

A man in a dark suit, white shirt, and dark tie is leaning against the hood of a classic black car. He has his hands in his pockets and is wearing a watch on his left wrist. The background shows a blurred city street with buildings.

CHOSEN

by a sinner

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MICHELLE HEARD

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Dedication

To the ones who like their heroes over the top possessive and
their heroines feisty and powerful.

Songlist

Click here - [*Spotify*](#)

Hit Me With Your Best Shot – ADONA

I've Got A Bad Side – ADONA

Promises – EMO

Buttlet With Butterfly Wings – Tommee Profitt, Sam Tinnesz

Without You – Ursine Vulpine, Annaca

Never Again – Tommy Docherty

Good To Me – EMO

Heaven – Calum Scott

Synopsis

My family rules the world, and I always get everything my heart desires.

Well, almost everything.

Okay, so there's one thing I can't have.

Luca Cotroni.

Rude, arrogant, and demanding as hell, he's the man I lust after and despise more than anything.

After a wild birthday party where I clearly had too many drinks, I wake up next to Luca wearing his ring.

A wedding ring.

Who accidentally gets married to the head of the Italian mafia?

Me. A bratva princess.

Our fathers insist we remain married for six months before we're allowed to consider an annulment.

Six months.

I have to live with him. Sleep next to him. Be a wife to him.

It's fifty-fifty whether we'll kill each other or give in to the lust.

Chosen By A Sinner

*Mafia / Organized Crime / Suspense
Romance*

STANDALONE in The Sinners Series

Book 4

Authors Note:

This book contains subject matter that may be sensitive for
some readers.

There is triggering content related to graphic violence.

18+ only.

Please read responsibly.

Priesthood:

*A gathering of Mafia dons that was in effect
a convocation of the nation's priesthood of
organized crime*

“Assumption is the mother of all fuck-ups.”

~ **Mariya Koslov**

Family Tree

Luca Cotroni



Family Business: Italian Mafia

Father: Lucian Cotroni (Cruel Saints)

Mother: Elena Cotroni (Cruel Saints)

Best Friend: Viktor Vetrov

Godfather: Alexei Koslov

Mariya Koslov



Family Business: Bratva

Father: Alexei Koslov (Tears of Salvation)

Mother: Isabella Terrero (Tears of Salvation)

Best Friends: Viktor Vetrov & Violet Hayes

Godfather: Demitri Vetrov (Tears of Betrayal)

Chapter 1

Mariya

Luca; 34. Mariya; 26.

Bouncing on the balls of my feet, I chuckle as Dad walks in a slow circle around me.

My dad is the retired head of the bratva, and my Mom's responsible for toppling many sex trafficking syndicates. My parents are badass to the bone and powerful. Hence, when Dad says it's time for a sparing session, I don't argue and do as I'm told.

"Come on, old man. I don't have all day. I still need to go collect my dress and get some last-minute shop—" My words cut off as Dad lunges at me, then my feet are swiped from under me, and my butt hits the mat hard.

I let out a burst of laughter while groaning.

"Old man, my ass," he mutters. "Little shit."

I climb to my feet, then dart forward. Grabbing hold of Dad's shoulders, I swing my body around his and wrap my legs around his neck. I take him down with a twist of my torso, and we both slam down onto the mat.

Someone starts to clap their hands, and my head snaps to the gym's doorway.

“Not bad, little sister,” Viktor praises me.

We might not be related by blood, but that doesn't matter. Not only do I consider Viktor my best friend, but my older brother as well. We were raised as siblings because our parents have an unbreakable bond.

Viktor's dad, Uncle Demitri, is my godfather, and Dad is Viktor's godfather. Since before I was born, both families have lived on the same property. I'm trained the same as Viktor, but because I have the protection of my family, I never take the sparing sessions seriously and just do it to appease my dad.

Viktor, on the other hand, is better than our fathers, which he needs to be, seeing as he's the head of the bratva.

My eyes land on the other man by Viktor's side. Luca Cotroni, the head of the Italian mafia and Viktor's best friend. Our families are close, and he's also Dad's godson.

The man is notorious for the ruthless way he dominates the arms market. No one dares go up against him and he's gained the respect of all the other mafia heads and my father, who's not easy to impress.

It's also one of the reasons I think so highly of him. We might not get along, but it doesn't stop me from admiring what he's achieved at the age of thirty-four.

Sigh, I've had a crush on him since I discovered my hormones. It's my most guarded secret – one I'll take to my grave, seeing as Luca is always indifferent toward me. It infuriates me to no end, and the little jabs we take at each other don't help either.

