over a carefully crafted face of makeup, she slipped her feet into a pair of low-heeled tan sandals and opened the door.

Volkan turned from where he was looking out the window, his hands in his trouser pockets. As his expression became one of heated appreciation, Yasmin was transported back to their time together in Toronto. Before she found out he was a psycho kidnapper.

He'd changed into a black tuxedo with dress shoes and a black bowtie finishing the ensemble. As he approached her, she caught sight of his diamond cufflinks. The stones were real, she'd bet her life savings of \$49.32 on it.

Walking toward her, he took a jewellery box from his pocket and opened it. Her breath caught as she saw that it was the engagement ring from earlier.

He lifted her left hand and pushed the ring onto her third finger. It was a perfect fit. Of course it was. Just like all the clothing he bought for her fit. He planned everything, right down to the last detail.

She looked down at the ring, a gasp flying from her lips. Before, she'd been too upset, too overwhelmed to see it properly. Now, as she held it up, she took in the incredible beauty of it. The diamond was light pink and nestled in a bed of smaller white diamonds. When she moved her hand, it caught the light, sparkling with a life of its own.

“Yasmin Mahdi, will you be my wife?”

It surprised her that Volkan would bother asking her the question. He'd kidnapped her, drugged her twice, and bullied her into complying with his commands. How could he possibly expect a yes?

She opened her mouth to tell him as much, but he held his hand up. In it was a cell phone. “Your family is one phone call away. You decide what you want your future to look like.”

Despair filtered through her and she looked away from him.

He took hold of her chin and forced her to meet his eyes. “I know you think I'm being harsh, but this is for your own good. You wouldn't have come to me if I hadn't forced your hand. You'll come to love me as much as I love you, and the day you realize it, you can thank me for doing everything in my power to bring us together.”

She shook her head and backed away, jerking her chin from his grasp. “You're delusional if you think that. I will never thank you, and I will never love you.”

He grabbed her arms, the cell phone still in his hand digging into her flesh. “Then you'll be miserable, because I'm never letting you go.”

His lips crashed down on hers and he kissed her with a painful fury that had her gasping and shoving at his shoulders. He pulled her closer into his chest, chaining her with his arms as he forcibly explored her mouth, his teeth slicing against her lips and his tongue choking her.

When she tried to bite him, he brought his hand up to grip her jaw and force her mouth wider. She cried out, but he swallowed the sound.

She could feel his cock, erect and hard against her belly.

Fear rushed through her and adrenalin gave her the strength to fight him. He dropped his phone as he wrestled with her. She was able to free an arm and swung it around, smashing her fist into the side of his head and finally breaking the kiss.



He let her go and she stumbled back, bringing a hand up to cover her mouth. When she took her fingers away, she saw blood. She glared at him. “You’re a monster, Volkan!”

“You want a monster?” he raged, storming toward her. “I’ll give you a monster.”

She tried backing away, but he grabbed her, swinging her off the floor and lifting her high before tossing her over his shoulder. As her stomach hit him, the breath whooshed out of her and she went limp. Before she could recover, he strode into the bedroom and threw her on the bed where she hit so hard, she bounced.

He landed on her, knocking the breath from her for the second time in less than a minute. His lips covered hers once more and he used his fingers to pry her jaw open, kissing her with enough force that she felt his teeth smack into hers. He shoved his tongue into her mouth, sweeping every part of it, before choking her.

She panicked, screaming into his mouth and shaking her head. She beat him with her fists until he took her wrists in an unbreakable hold and dragged them over her head where he pinned them with one large hand. He reached down her dress, dragging the skirt up until her legs were bared.

He broke their kiss to drop his face to her throat, sucking the skin into his mouth and biting, marking her.

“Volkan!” she shouted his name just as his fingers found the edge of her panties. He shoved them through the elastic and buried them in the folds of her vagina. “No! Don’t!”

He stopped moving, but he didn’t remove his hand.

“Do you have something to say to me, Yasmin?”

Oh god, oh god! How could he sound so calm? His fingers were still touching her pussy, though he hadn’t gone any further than to stroke her labia. Still, the threat of more was there.

“I’m sorry, I’ll be good.” She should have known better than to piss him off. He’d warned her, but she’d let her emotions get the better of her.

He lifted his head to look at her and what she saw in his gaze made her heart pound even harder than it already was, terror flooding her brain. His face was triumphant and filled with lust, but that wasn't what freaked her out so much. It was the cold control she saw there. He knew exactly what he was doing. Might have even planned it.

Nausea rolled through her as she realized what he was doing to her. He was torturing her just so she would be grateful when he stopped... if he stopped. He was showing her that he was the one in control, that he could change from benevolent, loving boyfriend to monster in the space of a heartbeat.

They'd been together for a day and already he was training her to be a good little captive.

He took his hand from her panties and got off her, smoothing her dress down her thighs before helping her stand. He took her shoulders in his hands and smiled gently at her before kissing her forehead. Before releasing her, he leaned down to speak next to her ear. "I expect an answer to my proposal before we arrive in Turkey tomorrow evening."

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## Chapter Sixteen



**DESPITE THE TERRIBLE** beginning to their evening out, it went surprisingly well... at least the beginning part. Volkan made sure that Yasmin never had an opportunity to get away from him or interact with anyone who might help her. At first, she was anxious, searching for any way to escape, but when she realized there was none, she relaxed and went with the flow. What other choice did she have?

They took the elevator from the penthouse down to the garage where Volkan's vehicle was waiting for them. As they stepped off the elevator, Henry, Volkan's bodyguard, met them.

"Mr. Kartel," He greeted Volkan before turning to Yasmin. "Ms. Mahdi. Good evening." He turned to speak directly to Volkan. "Everything is set for the evening."

"Good," Volkan said, then took Yasmin's arm and led her to the car where the driver opened the door for them.

Yasmin balked, noticing it was the same man who'd drugged her. His face swam before her as a wave of dizziness hit her, the memory of what had happened freezing her to the spot.

Volkan's hand was warm at her back and she felt safer in his presence. Which was completely laughable considering he'd drugged her too and done much worse things. She was in a bad way if she was looking to the orchestrator of her suffering for protection.

“Yasmin,” Volkan said, bending to speak in her ear. “You haven’t properly met Zeke yet. He delivered you safely into my keeping.”

“I remember,” she managed to gasp.

Zeke looked at her with a cool expression, nodding in greeting. She edged past him and slid into the car.

Volkan slid in next to her. When she tried to move further from him, he grabbed her arm and sat her next to him in the middle seat. He reached around her for the seatbelt, buckling her in.

The drive to the restaurant took about twenty minutes and Yasmin was able to see some of London. It was spectacular, especially as the sun was setting and the skyscrapers overhead were lighting up as rays hit the windows.

“It’s beautiful,” she whispered, craning her head to see past Volkan.

He wrapped his arm around her and urged her to lean against him where she would have a better view. Her stomach dropped and her heart fluttered when he touched her, but she did as he wanted. She didn’t know when or if she would have the opportunity to visit London again.

As if reading her thoughts, Volkan murmured in her ear, “We’ll be back. I do a lot of business here and I want you at my side when I travel.”

His reminder of their future together had her moving back into her seat and stiffening against his arm, which he kept at her back. Volkan leaned against her, his lips seeking her neck where he placed feather light kisses. When she tried to shift away, he anchored her in place and continued his exploration.

“I’m not going to stop touching you, Yasmin,” he said against her throat. “So you may as well relax and enjoy.”

She hated that a small part of her did enjoy his touch. She blamed it on biology, though. Everything about her hated his guts, but her damn hormones were totally fine with the hulking jerk.

She was grateful when the car pulled up outside a building. The driver got out and opened Volkan's door. Volkan took her hand and pulled her with him as he climbed out. When she was standing on the sidewalk next to him, he ran a hand down her length, brushing the creases from her dress.

Yasmin glanced around, hopeful of finding an avenue of escape, but Henry and another man who was wearing the same dark suit and sunglasses were standing on the pavement, making it difficult for anyone to get near the couple.

The two men hadn't travelled in the car with them and, when she looked around, Yasmin spotted another black car with tinted windows parked directly in front of theirs. She wondered why Volkan needed so much protection. Did he have enemies?

"Ready?" Volkan asked, guiding her from the sidewalk toward the building in front them.

It was smaller than the other buildings around it. Maybe twelve stories tall. It seemed older and its walls were made with stone instead of concrete and metal. A sign over the restaurant said "Rouge". As they walked toward the entrance, the doors opened and a woman stood to the side as they entered.

She followed them in, saying, "Right this way, Mr. Kartel, Ms. Mahdi."

So the staff knew to expect them.

The woman studiously avoided eye contact and escorted them past a set of French doors leading into the restaurant and onto an elevator where she hit the top button, then stepped back.

Bemused, Yasmin watched the doors closed. "What have you told people about me? Why are they so willing to look the other way?"

A day ago, Yasmin would've laughed if someone had told her she'd get kidnapped with plenty of witnesses around and that not a single person would lift a finger to help her.

“I don’t need to tell them anything,” Volkan said arrogantly. “The right amount of money seals lips.”

“That’s very cynical, Volkan,” she argued. “One day you’ll meet someone you can’t buy. Someone who won’t keep silent when you do the wrong thing.”

He looked at her and his expression was so fierce it stole her breath. “I already have.”

It hit her then, like a hammer to the side of the head. She knew why he wanted her. It wasn’t her looks, or her intelligence. It was her heart. Not love necessarily, though he wanted that too. He wanted the woman who lived life on her own terms, choosing her job, her studies, her dates. He wanted the one woman his money couldn’t buy. The woman who had rejected him on moral grounds.

But he’d acquired her in such an immoral way.

So, he didn’t want her to change him or he would have found a better way to unite them. He wanted her because he was amused by her resistance.

Any enjoyment she might have found in the evening dissipated as her thoughts became darker. What would he do with her if he grew bored? Send her away? Lock her in a basement somewhere? Or something worse? She didn’t know him well enough to know what he might do, which was why she had to try harder to get away from him while simultaneously making him think she was doing his bidding and dutifully falling in love.

The elevator stopped and Volkan took her arm, escorting her out. She gasped as they were greeted by a lovely rooftop patio. It was clearly set up as part of the restaurant, but there were no diners. All the tables except one had been moved to the side, along with the chairs.

Trellises and pagodas filled the patio with lush plant life. Ivy wound its way across the space with bright purple, pink, and orange flowers dotting the greenery. It was breathtaking.

Fairy lights peeked out strategically through the trellises like lightning bugs.

The table was close to the rooftop's edge and, anticipating her desire to see the view, Volkan walked her around the table to the edge of the roof. They were only twelve stories up, not a huge height compared to the surrounding buildings, but enough that they could see across the London cityscape.

"It's beautiful," she said, disappointed that she was sharing such a moment with a deranged man. She turned to him, looking up at his dark visage.

He wasn't facing the city as she had been, he was looking down at her.

"Can I ask you something?" she said.

He nodded, but his eyes took on a more serious look.

"Have you ever been obsessed with anyone before, the way you're obsessed with me?"

"I'm in love, Yasmin," he corrected. "There's a difference. And no, I've never felt for anyone what I feel for you."

She didn't know if his statement made her feel better or worse.

"What happens if you fall out of love with me?"

"That will never happen," he said vehemently, and she could tell he wanted to shut down the line of conversation.

"Please, Volkan," she whispered, using his name, her secret weapon. "I won't feel safe with you unless I know for sure you won't hurt me."

He lifted his hands, cupping her face and tilting it until she was looking at him.

"I can promise that I will hurt you, my love." The words were said so kindly that it took her a moment to understand. She gasped and tried to jerk back, but he refused to let her go. "You will inevitably do something you're not supposed to because you're feisty, intelligent, and independent. Don't get me wrong, I love these things about you, but they will lead you into making a mistake with me. And I will be forced to punish you in a way that I'm sure you will see as painful."

“I thought you loved me,” she shot back, jerking her face from his hold. He dropped his hand to her arm to stop her from stepping away from him, so she stood stiffly in his grasp.

“Sometimes love hurts.” His lip quirked as if they were sharing a private joke. “Or at least it will until you love me back.”

She huffed and tried to pull her arm away from him. “You know you’re describing Stockholm syndrome.”

“Exactly.”

She stared up at him, aghast. He couldn’t possibly mean what she thought he meant. “You’re okay with knowing that if I do fall in love with you, it’s because I have no other choice?”

He shrugged, his black tuxedo jacket shining in the fairy lights as he moved. “You’ve made me a desperate man, Yasmin. I’ll take your love any way I can get it.”

“Even if my love is only given to escape the threat of violence?”

He touched her face, brushing his fingers softly down her cheek. She flinched back, but he hauled her closer to his body.

“There’s a fine line between love and violence,” he said, dropping his lips to speak in her ear, the tickle of his breath sending a shiver down her spine. “And I look forward to exploring both with you.”

She tipped her head back to look into his enigmatic, dark eyes. She saw the determination that drove him to this point. To kidnap a woman he wanted simply because she said no to him.

She turned away, staring out into the rapidly darkening sky, then dropped her eyes to the street below her, wondering for a brief second if she had what it took to jump.

Glancing at him, her thoughts shifted to the night she met him in that dark alley. The night she intrigued the beast. He would hurt her, as he’d promised, and she would sink further into his evil fantasy.



He was right, though. She was feisty, intelligent, and independent. She wouldn't jump. She would fight Volkan and she would win.

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## *Chapter Seventeen*



“LET’S not be so serious. We have the whole evening to enjoy ourselves,” Volkan announced, pulling her away from the patio’s edge and toward their table for two where he pulled out a chair for her. As she sat, he pushed the chair in, then rounded the table.

As if materializing out of thin air, a waiter approached their table with an ice bucket and a bottle of Champagne. He popped the cork and filled two glasses, setting one in front of Volkan and one in front of Yasmin. Then he picked up Yasmin’s napkin and flicked it open.

Before he could set it across her lap, Volkan reached out and gripped the server’s wrist, holding him in place. “No touching.”

The server took note of Volkan’s deadly stern expression and backed off, dropping the napkin on the table next to Yasmin’s plate. “Of course, sir.” He left quickly, exiting through a nearly invisible door that Yasmin hadn’t noticed before.

“Was that necessary?” she asked, glaring at him. “The poor man was just doing his job.”

“Yes.” Volkan stood and rounded the table, picking up the napkin and smoothing it across her lap, his fingers wrapping briefly around her upper thigh and tightening. “It was very necessary. I will tolerate no other man touching you. I can barely stand having their eyes on you, but I recognize that unless I cover you from head to toe, men will stare.”

She wanted to tell him he was mistaking her for a supermodel, but she didn't bother since they'd already established his tendency toward delusion. Instead, she lifted her Champagne flute to her lips and took a healthy swallow of the bubbly liquid. It tickled her tongue and throat, but she thoroughly enjoyed the tart taste as it slid into her belly and warmed her from the inside.

Yasmin had always had healthy self-esteem from being raised in a wonderful home with a caring family. When she was a child, her mom would brush her hair and help her get ready for bed, declaring that she was the prettiest princess she'd ever seen. Her father would help her with her school projects, telling her what a smart little cookie she was. And Aisha would dote on her younger sister, playing puzzles with her and reading books. She never balked at having to babysit or take her baby sister with her when she went out with her friends. She always showed Yasmin off like the proud older sister she was.

So Yasmin was being realistic when she said she wasn't the most beautiful or unique woman on the planet. Not someone that should have caught a man like Volkan's attention. A man who had looks, wealth, and power. Sure, he lacked charm and a solid moral compass, but when it came to money, as Volkan was fond of pointing out, people were willing to let him get away with a lot.

But Volkan couldn't seem to see her clearly. Not her personality, not her looks, not anything about her. He was delusional and obsessed with the idea of her, rather than the reality. Eventually, something would have to give. Either he would wake up and see her for who she was, or she would succumb to his plan and Stockholm would drive her into his arms. Or the third option, she'd figure out how to get away from her psycho admirer and go into hiding until his obsession dimmed.

“What's that look?” he asked, reaching out to wrap his fingers around hers on the Champagne glass. He lifted the bottle from the ice bucket and topped up her glass. “You seemed sad for a moment.”

“I was thinking about my family,” she admitted, setting her glass on the table. The intimate way Volkan had wrapped his hand around hers unsettled her.

“I would prefer you think of us.” His words were hard and she sensed an underlying jealousy.

“This right here is the reason I broke up with you,” she said to him, taking the risk of angering him in an effort to get him to see that his jealousy was both unnecessary and disturbing. “You can’t dictate my thoughts and I won’t allow you to take my family from me.” When he looked like he would argue, she continued, “I know you can take me away from them physically. You’ve already done that. But no matter what you do, you can’t stop me from thinking about them. From remembering them and loving them from afar.”

“Your defiance isn’t amusing,” he said with a growl. “You’re supposed to be focusing on us. You said you would settle down if I promised to leave your family alone. That you would try to love me.”

“I’m not trying to defy you,” she argued. “I’m telling you that my family is a part of who I am. If you really loved me, you wouldn’t try to strip them away from me.”

He leaned back in his chair, contemplating her. Shadows played across his face, a slight breeze flickering the candlelight and making him look sinister. Her heart sank when he didn’t say anything for a long time. He was a cruel man who used cruel methods to get what he wanted. He would twist her until she was no longer shaped like herself, she was sure of it.

Then he did something unexpected. He said, “Alright, if your family truly is a part of you, then I don’t want to change that. I love you just as you are.” Her expression must’ve shown her shock because he chuckled and leaned across the table to tap her chin. “I’m not a complete monster. You’ll come to see other sides of me, *küçük olan*.”

Debatable, but she would accept whatever small concessions he threw her way. Then she’d push for more. “Does that mean you’ll let me see them?” He started to shake

his head, but she rushed to add, “I don’t mean right away, but one day, when things settle down. I don’t want them believing I’m dead. It would destroy them.”

He nodded. “Which would hurt you, too.”

“Yes.”

“Then I can’t allow that.”

“But you said you wanted to hurt me,” she pointed out with a frown. “So what do you care if it upsets me that my family thinks I’m dead?”

“I said I *would* hurt you, not that I *want* to hurt you. There’s a difference. Given that sharp brain of yours, I would say we’ll be exploring that difference sooner rather than later.” He took a drink of his Champagne, then nodded to hers, encouraging her to pick it up.

She didn’t want to get drunk in his presence, but she was enjoying the warmth spreading through her from the alcohol. It helped to calm her after the upheaval of the past few days.

“I can’t trust you around your family yet, but I’m willing to let them know you’re alive and well.”

Hope leapt into her heart and she straightened in her chair. “Really?”

“You’ll have to do something for me.”

She should have known he’d want something in return for a kindness. He was a monster, after all. “What do you want?”

“I want you to come to my bed willingly.” She shook her head, but he reached out and took hold of her hand, folding it in his much larger grip. “Think about it, Yasmin. You’ll be coming to my bed anyway. I prefer not to have to fight you to get what I want. Give in to me and I’ll let your family know you’re safe. I might even let you talk to them.”

Oh God, he’d added the one incentive she couldn’t say no to. She was willing to do a lot to hear her parent’s voices again. Even though it’d only been a few days since she spoke to them, it felt like weeks had passed.

“Alright,” she said, her throat dry. Using her free hand, she took another sip of her Champagne.

“Tonight.” His eyes gleamed with anticipation as he set her execution time.

“Will you let me speak to my parents tonight?” she asked bravely.

“This isn’t a negotiation, Yasmin.” He crushed her hand in his and leaned closer. “You will come to my bed tonight. How you behave in my bed will dictate whether I allow you to speak to your parents at a later date.”

She wanted to back out so badly. To tell him she couldn’t do it. She didn’t want him, was actively afraid of him. Instead, she thought of her family, told herself it was no big deal, just sex, and said, “Yes, Volkan.”

Before he could reply, the server arrived at their table with steaming bowls of tomato bisque soup. Once again, it would seem Volkan had ordered for them before they’d even arrived. She wondered if this was a precursor to her future. Never allowed to make her own decisions and negotiating sex for favours.

That last thought had her gulping the rest of the Champagne in her glass. Volkan refilled it. She eyed the bottle. Maybe she should get drunk. She didn’t drink often so it wouldn’t take much. She was already feeling the lull of the alcohol. Her head was fuzzy, and she felt relaxed despite the constant tension between herself and her dinner companion.

“This will be your last glass,” Volkan said smoothly, picking up his spoon and dipping it into his soup. He had a knack for reading her thoughts.

“Tell me,” she said, summoning up as much bravery as she could. “Is this the life you imagine having with me? Dictating my every move? Telling me what to eat and drink, what to wear, even what to say. It seems to me that if you liked me for myself, you wouldn’t be trying so hard to change me.”

He stopped eating, carefully placing his spoon in his soup and meeting her challenging stare with a cool gaze. “You

know better than that.”

“Do I? So far, you’ve dictated my wardrobe and jewellery. What’s next? My makeup?”

“Your makeup is tasteful and lightly applied. I see no need to change it. And if I did, it would be to make sure you didn’t draw the attention of other men. As for your clothes and accessories, I chose them for you because you showed no interest in choosing for yourself.” His thick brows lowered in a frown. “Had you been willing to accept my generosity, I would have allowed you more choice.”

She glared back at him. “We have very different definitions of generosity. Kidnapping me and forcing me to accept your so-called generosity erases any kind motives you might’ve had in buying me a new wardrobe. You’re trying to control me in any way you can.”

“Be careful what you say to me, Yasmin,” he warned, his voice deepening.

“Or what?” she snapped. “You’ll threaten me again? You’ve taken everything else from me. For the sake of my family, I’ve agreed to go along with the charade, but I refuse to allow you to dictate my words.”

“Even if your words have consequences?”

Ignoring his implied threat, she switched back to the previous topic of conversation. “Why won’t you allow me to choose what I eat?”

“You don’t need to order your food. I already know what you like.”

“That’s not the point, Volkan,” she retorted. “Sure, I like tomato bisque, but what if I’d wanted the chowder?”

“They don’t serve chowder here.”

She glared at him, but stopped talking. She wasn’t going to win this argument. He was intelligent enough to know what she meant, but he refused to acknowledge her point.

The light from the candle flickered, causing the shadows to move across his face in a menacing dance. When he spoke, his

voice was low and measured. “I won’t allow you to order because I don’t want you to speak to the staff. You belong to me and I want to keep you to myself.”

Like a toy he refused to let anyone else look at, let alone interact with.

“That’s ridiculous,” she said, shaken. “By that logic, you won’t ever let me talk to anyone.”

“You can talk to me.”

“Volkan,” she pleaded.

A shudder went through him when she said his name.

The server picked that moment to come up alongside Yasmin. Smiling, he nodded towards her untouched bowl. “Is the soup not to your taste?”

In a flash, Volkan was out of his chair, his fists wrapped in the server’s collared shirt. He dragged the man to the edge of the roof and leaned him across the brick barrier until his top half was dangling twelve stories above the ground. “You dare speak to my bride?”



## Chapter Eighteen



**YASMIN WAS** out of her seat and around the table in seconds. She grabbed hold of Volkan's arm and yanked, but he refused to look at her. He was too focused on the man he was threatening.

"I gave you one rule for tonight," Volkan snarled. "You serve our table and you leave. You don't look at my woman and you definitely don't speak to her. Is that too difficult to follow?"

"Volkan!" Yasmin cried.

"I'm sorry, Sir!" The guy yelled, looking over his shoulder at the street below and paling. He gripped the ledge in one hand and Volkan's wrist in the other. "I didn't mean anything by it. I forgot, that's all. I would never disrespect you or Ms. Mahdi."

Volkan shook the man. "There you go, allowing her name in your filthy fucking mouth. If I drop you, you'll never get the chance to speak her name again."

Though Volkan couldn't see it, the server met Yasmin's eyes, silently pleading for her help. She reached down Volkan's arm and wrapped her fingers over Volkan's hand, careful not to touch the server where he held on for dear life.

Softly, she said, "Volkan, I want you to bring him back onto the roof and let him go."

He looked down at her, his eyes still clouded with fury.

“Please, Volkan. I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if you hurt someone on my behalf.” She could tell her words were working. The fog was lifting and the tension in his shoulders seemed to ease. “Will you do it for me?”

She hated begging him for anything. Hated that she was debasing herself, asking him for a favour, acknowledging his obsession and the hold she somehow had over him. But she didn’t have a choice. If it was the only way to make him see reason and get him to release the poor, unsuspecting server, she would do what she had to.

Finally, Volkan stepped back, lifting the man off the ledge and placing him on his feet. Instead of letting him go though, Volkan dragged him up onto his toes until they were eye to eye. “You will leave this rooftop and never show your face near either of us again. If I see you, I will finish you.”

He released the man and, without so much as a word or a glance Yasmin’s way, the server took off at a run, wrenching open the door that led into the building and disappearing.

“He’s going to call the police,” Yasmin said, shaken.

“He won’t,” Volkan replied, his voice neutral. “The people who patronize this restaurant pay for silence as well as food. If anything, management will have him relocated.”

“Relocated?” Yasmin said in a squeak, imagining the worst.

He shook his head. “To one of their other locations.”

Volkan led her back to the table, helping her into her chair. He knelt at her feet and took her hand. “I’m sorry you had to see that, but I can’t allow someone like him to think he has a chance with you. From the moment he saw you, he was sneaking glances and looking for an opportunity to speak to you. I had to show him his place. I wouldn’t have dropped him.”

Volkan was delusional. The waiter hadn’t given her a second look.

“You weren’t in control,” she argued, gazing at him as though he were a snake about to strike. “It’s the same thing

you did in the apartment hallway with my roommates, and again at the bar with my friends. You lose control and threaten people.”

He squeezed her hands in an almost painful grip. “You don’t know me well enough to know when I’m in control and when I’m not. You need to trust me when I tell you, I wouldn’t have dropped the waiter.” He paused, then added, “Not in front of you.”

Now *that* she believed. If she hadn’t been there... she couldn’t say for sure what Volkan would have done.

Volkan returned to his seat and lifted his spoon as though nothing had interrupted their evening. When he noticed she wasn’t eating, he said, “Pick up the spoon, Yasmin.”

“I’m not hungry.” And she wasn’t. She hadn’t had much of an appetite before Volkan’s insane display of jealousy, but now it was completely gone.

He set his spoon down, wiped his mouth with his napkin, and stood, holding his hand out. “Then we’ll go home.” The gleam in his eyes told her what would happen when they got back to the penthouse.

She swallowed and looked up at him. “I’ll eat.”

He gave her a dark smile. “I thought as much.” Then he sank back into his chair and continued eating.

With a shaking hand, Yasmin followed suit, eating her soup in silence. Swallowing was made difficult by the lump in her throat.

A new server, a woman, showed up at their table, whisking their empty soup dishes away and placing plates filled with roasted vegetables and salmon with a creamy dill sauce in front of them. Volkan ate with gusto, as though nothing about their evening was disturbing to him.

Yasmin couldn’t quite pull off the same level of calm acceptance. She ate only a couple bites of her salmon and vegetables. She stopped drinking as the Champagne now tasted sour on her tongue. She was thinking about their night ahead.

She caught Volkan watching her as she fidgeted with her napkin.

“You’re nervous.”

There was no point in denying the charge, so she nodded.

“I’ll make it good for you,” he said in what she was sure he thought was a reassuring tone. “I want you to enjoy our time together. I never intended to hurt you.”

“You have a funny way of showing it,” she said bitterly, looking down at her fingers, which were twisted in her lap.

“The pain will be only temporary, Yasmin. You must trust me.” His voice was very sure and once more she wondered how he could delude himself to such an extent. “In time, you’ll see that my only desire is to make you happy.”

She locked eyes with him, “The only way I can be happy is if you let me go.”

His fist clenched so hard around the stem of his Champagne glass it snapped in two. The top half of the glass fell onto his plate and shattered. His gaze flicked down and he said in an emotionless voice, “Look what you made me do.”

Those six words were more chilling than anything else he’d said to her. It was the tone. The lack of emotion, the accusation, the disgust. It had her tensing in her seat, gripping the chair until her knuckles ached.

Volkan stood, tossing his napkin on the table. He closed the distance between them. “If nothing will please you except the one thing I refuse to give, then there’s no longer a reason for me to have a care for your feelings.”

“What are you going to do?” she asked desperately, flinching in her seat.

Volkan took hold of her arms and dragged her from the chair.

“I’m going to do what I’ve wanted to from the first moment I saw you.” He pulled her against his chest and kissed her hard, his large hand at the back of her head, controlling her. She tried to fight him off, but he ignored her struggles,

deepening the kiss until her breath was gone and the world swam around her.

She smashed her fists into his shoulders, trying her hardest to get him to lift his head. Ignoring her protests, he thrust his tongue into her mouth, choking her. The lights beyond his shoulder dimmed and she went limp in his arms, the fight sapped from her.

She was seconds from passing out from lack of oxygen when he lifted his head. His eyes were blazing with desire and vengeance as he looked down at her. “This is only the beginning.”

Tears leaked from her eyes, wetting her cheeks. “Please don’t hurt me, Volkan.”

“Why should I take your feelings into consideration when you don’t care about mine,” he said, ruthlessly twisting his hand in her hair until she cried out and reached back to grip his wrist.

“I’m sorry,” she said pleadingly. “I’ll do better.”

A knowing gleam entered his eyes and he eased his grip. One moment he seemed out of control, on the verge of hurting her or someone else, the next in complete control. It felt like he was manipulating her emotions, herding her toward some unknown conclusion.

It was horrifying, but she couldn’t think of a way out. Volkan blocked her at every turn, forcing her back to his side, forcing her to comply with his wishes.

“What do you want from me?” she whispered.

He bent closer, his breath caressing her face, his eyes hungry as he looked at her. “I want you to be happy with me.” His answer was so simple, yet so complicated. How could she be happy with a monster who threatened to hurt her and everyone she loved?

“I-I’ll try,” she promised, then reached up to touch his hand where it was still knotted in her hair. “Please, you’re hurting me.”

He removed his hand and stepped away from her, reaching out to touch her arm where the strap of her dress had fallen. She flinched, but he only moved his finger up, trailing it along her arm until he'd lifted the strap into place at her shoulder.

"The pain will be temporary," he said, his deep voice a methodical murmur.

"You said that already," she whispered. "But I don't want you to hurt me at all."

"Pain is inevitable in life." His gaze darkened as he glanced away and the lines bracketing his mouth deepened.

"D-did someone hurt you?" she asked, finding herself curious, despite the dark turns their evening had taken. She didn't want to care about his answer, didn't want anything to do with him, but something about him was drawing her in. Maybe his wild mood swings, or his flawed logic. She didn't know and she would find a way to harden her heart. But for now, she cared about his answer.

"Haven't we all been hurt?" His dark eyes were pools of pain, lust, and vengeance.

Yasmin didn't understand. Maybe she was reading him wrong, but perhaps there was more to this kidnapping than she'd originally thought.

"I wasn't hurt," she admitted. "Not until you."

He touched her lips, his gaze focusing on her face, coming back from wherever he'd gone. "I'm sorry, Yasmin. That wasn't my intention."

*Then let me go!* she silently screamed at him, though she didn't dare to say the words out loud. Instead, she said, "Your actions speak louder than your words."

He dipped his head in a nod of acknowledgement. "One day you'll see all that I've done for you and you'll come to love me as much as I love you."

Yasmin seriously doubted that.

He took her arm and led her away from the table. "I think we're done here."

As they stepped onto the elevator, Yasmin remembered her promise to have sex with him. Willingly.

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## Chapter Nineteen



**THE CLOSER THEY** got to Volkan's penthouse the harder her heart pounded, the damper her palms got, the drier her mouth felt. She felt like breaking down and sobbing again, which would be the second time that day. A lot for someone who hardly ever cried. Maybe the tears would sway Volkan, but she didn't think so. He seemed determined to have sex with her.

After they arrived in the underground parking lot, he reached around her to unlatch her seatbelt, then pulled her from the vehicle. She avoided eye contact with his men as he walked her to the elevator and hit the button.

The door had barely closed when he pushed her against the side of the elevator, dipping his head to bury his face in the crook of her neck. She gasped as he licked her, then nipped at her skin, sucking on it until she was sure he would leave a bruise.

Her heart accelerated, but this time it was from the sensations of his skilled lips at her throat. She hated that he could pull any feelings from her, let alone pleasure, but she wasn't in charge of her libido.

She tried pushing him away. "Not here, Volkan."

He refused to budge. "I own the building. No one will disturb us between here and the penthouse. I've been wanting to do this all evening. Since you stepped out of the bedroom in a dress that clings so beautifully to every curve that it makes me want to cut out the eyes of everyone who looks at you."



“You chose the dress for me!” she protested, still pushing against his shoulders. Unable to move him, she ducked under his arm and rushed to the other side of the elevator where she pressed her back against the wall, her hand at her neck where he’d bitten her. The spot tingled and sent sparks of pleasure straight to her nipples. She reminded herself that he was a psychopath and lifted her chin, glaring at him. “You can’t go around threatening to hurt everyone who looks at me or speaks to me. It’s barbaric.”

He stared at her, a satanic glow in his eyes, his dark hair ruffled from burying his head against her. “Then call me barbaric,” he said in a deep, guttural voice, reaching for her. “Because I won’t tolerate interference where you’re concerned. I will murder anyone who gets between us.”

She shivered as he dragged her against his chest, crushing her lips beneath his. She believed him. She believed he would murder anyone who tried to part them.

Fear for her family rushed through her. If they found out about her situation, they would try to intervene, which meant, if Volkan allowed her to speak to them, she would have to come up with a story to convince them she was fine. Her only other option was escape and Volkan was careful not to give her the opportunity. She was still hopeful one would present itself, but until then, she needed to take care with Volkan’s volatile temper. She couldn’t give him a reason to threaten the people she loved.

He gripped her arms and dragged them up, forcing them around his neck. He wanted her to participate in the kiss. As much as it bothered her to give in, she would do it. For her family.

Her body wasn’t arguing either as she wrapped her arms around him and threw herself into the kiss, taking his tongue into her mouth and tentatively caressing him back. Tingles sparked through her and for a moment she forgot where she was and who she was with.

Then the elevator dinged and reality set in.

She pulled away from him and he took her hand, striding into the vestibule with her. Yasmin blushed when she noticed Henry waiting for them.

“Is everything set for tomorrow?” Volkan asked.

“Yes, sir,” Henry replied, following them into the penthouse. “The jet will be ready for departure at 3.”

“Good.” Volkan moved toward the liquor cabinet, picking up a decanter and pouring a measure of amber fluid into a crystal glass. “I want you personally to accompany us. I won’t take any risks with my fiancé.”

“Of course. As previously discussed, Ms. Mahdi will be the security team’s priority,” Henry acknowledged, his eyes darting to Yasmin before sliding away. She thought she sensed a hint of concern, or maybe resentment there. She couldn’t tell which, but she didn’t blame him. Her presence must be upsetting their normal routine. Then she realized she had no idea what a normal routine for Volkan and his staff might be.

“Make sure that she is.” Volkan lifted the glass to his lips and sipped, savouring the liquid, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallowed. “If anything happens to her, I will make sure every person whose job it was to watch over her pays.” Volkan turned his back on Henry. “Dismissed.”

Though Volkan couldn’t see it, Henry nodded in deference and stepped back into the vestibule, disappearing seconds later as the door closed on his stoic figure.

“Are you always so rude to the people around you?” Yasmin asked, tossing her purse on the counter and heading for the liquor cabinet. If Volkan could drink his worries away, so could she. Before she could pour a glass for herself, Volkan gripped her hand and placed his glass in her fingers, then he forced her to lift the glass and place it against her lips.

The edge of the glass was wet from his lips. He wanted her mouth to touch the same place. Her cheeks burned with heat and her belly backflipped as she complied, taking a healthy swallow of the drink. It wasn’t as bad as she thought it might be. The drink was smooth, only biting a little as it slid from

her throat into her belly where it settled into a pool of pleasant warmth.

Volkan's heated gaze followed the movements of her lips and throat like it was the most fascinating thing he'd ever seen.

Not for one second was she thinking about actually falling for his insane plan to force her to love him, but a part of her, a very small part, could appreciate the way he gave her his entire attention when he was with her. As though nothing else in the world mattered to him.

"I'm not rude, I'm straightforward," he murmured. He brushed her throat with his knuckles, then down between her breasts, until he stopped at her belly where he spread his fingers, as if tracing the path the alcohol had taken when she swallowed.

She stepped back, breaking his hold and taking his drink with her. "How long have you known Henry?"

He frowned. "I don't enjoy hearing his name on your lips."

She rolled her eyes. "What exactly should I call him then?"

He pressed his lips together and shook his head. "You shouldn't need to refer to him at all."

Yasmin closed her eyes and took a big gulp of the drink. She thought it might be whiskey, but she wasn't sure. It was going down easier with every sip and she was recapturing the floaty feeling she'd experienced in the restaurant with the Champagne.

"Can you please just answer my question, Volkan? How long have you known him?"

The line between his thick brows deepened, but he finally answered, "I've known him for 28 years. Why do you ask?"

"So you knew him when you were children?"

"Yes," he confirmed. "We went to school together, then later we went into the military together."

"Military?" she asked, surprised.

“Yes,” he said in a clipped tone. “It’s compulsory for all males in my country to complete twelve months of service.”

She wondered if that was how he got his scars, but didn’t know how he would react if she asked. “Do you consider Henry a friend?”

He took her arm and led her to the couch, where he pushed her onto the cushions. He sat next to her. Close enough that his thigh pressed against hers. He was so much bigger than she was and it felt like he was looming over her as he talked. “Henry is my employee, not my friend.” He took the glass from her hand and set it on the coffee table, then turned to take her shoulder in his hands, pressing her into the cushions. He trailed his fingers down her arm. “Why are you asking me about Henry? You risk my jealousy, love, and I’d hate to lose Henry. We may not be friends, but I’ve known him a long time.”

“I don’t care about Henry,” she whispered, pressing her hand against his chest. “I just don’t understand how you can spend so much time with someone and not consider them a friend.”

He brought her hand to his lips, pressing a lingering kiss against the back of it, setting off sparks through her body. “I don’t allow weakness into my life very often, Yasmin. Doing that risks my ability to think clearly and make sound business decisions. My family and hundreds of employees count on my ability to run my business without distraction.”

She stared up at him, feeling as though she were finally getting to know something about the real him. He spoke of himself so rarely that the only thing she knew about him was that he had a terrible temper and he liked kidnapping women. Well, maybe not women, but definitely her.

“Am I a weakness?” she whispered.

He didn’t hesitate. “Yes.”

“Then why didn’t you leave me alone?” She was genuinely curious. “You could’ve walked away from me and never looked back. End of distraction.”

He smiled and stroked his fingers down her cheek. “Whether or not I’m with you, you will always be a distraction. At least when I have you close, I know you’re safe and well cared for.”

“I don’t understand you,” she whispered.

“You’ve never known anyone like me before. If you had, then you’d belong to him and I’d be dead because once I met you, nothing could’ve stopped me from claiming you as mine except a bullet.”

It was barbaric, but it was honest.

He didn’t give her the chance to say anything else. He gripped her by the back of the head and lowered his face to hers, taking her mouth in a passionate kiss that had her gasping. He took advantage, pushing his tongue inside and filling her.

She groaned and clutched the cushions beside her, resisting the urge to wrap her arms around his neck. Maybe the alcohol wasn’t such a good idea. It was making her forget all her reasons for resisting him.

*You were kidnapped, idiot!* Her inner victim screamed in outrage.

Oh right, the kidnapping thing.

She tried to tear her mouth from Volkan’s, but he deepened the kiss, taking her to the edge of pain but holding back so that the kiss didn’t turn into punishment. “You promised you wouldn’t resist,” he said against her lips, then dropped his head to her cleavage, licking a path around the edge of the dress before yanking the material aside and baring the cup of her bra.

“I’m scared, Volkan,” she told him, which was partially true. She wasn’t frightened in the moment, but she was afraid of the future and she didn’t think having sex with her kidnapper was the best choice.

He continued to nuzzle her breast. “You don’t need to fear me, *küçük olan*. I would never hurt you. I want only to make you soar in my arms with the pleasure I will give you.”

A shot of heat went straight down to her core, making her squirm. Why did a psychotic kidnapper have to say such romantic things? It wasn't fair. She was supposed to resist him, yet her brain couldn't come up with a single reason she should.

"Volkan!" she gasped, trying to get his attention as he ran his hand down her body, reaching for the edge of her skirt and dragging it up.

"Fucking love the way you say my name," he groaned against her. "Don't think I can wait to have you." He pushed her skirt up to her waist and reached for her panties. They were sheer and lacy and before she had a chance to process what was happening, Volkan ripped them from her body.

She cried out at the sting of the tearing fabric against her thighs, but she didn't have long to think about it because Volkan's palm replaced the panties. "Oh my god!" The heat of him seeped into her pussy, warming her and sending a gush of fluid into his hand.

"I'll make you come, I swear it," he said, his voice strained, his hands frantic as he tore at her clothes, attempting to remove all the barriers between them. "Fucking need you now."

He reached between them, unzipping his pants and pulling his cock free. It was the first time she'd seen it and it had her gasping and scrambling backwards on the couch. Not just because it was huge, and it really was, but because it was a reality check. Volkan was about to put that thing in her and she wasn't ready for it.

"Volkan, stop!"

"I will never stop, my beautiful Yasmin." He gripped her by the thighs and dragged her down onto the couch until she was laying underneath him. "I will spend the rest of my life fucking this perfect pussy. I will make you come over and over until your lips know no one else's name except mine."

He crawled up her body, lining his cock up against her slit.

“Say my name.” Her dark eyes gleamed with possession as he stared at her. He looked like the devil about to devour her whole.

“Volkan, I — “

She didn't get to finish the sentence. He slammed himself home, thrusting until he bottomed out against her cervix. Yasmin let out a scream of agony and gripped his shoulders so hard her nails would leave marks.

For a long time, Volkan didn't move.

After a moment, the pain subsided and she opened her tear-drenched eyes to look up into his triumphant face.

“A virgin,” he said, awe in his voice.

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## Chapter Twenty



**YASMIN FROZE**, pain crashing through her. She told herself to relax or it would just keep hurting but she couldn't. Not with his massive cock splitting her in two. He was saying something to her but she couldn't hear him through the rushing blood in her head.

She slapped her hand against his shoulder. "Get off me."

He tightened his grip and held her closer, which made his cock feel tighter inside her. She cried out, digging her nails into his shoulders. He was still wearing his clothes and part of her rebelled that he hadn't removed them before mauling her.

He brushed his hand over her head, smoothing back the locks that had fallen in her face during his aggressive assault.

"It'll stop hurting soon," he soothed her, and she wanted to hit him, but he was too close. A slap would barely make an impact. If he wasn't inside her, she would try dick punching him. "It's not surprising given how tight you are. Most virgins experience pain."

Virgin? No. She let out a bitter laugh and tried pushing him again. Of course the great behemoth wouldn't budge.

"I'm not a virgin," she hissed, a red tide washing over her face and chest. She wasn't a virgin, but she may as well be. She'd had sex once, hated it and never tried again.

She was smart enough to know that with the right partner she could experience pleasure, but the opportunity to explore that possibility never came up. She'd been too busy burying



herself in books and homework to pay much attention. Now she wished she was more experienced. The monster cock inside her could have used a bit more stretch.

“I know a virgin when I feel one,” Volkan said arrogantly.

“Have you been with one before?” she asked through gritted teeth. “Because I’m pretty sure virgins don’t feel much different than most girls who haven’t had sex in a long time.”

Anger suffused his face and he gripped her throat, pinning her against the couch cushion behind her. “I’ve been with one virgin,” he said. “And I know you’re one as well.” She was starting to suspect he wanted her to be a virgin because the alternative wasn’t acceptable to him.