The man is tall, dark, and handsome – an Italian work of art with a square jaw and a mouth I’ve had wild fantasies about.

Wearing a pair of sweatpants and a white t-shirt tailored for his muscled chest, he’s nothing short of a masterpiece. Every inch of him radiates confidence and power.

Damn, those sweatpants. H.O.T.

Just like Viktor, Luca is dangerous and ruthless. He’s also arrogant and demanding. But none of that stops me from lusting after the man.

I should get my head examined.

Luca smiles at Dad. “Uncle Alexei, good to see you.”

“You too, son.” Dad swipes up a towel and pats the beads of sweat from the back of his neck. “When are your parents arriving?”

“Tonight.”

Dad nods, then gives me a sideways hug. “Good session. Same time next week.”

“Yes, Daddy.”

When Dad leaves the gym, Viktor and Luca walk to the mat.

Curious, I ask, “Are you going to spar?”

“Yeah.” Viktor shoots a grin my way. “I need to kick some ass.”

“You wish,” Luca mutters.

He doesn't even look my way, and it hasn't escaped my attention that he didn't even bother to greet me.

Rude.

Just to rain on his parade, I smile sweetly at him. "Hi, Luca. It's good to see you again. I'm fine, thanks for asking."

His eyes only touch on me for a second. "Mariya, a pleasure as always."

Ugh.

I walk to where my towel and water bottle are lying and pick them up. I pat the towel over my cheeks and neck while watching the men take their positions.

Kick his ass, Viktor.

Viktor starts to move, lightly bouncing on his feet, but Luca doesn't move a muscle.

As I lift the bottle to my lips, Luca suddenly lunges, turns his powerful body in mid-air, and slams the heel of his foot against the side of Viktor's head. Then he lands on his feet and swipes Viktor's legs from under him.

Jesus.

I've fought Viktor before, and I've never been able to get the drop on him.

The bottle is still suspended halfway to my mouth, my jaw practically lying on the floor as I try to breathe past the instant burst of lust warming my lady parts.

Viktor's quickly back on his feet, and they lunge at each other, moving so damn fast, I can only blink as I watch them fight.

I realize Dad's been taking it easy on my ass because I don't stand a chance against them.

I keep drooling over Luca until they take a breather. With his breaths coming fast and a serious expression on his face, he glances at me.

So, so hot.

Then I realize Luca's watching me watch him. My stomach does a crazy somersault, and rattled because I was caught ogling him, I turn to leave but head in the wrong direction. "Get your shit together," I mutter under my breath before storming in the direction of the door.

I swear my brain melts into a puddle of hormones whenever that man is around.

It's so frustrating having a crush on someone who doesn't even see you as a person worth his time.

It's your birthday tomorrow. Go collect the dress you ordered and pamper yourself.

Forget about Luca Cotroni.

Ugh, I wish.

I've tried getting over him for eleven years, but it's no use. The more he ignores me, the more I want him.

It's a vicious cycle I can't escape.

Chapter 2

Luca

Mariya Koslov – the only woman alive with the power to drive me fucking crazy.

Christ, does she drive me crazy.

I've spent the past three months defending my turf in Europe from the Albanians, constantly flying between Italy and LA. Belonging to the Priesthood, a brotherhood of sorts, Viktor and I also had to take time to help Gabriel Demir, the head of the Turkish mafia, who took his revenge on the Polish mafia.

It's been fucking busy, as always, never having any time to even think about pursuing Mariya. My only saving grace is that most men are too fucking scared of her family to try to date her, and it's kept her single while I took over the mafia from my father.

I've known her all my life, but where Viktor and I became best friends, there's always been an invisible line drawn between Mariya and me. The only reason I haven't mentioned an arranged marriage to our families is because I know Uncle Alexei will never agree to one unless Mariya's willing. She's a bratva princess, and no one will force her to do something she disapproves of.

As Viktor takes a fighting stance, my thoughts turn to the fucking sexy scene I walked in on earlier when Mariya flipped her father to the ground.

God damn, it was hot. I knew she received training, but I didn't realize she was that good.

Viktor's foot connects with my thigh, and I only have time to lean backward before his other foot narrowly misses my head.

"Stop fucking dreaming and fight," he taunts me.

I focus on the sparing session, and we start to move. Having done this many times before, neither of us gets a good hit in, and by the time we're done, we're soaked in sweat and gasping for air.

Also, thinking about Mariya when I'm facing off with Viktor is just plain stupid, but damn, the woman is distracting.