She cried out in pain as he pulled out and shoved himself back in with possessive force.

“A virgin,” he growled.

“Unless you’ve been following me around since I hit puberty, you can’t possibly know that I’m a virgin!”

“I have your medical records,” he argued glaring down at her as he ground his hips into hers, forcing himself deeper. “You aren’t on birth control and you aren’t getting regular STI checks.”

The pain flared again, but so did the tingling that had pulled at her before he pushed himself inside her. She grunted as he pulled out and pushed back in.

“That just means I’m not sexually active!” she yelled, losing her temper. “I’m not a freaking virgin, you giant jerk!”

She probably should’ve realized what would come with a declaration like that, but in her defence, Yasmin wasn’t thinking clearly. There was an enormous cock stretching her from the inside, a psychopath kidnapper on top of her, and tingles of pleasure racing through her body in a wholly unwanted build-up to what she suspected was going to be an orgasm.

Before she could do anything though, his grip on her throat tightened and he leaned over her until his face was looming so

close to hers their noses touched. "Give me their names."

His growl was so chilling it sent a cold shiver down her spine and the little tingles she'd been experiencing evaporated, replaced by fear. "Wh-what?"

"I want the names of every man you've fucked."

She could swear she could feel his cock throbbing inside her, as angry as the rest of him. She shook her head, but his fingers tightened again until he'd cut off most of her airway.

"Please, Volkan, you're hurting me," she gasped.

"Names," he ordered, his eyes so dark it was like she was looking into the depths of hell. Tears sparked in her eyes and she shook her head. He lifted her up by the neck and slammed her back down into the cushions. "Now, Yasmin."

"Why?" she choked out.

"You know why," he said, an unholy gleam entering his eyes. "I'm going to find them and cut their dicks off. Make damn sure they pay for touching what should've been mine."

"You're insane!" she gripped his wrist and struggled to unseat him. He was too heavy though, and all she managed to do was bruise herself against him.

"Maybe I am," he agreed, "but you won't change my mind."

She shook her head and he tightened his hand until she could no longer breathe. Panic set in and she began fighting him, desperately trying to get air.

He stared down at her and she genuinely feared for her life. He was going to kill her while his cock was inside her. Not just inside her but moving. She realized he'd started rocking his hips against her, gliding his cock in and out while he choked the life from her.

A tear escaped as her vision blurred, his face swimming over top of hers. She tried to pry his fingers away from her, but it was like trying to move the hand of a marble statue.

Suddenly, she felt fuller, like his cock was growing in size. His movements became jerkier, his thrusts harsher. He slammed into her over and over. He stared down at her, his face twisted in rage. Then he groaned her name, and she felt the rush of hot cum inside her, easing his way.

Her arms flopped to her sides and her vision dimmed. She couldn't think straight.

He leaned over her, pressed his lips to her ear and said, "Give me every name of every dick that's touched what's mine."

She blinked and more tears leaked down her face.

Volkan eased his grip, and she sucked air into her lungs. He continued to pin her to the couch, his cock still inside her. She was trapped and panic overwhelmed her. She tried to hit him, but her arms were weak and all she could do was cling to his shirt.

He kept his fingers around her throat, tightening them again. "I can do this all night, my love. Strangle your delicate throat as you strangle my cock. I've been dreaming of fucking you for months. I have many hours of this left in me before I'll come even close to satisfied."

"Dustin," she gasped, turning her face to the side so she wouldn't have to look at him as she gave up the name of the only lover she'd ever had.

"Who else?" he demanded.

She tipped her head back to glare at him. Now that oxygen was reinvigorating her, she felt defiant once more. He might defeat her temporarily, but he would never entirely stop her from being herself.

"None of your business."

He lifted her off the couch again by her neck and held her up to his chest, his cock slipping from her body as he loomed over her.

She flailed and reached behind herself to grip the couch. Fluid leaked down the insides of her thighs.

“Give me their fucking names!” he roared.

She flinched and rasped, “Just one.”

“You’ve only fucked one other guy?” he demanded and when she nodded, he dropped her.

She landed on her side on the couch and curled in a ball, clutching her throat and coughing, glaring up at him as he paced away from her.

He shoved an angry hand through his hair, before turning back to her and pointing. “I want his full name and address.”

She shook her head, paling. “No, I can’t give it to you. I-I don’t even know it.”

“Liar,” he said accusingly.

She flinched, but he didn’t come near her. Judging by his agitated body language, she thought maybe he was keeping his distance so he wouldn’t hurt her again.

She touched tentative fingers to her neck and swallowed experimentally. Her throat felt hot and scratchy. Raw. Like she’d been screaming through a tube.

“I swear I’m not lying,” she insisted. “I was seventeen. I’d had a crush on him for ages and we were at a party together after high school graduation. We were heading to different colleges and I knew it was my last chance to kiss him.” The words came out in a rush and she couldn’t tell from the stillness of his body and his penetrating stare whether he believed her. “One kiss led to another, led to us ending up in the host’s bedroom. We had sex on a pile of coats and purses. I didn’t like it and wasn’t sorry when he left town.”

Volkan seemed to visibly relax, his shoulders dropping and his hands unclenching. She flinched back and held her hands up protectively as he strode toward her, but he only dropped to his knees in front of her. Even kneeling, he towered over her. He reached up her thighs, took hold of her skirt and gently twisted it back into place, smoothing it down.

A sob escaped her throat and she had the sudden urge to throw herself into his arms and beg him to hold her.

Stockholm, her brain whispered at her. One second, he was terrorizing her and the next showing kindness. Of course she wanted to lap up any drop of kindness he would show her. It was a messed-up situation and she couldn't tell if he was engineering the whole thing or if he really was as unhinged as he seemed.

He reached for her face, holding her and using his thumbs to wipe the tears from beneath her eyes. The move was so unexpectedly gentle that she was unprepared for his words. "You're lying to me about his name, Yasmin. No one forgets the name of the first person they fucked. Not even if the sex was bad and you never want to see him again. You'll give me that name or I will go hunting and it'll be so much worse for him when I find him."

She shook her head and more sobs spilled from her lips. "I can't let you hurt him. He didn't know. It wasn't his fault —"

He pressed a finger over her lips, cutting off the flow of her words. "Hush, *küçük olan*. It doesn't matter. I'll find this Dustin with or without your help. You need to calm down now. You've had an emotional evening."

Now she was really crying, the tears dripping down her face.

An emotional evening? She felt like her guts had been ripped out, played with by one of those monster children who breaks all their toys, then shoved back inside with no care as to where they belong.

First, he'd forced her to spend the day shopping while choosing everything for her, then he'd taken her to a restaurant where he'd nearly thrown a server off the roof. Now... this? No, it was too much. She was falling to pieces and there was no chance she would ever get put back together again in the correct order.

Volkan scooped her up off the couch, holding her against his chest. Ignoring her squeak of protest, he carried her into the bedroom, then through to the ensuite. "I know what you need."

“Volkan...” So far she’d hated all of his ideas. “What are you doing?”

“I’m drawing you a bath,” he said, setting her on her feet. He steadied her as she swayed, then turned on the taps, reaching over to close the plug.

A bath didn’t sound so bad. She was sore, and the fluid between her thighs felt sticky.

Volkan continued, “Then, I’m going to give you an orgasm so you’ll feel better.”

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## *Chapter Twenty-One*



“WHAT?” she gasped, backing away from him. “No, Volkan. I don’t want you to touch me again.”

He snatched her wrist, dragging her to his side. “You don’t know what you want. The first time you had sex you didn’t enjoy it, probably because he was some sweaty high school swine with more hands than brains.”

He wasn’t wrong, but she was pretty sure she hadn’t been much better, with her fumbling lack of experience and overactive mind.

“And your second experience was too rough.” Volkan reached behind her to draw the zipper of her dress down her back. An involuntary shiver ran through her as his fingers trailed down her spine. “I apologize for that. I lost my temper, which seems to be something I do around you. You make me volatile and out of control sometimes.”

It surprised her that he was apologizing, but she didn’t like the way he excused his behaviour, blaming her for what amounted to rape. Oh god. She’d been kidnapped and raped. There was only one thing left in the unholy trinity of the stalker’s playbook. Murder.

“I don’t want you to touch me again,” she said, and when his pleasant expression turned to a frown, she hastily added, “I’m too sore.”

He gave her a knowing nod and said, “I’ll be gentle.”

Tears surfaced again, only this time they were tears of frustration. She couldn't get him to listen to her.

He tugged the spaghetti straps of her dress down her arms, drawing his fingers along her skin as he pulled. When he'd freed her breasts, his eyes became heavy-lidded and smoky.

She felt vulnerable with her arms trapped by her sides and she lifted them, allowing the dress to fall to her feet. She was naked in front of him, wearing only his bruises. He touched each one, then replaced his fingers with his lips, kissing them.

She flinched and tried to move away when his lips trailed down to the angry welts created by him when he tore her panties from her.

"You bruise easily," he remarked huskily. "You'll have to be more careful to answer my questions when I ask you something, Yasmin. I don't enjoy hurting you, but I'll do what I must to protect you."

A bitter laugh escaped. "You've hurt me a lot for a man who doesn't like hurting me."

He gave her an indulgent smile and stood, pulling her arm until she was standing in front of the tub. Like a child, he scooped her up and deposited her in the water. She gasped as the heated water touched her skin, but quickly realized the water was the temperature she liked it. Had he done it on purpose? How could he possibly know what temperature she preferred?

*The same way he got hold of your medical records, her brain whispered to her. He's been stalking you for months, learning everything he can about you.*

He reached for a washcloth and dipped it in the water, then cupping her chin, he scrubbed the tear marks from her cheeks. His touch was gentle, lover-like. It made her feel off-balance after the brutality of what had happened in the living room.

"I knew you would fight when you first got here and I reconciled myself to having to use tough measures to keep you in line," he told her, and it took a moment to realize that he was answering her accusation. "The pain you experience now



will be short-lived in comparison to a lifetime of bliss. Once we get past this turbulent time in our lives, we'll settle down into a future of love and happiness. Trust me."

"But you lost your temper," she pointed out. "That doesn't seem like the action of a man who's in complete control. You threatened to spend the night... strangling me. Why should I trust you?"

"You provoked me," he said with a shrug. "So yes, I lost my temper, but I was in control of myself the entire time."

If he believed he was telling the truth, then that was even more frightening. That he was in control and he still forced himself on her while strangling her almost to the point passing out. It was beyond terrifying.

He maneuvered her in the tub until she was facing away from him, then dragged her until she was resting against the edge of the tub. She was uneasy with her back to him because his moods were so quick to change. She feared that without being able to see his expressions, she couldn't react in time if she did or said something to set him off.

His hand slipped between her breasts and over her belly, disappearing into the water. She gasped and squirmed as his hand found her pussy.

"Settle down, love," he said against her ear, wrapping his arm around her torso.

"What are you doing?" she asked, desperately trying to hold herself still as he touched her labia under the water, feeling her, exploring her.

"I told you," he said, his tone husky. "I'm going to make you come."

"Please," she begged him. "I don't want to be touched there right now."

"You need to trust that I know what's best for you." He slowly eased his fingers into her so there was only mild discomfort.

Her breath picked up and she waved her hands around uselessly in the tub, not knowing where to put them. She wanted to shove him away but knew from experience that would be impossible. Instead, she had no choice but to take the orgasm he was forcing on her.

She gasped and shook her head, her body shuddering as he strummed her clit with his thumb while pumping his fingers in and out of her, the water against her clit adding another dimension to his strokes. She couldn't think, couldn't breathe, could just feel as explosions went off in her core and raked through her body.

She flung her head back and he pressed his face to hers, still holding her in place as he forced the best orgasm of her life on her. She'd only ever come using her own fingers, and those orgasms were beyond weak compared to this.

"Oh god, oh Volkan!" she moaned, reaching back to grip him with wet hands.

He slowed the movements of his fingers as spasms wracked her pussy under the water. He lazily continued to push his fingers in and out of her, but he stopped touching her over-sensitized clit. He pressed kisses to the side of her head and face, but she didn't have the energy to shove him away.

"I like it when you call me that," he murmured in her ear.

"What?" she asked, confused.

"God."

She couldn't help herself, she giggled. "I didn't mean you."

"Oh really," he said, his voice husky and teasing. "I'm pretty sure I heard you call me a God. I guess we'll have to do it again and find out."

"No, no, no!" She tried to squirm away from him in the water, but he held her anchored to the side of the tub with his arm.

He strummed her clit again, but this time with enough force to make her jerk and gasp.

“It’s too much, Volkan!”

Ignoring her, he growled in her ear, “Say my name again. I fucking love it.”

She bit her lip, but she was losing herself to the sensations that were rapidly overwhelming her once again. She tensed, feeling the orgasm build even higher this time. “Volkan!” she shouted, her entire body spasming. She reached back and, gripping his head, soaked him with streaming water.

He grunted in her ear, clearly enjoying what he was doing to her.

As she came down from the high of two earth-shattering orgasms, he held her, stroking her body with his hands and pressing kisses to her throat when her head lolled to the side.

“You didn’t call me God that time, but it’s even more pleasurable to hear your sweet voice shouting my name.”

She laughed, then lifted a hand to cover her mouth. Why was she laughing? He wasn’t amusing; he was a kidnapper who’d touched her intimately against her will. She got off on his touch. No, no, no. She shouldn’t have done that. What kind of person was she?

She shoved away from him and moved to the other side of the tub, gripping her knees protectively against her chest. Tears burned in her eyes and she refused to look at him.

He sighed heavily. “I had hoped the regrets wouldn’t come so quickly.” He reached across the water tub and grasped her chin, forcing her to look at him. “This was going to happen whether or not you consented. It’s better that you enjoy my touch because we’ll be doing this again, often. I won’t be denied the body of my wife.”

“I’m not your wife,” she mumbled.

His grip on her tightened until she could feel each finger biting into her jaw. “You will be. There’s no other choice.”

He stood, still gripping her face, leaned over the tub and pressed a stinging kiss of possession against her lips. He stared down at her, his hold on her face easing. For a moment, he

looked haunted. Regret? Maybe if he regretted his actions, he might let her go. Her heart leapt at the possibility, but then he moved away, releasing her.

He picked up a towel and gestured at her to come to him.

She knew if she didn't, he would come get her and he would be rougher than he might otherwise be. She stood, averting her eyes from the look of pleasure on his face as he watched the water stream down her body.

He wrapped the towel around her and effortlessly lifted her from the tub, setting her on her feet on the bathmat and rubbing her down. She gasped and squirmed when he pushed the material between her legs; hard enough to send sparks of pleasure and pain through her.

He finished drying her and dropped the towel, stepping back to give her room. Reaching into the drawer, he handed her a toothbrush, which she took automatically. He squeezed some toothpaste on the brush and did the same for himself. They brushed their teeth together; her watching him in the mirror with an expression of wary curiosity. It felt weird standing naked with a fully dressed, but very wet man, while they brushed their teeth.

After she spit and rinsed the brush and her mouth, he asked her if she had to pee before bed. Face flaming, she nodded. She half expected him to stay and watch, but he strode into the bedroom, giving her a modicum of privacy, though he left the door open. She wanted to close it but was worried he'd come back and insist on watching if she did, so she sat on the toilet and stared at the wall until she relaxed enough to go.

She washed her hands and went into the bedroom, standing hesitantly in the doorway. The lamp was on and Volkan was on the bed, sitting up beneath the sheets. His chest was bare, crisp black hairs springing out across his ridged pectoral muscles and trailing down to his belly before disappearing.

“Come to bed, *aşkı*m.”

“What does that mean?” she asked, approaching the bed like she was walking to her death. She didn't know which

Volkan she would get at any given moment, and it made her head spin with anxiety. Was he going to crush her beneath his massive body and rape her again? Was he going to hurt her? Or was he going to be gentle and sweet?

“It means you are my love,” he said, his dark gaze watchful.

She held her breath as she slid beneath the sheet he held up for her. She rolled onto her side, facing away from him as he reached across her body and snapped the light off. He lowered his head to her bare shoulder and placed a lingering kiss to her skin, sending a shiver through her.

Then he rolled over and fell asleep almost immediately, his low snores filling the room.

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## *Chapter Twenty-Two*



### YASMIN WAITED ALMOST AN HOUR,

staring into the darkness, hardly daring to breathe before sliding out from under the covers. Volkan's heavy breathing continued uninterrupted as she stood and crept toward the closet. She placed her hand on the doorknob, then stopped, biting her lip. What if the noise woke him? But she couldn't bring herself to escape naked.

Then she remembered, Volkan had tossed his suit jacket across the chair in the living room. He was big enough that the jacket should cover all the important bits.

Yasmin made her way from the bedroom to the living room and found Volkan's jacket where he left it. She picked it up and slid her arms through the sleeves, buttoning it, but it was huge on her and gaped across her breasts. It covered her though, nearly going down to her knees.

She hurried to the front door, pausing by the bedroom to listen for Volkan's deep breaths. Sure enough, he was still sleeping soundly. Relief went through her as she slid her feet into the sandals she'd left there after their dinner date.

She stared at the alarm panel next to the door. There was a solid green light and a blinking red light on it. She didn't know what that meant. Actually, she had no idea how alarms worked at all. She'd never had to deal with one. Her family didn't use them and the only job she'd had was at the hotel, which was open twenty-four hours. Though there was security at the hotel

and panic buttons in case of emergency, there wasn't anything like this.

Would it go off if she opened the door? She had to assume yes, which meant she only had a few seconds to figure out what to do once she was through the door.

She wracked her brains, trying to remember what the area outside the door looked like. The first time she'd gone through, she'd been passed out in Volkan's arms. The second and third times had been before and after her dinner date with Volkan. Both times she'd been distracted by him and not paying attention to her surroundings. She was a terrible kidnap victim! She couldn't remember any relevant details.

Thinking hard, she vaguely remembered that the penthouse was the only apartment on the floor. There was a vestibule with a table that had a vase filled with flowers. A set of doors led into a stairwell next to the elevator.

And there was also guards.

They were so quiet and stoic, wearing black suits that made them fade into the background. There might not even be anyone out there, though she suspected there probably was. If Volkan needed security during the day, she had to imagine he would need it at night, too.

She turned toward the kitchen and reached for the butcher block, then paused, her hand hovering over it. What was she going to do with a knife? She had no idea how to fight and she didn't think she had it in her to stab anyone, but she couldn't get by the guard without a weapon.

"Darn it," she muttered.

No, she couldn't stab anyone... but she could throw something at them. As quietly as she could, she rifled through drawers and cupboards until she came up with two weapons. The first was a glass that she filled with milk. She could throw it in the guard's face, temporarily blinding him. A hot liquid would be better, but she didn't dare attempt to boil water in case Volkan woke up. The second was a can of cooking spray, which she shoved in the suit jacket pocket. If the guard came

after her, she would spray his eyes with it. She didn't know how effective it would be, but it had to be better than nothing.

She carried the glass of milk to the door and took a deep breath, reaching for the locks on the door. There were three. Two deadbolts and a chain. She carefully, noiselessly, eased each one open. When the door was unlocked, she pulled it open, setting off the alarm, and hurried into the entryway. A startled guard looked her way as she frantically scanned the area.

The guard was standing between her and the elevator.

“Can I help you, Ms. — ” She didn't give him a chance to finish. She rushed toward him, hurling the glass at his head. It flew past his shoulder, spraying him with milk and smashing into the wall behind him, shattering as it hit the floor. He barely reacted, but his expression was one of bewilderment.

She rushed toward the table with the huge vase of flowers and shoved as hard as she could. The flowers toppled over and the table flew into the guard. It didn't knock him over, but it sent him stumbling back. She grabbed the cooking spray and hurtled toward the emergency exit door. As she reached for it, the guard grabbed her arm, swinging her around.

She brought the cooking spray up and let it loose in his face. A shaft of guilt went through her as his face twisted in surprise and pain and he let go of her arm.

“Yasmin!” Volkan bellowed her name and she heard thundering footsteps rushing through the penthouse toward the door.

Yasmin turned on her heel and slammed her free hand into the emergency exit door. It flew open and smashed into the wall. She lunged through, but there was a guard standing on the other side holding a gun, which he pointed at her. The second he saw her face, he pointed the gun away from her, then stepped toward her. She lifted her can of cooking spray, but before she could get him, an arm yanked her back into a very hard, very naked body. A hand slapped hers with enough force to knock the cooking spray away from her. She was



lifted off her feet and dragged backwards, kicking and screaming into the entryway.

The guard she'd attacked glared at her as Volkan pulled her past him. Volkan stopped in front of the man and looked him up and down. "Did you touch her?"

He looked confused for a second, then a look of horror flashed across his face before he schooled his expression. Yasmin stopped fighting and stared at the man. She thought about her desperate bid for freedom and realized he'd touched her for a split second. He hadn't hurt her though. He'd been trying to stop her. Still, given the way Volkan asked the question and that split second look of horror, she suspected the guards had been given orders not to touch her.

She made eye contact with the guard and gave her head a slight shake, which Volkan saw.

He one-arm lifted her off her feet and growled in her ear, his eyes on the guard. "Don't encourage my men to lie to me. They know the punishment will be much worse if I find out." He sank his teeth into her ear and bit down hard enough to make it hurt. Yasmin cried out, and he released her ear. His gaze sought the guard again. "The truth."

The guard nodded. "I tried to stop her, so I grabbed her arm."

"Yet you were explicitly told never to touch my woman."

"I'm sorry, sir. It won't happen again."

"No, it won't." Volkan said grimly.

Yasmin suspected this was a no-win situation for the guard. He was probably also given orders not to allow her to escape. Yet how could he possibly do that without touching her?

Volkan strode with her to the penthouse door and kicked it open with his foot. He shoved her through. "Stay here," he said, then turned to the other guard who'd come through the emergency exit door. "Watch her."

He followed Yasmin into the flat as she backed away from him, clutching the halves of her borrowed jacket together. “Volkan, what are you going to do?”

His dark, emotionless eyes met hers. “I’m going to show my security staff what happens when they don’t follow my orders to the letter. He will take your punishment and you will think twice next time to involve my people.”

Oh god, he wasn’t going to punish her for the escape attempt, but the man who’d tried to stop her.

“Volkan, don’t do it,” she said desperately, wanting to grab his arm and plead with him, but too frightened to edge past the guard.

“Begging won’t work this time,” Volkan said to her, his voice gentling. “Go to bed, my love, and wait for me. I won’t be long.”

He closed the door on her and seconds later, she heard the sound of a fist hitting flesh and a man grunting in pain. She covered her ears, but it went on and on until Yasmin couldn’t stand it anymore. She was helpless to do anything. She rushed into the bedroom, slammed the door shut, and collapsed to the carpeted floor at the end of the bed. She wrapped her arms around her knees and dropped her head, rocking and sobbing until she had no more tears left. She curled up on the floor, pillowing her head on her arm, her gaze fixed on the door. It felt like hours passed before she heard him re-enter the flat.

Though she hadn’t turned any lights on, the dim glow of the city allowed her to see the misting of sweat on his naked body as he approached. He knelt next to her and she traced flecks of blood across his skin with her eyes. It made her stomach roil and the room spin. She closed her eyes against it.

He gathered her in his arms and placed her on the bed. He removed the suit jacket and covered her with the blanket, then sat next to her, brushing her hair away from her face. “You shouldn’t have done that.”

She nodded but said nothing.

“I’m trying to be gentle with you, Yasmin, but you keep forcing my hand to harsher methods.”

She wanted to scream at him, to tell him she wasn’t forcing him to do anything. He was forcing *her*. But there was no point. His twisted brain thought he was doing the right thing and nothing she could say would convince him otherwise.

“I need you to sleep, *aşkim*,” he said, reaching into the breast pocket of the suit jacket, which he’d tossed on the floor next to the bed and pulling out a syringe.

Oh no, why hadn’t she thought to check all the pockets? That syringe could’ve gotten her past the guards if she’d been able to use it on them. Or maybe used it on Volkan while he was asleep.

“I can see your thoughts in your eyes.” He said, a grim smile creasing his lips. “You are quite expressive. As much as I prize your feistiness, I think you’ve had enough for tonight. It’s time to sleep.”

She grabbed his wrist as he uncapped the syringe. “Please, Volkan, don’t.”

He brushed her hand aside and jabbed the needle into her arm. Her heart hammered with anxiety and dread as she waited for the drug to take effect, but her body didn’t go numb the way it had when he’d paralyzed her. Instead, she felt lethargic, like a fog was moving into her brain. Exactly like how she’d felt in the car after she was picked up from the airport.

She was glad it was the drug that made her sleep and not the other one. She giggled as she realized how stupid it was to prefer one drugging method over another. As her mind drifted, she thought about what her life was becoming. She was a puppet, and Volkan was her master, pulling her strings as it pleased him.

## *Chapter Twenty-Three*



**WHEN YASMIN WOKE** the next morning, she was groggy and disoriented. She pushed herself up in the bed, gripping her head, which was spinning and painful. She winced and reached for the glass of water that had been placed on the bedside table. She hesitated, then remembered Volkan telling her if he wanted to drug her, he'd just do it, not put it in her food or drink.

She gripped the cup and drank until it was empty. As she put the glass down, she felt a bit better. Or she did until Volkan pushed the door open without knocking and entered the room.

Spotting her sitting on the side of the bed, he grinned and said, "You slept in this morning."

She dragged the sheet up to cover her body. "Easy to do when you've been drugged."

He gave her a sharp look. "Would you like to talk about what happened last night, or would you like to move on with our day?"

She wrinkled her nose and mumbled, "Move on with our day."

He strode to the bed and tilted her face until she was looking at him. "Good, I prefer to dwell on the positives as well. Now, get up and get dressed. We need to eat and catch our flight."

Once again, his mention of their upcoming flight to Turkey made her stomach knot with anxiety. If she found it difficult to

escape him in London, how would she possibly do it in Turkey? Even if she managed to get away from him, she'd have to somehow find the Canadian embassy and get them to believe her wild story.

"I can see your brain working," Volkan said, his voice light but chiding. "While I appreciate your intelligence, I don't recommend you do as you're thinking. It will end badly for everyone."

"Except you," she retorted, pulling her chin from his grip and standing. Dragging the sheet off the bed, she pushed past him and headed for the washroom. Over her shoulder, she said, "You get to do whatever you want. Stomp on as many lives as you want and get away with it."

He grabbed her arm and swung her around. "You say that like it's a bad thing," he said, a hint of annoyance in his voice, "but I wouldn't be where I'm at if I couldn't wield the power that has fallen to me. I support my family, I run an extremely successful shipping and transport business, and I have the ears of some of the most powerful men in the world."

"Do you hear yourself?" she snapped, yanking her arm from his grip. "You wield your power with evil. You break laws as though it's as easy as breathing. You take what you want and don't care about the consequences." She came so close to adding 'you're a monster' but remembered what happened last time she'd done that. She didn't want a repeat. She was still sore from when he'd hurt her the night before.

"Laws are for controlling the masses. They don't apply to me."

Yeah, she totally despised this man. And since nothing she said made a difference to him, she simply turned around and walked into the washroom, closing and locking the door. He could break the lock, of course, but it was as much defiance as she could manage.

"You have half an hour," he called through the door.

Yasmin took every minute of the half hour to scrub her body of his scent, blushing as she remembered the way he

touched her, the way he'd made her come as he shoved his fingers inside her. It was by far the best and most confusing sexual experience of her life.

How could she hate someone so much, yet still enjoy his touch? Did her body not understand that it needed some solidarity with her brain? She absolutely couldn't allow herself to enjoy his touch. But neither did she want it to hurt either.

So, what was in between pain and pleasure?

"Nothing," she whispered to herself in the mirror. "You can do nothing." Just lay there and take it when he was pawing her. She wouldn't give him the pleasure of a reaction. She wouldn't struggle or reach for the orgasm he promised. If the only thing left to her was passive resistance, then that's what she would do.

And while she was passively resisting, she'd work on having a better game face. If she could earn his trust, or at the very least, convince him to relax his vigilance around her, she might find an opportunity to get away. She just had to remember not to lose her temper, not to argue, and not to resist him when he tried to touch her.

"Not so hard," she said sarcastically to herself.

She jumped as a fist hit the door.

"Time's up, Yasmin," Volkan's voice sounded from the bedroom. "Open this door right now."

She narrowed her eyes at herself in the mirror, took a deep breath, plastered as much of a smile as she could manage on her face and went to open the door. She was wearing only a towel when she emerged and Volkan's eyes skimmed her body.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to take so long," she said in a pleasant tone. "I'll hurry and get dressed."

She tried to walk past him toward the closet, but he stepped into her path, his gaze on her face. Her heart picked up speed and for a second she thought he was suspicious of her sudden about-face, but then his gaze dropped to her arm and he brushed his fingers over her bicep.

“I bruised you.”

She looked down and saw what he meant. Shadowy finger marks were starting to show against her brown skin. When she looked at him again, she didn't see shame, but pride. He enjoyed seeing his mark on her.

“Excuse me,” she said through a throat gone suddenly dry. How was she supposed to pretend she could tolerate him when he said and did weird, creepy stuff every time she saw him?

Instead of letting her pass, he gripped her arms over top of the bruises he left and lowered his head to hers, kissing her. He used too much pressure, bruising the already swollen tissues of her lips. She whimpered and eventually he let up, but she could tell he enjoyed her pain.

Touching her lips, she rushed past him and into the closet. She prayed he wouldn't follow and let out a sigh of relief when he left the bedroom. She went through her new wardrobe searching for something to wear on the flight to Turkey.

Then it struck her that she hadn't seen her luggage since the day before. Had he done something with it? She glanced in the bedroom and realized that she was right. Her bag was gone. Along with all of her belongings. Where had he taken them? Would he give them back? She had to fight the urge to storm into the kitchen and demand her things.

No, she was determined to lead with logic rather than her emotions. It was only stuff. She could replace everything that had been in the bag. But had he also confiscated her purse, along with her passport and identification?

She disappeared back into the closet and randomly chose a white sundress with a big yellow sunflower splashed across the skirt, a white cotton panty and bra set and tan leather sandals with three-inch heels. She wouldn't be anywhere near Volkan's height, but she'd have more than nature gave her.

After dressing, she ran a brush through her hair, brushed her teeth and declared herself ready for the next leg of her kidnapping. With a bitter laugh, she walked into the kitchen, plastering an innocently curious look on her face.

Volkan was preparing lunch and, glancing at the clock, she realized it was 11:30. Only a few hours until their flight.

“Can I help?” she asked.

Volkan looked at her and lifted a brow, but he said, “Of course, *aşkı*m. Come finish with these vegetables while I take the pitas out of the oven.”

He handed Yasmin the knife and turned his back.

She stood clutching the knife and staring. He’d just given her a weapon. She could stab him and escape.

No, she couldn’t. Not any more than she could harm his guards the night before. Plus, if she somehow incapacitated Volkan, how would she get past the guards that would inevitably be waiting for her on the other side of the door? No, she needed to stick with her earlier plan. Show Volkan that she could be a good little captive, get him to drop his guard, then get the heck away from him.

Taking a deep breath, she forced the tension from her shoulders and concentrated on the task at hand. Slicing the tomatoes, onion, and avocado in front of her.

Volkan took four pitas from the oven and laid them out on a long wooden board. As she chopped, he filled the pitas with the vegetables, feta, cold chicken, and some chickpeas. He squeezed some lemon and sprinkled cilantro over them, then carried the platter to the table.

Wiping her hands on a dish towel, Yasmin followed, lured by the delicious aroma of the warm pitas. Volkan held her seat out for her and pushed her chair in as she sat. He left for a moment, coming back with a bottle of white wine and two glasses, and took the seat next to her. He poured the wine, then reached for a pita.

They ate in silence, sipping their wine and enjoying the view of London from the penthouse windows.

When she’d eaten her fill, Yasmin picked up her wineglass and relaxed against the back of her chair. She closed her eyes and took a long sip, savouring the moment. If she was honest with herself, it was perfect.



Not Volkan, of course, but the moment.

She was in an incredible high-rise penthouse, having just finished a delicious meal while sipping an incredible wine. She wore designer clothes and the man who insisted on lavishing such riches on her was wildly handsome. The only problem with her perfect moment? His personality.

Maybe if he never spoke again, she could grow to enjoy this lifestyle. She glanced sideways at him. He'd also have to quit touching her without permission, call off his guard dogs, and he definitely had to stop drugging her.

She giggled as she imagined telling him she'd be happy to stay with him forever if he completely changed his personality and stopped talking.

“What is it?” he asked, his lips curling in amusement.

“I enjoyed that,” she admitted, and at his questioning look, added, “Lunch, I mean. It was really good, and the view is fantastic.”

“You would never have seen it if I hadn't come into your life,” he said with an indulgent smile. He caressed her throat and cupped her shoulder, wrapping his big fingers around her. “You must admit, things haven't been all bad since I brought you here.”

And there was his personality, ruining her good mood. Still, she forced the smile to remain on her lips. “You're right, Volkan. There are some things I've enjoyed.”

He touched his thumb to her lips, then dropped his hand to her throat and circled it with his long fingers. Her pulse fluttered against him as he pulled her slowly toward him. His expression went from indulgent to suspicious. “Not that I'm complaining about this newfound complacency, but where is the wildcat of the past two days?”

She knew her pulse was battering against his grip. Thinking quickly, she licked her lips and lied. “I... our time last night... in the tub. It was so good, Volkan.” A well-timed blush swept across her cheeks and she could see a flare of triumph in his dark gaze when she mentioned his sexual

proWess. "I was thinking maybe we could do it again?" Was he really stupid enough to fall for her half-hearted feminine wiles?

No, he wasn't.

His grip tightened. His voice was eerily pleasant while his actions held an edge of violence. "You were frantic about your family yesterday, Yasmin. You care more about sex now than your loved ones?"

She could have laughed, but she didn't. He just gave her the means to salvage this charade. "Of course I care about them. I thought maybe if I gave you what you wanted, you'd be more likely to let me contact them."

His dark gaze was impossible to read. "We'll see," he said, then released her. "Come, our car will be waiting to take us to the airport."

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## *Chapter Twenty-Four*



**YASMIN WAS** surprised when they drove to a different airport than Heathrow, the one she'd flown into from Canada, but then she realized why when their car drove onto the tarmac and made its way to a private jet. She gaped as they approached and she couldn't help looking out the window at it in awe.

It wasn't as massive as the commercial jetliners, but it was big enough to comfortably hold... she counted windows... twenty people. She discovered exactly how much security Volkan had with him when they all piled onto the jet.

It made her realize there was likely no way she could've gotten away from Volkan when she tried to escape. Sure, she'd only seen two men, but where were the other eight? Henry seemed to be in charge of the others, issuing orders and then speaking to the pilot before takeoff.

Volkan led Yasmin to the back of the plane where there were leather couches with seatbelts, a big screen TV, a gaming console, and a wet bar. She sat and looked around as the flight staff prepared for takeoff.

As much as it horrified her to be in a situation that she couldn't control, she had to admit, being on a private jet didn't suck. She ran her hand over the buttery leather armrest and accepted a pile of magazines from the flight attendant who also took her food and drink order, promising to have it ready for her after takeoff.

Volkan was on the phone and it sounded like a business call, though she didn't know for sure because the language wasn't French or English, the only languages she knew. She guessed he was probably speaking Turkish.

As soon as he hung up, she asked, "Why did you make me fly all the way to London to kidnap me? You could've done it in Toronto and I could've flown in this."

His lips curled up and he smiled at her. "I have my reasons. What's important is that you're here now and you'll be travelling like this from now on. I rarely take commercial when the family jet is available."

The relaxed posture of his body and the look he gave her told her that her plan to convince him she was starting to accept her new life was working. If he thought she enjoyed the things he was giving her, he might also believe she could enjoy a life with him. Of course, it wasn't difficult to enjoy the luxury jet.

"This belongs to your family?" she asked, curious to hear more about the people she would soon meet. She was both nervous and excited. Nervous because if they were all psychotic kidnapers, then she would really be in some trouble, but excited because if they were halfway normal and even a little bit moral, they might convince him to let her go.

"It belongs to me, but I allow my family its use when they need it." He reached across to buckle her belt as the jet's engines fired to life. He buckled his own belt as well and then watched her face as she looked around.

"Do they use it often?" she asked, not really curious, but wanting to talk now that he was in a good mood and not saying terrible things.

"My mother and sister like to take it a couple times a year for shopping around the world. They also use it to go to our private island, which has an airstrip."

She'd forgotten that he'd mentioned his family owned an island. Her few dates with him in Toronto seemed like they were years ago, rather than only months. "And my brother

uses it when he has business. I'm usually the one who sends him on the trips, so it's only fair he has use of the jet."

Fair was not a word she'd use when describing Volkan, but she supposed even an evil psychopath might have a soft spot for family.

"Does your brother work with you?" she asked.

He nodded and unbuckled his belt, stretching in his seat. They were in the air and the flight attendant was coming back with their drinks and snacks. Yasmin followed suit, easing her chair into a recline position. The attendant set out an array of coffee, tea and juice, as well as a bowl of fruit, some croissants and a charcuterie board.

Popping an olive into her mouth, Yasmin watched Volkan as he talked about his family, noting the softening of his face when he spoke of his sister and mother and the deepening lines when he spoke of his deceased father and brother.

"Yes, my brother works for me. So does his wife. She was his executive assistant, but Demir convinced one of our shareholders to sell some of his shares to Zeynep and now they both sit on the board." Judging by the hardness in his gaze, he hadn't approved of the brother's wife buying shares to his company. The wife sounded like a strong woman who could be a potential ally for Yasmin. She'd have to find a way to speak with her alone and see if she could get Yasmin help.

"Why so suddenly curious about me and my family?" Volkan asked, suspicion in his gaze. "Yesterday you were trying to escape and today you are eager to go with me to my home country."

Yasmin told him the truth... mostly. "Yesterday, I thought I had a chance to escape, today I know better. I'm not stupid, Volkan. I know when to try to run and when to accept that there's nothing I can do to change my situation. I'm curious about the place and the people you're taking me to. I'm nervous, but I'm also sort of excited. I haven't travelled much and I love visiting new places."

He watched her face, as though memorizing each micro-expression and then analyzing them for truth or lies. It was an uncomfortable feeling, but she had nothing to hide from him at the moment. Every word she'd spoken was the truth.

He seemed to come to the same conclusion as he relaxed back into his chair, taking a healthy swallow of his coffee. She watched his lips caress the cup and his throat bob as he swallowed the liquid and a shot of heat went through her. "Your eagerness pleases me, *aşkı*m. After our marriage, you will be a great asset to the family."

His reminder of their upcoming nuptials made both her stomach and her smile drop.

Of course, his sharp gaze missed nothing. "You have yet to give me an answer to my proposal and we are almost in my homeland."

She bit her lip and reminded herself that she was trying to keep him happy, to get him to drop his guard. She should just accept his proposal and move on with trying to formulate an escape plan. But getting married felt like such a big deal, which was ridiculous. She'd been kidnapped, drugged, and raped. Why not married?

Still... she couldn't bring herself to accept. Not yet. Accepting felt like giving up the dream wedding she'd always thought she'd have. A groom with similar interests, her sister to help her choose a dress, her parents standing with her at the altar. A man who respected and loved her for her. Not the idea of her, or whatever it was that Volkan insisted he loved about her.

"I need more time," she pleaded in a low voice, reaching out hesitantly before taking his hand with both of hers. She'd noticed that when she spoke his name or touched him, sometimes she could get through to him. "Two days ago, I was in Canada with no idea that you'd come back into my life." She deliberately stayed away from saying things like kidnapping, psycho, insane, and what-the-actual-fuck-is-wrong-with-you? "A few hours ago, I was in the United Kingdom and now I'm on a private jet to Turkey. My whole

life literally changed overnight, and my head is spinning trying to keep up. Marriage is a big deal, and we don't know each other very well yet."

Volkan cupped her cheek with his hand. "We have a lifetime to get to know each other. We can do it after our marriage. I won't be swayed into postponing the wedding."

She nodded, but was grateful that he seemed to listen, at least in part. "I know that, but can you give me a little time?" she pleaded. "You've gone to such lengths to purchase a new wardrobe for me. All that jewellery, even the toiletries in the penthouse were my preferred brands. Every girl imagines her wedding day and I'm no different. I need time to adjust my expectations, to avoid disappointment."

"Why would you be disappointed?" he asked sharply.

She sucked in a breath, worried that she'd messed up, but she explained anyway. "Well, if you want to get married quickly, then where will I get my dress? Who will we invite? You haven't even allowed me to talk to my family. Will they come to my wedding? I'll be heartbroken if my father isn't the one to walk me down the aisle."

At first, she seemed to get through. He looked thoughtful, pensive, like he was contemplating what she'd said. It was better than she hoped. If she could somehow convince him to bring her family to Turkey, then she could get them to help her. They wouldn't rest until they had her safely back with them.

Then he did what she feared he would do. He shut her down. Pulling away from her both physically and emotionally, he said, "You'll get over your disappointment. We'll be married as soon as I can arrange it."

Yasmin blinked away the tears and turned her back on him, pulling her legs up so she could curl into her seat. The flight no longer held her attention. Instead of a glamorous private jet, it now felt like a flying cage that was taking her to her new prison.

The flight from London to Istanbul took slightly less than four hours, and by the time they arrived, Yasmin was a pile of nerves. It was a very weird thing to meet her kidnapper's family, yet that was what she was about to do.

She half expected Volkan to lecture her on what to say and not say to his family as he escorted her to a waiting car on the tarmac, but he was silent and preoccupied with his own thoughts.

They travelled to the Kartel family villa in silence. It took about half an hour and each minute that passed sent Yasmin's anxiety higher. She was a bundle of vibrating nerves by the time they arrived. The car pulled into a long, curved driveway lined with trees. As the trees broke, Yasmin gasped, catching sight of the ocean beyond a sprawling white house that looked like it could fit ten of the family home she'd grown up in.

The grounds were huge and she could see men in suits patrolling the area. As the car came to a stop, someone opened Yasmin's door and reached a hand in to help her out. Before she could take it, Volkan dragged her out the other door and forced her to stand with him. He glared at the man on the opposite side of the car.

"Brother, welcome home," the man said in a voice that, contrary to his words, stated that he wasn't at all pleased to see Volkan at their family home. So her guess was correct, there was trouble in the Kartel household. Though they were similar in looks, the brother appeared a few years younger, was smaller in stature, and not as handsome as Volkan. "Mother is expecting you in the salon. She has tea and sandwiches."

Volkan grunted his acknowledgment, and, without introducing Yasmin to his brother, escorted her into the house and straight through toward the back where windows stretched from wall-to-wall showing off a spectacular view of the Black Sea. Yasmin wanted to walk through the double doors at the back of the house so she could admire the view, but Volkan caught her elbow and escorted her into another room. It was spacious but cozy, with an oriental rug and antique furniture.

A woman sat with a teacup cradled in her hands.



“Mother,” Volkan said.

She set her teacup down and stood. Volkan’s mother was an elegant woman in her 50s or 60s. She wore black fitted trousers, a coral blouse with a cowl-neck collar and low-heeled shoes. Her sleek, dark chestnut hair was swept into a perfect knot at the back of her head and a string of pearls lay against her collarbones.

Yasmin felt suddenly shy as they approached. Kidnap victim or not, it was still nerve-wracking to be presented to a potential future mother-in-law.

“Mother, this is my bride-to-be, Yasmin Mahdi.” He took Yasmin’s hand and pulled her forward. “Yasmin, this is Narin Kartel, my mother.”

It was on the tip of Yasmin’s tongue to say an automatic ‘nice to meet you’, but two things stopped her. First, it wasn’t particularly nice to meet Volkan’s mother, not under the current circumstances. And second, because the woman was looking at her like she was seeing a ghost.

She took a step forward, her face crumpling with pain as she clutched her throat, her long fingers tangling in her pearls. Her voice was hushed as she said, “Caria?”

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## *Chapter Twenty-Five*



**“NO, MOTHER,”** Volkan said, somewhat impatiently. “Not Caria. As I’ve explained, this is Yasmin.”

“But she looks so much like...” Narin’s gaze was pleading and her hands were restless, as if she didn’t know what to do with them. She continued to stare at Yasmin, her face pale.

“You are mistaken,” Volkan said coldly. “Now, I will show Yasmin our suite while you gather your wits. I don’t want to hear anymore nonsense about Caria.” Volkan placed a hand at Yasmin’s back and led her toward the entranceway. Looking back at his mother, he asked, “Where are Defne and Zeynep? We saw Demir when we came in.”

Narin seemed to get hold of herself, tearing her eyes from Yasmin’s face to look at her son. “Defne is resting and Zeynep is still at the office. Demir came home early to greet you. Everyone knows that you’re expected home today and plan on joining us for our evening meal.”

“Excellent,” Volkan said, seemingly content with her answer.

He led Yasmin through the door and they ascended the stairs to the second floor. The interior of the mansion was decorated in whites and golds with lots of mirrors and pictures of landscapes. Vases filled with fresh flowers decorated every corner and every surface.

The mansion was huge and posh but was decorated with warmth. It threw Yasmin off balance. She’d expected cold,

reserved, aloof... like Volkan until his temper ignited. Instead, it looked and felt like a family home.

“Does your whole family live here?” she asked, glancing around as they ascended another flight of stairs to the third floor.

“Yes,” Volkan said, pulling her with him. “Each of us has our own suite. As the eldest son, mine is the largest and takes up the top floor.” He led her to a door where he pulled a key from his pocket and fitted it into the lock. She wondered why he kept his suite locked. Didn’t he trust his family?

Similar to the penthouse in London, Volkan’s suite was painted white and had only a few pieces of art decorating the walls. The furniture was white leather and the tables were glass with white column bases. The floor was light coloured wood with a large white area rug with a red poppy painted on it.

Yasmin hated everything about his suite... or she wanted to. It was too much like him. It even held the faint scent of his cologne.

He gave her a tour, opening doors and waving her through. Off the main living space was a modern kitchen with stainless steel appliances that looked largely unused. He confirmed her suspicion, saying, “I take most of my meals downstairs with my family, but now that you’re in my life, we’ll sometimes eat alone up here.”

That sounded a little too cozy for her liking. She wondered if he expected her to cook. Not that she minded cooking. In fact, she enjoyed a lazy afternoon spent baking with her mother in her family home, but she didn’t enjoy servitude.

Catching her expression, he reassured her. “Either you can cook our meals or we’ll have them ordered in until you can hire a chef.” He took her hands in his and pulled her against his chest. “I don’t want to share you with anyone more than I have to, including my family. I have no expectations that you cater to my culinary needs.”

It occurred to her that Volkan was a sharp man. He read her expression as easily as if she voiced her complaint out loud, which made it difficult to believe that he wasn't orchestrating every interaction between them. He was too intelligent not to anticipate her desire to escape him. She would have to stay on her toes, try to hide her true intentions from his sharp gaze and mind.

"Where... where will we sleep?" she asked softly, not wanting to ask the question that might lead to another painful sexual encounter but needing to know.

"Through here." He took her hand and pulled her into another room. It was quite beautiful, with vaulted ceilings and a bed piled high with white and grey pillows and a fluffy white duvet. Double doors led out onto a large wraparound balcony.

He showed her the ensuite and explained that there was another washroom, a guest room, and an office off the living room.

"It's twice the size of the apartment I shared with four roommates," she mused, looking around in awe.

"Don't remind me," he growled.

She looked at him. "Remind you that I had roommates?"

"I don't enjoy knowing that you lived with other men before we were together."

*And I don't enjoy being kidnapped, but again, here we are.* She kept her snarky comment to herself though, and instead asked, "Who's Caria?"

His shoulders stiffened and he pushed her into the living room again. "No one," he said shortly.

"The look on your mother's face tells me she wasn't no one," Yasmin said insistently and when he gave her a look that suggested she better stop speaking about the mystery woman, she hurriedly added, "I'm curious, that's all. She seems important, and I want to know who she is to you." She added a pout, hoping he would think she was just jealous and not mining for information.

He stared at her for a long moment, then his shoulders seemed to relax. He strode to the wet bar and poured two drinks: a glass of red wine and a shot of whiskey. He handed her the wine, which she took and set down on the coffee table. Now seemed like a bad time to drink. If she started, she might not stop until this whole alternate universe she found herself in faded away.

“I suppose it’s better you hear about Caria from me,” he said, his voice resigned. He downed his whiskey, set the glass on the coffee table and leaned back, resting his arms across the back of the couch. Touching the ends of her hair, he continued, “Caria was my ex-wife.”

She gasped, unable to hold her surprise in. She hadn’t a single hint that Volkan might’ve been married. Everything in him seemed so focused on her, she couldn’t imagine him being with another woman. Then again, how well did she really know him? She knew he was a psychotic kidnapper, with some kind of obsessive-compulsive disorder that drove him to do immoral things. What if he’d focused that obsession on another woman before her? What had become of the other woman?

Dread filled her belly as she remembered the look on his mother’s face.

“What happened?” she asked, swallowing past the sudden dryness in her throat.

He shrugged. “The marriage was arranged by our families and, after a few years, she decided it no longer suited her and she left.”

“You let her go?” Yasmin asked incredulously, doubting his story.

He smiled at her expression. “By the time my wife left, I was no longer in love with her.”

He was lying. She didn’t know how, but she knew he was lying. Maybe it was the way he stopped touching her hair, his hands gripping the back of the couch like he was going to tear

the leather apart. Or maybe it was the icy look in his eyes that dared her to contradict him.

She suddenly felt very alone in his apartment, high above the rest of the house. She hadn't heard so much as a bang or a voice to suggest the residents of the massive home could hear each other when they were in their own suites. Which meant he could do whatever he wanted to her and no one would know.

Is that what happened to Caria? Did she say or do the wrong thing and then have to face his wrath?

"Do you know where she is now?" she asked.

"No," he said shortly, and she thought he was lying again. But why? What did it matter if he told her the truth about his ex-wife? Unless he was hiding something.

More than ever, Yasmin felt trapped. She thought maybe meeting Volkan's family would give her the opportunity to explain her dilemma to someone less insane than Volkan. Instead, he lived in a suite that was cut off from his family and, from what he told her, he was almost entirely responsible for his family's finances. Would they help her if she tried to tell them their son and brother kidnapped her? There was only one way to find out.

"We'll be eating with your family?" she asked innocently.

"Yes, it's expected when I've been away for a while." His closed off expression evaporated and a gleam of possessive excitement lit his eyes when they fell on her. "I'm eager to introduce my soon-to-be bride to everyone." He caught her hand and brought it to his lips, pressing a kiss to her wrist. "You have nothing to worry about. I know they'll love you as much as I do."

She nodded. She didn't really care what his family thought of her. She wasn't planning on staying long enough to seek their good graces. What she cared about was how useful they could be to her. All she needed was one sane person to listen to her story with a sympathetic ear.

As Yasmin readied herself for the evening ahead, she pondered how to talk to Volkan's family about her situation. Blurt it out over the dinner table and hope that they'd be willing to pin him down while someone called emergency services? That would be the best-case scenario, but she didn't think she was going to get that lucky. No, she'd have to watch and listen and hope an opportunity to get someone alone came along.

And if the family wouldn't help her, maybe one of the staff would. She hadn't seen anyone, but assumed there were cleaners, gardeners, servers, cooks, whatever it took to run a household of this size. Volkan's mother certainly didn't look like her life was devoted to manual labour.

Yasmin showered and washed her hair before blow drying it into waves that fell past her shoulders. As she applied her makeup, her thoughts turned to Volkan's ex-wife. She wished she could see a picture of the woman. Find out just how much they looked alike.

Yasmin had darker skin than either Volkan or his mother. Her family was originally from India. Though she'd grown up in Canada, she'd been back to India twice in her lifetime to visit her extended family. She wondered if Caria had dark skin and hair too, or if they resembled each other in some other way.

It unsettled her that there was a resemblance between herself and Volkan's ex. Why would he choose a woman who looked so much like his ex-wife unless it was on purpose? Was he using Yasmin as a replacement for Caria? Was that why he seemed so determined to stomp out any independence he saw in her? It bothered her more than she wanted to admit that he might be trying to turn her into his ex-wife, which made her more determined than ever to find a way to leave.

She grabbed a random dress from the closet and added matching lingerie. Volkan had been thorough when replacing her wardrobe. Every item came with matching underwear, shoes, and accessories.

Yasmin looked at herself in the floor-length mirror, admiring the way the cherry-coloured wrap-around dress clung to her curves. She had to admit, while she hated the kidnapper, she didn't hate his taste in clothes.

She left the bedroom and met him as he was coming out of the other washroom, his arm bent as he tried to attach his cufflink.

“Let me help,” she said automatically.

He looked surprised, then pleased, extending his arm to her and dropping the cufflink in her palm.

“I've never done this before,” she admitted, bending over his wrist, “but I've seen my mom do it for my dad, so I think I can figure it out.”

The memory of her parents doing this same thing was bittersweet. Would she ever see them again?

Volkan caught her chin and tilted her face until she was looking at him. “I don't like seeing you unhappy.”

She bit her lip and looked away from him, remembering what he said if she was unpleasant to him. He wouldn't ever let her talk to her parents again. “I'm sorry, I'll try harder.”

He sighed heavily and shook his head. “What am I doing to you, my little love? Am I such a beast that you think you can't have a brief moment of sadness in my presence?”

She stared back at him, not knowing what to say. Yes, he was a beast who tried to control her thoughts and actions, but he was also just a man with too much power and privilege. In some ways, he was relatable... sympathetic even, but only fleetingly.

Maybe he needed a woman to love him. To show him how to behave. But that woman wasn't going to be her.

She forced a smile to her lips. “Let's get these cufflinks figured out. I don't want to be late for my first evening with your family.”



## *Chapter Twenty-Six*



**YASMIN WAS** nervous about meeting Volkan's family, but they accepted her into the fold immediately and with little fuss. She suspected they'd been warned of her resemblance to Caria because, while they all took turns staring at her, no one mentioned the likeness.

The meal itself was interesting. Narin directed the servants like she was the conductor of an orchestra. It was clear that the evening meal was her time to shine. There were four courses, each one plated like a work of art. She smiled coolly as the plates were placed in front of each person at the table and she watched with eagle eyes as they were cleared and replaced with the next course.

Narin listened to the flow of conversation, but mostly remained quiet, only adding her two cents when directly asked a question. Yasmin was getting the picture of a quiet but strong matriarch who ran her household with iron control, but still seemed to have a heart for her children. She favoured Volkan, doted on her daughter, Defne, was impatient with her other son, and tolerated his wife.

Volkan's brother, Demir, and sister-in-law, Zeynep, greeted Yasmin enthusiastically and asked after Volkan's business interests abroad. Though Volkan answered Demir's inquiries with clipped answers, he ignored his sister-in-law entirely. There was tension between Demir, Zeynep, and Volkan, but Yasmin didn't know the family well enough to understand where it was coming from.

Zeynep was a stunning woman, but when Yasmin looked closer, she realized it was mostly polish. Zeynep knew how to choose clothes and makeup that suited her, giving her an air of cultivated sophistication. Her hair was dyed blond with the roots left stylishly dark, and falling in a straight sweep to her shoulders. Though she was the picture of perfection, as though she'd fallen straight out of a magazine, Yasmin sensed something about her that didn't go with the look. Insecurity maybe? Zeynep's eyes darted around the table frequently and her words spilled from her lips with an unnatural brightness, as though her smile and tone were forced.

As she'd married into the family and was technically an outsider like Yasmin, perhaps Zeynep could be an ally. But there was something in the way Zeynep's calculating gaze landed on Yasmin that made her uneasy.

Volkan's sister, Defne, was the most welcoming of the family, beaming at Yasmin and taking the chair next to her. She was very thin and frail looking, the outline of her bones visible through her skin. She directed the bulk of the conversation, asking questions at a rapid-fire pace. She wanted to know where Yasmin lived before she got together with Volkan, then she wanted to know all about Yasmin's education, job experience, roommates, and former pets. Yasmin laughingly answered as many questions as she could while deferring the ones that were more difficult to answer.

She thought Volkan might step in and stop some lines of questioning, since they touched on the life he told Yasmin he wanted her to forget, but he sat back and watched with an indulgent smile.

"What made you choose archaeology for your university major?" Defne asked eagerly. "I've always loved history, especially since we live in such a culturally rich country."

Yasmin dove into a conversation with Defne with enthusiasm, finding an equal partner in her love of history. They talked about her different courses and Defne's understanding of archaeology in her own country.

Before she knew it, the meal was over and most of the family had excused themselves. Zeynep and Demir had gone and Volkan was sitting with his mother beyond the French doors that opened onto a patio. They were sipping from liquor glasses and Volkan held a cigar loosely between his fingers, his leg crossed over his knee, his posture relaxed. They seemed to be deep in conversation. Yasmin had a vague recollection of Volkan telling her he was going to step outside for some fresh air.

“I hope we’re not being rude,” Yasmin said, glancing at the empty chairs around the table. She hadn’t thanked Narin for the wonderful meal, though she assumed a chef was the real brains behind the food they ate.

“Not at all,” Defne assured her with a smile. “It’s so nice to have a new person in the house with us. It’s not very often that we get to mix up the conversation. Volkan is always interesting, of course. I love hearing about his travels when he comes home.”

Yasmin caught the hero-worship on Defne’s face and her heart sank a little. As much as Defne seemed like an ally, she clearly adored her older brother. It was unlikely that she’d help Yasmin get away from him, or even believe Yasmin if she tried to explain her situation. Still, she had to try.

“Has your brother brought anyone home before?” Yasmin asked tentatively.

“Oh no,” Defne said, shaking her head. “Only Caria, and she was a terrible mistake. We don’t really talk about her.”

Yasmin nodded, not wanting to push, but also quite curious about the lookalike woman who no one wanted to talk about. “Why do you call Volkan’s ex-wife a mistake?”

Defne stared at her, then glanced at Volkan, before saying in a hushed voice, “He told you about her?”

She hated deceiving the young and obviously naive girl, but if she was going to find a way out of there, she needed all the information. “He did.”

Defne looked relieved but continued speaking in a low voice. “We all knew she was no good the first time he brought her home. She was wild and had no respect for anyone other than herself. She took off at all times of night and came back drunk or high. Volkan was so frustrated, but he loved her, so he put up with it.”

Yasmin was surprised. Hadn’t Volkan said his marriage was arranged? Maybe Caria’s party-girl side came out after the wedding. Although Volkan was such a controlling man that she couldn’t picture him allowing his wife the freedom to go out and get drunk and high. She snuck another look his way and caught his gaze on her. It held warning, though he continued to sit with his mother where he couldn’t hear Yasmin and Defne’s conversation.

“How old was he when he got married?”

Defne thought about it, then said, “He was young, maybe twenty-two.” The same age as Yasmin. Defne continued, “He hasn’t had a girlfriend since. Not until a few months ago when he came home and told us about you.”

“A few months ago?” Yasmin felt suddenly dizzy. He’d told his family about her *months ago*?

Defne nodded. “Yeah, he was here in April and he told us all about you and how you were going to get married. It’s so romantic how you met.”

“How did we meet?” Yasmin asked faintly.

Defne laughed. “You don’t remember? You were at the hotel, throwing out a bag of garbage in the alley. He was worried about you being alone back there and helped.”

It felt like a lifetime ago, that deep voice reaching out to her from the shadows.

“I love how you just knew he was the one right away,” Defne continued. “My brother isn’t usually one for romance, so we were all surprised when he came home and announced he would bring his bride back with him when you finished school.”

Yasmin felt a multitude of emotions at once. Anger that she'd fallen for Volkan's plan every step of the way, frustration that she couldn't seem to untangle herself from this mess and, in fact, kept sliding deeper in. The Volkan his sister was describing was a different man from the one Yasmin was getting to know. But if she was being totally honest, a small part of her was pleased that there weren't any other women in Volkan's life besides the mysteriously missing Caria.

Yasmin realized that they'd been talking for a while and she hadn't once tried to convince Defne that she needed help.

Glancing toward Volkan to make sure he was still deep in conversation with his mother, Yasmin lowered her voice and leaned toward Defne. "It's true that I met your brother at the hotel where I worked, but I broke up with him. I had no intention of marrying him."

Defne laughed and reached out to touch Yasmin's hand, which wasn't the reaction Yasmin was expecting.

"He told us all about how you tried to get away from him, but he wooed you back through gifts and charm. Though he's usually very serious, I've seen my brother use charm on our mother, so I know how irresistible he can be. It's so sweet how he changed his business plans in order to make it to Toronto for your graduation."

Charming? Irresistible? Sweet?

Yasmin had to remind herself to close her mouth as the other woman spoke, her face soft with the pleasure of recounting Yasmin and Volkan's romance. Defne's version certainly made their relationship seem joyous and mutual.

"That's not quite how things went down," Yasmin said urgently, moving her hand out from under Defne's and gripping the other woman's hand. She had to make Defne see the reality of what happened and she didn't have much time. "Your brother — "

"My ears are burning," Volkan drawled from behind Yasmin, his hand falling heavily on her shoulder and

squeezing hard enough that she had to suppress a flinch. “What are you two talking about?”

“You caught us,” Defne said with a laugh, pulling her hand out from under Yasmin’s grip. “We were talking about how you lied and cheated in order to convince such a lovely woman to fall for you.”

Yasmin sat stiffly, worried that Volkan would blame her for his sister’s words, but he chuckled and his grip on Yasmin’s shoulder eased. He leaned over and kissed Yasmin on the neck, drawing a blush from her.

“There’s no getting away from me now,” he said in her ear, loud enough for his sister to hear.

“You two are so cute together!” Defne giggled. “When’s the wedding going to be?”

“That is my question, too.” Narin returned to the dining room through the French doors, her guarded gaze on Yasmin’s face.

“One month,” Volkan said, and when both his mother and sister tried to argue that it wasn’t enough time for them to prepare, he held up a hand, stopping them. “I won’t change my mind. It was difficult enough to wait the three months it took for Yasmin to graduate. I won’t be denied my bride any longer than I have to. You two are clever enough to throw a wedding with four weeks’ notice.”

Narin shook her head and let out a heavy sigh. “You must always have your way, my son. Very well, we’ll do what we can to make the wedding a magnificent event. We’ll need your bride though. She’ll have to be fitted for a dress, choose her colours, flowers, the caterer.”

The room started to spin around Yasmin and she gripped the edge of the table to stop herself from falling over.

“Yasmin, are you alright?” Defne asked, concern in her voice.

Yasmin tried to nod, but the dizziness continued. Stress. She’d been under so much stress since Volkan snatched her that her body was protesting.

“It’s all happening so fast,” she said faintly.

“Look what you’re doing to your fiancé by rushing the wedding,” Defne scolded, patting Yasmin’s arm.

Volkan knelt next to the chair and took Yasmin’s other hand, looking into her face. She desperately wanted to get away from everyone and be by herself so she could process everything.

Volkan seemed to sense her need for space. He lifted her out of the chair, hefting her against his chest. “She’s tired from travelling halfway around the world in just a few days,” Volkan announced. “I’ll take her up to bed. Tomorrow is soon enough to talk about wedding plans.”

Without another word, he strode away from his mother and sister and climbed the stairs to the top floor while holding Yasmin as though she weighed nothing at all. She wanted to protest that he should put her down, but she really wasn’t feeling well at all.

A servant was dusting in the stairwell and Volkan had them unlock and open the door. He then sent them downstairs to make a cup of ginger tea.

Volkan placed her gently on the bed, sitting with her and smoothing the hair from her face. “What’s going on?”

Yasmin opened her mouth to speak but didn’t know what to say so she shook her head and buried her face in the pillow. She didn’t want to look at him, not when she was so confused about everything. It had been overwhelming to hear him and his family talk about wedding plans, but there was a part of her that had wanted to join in the excitement.

It was like she was starting to disassociate from her old life, to leave it behind and begin to look forward to a new future. One where it was possible to live with Volkan as his wife. To make a new home in Turkey, to visit with his family, to wear the beautiful clothes and jewellery he bought for her.

What was wrong with her? Was she willing to throw everything away just because some shiny baubles caught her

eye? She knew that wasn't the truth, though. She'd never been one to covet material possessions.

It was Volkan. Listening to his mother and sister talk about him. It made him seem more human.

He stroked his hand down her back and remained silently at her side until the tea arrived, then he sat with her while she drank, watching her, his face set in grim but determined lines.

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## *Chapter Twenty-Seven*



**YASMIN WAS FEELING BETTER** the next day and determined to make someone in the household listen to her. She didn't think Narin would help and Defne worshipped her brother to the point that Yasmin didn't think she could convince the other woman he was capable of doing anything wrong.

She was by herself in the suite, pacing and trying to decide her next course of action. Volkan had left for the day, kissing Yasmin on the forehead and announcing that he would go to his dockyard office for the morning to go over the shipping manifests with the dockyard supervisor.

Yasmin had nodded and asked if she could leave the suite, to which he gave an affirmative. She let herself out of the suite, determined to explore her new home and see if she could find a way off the property. One of the house staff, a young woman who was polishing picture frames on the second floor, quickly waylaid her.

"Can I help you with anything, Ms. Mahdi?" she asked, her sharp gaze assessing Yasmin's features before falling away. Was she wondering about Yasmin's resemblance to Caria?

"I'm just looking around," Yasmin admitted. "Are the other family suites on this floor?"

"Yes, if you'll follow me, I'll show you." Without waiting for Yasmin to agree, the woman set off, pointing at each suite as she went past. The first one next to the stairs belonged to

Narin and the one next to it was Defne's. "Defne has the smallest suite," she explained. "As she's unmarried and prefers to spend her time in the main floor rooms when she's feeling up to it."

"Is she often under the weather?" Yasmin asked curiously, following the other woman down the hall.

She nodded. "Ms. Defne has a weak constitution. She was born with the condition and sometimes it plagues her when there's too much excitement going on. When she's not feeling well, she spends all of her time in her suite. Only the doctor, Mr. Volkan, and her mother are allowed in to see her."

A shaft of guilt went through Yasmin as she realized her plan to convince Defne to help her wasn't going to work. News that her brother was an unscrupulous monster could set her health back. Yasmin shouldn't care, since she was the victim, but she did. Defne was only a few years younger than Yasmin. She was sweet, kind, and unspoiled. Yasmin didn't want to cause her any grief, though once she escaped and alerted the authorities to what Volkan had done, inevitably, Defne would find out.

The house tour continued. Damir and his wife lived on the opposite side of the hall from Defne and Narin. "Their suite is larger than any other in the house except for Mr. Volkan's. Ms. Zeynep insisted on having it renovated and the wall to the next suite knocked down so the two spaces could be joined."

From the maid's tone, Yasmin could tell she didn't care for Zeynep, which seemed to be a common theme throughout the household. Yasmin wondered why? Was she rude to the house staff or was it something else?

Yasmin was shown through the kitchen, which was bustling with one chef and two assistants. The chef handed Yasmin a chocolate scone and a cup of coffee, then shooed the two women out the door.

Bemused, Yasmin sipped her coffee and took a big bite out of the scone as she stepped out of the French doors leading to the back yard. Not just a back yard, but a stretch of manicured lawn that went on for what looked like several acres before

ending at a beach, the sparkling blue waters of the Black Sea beyond.

It was breathtaking and for a single moment, Yasmin took the time to breathe in the fresh air, feel the warmth of the sun on her head and shoulders, and enjoy the taste of the heavenly, buttery scone on her tongue.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” the maid said with pride, standing next to her.

Yasmin looked at the woman. “Were you told to keep an eye on me?” It would have been impossible to leave the top floor suite and get past her without being noticed. On top of that, she hadn’t left Yasmin’s side since the tour began.

“Mr. Volkan asked me to help you find your way around,” she said as she averted her eyes.

Yasmin looked at her shrewdly. “He also told you I wasn’t to be left alone, didn’t he?”

The girl was saved from admitting the truth when Narin joined them on the patio. “Thank you for showing Yasmin around her new home, Alena,” Narin said in a warm but firm voice. “I’ll take care of her now. See if Defne needs anything. I believe she’s sleeping in this morning.”

“Of course, ma’am,” Alena replied, then walked swiftly away.

Narin turned her smile on Yasmin, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes. She nodded at the cup of coffee in Yasmin’s hand. “Why don’t we sit while you finish that, then I’ll show you around the grounds.”

Together, they sat at a small white wicker breakfast table with a glass top. Brightly patterned cushions saved the chairs from being uncomfortable. Narin’s gaze drifted over Yasmin’s features and once again a haunted expression crept onto her face.

“Do I look so much like your ex-daughter-in-law?” Yasmin asked bluntly.

A sigh escaped Narin's lips and she folded her hands in her lap and leaned back in her chair. "Yes, you do. It's not an exact likeness, but close enough to be spooky. Your skin is darker than Caria's and her hair was brown, rather than black, but your features..." she trailed off, gazing at Yasmin but looking through her, as if picturing the other woman.

"Do you... do you think he brought me here because I look like her?" Yasmin asked cautiously.

Narin frowned. "I'm sure that's not true. Perhaps he was struck by your appearance at first, but he wouldn't marry you solely for the way you look."

Yasmin hedged. "We haven't known each other long, and the wedding is such a whirlwind. Do you approve of Volkan... of us getting married so soon?" She was talking around the issue, but she couldn't bring herself to spit out the words, 'I've been kidnapped, please call the cops.'

Apparently, Narin saw through her weak attempts to speak the truth. She narrowed her eyes and said, "Why don't you ask me what you really want to ask?"

Yasmin's heart sped up and she licked her lips before asking, "Do you know... that your son... that Volkan..." Why was it so freaking hard to tell his mother he was a kidnapper?

"You're wondering if I know under what circumstances you came to my home?" Narin asked, her eyes glittering like two chips of ice. "Of course, I know. Very little happens under my roof and in the lives of my children that I don't know about."

Yasmin put her coffee cup down with a clatter and leaned forward in her seat. "Then how can you —?"

"Condone what my son has done to you?" Narin asked, smiling coolly. "I am a mother, of course. I will love my children no matter what they do. Volkan in particular has always been headstrong. Even as a child, the boy had to have his own way or there would be hell to pay."

Narin's words spoke of indulgence, but her eyes... they were ruthless, like her son's. Yasmin's heart sank.

“You won’t help me, will you?”

Narin shook her head and reached out to pat Yasmin’s hand, which Yasmin pulled away. Now that she knew Volkan’s mother was fully versed as to her situation, she didn’t have to pretend to want to be there anymore.

“You’re here at my son’s behest,” Narin said as if that explained everything. “He’s head of this household, and I won’t contradict his wishes. Even if I don’t always agree.”

“But he kidnapped me!” Yasmin said incredulously. They were all psychopaths!

Narin’s nose curled in disgust. “Such a strong word to use.” She shook her head in disappointment. “Volkan loves you and wants you to live here with us.” There was admonishment in her voice. “He will have his way whether or not we agree with his plans, it’s best to humour him.”

“By keeping me captive?” Yasmin had that feeling again, like she was on another planet.

“You’ll settle in just fine,” Narin added, her tone softening. “I do wish my son had gone about bringing you to us in a more... natural manner, but I can’t disagree with something that makes him so happy. He’s been quite grim these past several years since we lost dear Caria.”

“Lost?” Yasmin asked. “I thought they divorced.”

Narin shook her head. “No, Caria and Volkan would never have divorced. She died eight years ago.”

Yasmin’s mouth went dry. “How did she die?”

Narin’s gaze pierced Yasmin and it was in then that Yasmin suspected the older woman was directing every part of their conversation. She had wanted Yasmin to know that she knew about the kidnapping. That she wouldn’t find an ally under that roof. Now she wanted Yasmin to know about Caria. It was a subtle but unmistakable threat. If Yasmin didn’t fall in line, her fate could become the same as the woman who went before her.

“The poor girl drowned,” Narin said, sipping her cup of tea, her gaze on Yasmin’s face, clocking each expression. “She was visiting the dockyard and slipped over the edge between the dock and one of the ships. She drowned before anyone could get her out. Such a tragedy. Volkan was a broken man for years after the incident.”

Narin’s eyes glittered, reinforcing Yasmin’s thinking that she was being threatened by the mercurial matriarch of the Kartel household.

Narin drained her tea and pushed away from the table, standing. “Now, if you’re ready, I’ll show you around the rest of the property. We have guards stationed all over the grounds, but you’ll barely see them, they blend in so well. We have other security measures as well, including a sophisticated alarm system...” She continued to outline everything that would make it difficult for Yasmin to escape, while Yasmin trailed behind her, feeling more trapped than she had since waking up in Volkan’s arms the first time he’d drugged her.

## *Chapter Twenty-Eight*



### AFTER THEIR MORNING CONFRONTATION,

Yasmin wanted to despise Narin, but the other woman was making it difficult. Mostly because she was impossible to pin down long enough to hate. She was always moving, always touching and rearranging things, directing staff, and worst of all, knocking down wedding plans like they were bowling pins.

After showing Yasmin the grounds, Narin had a wedding consultant come in who outlined everything that would need to be done to pull off a wedding in a month. First, they'd need to find a dress so it could go for alterations immediately. Then they had to decide on flowers, colours, traditions, etc.

Narin was careful to incorporate Yasmin's Hindu heritage, suggesting a gorgeous red sari for the wedding dress, which Yasmin agreed to immediately, her eyes clinging to the sketch the designer made for them. Hindu weddings were usually three day affairs, but given the short time they had to plan, both women agreed to a single day event.

Next came choosing the invitations, which was mind-numbingly boring. Finally, Yasmin pointed at one and said, "That one."

"Oh, good choice," Narin said, giving her a genuine smile as she circled the magnificent mahogany dining table, which was covered in stationery.

Next, Yasmin was whisked into the yard for the next stage of wedding planning. A mishmash of decorations were being constructed everywhere she looked, and it took her a moment to realize that they were getting a live sampling to choose from. On one hedge, a red ribbon was wrapped around in a bow, while another sported white tea lanterns.

“I think... I need a break,” Yasmin said faintly, reeling from the scope of it all. An overwhelming desire to crawl under her blankets and shut out the world came over her.

Narin gave her a quick look of concern. “Have some lunch and a rest.” She checked her watch. “We’ll meet in the salon at 3 for cake tasting.”

“Cake tasting?” Yasmin said faintly.

Narin gave her an indulgent look. “Go freshen up. I’ll see if Defne wants to join us this afternoon. She loves sweets and has a good palate.”

“Uh huh...” Yasmin made her way slowly up the stairs to her suite. It was a relief to close the door behind her and turn the lock. She let out a long breath and collapsed onto the couch. She curled her knees up, propped her hands on the back of the couch and rested her chin on her hands, gazing unseeing across the luxuriously landscaped yard.

It felt strange making all these wedding plans without her family. They should be involved in one of the most momentous occasions of her life. Even though she still planned on leaving as soon as she found an opportunity, she couldn’t bank on being able to get out before Volkan put a ring on it. Which meant, like it or not, she was getting married. And if she was getting married, she wanted her family to at least know.

With that in mind, she did as she was told and ate a lunch of olives, cheese, meats and freshly baked bread, which a servant brought up to her on a tray. After, she had a quick shower to freshen up, changed into a pair of black leggings and a pink top and made her way back downstairs.



Defne joined Yasmin and Narin for the cake tasting, which made the process far more fun than trying on wedding dresses. They laughed and ate, trying bites out of each cake, then going back to the beginning and trying them all over again.

“I like the white cake with the pink frosting best,” Defne announced, collapsing onto the sofa with her hands on her stomach.

“I prefer the chocolate ganache,” Yasmin said, joining her.

Narin smiled at the caterer and said, “We’ll take the ten-foot bridal tower, twelve layers, with the white cake and sea-foam icing.”

Yasmin rolled her eyes at Defne. “Good thing I’m here to help.”

Defne gave her a sly look and whispered, “Get used to it. She’s brilliant, but she’s a drill sergeant when it comes to events. She lives for this kind of thing and as much as she might complain about having to pull a wedding together in just a few weeks, she’ll love every moment.”

Narin bustled around the table piled high with cakes, giving the caterer a list of instructions. She was a capable woman, but what exactly was she capable of? Certainly, she was an accessory to Yasmin’s kidnapping. She might not have planned it, might even object to it, but she was also making sure Yasmin was a prisoner in the family home, which made her complicit.

Later, when Volkan arrived home and asked about her day, Yasmin told him the truth. She stood with her arms crossed, gazing out the window to the ocean beyond. “Your mom showed me the property this morning, being sure to point out all the security measures and making sure I knew it would be impossible to leave. Then she chose the invitations and cake for our wedding before sending me up to shower and change for an intimate dinner with my fiancé.”

Volkan approached her from behind, she could see his reflection in the glass. He slid his hands down her arms, holding her in a gentle caressing grip. He placed a kiss on the

side of her neck. “Do you want me to ask my mother to back off? I know she can be intense, but I’ve grown used to her. I didn’t think what it would be like for a newcomer in the family.”

Yasmin shook her head. “No, I don’t want you to say anything. She knows what she’s doing and if we really are getting married in four weeks, she seems like the best person to plan the wedding.”

“Then what has you so bothered?” Volkan turned her around and tipped her face until their eyes met.

“Besides getting married against my will?” She shrugged and shook her head, but then admitted, “It sucks to plan a wedding without my family’s involvement.”

Volkan nodded and though she half feared she’d incur his anger, he didn’t seem upset. Instead, he looked thoughtful as he sat on the couch, pulling her down with him.

“Would you feel better if they were involved?”

She nodded. “I’d feel better if they knew, but that’s not a possibility, is it? They must think I’m missing, or worse.”

“They don’t think you’re dead,” Volkan assured her.

“Well, missing then.”

“They don’t think you’re missing ether.”

She watched in puzzlement as he stood and strode through the door to his office, coming back a minute later, holding something. When he handed it to her, she realized it was her cell phone. With a withering glance at Volkan, she unlocked it and immediately checked her messages, expecting an explosion of frantic texts and emails as her parents tried to locate her.

There was nothing. Not a single unread message.

But that was impossible, she’d been gone for four days. There was no chance she could fly to another country and not check in with her parents without having them lose their minds. Then, when she looked closer at her messages, she

realized she *had* checked in with her parents. Or someone had done it on her behalf.

There was a family chat that went back four days, almost to the moment Yasmin had arrived in London.

**Yasmin:** I'm here. City is amazing. Very tired. Will text in the morning.

**Mom:** Thanks for checking in, love you sweetie.

**Aisha:** Bring me back a miniature Big Ben.

The next day:

**Yasmin:** I'm all checked in with Dr. Ryan. We're flying out tomorrow to a dig site in Turkey. Limited cell service, so I'm not sure when I'll be able to check in.

**Mom:** Be careful, sweetie. Don't talk to strangers and wear sunscreen.

**Dad:** Send lots of pictures. I've always wanted to go to Turkey.

**Aisha:** For all your legal concerns, call 1-800-HOT-LAWS

This morning:

**Mom:** When can you call us? We miss you.

Yasmin dropped the phone and covered her face, squeezing her eyes to stop the hot tears that threatened to fall.

"I thought you'd be happy that I'm communicating for you. This is what you wanted, isn't it? You wanted your family to know you're safe and well cared for."

She looked at him, blinking the tears away. “Am I? You’ve threatened me and you’re holding me captive. How am I safe?”

He tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. “You’ll always be safe with me.”

“You’re the only one who’s hurting me.”

A hard look passed over his expression, and Yasmin shuddered. “I’ve already told you, the pain is both temporary and necessary for our future together. Would you prefer your parents think you’re dead? Because that can be arranged.”

“No,” she whispered.

He slid his arm along the back of the couch and pulled her against his chest. “Do you want your family to come to our wedding?”

She thought about it. Did she want to pull her family into this mess? She didn’t know how it was going to be possible to convince them to come all the way to Turkey to attend their daughter’s wedding when they didn’t even know the groom existed yet. Still... she didn’t want to go through with a wedding without her parents’ support.

“Yes, I want them.”

He turned her on the couch until she was looking at him, then he cupped her face and placed a feather soft kiss on her lips. Despite herself, her heart fluttered.

“If you want your family, then I’ll get your family here,” he told her, and a spark of hope leapt into her heart. “But you’ll have to trust me and do as I tell you to. One misstep and I’ll take you from your family forever. You understand me?”

How could a man who proclaimed to love her be so sweet one moment and so cruel in the next?

She nodded. “I understand.”

“Good, then we’re going to call them and you’re going to say exactly what I tell you to.”

Yasmin was ecstatic and obediently listened to Volkan's instructions before making the call. She hated deceiving them, but he'd orchestrated a story that might almost be believable. She just had to act her heart out and get her family to play along.

"You've got this." Volkan slid his hand over her shoulder and squeezed.

She gave him a hard look before hitting the connect button that would dial her parents' home phone. "I will never forgive you for forcing me to lie to them."

He gave her a quick stinging kiss and said, "No one is forcing you to lie. By all means, tell them the truth."

"And never see them again," she said accusingly.

He inclined his head, but they were saved from further conversation when Yasmin's mother answered the phone. As instructed, Yasmin told her mom about her flight to London but tried to keep the conversation general so she would have to lie as little as possible. Finally, she admitted to her mom that she'd met someone. Her mom was surprised since Yasmin had barely dated at home, let alone finding someone on another continent within days of landing. When pressed, she gave the details Volkan had fed her.

"He owns the transportation company that flew us to Turkey for the dig. We've gone on a few dates and he seems really sweet." She choked on the word 'sweet' but continued to push the half-truths. "I've met his family already and have been to his home. It's huge and so beautiful. You'd love it here."

Her mother admonished her to be careful and not do anything rash. To stick with her archaeology team and take things slow with the 'Turkish gentleman' who had taken a sudden interest in her. Yasmin agreed, a gnawing guilt sensation eating away at her as she lied.

She would call again in a few days and tell them she'd left the dig to spend more time with Volkan. She would disappoint and worry them, but not as much as if they knew the truth.

Then, in a week, she would call to tell them she was engaged and beg them to fly to Turkey on Volkan's private jet. Then, when they arrived, Volkan would set about wooing them so they wouldn't worry about their daughter making such a rash decision.

It was perfectly planned out and she barely had to do anything except bear the bitter weight of her parent's disappointment, which seemed a small price to pay if it meant they were safe. They didn't need to know that their daughter had been kidnapped and raped and now faced a lifetime of imprisonment at the hands of the man she hated.

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## *Chapter Twenty-Nine*



**YASMIN WASN'T** sure what exactly Volkan's job was as CEO of a transportation company, but she was getting the impression that it was a lot of work. He left before she got up in the morning and he came home late, often after the family had eaten dinner.

The days passed in a blur of wedding planning and late evenings when Volkan joined her for an evening drink before announcing bedtime. Each time he said the words, she would tense, expecting the worst. He hadn't touched her though, beyond kissing her goodnight, rolling over and going to sleep.

The tension was stressing her out. He still touched and kissed her every chance he had, but he hadn't tried to have sex with her again. Was he waiting until after the wedding? But if that was the case and he was simply following tradition, why were they sharing a room? Or maybe it was psychological warfare. He was teasing her with the possibility of sex, but she would never know when he planned on following through.

She didn't want to provoke him, so she kept her questions to herself and did her best to follow his rules while cataloguing everything she saw and heard in the house.

Finally, as they were getting ready for bed on their third day in Turkey, Volkan offered to take her to work with him the next day and she accepted. She didn't want to spend extra time with him if she could help it, but she liked the idea of finally leaving the house and seeing more of Istanbul. Plus, she might find a way to escape.

The next day they climbed into the car together and Henry drove them to Volkan's offices, which were at the dockyards. As they drove, he explained that Kartel Transport was involved in many different transportation businesses, including shipping, which was their largest enterprise, air cargo, trains and semi-trucks.

"So everything," Yasmin murmured.

He nodded. "It was originally built as a shipping company, but I find it helpful to have my fingers in everything. If one branch of the business goes down, then there's always another to scale up and replace the loss."

Yasmin was impressed with Volkan's business acumen and listened attentively, forgetting for a blessed few minutes that she was a kidnap victim. She asked questions and took mental notes on the extent and breadth of Kartel Transport.

The business was started a hundred and fifty years ago by Volkan's great-great-grandfather who saw an opportunity to loan out his fishing boats for cargo transportation. The business grew as it was passed down from generation to generation until it became the massive conglomerate it was today.

"It was expected that I would take over from my father and that my brother would work in the business as well," he explained, the pride in his voice unmistakable. He twined his fingers with hers and held her hand like it was the most natural thing in the world. "One day my son will take over and then his son after him."

"You have a son?" she asked, thinking maybe he'd had one with his first wife and that the child was growing up somewhere else. Maybe with his maternal grandparents.

Volkan lifted her fingers to his lips and kissed them. "Not yet, but one day soon, I hope."

She realized he meant her and jerked her hand from his. The world tilted as she realized they'd had sex without any birth control. She'd been so worried over the kidnapping thing



she hadn't thought about the consequences of their having sex without protection.

"Hey, look at me." Volkan touched his hand to her chin and turned her face. She blinked a few times before he came into focus. "You have nothing to worry about. You'll be an exceptional mother."

"I'm not worried about being a good mother." She jerked away from him. "I'm not ready for kids. I'm not ready for any of this, and you keep reminding me of how little choice I have." She glared at him, ignoring the twitch of annoyance in his jaw and the quick glance he sent toward Henry, who was driving the car. "The only reason I'm complying with the wedding plans is because you've threatened to cut me off from my family if I don't act like I'm your happy little bride. I can't even speak my mind without worrying that you'll tell everyone I love that I'm dead."

The knot in his jaw pulsed for a second. He replied in a calm but hard voice, "Bravo, little bird, you've made it three days without being unpleasant. Since you are so stuck on your parents being your reason for complying, I'll take that off the table. So, if you wish to speak your mind to me, then you may do so." He leaned in close and tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear, his warm breath brushing her. "I find I prefer to know what's in your mind than to try guessing at your nastier thoughts, anyway. I hadn't realized it at the time, but in our first few meetings in Toronto, it was your wit that caught and held my attention. I haven't enjoyed the lifeless doll you've become over your worry for your family. You may speak your mind to me from now on without concern."

She chewed on her lip for a moment trying to judge if he meant it, then decided it didn't matter, she was also done with acting like she belonged in Turkey with him and his family. She turned her head to glare at him, her eyes inches from his.

"Thank you for allowing me that much, at least," she said scathingly. "I'll tell you exactly what I think. I don't belong here and you know it. Your whole family looks at me and wonders where you picked me up. Even they know I don't belong, but you refuse to see it. You've allowed your sick

obsession with me to twist you to reality. And kids? Do you think I want kids with some psycho kidnapper who will teach them to be just as disgusting? Not a chance. I'd rather get an abortion."

She knew she'd gone too far as soon as the words left her mouth, but it was too late. Unfortunately for her, they arrived at Volkan's dockyard office.

He wrapped a hand around her bicep and squeezed so hard she thought she would find bruises later. He looked at Henry in the rearview mirror and said, "Park the car. Stay nearby."

Why couldn't she keep her mouth shut? Oh yeah, because he told her she could speak her mind and she believed him. She should've known better.

He pulled her from the car, barely giving her enough time to steady herself on her heels before dragging her into the Kartel offices. She saw a blur of glass and steel as she was hauled through the building at a dizzying pace.