She radiates elegance, beauty, and power – royalty in the mafia world. A true princess who's worth killing for.

She's one of the reasons I'm still single at thirty-four. The other is that I've been too busy working my ass off to bother dating. But I'm not getting any younger. I'll have to figure out a way to erase the line between Mariya and me.

"Are you coming to Mariya's birthday party tomorrow night?" Viktor asks.

"Of course." I wouldn't miss it for the world. It's an excuse to be around the woman I consider my future wife.

People see her as a spoiled socialite who has nothing better to do than spending her parents' money.

But there's more to her than meets the eye.

Mariya loves with all her heart. She'd die for her family and friends, and that kind of loyalty is rare in our world.

She's stubborn, but that's a turn-on for me. The more she snubs me, the more I want her.

But what I love most about her is that she's always direct. The woman doesn't play games, and that's so fucking refreshing.

I have to make her love me, which is a problem because I've never seen Mariya date. I have no idea what she finds attractive and what she hates.

I can't ask Viktor because he'd probably try to kill me for even thinking romantically about his sister.

If only I knew where her mind's at, it would help a great deal.

"We're going to Vegas this weekend. You want to come? I could use the company while babysitting Mariya and Violet."

A smile spreads over my face. "Sure. The break will do me good."

We walk out of the gym, and I head to the guestroom I used to change out of my suit.

Grabbing the back of my sweat-soaked shirt, I tug the fabric over my head. Just as I turn the corner, someone slams into my chest. Instinctively my arms come up, and I grab hold of a pair of slender shoulders.

As I look down, Mariya's eyes widen as she stares at my chest, one of her hands firmly planted on my abs.

“Good God,” she breathes, then her gaze burns over my skin until she locks eyes with me. Her pupils are dilated, her lips parted.

We stare at each other for a moment until Mariya takes a step back. She shakes her head once, turns around, and hightails it away from me.

Interesting.

The princess liked what she saw.

The corner of my mouth lifts in a smirk as I step into the guestroom so I can shower and change back into my suit.

Chapter 3

Mariya

Wearing a deep burgundy evening dress that falls softly around my body, complimented by my favorite black high-heels, I head toward the entertainment room at the back of the mansion.

The rubies my parents gave me for Christmas adorn my earlobes and neckline, and the soft scent of my favorite French perfume floats around me.

The murmur of voices blends with soft classical music. Like they do every year, my parents arranged a birthday party for me. A handful of the guests have business relations with the bratva, and the rest are from the most influential families in the world.

Entering the room, decorated with fairy lights and glittering black balloons floating against the ceiling, my gaze scans over the large group of people wearing elegant dresses and expensive suits. The catering staff moves between the guests with trays of champagne and appetizers.

Spotting Violet, my best friend, a smile tugs at my mouth as I walk to where she's standing awkwardly in a corner.

Violet's eyes land on me, a wide smile spreads over her gorgeous face, then she grabs me into a playful hug. "Finally,

the birthday girl decided to grace us with her presence. I thought you were planning to leave me alone with all these people.”

We hug, her sweet perfume drifting to me. Violet is as introverted as they come, whereas I’m a people person. Our polar-opposite personalities complement each other well.

Her father, Tristan Hayes, and my father run a company together, so we’ve been friends since diapers.

“Shut up,” I mutter. “You saw me thirty minutes ago when you said hello.”

“For me, that’s *hours* too long,” she jokes.

We pull apart, and I glance over the guests. “Have you seen my parents?”

“Nope. Mine called to let me know they’re running late.”

Just then, a rush of murmurs spreads through the room. Turning toward the entrance, my lips curve up as I watch my parents walk into the entertainment room, followed by Uncle Demitri, Aunt Ariana, and Viktor.

Dad’s eyes snap in my direction, then his smile widens, love softening his gaze. Letting go of Mom, he walks to me, and the moment I’m within touching distance, he sweeps me against his broad chest. “*Printsessa*.” I’m engulfed in a tight hug. “Happy birthday, my baby-girl.”

I let out a happy sigh as I soak in the safety of my father’s arms. “Thank you, Daddy.”

When he lets go of me, Dad gestures in the direction of the table that’s overflowing with gifts. “All for you.”

Yeah, I'm spoiled rotten.

I'm not ashamed to admit I'm a daddy's girl. I have the best father in the world. Alexei Koslov might be one of the most dangerous men this planet has ever seen, but to me, he's safety, love, and home.

He's also the reason I'm still single at twenty-six. There isn't a man alive that's brave enough to date me. A one-night stand, sure. But the moment things become serious and they have to meet Dad or Viktor, they run away with their tails tucked between their legs. *Cowards.*

Mom moves closer. "Give me a hug before we get the party started."