They reached the end of a corridor, which opened up into a reception area. A pretty woman stood as they approached, her red-lipped smile falling from her face, replaced with worry when she caught sight of Volkan's expression. Yasmin couldn't blame her. She'd pricked Volkan's temper enough times to know that it wasn't a pleasant experience.

Volkan snapped at her. "Go for a coffee, Janie, and lock up behind you. I don't want anyone in the office for the next half hour. I want some privacy while I show my *bride* around the building." The way he said the word *bride*, with a hard edge, sent a shudder down her spine.

Yasmin could feel her cheeks burn with humiliation as the woman gathered her purse and cast a look Yasmin's way.

As soon as Janie hurried away, her heels clicking on the tiles as she went, Volkan shoved open the door of his office and pushed Yasmin inside.

She stumbled and reached for the back of a chair, then turned to look nervously at him. He towered over her, his chest heaving in anger, the veins on his forehead throbbing.

“You said I could speak my mind to you, and I did!” She was trying to defend herself, but it came out sounding defiant. Darn it, why couldn’t she just do humble while attempting to talk to the beast?

“You dared to say that you would abort my baby,” he snarled, reaching for her. He gripped her by the neck and shoved her back until her hip hit his desk. She gasped and clutched the wood, trying unsuccessfully to slide away from him. “Do you have any idea what this means?”

“No,” she whispered, panic sending her pulse into overdrive. She’d seen him angry before, but this was different. This was on a whole other level, and she feared he really might hurt her.

“It means that you’ll have to be watched and protected at all times, even from yourself. It means your narrow world has narrowed to an even smaller cage because I can’t trust you not to hurt yourself or our baby.”

“But there is no baby!” She tried to reason with him, bringing her hands up to push on his chest. Of course, he didn’t budge.

“There will be a baby, Yasmin,” he said, his voice deepening and his eyes dropping down the front of the red wraparound dress she’d chosen to wear that day. “There will be a baby very soon.”

“No, Volkan, please,” she begged as he dropped his hand to her waist and yanked on the belt holding the halves together. It fell apart and he slid his hand into the material, covering her belly with his palm.

“You will carry our child and you will raise it with the love you refuse to show me.” He leaned toward her, his lips hovering so close to hers that she could feel his breath on her face. “If you refuse, then I will kill you with my own hands.”

A shudder ripped through her and she jerked against the cage of his arms. She couldn’t believe he was threatening to kill her, but the fury vibrating through his body was unmistakable. He meant what he said.

Before she could reason with him, he yanked the fabric of her dress aside, baring the front of her body, then slammed his lips down over hers, taking her in a brutal kiss. It wasn't romantic or pleasant, it was meant to tell her just how much he could dominate her.

She tried to push him away, tried to turn her head, but he used his greater bulk and height to his advantage, crushing her protests. He kissed her until she tasted blood and he pulled on her clothes until her breasts were bared and he was able to slide a finger into her pussy.

She gasped at the intrusion and struggled furiously.

Breaking their kiss, he laughed and reached up to grip her throat, dragging her back onto his desk where something jabbed her in the back. "You protest, but you're dripping wet for me, *küçük olan*. You want this as much as I do. Now lay back and open your legs."

His words served only to ignite her fury and she lifted her legs to kick out at him, striking him in the hip with one of her heels. He captured her ankle and dragged it up to his shoulder, pushing himself against her. He took both of her hands in one of his and forced her wrists over her head, pinning them to the desk.

Then he reached between them and freed his cock, pushing it against her heated core. She gasped and cried out as he slid into her body, stretching and filling her until she didn't think she could possibly take more. It hurt, but it also felt good, which she hated.

She wanted to despise this man with every fibre of her being, but on a visceral level, she was beyond attracted to him. His scent made her mouth water with anticipation, his touch made her tingle with longing, and his deep, sexy voice sent a shiver down her spine when he spoke. She wanted to hate him, but she just couldn't hate all of him.

She clung to him, sliding her hands under his leather jacket and digging her nails into his back through his shirt. Tears leaked from her eyes and dripped into her hair as he slammed

his cock into her over and over, taking his own pleasure while driving hers into the stratosphere.

She shrieked and jerked in his arms, nearly throwing him off her as an orgasm slammed into her with the force of a truck. She screamed again, her fingers curling against the cage of his hands, her nails piercing his skin. Then she melted, going boneless on top of the desk as he continued to stroke her with his cock.

He took a fistful of her hair and forced her to look at him as he said, “You will take every drop I give you and you will make a baby. Your hot little pussy is made for my cum. Take it all, *küçük olan*, take everything I have.”

A dark part of her mind clung to his words, her pussy doing exactly as he ordered and preparing to take his seed by getting wetter and wetter from his words and the little aftershocks of pleasure from her orgasm.

Finally, she felt the movements of his hips growing jerkier and his hands clutched her harder, bruising as he grunted, coming deep inside her body and bathing her in his seed.

He continued to work his cock and out of her, saying, “Take it all. Take all the cum and make me a baby.”

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## *Chapter Thirty*



**YASMIN LAY** on his desk in shock as he finally pulled himself from her and straightened. His eyes travelled over her body, his lust-filled gaze on her pussy where a trickle of semen dripped down her thigh.

He gathered it in on his finger and shoved it inside her, pressing the tip of his finger against her G-spot and drawing a shout from her. She clung to his shoulders, lifting her knees protectively, but he forced his hips between hers, holding her open for him.

“Come for me, Yasmin. Suck all the seed into your womb.” He pumped his finger against her, sending her soaring once more. He planted his hand next to her head. Needing to feel anchored as her body spasmed and reached for another orgasm, she gripped his wrist and held on for dear life.

His black eyes refused to let hers go as the tension wound through her body like a tightly coiled spring. “Come for me now.”

His order seemed to give her body permission to let go, the spring releasing, and another, far more intense, orgasm crashing through her body. It stole her breath, her wits, everything. She collapsed like a used rag as Volkan slid his hand from her, lifted it between them and licked each finger.

The world and everything that had happened between them fell away. They were two people with insane chemistry that sparked into an inferno whenever they were near each other.

Yasmin wondered if he'd felt the same about his wife, Caria. That thought had her pushing herself off the desk in a hurry and turning her back on Volkan as she tidied her appearance.

When she turned back to him, his cock was tucked back in his trousers, and he'd taken his leather coat off and tossed it over the back of a chair.

She looked at him with wariness, and he stared back with that burning black gaze that promised both pleasure and pain if she didn't fall in line.

She was so conflicted. One minute she thought her best bet would be to lull him into believing she was accepting her existence with him until he dropped his guard and she was able to get away. The next she was shouting at him, saying things she knew would anger him but unable to stop herself. It was like she thought she might actually stay with him and marry him, so she felt the need to stand up for herself and fight for the things she believed in, like self-autonomy and birth control. But if she was going to escape, why would she consider what her life would be like with him? Why would she fight him for any small freedom she could get?

"I can read your thoughts in your eyes," he said, his voice calmer, though he still looked like he might reach for her and strangle the life from her.

She nodded. "I never was any good at hiding my feelings."

He took a step toward her and lifted his hand. She flinched away from him and he froze, slowly dropping his hand. "I suppose I've given you reason to be wary." He lowered himself into one of the guest chairs and waved at her to take the one beside him. "Tell me what's on your mind. Maybe we can find a way going forward that will ease both of us." When she hesitated, he added, "I don't want to cage you as I threatened, so let's speak."

It was the first time he tried to offer her compromise or a voice in their relationship. It felt like progress, which confused her even more. Was he doing this on purpose? Torturing her, shaking her up, then offering her crumbs so she'd fall deeper

and deeper into his trap? She didn't know, but she had to try to reason with him.

She slipped into the chair, careful to point her knees away so they didn't touch him. She was still shaken up from his brutal ravishing, but she was even more shaken up by how much she enjoyed it. Her body felt soft and warm after being rocked by the intense orgasms he'd forced on her.

"I didn't really mean what I said about aborting our baby." She looked down at her lap where her fingers twisted in the fabric of her dress. "I hate having the choice to start a family taken away from me." She looked at him with pleading eyes. "Please understand, I was raised to believe that my body belongs to me and that I'm the only one who should make decisions about it, including when to have children."

He nodded and reached towards her. He did it slowly, so as not to startle her, sliding his hand over hers and clasping it lightly. She allowed the contact because she needed it. She needed his comfort.

"I can understand your concern," he told her. "And I'm coming to appreciate that women should be able to make these choices. I used to take charge of Defne's medical needs, but my mother convinced me that Defne is now an adult that she should make those decisions for herself."

A rush of hope surged through Yasmin at hearing about his concession to his sister. "Yes, exactly!"

"No, not exactly," he said, his lips pressing in a grim line. "Not where you're concerned. With you, I'm unable to give up that control. I love you too much to allow you to make decisions that might injure your body or our future children. While I understand your desire to make those decisions for yourself, I can't allow it."

Yasmin yanked her hand away from him. What was the point in talking to him anyway? "That's not love, Volkan, that's obsession! If you loved me, you would also respect me and my decisions."



He shook his head. “You’re rejecting my love because you can’t bring yourself to feel what’s truly in your heart.” He snatched her hand and placed it against his chest. “This beats for you, *küçük olan*. No one else.”

“Not even Caria?” she asked, unable to help herself. “From what I’ve heard, you loved your first wife too, but she had far more freedom than you’re giving me.”

“I told you not to speak of her.” His hand squeezed shut over hers, crushing the delicate bones until she cried out. He didn’t release her though, instead using his grip to pull her from her chair to kneel on the floor in front of him. Then, he eased his grip and leaned over to kiss her. “What am I going to do with you? My instincts tell me to crush your spirit and silence your arguments, but I despise the complacent doll you’ve turned into these past days.”

“Is that why you didn’t want to have sex?” she asked, then cursed herself for sounding like she cared.

“So, you did miss me.” His mood seemed to brighten and he stood, pulling her up to her feet. He scooped up one of her heels, which had fallen off, and handed it to her.

She took it and grabbed his desk to steady herself as she pulled it on. “No, I didn’t miss anything about you,” she said tartly. “I was just wondering if you lost interest in me so I could go home.”

He snorted his amusement. “Unlikely. I was simply tired after long days in the office and I wanted to give you a chance to settle into the house without worrying about what I wanted of you at the end of the day.”

“That’s generous of you,” she said sarcastically.

A light knock on the door heralded the return of Volkan’s secretary. He introduced Yasmin to Janie and had the woman show her around the offices while Volkan settled into work.

Yasmin was curious about Volkan’s place of work. It was a modern building with lots of glass and white painted walls, but it was surrounded by the dockyard, which was dirty and noisy.

Yasmin asked if they could go out into the dockyard and Janie hesitated. "Maybe we should ask Mr. Kartel."

A swirl of nerves at the thought of seeing Volkan again so soon after their intense encounter prompted Yasmin to say, "Never mind. I'll get him to show me another day."

Janie looked relieved and said, "Would you like me to show you to your office now?"

Surprised, Yasmin asked, "What office?"

Janie smiled and showed her to the room next door to Volkan's office. She opened the door and ushered Yasmin inside. It was a lovely space with white walls and a glass-topped desk with rose-coloured columns underneath. On the wall, there was a picture of the Istanbul cityscape, throwing in a splash of colour in with all the white.

Yasmin ran her fingers over the desk, stopping to touch an item before picking it up. It was heavy and made of a hard rubber. Baffled, she looked at it closely before she recognized what it was. "A Mayan pitz ball." She said the words out loud, though surprise tinged the tone. She looked at Janie. "These are quite rare. Where did you find one?"

The ball was used in a game the ancient Mayans used to play. The game was like the Mayan version of an organized sport, like volleyball.

Janie cleared her throat and nodded toward the wall where Volkan's office was on the other side. "He found it and had it shipped to the offices, instructing me to leave it on your desk. I thought it was a strange gift but judging from your excitement I'd say he nailed it."

"I'd say so," Yasmin breathed, unable to believe she was actually holding such a treasure. Touching such a rare item felt both thrilling and forbidden. Where had it come from and why wasn't it in a Mexican museum somewhere? She should tell Volkan to donate it, but she couldn't bring herself to let go of such a precious gift.

Gently, she set it on the desk and turned to Janie. "What am I supposed to do here?" She waved a hand around the

office. “I don’t have a job.”

Janie smiled indulgently. “You can do whatever you want with it. This space is yours. You can use it as a base for home renovations, or you can do your archaeology research here. Further education. Whatever you want it for. Consider it your private sanctuary.”

“Thanks,” Yasmin said faintly.

“Don’t thank me,” she said with a shake of her head, her eyes sparkling as she added, “This was all Volkan’s idea. I’ve never seen a man so in love as him. He gave you this office so he could spend time with you during the workday. You’ll have to thank him if you like what you see.”

As lovely as the office was, Yasmin had no desire to thank Volkan for anything, yet he kept doing things for her that she felt grateful for. It was a confusing feeling, being grateful to her captor. How did she hate someone who was determined to make her life better?

Yet, he refused to give her the one thing she needed to be happy with him; the freedom to choose her own path in life.

“Can I help you with anything else?” Janie asked.

Yasmin shook her head and turned to look out the window, crossing her arms over her chest. “No, thank you. That’ll be all, Janie.”

## *Chapter Thirty-One*



**YASMIN SURPRISED** herself by enjoying her time in her new office. First, she rearranged the furniture so her desk was facing both the door and the big picture windows that overlooked the dockyards. She was fascinated by the massive ships and the shipping containers that were being constantly loaded and unloaded. Throughout the day, different ships came and went with smooth precision.

When she'd had enough of watching the ships and dockworkers, she settled at her desk and opened the shiny new laptop she assumed was hers. She went through the setup process while doing her best to ignore the excited voice in the back of her head telling her that this was it, her chance to get away from Volkan. As soon as she was online, she could contact the authorities and explain her situation.

Only when she thought about turning Volkan into the authorities, things became murky. She couldn't picture him going to jail, but she also couldn't picture a life spent in subjugation to a man who displayed violent tendencies.

Instead of deciding what to do about her captivity, Yasmin made lists. List-making was one of her all-time favourite activities, and it always worked to calm her mind when she was feeling stressed. First, she made a list of things she could use her new office for, then she made a list of the supplies she would need. Then she decided to take one of Janie's suggestions and use the office to plan the redecoration of Volkan's suite.

Did that mean she was ready to accept that she would have a life with Volkan? No, she told herself; it didn't. It meant that she wanted to disrupt his carefully ordered life as much as possible before finding a way to leave.

Still, it was fun cataloguing all the rooms and the things she could buy for them. She wanted a soaker tub in the master suite, so they'd have to hire a plumber to install it, which would mean they'd lose the shower-tub combo that was currently in there. So, she'd have to hire someone to make them a glass surround shower that would go next to the tub.

"Do you have a minute?"

Yasmin looked up, startled to find Zeynep standing in the doorway. The other woman looked gorgeous in a sleek royal blue, knee-length sleeveless sheath that was belted in the middle to show off her narrow waist. She wore a matching pair of blue heels, and her blonde hair was swept up into a chic knot. Her makeup was perfectly applied, her eyeliner a smoky cat's eye and her lips a pouty purple a few shades brighter than her dress.

Yasmin felt young and inadequate next to the glamorous woman who was staring at Yasmin like she was seriously lacking. Yasmin knew she looked good in her wraparound dress and heels but, like most days, she was bare-faced, wearing her glasses, and her hair was mussed more than usual due to Volkan's attentions.

"Sorry, I didn't hear you knock," Yasmin said, standing.

Zeynep gave her a tight-lipped smile. "I didn't knock. We're used to an open-door policy around here. Hope you don't mind."

Yasmin nearly laughed as she imagined Volkan supporting an open-door policy with his employees. He was so obsessive about everything being perfect that there's no way he'd be okay with people coming and going from his office.

"What can I help you with?" Yasmin asked.

She didn't know why exactly, but intuition told her she shouldn't trust Zeynep. There was something that didn't sit

right about the way her husband made her a member of the board without Volkan's permission. Yasmin knew little about how corporations worked, but she figured any changes to the board should be run by the company's CEO. Volkan's brother and his wife made the change while Volkan was out of Istanbul, which told Yasmin they knew he would've tried to stop them.

*Way to judge this woman for wanting a top spot in the company and meanwhile you're shacking up with a kidnapper, Yasmin's inner voice reminded her. Great moral compass.*

"I wanted to see if you would have lunch with me," Zeynep said with a smile that was so bright and fake it was nearly blinding. "I'd love to show you a little of Istanbul since you've never been here before. There's this great cafe not too far from here right on the beach."

Though Yasmin didn't trust this woman, the invitation was tempting. She was dying to get out and see a city with so much historical significance. She was also hungry, and her stomach was urging her to take Zeynep up on her offer. Still... something told her Volkan wouldn't approve. The way he'd ignored his sister-in-law so completely at their evening meals told Yasmin that he wouldn't appreciate the two women becoming chummy. Not that she cared what he thought, but she was trying not to provoke him while she decided what her next move would be.

"I better ask Volkan first," she said, cringing and almost taking the words back. She hated the idea of having to ask a man for permission to do something she would've been able to decide for herself only a few weeks ago.

Zeynep gave her a superior look and shrugged, examining her perfectly manicured nails. "You'll have to wait for him to get back from his business lunch before you can ask."

A shaft of hurt went through Yasmin at the thought that Volkan had left her alone at the office without checking in with her. She'd assumed they would have lunch together or that he would take her back to the house for the afternoon.

Instead, it would seem he went about his day with little thought to what she was doing.

Yasmin grabbed her purse and stood. “Okay, let’s go. I’ll let Janie know on our way out.”

“Janie’s left for lunch too,” Zeynep said, a hint of pity in her voice. “I’m glad I checked in on you or you would’ve been left to find your own lunch.”

Yasmin gave a tight smile. “I’m pretty good at taking care of myself.”

Zeynep let out a tinkling laugh as she escorted Yasmin down the hall. “That’s not what it looks like from the outside. Volkan does everything for you short of cutting your meat into bite-sized pieces.”

Yasmin frowned at her impromptu lunch companion. What was the other woman up to? Everything about her seemed calculating. Yasmin didn’t believe for one moment the woman wanted to eat with her. She wanted something from Yasmin, or she wanted to stir up trouble.

What was that saying? Keep your friends close and your enemies even closer. Yeah, it felt like Zeynep was applying that philosophy to Yasmin. She hadn’t had much to do with Yasmin until Yasmin had shown up at the office, now she was eager to get acquainted. The whole thing felt fishy.

Zeynep led Yasmin out to her car, a cherry red Audi parked in the staff parking lot. Yasmin looked around for Volkan’s car. Sure enough it was gone. She hadn’t totally believed Zeynep when she’d said he left for a business lunch, but the missing car seemed to suggest Zeynep hadn’t lied. Why hadn’t he popped his head in to tell her? She wouldn’t have minded his leaving, but it bothered her that he maneuvered every step of her existence with him then abandoned her in his place of work.

“Something on your mind?” Zeynep drawled as they slid into the leather seats and she fired the engine.

Yasmin forced a smile and shook her head. “Just looking around. I know nothing about shipping and find all this very

fascinating.”

Zeynep rolled her eyes and said, “I hate everything about this place. It’s so gross and noisy. I don’t know why Volkan didn’t move the offices downtown or somewhere less in the way. He can conduct his business without having to be on site. The business itself is actually quite boring.”

Yasmin was surprised at the other woman’s scathing assessment of Volkan’s office and family business. She’d thought since Zeynep had gone to all the effort of purchasing shares and ensuring her place on the board that she would love what she did for a living. Apparently not. Which made Yasmin wonder why she was there at all. Judging from what she’d seen so far of the family operations, Yasmin had to assume that Zeynep could stay home if she didn’t like going to the office. The family certainly seemed to have enough money to support everyone not working. Except Volkan, of course. Someone had to run the place.

“What do you do at Kartel Transport?” Yasmin asked curiously.

Zeynep gave her a frowning look. “I support my husband, of course.”

“What does he do?” Yasmin pressed.

Zeynep made an annoyed sound and then threw around some corporate phrases that sounded like complete bullshit. By the time they reached the restaurant, Yasmin figured that Zeynep and Demir spent most of their time at Kartel Transport watching the company ledger with vested interest, taking bonuses and raises whenever they saw the opportunity. Yasmin suspected she knew why Volkan had very little patience for the pair.

“What do you think?” Zeynep asked proudly as she and Yasmin walked down a boardwalk toward an outdoor restaurant. It was stunning, and for the first time, Yasmin felt drawn to the country she’d had been brought to against her will.



Yasmin also sensed a passion in Zeynep for her country of birth as she pointed out landmarks that were visible from where they stood. She pointed out the dockyard, which was only a few kilometers up the coast, the ships and cranes visible from the restaurant. Then she pointed in the other direction, explaining that the family mansion was about half an hour down the coast in the other direction.

They ordered fresh oysters, a plate of greens and some Chardonnay. The lunch was delicious and, Yasmin had to admit, pleasant once Zeynep focused less on Kartel business and more on her home country of Turkey.

She should've been a tour guide, Yasmin mused, nearly giggling out loud as she pictured the elegant Zeynep in an orange tour vest, her shiny name badge in place, a clipboard in her hands. It would never happen, of course. A job in the tourism industry would be too far beneath any of the Kartel family members.

They fell silent for a few minutes as they ate their oysters and sipped their wine, the warmth of the sun on their heads.

As they were finishing up, Yasmin had to admit she'd enjoyed herself and would do it again if asked. She didn't hate spending time with Zeynep. When away from the mansion and the family, Zeynep seemed less manipulative and pouty and more herself.

As she dabbed her lips with a napkin, Zeynep narrowed her brown-eyed gaze on Yasmin. "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course," Yasmin said.

"Why haven't you asked me to help you get away from Volkan?" She leaned across the table, dropping her voice and looking around as if by saying his name, she could invoke his presence. "I thought you'd jump at the opportunity as soon as we were alone."

## *Chapter Thirty-Two*



“WH-WHAT?” Yasmin stuttered, stunned by Zeynep’s revelation. Did everyone in the family know she was a kidnap victim?

“It’s pretty obvious,” Zeynep said.

“How?” Yasmin demanded. She thought she’d been a pretty low-key captive.

Zeynep shrugged. “Volkan’s always dragging you about and when he isn’t, his mother is. They also speak for you whenever someone asks a question. And the way you look at Volkan, like you’re going to stab him at the first opportunity, isn’t exactly the face of a blushing bride to be.”

“Oh,” Yasmin said, unable to think of anything else. She’d only been there a few days. Zeynep must have sharp eyes if she caught all that.

“Add to all that the fact that you could be twins with Volkan’s wife, Car — “

“Caria,” Yasmin finished grimly. It didn’t sit well that she was such a lookalike with Volkan’s wife that everyone felt the need to comment about it. Looking around, she said, “I think it’s time to go back to the office.”

A calculated look of horror crossed Zeynep’s delicate features as she reached out to touch Yasmin’s arm. “I’m so sorry if I’ve crossed a line with you. I really thought you looked like you could use some help.”

Yasmin slid her arm away from Zeynep. “What exactly could you do for me if I told you I did need your help?” Yasmin couldn’t explain why she wasn’t jumping at the opening Zeynep was giving her. This was her chance to get away from Volkan, but Yasmin couldn’t shake the feeling that Zeynep had a nefarious purpose for wanting to help.

Zeynep glanced around and leaned in to speak in a low voice. “Volkan’s reach goes far in this country, so it would be difficult to get you out if you wanted to leave, but not impossible. All kinds of transportation information, like schedules and manifests, cross my desk every day. I could find a way to smuggle you out on a ship or an airplane.”

“And what would be in it for you?” Yasmin asked, crossing her arms over her chest and staring at the other woman. “Why would you help a complete stranger?”

Zeynep tried to look offended. “Why wouldn’t I help another woman in trouble? It breaks my heart to see a woman being forced into a marriage she doesn’t want. Our gender needs to stick together and have each other’s backs.”

Though she agreed with Zeynep’s words, Yasmin was willing to bet the other woman didn’t care one rip about her plight. Zeynep wanted Yasmin out of the country for another reason, but she wasn’t saying what.

“I want to go back to the office,” Yasmin said insistently. She’d had enough of her lunch.

And truth be told, she was annoyed. For the first time since her ordeal began, she’d found herself enjoying life again. She had a beautiful new office and she’d been enjoying their sojourn on the boardwalk. Why did Zeynep have to go and ruin her day by reminding her she was living in a den full of vipers, all with differing agendas?

Together, they walked back to the vehicle, their heels clicking as they made their way to the car. Before Yasmin could get in the Audi, Zeynep gripped her arm, digging her nails into the flesh just enough to make Yasmin uncomfortable.

“Volkan doesn’t need to know about this conversation,” Zeynep said in a hard voice, her eyes glittering.

Yasmin was tempted to tell the other woman that she and Volkan told each other everything and that she couldn’t possibly keep something like this from her fiancé, but she didn’t want to burn the only bridge out of Turkey that had opened up for her.

“I see no reason to tell him anything other than that we had a pleasant lunch on the boardwalk, and you showed me some of the local sights while we were here.”

Zeynep looked genuinely relieved, removing her hand with a guilty look. “Thank you.”

Yasmin slid into the car, relieved when Zeynep turned the vehicle onto the road that would take them back to the shipyard. She didn’t know what to make of Zeynep, but she thought it might be in her best interests to befriend the cagey woman... in case she needed to take Zeynep up on her offer.

When they arrived at the office, there were several vehicles in the parking lot that weren’t there before. Yasmin hoped she wouldn’t have to meet anyone else. She was tired and wanted to go back to her beautiful office and perhaps take a nap on the cozy looking couch.

When they entered the building, they discovered a crowd of big, burly men in black suits. There seemed to be about ten of them. As she looked at them, she decided they looked like a lot like Henry; bodyguards or security. Then she caught sight of Henry who was standing to the side with Volkan. He was talking to the bodyguard in a low urgent voice, waving his hands in agitation as he spoke.

Yasmin edged around the men toward him, trying to find out what was happening. Maybe there was something wrong. Maybe a threatening ship came in or something. She didn’t want to interrupt what looked like an important conversation, but she wanted to know what was going on.

As she approached, she caught sight of Zeynep slipping away down a hallway, probably heading back to her office.

The look on her face was one of guilt. What on earth was going on?

“Check in with our guy at the embassy and see if she went there; it’s probably first on her list of places she’d go. Then check the airports. I’ll take a couple of guys and go over the entire shipyard, then we’ll have to check each ship one at a time. She can’t have gone far, but I don’t want to risk her getting injured while she’s on her own. She doesn’t know about the threats we receive here. If one of my rivals gets their hands on her...”

Yasmin had a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach that all the fuss was about her. Volkan thought she’d gone missing.

She searched for an escape route, wondering if she could make it back to her office and say she never left. From the thunderous anger on his face, she was sure she didn’t want to tell Volkan the truth if she could avoid it.

Unfortunately, she didn’t make it more than two steps before Henry caught sight of her. His brows lowered and he jerked his head Yasmin’s way, “Looks like your bird came home on her own.”

Volkan’s head swivelled around and his eyes lasered in on her. He grabbed her as she tried to skitter out of his path. His fingers bit into her arms and he hauled her against his chest.

“Where the fuck were you?” he thundered.

Men eased away from them, not wanting to get caught in the crossfire.

“I was... I was...” she stuttered, her thoughts scattering in the face of Volkan’s rage. She gathered them quickly and spoke as fast as she could. “I went out for lunch with Zeynep. I wanted to check with you, but she told me you were out at a business meeting. As long as I was with one of the family, I didn’t think you would mind.” She threw Zeynep under the bus, not even remotely feeling bad about it. The other woman would’ve done the same to her.

“Thank god you’re okay.”

Volkan crushed her in his arms, tucking her head under his chin. She could understand that he might think she'd tried to escape, but why was he so worried about her safety? What was she missing?

Finally, he ended the embrace, but kept his grip on her arm and stepped back to address the men assembled. "Obviously, the search is no longer needed. Please go back to your regular duties."

Without waiting to watch the men disperse, Volkan pulled her toward his office and pushed her inside. Janie didn't look at either of them as they passed her, busying herself with the paperwork in front of her.

When Volkan closed the door, Yasmin turned to look at him, backing up a few steps when she saw the deep frown he still wore.

"I don't understand what's happening," she said, trying to look and sound innocent. Maybe if she'd put more thought into her actions, she would've realized there was no way Volkan would let her go without knowing where she was going and with who. She was the idiot for believing Zeynep when she told Yasmin that Volkan had left. Obviously, the other woman had either lied to Yasmin or been misinformed.

"I went to find you in your office so we could get lunch together and you were gone." The clear distress in Volkan's voice told Yasmin just how worried he'd been. "I thought you'd wandered off and gotten hurt."

She hesitated, then approached him slowly, reaching out to touch his arm. It was maybe the first time she had voluntarily touched him.

"I know about Caria and how she died. It must have been so horrible for you." She guessed he'd been overly worried because of what had happened to his previous wife. When his frown deepened, she quickly added, "I know you told me to leave it alone, but I was curious about your wife and I asked Defne. It's not her fault, though. I led her to believe that you'd told me the entire story." When he didn't say anything, she gripped his arm harder. "Please don't be mad, Defne is

innocent and I don't want her to get in trouble because of something I did."

His frown melted into a thin smile, and he gripped the back of her head and pulled her against his chest. "It warms my heart to hear you defending my sister." He pulled back just enough to look down at her. "I knew you would fit in well with my family."

Yasmin wasn't so sure about that, but now that he seemed calmer, she wasn't about to contradict him. "I'm sorry I disappeared." He nodded and she relaxed in his embrace. "Who were those people out there? There were so many of them."

"Most of them were dockyard security, though I pulled a few others in from the estate when I realized you were missing."

Worried that he was going to be upset again, she hurried to say, "I truly didn't think you would mind. Zeynep thought you were out at a meeting and wanted to welcome me to the family by taking me out for lunch and showing me some sights."

Volkan's gaze grew hard. "I would never leave for any reason without telling you first, and if I had a meeting that required me to leave, I would expect you to accompany me."

Yasmin sighed. There was the autocratic kidnapper she'd grown accustomed to. "And I'm used to being able to make my own decisions without running them by anyone. I would have told you if I thought you were here."

"Regardless, you are never to leave again without first talking to me. Do you understand?"

"I'm not in kindergarten, Volkan, I understand basic English."

He took her chin in a hard hold and forced her to look at him. "I won't tolerate defiance from you on this. You will do as I say, or you will spend all your time within the confines of the mansion."

Yasmin thought Volkan's privileged upbringing led him to think being locked up in a mansion with endless amusements

available, a pool to swim in, and a huge property to walk and admire was ‘confining’, but she wasn’t going to argue. She was learning that arguing with Volkan never led to anything good. She was better off trying to reach him on a human level, to try to understand him so she could understand his motives.

Like the lunch incident. Volkan had been angry, but he’d also been afraid for her and, for the first time since he’d abducted her, she felt something other than fear or anger in his presence. She felt compassion because she knew about his ex-wife. Knew that she’d died at the dockyard.

“I won’t leave without talking to you first,” she conceded.

Again, his face softened and when he took hold of her arms, he was gentle.

Hmmm... sooth the beast by giving him what he wanted. Why hadn’t she thought of that earlier? Oh yeah, because the beast was also a kidnapping psycho.

“I want you to tell me everything that you and Zeynep discussed while you were away,” Volkan said, his expression serious. “I hate to say this about any member of my family, but you can’t trust Zeynep. She always has an ulterior motive or manipulation on her mind.”

Yasmin agreed with his assessment. She’d thought the same thing pretty much from the first word out of Zeynep’s mouth. But what she didn’t think Volkan saw was the loneliness and longing that ate away at his beautiful sister-in-law.

“We mostly talked about the sights I should see around Turkey,” she told him truthfully. “Zeynep has extensive knowledge of the area.”

Volkan’s lip curled in disgust as he said, “She comes by it through her family. Her mother was a tour guide before she died in a car accident and her father is a local oyster salesman who sets up his booth in the tourist areas.”

Yasmin glared at him. “Don’t you dare insult blue-collar workers who’re out there making an honest living. My father was a bus driver who raised a whole family on his salary!”



Volkan gave her an indulgent smile and said, “I wasn’t insulting the blue-collar worker, *aşkı*m. I myself enjoy spending the occasional day operating the crane or flying cargo when we’re short on pilots. I was simply saying that Zeynep is a climber. Once she sank her nails into my family and our wealth, there was no dislodging her. She is the one who disdains her upbringing, not me.”

“Oh.” Yasmin had gotten so used to vilifying everything about Volkan that she believed him fully capable of treating lower classes dismissively. Like the waiter in the restaurant who’d nearly gotten thrown off a roof. Though, she supposed it had nothing to do with the man’s job and everything to do with his looking at her. “Wait... you have your pilot’s license?”

Volkan grinned and nodded. “If you’re good, I’ll take you up in my Cirrus SR22.” His face grew serious once more. “Did Zeynep say anything else to you? Inquire after your family or your home country?”

Yasmin shook her head. “No, we mostly just talked about the beach and the tourist sights.” It was a lie, but he didn’t need to know that Zeynep had offered her a way out if she wanted to leave Turkey.

She didn’t trust Zeynep, but the other woman might become a last resort if Yasmin needed to leave in a hurry.

## *Chapter Thirty-Three*



**THE DAYS FLEW PAST,** dragging Yasmin closer and closer to her wedding date. The Kartel villa seemed to be in a constant uproar, with dressmakers wanting to take measurements and make adjustments, decorators transforming the house, and caterers moving equipment and food into the kitchen area. Despite the busy household, Yasmin felt restless and unproductive.

Volkan was away on business and had been for two days. Yasmin didn't exactly miss him because they hadn't settled into a routine before he left, but she noticed his absence. He wasn't there at meals to help mitigate the awkwardness with his family at the dinner table. He wasn't there when she wanted to connect with her family and she couldn't do it without him because she needed him for access to a phone, and he wasn't there when the nights became long and she needed the comfort of someone familiar when her thoughts became a chaotic whirl of fear and anxiety.

"Would you like to step inside now, Ms. Mahdi?" Henry asked, startling her as he came up beside her. "The sun is hot today and your cheeks are flushed."

She glanced at him. "I'm very comfortable but thank you for your concern."

Before he could say anything else, Defne came rushing from the house and hurtled toward them. "Yasmin, come quick!" Alarmed, Yasmin ran to the younger woman's side as Defne wrung her hands and wailed, "Volkan is missing!"

“What?” Yasmin asked sharply. “What do you mean?”

“There’s a storm off the coast and we can’t get in touch with him. He’s supposed to fly in tonight!” Fat tears leaked from Defne’s large, frightened eyes and trickled down her cheeks. “What if something happened to him?”

Yasmin didn’t understand. “Volkan is missing? You know this for sure or you just haven’t heard from him?”

“We haven’t heard from him,” she admitted, then rushed to add, “But he’s supposed to stay in touch at all times and he hasn’t contacted us at all.”

Yasmin glanced at Henry, who was frowning down at Defne. “Do you know anything about this?”

He shook his head. “No, but the boss always flies safe. If there’s a storm, then he’ll divert his flight path and go around.” He hesitated before awkwardly addressing Defne. “I’m sure he’ll check in when he gets a chance. There might be interference on the radio if he’s flying around a storm.”

“Yes, that must be it!” Defne said, seizing on the thought. “He’s just busy. I’m going to go to my room and watch the weather radar on the computer to see where he might fly.” Before she could take more than a few steps, though, Defne collapsed.

Henry caught her before she hit the ground and lifted her in his arms.

“Oh my god!” Yasmin rushed to them and picked up Defne’s wrist, holding her hand. “What’s wrong? Should I call an ambulance?”

“She’ll be okay,” Narin said grimly, walking swiftly from the house toward them. “She got over-excited, that’s all.” Looking at Henry, she said, “Bring her inside. We’ll get her settled in bed, then I’ll call her doctor to come check on her.”

Narin walked back into the house followed by Henry who held Defne cradled in his arms. He cast a look back toward Yasmin but followed Narin inside.

Chewing on her lip, Yasmin tried to decide if she should follow them. She was concerned by Defne's collapse, but truth be told she was somewhat frightened of the tough Kartel matriarch. Narin was the picture of gentle etiquette on the outside but had shown herself to be as sharp and manipulative as her son.

It was the first time she was alone without the family or a bodyguard watching her and she wondered what she should do. Probably go back inside and either check on Defne or go to her suite and wait for Volkan to return.

She wondered briefly if she should be worried about what Defne had said... but no one else seemed worried. One would think if something was wrong with Volkan, his mother would be just as upset and Henry would be doing more than trying to get Yasmin out of the sun.

It was strange how distraught Defne had become over the possibility of Volkan flying into a storm. And what did she mean when she'd said he was missing? Had Defne tried and failed to contact him?

Yasmin felt a flash of worry, but without more to go on there wasn't much she could do about Volkan. When he returned, she would ask him if he'd been in any danger and why he couldn't check in. Maybe next time she would be in a better position to ease Defne's worries.

Instead of going inside, Yasmin decided to go down to the beach. It wasn't strictly forbidden to her, but it also wasn't a place she was supposed to venture to without a bodyguard. Oh well, Volkan wasn't here to admonish her and she had a sudden desire to sink her toes into the warm sand while looking out at the sparkling ocean.

She followed the cobblestone path from the house to the beach and made her way to the ocean where she kicked off her shoes and sank her toes into the sand on the edge of the surf so the water would wash over her and cool her feet before she became too hot.

"Oysters, Ms. Mahdi?" Yasmin jumped and craned her neck around to see who was talking to her.

A man with a weather-beaten, permanently sunburned complexion stood behind her, holding several netted bags in his fist. He held them up for her to see.

“How do you know my name?”

He had a sly look on his face. “My daughter told me about you.” His English wasn’t perfect, but she understood him.

Yasmin stepped away, wishing she hadn’t left the house without her bodyguard.

“Your daughter is Zeynep Kartel?” she asked, nodding toward the house.

“You know her?” he asked proudly.

“A little. Why did you come find me?”

His dark eyes roved down her body. “She told me you might need help leaving the big house while the boss is away. Is it true?”

Before she could answer, Yasmin caught sight of Henry striding down the path toward them, his handsome face creased in a frown. When he caught sight of Zeynep’s father, he snapped, “Get out of here. This stretch of beach is private.”

The older man shuffled along, casting another calculating glance at Yasmin before leaving her side.

Yasmin asked Henry, “Do you know who he is?”

“Some old oyster peddler who insists on selling his wares on this part of the beach, despite being told he’s not welcome. I’ll have to tell the boss he’s down here talking to you.”

Yasmin felt bad for the older man. Though she got some sketchy vibes from him, she didn’t want him to get into the kind of trouble Volkan could bring to him.

“Please don’t tell him,” she pleaded. “He’s just doing his job. I’m sure he’s learned his lesson and won’t be back. Volkan might not understand and try to take what little the man has.”

Henry stared at her for a long minute, then nodded. “Make sure you stay away from strangers. Volkan wouldn’t like it.”

That was an understatement, but she readily agreed.

Yasmin wondered why Henry didn't recognize the oyster salesman. The family was close, and Henry always seemed to be around. Maybe Zeynep was ashamed of her father and asked him never to come around? If so, then what was he doing on the beach?

Yasmin had more questions than answers when it came to Volkan's enigmatic family. As she made her way inside, she thought of her own family.

Volkan had allowed her to text with them again and then before he left, he allowed her to have a carefully orchestrated call with her parents. Hearing their voices was exactly what she needed, but it was difficult to listen to their disappointment and concern when she told them she had dropped out of the archeological internship to follow a man to Turkey.

Of course, their concern was natural, but it gutted her to know that they thought their daughter was throwing away her university degree to shack up with some guy she barely knew.

She'd been angry with Volkan and argued that she wouldn't go along with his narrative, but he'd told her it was better than the alternative.

"And what's that?" she'd asked angrily. "Tell them some asshole kidnapped me and forced me to move to Istanbul with him?"

He'd stood to his full height and faced her. "No, my love. It would have been much more traumatic for them had you simply disappeared without a word, which was my original plan."

She'd paled at his words and calmed down enough to think straight. He was right. It was far better for her parents to think she was flighty than it was for them to believe she was dead.

After her conversation with her parents, she'd cried herself to sleep, rejecting Volkan when he tried to comfort her. She didn't want his sympathy. She didn't deserve to feel better after lying to the people who had raised her, provided for her,

and supported her emotionally. As much as she knew it was for their benefit to lie to them, it didn't sit well.

Once she'd calmed, Volkan had told her he would let her call her parents again in a few days to announce their engagement and to invite them to the wedding. She was nervous, but also excited. If they agreed to come, she would get to spend time with them and maybe show them around her new home.

It struck her that she was thinking of herself as a resident in Volkan's home rather than a captive. He still didn't trust her, and she couldn't totally blame him. She wasn't sure exactly what she would do if she had a clear path off the property when Henry was looking the other way. Would she try to escape?

She didn't honestly know the answer and it made her question herself, which was why she found herself sitting in a bathtub full of water and bubbles, drinking a very large glass of red wine and sobbing.

It didn't help that Volkan hadn't checked in yet either. It had been two hours since Defne frantically told her about the storm. Yasmin didn't want to worry. She didn't want to care. In fact, maybe it was better if something happened to him. Then his mother could quietly buy her a plane ticket to Canada and be rid of her.

The thought of Volkan's demise made her cry even harder. What the heck was wrong with her? She hated him, right? Then why did it bother her so much to imagine his small airplane sitting on the bottom of the ocean, his body entombed forever in the deep icy waters?

"Hey, hey, *aşkım*, why are you crying?"

Yasmin was startled as Volkan rushed to her side and knelt next to the tub, reaching for her. She didn't think twice. She launched herself into his arms and hugged him, splashing water everywhere and ruining what was likely a costly business suit.

“Will you tell me what’s disturbed you so much?” he asked, gently pushing her away so he could frame her wet cheeks with his hands. “I will kill the person who has made you suffer.”

She gave him a watery smile. “I w-was worried that you’d died in a plane crash, then I was mad at myself for caring because I’m s-supposed to hate you. Also, I don’t like the flowers your mom picked out for the wedding, but I don’t want to hurt her feelings.”

He chuckled and wrapped his arms around her, holding her tight despite the water soaking him. “I’ve been told that my sister is to blame for some of this upset. I should’ve warned you that she can be strange when it comes to my flying or doing anything she considers dangerous. I think it’s because she’s confined to the house so much of the time that she worries about what the outside world might do to her loved ones. I was never in any danger, nor would I fly into a situation that could become dangerous.”

Yasmin nodded, glad that he was safe.

“As for my mother, I will have a word with her. I know she can be intimidating.”

Yasmin sighed and relaxed against him, turning her head into his shoulder. “Thank you, Volkan.”

“It warms me that you care enough about me to worry and that you care enough about our wedding to have an opinion on the flowers.”

“I shouldn’t,” she said, rubbing her cheek against him and wiping her tears on his sleeve. “I should hate you and want nothing to do with the wedding.”

“But you don’t,” he concluded.

“What’s wrong with me that I can give up so easily?”

“Perhaps you’re falling in love.”

“Gross, Volkan,” she said, pulling away from him. “Let’s not get carried away.”



He chuckled, then eyed her naked breasts, which were exposed, the dusky nipples visible above the bubbles. “Or perhaps we should get carried away.” He stood and held his hand out to her. “Come, my love, I’m eager for a taste of my soon-to-be bride.”

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## Chapter Thirty-Four



**“I DON’T UNDERSTAND** why you have to get married so quickly,” Yasmin’s mother said, her tone pleading, her face creased with worry. “Don’t you think you’re rushing into things with a man you barely know?”

Volkan’s private jet had flown in that morning with her parents aboard. They would attend the wedding in two days’ time. Yasmin had brought her mother up to their suite for refreshments while Volkan took her father to the garage to show him the family’s vehicle collection. Her father had been dazzled when Volkan had sent the Ferrari to pick them up from the airport.

A shaft of pain pierced Yasmin’s heart as she suppressed the desperate desire to explain the real situation behind her rush to the altar. Yasmin tried to placate her mother without lying. “Volkan wants to get married quickly. He says we have our whole lives to get to know each other.”

“That explains *his* behaviour, but not yours,” her mother chided. “You’ve always been the more conservative of our children. Your sister is crazy and wild. You were our steady, dependable daughter.”

Ouch. Meaning she was no longer the steady, dependable daughter. Silently cursing Volkan yet again, she said, “I’ve thought this through, Mom. I’m not jumping blindly into something.”

“But a couple of weeks isn’t long enough to get to know a person.”

“Has your daughter not told you?” Volkan said as he walked into the room, Yasmin’s father at his side. “We’ve known each other for months, not weeks. We met four months ago at the hotel she worked at. It was love at first sight for me, but she took a little more convincing.”

Her mother turned an accusing look on Yasmin. “You didn’t tell us there was someone in your life! You’ve always been so secretive about this sort of thing, so I suppose I’m not surprised.” She seemed relieved, but a frown still creased her brow. “That doesn’t explain how you were both in London at the same time, or how Yasmin came to leave the employ of Dr. Ryan.”

Yasmin had enough of dancing on hot coals trying to explain the unexplainable to her family. Instead, she stared hard at Volkan, silently telling him it was his turn to step up and explain her kidnapping in a way that wouldn’t send her parents running to the nearest police station.

And of course, her criminal of a fiancé lied beautifully to smooth the situation over. He sat next to Yasmin, slid his hand behind her back and tugged her against him. “We had a small misunderstanding when I was visiting Yasmin in Toronto and I went home believing she never wanted to see me again, but the more I thought of her, the more determined I was to win her back. When I found out about her new position in London, I followed her. It was there that we reconnected and rekindled our love. It took some convincing, but I finally got her to agree to move to Turkey with me and become my wife.” His expression shifted to one of apology as he added, “It was never my intention to upset you or make you worry over your daughter’s safety. You must believe that Yasmin’s well-being is my first priority.”

Yasmin’s mother wasn’t a stupid woman and continued to question Volkan, but slowly, his wildly romanticized version of their coupling won Mrs. Mahdi over until she was chattering excitedly about their upcoming nuptials as though she’d been on board with the wedding from the very beginning.

Yasmin's father agreed with his wife on most things, and Yasmin's rushed wedding was one of them. It pleased him that his daughter had found a wealthy businessman for a husband, and though he would miss having her nearby, he was comforted when Volkan offered him the use of his private jet any time the family wanted to visit.

Only Yasmin's sister was vocally negative about the wedding and texted Yasmin constantly, begging her to reconsider the wedding, or at least wait until she could attend. Aisha was stuck in Canada, working on a big case that she couldn't get away from.

Aisha told Yasmin that she knew her better than anyone else in the family and Yasmin would never do anything as spontaneous as hook up with a guy on the other side of the world, follow him to his home country and marry him after only knowing him such a short time. There had to be something shady going on and she was going to find out what.

Volkan now trusted Yasmin with a phone and had gotten her a brand new one with a gold encrusted case and a slew of games and apps pre-installed. He'd also gone through her contact list and removed everyone except for her immediate family and a few girlfriends from Toronto. He'd added his family members in as well as Henry and a few other bodyguards that she had regular contact with. Noticeably absent were any men unrelated to her, including her old roommates.

As she lay in bed that night after settling her parents into another suite, she stared at the last message from her sister.

**Aisha:** I'm coming to Istanbul as soon as I can and I'm kicking some serious ass until I find out what the fuck is going on.

It wasn't like Aisha to swear, which told Yasmin her sister was genuinely upset. That bothered Yasmin almost more than the worry her mother had harboured. Aisha wasn't just a sister;

she was Yasmin's confidant and best friend. She was hurting because she thought Yasmin was doing something as important as getting married without her big sister in attendance.

Yasmin chewed on her lip as she thought about what to say.

"Where is your mind at, my love?" Volkan asked, sitting on the bed next to her and bending to take his shoes and socks off.

She tossed her phone on the bedspread. "Aisha doesn't believe a word of the lies we've been telling my parents. She wants to see me with her own eyes and... and I think she's devastated that I would go ahead and have the wedding without her." Her eyes filled with tears at the thought of what she was doing to her family.

Volkan turned to look at her. "Would you postpone the wedding if your sister could come?"

Her heart leapt with hope. "Yes, it would mean the world to me if she could be here."

"Then she will be."

"You're going to postpone the wedding?"

"No, postponing isn't an option. I want you as my wife and I won't rest until I've made that happen," he said firmly. "What I can do is make sure that your sister is available to attend."

Yasmin stared at him in horror. "Don't you dare kidnap my sister!"

He chuckled. "That wasn't my intent, but I can ensure that her current case wraps up quickly."

"How?" she asked.

"My naïve little fiancé," he said with an indulgent smile. "Money is how I resolve everything. I'll make the case go away with a large lump sum payment to whoever needs it in order to drop the case."

“That’s...” Yasmin drifted off, looking for the correct word, “... diabolical.”

“It’s business,” he said with a shrug. “Money makes things happen. In my case, I have a lot of money, which means I can make things happen faster.”

“You’re also arrogant if you believe money can fix all your problems,” she said dryly.

He grabbed her by the waist and dragged her down onto the bed, climbing on top of her and straddling her hips. “Arrogant, am I? We’ll see about that.” He dug his fingers into her ribs until she was laughing and begging him to stop.

She was breathless when she said, “You’re also insufferable, overly confident, demanding and quick to anger when you don’t get your way.”

“I believe the word you’re looking for is successful. I may be all of those things, my beautiful love, but I’m also very successful. My wealth opens doors that are otherwise closed to the average citizen. I won’t apologize for that and I won’t take it back.”

She grew serious as she stared up at him. “Money also corrupts. The average citizen would never consider kidnapping a woman who rejected him.”

He stilled, and for a moment, she thought he would become angry.

Instead, he framed her face with his hands and said, “Money had nothing to do with my decision to take you for myself. Had I been a poor man, I would’ve done the same thing. Money enabled me to bring you into my keeping in the quickest and easiest way I could think of.”

Her heart raced and her body reacted with desire, her nipples tightening and her pussy growing slick with need. She hated him for making her feel this way, but she also hated herself for not really hating him. Her memory of the past several weeks was fading. The kidnapping, the drugging, the rape. It was becoming fuzzy as her feelings grew for the man pinning her to the bed.

“I’m scared,” she admitted, without explaining what she meant.

Volkan either understood what she was saying — that she feared the future, feared living in a new country with a man she barely knew, feared disappointing her family. Or he didn’t care because he knew exactly what their future would be and had determined that there was nothing to fear.

“I’ve got you, *küçük olan*,” he murmured, bending to kiss her lips softly. “You will have nothing to fear as long as I’m around.”

But she didn’t believe him because she couldn’t trust him. She’d seen his temper, seen the way he resolved things. She knew that eventually, he would do something that would ignite her fear again, and the anxiety of not knowing kept her awake long after Volkan had fallen asleep next to her.

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## Chapter Thirty-Five



**TWO DAYS LATER**, Yasmin found herself walking toward the man she was about to promise to love, cherish, and obey for the rest of her life. Their families surrounded them, everyone in their finery. Flowers exploded throughout the yard in every shade of Yasmin's favourite colours of yellow and blue, Narin apparently compromising after Volkan spoke to her.

The day of her wedding would have been spectacular, except for one small thing. A tiny thing, really. A secret she hadn't told anyone yet. Well, almost no one.

As she reached the steps leading up to the gazebo where they would speak their vows, Volkan reached for her, taking her hand in a firm grip and helping her. His grip was a comfort and she accepted the hand he slid across her back.

He bent, pressing his face to her floor-length red veil and speaking in her ear, "You are truly stunning, *aşkim*."

Yasmin blushed and smiled. Her wedding dress had turned out perfect and was by far the finest thing she'd ever owned. She loved it and would treasure it forever.

The sari was handmade with a gold embroidered bodice over red silk fabric, with a sweetheart neckline. The short cap sleeves and the front of the dress were embroidered with gold and inlaid with jewels. A red sash crossed over Yasmin's shoulder and wrapped around her waist. It wasn't originally meant to go with the dress, but Volkan had insisted when he saw the swath of bare belly that would be revealed without it.



She wore her hair in an intricate braided updo with a gold and red crown with her veil. She'd traded in her glasses for the contacts Volkan had insisted on buying her when he found out she preferred them over her thick glasses. The total effect was stunning, so Yasmin had to agree with Volkan's assessment, though she gave the dress more credit than herself.

She and Volkan exchanged their vows, kissed, and then greeted their guests. Everyone seemed looked delighted, even Aisha, who'd flown in on Volkan's private jet the day before. She'd arrived in time to join their mother, Narin, and Zeynep in decorating Yasmin's hands and feet in henna. She hugged her sister and held her close.

"I'm sorry it took me so long to accept your decision to get married," Aisha said quietly in Yasmin's ear. "I can see how happy you are and Volkan seems like a great guy. I wish you the very best in your marriage."

Yasmin blinked away tears as she squeezed her sister back. She hated that she'd lied to her family, but there was some peace in knowing they weren't worried about her. Of all the people in the world, Yasmin wanted to open up to her sister and tell her the truth, but she couldn't. Aisha was a warrior. If she found out what really happened to Yasmin, she would make the world burn until her little sister was avenged. Perhaps one day Yasmin would confess to Aisha, but not today or any time soon.

Yasmin was amused when she and Volkan were tied together with a red ribbon and made to stand in each other's embrace while members of his family came up and pinned money and gold to the ribbon.

"You're richer than Bill Gates," Yasmin said with a laugh as Volkan's great uncle pinned a Turkish note to the ribbon. "Why are we taking money from people?"

Volkan chuckled and said, "It's tradition, my love. It would insult them if we rejected their offerings."

"I suppose if I must take the money," she said with an exaggerated roll of her eyes that had him smiling.

“It’s all yours, my love. Spend it on something outrageous,” he said indulgently.

In that moment, the past faded and Yasmin saw a future with Volkan, one where they smiled and laughed like they did on their wedding day. Maybe if she let go of her resentment and fear, she might learn to enjoy living in Turkey.

But to do that, she would need to forgive Volkan for hurting her and taking away the future she’d envisioned for herself, and she wasn’t quite ready to do that.

Besides, now she had someone else to consider and having only spent four weeks with Volkan and his family, she wasn’t sure she could trust them to do right by her... or her baby.

She slid a hand over her stomach just as the ribbon enveloping her and Volkan was removed. He took her hand and held it high as their guests cheered for them, then he led her onto the makeshift dance floor, a platform set up on the lawn, and took her in his arms for their first dance.

She stared up at him, trying to picture him as a father. Would he be as gentle and loving as he was with her when she was following his wishes? Or would he fly into a rage, as he’d also done with her when she wasn’t obedient to his wants? Could she risk that he might yell at, or worse, harm their child?

She was developing feelings for Volkan, but trust wasn’t one of them yet and every time she thought of the tiny brand-new life growing inside her, she could no longer imagine what her future was going to look like. She couldn’t imagine Volkan as a father, but neither could she imagine taking his child away and raising it by herself.

Despair threatened to ruin what had otherwise been an amazing day, but she pushed it away with help from an unexpected source; Zeynep. The other woman was revolving on the dance floor in the arms of her husband when she caught Yasmin’s eye. At first, her expression was concerned, but then she smiled warmly and winked at Yasmin.

Yasmin smiled back, accepting the silent support.

Zeynep was the only other person besides herself that knew about the pregnancy.

The day before, they'd both gone into the office at the dockyard. Yasmin had wanted a quiet moment to herself away from the non-stop wedding planning and the constant chatter between the mothers. The two women were either in perfect agreement and crowing about their accomplishments when it came to the wedding, or they hated something the other had suggested and were actively trying to gain allies from among the household staff and family members. Henry had eagerly offered to accompany Yasmin to the office to escape her mother's persistent pushing that he choose her side in an argument with Narin over whether they should get a DJ or a live band. Yasmin had escaped with Henry before finding out which it would be.

She'd worked until lunch, expecting that Volkan would collect her when he was ready to eat, when a wave of nausea had her diving for her wastebasket. She'd vomited two more times before collapsing weakly on the floor with her back against her desk.

Zeynep found her there when she'd come to find out if Yasmin wanted to have lunch with her. She'd rushed to Yasmin's side, pressing the back of her hand to Yasmin's forehead, her nose wrinkling as the smell from the garbage can made itself obvious.

"Yasmin, are you alright?" She seemed genuinely concerned as she helped Yasmin to her feet. "I'll go get Volkan."

"No, please don't," Yasmin rushed to say. "It's nothing. I just got a little dizzy, that's all."

"From what? You looked perfectly healthy this morning at breakfast." Zeynep narrowed her eyes as she studied Yasmin, then asked bluntly, "Is it possible that you might be pregnant?"

Yasmin opened her mouth to deny it, but her head flew with the calculations. She'd been with Volkan for over a month and they'd been sexually active almost from the start. When was her last period? Six... no seven weeks ago. Oh no.

“This is bad,” she whispered.

Then denial started to set in. What were the odds of getting pregnant that quickly? Stress could cause periods to be late. Hers was just late. She was definitely one hundred percent not pregnant. She couldn't be.

As panic set in, Zeynep said, “You stay here. I'll be back in a few minutes. I'll send Janie in to clean up.” Zeynep helped her to the couch and then took off. A few minutes later, a bustling Janie let herself in. She checked on Yasmin before leaving with the wastebasket. Yasmin was worried either Janie or Zeynep would tell Volkan, but when he didn't bust into her office to demand an explanation, she decided they were being discreet.

Twenty minutes later, Zeynep returned with a pregnancy test. Feeling better, Yasmin felt slightly ridiculous taking it. As she unwrapped the test, she was convinced her period was just late.

As she peed on the stick, she decided she was doing it to appease Zeynep who was standing on the other side of the washroom door, her foot tapping an impatient tattoo against the tiled floor.

Yasmin set the test aside, wiped and stood, pulling her skirt into place. She washed her hands and then she waited. Zeynep asked to come in so she could see the results too, but Yasmin told her she wasn't finished. She didn't want to share this moment with anyone.

She definitely wasn't pregnant... but if she was, she needed to be the first to know.

After a minute had passed, she nervously looked at the test. The positive result had her kneeling in front of the toilet and offloading everything left in her stomach. Zeynep banged on the door until Yasmin reached behind herself and unlocked it.

Zeynep stepped over Yasmin and snatched the test off the counter, holding it out so she could see. Yasmin watched her

expression flicker from what looked like disappointment, to pain, to the fake smile she often showed the world.

“Congratulations, you’re going to be a mother,” she said in a strange voice.

A chill swept through Yasmin and she felt suddenly vulnerable. Using the wall for support, she pushed herself up until she was standing and once she was steady enough, faced Zeynep. “Thank you,” she said with a tight smile. “And thank you for purchasing the test for me, I appreciate your help.”

Zeynep nodded, but she seemed dazed.

“Are you alright?” Yasmin asked drily. She was the one puking up her guts, but Zeynep looked like she’d seen a ghost or something.

Zeynep seemed to pull herself out of wherever her thoughts were. She gave Yasmin a huge smile and hugged her, kissing both her cheeks. “I’m wonderful! I’m going to be an aunty. I was just shocked for a moment. You and Volkan haven’t known each other very long. I thought you’d wait before you started trying for children, especially considering the circumstances that brought you here.”

She was doing it again, implying that she knew for a fact Yasmin had been kidnapped. She couldn’t know, but her words were eerily accurate, and Yasmin couldn’t disagree. If she’d had a choice, she would have waited a good long while before entertaining the thought of having Volkan’s child.

Her hand drifted to her stomach as she tried to imagine becoming a parent. It wasn’t something she’d wished for. Well, she had, but not for a long time into the future. She was only twenty-two. No one purposely had babies at twenty-two anymore.

Yasmin looked at Zeynep. “Please don’t tell anyone. I want to be the one to let Volkan know he’s going to be a dad.” She almost choked on the word dad. How could he make a good father? He was so... kidnappy.

But he was also great at business, good at juggling his family’s needs, and an excellent planner. Even if some of those

plans were technically illegal.

Zeynep squeezed her hand. “Don’t worry, you can depend on me. I’ll help you.”

The other woman had left before Yasmin could ask her what she meant, and the wedding was the first time Yasmin had seen her since.

“Where are your thoughts, my wife?” Volkan said in her ear, drawing her attention. “I hope they’re on me and our honeymoon.”

Volkan was going to fly her to his island so she could see her new home and enjoy the sunny beaches. He planned to take a week off work and make the most of their time off together.

She did her best to smile at him to let him know how excited she was, but her thoughts were entirely on the life growing inside her. Nausea threatened and she had to excuse herself from the dancefloor, unable to stomach the other couples as they whirled around her.

Volkan offered to come with her, but she declined, telling him she’d be back quickly.

She made her way into the house and considered going up to her suite where she could have a brief rest before facing the wedding guests again. She was on her way up when Defne stepped in front of her.

Yasmin was glad to see her new sister-in-law was feeling better. She hadn’t joined in the henna session the day before, pleading illness. Defne looked lovely in a white dress with pink ribbon rimming her waist and sleeves. Her hair was up in a sleek knot with a white daisy pinned to the centre, and her makeup highlighted her wide lips and large luminous eyes.

Yasmin looked closer. “Have you been crying?”

Defne shook her head, but her eyes slid away. “Of course not, this has been the most perfect day ever. I just wanted to let you know that Zeynep was asking after you. She said your limo to the helicopter is ready.”

Yasmin frowned. “My limo to the helicopter? I thought we were taking Volkan’s plane to the island.”

Defne’s eyes widened and she nodded. “Yes, of course, that’s what I meant. How silly. A helicopter won’t go that far. The limo is waiting to take you to the airstrip where you’ll fly with Volkan to the island.”

“Where’s Volkan?” Yasmin asked in confusion. “Does he know the limo is ready to go? It seems early to leave the guests.”

“Not at all,” Defne said brightly, linking arms with Yasmin and leading her toward the front entrance. “It’s normal for the bride and groom to leave early for their honeymoon here. It shows an eagerness to start their lives together.”

Yasmin supposed that made sense and allowed Defne to lead her out the front door and toward a waiting limo. Zeynep and Demir were standing next to it.

Demir opened the car door and as Yasmin approached, leaned over to kiss her cheek. “Welcome to the family, little sister.”

Yasmin smiled warmly. “Thank you.” She glanced around. “Isn’t Volkan coming?”

He shook his head. “Not yet. He said he’ll meet you there. He has to take part in one last male-only tradition. As head of the Kartel household, he must accept the blessings of each male member of the family.”

Yasmin hadn’t heard of the tradition, but she was still new to Turkey and the wedding planning had been a whirlwind. She might have missed some of the information constantly being thrown at her.

Though she got a weird vibe from Defne, Zeynep and Demir, she didn’t think all three would plot against her. Not on her wedding day. Not Volkan’s brother. Why would he sabotage his own family? He wouldn’t. Yasmin was letting her imagination get away from her.

She slid into the back of the limo and he closed the door behind her.

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## *Chapter Thirty-Six*



**YASMIN LOOKED** over her shoulder as they drove. Demir was driving and Zeynep was sitting next to her in the back seat. Both were giving off nervous energy. Yasmin peeked out the back window, half expecting to see another limo behind them with Volkan inside.

The only thing she saw was a rapidly setting sun and a few scattered vehicles that were definitely not Volkan.

With a frown, Yasmin turned to Zeynep. “Are you sure Volkan is going to follow? I should have at least told him I was leaving. He doesn’t like it when I go places without him.” It sounded lame to her ears, but it was true. She didn’t leave the house without him, and it seemed very odd that he’d allow her to leave during their wedding.

Zeynep seemed stressed, but tried to reassure Yasmin. “It’ll be fine. You can meet him later.”

Yasmin narrowed her eyes at the other woman. “You didn’t answer my question. Where is Volkan and why don’t I see him behind us?”

It was Demir who answered this time, glancing at her through the rearview mirror. “You need to trust us, Yasmin. We’re helping you.”

Panic trickled down her spine. There was too much wrong with this picture. Why was Demir driving the limo when they had drivers for the family vehicles. And why were the husband and wife duo escorting her to the airport when it would be more appropriate for them to stay at the house with the rest of

the family and allow the couple to leave on their honeymoon together?

No, the more she thought about it, the more she realized something was off. There's no way Volkan would allow her to go anywhere without him on their wedding day.

"Turn around," she said loudly, gripping the door handle so tight her knuckles turned white. "I want to go back to the mansion and leave with Volkan."

"I told you," Zeynep said in a soothing voice. "Volkan is going to follow. He had a few more people to talk to before leaving and he sent you ahead because he thought you'd be bored."

Yasmin narrowed her eyes. "You don't know Volkan at all if you believe he'd say something like that. Up until now, Volkan has been ridiculously overprotective of me. Why would he suddenly be okay with me leaving our wedding without him? I think you're taking me somewhere else."

It was hard to squeeze the words out with a chest constricted by panic. How many times could a person get themselves abducted in one lifetime? Did she have a sign on her forehead that read, 'easy pickings, please take'?

Zeynep glanced in the rearview mirror, meeting her husband's gaze. He shook his head, glaring at her, but finally Zeynep broke down. "Alright, we're not taking you to the airport. We're taking you to a helicopter we arranged to take you out of the country. It's going to fly you across the border and drop you off in Bulgaria where you can go to the embassy."

Yasmin was so shocked she couldn't speak for a moment, then panic really took hold. "No, you can't do that! Take me back right now." She frantically yanked on the door latch, but of course it didn't open. All the doors were locked and the car was in motion. "Stop the car, I need to get out!" Zeynep reached for her hand, trying to pull her away from the door, but Yasmin jerked away from her. "Don't touch me!"

“We’re trying to help.” To her credit, Zeynep looked guilty but determined, as though she truly thought she was helping. It was Demir’s shifty gaze, resting on her in the mirror, that worried Yasmin. Zeynep continued, “After what happened to Caria, we couldn’t leave you alone with him. Not knowing there’s going to be a baby.”

Yasmin frantically continued trying the door. “You don’t understand. He’s going to think I tried to leave him and he’s going to burn everything until he gets me back. You were there when we disappeared for lunch. There’s no way he’ll allow me to leave for good.”

“He won’t find you,” Demir said, his voice very sure.

Yasmin glared at him. “And why is that?”

It was Zeynep who answered. “We’ve prepared everything for you. Trust me, he won’t find you. Our people are good at this sort of thing.”

“You’ve had to sneak women out of Turkey before?” Yasmin asked sarcastically.

“Well, no, not this exact thing, but they’re good at what they do.”

She believed Zeynep had somewhat good intentions when it came to helping Yasmin, but she didn’t think Demir cared one iota about her, which meant his actions were a lot more suspect. There was no way she was getting on a helicopter he’d hired to take her away. She could end up being tossed out over the ocean.

Reasoning with Zeynep was her only hope. She turned on the seat and reached out to grip Zeynep’s hand. “You’ve made a mistake; I don’t want to leave Volkan. Please, you must take me back to him. When he finds me missing, he’s going to think my family had something to do with it.”

Zeynep shook her head. “We thought of them. Don’t worry, they’re already on their way to a private jet, which we’ve chartered to take them back to Canada. He won’t be able to touch them.”

She frowned. “Then why aren’t you taking me to them if you’re so concerned about my safety?”

Zeynep looked confused and glanced at her husband, clearly wondering the same thing.

“Okay, even if my parents are safe, you have no right to assume I don’t want to be with Volkan. Maybe our relationship wasn’t perfect in the beginning, but he loves me and I’m getting used to living here with him.” She dropped her hand to her belly and added, “I’m pregnant with his child. Why wouldn’t I want him to be part of our lives?”

She was desperate, trying to get them to believe her, but as the words tumbled from her mouth, she realized they were at least partially true. She didn’t know how she felt about Volkan, but she did know that leaving him on their wedding day was not what she wanted.

She had to find a way back and explain to him that this whole botched ‘escape’ wasn’t her idea. Even if Demir and Zeynep had gotten her parents out of the country, she didn’t believe for one moment that they were beyond Volkan’s sphere of influence. Nor did she trust him not to retaliate by using them.

“Please take me back,” she said desperately, hoping they could hear the worry in her voice and realize she didn’t want to take part in whatever this was.

“You don’t understand,” Zeynep said softly, so only Yasmin could hear. “We’re trying to save your life. If you stay with Volkan, he’ll eventually kill you. We’ve seen it before.”

“Caria,” Yasmin said. “But that was an accident, wasn’t it? She fell off the dock.”

Zeynep gave her a pitying look. “Is that really what you believe?” She glanced over her shoulder as if she half expected to find Volkan closing in. She looked at Yasmin, her expression urgent as she spoke quickly. “You must have come up against his temper by now, he’s not good at keeping it for long.”

Yasmin refused to play along, crossing her arms and staring stonily at the other woman.

Zeynep continued. “Caria’s fall off the dock was no accident. Volkan had been arguing with her that day over the paternity of the baby. According to him, she came to the dockyard to see him but never made it to his office.”

“You think Volkan pushed her?” Yasmin asked, aghast, her hand on her stomach. There was no bump yet, but she felt protective of the tiny spark of life nestled within. “Why did he doubt the baby’s paternity?”

“We know he pushed her in,” Zeynep said.

“There was video footage from the security cameras,” Demir added.

“Then why isn’t he in jail?” She felt sick at the implication... yet she couldn’t bring herself to entirely believe the charge. Volkan had lost his temper with her, but he’d never injured her. Not really.

*He did threaten to throw a waiter off a roof for looking at you,* her helpful brain reminded her.

Yasmin was confused and off-balance. Volkan hadn’t given her much reason to believe he wouldn’t kill someone, but she couldn’t bring herself to believe he’d murder an innocent woman. Not just any woman, but his pregnant wife. He might use underhanded methods to get the things he wanted, but she didn’t think he’d deal with the problem of his wayward wife with such violence.

*Are you really willing to risk your baby on your gut feeling?* No, she wasn’t, but neither was she going to take Zeynep’s and Demir’s word that Volkan killed his wife.

“I want to see the video,” she announced. “If he really killed his wife, I want to see it with my own eyes.”

Demir glanced in the mirror and she shivered at the look of cold loathing he gave her, though when he spoke, his tone was pleasant enough. “The video was erased.”

“Convenient,” she said, glaring back at Volkan’s brother.

She saw the shipyard in the distance and knew that there was a helicopter pad on top of the office building.

“It *is* convenient that the proof needed to send my brother to jail has been erased,” Demir said bitterly.

“If it existed at all,” Yasmin snapped.

“It did,” Zeynep said from next to her. “I saw it with my own eyes. It was grainy, but there was someone out there on the dock with her and she was pushed. I know you don’t want to believe us, but if you care at all about this baby, you can’t stay. He’ll eventually find a reason to kill you, too.”

An icy shiver went down Yasmin’s spine and her chest tightened as she warred with indecision. She didn’t believe that the couple was telling her the whole truth, but she’d seen and experienced what Volkan was capable of. Yes, she believed he could kill. But would he... could he kill her? And was she willing to take the chance?

“Okay, say I believe you,” she said as the vehicle pulled into the dockyard parking lot. “I definitely don’t trust you. How do I know you don’t have your own reasons for getting rid of me? Why should I get on a helicopter you two procured for me? I’d rather find my own way to the embassy.”

“You have to trust us,” Zeynep said, opening her door as Demir parked it next to the building. “We’re out of time. Volkan will have realized that you’re missing by now.”

Demir opened the back door, gripped Yasmin’s arm and jerked her out. She landed on her hands and knees, letting out a sharp cry as the pavement abraded her hands.

“Come on!” He yanked her to her feet and dragged her toward the building, but instead of going inside, he strode around the side to a set of metal steps leading up to the roof.

“Take it easy, Dem!” Zeynep called, hurrying to catch up, her high heels tripping her up.

“Why do you want to get rid of me?” Yasmin shouted over the sound of helicopter blades as they started whirring. “It’s the baby, isn’t it? Something to do with your inheritance? Or maybe the business.”

She was striking out blindly, but her intuition was telling her that Demir wanted her gone, that he didn't care if she lived or died. His wife was on a different wavelength though. When Zeynep caught up to them, she grabbed Demir's arm and tried to stop him.

He backhanded her with enough force to send her tumbling down the metal steps. "Get off me, you childless bitch," he snarled, then continued up the steps, Yasmin still held tight in his grip.

As he pulled her onto the helicopter pad, the wind kicked up by the whirring blades hit her, sending her veil flying into Demir's face. The momentary distraction gave her the opening she needed to jab her elbow into his ribs. He released her and she lunged away from him.

The problem was, there was nowhere to go. He was between her and the stairs, and there was no other way down. As soon as he recovered, he stalked her across the platform, his face a twisted mass of hatred. Any brotherly resemblance to Volkan disappeared.

A moment later, the door to the helicopter opened and the pilot joined Demir as he tried to trap her.

Yasmin screamed for help, but there was nothing she could do as they cornered her. It was either jump off the side of the building or allow them to wrestle her into the helicopter.

The pilot held her flailing arms as Demir lifted her off the ground. "Stop, someone help!"

They dragged her kicking and screaming onto the helicopter, but she didn't stay there long. Before Demir could close the door, he was wrenched backwards and flung onto the cement pad. The pilot followed, landing so hard his head bounced on the concrete and he rolled toward the edge of the building.

Yasmin stared in open-mouthed shock as Volkan climbed onto the helicopter. She reached for him, but before she could fling herself into his arms, he gripped her by the throat and dragged her into his chest.

Shocked, she was helpless to do anything but hang onto him and try not to choke.

“I’ll make sure you regret leaving me, Yasmin Kartel,” he snarled into her face while she fought for breath. “By the time I’m done, you won’t be able to leave my bed without asking my permission.”

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## *Chapter Thirty-Seven*



**VOLKAN DRAGGED** her out of the helicopter and down the steps of the building. Demir was lying on his side, his arms wrapped around his stomach, rolling and moaning on the helicopter pad. The pilot was no where to be seen. Had Volkan thrown him right off the building?

“Please, Volkan,” she pleaded with him as he dragged her toward his Ferrari. “I can explain.”

He ignored her, either because he wasn’t interest in her explanation or because her voice was being carried away by the still whirring blades of the helicopter.

Volkan opened the passenger side door and thrust her inside, reaching down to grip a fistful of the dress and veil and shoving them in with her so they wouldn’t get caught in the door when he slammed it shut. He climbed in the other side and fired the engine before peeling out of the parking lot.

“Volkan, can we talk?” she asked tentatively. Now that they were in the quiet of the car together, she was determined to make him listen. “I had no idea –”

“I told you what would happen if you tried to leave me,” he interrupted her. “Now you’ll take the consequences.”

“But I –”

He took a corner going so fast, she stopped talking and gripped the dashboard with both hands to keep herself from smashing into the door. His knuckles on the steering wheel were white with tension and his jaw was knotted. She cringed

against her seat, wondering where he was taking her. A quick look around told her they weren't going back to the mansion.

“I need you to listen to me,” she tried again.

He pulled the car up to a stop sign and then twisted in his seat, his stare was like looking into the eyes of a monster. One that was about to gobble her up whole.

“You had the past month to talk to me, Yasmin,” he said, his voice glacial. “We're done talking. I should've known you wouldn't settle into a life here with me. It was too good to be true and you, my love, are a fine actress. You had me fooled that you were beginning to feel content, that you might be able to love me back. Now that I know the truth, that you were biding your time until an opportunity to escape came up, I'm going to do with you what I should have done in the first place.”

“What are you going to do with me?” she whispered.

Even while fear was rushing through her, making her feel dizzy with worry, she felt the tug of their chemistry. The heat of his body warming her in the small space of the car, his scent, mouthwatering combination of expensive cologne and cigar smoke. As much as she tried to deny their connection, it was always there.

Before Volkan could answer her question and tell her where they were going, a car beeped at them. Volkan glared in his rearview mirror and hit the gas hard, sending them hurtling into the intersection. She closed her eyes and clutched the dash hoping they wouldn't get hit by another car.

She glanced at him again, wondering if she should blurt out everything as fast as she could before he had a chance to cut her off, but before she could decide, he was turning the car into the airport. She watched in apprehension as he drove onto the tarmac and out to a small airplane.

It was much smaller than his private jet.

Volkan stopped the car and Henry opened Yasmin's door. She was momentarily grateful to see him and even tried a weak smile, but his face was set in stony lines and he refused

to make eye contact with her. Darn it, she hadn't done anything wrong.

Henry turned to Volkan as he strode around the car, toward the airplane. "It's been checked and fuelled up. Your flight plan is in place."

Volkan jerked his head in a nod at his head of security, then wordlessly pushed Yasmin up the steps and into the plane. She ducked her head as she climbed aboard and glanced around indecisively, unsure where she should sit. When she turned to look at Volkan, he was holding a needle up.

"No!" she gasped, trying to back away from him, but she bumped into the seats behind her. There was no escape from him. "Volkan, you can't."

He advanced on her, grabbing her arm and dragging her to him. He held her tight as he pressed the syringe against her bicep. She stood as still as she could so she wouldn't accidentally push herself onto the needle, though panic threatened to overwhelm her.

"I'm pregnant," she blurted out. "Please, you might hurt the baby."

He froze, his eyes lifting to hers. For several long seconds, probably the longest of her life, he didn't speak, then he said in a tone that suggested if she answered him wrong, he would snap her neck on the spot, "You were trying to run away with my baby?"

She shook her head frantically. "That's not what happened."

Ignoring her, he said, "You'll soon learn that there's no place on this planet you can hide from me. I will always find you."

"Please, Volkan, you're scaring me."

"You should be scared." He shoved her into the seat behind her. She caught herself and sat gripping the leather seat cushion. "Put your seatbelt on and do yourself a favour, don't speak to me again. I can't answer to what I'll do if I have to listen to your mewling pleas."

She gasped but bit her lip to keep from talking. There was no getting through to him while he was in a rage.

She settled into her seat, determined to do exactly as he'd told her, keep her mouth closed. Maybe he'd calm down before they got to wherever they were going.

He closed the door and put a headset on, then started the plane. He didn't give her a headset and she was glad. It would aid in her vow not to say another word to him until he calmed down.

Takeoff was a blur, and when Yasmin's panic settled enough, she felt the injustice of how Volkan was treating her. Clearly, Demir and Zeynep had set her up. Yasmin was convinced that, based on the conversation between the couple, Zeynep hadn't meant her any harm.

Demir on the other hand... she shivered as she imagined what he might have had in store for her. As worried as she was about what Volkan was going to do with her, she knew he wouldn't hurt her. At least not grievously. But seeing the way Demir had hit his own wife and the desperation he'd shown to get Yasmin on the helicopter told her he'd been planning something nefarious.

Eventually, the drone of the plane engine and the fading adrenaline lulled Yasmin into sleep. She slumped against her seat and used the side of the plane as a pillow. She rested her hand on her belly as she slept.

The jolt of landing woke her, and she straightened up, startled, and looked around blearily wondering where they were. It was dark, so there wasn't much to see.

Volkan brought the plane to a stop, rose from the pilot's seat, and opened the door before turning to reach for her seatbelt. She wanted to protest that she could do it herself, but his expression was angry and forbidding so she kept her mouth shut. He gripped her arm like he had before and she bit back a cry of pain at the pressure on her bruise.

He pulled her from the plane and she got her first good look.

They were on a beach, sand all around them except for the runway. She heard the lapping of waves nearby. Next to the runway was a small building that Volkan dragged her toward. He punched a code into a panel and the garage door lifted to reveal two Jeeps. He took a set of keys from a hook on the wall and pushed her toward one of the Jeeps.

Yasmin climbed in, looking at Volkan nervously as he got into the Jeep beside her and fired the engine. He'd told her to stop talking, but she had a million questions, one of them extremely pressing. When would they arrive at a toilet? She hadn't peed since before the wedding and what with being kidnapped, then rescued, then forcibly flown... somewhere... she hadn't seen the inside of a washroom in too many hours.

"Volkan," she said quietly as he pulled the Jeep out of the garage, hitting a button on the visor that closed the door behind them. "Where are we?"

It took him so long to answer the question that she didn't think he was going to. Then he said in a short, clipped tone, "We're on my family's island."

"You're taking me on our honeymoon?" she asked incredulously. It was where they'd planned on going after the wedding. They'd just arrived a few hours earlier than they meant to.

This time, he didn't answer her question.

She couldn't see much beyond a few scattered palm trees as the Jeep passed them. She didn't know what time it was but thought maybe around midnight.

Volkan had told her about the island, so she knew it was two kilometres long and half a kilometre wide at its widest point. It was in the Mediterranean, about five and a half hours flying distance from Istanbul, which meant she'd slept for nearly four hours.

As they drove, the house became visible. Lights surrounded the base, illuminating the massive structure. It was surrounded by palm trees and a stone fence. As expected, it was massive, with a long winding driveway. In fact, the

sprawling two-story estate looked very much like the house in Istanbul, except this one had a more tropical feel. The house was painted white and had white pillars all around it with lush vegetation wrapping around the columns. A huge pool wrapped around three sides of the house.

Yasmin tried to imagine the massive effort that must have gone into building the property. Where had the workers come from and where had they stayed while it was being built? How did Volkan get services on the island, like electricity and sewage? She had many questions, but the forbidding look on his face told her to shelve the inquiries for now. He wasn't in the mood.

He was calmer than he'd been when they got on the airplane, though, and she thought now would be a good time for another crack at an explanation. After she used the washroom.

He pulled the car up outside the house and got out. Yasmin hurried to unlatch her seatbelt and followed him. He gripped her arm again and forced her up the steps to the house.

She yanked on her arm and said, "I'm not going anywhere, Volkan. I don't need to be dragged."

He stared at her coldly and dropped her arm, then punched in a code on the front door and pushed it open. Yasmin had gotten used to being surrounded by staff in the Koba household, so it felt eerily lonely to enter a huge house to see no one inside.

The interior of the house was open, with vaulted ceiling and corridors leading to other areas of the house.

"Where's the washroom?" she asked.

Volkan nodded toward a door and Yasmin rushed toward it.

As she was peeing, she realized Volkan hadn't been holding any bags. What were they going to wear? The mansion was enormous, so maybe there was a closet full of clothing. That seemed the most likely explanation. Still, it

would have been nice to grab her toiletry bag so she had her contact lens stuff, and her brands of hair products and makeup.

After washing her hands, she stared at herself in the mirror. She looked pretty good for having gone through a forced wedding, a botched kidnapping and an impromptu flight to a deserted island. Her makeup was still intact and though there were some escaping wisps, her updo still looked fantastic.

Taking a deep breath, she squared her shoulders and re-entered the house to face Volkan. This time, she would make him listen to her. She wasn't going to let him accuse her of running away when she'd done nothing of the sort. They were married now and married couples communicated. Or they should.

Stepping through the door, she glanced around for him. "Volkan?"

He stepped out of the shadows and strode toward her, his huge body lit up from the moonlight spilling through the massive windows. Shadows fell across his face, obscuring his expression, but she could feel the menace emanating from him.

"Volkan, we need to talk," she said firmly. "You don't know what really happen – " Before she could finish, he pulled her into his body, his lips crashing down on hers.

## *Chapter Thirty-Eight*



**“VOLKAN, NOT LIKE THIS!”** She twisted her head to the side and tried to reason with him. “We have to talk first.”

“No,” he snarled, picking her struggling body off the floor and tossing her over his shoulder. “We’ve spent weeks talking and I’m not getting through. If you refuse to love me the way I love you, then you’ll stay here until you do.”

“That doesn’t make any sense!” she shouted, beating her fists against his back.

He walked through the foyer to the staircase leading up to the second floor and began climbing. Yasmin bounced against his shoulder, her stomach striking him painfully. Her veil caught on the post at the bottom of the stairs and flew off her head, floating to the white marble floor. Nausea threatened to have her spilling her supper down Volkan’s back, but before it could happen, they made it up the stairs and he kicked open the door to a bedroom, striding inside and tossing her on the bed.

“Volkan!”

He came down on top of her, his lips crushing hers, his tongue thrusting against hers. He stole her breath and her will in that one harsh kiss, reminding her of the sensations he could build inside her when he put his mind to it.

He gripped the neckline of her dress.



“No, Volkan, don’t,” she begged, her hand landing on his, trying to pull him away from the delicate fabric. “Your mother will be devastated.”

“What do you care about my family?” he asked coldly, tearing the fabric from neck to hem and then viciously yanking it from her body.

Tears pricked her eyes, but he either didn’t notice or didn’t care. He smashed his mouth against hers while touching her exposed body, running his hands over her, touching her with purpose but little passion.

She couldn’t get him to listen to her, but maybe she could get him to slow down before he destroyed the fragile relationship they’d been building. She didn’t think her self-respect could handle another brutal mauling. If he hurt her this time, it was over. She really was going to leave him. At least she would when she found her way off the darn island.

Instead of stopping him, she ignored his rough handling and touched him gently, like a lover, running her hands over his shoulders in a caress, then down his back, tracing his spine with her fingers. He shivered under her touch, so she did it again, sweeping her hands up and down his warm back.

When he froze over her, his hands settling on her, rather than squeezing or pinching, she pushed her luck, sliding her hands beneath his shirt. He groaned in her ear as she ran her fingernails down his bare skin. Moving her hands to his front, she unbuttoned his shirt, then slid her hands into his pants, tugging it free.

She peeled it back from his shoulders and ran her hands down his chest, touching the springy hair that covered his pectorals. It felt rough against the pads of her fingers, contrasting with the silken skin covering the steely muscles. She scraped her fingernail over his flat brown nipple, drawing a shudder from him.

He captured her hand. “What are you doing, Yasmin?”

She shivered at the way he spoke her name, in a hard, uncompromising tone. No Turkish endearments.

She licked her lips and tipped her head back on the soft mattress to look up at him. “I’m trying to seduce you so we can have a proper wedding night.”

His hand tightened around hers, threatening to crush the delicate bones. “And why would you do that when you were trying to escape our wedding night?”

“Because I don’t want you to hurt me,” she whispered.

There was no point in trying to convince him she was innocent. He wasn’t ready to listen. But if she could get him to set aside his anger and treat her like the beloved spouse he swore she would be, maybe there could be a path forward from this mess.

She had to try.

She leaned up on her elbows and pressed her mouth to his, closing her eyes and immersing herself in the firm, dry warmth of his lips. As she wanted him to set aside his anger, she set aside her fear and pushed boldly forward, determined to seduce him into remembering that she was the woman he claimed to love.

At first, he did nothing but allow her to take the lead. She moved underneath him, wiggling out of the remnants of her dress, then she reached for him, touching him in sweeping strokes meant to ignite the fire of his lust. She reached for his pants, unbuttoning the top button before sliding the zipper down. It wasn’t an easy task given his thick, hard cock was pressing hard against the fabric.

Finally, he captured her hands, dragging her arms over her head. At first, she feared he was going to attack her again, but he didn’t. Instead, he kissed a path down her body, lingering at her breasts where he tormented her in the best possible way.

He licked a path between her nipples, then used his teeth to torture the sensitive buds, drawing gasps of pleasure from her. Heat flooded her core, and she wrapped her legs around his waist, urging him to sink into her. He didn’t waste time, but shoved his trousers down his legs, kicking them off, along with his shoes and socks.

Naked, he kissed every part of her he could reach, moving down her torso to tongue her bellybutton, which had her squirming and begging him to stop.

“You need some kind of punishment,” he growled.