I wrap my arms around her, and for a solid minute, we just hold each other before she whispers, "Happy birthday, sweetheart."

"Thank you, *Mami.*" With Dad being Russian and Mom Colombian, I've learned some Russian and Spanish growing up. Mostly terms of endearment and curse words.

As Mom pulls away, I hear movement behind me. Before I can glance over my shoulder, strong arms wrap around me, and I'm lifted from my feet. "Viktor!" I shriek, laughter bubbling over my lips.

"Happy Birthday, little sister," Viktor says before planting a kiss on my cheek. "You're getting old."

Pulling away from him, I give him a playful scowl. "Not as old as you."

"True," he sighs as if he's not two but twenty years older than me.

A server with a tray of food draws his attention, he grabs a salmon appetizer and pops it into his mouth.

Uncle Demitri and Aunt Ariana wish me a happy birthday as well, then they scatter between the guests to socialize.

I watch as Dad places his hand on Mom's lower back, always keeping hold of her as they greet Mr. and Mrs. Cotroni. Seeing Luca's parents, my gaze searches for the man who left me stunned out of my mind yesterday after I bumped into his bare chest in the hallway.

God, those abs. Rock hard and perfect.

The man looked hot as hell, which had me turning around and walking away because I didn't know how to handle the situation.

My attention is drawn to Viktor as he asks, "What time do you want to leave?"

I've planned a weekend getaway with my friends. Usually, we'd go somewhere exotic, but Viktor is too busy, so to accommodate him, we're going to Vegas.

"In two hours," I murmur, my eyes scanning the guests again for any sign of Luca.

It's hard being attracted to the man you despise more than anything. He always makes me feel like I'm less and not worthy of his time.

Okay, maybe despise is the wrong word. I'm more annoyed than anything because I always get what I want, except for Luca Cotroni.

Sigh. It sucks.

I'm glancing to my right when an intense presence makes the tiny hairs rise on the back of my neck. My heart sets off at a wild pace, my breath catching in my throat.

He's here.

"Business taken care of?" I hear Viktor ask.

"Yes." The single word is clipped, carrying the danger of a flying bullet aimed directly at my heart.

Sweet Jesus. Calm down, Mariya.

For the sake of my pride, I feign indifference as I turn my attention to Luca, whose eyes are resting coolly on me.

My stomach dips and spins with nerves. The effect this man has on me is downright scary at times.

"Mariya," he murmurs, and taking hold of my arm, he leans into me. Tingles explode over my skin from his touch, and I'm unable to stop my eyes from drifting shut as the distance between our faces shrinks.

Breathe.

Every inch of my body is overly aware of Luca, my insides practically vibrating from the attraction I feel whenever I'm near him.

His lips brush my left cheek, then my right as his woodsy aftershave wraps around me, along with the intensity of a thousand suns.

This man is the only one with the power to make me feel small and worthless. This has to stop.

With our faces only an inch apart, I feel the warmth of his breath, the confidence rolling off him in waves, and the

magnetism of his entire being. It's all overwhelmingly intoxicating.

"Luca," I whisper politely as he pulls away from me.

Our eyes lock for a moment, and I feel the punch to my stomach.

"Happy Birthday," he murmurs, his tone low and deep before the air around me cools as the heat of his attention leaves me.

He starts to turn away from me, and in a desperate attempt to keep his attention on me for a moment longer, I say, "I'm surprised you came."

He glances back at me. "Why wouldn't I?"

I shrug as I hook my arm through Violet's. "The great Luca Cotroni is always so busy. I didn't think you'd make it."

"It's your birthday. I thought I'd spare ten minutes," he mutters before turning away and shutting me down completely.

Gorgeous bastard.

I steer Violet away from Viktor and Luca while they start to talk about business.

"Why do you always get worked up around Luca?" Violet asks.

"You know why."

"Still, you'd think after years of doing this dance with him, you'd give up and find someone else to lust after. It would exhaust the hell out of me."

“I know,” I mutter. “If only it were as easy as flipping a switch.” Changing the subject, I ask, “Where is Oliver?”

Oliver and Violet recently got engaged, but they’re already acting like an old married couple. It’s endearing.

She gives me an apologetic look. “He called ten minutes ago to say he’s sick as a dog. It sounds like he came down with one of those twenty-four-hour bugs.”

“Oh no.” I squeeze her arm, then ask, “Are you still coming to Vegas? I’ll understand if you can’t.” The selfish side of me hopes she’s still coming. I was looking forward to dancing the night away with her.