She laughed, surprising them both. She really thought she'd only temporarily seduced him into forgetting his anger, but it seemed he was fully aware, despite his desire for her. He was choosing to set aside his anger, which was a huge step for him.

She rewarded him by digging her nails into his scalp as he continued to move lower and sending what she hoped was a cascade of sensation down his neck and back. It must have worked, because he shivered and nipped at her thigh, causing her to gasp and jerk beneath him.

He kissed his way down her legs, lingering on her knees, then her feet, pressing kisses against the top of each toe. Then he wrapped his hands around her waist and flipped her over onto her stomach. She squeaked in surprise as he made his way up her body, stopping at her ass.

She froze when she felt his finger's part the rounded globes of her butt cheeks, then jumped as a stream of air hit her in her most private spot. “Volkan, what are you doing?!” Oh god, he wasn't going to...?

He touched her forbidden place, pressing a fingertip to her puckered hole. She jerked and tried to squirm away from him, but he wrapped an arm around her waist and anchored her to him as he explored her.

She whimpered in protest, but bit her lip, trying to hold it in. If this was the worst of what he was going to do to her for punishment, she could handle it. Maybe? She'd heard anal could be painful, especially if she wasn't prepared properly and she hadn't spied a tube of lubrication anywhere.

“Volka – ” she started, but his name ended on a garbled note when he pushed his finger past her anal barrier and into her ass.

Oh god, it was too much! It didn't hurt exactly, but the pressure was incredible. Finally, as she began to relax against the invasion, she felt something new. A new kind of pleasure, a deeper kind. Like a bite, but one that felt good.

"Are you... are you going to...?" She couldn't finish, instead blushing and pushing her face into her pillow.

He didn't reply, leaving her to imagine the worst, that she was about to do anal for the first time in her life with an angry man and no lube. Then he leaned down and licked her on the butt cheek, then bit her, sinking his teeth into the flesh while seating his finger deep in the most intimate, forbidden part of her.

Gasps spilled from her lips and she squirmed against him, but had nowhere to go because he was anchoring her with his strong arm. Amazingly, she felt the buildup to an orgasm starting in her ass and rippling through her empty pussy. His teeth, which were still latched onto her ass, sent waves of sensations through her.

He lifted his head and as the air dried the saliva he'd left on her, cooling her flesh and heightening the sensory overload she was experiencing, he said, "Not this time, but soon. Every part of you belongs to me and I won't be satisfied until I've claimed it all."

He dragged her hips back, settling her against his cock, which he pushed into her wet, tight heat. His finger, which was still in her ass, set off a whole new set of explosions as his cock filled her pussy. She felt so full, the intensity incredible. It was like she was floating on a cloud of sensation.

Her body craved more, craved the orgasm that hovered just over the horizon. She shoved herself back on his cock, forcing more of him into her and pushing his finger deeper into her ass.

"My baby likes this, does she?" Volkan said in his deep, delicious voice.

"Yes!" she gasped.

“You like when I fuck your ass with my finger?” he pushed.

“Yes,” she agreed, rocking back again.

“And one day you’re going to let me fuck this perfect ass, yes?”

It took her a moment to answer. Not because she didn’t want him to fuck her ass. After this experience, she was more than ready to give anal a try, as long as lube was involved. She paused because he pulled back and stroked his cock inside her, lighting up every nerve ending until she was ready to explode.

“Oh god, yes!” she finally shouted, answering his question. “I want you to f-fuck my ass!” She had some trouble pushing the F-Word past her lips since she rarely cursed and never that word.

“Jesus,” he groaned, his hand tightening on her waist and dragging her back into the cradle of his hips, stroking her with his gigantic cock until she was a begging, whimpering mess.

When he pulled his finger from her ass, she moaned in protest, but then he gripped her hips and slammed his cock into her so hard it sent an instant orgasm shooting through her.

She screamed as her pussy tightened, clamping down on his cock and holding him in place as explosions rocked her body.

He swore, then shouted his release as he came inside her, the heat of his orgasm warming her from the inside. He collapsed on top of her, his hands still spanning her waist.

She didn’t complain or try to move. She was far too sated.

Eventually, after several long minutes, Volkan rolled off her.

She risked peeking at him to find out if he was still angry with her. If there was ever a good time to reason with him, post-coital orgasm was it.

His face was set in grim lines, despite his recent release. But then, Volkan always looked forbidding. Maybe he’d be willing to listen.

“I didn’t run away,” she started. “I thought I was meeting you somewhere for the honeymoon. Zeynep and Demir tricked me.”

His expression was inscrutable, then he said, “You should have known I would never leave our wedding without you. You should have stayed where you were or shouted for help. I would have found you.”

“You believe me?” she asked hopefully, but then her heart sank when he shook his head.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said grimly. “Regardless of your reasons for leaving, you left. You fucked up and made it worse by taking our unborn child with you. This is the consequence of your action.”

If the consequence was spending time on a vacation island and having mind-blowing sex, then she wasn’t doing too bad. Still, it bothered her that Volkan refused to listen to what had happened.

“Volkan...”

“Stop,” he said, rolling against her and framing the back of her head with his large hand. “We can’t rewind time. We’re here and you’re safe, that’s all that matters.”

She nodded, not exactly sure what he meant. Did he think she was in danger from his brother? Still, she was glad he didn’t seem as angry as he’d been when he brought her to the island.

“What happens now?”

“You go to sleep,” he said, giving her a strained smile before sliding his hand under her body and cupping her stomach. “Our son will need you to be at full strength.”

She smiled and buried her face in her pillow. She was going to be a mom! Now that she and Volkan were okay, she could allow herself to think about the pregnancy. She’d never imagined getting pregnant at twenty-two, but now that she was, she was excited about it.

A baby!

Her mother was going to be thrilled.

She'd ask Volkan for a phone in the morning so she could call her family and tell them all about the baby. She also needed to make sure they made it home safely.

As she thought about everything she had to do, her eyes drifted closed and she fell asleep, safe and secure in Volkan's warm embrace.

Later, she woke, the cool caress of the breeze coming through open balcony doors waking her. She sat up in the bed, rubbing her eyes and looking around.

"Volkan?" she called, then louder when she didn't get an answer. "Volkan!"

Still no answer.

She stood and made her way to the balcony, reaching out to close the doors. Glancing down at the driveway, she noticed the Jeep that they'd driven to the house was missing. She looked up and traced the path of the road with her eyes until it disappeared into the palm forest.

"He's gone back to the plane for our bags," she told herself.

But she was wrong.

She heard a plane's engine and seconds later, saw the plane flying over the house before disappearing into the distance.

"Volkan?"

Did her husband of less than a day just abandon her on a deserted island?

## *Chapter Thirty-Nine*



**HE HAD** no choice but to leave her behind. He wanted the truth and he couldn't trust himself to get it from her. Not without hurting her and that was something he wasn't willing to do.

Still, her betrayal lit a fire of fury in his veins and he couldn't seem to quench it. Or at least, he couldn't do anything until he was back in Istanbul.

He didn't like leaving Yasmin alone, but it was the best choice. He couldn't trust her not to try to escape while in Istanbul, so she was better off on the island until he convinced her to stay with him.

Fuck! He thought she wanted to stay, but this stunt showed him she'd been biding her time until she found the best opportunity for escape. He had to admit, she'd been smart about it. Waiting until their wedding day when he was too distracted to track her every move.

And now she was claiming to be pregnant. Was she lying to get herself out of trouble? It made his head spin and he couldn't control his emotions. He had to leave.

Though guilt ate at him he knew he was no good to her until he could calm down and think straight. He had to stop hating her for trying to escape and taking their unborn child with her. If anything had happened to her in that helicopter stunt, his entire world would've crashed, like it had when Caria died. He couldn't go through it again; another pregnant wife trying to leave him.



He would get some answers, calm down and go back to her where they could spend some time alone. Maybe start over. He'd find a new way to woo her, to convince her to love him the way he loved her. He wouldn't stop until she belonged to him, heart, body, and soul.

Several hours later, he strode into the Koba mansion as dawn was breaking and the sun was peeking over the ocean. The wedding attendees had cleared out and most of the decorations had been taken down. It seemed his mother was protecting him by removing traces of the best day of his life and the worst betrayal.

“Volkan!”

Before he knew what was happening, Defne was in his arms, hugging him tightly around his waist. He gave her a squeeze, then set her away, asking, “Where is mother? Where are Zeynep and Demir?”

“Mother is out back helping the caterers pack up the leftover food,” she said. “And Zeynep and Demir left in a rush after packing a few bags. They said they'd be back after you calmed down.”

Volkan was furious his brother had escaped his wrath and vowed to hunt him down and get the answers he needed.

“Go to bed,” Volkan said to his sister. “Get some rest. You look like you were up all night. There's no point in your having a flair-up.”

“I was up waiting for you to come home and helping mother direct the staff.” She took his hand in both of hers and squeezed it, giving him a radiant smile. “You take such good care of me, brother.” She went onto her toes and kissed his cheek before scampering off toward the staircase leading to her suite.

He frowned after her. Why hadn't she asked after Yasmin? He'd thought the two had been growing close since Yasmin's arrival. It should seem strange to her that his bride of only a few hours was missing and he came back alone. Perhaps he was mistaken about their friendship. Still, something was off.

As he strode to the back of the house and out the patio doors, he glanced around. Everything was close to normal, as though a wedding hadn't taken place the day before.

Yasmin's parents left around the same time she had the night before, which was likely planned ahead of time. He'd called the jet, thinking Yasmin had been on board, and found out it was still at the airport with no scheduled departures. So, her family had found another way back to Canada.

He'd gone about loving her all wrong and what had happened was his fault. He could see that, though knowing it didn't put a damper on his fury. Nothing would until he got hold of his brother and found out his motives for helping her.

"Mother," he said, approaching Narin, who was sipping a cup of coffee while overseeing the removal of the catering tables.

She turned to him, concern bright in her eyes. She set her cup down on a wrought-iron table. Then she did something unusual. Instead of greeting him with her usual kisses on the cheek, she fully embraced him, wrapping her arms around his torso and squeezing.

He was shocked for a moment, then he returned the hug, holding her for a moment, before setting her away from him.

"Tell me what you know," he demanded.

She spoke at almost the same moment, saying, "What happened, son?" Then she looked past him and asked, "Where is Yasmin?"

It was the same question he'd thought Defne would ask.

His mother looked at him with an expression of worry and, if he wasn't mistaken, fear. Why would she fear him? Then it hit him. She'd questioned where Yasmin was. She was worried he'd done something to her because, like everyone else, she thought he'd done something to his first wife.

He wasn't here to rehash old events though, not until he'd sorted through his current drama.

“I’m here to find out what happened,” he said, then, to appease her concern, added, “Yasmin is safe on Isla Narina.”

Narin nodded, then asked, “Is she okay?”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “Why do you care? You tried to convince me not to marry a foreigner. That she would never truly fit in with our family. I would think you’d be happy to have her out of your well-ordered life.”

Narin frowned at him. “Of course I care, Volkan. I’m not a monster. When you first told me of her, I was concerned that you were becoming far too attached to a girl who didn’t share your feelings. But since you brought her into this family, I’ve done my best to make her feel welcome.”

Volkan felt like an ass for snapping at his mother. She’d been a saint when it came to Yasmin and the wedding, and he was doing her an injustice by accusing her of not caring.

“My deepest apologies, mother.” He bent to give her his respect, kissing her right hand and pressing his forehead briefly against her fingers. Then he straightened and shoved his hand through his hair in frustration. “I don’t know what to do. I can’t be near Yasmin right now. Not until I’ve calmed down, but I need some answers.”

She nodded her understanding. “Of course.” His mother loved him deeply, but she knew what his temper was like.

“Zeynep and Demir helped her leave,” he said, though the words burned in his throat. He’d never been close to his brother, but he hadn’t expected this kind of betrayal from his own flesh and blood.

Narin nodded. “I suspected as much since they rushed off with their bags after coming back to the house without Yasmin. Zeynep had a mark on her cheek and your brother was limping. They said they were going on a mini holiday, but they were in such a hurry and refused to say where they were going.”

“Because they knew I’d be on their heels as soon as I stashed Yasmin somewhere safe,” he said grimly.

His mother nodded, hesitated, then said, “That’s why I had them followed.”

Volkan fixed his mother with a stare that told her she better cough up the information he needed, or he’d tear the house down piece by piece until he found it.

Narin looked indecisive, which was unusual for his generally forthright mother. Finally, she let out a small sigh and looked at him with an expression of loving exasperation. “I can’t believe I have to say this, but I’ll only give you the address if you promise not to harm your brother.”

“He was in the process of shoving my wife into a helicopter last time I saw him. There’s no way he’s getting out of this unscathed.” When she twisted her fingers together in anxiety, he added, “I can promise not to kill him.” *Yet*, he added silently.

“I suppose that’s the best I’m going to get,” she said with a sigh. “Why didn’t you boys ever get along as brothers should?”

“Because Demir is greedy, jealous, and lazy.” Volkan’s voice uncompromising. “The address, mother.”

“Follow me.” She led him into the house to her office, then opened the drawer to her oak desk and pulled out a piece of paper, handing it to him. “I sent Henry to watch them. It’s remote and will take you some time to get out there.”

He took the address and, without another word, left the house to find his brother.

## Chapter Forty



**ZEYNEP WATCHED** her husband with wary eyes as he paced the cabin, speaking agitatedly to someone on the phone. She'd never been there, but she recognized some of his things, so it either belonged to him or he'd been there before. She ran her fingers over the back of a jacket that was carelessly tossed over a chair, her nail stopping on a long strand of dark chestnut hair. Zeynep had been dying her hair blond since before she met Demir, so it wasn't hers.

Shoulders slumping, she chose a chair by the fire and stared into the flames. It had been stupid of her to decide to 'help' Yasmin leave Turkey. It was clear now that Yasmin hadn't been excited at the prospect. But after what'd happened to Volkan's first wife...

"Don't just sit there," Demir snapped at her. "Call your father and see if he has a place we can stay. Volkan will eventually find us here. We need to move."

"Maybe we should try talking to him," she suggested, then flinched when he turned an ugly glare on her.

"Don't be stupid, he'll kill us both if he finds out where we are."

She touched the mark on her cheek where he'd backhanded her. It hadn't been the first time he'd used his fists, but before when it happened, he apologized. He brought her gifts, begged her not to leave him, told her it would never happen again.

Now, the way he was looking at her, she was half afraid his future plans didn't involve her. Maybe he was regretting putting her on the board of Kartel Transport. At the time, she'd seen it as a move to have his wife closer to him while he worked. Now, she suspected it had far more to do with taking control of the company should anything happen to Volkan.

She wasn't entirely innocent when it came to manipulating herself into a position on the board or with Yasmin. She liked having a position at the company that commanded respect and a healthy paycheck. She liked feeling important and she was genuinely good at her job. And as far as Yasmin was concerned, Zeynep bore her no ill will, but it was in both of their best interests if she left the country. It wouldn't do for Yasmin to have the first Kartel grandchild; not after Zeynep had been struggling to get pregnant for years.

Still, she felt guilty for her part in what happened to Yasmin and hoped the other woman was safe. She'd known Volkan would think Yasmin had tried to escape. She'd even encouraged the narrative, but she'd thought Yasmin would be well out of Volkan's reach before that happened. Instead, he'd discovered their plan and he'd been furious.

Zeynep shuddered as she remembered the look on his face. As explosive as her husband could be, he'd never reached the level of terrifying as she'd seen with Volkan. It was why she wanted Yasmin to leave him. She was young and pregnant. She didn't deserve to go the way of Caria.

“On the island?”

Zeynep turned her head to listen in on her husband's conversation. Had he found out where Volkan and Yasmin had gone?

“Take care of her,” Demir growled. “Finish the job and you'll get paid.”

Zeynep's stomach dropped as she realized what her husband was saying. When he finished his call and put his phone down, she asked him bluntly, “Are you planning on having Yasmin killed?”

Demir turned his malevolent gaze on her and shoved shaking fingers through his greasy hair. He was still wearing his rumpled suit from the wedding. He didn't answer her question but his ramblings indicated as much. "This changes nothing. Only difference is Volkan knows what we're up to. If I'm going to sever ties with my brother, I need to have leverage. Knowing his woman and baby didn't make it will break him. I'll be able to take the company while he wallows in self-pity, the same as he did when Caria died."

Volkan had been an utterly broken shell of a man after Caria's drowning. Everyone had assumed it was guilt over his role in her death, but now Zeynep wasn't so sure. "Did you... did you hurt Caria?"

Demir looked at her scornfully. "Why would I do that when my brother is perfectly capable of making his own mess? It was only a matter of time before he drove her away or did something to her, which we all know he did."

Zeynep was relieved her husband hadn't had a hand in what had happened to Volkan's first wife, but she didn't like his plans for Yasmin. "I think you should call off your person. There's no need to hurt an innocent. We'll get our hands on Kartel shipping another way."

"This is the only way I'll ever get the company," Demir argued feverishly, his hands twisting together as he continued to pace.

She wanted nothing to do with Kartel Transport anymore. Demir had tricked her into thinking he only wanted to help Yasmin escape. He'd used his wife to gain information, insisting she ask Yasmin out for lunches when she was in the office.

She'd known that he was a greedy and grasping man, slightly unhinged on occasion, but nothing unmanageable. She put up with it because being married to him had some addictive perks, like credit cards without limit, a mansion home, vacations abroad. But nothing was worth murder or the jail time she could get if she was associated with the murder.

She had to get him to call it off before it was too late. She stood, putting on her most seductive smile. She stepped in front of him as he walked past her, blocking him. Putting a hand on his chest, she ran her fingers from his pectorals to the waist of his suit pants.

“There’s no reason to spill the blood of innocents,” she pleaded. “Especially not an unborn child.” She felt a pang as she thought of the tiny life being extinguished. She’d had too many years of disappointment and negative pregnancy tests to ever want anyone else to feel that loss. “Call your man and tell him you changed his mind. We’re fine with our cut of the company, and maybe, one day, we’ll be able to get our hands on more shares.”

Demir’s gaze appeared to soften as he looked at her, and she felt a moment of relief. Her husband had never been able to resist her when she wanted something. She pouted, cajoled, and seduced until she got what she wanted.

Demir moved so swiftly she couldn’t protect herself when her head smacked into the wall behind her. She couldn’t breathe because her husband’s hand was wrapped around her throat, squeezing the life from her.

“Enough of your manipulations,” he snarled, spittle flying from his mouth.

She gripped his hand as she choked, trying to pull it away, but he was too strong.

He dragged her towards him until they were nose-to-nose. “You’re a stupid cunt, Zeynep. I married you because it was easy to turn the head of the daughter of a lowly oyster salesman and you were a decent fuck. I convinced you to take a position in the family company, then made you think it was your idea to sit on the board. Do you really think I intend to share Kartel Transport with you? You were a means to an end and now you’ve outgrown your usefulness.”

Zeynep dug her fingernails into his hand until she drew blood. As he eased his hold, she said the only thing that might keep her alive. “You think I don’t know that?” Tears streamed from her eyes.



He threw her from him in disgust and glared down at her as she collapsed to the floor, rubbing her throat. “What the fuck do you mean by that?”

She stared at him with loathing. If they were getting everything out in the open, then she didn't have to pretend to be the adoring wife anymore. “I knew you chose me because I was pretty enough to fit into your world, but uneducated enough to go along with your plans. Well, guess what?” She pushed herself off the floor and stood on shaking legs. “I never trusted you, which is why I named someone else as the beneficiary of my shares.”

He stared at her in shocked silence for a moment, then lashed out, slapping her so hard her head rocked back. She expected the vicious attack though and stayed on her feet.

“Who is it?” he demanded.

She shook her head. “I'm not that stupid.”

“Your father?” he shouted the question. “It has to be him. You don't have anyone else.”

“Don't I?” she asked, arching a brow.

Of course she'd named her father as her heir. She would have done it anyway, even if she loved her husband. Demir had plenty of money, but her father had next to nothing. If anything happened to her, she wanted her father taken care of. She'd known Demir wouldn't approve, so she hadn't told him. Now she had to bluff for her life.

He grabbed her by the throat again, shaking her. “Tell me who you named!”

“Never!” she snarled.

“Then I guess it doesn't matter if you live or die, the outcome is the same. I'm down one wife and all her shares in my company.”

She forced a smile to her lips and mouthed the words, “Our company.”

If she was going to die, then she'd do it pissing off her loser of a husband. He thought she was so naïve... that day he

found her selling oysters alongside her father and asked her out, she'd agreed solely based on the money he exuded. She wanted out of poverty and he was her ticket, it didn't matter that she didn't love him.

As his fingers tightened and the realization set in that this was it, she made peace with herself. She'd done some shitty, fucked up things in her life, but she wasn't a bad person. She'd wanted to lift her dad out of the hellhole of poverty he lived in, and she wanted to save Yasmin from the same fate as Volkan's first wife.

Of course, making peace didn't mean she had to go peacefully. She was going to make damn sure if Demir used his brute strength to kill her that she got a few licks in.

With the last of her energy, she lashed out, raking her nails across his face. He jerked, loosening his hold for a second, before adjusting his grip. His face twisted into a mask of pure evil. He was as much a psychopath as Volkan was, only Demir was able to keep his sickness under wraps. Deep down, she knew the truth of it, but refused to believe it. She wasn't willing to leave all that money behind. Now she would pay for her greed with her life.

She was too drained to fight back and the black spots in her vision signalled the end to her pain. Her gaze drifted past his shoulder to the window behind him and she smiled. Before passing out, she whispered with her last breath, "Your turn to die."

## *Chapter Forty-One*



**THE DRIVE UP** to the cabin where Demir and Zeynep were holed up felt like an eternity. Volkan's thoughts were entirely with his wife. The more distance he got from her, the more he regretted his anger. He should have been gentle with her, shouldn't have yelled. She was pregnant and confused, and he'd forced her into a life she didn't want.

He loved her too much to let her go, the thought of losing her fuelling his rage. It was an obsession; a sickness and she was suffering because he couldn't control it. But his obsessiveness led him to Yasmin, and she'd become his whole world. He would learn to be gentler, maybe keep her on the island until he trusted himself to be around her without hurting her.

Until her, he'd believed that Caria was it for him. His first wife had been vivacious, captivating, dramatic. She'd had an appeal that could captivate an audience and he never minded. He watched with pride as people had adored his wife.

Then she'd started coveting the attention more and more, complaining when he refused to take her out every night. Eventually, she started attending functions without him, which had led to her courting the attention of men who could spend more time with her than Volkan.

When she'd told him she was pregnant, he'd been ecstatic, thinking a baby, a Kartel heir, could save their marriage. But then she'd told him she didn't know who the father was.

He'd been devastated and had considered kicking her out, but she'd begged him to let her stay. At least until the baby was born and they could do a paternity test. He'd agreed and as the months passed, she'd shown a softer, more humble side as she prepared to become a mother. They worked on their marriage and he was starting to forgive her.

A few weeks after they decided to give their marriage and parenthood a real shot, she was dead and he was left devastated and determined never again to allow a woman to take him on the emotional roller coaster Caria had.

As he took the final turn onto the dirt road that would lead him to his brother, he contemplated what he would do. He wanted to kill Demir and thought he might do it if it weren't for his mother. She loved all three of her children and losing one would destroy her. Volkan wouldn't be responsible for emotionally crippling his mother.

Short of death, there was a lot he could do to Demir to make him see his error in betraying his older brother.

He stopped the car well back of the house, wanting the element of surprise on his side. As far as he knew, Demir didn't know he was on his way to the cabin, though he would likely be on alert.

He climbed out of his car and strode toward Henry who was loping down the dirt driveway toward him, a concerned expression on his face. "I've been keeping watch, like you wanted. They're still in there, but something's going on. I think Demir is taking out his anger on Zeynep."

Volkan nodded. He didn't particularly care for his brother's greedy, grasping wife, but he didn't want her dead either. Unfortunately, Narin was fond of Zeynep. He decided if it weren't for his mother's too-easily offered affections, he'd be ready to clear out his own house and start over.

Volkan approached the door and heard a scuffle coming from the other side. He tried the doorknob, but it was locked. Backing up a couple of steps, he kicked the door next to the lock, cracking the wood frame.

The door flew open.

Inside, Demir had Zeynep up against a wall, his hands wrapped around her throat. Her eyes were closed and her arms were limp at her sides, her face was a pale bluish colour. Shit, it looked like he didn't make it in time. Another mess of Demir's he'd have to clean up.

Demir released Zeynep's body and she collapsed to the floor unmoving.

"Brother, I –" Demir started.

Volkan picked him up by his lapels and threw him as hard as he could. Demir hit the couch hard enough to flip it over and send him rolling onto the floor. Before he could scramble away, Volkan grabbed him and rolled him onto his back, then sent his fist flying into Demir's face, shattering his nose and smashing the back of his head into the floor.

"Fuck!" Demir shouted, grabbing his face. "You broke my nose!"

"I'm about to break a lot more than that," Volkan snarled, lifting Demir off the floor and hurling him across the room.

He hit the cabinets in the kitchen, cracking one of them before collapsing to the floor. With a groan, he tried to crawl away from Volkan, bringing his arms up protectively.

"Stop!" he begged. "I was just trying to help."

Volkan laughed bitterly. "By arranging to have my bride taken from me? That sounds like my kind-hearted brother."

He kicked Demir, hoping Demir's scream of pain meant he cracked a rib. He crouched next to his brother and sent his fist into Demir's stomach, then another in the spot where he'd kicked him. "You need to fucking learn not to touch what's mine." He grabbed Demir's hand, chose the middle finger and bent it back ruthlessly until he felt the bones separate. Demir's screams were a symphony to Volkan's ears.

"For years you've been trying to sabotage me, to steal shares in the family business, to lessen me in the eyes of our mother and sister. Your jealous machinations end here." He

chose another finger and gave it the same treatment as the first. “I will no longer cover for your lazy ass. This time, you pick up your own pieces.”

A hand touched his shoulder and he was on his feet in seconds, ready to attack. He was surprised to see Zeynep standing behind him. Her hand was at her throat where livid bruises were forming.

“H... he’s had enough,” she said, coughing. Her voice was hoarse.

He advanced on her, causing her to stumble back and look at him warily. “You tried to get rid of my wife.”

Zeynep shook her head frantically. “No, I was trying to help her.”

“Like your husband was helping?” he demanded. “Because I’m pretty sure his idea of helping would’ve been shoving my pregnant wife out of a helicopter over the Black Sea.”

Zeynep’s shoulders slumped and she nodded. Her legs folded under her and she half sat, half fell into an armchair next to the overturned couch. “I think you’re right,” she admitted, and when Volkan glowered at her, she added, “But I was genuinely trying to help her. She seemed so lost when you brought her here. I knew something wasn’t right, that she wasn’t here willingly. I had to get her away before anything could happen to her.”

“Very noble,” he sneered, making it clear he didn’t believe her motives were entirely pure. “Why would anything have happened to my wife, unless it was you or your husband planning it?”

She stared at him fearfully but lifted her chin and answered. “Because of what happened to Caria. I didn’t want the same thing to happen to Yasmin. She’s an innocent, she doesn’t deserve to die so young.”

Volkan laughed darkly and shook his head at the fantasy she’d weaved in her head. “Of course you would believe I would eventually kill her since I killed my first wife.”

“You haven’t given us reason to think otherwise.” Her voice was pleading as she tried to get him to understand. “You’ve been so angry, so cold and closed off since Caria’s death. When you brought Yasmin into our family, I guess I thought it would happen all over again.”

“I will only say this once, Zeynep, and then never again.” His words were soft and dangerous. “What happened to my wife was a tragic accident. Nothing more.” Volkan would have left it at that, but there was something else he needed to know.

He knelt next to Zeynep’s chair, ignoring her as she shuddered and shifted her knees away from him. He picked up her hand and held it, rubbing his thumb along her finger.

“You need to tell me the truth now, Zeynep.” He gave her finger a subtle squeeze, making it clear he would do to her what he’d done to her husband if she didn’t give him the response he wanted. She nodded, her eyes wide with fear. “Did Yasmin choose to leave me, or did you surprise her?”

To Zeynep’s credit, she didn’t hesitate. “No, she didn’t come willingly. She got in the car, but we made her think she was going to meet you for the honeymoon.”

Volkan dropped his head as the guilt hit him. He’d been so angry with Yasmin. In light of Zeynep’s admission, his actions toward his wife were unforgivable. Thank god she’d calmed him with her gentle spirit before he fucked her or he could’ve injured her. He was a fucking beast.

“I’m sorry,” Zeynep whispered.

He considered breaking her finger anyway, avenging himself on the woman who tried to have his wife abducted, but he reminded himself that her reason for doing what she did was to protect Yasmin. At least it was part of her motivation, and he supposed he couldn’t blame her for that.

Finally, he said, “You weren’t doing her any favours. She could’ve been killed in that helicopter.” He stood and glanced at his brother’s unconscious body, then added, “I’m positive that was the plan. Toss her in the ocean and pretend she’d been

dropped off at an embassy somewhere, never to be heard from again.”

Zeynep stared at her husband and nodded. “I just found out before you came in here.” She lifted worried eyes to meet his gaze. “He knows she’s on the island and I think... I think he’s sent someone after her.”

Her words almost stole what was left of his sanity. He’d made a colossal mistake leaving her alone. He thought she’d be safe on the island while he ferreted out the traitors living under his roof. Instead, he’d made her a sitting duck.

He sprinted for the door, shouting Henry’s name, desperately hoping he would arrive in time to save Yasmin.

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## *Chapter Forty-Two*



### **YASMIN WOKE AROUND MID-AFTERNOON,**

feeling groggy and out of sorts. After Volkan left her, she'd crawled into bed and cried herself to sleep, waking up periodically to remember what had happened and then crying again. She went through a gamut of emotions, eventually settling on white hot rage.

How fucking (yes, she was swearing now – Volkan deserved the F-word) dare he trick her into flying halfway around the world then forcing her to fall in love with him. And yes, she was definitely in love with the giant jerk, be it true love or some twisted form of Stockholm, what she felt in her heart was real.

Which was why her heart was shattered over Volkan's abandonment. Even if he still believed she tried to escape him, he was a complete beast for leaving her on an island alone the day after their wedding without a single word about when he'd be back.

Her rage helped hold back the worry that threatened to consume her. What if he left her for days or even weeks? She'd searched the house for a phone and hadn't been able to find one. There were touch screen panels on the walls in every room, but they were passcode locked and she didn't have access.

But with the dawning of a new day, Yasmin felt more centred. She crawled out of the bed, determined to make the

most of her time in the mansion on the island. It was a glorious location and the weather was so beautiful she could sleep with the balcony doors open. She took a moment to step outside and breathe in the scent of fresh ocean breeze. It was both comforting and stimulating.

“No reason to be angry here,” she murmured to herself. “Though it would be nice to know where my family is.”

She was worried. She knew they’d be worried about her, too. In their eyes, she’d been acting so strangely over the past few months. Then, on the day of her wedding, she’d disappeared without saying goodbye. At the very least, her apparent snub must have hurt them. She needed to find a way to call them and make sure they were safe.

She decided to go about her day as if everything was normal... or as normal as it could get for someone abandoned in a mansion alone on an island in the Mediterranean. She had to believe that Volkan would be back for her soon. Checking the closets, she found several racks of women’s clothes all sized to fit her.

Picking out a pair of pink shorts and a black top with a bow between the breasts and cute patterning on the sleeves, she tossed them on the bed and made her way into the washroom. She took a long hot shower, trying to wash all her worries down the drain.

“I’m going to go to the kitchen, look over the supplies, find a blender and make myself a pina colada.” She dropped her hand to her belly and added, “Non-alcoholic, of course. Then I’m going to find a paperback and head to the pool where I will sit on a chair and read. Then, if I’m feeling it, I’ll swim in the pool.” As she shampooed her hair, she continued her one-sided conversation. “I’ll swim naked since there’s no one around to see me. After, I’ll eat every piece of chocolate I can find in the house, then I’ll watch all the movies in what’s probably a magnificent home theatre.”

What good was a deserted island if she couldn’t find the time for leisure activities?

She convinced herself that she was going to be okay. Even looked forward to some alone time in an enormous house with every possible convenience at her disposal. She dressed and headed out of the bedroom. The touchscreen panel on the wall caught her attention, and she backtracked to stare at it.

In big bold red letters, it said, “3 MISSED CALLS.”

That was weird. She touched the button, but it refused to show her who had called without the proper passcode. She wondered if it was Volkan trying to get hold of her, or someone maybe trying to get hold of Volkan. Either way, it didn't matter since she couldn't access the messages.

She skipped down the stairs to the kitchen and began going through the cupboards, fridge, and pantry. “Well, it appears we'll be eating for the next several apocalypses, so that's good news.”

The calibre of food ingredients suggested that the family brought in a chef when they were visiting their island residence. Everything looked amazing, but she settled for making herself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. She took a big bite out of it as she wandered the bottom floor of the mansion, checking everything out.

Sure enough, there was a media room with a screen that covered an entire wall. The room was filled with reclining leather chairs in rows, like in the theatre. Still munching on her sandwich, Yasmin picked up the nearest remote control and turned the TV on. The sound that came through the speakers was so intense she immediately shut it off.

“Okay, we'll try that again when I'm in the mood to be blown out of my seat.”

She left the media room and was on her way to the pool deck when a ringing sound caught her attention. Recalling the three missed calls, she found the nearest panel. Sure enough, there was a picture on the screen of a vibrating green phone and Volkan's name above it.

She smashed her finger into the “accept call” button so hard she might've sprained the digit. “What the actual heck,

Volkan! You stranded me on a deserted island? That is a whole new level of messed up, even for you. If you don't come get me immediately, I will be filing for divorce the second I get back to civilization."

"Yasmin, listen to me – "

She cut him off. "I really don't get you, Volkan. You say you're obsessed with me or whatever, but then you ditch me on an island? Hard to spend time with the object of your – "

This time, he interrupted her. "Yasmin, stop talking and listen."

"Oh, you do not get to act like the injured party," she fumed, waving her sandwich at the screen. "Not after everything you've done to me."

"Yasmin!" It wasn't the volume of his voice, though he was certainly loud, that finally caught her attention, but the tone of fear. It wasn't something she'd ever heard from him before. Volkan always knew what he was doing, he was so sure of himself. She didn't think fear was part of his repertoire.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"There are people on their way to the island who are going to try to hurt you."

"Oh god." The sandwich slipped from her hand unnoticed, hitting the floor at her feet. "Are you sure?"

"Zeynep told me." He was speaking in a rush, as though he couldn't get the words out fast enough.

"You're coming to get me, right?" she asked in a small voice, looking nervously over her shoulder. "You'll get here in time?"

"I'm on my way, *aşkim*, but I won't get there before they do. They have a head start on me."

"There has to be something you can do!" she shouted. "The police! Where is the nearest inhabited island? They can take a boat or a plane over and pick me up. I'll be safe."

“No, Yaz, there’s no one close enough.” The break in his voice and the way he used the shortened version of her name convinced her she was in serious trouble.

“What do I do?” she asked frantically. “I don’t want to die.”

“You won’t.” He said the words with such rage that she knew he didn’t quite believe them. He was too far away and she was helpless. Stranded on an island with not enough hiding spots.

“You’ll need to hide,” he said grimly. “There’s a boat on the other side of the island, but it’s too far to go and they’ll look there first. Besides, if you try to reach it, they’ll be between you and the boat, so you’ll have to stay at the house. They won’t know that you’ve been warned, so you’ll have the upper hand.”

Some upper hand. She had a degree in archaeology, not martial arts.

“I swear to god, Volkan, if I die, I will haunt you forever.”

“You’re not going to die,” he insisted. “You’re a scrappy little fighter. Remember when you tried to escape the condo? You were magnificent. You fought tooth and nail. I expect you to do the same if anyone lays a hand on you who isn’t me.”

“I barely made it a dozen steps outside the condo!” she cried. “I’m screwed!”

“You’re not screwed, but you have to listen – ”

She heard the drone of an airplane overhead. “I think they’re here!” Her stomach dropped and she had to take a deep breath to stop from throwing up the half a sandwich she’d eaten. “What do I do?”

“Listen to me, Yaz, you’re going to be okay, you understand?” He sounded angry.

“Come get me, Volkan,” she begged. “Please don’t leave me here.”

“Never, baby, never.”

The lights went out and she jumped, letting out a squeak.

“What happened?” he demanded.

“The lights are gone.”

“Fuck, they’ve cut the power.” She heard a door slamming on Volkan’s side of the conversation, then feet hitting the pavement as he ran. Seconds later, she heard his airplane’s engine coming to life. “Run and hide. You better fucking be okay when I get there.”

“Volkan!” she said desperately, not wanting to hang up on him, but she needed to hide.

“I love you, Yasmin.”

The phone went dead.

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## *Chapter Forty-Three*



### YASMIN RUSHED THROUGH THE HOUSE,

grabbing everything that looked like it could be used a weapon. She didn't have long to make a plan. It had only taken Volkan a few minutes to drive them from the landing strip to the house when he'd brought her to the island, which meant, if they were taking a Jeep, they would arrive in about two minutes. And they were definitely going to take a Jeep. The keys were right on the wall next to the vehicle. Short of a flashing sign that read "Keys right here! Please steal Jeep!" they didn't need much more of an invitation.

"Focus, focus, focus!" she told herself, trying to use every second she had before the bad guys arrived.

Oh god, there were bad guys coming for her!

She searched under the sink in the kitchen until she came up with a fire extinguisher. She'd seen movies where the protagonist lets the extinguisher go into the face of the bad guy. She snatched up the sharpest bitcher knife she could find and then ran as fast as she could for the second floor of the house.

Every step she took had her questioning herself. Was it stupid to go upstairs where they could trap her? No, she had a plan. Plus, she was on a deserted island, so it didn't matter where she went. They were going to find her.

"Oh god, oh god, oh god!" She skidded into the bedroom, her bare feet sliding from the hard floor of the hallway to the

carpet in the bedroom where she tripped, righted herself, then hurtled into the bathroom. Opening drawers, she found what she was looking for and snatched it up.

Clutching her armload of makeshift weapons, she raced for the balcony doors, which were still open, staying just inside the house and peeking out. Sure enough, one of the Jeeps was headed up the long driveway toward the house. Whoever was inside was so sure they would find her, they weren't even trying to be stealthy. They were planning on waltzing in through the front door and killing her.

“Not today, Satan,” she muttered.

Turning, she ran for the bedroom door and across the hall into another suite. It was almost a mirror image of the one she'd shared with Volkan, only it was more feminine. Defne's bedroom, she assumed. She pushed the balcony doors open and glanced around.

Yes! It was exactly what she'd noticed when she was checking out the pool deck. A trellis built into the side of the house with flowery shrubbery winding its way up the entire length.

She looked down at the fire extinguisher and her other supplies, realizing she couldn't possibly climb a trellis while holding onto everything.

She ran into Defne's room and into the closet where she snatched up the first large purse she saw. It was a tan leather Fendi bag, which Yasmin would normally send a pic of to her purse-loving sister, but first had to survive the rest of the day so she could send a 'look at my awesome life and be jealous' text to her sister.

She shoved everything she was holding into the purse and flung the straps over her shoulder where they sat heavily against her back. As she headed back to the balcony doors, she heard something shatter on the first floor, then a shout.

She was out of time.

She glanced outside to make sure no one was on the pool deck, then she eased through the doors and onto the balcony,



closing the doors as quietly as she could. The next part was going to be the worst. She'd never been good with heights.

As if agreeing, her tummy made a little somersault, reminding her she wasn't alone. Knowing she had to protect her baby made her feel much calmer than she might otherwise be. She had to keep her wits to give her baby a chance at life.

With new determination, she squared her shoulders and swung her leg over the balcony railing, reaching for the lushly decorated trellis. She pushed her hands into the foliage, hoping like heck the trellis was made of titanium or some other extremely durable building material.

As her hand connected with the frame, she wrapped her fingers solidly around it. She swung her other leg over the balcony and gripped the trellis with both hands. Taking a deep breath, she shoved her foot through the foliage, found a decent foothold and then pulled herself onto the trellis.

She held her breath for several seconds as she waited to see if it would hold her weight. It didn't so much as groan, telling her she was right, it was industrial grade. Thank god!

As she was trying to determine where to go next, she heard the patio doors open on the first floor.

Glancing down, she saw a man dressed all in black fatigues step through. He was holding what looked like a semi-automatic in his hands. He scanned the area, looking for something or someone. For her.

A male voice shouted from the interior of the house and he turned to shout back. She used the noise they were making to quickly shift her body into a denser part of the foliage, allowing it to swallow her up. It would only work if he didn't look directly at her. The greenery was lush enough to hide a person, and hopefully her pink shorts and the tan Fendi bag would blend in with the flowers.

It was a gamble. If he saw her from the ground, then he could spray the side of the house with bullets and it would be game over for her. Maybe she should have hidden in a cupboard, which had been her first instinct.

But no, she'd seen enough movies to know that a person shouldn't hide in the obvious places, like cupboards, closets, or under beds. They had to pick someplace weird that no one would think to check. Like the shrubs climbing up the side of the house. The bad guys might eventually think to check, but it was going to take a while. Hopefully long enough for Volkan to arrive.

In the meantime, she had to find a comfortable way to cling because she was already feeling fatigue from balancing and her face was itchy from being pressed into a giant flower full of pollen. She had about five hours to go before Volkan would arrive. All she had to do was stay alive until then.

The first hour passed.

It was relatively quiet except she could hear the men occasionally smashing things in the house. She'd had a tense few moments when someone came out on the balcony and looked around, but he was leaning over the railing, scanning the pool area. He'd have to turn his head all the way to the left and squint really hard to spot her.

When they searched the pool shed and pool area, she'd clung to the foliage for all she was worth and didn't move a muscle. By some miracle, or her incredibly good hiding skills, they didn't see her.

Her arms and feet were sore and she worried her body would grow too stiff for her to climb back over the balcony. She shifted her body weight back and forth on her feet, counting slowly in her head to keep herself distracted.

Thirty seconds right foot.

Thirty seconds left foot.

Back and forth. Back and forth.

Five minutes passed.

Ten.

Thirty.

Sixty.

After two hours, the men grew impatient and began calling for her. That was when she figured out there were only two of them. She'd been imagining at least a dozen men, all clad in black, swarming the island in militaristic fashion. Though the guy she'd seen on the pool deck looked like a professional she was starting to wonder. Who called out for their victim and expected an answer?

One of the men stepped out onto the pool deck again and shouted, "Come out, Yasmin. We're all friends here. We just want to take you safely back to your family in Canada. We were told you needed our help."

How stupid did they think she was? Had this worked on their other victims?

A sharp cramp ripped through her arm and shoulder, stopping at her neck with a lightning bolt of pain. She bit her lip to keep the groan of pain inside. The cramp didn't let up and she had to wait until the bad guy went inside before she could move enough to rotate her shoulder and ease the pain.

She had at least three more hours of this and that was only if they didn't find her first. She was seriously regretting her hiding place.

"Please come find me, Volkan," she whispered, squeezing her eyes shut to stop the tears.

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"Storm gathering on your flightpath, boss."

Volkan's radio crackled as his person at the shipyard updated him.

"I know," he said grimly, staring out the window at the massive thunderheads in front of him. "How far off track will I be if I go around it?"

He'd been in the air for three hours. Only two and a half to go.

There was a pause, then, “It’s a big one. It’ll push you at least an hour off your current ETA. You don’t have the fuel for that. You’ll have to land somewhere else for a fill-up before heading to the island.

There wasn’t time to go around the storm. Yasmin didn’t have the time it was taking him to get to her. There was no way he could take another hour or two to reach her. His brother had hired professional mercenaries to take Yasmin out. He’d beaten the additional information out of Demir after Zeynep had admitted the truth to him.

Yasmin was a bookish student; she wasn’t capable of standing up to a professional killer. Hell, she was right. She’d barely made it a dozen steps out of his condo in London before she was captured.

Fuck, how had things gone so wrong?

*Your fault*, a voice whispered in his head.

His conscience... not something that usually spoke to him.

But with Yasmin, he cared. He wanted to be the better man she expected him to be. From their first meeting, he’d constantly fucked up. Given her reason after reason to not want to be with him until he was forced to kidnap her to keep her in his life.

And now his family was going to destroy her and he was entirely responsible. He had to get to her in time. There was no other choice, because he couldn’t live knowing she’d perished, along with their unborn child.

He’d abandoned his whole fucking life on that island. He deserved whatever happened... but Yasmin didn’t. He was going to get there in time, and he was going to be the man she needed him to be. He couldn’t live with any other ending to their story.

He did the only thing he could do. He flew straight into the storm.

## *Chapter Forty-Four*



### **FOUR HOURS.**

Yasmin's head was pounding from the desperate ache in her neck and shoulders. She was cramping all over the place. She had to move or she was going to fall. A sob escaped her lips.

She shouldn't have put the fire extinguisher in the Fendi bag. It was too heavy and growing heavier with each passing minute.

The men were now angry, shouting at each other across the house with enough volume that she could catch the occasional phrase. They questioned whether she was really there, but concluded she had to be. They'd found her unmade bed and her torn wedding dress on the floor of the bedroom.

The longer they searched the more aggressive they became, carelessly destroying whatever they touched. She heard something heavy fall in Defne's room, then shattering. There was no point to the destruction as far as she could tell.

She craned her head, looking for a path out of her current predicament, but decided she wouldn't make it to the roof. Which left down. There was no one in the pool area, so maybe she could climb down and run to the beach. There was no place to hide on the beach though. She'd be a sitting duck when they went for another look.

She jumped when the balcony door next to her hiding place was jerked open and one of the men stepped out, muttering, "Where the fuck is this bitch?"

The door below her opened and she froze, not daring to breathe.

Then the worst happened. The guy on the ground looked up at the guy on the balcony, then he looked left... directly at her.

His face twisted into a mask of rage, like he was personally offended that she'd spent so much time eluding the death they were trying to deal her. She watched in horror as he pointed at her while reaching for his semi-automatic, shouting, "She's there!"

Without thinking, Yasmin gripped the straps of her bag and flung it at the guy on the ground. Yasmin had never in her life been able to aim at the thing she was trying to hit, but a good luck fairy was sitting on her shoulder that day, because she hit him square on the head and he went down, the impact of the fire extinguisher knocking him out.

Of course, now the other guy knew where she was and was reaching for his gun.

If she tried to climb, he'd have her. Her only chance was to surprise him, which she did when she scrambled across the trellis and onto the balcony railing, reaching for his gun.

He obviously hadn't expected the move, because he gaped at her and did nothing for a few precious seconds. It was all she needed. She used his body for leverage, gripping the gun while shifting herself to the front of the balcony. The fact that there was a strap attached to the gun helped her as his head was wrenched around when she moved.

Then she shoved with all her might, pushing hard with her feet and swan diving backwards off the balcony, praying as she did it that she reached the relative safety of the water. She'd been holding the gun when she jumped, which dragged him against the edge of the balcony. He had to brace himself to stop from going over until she let go of his gun.

She smashed into the water so hard her back touched the bottom of the pool, but not hard enough to hurt her. She

righted herself and pushed off with her feet, heading toward the surface, then something whizzed past her in the water.

Bullets! Bullets were whizzing past her!

She frantically swam to the side of the pool where she was able to shelter from the bullets. She stayed as low as she possibly could, breathing through her nose, which was just above the waterline. The bullets continued to hit the water, but they couldn't reach her.

She heard an angry shout, then nothing. No bullets, no shouting.

He was on his way downstairs.

She scrambled out of the pool and reached for her bag, which was next to the guy she'd hit. She glanced at him, then looked away. Blood was everywhere, he wasn't moving... and his eyes were open staring at nothing. Vomit rose in her throat, but she choked it down. There was no time. She dumped the bag on the ground and snatched up the hairspray and lighter she'd grabbed from the washroom.

She was still crouched on the ground when the other guy came flying through the back door. In the time it took him to look around, she lifted the can of spray and lit the lighter, sending a stream of fire directly at him.

She was so surprised by the amount of heat and the strength of the fire coming from her makeshift weapon that she nearly dropped it. She didn't though. But the heat was burning her hand and she was forced to drop the lighter, but she kept spraying and the fire continued to catch as the aerosol let loose.

She jumped to her feet and followed the guy as he tried to leap out of the path of the fire, When his clothes caught fire he stumbled backwards into the house, falling to the floor. The fire quickly spread to the carpet and the drapery.

Satisfied that bad guy number two wasn't coming after her, she ran back to the Fendi bag and snatched up the butcher knife. She was pretty sure there were only two guys, but just in case, she wanted to have a weapon.

She ran around to the front of the house, flinging the door to the Jeep open. Thank god, they'd left the keys in the vehicle. Biting her lip, she slid into the driver's seat and frantically searched for the 'drive' button. She had a driver's license, but she hadn't driven a car in nearly four years. She hadn't needed to while living in Toronto. She'd taken the bus and train everywhere.

Just as she found the right button and pressed it, the front door to the house burst open and the guy she'd lit on fire came lurching out. He was engulfed in flames.

She gaped at him as he fell onto the driveway and began crawling toward her.

"Reverse!" She hit the gas, but instead of reversing, the car lurched forward because it was still in drive, and... hit the bad guy.

"Oh no," she breathed, closing her eyes for a moment to process what'd just happened. Then she remembered the guy was in flames and currently under her vehicle, which had a gas tank.

"Oh god, oh god, oh god!" She smashed her finger into the reverse button and slammed her foot down on the gas pedal, flinching at the thumping sound as she ran over the guy again.

She hurtled down the driveway as fast as she could.

"Maybe he's not dead," she told herself, but she knew she was lying to herself. She'd for sure killed him when she ran over him with the Jeep. Twice. "Okay, he's probably dead, but it's not murder if he was there to murder me first. And that other guy? Well, that could be an accident. Purses fall off walls and kill people all the time, especially terrible murdering people. It's called self-defence, bitches!"

She was hyper from the adrenalin rushing through her veins. After jumping off the balcony and into the pool, followed by her firebomb finish, she was feeling pretty good about her ability to stay alive... until she saw what was between her and the boat.

An airplane and another bad guy.



Oh god. Oh god. Oh god.

He was looking toward the Jeep, squinting his eyes at the glare of the headlights. He couldn't see her! He must think she's his team.

Without allowing herself to think about it too much, she hit the gas, speeding up, heading straight at him. "Self-defence, self-defence, self-defence."

He realized that she wasn't slowing down and lifted his gun.

She ducked as he sprayed the Jeep with bullets, flinching when they thunked into the side as she flew past him. He continued to shoot at her, but the gas pedal was touching the floor and the Jeep had reached its maximum speed, hurtling her out of his range quickly.

"Darn it!" she shouted.

Now what was she going to do? The island wasn't big enough to escape him for long and there was a good chance the house was in the process of burning down, even if she could get around bad guy number three and head back. She had to get to the boat, it was her only hope.

She had to get far enough away from the island to wait him out until help arrived. Volkan had warned her not to try the boat, that they would stop her before she could get away, but it was her only choice. The guy was going to take the remaining Jeep and come after her.

She continued to floor the gas pedal, driving 180 kilometres an hour until she caught sight of the boat.

Her jaw dropped.

It wasn't a boat; it was a yacht.

"Ugh, Volkan! Why can't you have normal stuff?"

She had no clue how to sail a yacht, but she had to try. Her only other choice was to stop the Jeep and hide, but there was nothing except sand and a smattering of palm trees.

She stopped the Jeep at the dock, snatched up her knife, flung the door open and leapt out, leaving it running. She hurtled up the dock toward the yacht, reaching for the first rope tying it to a wooden pillar. She couldn't get the rope undone, so she used the knife, hacking at it until it fell apart.

As she ran to the second rope anchoring the yacht, she heard a droning sound overhead. Her heart leapt in excitement and, as she sliced at the rope, she scanned the sky. She couldn't see it in all the nasty clouds closing in on the island, but it was definitely getting closer.

The first raindrops splattered onto her head just as the second rope fell away. A wave of water pushed against the yacht and it moved a few inches from the dock. She quickly climbed up the ladder and ran toward the front where she let herself into the engine room.

Glancing around in dismay, she realized she didn't recognize anything. She'd only been on a handful of leisure boats in her life and definitely not anything this fancy or complex. But she had to try. She'd come too far just to lay down and die.

As soon as the thought left her head, she heard footsteps on the dock as someone rushed toward her. Seconds later, the roaring of a plane coming in for landing drowned out the footsteps.

Finally, she found a green button next to a set of keys that were sitting in the panel. She turned the key and when nothing happened, she hit the green button. The yacht's engine fired to life and she frantically looked for the gas and a steering wheel so she could move it away from the dock.

She was too late though.

The door flew open behind her with enough force to slam into the wall.

She grabbed the kitchen knife and lifted it.

Bad guy number three walked toward her, a gleam of triumph in his eyes.

He looked like the other two, broad and muscular, wearing dark clothes with lots of pockets and weapons.

“I’m sorry I killed your friends!” she blurted because it was the only thing she could think of to say and she didn’t want him to be angry.

She mentally rolled her eyes at herself. Like maybe he would kill her a little nicer if he wasn’t upset about the other guys.

He paused, then laughed. “Sweetheart, you did me a favour. I don’t have to split the prize three ways.”

She waved the knife threateningly. “I’m not your sweetheart.”

He laughed again, then eyed her in a way she didn’t like. “You’ve got some fight in you.” He sounded admiring. “You got past the others and made it this far. Maybe you don’t need to die right away. I like it when my prey fights back.”

“You make me sick,” she snarled, edging away from the controls, toward a door she hoped went below deck.

He stepped toward her, but he didn’t grab hold of his gun, which was strapped across his chest.

She lifted the knife, preparing to defend herself, but she was no match for him and he quickly disarmed her, grabbing her wrist, forcing her to drop the knife, then twisting her arm around behind her back and dragging her into his chest.

Dropping his head to her neck, he mumbled, “We’re gonna have lots of fun on this fancy boat and if you treat me right, I’ll make it quick when it’s time to die.”

“You’re too kind,” she said scathingly, bucking against him.

His arms tightened until she couldn’t breathe. “Be a good girl, now.”

She vowed to bite his tongue off if he tried to kiss her.

He didn’t get a chance though.

Suddenly, the guy was jerked away from her and she was flung into the control panel, where her hand hit a lever. The boat moved so unexpectedly it sent her sideways where she toppled to the floor. Through the tangle of her hair, she could see bad guy number three struggling with someone.

Not someone. Volkan!

His arm was wrapped around the other guy's neck and he was holding a gun. He lifted it, pressing it to the bad guy's head. He looked at Yasmin and said, "Look away, *aşkım*."

She dropped her head to the floor and squeezed her eyes shut, pressing her hands tight over her ears. She jumped when the bang reverberated through the cabin.

That was when the tears started falling.

She was safe now. Volkan had come for her, like he said he would.

Later, she'd ream him out for leaving her in the first place, but in that moment, he was her hero.

Wrapping his arms around her, he lifted her into his chest and cradled her as she cried out her relief.

## *Chapter Forty-Five*



“**FUCK**, Yasmin, you’re killing me. I thought I wouldn’t make it in time.” He gripped her face so tight she thought he would crush her. “You are never to be out of my sight again. You understand?”

She nodded, swiping at the tears that were still dripping down her cheeks. “I think I’m good with that.”

He lifted her off the floor and wrapped his arm around her head. “Don’t look.” She did as he said, turning her face into his chest as he led her past the dead bad guy. “We have to get out of here. There’s a storm heading in fast. We need to get to safety.”

“How do we do that when we’re on an island?”

“We’ll go to the house.”

She shook her head. “There’s no house anymore.”

He guided her out onto the deck where the wind had whipped up and the waves were rocking the boat into the dock. “What do you mean?”

“It’s on fire,” she admitted, then added, “It was their fault.” She figured since all the bad guys were dead, and technically the house wouldn’t have caught fire if they hadn’t been there, that she should get to blame them for the fire.

“Did they hurt you?” he asked, turning her toward him and running his hands down her arms.

She did a top to bottom mental scan and discovered she was surprisingly unscathed considering everything that had happened to her. “No, I’m okay.” She dropped her hand to her stomach and gave Volkan a worried look. “I don’t know about the baby, though. I took a couple of nasty falls.”

A flash of herself jumping from the balcony to the pool ran through her head and she shook it away before terror could well up and choke her. It was over. She was safe and Volkan was there.

Volkan helped her from the boat and onto the dock, a task made more difficult because the boat was no longer tethered to the dock but rocking wildly against it. “The boat,” she said, twisting to look at it as they climbed onto the dock. “I cut the ropes.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Volkan said.

“But it’ll sink in the storm, won’t it?”

“It doesn’t matter, Yaz,” he said, then turned to grip her face, staring down at her. “We’ll buy a new one. The only thing that matters is getting you to safety.”

Once they were on the dock, Volkan pulled her toward the beach where his airplane was parked on the sand, tilted onto one wing.

She gaped at it. “Did you land on the beach?”

“Yes. I saw him driving toward the dock as I was coming in for a landing.”

He held the passenger door for her as she climbed inside the Jeep, then slammed it shut. She scanned the sky as he rounded the vehicle and climbed into the driver’s seat. Dark clouds had gathered and rain was splattering forcefully against the windshield of the Jeep. The wind was blowing hard enough to rock the vehicle.

Volkan started the Jeep and reversed, spinning the wheel sharply, flinging them around until they were facing the length of the island. As he hit the gas, he reached across, dragging her seatbelt over her chest and buckling it in one impressively smooth move.

He hurtled at top speed toward the airstrip. When they arrived, he opened the door on the hanger and drove the Jeep inside.

She watched anxiously from the relative safety of the hangar as Volkan ran out to move the bad guys' airplane off the runway. He'd said the runway would need to be clear in case a rescue plane was sent for them. As he jogged back, she asked, "Will we have to spend the night here?"

"I'm afraid so," he said, then strode toward her, running his hands down her arms. "We'll be safe enough in here." But his expression was worried.

"What aren't you telling me?"

He stared at her for a second, then a spark of pride lit in his gaze. "You're tough enough to hold off a group of mercenaries on your own, you're tough enough to know what could come our way. The storm is building so rapidly over such a large area that it's looking like it might become a cyclone. They only hit the region a few times a year, but they can be bad."

"Are we safe in here?"

"Yes," Volkan said firmly, but she could see how worried he was.

He took her hand and led her toward a small office with a cot in it. She sank gratefully onto it, moaning as she kicked off her shoes and lifted her aching feet onto the bed.

Volkan sat in the office chair and messed around with some of the instruments. He twisted a dial and leaned toward a microphone, the chair creaking beneath the weight of his big body. "Mayday, mayday. We're trapped without transport on an island off..." He gave their exact coordinates. There was no response except for fuzz.

Volkan explained that the storm would interfere with the radio signal, but he would keep trying. And he did. Hours passed as he continued calling for help, until finally Yasmin reached out for him, touching his shoulder to get his attention. When he turned to her, she beckoned him to come sit with her on the cot.

Wind howled all around the hangar and occasionally something would hit the side, sending a reverberation of sound through the metal building. It was frightening, but the longer the storm went on, the more secure Yasmin felt in the sturdy hangar.

Volkan sighed and shoved a hand through his hair, then stood and dropped tiredly onto the cot. She rubbed his back and leaned her head into his shoulder. “Take a break. The mayday will go through in the morning, after the storm passes.”

He stubbornly tried to stand. “I have to keep trying. We need to get you and the baby to a hospital.”

She held his hand and refused to let go until he sat next to her again. She turned to him, taking both of his hands and squeezing them, before pressing one hand against her stomach. “Volkan, listen to me,” she said softly. “We’re okay. Both me and the baby. You saved our lives today. Now it’s time to leave it to someone else to get us off this island.”

He made a growling sound, his eyes feverish as he said, “It’s not good enough. You could have died today and... and it would have been my fault. I shouldn’t have left you here.” He paused. “No, what I did was worse than that. I introduced you into my family while there was a snake under my roof. I put you in danger the moment I decided to make you mine.”

“You couldn’t have known,” she insisted, but he wasn’t listening.

He pushed himself off the cot and paced the tiny space. “I should never have left you here. I let my anger blind me to everything except punishing the woman I love and murdering my own brother.”

She bit her lip, then asked quietly, “Did you?” When he looked at her, she added, “Kill him, I mean.”

He shook his head. “I would’ve, but Zeynep stopped me.”

Yasmin was relieved though she never wanted to see Demir again if she could help it.



“I’ve fucked up every step of the way and you’ve been the one to pay for it,” he said, his voice anguished.

She stood with him and took his hand. “Today, when those men were searching for me, threatening me, I knew you would come. I kept telling myself over and over that you were on your way here and you would arrive in time. I had complete faith in you.”

“You should’ve been cursing me,” he grunted.

She shook her head and smiled up at him. “I stopped cursing you weeks ago.”

“I don’t deserve you,” he said, cupping her head and tilting it up towards his. “I wanted you from the start and I’m so fucking used to getting what I want that I didn’t slow down enough to do it properly. I terrorized you, hurt you. You’re a fucking saint and I’m the monster who refused to let you go.”

“I don’t want to go,” she admitted.

“You don’t make any sense.”

“Don’t I?” she teased. “What would make sense?”

“If you demanded I set you free.”

“Would you if I asked?” She held her breath as she waited for his answer. Though she’d been through a nightmare and was tired enough to sleep for a year, she knew they had to have this conversation. It could be the most important one of her life.

He stared at her for a long time, his face twisted in anguish, then he shook his head. “God help me, no. I knew from our first moment in that alley that you were it for me. That we would spend our lives together.”

“But I refused to cooperate,” she said ruefully.

“And I’m a bastard for forcing you.”

“Yes, you are,” she agreed. “But I’m here now and I’m ready to have our future together.”

“You deserve better.”

“We’ve already established that,” she agreed. “We’re moving onto the next part where you tell me how much you love me and can’t live without me.”

“Love,” he laughed bitterly, “It’s such a weak word for what I feel for you.” He gripped her so hard she thought he would leave bruises. “You’ve dug a bloody gaping hole into my soul that nothing will patch except your presence in my life.”

She pushed herself up onto her toes, her hands splayed against his chest. “Remember in London when you told me one day I would thank you for kidnapping me?”

“I will never forget London,” he said with conviction. “The things that I did to you there. I was a beast.”

She pressed her finger to his lips and whispered, “You’re right, you were, which is why I’m not going to thank you for kidnapping me. Instead, I’ll thank you for loving me and never letting go.”

She lifted her face to his, but she couldn’t span the distance to get to his lips. Finally, after staring at her with near-frightening intensity, he lowered his head to hers, kissing her.

It wasn’t a passionate kiss, nor was it more than the meeting of their lips, but it spoke of everything that had brought them to that moment. His obsession, her fear, his diabolical plot to trap her, her anger, his anger, a wedding, a baby... everything.

She broke the kiss, but stayed in his embrace, pressing her ear to his chest over his heart and listening to the steady thump, thump, thump. “I love you, Volkan.”

He crushed her against his chest, flinging his head back to stare at the concrete ceiling. She felt the bob of his throat against her head and thought maybe he was holding back tears. She wanted to tell him it was okay, but she was crying enough for both of them.

As the moment passed, Yasmin convinced Volkan to lie down on the cot with her. She was so tired she thought she

would drop if she didn't close her eyes. The cot was much too small for the two of them, so Volkan lay down first on his back and she curled up on top of him, smiling contentedly.

She was about to fall asleep when he spoke.

“When I was a child, my parents knew there was something wrong with me.”

She propped her chin on top of her hands, which were folded on his chest. “What was wrong?”

“I had a terrible temper when I didn't get the things I wanted.”

Despite his serious tone, she laughed. “Tell me something I don't know.”

His lips quirked, but his expression remained grim. “It was more than a few temper tantrums. I was obsessive. If there was something I wanted, I would stop at nothing to get it, using violence when necessary. They discussed institutionalizing me for the safety of everyone around us.”

Yasmin wondered what he'd done to cause such alarm, but figured she was better off not knowing. If Volkan wanted to share the details, he would. “I take it they didn't have you locked up?”

He shook his head. “They gave me focus instead. From the age of eleven, I've been involved in the family business. I learned how to sail when I was fourteen and how to fly when I was sixteen. Transportation is in my blood and it gives me an excellent place to focus my obsessions.”

“Until I came along,” she said softly.

“Until you,” he agreed.

She bit her lip, wondering if she should say anything, then decided now was as good a time as ever. “What about Caria? Was she an obsession too?”

“No,” he said, his voice devoid of emotion. “She was fun and interesting. She loved to laugh and have a good time.” She nodded, and he captured the back of her head in his big hand,

his dark eyes boring into hers. “I didn’t kill her, Yaz. I need you to believe that.”

“I do,” she said immediately. “Of course you didn’t kill her.”

He looked shocked. “Everyone else believes I did it.”

She shrugged. “I’ve refused to go along with you almost every step of the way, and you didn’t hurt me. In fact, you went out of your way to make sure I wasn’t injured.” She stopped, then added. “Though one day we’re going to talk about all those druggings.”

He chuckled but sobered quickly. “Caria never made me as angry as you have because I was never in love with her the way I am with you.”

“I understand,” she said, kissing his chin and then snuggling her head against it. “What happened to her was a terrible accident. It’s time to let her go.”

He held onto her like he would lose her if he let her go and they fell asleep that way, cozy in the tiny pilot’s office, the wind and rain howling as the storm passed over the island.

## Chapter Forty-Six



**THE STORM PASSED** during the night, and early the next morning, they were woken by the sound of a plane coming in for a landing. Volkan was cautious, heading out to greet the arriving plane while instructing Yasmin to stay hidden.

After a few minutes, he came back inside and found Yasmin nervously pacing the tiny office.

“They belong to us,” he assured her, taking her hand and leading her out of the building. “They’re refuelling at the gas shed, then we’ll leave. I’m going up to the house for a look before we go. Come with me.”

Yasmin thought about it and shook her head. “The men that attacked me are there.”

Volkan slid his hands up to her shoulders and massaged, easing the tension. “They’re dead, *aşkim*. You have nothing to worry about.”

“I know they are, but I don’t want to see their bodies.” Tears filled her eyes as she tried to explain. “I k-killed...”

Realization dawned on his face, and he pulled her against his chest. “Never mind the house. I’ll send a crew out to check when we arrive on the mainland.”

She sighed her relief and snuggled her head against his chest. It felt good to tell him about her fears and have him respond with sensitivity rather than forcing her to do what he

wanted. Maybe he was right, maybe she was changing him for the better.

The flight back to the mainland went by in a flash. Volkan and Yasmin were so wrapped up in each other, they barely noticed the outside world. She'd admitted her love to him and that admission seemed to open the floodgates of his own understanding and trust.

She supposed going through a near-death experience together also strengthened their bond.

Narin met them at the helicopter pad when they landed and rushed to hug both of them, bursting into tears against Volkan's chest, sobbing out her fury and pain at the arrest of her younger son. Together, Volkan and Yasmin tried to calm her, helping her off the pad and down the stairs.

Henry was waiting for them by the car and he shook Volkan's hand as they approached, relief clear in his expression. He squeezed Yasmin's shoulder as she passed, though he did it outside of Volkan's view.

When Narin was settled in the car and was out of earshot, Henry said to Volkan, "Demir has been taken into custody. The police want your statements as soon as you're ready to give them. They'll finish charging your brother based on your statement and that of Ms. Mah... uh... the younger Mrs. Kartel."

Volkan's gaze hardened. "My wife will not be making a statement, nor will she be testifying. They'll have to lay charges based on my statement alone."

Yasmin squeezed his arm. "Please, I really don't mind, especially if it'll make things easier. I can explain that Demir wasn't thinking right, that his actions were made in the heat of the moment. Maybe they'll be lenient."

Volkan's gaze softened. "There will be no leniency. My brother deserves whatever's coming to him, and even then, it's not enough to satisfy me. He tried to kill you and might have succeeded if I hadn't arrived when I did. Demir doesn't just deserve prison, he deserves to be disowned, stripped of every

privilege he's ever had, both professionally and personally, then thrown to a pack of wolves where he's eaten alive over many weeks until there's nothing left of him."

She stared at him, appalled, but also kind of alright with his vengeance plan. Demir had tried to have her killed. For Volkan's sake, she was willing to go easy on him, but she wouldn't forgive.

He cupped her face in his hands and gazed down at her while Henry moved away to give them privacy. "No, my love, you will not be testifying on behalf of my brother. You will remain safe at home with our baby nestled in your belly. Your beautiful heart will be with me though, as I pursue legal action against a man I once called brother."

Yasmin smiled sadly. "I'll give you whatever support you need."

Volkan dropped a lingering kiss on her lips that sent little sizzles of pleasure and expectation through her body, lighting her up and causing her to gasp into his mouth.

"What is it, my love?" he murmured huskily against her lips.

"I think the baby hormones are making me..." she drifted off, blushing rather than finishing the sentence.

"I see." His voice dropped into a rumbling purr that made her nipples peak. "I can do something about that when we get home."

"What about the police? Don't you need to give them a statement?"

He laughed. "What have I told you about money?"

"It can buy anything?"

He nodded. "Fuck the police. I want to bury myself in the love of my life."

A blush crept down her neck and across the tops of her breasts. "Okay, f-fuck the police."

She slid into the car and he dropped into the seat beside her. On their way back to the mansion, Narin gave them a rundown of the past few days.

Narin had told everyone that Yasmin and Volkan had to leave early to catch their honeymoon flight, which had been moved up due to bad weather. They hadn't wanted to ruin anyone's enjoyment of the reception, so had slipped out unnoticed. The few guests who had grumbled about their abrupt departure had been given a glass of strong spirits and an invitation to spend time with the couple when they were back in Turkey.

Only Yasmin's parents had persisted in their concern. As planned, Zeynep whisked them out on a chartered flight, but Yasmin's lack of communication still upset and hurt them.

Though Yasmin was eager for time alone with Volkan, she had to talk to her parents. She chose Zoom rather than simply calling, needing to give her explanation and apology face-to-face. She told Volkan that she was done lying to her family, that it was a precedent she refused to set with them. Surprisingly, he agreed, letting her control the call, standing just out of view and pacing behind the laptop.

Yasmin told her parents that Volkan's brother had her kidnapped to get her out of the way while he tried to take over the family business, and that she'd ended up on the family island for a few days. She left out the part about Volkan being the one to leave her on the island when he thought she'd betrayed him. She also left out her confrontation with the mercenaries. There were some things she would never tell them.

"Oh sweetheart, we're just glad you're okay," her mom said, her eyes luminous with unshed tears. "We didn't know what was happening, other than that we were rushed away and told that you'd already left for the honeymoon."

"Which we thought was an extremely rude thing to do," Aisha piped in, shoving her face into the screen. "When I thought you were just being an asshole, I was gonna fly out there and kick some entitled booty. But now that I know you



were kidnapped, I'ma fly out there and murder somebody's little brother, which is not a great way to start off our cross-Atlantic family relations.”

Volkan cough-laughed from behind the laptop and shook his head at Yasmin's sister. Yasmin laughed too, but it was because of Volkan's expression. She continued to chat with her family until everyone was satisfied that she was safe and no harm had come to her. When she finished, she closed the laptop with a contented sigh and looked at her husband.

“Thank you for letting me tell them the truth, or at least part of it. I've never lied to them before and I really don't like the way it makes me feel.”

Volkan came around the side of the desk and sank to one knee next to her chair, folding her hands in his. “Your honesty was one of the first things about you I fell in love with. It took me a while to realize that by forcing you to lie, I was destroying that part of you. I can promise that this will not happen in the future. I will never again give you reason to lie for me.”

She smiled and kissed him, her lips lingering against his. “Thank you, Volkan. It means a lot to me when you say things like that. I feel hopeful for the future.”

He nodded, then asked, “Why didn't you tell your parents about the baby?”

Yasmin leaned back in her chair and looked down at her hands, which were folded in her lap. “I suppose it doesn't feel real yet. I mean, I know I'm pregnant, but it doesn't feel like anything yet. And after everything that happened over the past few days, well...” She couldn't say it out loud. She'd been excited when she found out she was pregnant. Stunned, but excited. A life was growing inside of her, and it was part of her. But after being attacked on the island...

“You worry you might have lost the baby,” Volkan finished for her, a shadow passing over his face. “We will go see a doctor immediately and reassure ourselves that the baby is safe.”

He stood and, taking her hands, tugged her to her feet and toward the door.

“Wait... what?” She followed him because she didn’t have a choice. “Are we going right now?”

Volkan stopped walking and turned to her. “Will you feel better knowing that no harm has come to our child?”

“Yes, but...”

“Then we go now,” he said decisively.

Yasmin snatched up her purse as they passed by the table and together, they left the house and headed to the hospital where Volkan ordered a barrage of tests.

Later, as they lay in bed together, facing each other, they discussed their soon-to-be-baby.

“Do you want a boy or a girl?” she asked.

His gaze seemed faraway as he thought about it. “I was going to have a boy once before.”

That wasn’t her question, but the pain in his voice tugged at her heart. “You were looking forward to being a father?”

He nodded. “After Caria... after she died... I couldn’t bring myself to think of my son. Now, I regret not celebrating him when I had the chance or creating a memorial for him. He was gone before I knew him and now there’s nowhere for me to mourn him.”

She touched his face, cupping his cheek. “It’s not too late. We’ll celebrate him, just as we’ll celebrate this one. He might no longer be with us, but he’s always going to be a part of you.”

Volkan’s gaze was serious as he kissed her, lingering with his mouth against hers. “I don’t deserve you.”

She smiled against his lips. “But you’re going to take me anyway.”

He chuckled and slid his tongue into her mouth.

The heat of their chemistry took over as she slid her hands over his shoulders and he pushed her robe open and explored her body. He worshipped every part of her with such aching sweetness that tears leaked from the corners of her eyes when he finally slid into her welcoming heat.

Volkan assuaged the aching need within her, made even greater with the pregnancy hormones raging through her. Knowing her baby was safe and that the father loved Yasmin deeply made her passion burn brighter, and she didn't hold back, crying out her orgasm as Volkan grunted his own, his face buried in her neck, Turkish words spilling from his lips.

As they lay in the aftermath of their heated encounter, Yasmin rolled onto her side to look at her husband. "What did you say?"

He rolled to face her, pulling her against his warm body and tucking her head under his chin. "I told you how much I love you and the life growing within you. I told you that you would be a glorious mother and that I will be with you every step of the way. I said..."

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# *Chapter Forty-Seven*

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## SEVEN MONTHS LATER



**YASMIN GLANCED** at her phone and bit her lip, indecision warring within her. She was supposed to go to her obstetrician appointment with Volkan, but he wasn't back from the dockyard yet and any attempt to reach him landed her in his voicemail. It wasn't like him to not show up for an appointment, especially for the baby.

After rescuing her on the island, he'd become a devoted husband and soon-to-be-father. Their suite was filled with every top-end baby item imaginable and more arrived each day. He insisted on taking her to all her appointments since she refused to allow him to hire a private doctor to live with them. He'd only conceded because Yasmin had done some research and discovered that one of the world's top obstetricians worked in Istanbul.

Of course, Volkan tried to hire the woman to stand vigil over Yasmin, but both the doctor and Yasmin balked, and he'd had to give in, but only with the caveat that Yasmin was to see Dr. Abbidi once a week for the duration of her pregnancy. He hadn't missed a single appointment.

A soft knock on the door caught her attention and she made her way slowly to see who was there.

"Defne," she said, greeting her sister-in-law. "How are you? Come in."

Defne smiled and gave Yasmin a quick hug before slipping past her and into the suite. "Volkan sent me. He said he was

going to be late and that I should go with you to your appointment.”

Yasmin frowned and checked her phone. There was no message from Volkan. “Strange, why didn’t he call me himself?”

Defne shrugged. “He said there was an emergency at the office.” Catching Yasmin’s alarmed expression, she quickly added, “Nothing terrible. A paperwork mix-up that needs his attention right away. The accounting team was called in to help him deal with it. He said it was going to take all day to clean up the mess and that we should go to the appointment, then meet him at the dockyard. He said he wanted to treat his favourite ladies to a meal out when he’s finished work.”

Yasmin smiled her relief. She still wasn’t sure why Volkan didn’t contact her himself, but there was no reason for Defne to lie to her. In fact, since finding out she was going to be an aunt, Defne seemed perkier and more involved in household events than she had previously. She was more than willing to leave the house for shopping trips and appointments. It thrilled Narin to see her daughter thriving, especially since her younger son was about to be sentenced and things weren’t looking good for him.

Demir was in prison with no hope of release any time soon. Volkan had ensured that he wasn’t offered bail, so he’d been forced to languish in prison while awaiting trial and sentencing. The trial had finished and he was found guilty of kidnapping and conspiracy to commit murder. Sentencing was in a few days.

Zeynep had disappeared after Demir’s arrest. At Narin’s request, Volkan tracked his sister-in-law down, finding her with her father and helping him with his oyster business. Narin asked her to move back into the house, but Zeynep had gracefully refused, saying that she wanted to spend time with her father and discover what she truly wanted in life. Both Defne and Yasmin kept in touch and Yasmin found herself developing a genuine and fulfilling friendship with Zeynep.

Just as she was deciding what to do, her phone rang.

It was Volkan.

“Hi,” she answered, unable to help the smile that tugged at her lips.

She’d fallen hopelessly in love with her husband to where the mere sound of his voice sent a rush of happy tingles through her.

“I’m sorry, my love, I won’t be able to take you to your appointment,” Volkan said, sorrow in his tone. He really didn’t like when he had to break plans with Yasmin and always made his displeasure clear.

“It’s fine,” she said brightly. “Defne just arrived and offered to go with me. She said we’ll meet you at the dockyard after we finish.”

Defne smiled at her and nodded.

“Excellent,” Volkan said. “It’s as I hoped. I’ll be able to see my two favourite girls after a long day at work.”

“Did you ask your mom or Zeynep if they’d like to join us?” Yasmin asked hopefully. “It’ll do them both some good to spend time with the family.”

There was a long pause on Volkan’s part, and Yasmin knew what he was thinking. He’d had difficulty with both women over the past several months, and it had taken a lot of work on Yasmin’s and Defne’s parts to reconcile him to his family members once more.

He’d been angry when Narin continued to support Demir after his arrest. She visited him in prison and begged Volkan to intervene and use his influence to lessen Demir’s sentence. When he’d refused, Narin had been upset, which Yasmin explained to Volkan, was only natural. It would be difficult for any mother to see her child jailed with very little hope of release in the near future.

Volkan’s anger at Zeynep for her part in Yasmin’s traumatic island experience had begun to cool, but he was a long way from wanting to spend time with his ex-sister-in-law. He tolerated her existence for Yasmin’s benefit, but he refused to have much to do with her otherwise.

Yasmin did her best to gently influence her husband toward forgiveness and it was working, slowly and with effort.

Finally, Volkan answered in exactly the way she knew he would, “If it will make you happy to invite Narin and Zeynep, then by all means, make it a family affair. I will make a dinner reservation for 5:30 at your favourite restaurant on the beach.”

Yasmin grinned. “Just you and the ladies. Sounds like a perfect evening.”

“Or torture, depending on the topics under discussion,” Volkan chuckled.

“Don’t be sexist,” she said with a laugh.

“Tell Defne not to talk about purses and shoes all night and I’ll see about changing my attitude.”

“I love you,” Yasmin said spontaneously. She loved hearing him so relaxed and making jokes. This was the side of him she most enjoyed.

“And I love you, *küçük olan*,” Volkan said, his deep voice indulgent. “I look forward to seeing you after your appointment.”

They hung up and Yasmin gathered her purse and jacket, heading to the door where Defne waited for her. Henry was downstairs, ready to accompany them to the hospital. On their way out, Yasmin secured Narin’s promise to meet them at the dockyard where they would all go out to supper. She sent Zeynep a quick text as she was sliding into the car.

As they drove to the hospital, Yasmin contemplated how much her life had changed. A year ago, she’d been finishing school and looking forward to entering the field of archaeology. She’d been excited to fly halfway around the world for a job in her chosen field.

Now, she was on a completely different trajectory. She still studied archeology and was working on her Master’s degree through the University of Istanbul, specializing in Middle Eastern pre-history, but she was about to have a baby, and much of her focus was on her impending motherhood.



Her parents visited often, staying with the Kartel family for weeks at a time. Their visits always brightened Narin, which made Yasmin happy. She was pleased to see her parents and her mother-in-law spending time together and enjoying each other. There were cultural differences, but nothing insurmountable. Her parents were working on getting Narin to fly to Canada for a few weeks, which Yasmin thought was an excellent idea. Though the thought of the elegant older woman sleeping on a daybed in her parent's cluttered study because they would never allow family to stay in a 'cold, impersonal' hotel made Yasmin smile.

Dr. Abbidi announced Yasmin healthy and fit, her pregnancy exactly where it was supposed to be at eight months. They discussed Yasmin's birth plan, which hadn't changed. She wanted to go into labour on her own without being induced and she would come to the hospital to give birth where Dr. Abbidi would attend her.

Yasmin thanked the doctor and made her way back to Defne, checking the time on her way. It was 4:30. Volkan would be expecting them at the dockyard.

Henry drove them, parking alongside the building next to the front entrance.

Defne glanced at her phone, then looked around, her eyes lighting up as she gazed out across the dockyard. "There's a ship coming in," she said excitedly, reaching for her door handle. "Come on, let's go watch it! It's been forever since I watched a ship come in, and Volkan isn't finished yet."

Yasmin frowned. Why was Volkan communicating with his sister and not her? Shouldn't he be telling his wife that he was still in a meeting or whatever it was he was doing? She sighed and rubbed her extended belly, telling herself to drop the crankiness. She was out of sorts because her body ached and Volkan had missed her appointment, which wasn't a big deal.

She summoned up an indulgent, if somewhat tired, smile. "Sure, let's go watch the ship."

They let Henry know what they were doing and he nodded, following them at a distance as they made their way toward the incoming ship. It was massive, with containers stacked eight high. It was moving slowly up the dock, preparing to stop.

Yasmin kept her distance, wary of the large noisy ships, but Defne stepped closer to the edge of the dock, smiling at Yasmin over her shoulder. “Come look, you can see the water churning.”

“I think you should come away from there,” Yasmin said nervously.

“The ship isn’t even close yet,” Defne said with a laugh. “Come look. How often does a person get to see something of this scale?”

She was right. Even though Yasmin had been coming to the dockyard for months, she spent little time outside of the office. The gigantic ships and the cranes freaked her out, so she stayed safely away. Apparently, her sister-in-law had no such inhibitions.

Yasmin moved slowly toward the edge, coming alongside Defne as the ship approached.

“It makes you feel tiny, doesn’t it?” Defne shouted to be heard over the noise of the incoming ship.

Yasmin nodded and watched the dark swirling water several feet below the dock as it sloshed against the pilings underneath from the force of the ship’s propellers.

“Do you suppose this is the last thing Caria saw before she died? The massive front of a ship and the raging water?” Defne yelled the words in Yasmin’s ear, her voice excited, her eyes taking on a feverish look.

Yasmin tried to step back, a prickle of awareness creeping through her and setting her hair on end. Why would Defne bring her out here and start talking about her brother’s dead wife? It made Yasmin uncomfortable. Defne caught her arm in a surprisingly forceful grip.

“I want you to see,” she said, her expression twisting with malice. “I want you to see what she saw.”

Yasmin shook her head and tried to step back, looking around for Henry. The big bodyguard was staring back at them, his brows pulled down in a frown. When Yasmin caught his gaze, he shook his head and beckoned her to move away from the edge of the dock.

She tried to pull her arm from Defne’s grip, but she refused to let go. “You’re just like her.”

“Let me go,” Yasmin shouted. “I want to go find Volkan.”

At Volkan’s name, Defne’s face transformed once again, this time into a mask of pure hatred.

“You can’t have him,” she said in a voice that Yasmin barely recognized. In fact, she didn’t recognize anything about the sweet and flighty girl. The Defne she’d gotten to know over the past several months was no longer there, if she ever existed. In her place was a woman whose face reflected grim determination.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she tried pleading with Defne while keeping Henry in her peripheral.

“He’s mine!” Defne shouted, digging her nails into Yasmin’s arm with enough force to cut. “He’ll never be yours!”

Yasmin cried out and twisted around, shouting, “Henry!”

Without pause, Henry responded to the panic in his mistress’s voice, sprinting toward them. He wasn’t close enough, though.

Defne looked at something past Yasmin’s shoulder. “I’m sorry you have to see this, mother.”

Yasmin turned her head, catching sight of Narin who was standing several feet behind the two women, her purse clutched in her hands, a stricken expression on her face.

Yasmin tried to fight the inevitable. She shoved Defne and tried to hurl her body toward Henry as he approached, but he was too late and her efforts weren’t effective. Defne dug her

fingers into Yasmin's shoulders and shoved her toward the edge of the dock.

Yasmin let out a bloodcurdling scream as she fell backwards. She frantically reached out, trying to hold onto anything as she fell. She latched onto Defne's wrist and, as gravity took her over the edge, plunging her toward the water, Defne fell with her.

Black swirling water rushed at her and she thought of her Volkan. If she died, so would the baby, and she didn't think Volkan would survive without them. In one selfish act, Defne was destroying an entire family.

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## *Chapter Forty-Eight*



**VOLKAN STOOD** and stretched his arms over his head before straightening his tie and cufflinks. He was looking forward to seeing his wife after a long day of straightening out business ledgers and talking to a potential prospect for his brother's old position. Though Demir had proven himself untrustworthy, he'd been decent enough at his job and was difficult to replace. Volkan had spent the past several months doing both jobs until they found a suitable candidate.

As much as he wanted to see his wife, he couldn't say he was looking forward to dinner with the entire family. He wanted her to himself, not share her with others. Unfortunately, his stubborn wife seemed determined to help heal his family after the trauma of Demir's betrayal.

Volkan picked up his leather briefcase and headed for the door, but before he could reach it, Janet burst through stopping him in his tracks. She never entered his office unannounced.

"Something's happened!" she said on a gasp, her face pale with fear. "There's a commotion outside. The dock workers are saying someone went into the water."

For a few precious seconds, he stopped breathing as intuition skittered down his spine. Yasmin. He dropped his briefcase and raced through the door, shoving past Janet, who chased after him.

Every step he took, every second that passed felt like an eternity as he imagined every horrific scenario. Yasmin falling into the water, being pulled under a ship, or sucked under the

docks and drowned. At eight months pregnant in the strongly churning waters, she wouldn't have the ability to keep herself above for very long, if she survived the fall. If a ship had been coming into dock... it didn't bear thinking about.

He flung the outside door open and sprinted through it, running across the docks toward a large group of people who were gathered next to a container ship that had just come in. They were surrounding something.

It was his mother, collapsed on the dock, sobbing, her face in her. He dropped to his knees and gripped her shoulders.

"Yasmin!" It was all he could say. No other words would emerge, but she understood. She lifted her tear-stained, stricken face to look at him and nodded.

"And Defne," she whispered.

Fuck, his sister too? What the hell had happened to cause two women to fall off the dock and into the water? There were people everywhere. Someone should've spotted them. He looked up at the massive container ship. Their odds of survival were next to nothing.

"Boss."

Volkan looked up at Henry who was striding toward him. Rage took over every brain cell in his head and he jumped to his feet, launching himself at Henry. He gripped the other man's collar and lifted him almost off his feet. "You let this happen!" he roared. "You let her fucking die!"

The flash of guilt that crossed Henry's face did nothing to appease Volkan. No amount of guilt would bring his wife back. He released his bodyguard and stumbled back. Fuck, he was as guilty as Henry. If he'd set his work aside for a few hours and accompanied Yasmin to her appointment, then she would now be safe.

"Boss," Henry said again, stepping toward him. A brave move, considering Volkan was ready to throw Henry off the dock and make him go find Yasmin. Instead, he tried to focus on Henry and listen to what he was trying to tell him. "I saw everything. Defne tried to push Mrs. Kartel off the side of the

dock, but Mrs. Kartel grabbed hold of her and they both went in.”

“What the fuck are you saying, man?” Volkan shouted.

A hand landed on his arm, squeezing. Volkan looked down, his gaze meeting his mother’s. “He’s telling you the truth,” she said, her voice hoarse. “Defne was trying to... to hurt Yasmin. I don’t know why, but she pushed her and they both fell over the side.”

Henry nodded, then said, “The ship was coming in and churning up the water, but it was still a way off. Maybe they...”

Hope lit a tiny flame in his heart. “Maybe they went under the dock instead of the ship,” he finished, then glanced down at the industrial dock. The platform was thick wood and concrete. “We need a boat right away.” He turned to look out at the dockyard workers who’d gathered, his eyes landing on the manager. “Get a boat ready, we’re going under the docks.”

The manager nodded and turned on his heel, striding quickly away. Volkan followed, his mind racing as he tried to prepare himself for what he might find. No, he couldn’t go through it again. Couldn’t go through seeing his wife’s body pulled out of the water. He’d had to identify Caria when they’d found her. He couldn’t do it. Not again. Not with Yasmin. Not his sweet, precious wife.

Tears stung his eyes as he ran. “Please god, let her be alive.”

The dockyard manager thundered down a set of stairs to the side of the dock and Volkan followed him. There was a floating dock below with a tugboat and a couple of speedboats tied to it. It was where they kept the pilot boats for the ships that needed guiding.

Volkan leapt into the boat just as the manager untied it and pushed away from the dock. Seconds later, the boat rocked violently as someone jumped in beside him. He turned to find Henry panting.

When he caught his breath, Henry said, “We can’t let her die.”

Volkan nodded and gripped his man’s shoulder, appreciating his friendship for perhaps the first time in their long association. “This isn’t your fault,” he choked out past a throat constricted by fear. It was as much an apology as he was capable of.

They got the motor going and turned the boat toward the massive dock, heading into the shadows of one of the most dangerous places in the dockyard.

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“Defne!” Yasmin shouted, clinging to one of the barnacle covered pilings with all her strength. Between the slowing engines and the sloshing water, the noise of the massive container ship coming into dock was deafening.

Water sucked at Yasmin, trying to rip her away from the piling. Then, as the waves reversed with the movement of the ship, she was thrust hard against the piling, her face scraping against the barnacles as she held on.

She looked around frantically for Defne.

When they’d gone into the water, the strength of the current dragged them both under, separated them, then spit Yasmin out under the platform the ship was attempting to dock at.

Yasmin swallowed the sobs that threatened to spill from her lips, telling herself she had to be smart and save herself until Volkan could rescue her. Like when she was in trouble on the island, she knew he was on his way. Both Henry and Narin had seen them go over the side of the dock. Someone would have told Volkan. She just had to keep herself above water until he arrived.

The pillar she was holding onto vibrated as the container ship continued to make its way slowly toward her. She had to move. She was too close to the edge of the dock. If the ship



came in behind her with its engines still on, she wouldn't be able to maintain her hold. She'd be pulled under the water and, if she was really unlucky, into the slowing blades of the ship's propeller.

She looked around, trying to situate herself, but every time she tried, water would wash over her. She had to do something. Her grip was already weakening and her stomach was being smashed into the piling. She gathered as much strength as she could and, in the seconds between the sucking waves, maneuvered herself around to the other side of the piling. Then, as the next wave hit, she pushed off and swam as hard as she could toward the next piling, which was closer to the interior of the dock.

The water smashed her into the wooden pillar and she gasped as her stomach hit. Oh god, the baby! What if it was injured in the fall? What if it was in shock? Could unborn babies go into shock? Could its heart stop? Tears streaked down her cheeks as despair hit.

She couldn't feel it moving, which she logically knew was probably because her own heart was hammering away loudly inside her, and her body was taking a battering.

"Volkan!" she cried out, as despair threatened to drag her under.

Water rushed at her again, ripping her grip from the piling. She shrieked as she was dragged steadily back toward the ship, but before she was pulled under the water, something took hold of her hair and she was yanked back toward one of the pilings.

"Why did you do that? Why did you pull me in, too? You were meant to die alone, like her!"

For a second, Yasmin thought she was hallucinating, but then, as the water cleared from her vision, she saw Defne's face swimming next to hers. Her expression was twisted with hate and anger, and before Yasmin could respond, Defne thrust her under the water.

Yasmin tried to fight back, but she was exhausted and was still being battered by the current. It was too much to fight both Defne and the water. Yasmin did the only thing she could, she pulled her fist back and sent it flying into Defne, hitting her breast.

The grip on her hair loosened, and Yasmin fought her way back to the surface. “You stupid little — ” Defne shrieked, but as soon as Yasmin’s head broke water, she threw another fist into Defne’s mouth.

“Ouch!” Yasmin gasped as pain burst through her knuckles, but Defne let her go.

Yasmin readied herself and the moment the water started moving toward the dock instead of the ship, she shoved off the piling and swam for all she was worth away from Defne. She heard splashing behind her and assumed Defne was trying to follow her.

“You’re going to kill both of us!” Yasmin screamed over her shoulder at her sister-in-law just as Defne slammed her hands down on Yasmin’s back, gripped her jacket and tried shoving her back under the water.

The water pulled away again, and the women were sucked backwards into the piling behind them, Yasmin’s body smashing Defne’s into the post. She elbowed the other woman hard, pushed away and swam toward another piling, relief pumping through her as her hands made contact. She wrapped as much of her body around the pillar as she could, determined to hang on until rescue arrived.

“I hate you!” Defne screamed from her piling. “You’ve ruined everything!”

Yasmin looked at her. Defne was keeping her grip on the other piling rather than making another attempt to come after Yasmin.

“I don’t know what you mean!” Yasmin shouted, glaring at Defne through the wet strands of hair clinging to her face.

“You don’t love him like I do,” Defne wailed, sobbing against the piling. “I give him everything he could possibly

want. Companionship, love, a partner for galas and business dinners when he needs one. Why did you have to come and ruin it? You're just like her."

Understanding finally dawned on Yasmin and the past year ran through her brain like a movie reel on fast forward. Of course... Defne loved Volkan. She'd never made a secret of her adoration, only everyone thought her love was sisterly.

"He would have seen it eventually," Defne moaned. "He would have come to me. Loved me the way he thinks he loves you." She glared at Yasmin. "He doesn't love you, you know. One day, he'll come to realize what a faithless bitch you are and he'll come back to me."

Yasmin was too shocked to say anything. It didn't matter. There was nothing she could say that could appease the mentally distressed young woman. Defne had built a fantasy surrounding her relationship with her brother, and Yasmin had come along and destroyed it.

Volkan was obsessed with Yasmin. He rarely let her out of his sight and when he did, he made sure everything around her was perfect. It was impossible to miss the depth of Volkan's feelings for his wife. Defne's fantasy couldn't possibly stand up to that kind of reality.

It occurred to Yasmin that she could hear every word Defne was saying and that they were no longer shouting. The ship's engines had stopped and, though the current under the dock remained dangerously strong, it was no longer trying to pull them toward the ship.

Relief rushed through her and she leaned her head against the piling and allowed the exhaustion to wash over her. She looked at Defne, wanting to keep the other woman in sight in case she tried to attack again, but Defne was as beat up and exhausted as Yasmin.

"Defne," she said, getting her sister-in-law's attention. "Did you push Caria off the dock the way you pushed me?"

Defne narrowed her eyes. "It would have worked on you too if you hadn't grabbed hold of me."

Yasmin let out a weak laugh. “It wouldn’t have worked. The ship wasn’t close enough to pull me under and its propellers were too slow once it got here. Your timing was off and now you’ll have to answer to your brother and the authorities.”

Yasmin could swear Defne paled, though it was hard to tell under the shadowed dock.

“It’s your fault,” Defne said bitterly. “If you’d just went over to the edge when I told you to, I would have led you closer to the ship. It would have worked perfectly.”

Yasmin shook her head. The girl was delusional.

A faint noise caught her attention and she lifted her head from the wooden piling and squinted in its direction. It looked like a boat and two or three people.

“Volkan!” she screamed, not daring to let go of the piling to swim closer to him. She would wait for him to come to her. “Volkan, I’m over here!”

It took a few minutes for them to get close enough to hear her and Defne didn’t help. She’d turned her face against her wooden post and went silent.

Finally, Volkan’s strong hands gripped her and she was pulled from the water. She collapsed into the bottom of the boat, her arms wrapped around her middle. She looked up at Volkan, her lips quivering in fear. “The baby,” she whispered.

“There’s an ambulance on the way,” he said, his voice grim as he ran his hands over her, his thumb lingering against a scrape on her chin from the barnacles. “It’ll be here by the time we get you topside.”

“Thank you,” she whispered, then added, “Make sure you get Defne too.”

“No,” he said firmly. “She can find her own way out.”

Yasmin shook her head and narrowed her eyes at him. “You pull your sister out right now. You can be mad at her later, but we’re not letting her die.”

Volkan jerked his chin at Henry and a moment later a wet and shivering Defne was sitting on the bottom on the other side of the boat. Her gaze clung desperately to Volkan's back where he was crouched next to Yasmin, his big hand curved over the back of her head, his desperate stare clinging to her face.

“Volkan...” Defne whined.

Volkan refused to look at her, watching Yasmin as he said, “If you speak to me again, one single word, I will crush the life from you. Nod if you understand me, Defne.”

Yasmin could see Defne nod, though Volkan couldn't.

At the same moment, Yasmin gasped loudly as a tiny foot kicked her from the inside. Tears filled her eyes and she dropped a hand to her belly, where she caressed the foot that was pressed against her.

She gave Volkan a tearful smile. “I can feel the baby. I think it's going to be okay.”

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## *Chapter Forty-Nine*



**VOLKAN REFUSED** to let go of Yasmin, ignoring the arms that reached for her as the speedboat docked. He stepped from the boat onto the dock, then leapt up the stairs and toward the ambulance that was coming out to meet them, lights flashing.

As the doors to the ambulance were opened, Volkan climbed inside with Yasmin still safe in his embrace. He continued to hold her as the paramedic checked her over.

Yasmin craned her head to see the activity on the dock. Narin had her arms around Defne, who had collapsed to the dock after Henry had helped her up the stairs. She was sobbing, tears streaking down her cheeks as she pointed toward the ambulance and screamed her side of the story for all to hear.

“She stole him!” Defne tried to pull her mother’s arms from her neck. “Volkan, I love you! Choose me! She’ll never make you happy.”

Yasmin cringed and glanced at Volkan whose face was stony. It was clear he heard Defne’s words but was unwilling to acknowledge them.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

Volkan’s head jerked down as his gaze met hers. “What can you possibly be sorry about?” he asked, a note of bitterness in his tone. “My family keeps trying to kill you. You are not to blame for their actions. I should never have brought

you here to Istanbul. We could have lived happily anywhere in the world. This is my fault.”

She smiled at him, though it was strained. “You love your family and your home. Your life is here. You aren’t any more responsible for the actions of your siblings than I am.”

“Aren’t I?” His eyes were pools of darkness as he looked at her, his body stiff with anger. “I brought you here against your will and forced you into an unwanted marriage. Am I not just as much to blame as my brother and sister for your suffering?”

The paramedic drew in a sharp breath, his fingers stilling on Yasmin’s wrist. He lifted his gaze to meet hers, concern in his expression.

She tipped her head back and leaned up to kiss Volkan’s jaw, her lips lingering against his bristled skin as she breathed him in, absorbing his strength. “No one kidnapped me, and I married you of my own free will. I forbid you from saying otherwise. Now hold me tighter because I think we’re about to find out how the baby is doing.”

She held her breath, hoping that Volkan could take the hint. There was little point in demanding anything of Volkan because he was going to do his own thing anyway, so she needed him to wake up and realize what he was saying in front of outsiders.

Volkan hesitated for about two seconds, then did as his wife commanded, wrapping his arms around her and holding her tight while the paramedic listened to the baby’s heartbeat. He frowned, moved the stethoscope, and listened again.

Yasmin held her breath until she was dizzy.

What was taking so long? When the obstetrician checked the baby’s heartbeat it took seconds.

Finally, the paramedic lifted his eyes to meet hers, then slid his gaze to Volkan’s. “We need to get you to the hospital.”

“Why?” Yasmin asked sharply. “What’s wrong?”

“Hush, *aşkim*, I’m sure it’s nothing,” Volkan said, shifting himself back on the bed and cradling her against him. He looked at the paramedic. “Let’s go.”

“Please, just tell me what’s wrong with my baby!” She was freaking out. The panic she’d felt under the dock spiked again, sending adrenaline rushing through her. She tried to fight free of Volkan’s grip so she could demand the paramedic tell her what was happening, but Volkan refused to give an inch.

The paramedic told his partner to get moving and then stood to close the back doors of the ambulance. Yasmin got a glimpse of Defne being led toward a police car, her hands cuffed behind her back. Henry was on one side of her while Narin was on the other. Then her view was cut off as the ambulance sped away.

Silent tears rolled down her cheeks as the paramedic instructed Volkan to lay her down on the stretcher where he strapped her down and moved the stethoscope back to her stomach.

She caught the paramedic’s hand in hers and said, “Please, tell me what’s wrong with... with my baby.” She had to bite her lip to keep the sobs from tumbling out.

He lifted his eyes to meet Volkan’s gaze and Volkan nodded.

“The baby’s heartbeat is a little slow, that’s all,” the paramedic explained in a calm voice. “Nothing to be worried about yet, but we’ll get you to the hospital and checked out.”

Yasmin tried to sit up, but the straps restrained her. “That’s not right! Shouldn’t the heartbeat be fast, like mine? I had a shock, which means the baby had a shock. Shouldn’t the heart be faster?” She looked up at Volkan who was sitting at the head of her bed, frantically reaching for him.

He took her hands in his and bent his head, pressing a lingering kiss to her knuckles. The warmth of his lips and his presence helped to calm her a little, but she was still terrified. Of everything she’d survived in the past year, she didn’t think she could survive the loss of her baby.



“Please tell me it’s going to be okay,” she begged, the sobs breaking free as Volkan held her as they rushed toward the hospital.

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Yasmin couldn’t stop staring at her son. He was so tiny and perfect, his bald head nestled at her breast where he was drinking thirstily. He grew bigger and stronger each day and each day that passed, she gradually accepted that her son was going to be okay.

Three weeks earlier, Tarkan Ajay Kartel was born exactly thirty-six minutes from the moment the ambulance left the dockyard. Yasmin was rushed into an emergency c-section where Dr. Abbidi and her staff removed the baby and artificially breathed life into him, bringing him back from the brink of death.

Yasmin had been sedated, but aware as the team of medical staff worked to save her son’s life. Volkan had knelt on the floor next to her, holding her while she cried into his shoulder, begging him to tell her that her baby had survived.

The happiest moment of her life was when she’d been rolled in a wheelchair to the incubator where she could touch him through the holes in the side. She’d had to wear gloves, but feeling his warm body, and placing her fingers on his chest, feeling the gentle rise and fall of his tiny ribcage as he slept had made every terrifying experience leading up to that moment worth it.

Her son was alive. He was breathing. He was going to be fine.

And he was.

Yasmin had been released from the hospital four days after she’d gone over the side of the dock. She and Volkan had spent every waking minute in the hospital until Tarkan was released after one week in the incubator and another under medical supervision.

Despite her sadness over her daughter's arrest, Narin had given both Yasmin and Tarkan a heartfelt homecoming. When they were in the hospital, Narin hadn't once visited, so Yasmin worried that Narin blamed her for what happened to her family. Yasmin was indirectly responsible for the loss of two of Narin's children. But it had turned out that Narin hadn't visited because she'd been ensuring her daughter received fair treatment in the justice system, insisting Defne be assessed by mental health professionals. She'd also completed the nursery so baby Tarkan had a place to go when he came home.

Now, she sat opposite Yasmin, her gaze softening on her first grandchild as he ate. Narin spent hours each day in Yasmin and Volkan's suite. Yasmin welcomed her presence. Volkan had a lot going on at work and spent a few hours a day in the office. Narin made sure Yasmin had the support she needed with the baby.

Admittedly, at first, Yasmin had been hesitant to accept Narin's help. Even if she didn't blame Yasmin for the arrest and confinement of two of her three children, Yasmin had trouble trusting a woman who'd managed to raise a trio of psychopaths. And yes, she was including Volkan on the list. She loved him, but he definitely lived on a separate plane of moral existence than her.

But as Yasmin spent more one-on-one time with Narin, she realized that the older woman was as much a hostage to her family as Yasmin was when Volkan kidnapped her. Narin had been pushed into marriage with a powerful, morally corrupt man in much the same way Yasmin had.

She raised her family the best way she knew how, and her children were given many privileges and opportunities that most people didn't experience. The word 'no' wasn't one often used in the Kartel household, which led the kids to feel as though they could have whatever their heart's desired. Money opened doors to them, convincing all three that, with enough money, no door was closed to them.

Yasmin suspected that Narin's presence in her husband's life had mitigated some of the children's darker tendencies, which allowed Volkan to love his wife wholeheartedly and

unselfishly. Though he could be autocratic with brutal tendencies, he was always gentle and kind with his wife and child. Since their night on the island, he hadn't said a single harsh word to her, which allowed her to be contented in her new life.

“When is Defne’s sentencing?” Yasmin asked quietly.

Narin lifted her gaze from the baby, her face creasing in sadness. “She’ll be sentenced in a few days. I’ll go to the courthouse to be with her and her lawyer said I would be allowed to accompany her to the facility she’ll be staying at.”

After speaking with police and the family’s lawyer, Narin was convinced it would be best for her daughter to plead guilty to the murder of Caria and the attempted murder of Yasmin. Several mental health professionals had already assessed her and declared her unfit to stand trial. She would be sentenced to a minimum of twenty years in an institution that deals with such psychosis.

“They’ll be able to give her the help she needs,” Yasmin said, trying to reconcile Narin to her daughter’s fate. Narin knew this was the best thing for Defne, but it still upset her to think that her daughter might never again come home.

Narin nodded. “My brain knows it, but my heart wants her back.” Tears filled her eyes and slowly trickled down her cheeks. She hastily scrubbed at them with her hands. She let out a breath and looked up at the ceiling blinking rapidly. “Maybe I deserve this. If I’d raised them right...”

Yasmin didn’t know what to say to make Narin feel better so she did the one thing that usually worked. She gently handed Tarkan, who’d finished eating, to Narin, settling him in the other woman’s arms.

“Cuddle your grandson and remember what the lawyer said. It’s entirely possible that, with some successful rehabilitation and therapy, Defne could come home someday.” Yasmin didn’t say it out loud, but they would also need Volkan to calm down a lot before the family could ever consider having Defne in the house again.

When Yasmin had tried to talk to him about it, he'd gotten so angry that he'd declared if he ever saw either Defne or Demir again, he would kill them with his bare hands. He absolutely refused to entertain the thought of allowing them near Yasmin. He'd rather they both rot in prison.

He was still angry with Zeynep, but his anger with his former sister-in-law was fading. Especially when Yasmin explained that Zeynep was the only real somewhat age-appropriate friend Yasmin had made in Turkey so far. Part of that was because of Volkan's insane over-protectiveness. It was difficult to make friends when she wasn't allowed to work or leave the house without Henry and two to three bodyguards.

Narin nodded, dropping her face into Tarkan's bundled body and inhaling his baby scent. "Someday..." she whispered. "Someday my children might come home." She looked at Yasmin and gave her a wobbly smile. "In the meantime, I will enjoy my grandson and wait for you to produce a few more so I may have something to look forward to over the years."

Yasmin's jaw dropped. She'd just had Tarkan three weeks ago; there was no chance she was contemplating having another. Not while her body felt like it had been ripped open with the jaws-of-life.

Then she caught the light of humour in Narin's eyes and realized her mother-in-law was teasing her. She laughed. Though life hadn't gone according to plan for either woman, there was still joy to be had in moments like these.

They discussed what they would have for dinner that night and before long, Volkan arrived home, shoved his mother out the door, and gathered his wife and his son in his arms, holding them as though they would break if he squeezed too tight.

"*Aşkı*m..." Volkan said huskily, kissing the top of her head.

"Welcome home, husband," Yasmin replied, pressing her head to his chest to listen to his steady heartbeat.

# *Epilogue*

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## NINE YEARS LATER



**“SHOULD I DO THE THING?”** Yasmin asked, turning her head to look at her children.

“Do it, Mom!” Tarkan shouted into his headset.

“I don’t know,” Yasmin said, pretending to be indecisive. “Your father doesn’t like it when I do the thing.”

“Please, Mama!” Astrid chimed in, clapping her hands. “We want to wave at Daddy when we pass the house.”

“Well, I suppose just this once, but make sure your sister is strapped in tight.”

Tarkan leaned over the baby, checking on her car seat, which was strapped to the seat. Tianna waved her arms in the air, excited that her big brother was paying attention to her. At nine, Tarkan was becoming more independent and didn’t often have time for his younger sisters who were five and two.

Yasmin prepped the plane for landing, zeroing in on the small island, which was now easily visible. She felt the growing excitement in her children as they neared Isla Narina. They loved their second home as much as their parents and were ecstatic that the family had planned a month’s vacation on the sandy stretch of land.

“There’s the house!” Astrid called out.

Excitement lit a flame in Yasmin and her belly did a flip-flop, the same as it did every time she was about to see her handsome husband. She turned the plane toward the house,

dipping lower in the sky and scanning the ground. She could see the work crew Volkan had hired to update the pool area.

He'd rebuilt the house shortly after the fire, but the pool hadn't been updated at the time and was now in need of some TLC. Yasmin was pleased that it would be finished within the next few days, which would give the kids plenty of pool time while they were on the island.

"I see Nene!"

Yasmin leaned to look out her side window at the woman waving frantically at the small plane. It looked like Narin was taking a walk on the beach and gathering seashells if the bucket she was holding was any indication. Narin had come over with Volkan a few days earlier to help oversee the pool renovation.

"Here we go! And look!" Yasmin called back to the children, pointing out the window. "Daddy's waving at us!"

She tilted the plane's wing and flew low over the house where Volkan was standing. The children screamed and waved at him. Yasmin made eye contact with her husband and grinned mischievously. He wagged his finger at her, indicating she was in deep trouble, but the smile stretching his mouth told her he was happy to see her.

Volkan taught her how to fly after Tarkan was born, which Yasmin took to like a fish to water. She loved hurtling through the open sky, skipping along the clouds and aiming for the endless horizon beyond. These days, Yasmin flew more often than Volkan, especially since he purchased a Cessna for her thirtieth birthday, which took most of the sting out of turning the big 3-0.

Though Volkan preferred his wife by his side, he'd loosened up somewhat, allowing her to fly the children back and forth when he was busy. Given how psycho he was about their safety, she realized just how much trust it took for him to allow his family to fly without him. So, her silly moments, such as flying low over the house before landing, which Volkan had forbidden her from doing, were far and few between.

She turned the plane and headed for the airstrip on the other side of the island, coming back around for landing. She concentrated on her landing, focusing on safety first as her children cheered and screamed, spotting their father driving one of their Jeeps up the tarmac to meet them.

As soon as the plane stopped, the children ripped off their seatbelts and Tarkan unlatched and opened the door, launching himself out and into his father's arms, followed closely by the girls. Yasmin quickly grabbed hold of Tianna's arm, forcing her to wait for her mother so she wouldn't fall out of the plane.

Lifting the struggling child onto her hip, Yasmin climbed out the door and down the steps, walking into her husband's open embrace. The children surrounded them, chattering excitedly as Volkan pressed his lips to Yasmin's. The world around them dimmed and it was just the two of them, lips together, eyes clinging, unspoken words of love passing between them.

Then the moment passed and their offspring captured their attention again, tugging on their hands and dragging them toward the Jeep where they insisted they be dropped off with their grandmother. Yasmin and Volkan were happy to comply, giving them a few minutes with Narin before everyone piled into the vehicle and headed up to the house.

Volkan came around to Yasmin's side of the vehicle and opened the door. Instead of allowing her to walk to the house, he lifted her off her feet, sweeping her against his chest, much to the delight of their children who followed them inside.

"I can walk!" Yasmin protested, but her smile turned to an expression of shock when they entered the house. "Whaaaa...?" Volkan had barely set her on her feet before she was strangle-hugged by her sister. "Aisha! What on earth are you doing here?"

Aisha visited with them twice a year, but the distance never got easier. Yasmin missed her parents and sister, but they'd seen each other a few months ago in June. They weren't due for another visit until Christmas.



Then she spotted her parents, who were eagerly hugging their grandchildren.

As soon as Aisha let her go, Yasmin wheeled around to face her husband, her hands jammed into her hips. “What’s going on here?”

“They’re here to celebrate,” he announced.

Yasmin’s mouth fell open as she realized how thoughtful her husband was being. It was their tenth wedding anniversary in a few weeks, and they’d planned on having a small celebration on the island with the kids and Narin, Zeynep, and her husband. Apparently, Volkan had extended the invitation to her parents and sister.

“Thank you!” She threw her arms around his neck and hugged him, covering his cheek and chin in kisses.

“Mmmm... as much as I enjoy your gratitude, my love, you may want to hold off,” Volkan drawled with a chuckle. “The jet will soon arrive with the rest of our guests.”

“Zeynep?” she asked excitedly.

She and Zeynep had grown close over the years, developing an unshakable friendship. Zeynep continued to live with her father, but she’d remarried and her new husband had moved the pair into his home. With her husband’s backing, Zeynep started a tourism business, guiding visitors all over Istanbul and the surrounding area as well as planning excursions for her clients. She loved her business and occasionally asked Yasmin to take groups out to archaeological sites, which Yasmin was more than happy to do.

“Yes, your friend will soon arrive, along with her father, husband, and that urchin they call a son.”

Tarkan let out a whoop of happiness upon finding out his best friend would soon arrive on the island.

“You’ve planned everything, haven’t you?” Yasmin said appreciatively.

“Do you think I would allow my wife to lift a finger if she doesn’t have to?”

She laughed. “Of course not. If there’s anything I’ve learned about you over the years, it’s that you prefer your woman overfed, lazy, and at your beck and call.”

Volkan caressed her full hip, groping her, a lascivious grin spread across his face. “You said it better than I could have.”

“Enough, you two,” Yasmin’s mother scolded, peeling herself away from her grandkids long enough to hug her daughter. “After ten years, you’d think the flame would die a little. At least enough that the rest of us can bear being around you.”

“What are you saying?” Yasmin’s father asked her mother with mock disappointment. “You don’t love me the way these two love each other?”

She rolled her eyes. “God forbid. We’d be exhausted trying to keep up with their level of PDA.”

Yasmin laughed, turned in her husband’s arms, plastered herself to him, lifting a leg to hook over his hip. She grabbed him around the neck and dragged his head down to hers, going all in with a tongue-thrusting, sloppy kiss. Gales of laughter sounded behind them along with a chorus of “ewww, gross” from the kids.

Two days later, Yasmin and Volkan renewed their vows in front of their loved ones, accepting their well wishes and partying late into the night. The next morning, Yasmin woke up to another surprise.

She blinked several times, the sun streaming through the window, warming her skin and encouraging her to wake lazily with the beams that crept across her bed. She reached a toe out, searching for her newly re-vowed husband, but he wasn’t there.

“Volkan?” she asked, sitting up with a yawn.

There was no answer.

Pulling on her pink flower-patterned silk robe, she wandered onto the balcony, gazing out across the island. If she squinted, she could just barely make out the airfield. There didn't seem to be anyone around, either at the house or further up the island. Weird. There should be staff and guests wandering about.

She made her way back inside, opening the bedroom door and stepping into the hallway. It was deserted. Her foot landed on something cool and soft. Looking down, she discovered rose petals scattered across the floor, leading toward the stairs.

She bent down and picked a handful, holding them up to her nose before letting them sift through her fingers and fall to the floor. It must be another gift from her husband, but where were the children? In the past nine years, she'd not once known them to be this quiet in the morning.

"Tarkan, Astrid, Tianna!" she called, her heart picking up at the lack of human activity, though logically she knew there had to be an explanation. Still, until she laid eyes on her three children, she wouldn't relax.

She followed the rose petals downstairs where they led out onto the pool deck. She gasped when she caught sight of her husband. "Volkan! What are you doing? The kids..."

He was standing naked next to a cart filled with coffee, juice, croissants, fruit, whipping cream, chocolate and more. It wasn't the food that caught her attention, but the cock that was rapidly making its pleasure at the sight of its favourite person known.

Volkan chuckled. "Everyone woke up early and went back to the mainland. The kids are with Narin, and your family is going to spend a few days with them before flying back to Canada."

"But..." She didn't finish the sentence, staring open-mouthed as Volkan stalked toward her, his eyes glittering with the predatory light she'd come to love.

He reached for her, gathered her hair at the back of her neck and wrapped it around his fist, using the tether to pull her

head back until she was staring up at him. “But nothing,” he said in his deep, whiskey voice. “I have you to myself for ten days, one for each year of our marriage. I intend to make each one the best day of your life until you’re so filled with bliss that you’ll never consider leaving.”

It was difficult to maintain her smile as a hint of sadness entered her heart, but she managed it. Something she’d learned over the years was that her husband didn’t trust happiness. He was certain that if he took his eyes away, loosened his grip, everything he loved would disappear.

It didn’t help that his father had passed when he was still relatively young or that his first wife and child were killed by his sister, his brother was in prison for life, and his sister was locked up in an institution for at least another ten years. The losses he’d experienced had caused him to tighten his grip even more on the family he had left. His anger at his sister had dissipated when he came to understand how mentally ill Defne was, and he’d gone to visit her many times over the years.

Defne seemed to be doing better, but she still held bitterness toward Yasmin, who abstained from visiting. It was enough that Narin saw her daughter once a week and Volkan made time to go see her once in a while.

“So... what do you plan on doing with me, now that you have me all to yourself on this deserted island?” Yasmin asked, a smile teasing her lips.

His grip tightened and he swung her around, dropping her backwards onto one of the lounge beds and then coming down on top of her, covering her with his body. She gasped as his heated cock pressed against her leg.

Volkan slid his hand into her robe, discovering the bare skin beneath, before yanking the robe completely open and feasting his eyes on her flesh. The fire of his desire had never dimmed, though her body had birthed three children. Her hips and belly were fuller, her breasts not as full, and there were stretch marks on her stomach and hips. He saw all of it and loved her even more fiercely for it.

He dropped his head to her belly and kissed a path across her stretch marks, declaring them ‘his.’ Each one belonged to him, the marks of his possession, of his legacy. Marks that she was happy to carry.

He kissed a path lower, discovering her freshly waxed pussy.

She hadn’t counted on them getting enough time for sex on the island, what with a two-year-old who liked to crawl into bed with them, and a house full of people, but she’d hoped Volkan might find a few minutes of privacy for them, and now she was getting her wish in a glorious way.

“Oh god!” she gasped, digging her fingers into the lounge mattress as Volkan dipped his tongue inside her before settling into a rhythm he knew would drive her insane. Soon she was screaming her orgasm to the fluffy white clouds floating lazily above.

Volkan made his way up her body, easing his big hands under her shoulders and lifting her boneless body off the mattress. She groaned in protest until he gripped her by the ass and lowered her down onto his steely length. She flung her head back and moaned at the sky as he wrapped one arm around her waist and rocked her on his cock, lighting them both up with pleasure.

He took a fistful of her hair in his other hand and forced her to look at him, to see his brutal, possessive love. He was telling her in no uncertain terms that she belonged to him. Today. Tomorrow. Forever. That he would never let her go.

“We come together,” he said with a grunt, and she nodded.

She didn’t know how he could time it, because god knows, she’d never been able to hold off an orgasm. But Volkan could and often waited until she tipped over the edge and he could come with her.

He continued to fuck her, rocking his hips against her, kissing her, fucking her with his mouth, holding her so tight that she felt like she would burst. And then she did.

Tearing her lips from his, she gasped, “I’m coming!”

His hands tightened on her and she felt the hot gush of his seed as he bathed her from the inside, the rocking of his hips slowing as they both drifted in the sweet aftermath of incredible sex.

Volkan continued to hold her, his gaze intense. “You are a goddess, Yasmin Kartel.”

She smiled, then searched for her bathrobe. Spotting it, she leaned over until she could grasp the edge. Dragging it toward herself, she said, “I have an anniversary gift for you, too.”

“In your robe?” he asked, waggling his eyebrows. “I think I ruined the surprise when I unwrapped it.”

She giggled and smacked his shoulders. “In the pocket!”

She reached into the pocket and pulled the tube out, handing it to him.

He stared at it, then at her, his expression turning to shock. “Is this real?”

She grinned, nodded, and held up four fingers to indicate their fourth child.

“I fucking love you so much!” He shouted, jumping on top of her and knocking her back onto the bed, covering her face and chest in kisses. “I can’t fucking wait to be a parent with you again.”

“I love you too,” she whispered, wrapping her arms around his shoulders and holding him close as they celebrated their joy.

**THE END**

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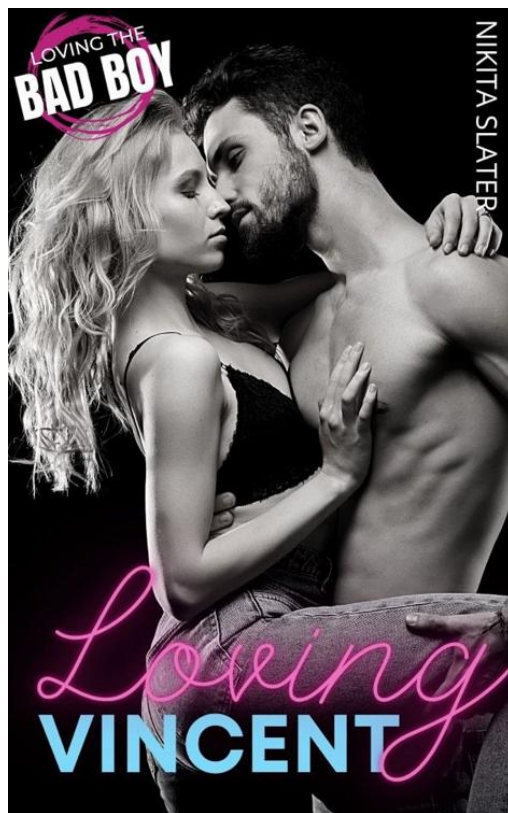
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## *Bonus: Loving Vincent*



“Are you fucking kidding me?” Vince snarled.

He stood slowly from behind his desk and shot Jared the type of glare he reserved for people that knew they truly screwed up. Usually the life expectancy that followed was extremely short. Of course, he wasn't going to off his business partner and best friend just because his plan wasn't going smoothly, but he was going to make the other man deeply uncomfortable for a few minutes.

Cracking his tattooed, scarred hands he placed his knuckles on the top of his desk, which was littered with



papers, and growled, “How exactly did things not go according to your plan? You told me to trust you with this. That you would make sure Enrico would get the information he needed to make the hit. Now you’re telling me it won’t go down as planned? Am I getting this right?”

Jared nodded his big, shaggy head and looked grim. “That about sums it up. There were unforeseen circumstances.”

Vince breathed in through his nose, trying to call up some patience, a quality he wasn’t known for. “Tell me.”

“The girl refuses to cooperate.”

He frowned, trying to recall a girl. He hadn’t actually been briefed on many of the details. It hadn’t been necessary. That’s what he had people for. He just needed the hit done, so the fucker that cut off one of Vince’s suppliers was taken out and used as a message for anyone else that thought prison was a safe haven from his wrath.

“What girl?” he asked impatiently.

“The health nurse that oversees Enrico’s insulin shots,” Jared explained. “We’re using her to get a message to him. Enrico’s gang-affiliated, same as the rest of us. The prison locks them down tighter than a nun’s ass. No visitors, no calls. She’s the only one he sees regularly.”

Vince nodded absently. He knew how the prison dealt with gang; he’d had the displeasure of experiencing their local penal system himself. It’d been a risky move putting any of them back in the pen for that reason. It had been Enrico’s idea to go in because he had a minor outstanding warrant, meaning he wouldn’t be in the prison long. And Enrico’s need for health care gave Vince a way to send messages. Except apparently their nurse wasn’t bribable.

“How much did you offer her?” Vince asked. Fuck, anyone could be bought. Jared hadn’t gone high enough.

“I ended around five hundred large, just because she was pissing me off.”

“Jesus fuck,” Vince exploded. “Half a million! Who the fuck does this bitch think she is? A trust fund baby?”

Jared smiled grimly. “That’s just it, she lives like a damn beggar in a shack in the old army barracks on the edge of town. Place should be condemned.”

“I assume you went to plan B when bribery didn’t work?”

Jared didn’t say anything, refusing to make eye contact. Vince swore the giant enforcer would’ve rubbed the toe of his booted foot on the carpet if he thought he could get away with it. What the fuck?

“You didn’t force her compliance? Rough her up a little?” Vince assumed.

“Not exactly.”

Vince rubbed a hand over his face, flexing his tattooed fingers over his eyes. “Why exactly am I paying you?”

“I couldn’t do it, man. As soon I threatened her, she begged me not to hurt her. She said she has a little girl. You know how I feel about kids!”

It was almost laughable that Jared, who was the size of a bear, could be brought to his knees by small children and mothers. Both men were ex-bikers. After decimating their own club for betraying them by setting them up after a drug pick up went wrong, they’d moved onto greener pastures and created their own opportunities. They both still looked the part with large, ruthless physiques, tattoos and take-no-prisoner attitudes. Most of the guys on Vince’s payroll fell into a similar category. Except for the Accountant. That guy was beyond fucked up.

“Okay, fine. Where’s the kid? Just threaten the little urchin. You don’t have to mean it, just shake mom up a little, get her compliance. I don’t care what you do, just do your fucking job.”

“Apparently Lola’s dad has custody. Jenna lost the custody battle because he has shit tons of money and lied about her mental health in court. He even made it so she only gets supervised visits so she has to see him four times a month, the fucker,” Jared growled, popping his knuckles.

Vince raised his eyebrows. “Did you have a nice cozy tea and chat with our little nurse who you’re supposed to be turning into an informant? Jesus man. So why didn’t you mess her up after you found out the kid wasn’t around?”

Jared stared at him in disgust, like he had no heart, which was probably true. “She’s still a mom,” he said, like that explained everything.

Vince slammed his fist on the desk. “I own this fucking city and one little nurse thinks she can fuck up my plan? If we don’t get Enrico the time and place for the hit we’re going to miss our opportunity to send the fucking Ghosts a message,” Vince said, an unholy light gleaming in his eyes. “I assume you have a file on her, with her complete schedule?”

Jared handed it over without another word. There would be no arguing with Vince, even if Jared liked the health nurse. There’s no way she’d be getting her daughter back now, she was about to become collateral damage in a war she didn’t even know about.

Vince flipped the file open and stopped cold, dark eyes on the contents. He picked up the picture in his long fingers and held it up taking in her sweet, pretty features and shoulder length red hair. Lifting his other hand he pointed at her, marking her with a finger tattooed with the word ‘hell’.

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## Bonus: *Scarred Queen*



Ignacio Hernandez had never before brought a woman to a meet. Then, they'd never met at a club before. The entire scene was unprecedented. Reyes didn't do unprecedented, but he was willing to make an exception because he was curious. He could sever the Miami connection if he had to. It would cause some shockwaves, but it wasn't out of the question. Ignacio was beginning to annoy him anyway. His poor decisions were beginning to affect the Bolivian. Such as bringing a woman like *her* to a meet with a man like *him*. Something that was meant to show off Ignacio's power and wealth would become a big mistake.

His gaze flickered over the woman, calmly drinking her champagne and orange juice as though she weren't sitting at a table with four of the most dangerous men on the continental East coast. Two kingpins and their right hands. Only Reyes didn't think she was as calm as she appeared. Her wrist trembled slightly, giving her away. She had enough presence to make sure that tiny shake ceased by the time it got to her slim fingers where they clenched the crystal of her glass. It wasn't the fingers or her ability to remain coolly poised while the men around her talked business that captured his curiosity. It was the mark on the back of her delicate hand, permanent slash lines, viciously marring her porcelain skin.

Anger burned deep in his gut, surprising him. Reyes rarely felt anything. Ever. Certainly not for a woman. This was how he made effective decisions. How he moved trade across borders with ease and cool logic. Emotion had been removed from him. First by a ruthless father, then by a vicious military stint in his home country and finally by an unrelenting, merciless prison sentence that had systematically broken him before he had, in turn, broken down the prison itself and owned it from the inside out. By the time he was released it was into a world of his own making; a world shaped by him on the inside and ruled by him on the outside.

Yet the sight of this cool, blond beauty, so broken yet utterly resilient was doing something to him, forcing him to *feel*. He shifted in his seat, sliding his arm across the back of the leather, his eyes never leaving her while he listened to the other men speak. Negotiate terms. He didn't need to add his voice. Alejandro, his right hand, knew the terms. Knew not to fuck up while in pursuit of new deals for the boss.

Reyes wanted her. The electrifying anger he felt when his eyes caressed that mark assured him he would take the woman and make her his. Not because it infuriated him that she had been abused. No, he was not a good enough man to care about that. He was under no illusions he would treat her any better than Ignacio. Hell, he'd probably treat her much worse. Because Ignacio undoubtedly set her up like a trophy in his great mausoleum of a house and then ignored the unapproachable beauty.

Reyes had no intention of ignoring her. He was going to take her and fuck every inch of her, just the way he wanted. Hard, brutal, mean. Exactly how he was. Exactly how this world had shaped him. Because he could. She was about to become spoils of war.

No, he wasn't angry about the mark on her hand at all. He was pissed that the mark was twisted into the shape of an "H" and not an "R." He wanted her to belong to him, to the King. When he got his hands on the woman, that would be the first thing he changed.

Finally, after nearly an hour of sitting in the booth together, his eyes rarely leaving her face, she lifted hers to meet his uncompromising gaze. And for the first time in his life, he felt his heart stop in his chest. He was unprepared for the impact. Her eyes – one startling green and the other amber brown – were vivid, stunning and unrelenting. Though her expression didn't flicker once from the blank mask of icy beauty, he saw the burning disdain, the heated fury buried deep within those fiery orbs for the men that surrounded her. She despised all of them.

His lip lifted in an answering sneer. She refused to drop her eyes from his challenge, despite her husband sitting at the same table. He wanted nothing more, in that moment, than to take this scarred Queen from her throne and tame her. He vowed, then and there, that he would eventually have her.

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## *About the Author*



Nikita Slater is the USA Today Bestselling Author of action-packed suspenseful romance. She writes dark romance, mafia romance, and post-apocalyptic dystopian romance. She lives on the beautiful Canadian prairies with her son and her crazy awesome dog. She has an unholy affinity for books, wine, pets and anything chocolate. Despite some of the darker themes in her books (which are pure fun and fantasy), Nikita is a staunch feminist and advocate of equal rights for all races, genders and non-gender specific persons. When she isn't writing, dreaming about writing or talking about writing, she helps others discover a love of reading and writing through literacy and social work.

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