A bunch of the guests wish me a happy birthday, and when we step outside into the balmy summer air, I inhale a deep breath.

“You know how it is,” Violet says. “Men are always dying when they get sick. I’ll make it up to you. Once Oliver is better, we can have a spa day.”

I feel a flicker of disappointment but smile at Violet, not wanting her to feel bad. “It’s okay.”

I might as well cancel the plans for Vegas. There’s no way I’ll get Viktor on a dance floor. Besides, he’s busy with work and a girl he kidnapped after an attack on the Sicilians. The only reason the family hasn’t lost their shit about Viktor keeping a woman prisoner is that we know he won’t hurt her, and Rosalie has nowhere to go after her family was wiped out.

From the couple of times I’ve interacted with Rosalie, she’s made it clear she’s not interested in getting to know me, so I haven’t forced the subject.

Viktor asked us to trust him and not to interfere, so we're all respecting his wishes. *For now.*

"*Printsessa*," Dad calls me.

I walk to Dad's side, and he wraps an arm around my lower back, giving me a sideways hug while pressing a kiss to my forehead. His sharp gaze searches my features, then he asks, "What's wrong?"

"Oliver is sick, so Violet won't be able to come to Vegas." I step in the direction of the doorway so I can call the hotel. "I'm just going to cancel the reservations, then I'll be back for the toast."

"What?" Violet gasps. "No, don't cancel your plans because of me."

I smile at Dad and Violet. "It will be just Viktor and me, and besides, he's busy. It's okay."

"I'm never too busy for your birthday weekend," Viktor says behind me, making me turn to look at him. "We're going to Vegas." Then he grins at Luca. "Besides, Luca's a good dancer."

What?

My eyes dart to Luca's, and I instantly fall into the dark pools, my lungs forgetting how to function.

God, this man. Just having his eyes on me is enough to make me weak.

What were we talking about again? Oh, right. Vegas.

"Problem solved," Violet grins.

Because Dad's right next to me, I smile sweetly at Luca. "You don't mind coming to Vegas with us?"

Luca glances at Viktor and Dad, then a smile tugs at the left corner of his mouth, making him look hot as sin. "Not at all. It will be my pleasure."

I'm sure it will.

I know he's only saying it because of Viktor and Dad. He'd do anything for them. Sometimes I'm jealous of the friendship between them.

"I'll sleep better knowing you're both watching over my baby girl," Dad says, patting Luca on the shoulder before walking toward the small stage so he can make the toast.

Luca's eyes lock with mine again, making my stomach dip like I'm on a crazy rollercoaster ride. Clearing my throat, I mutter, "Don't do me any favors. I was actually hoping to enjoy the weekend."

His eyes darken, and I'm never sure whether it's because he loves this tit-for-tat between us or whether he wants to snap my neck.

A weekend in Vegas with Luca Cotroni. God help me.

I'll either die from an overdose of attraction, or we'll end up killing each other.

Chapter 4

Luca

Fuck, Mariya looks breathtaking tonight.

As always, her demeanor is standoffish, as if she's only tolerating my presence because of our families. But after the interest I saw in her eyes yesterday, I'm starting to think it's all an act.

This weekend in Vegas is just what I need. Time alone with Mariya. Viktor hates clubs, and I know he'll trust me with the woman he considers his little sister.

Feeling a hand on my shoulder, I tear my eyes away from the beautiful vision that's the Koslov princess and glance at my father.

His eyes flick from Mariya to me. "Just say the word, and I'll talk to Alexei."

Dad's the only one who knows about my feelings for Mariya.

I shake my head. "We both know it won't do any good. He'll never force her, and that's the last thing I want." Changing the subject, I ask, "When are you heading back to Italy?"

Dad and Mom are visiting the Koslovs during their vacation. Since before I was born, Dad and Uncle Alexei have

been close friends and allies. Uncle Alexei has saved Dad's life on more than one occasion, making their bond unbreakable. Much like the friendship I have with Viktor.

I'm the spitting image of my father and have been named after my grandfather, who was a great man before he was assassinated.

"In a week," Dad answers. "Will you be joining us on the flight?"

I shrug. "I have a couple of things to take care of in LA. We'll see."

"Can I have everyone's attention?" Uncle Alexei's voice comes over the speakers. We turn our attention to where he's standing on the stage. "Thank you for celebrating my baby girl's birthday with us."

Thank God the man doesn't know about the filthy things I want to do to his baby girl. He'd probably kill me with his bare hands.

Taking another sip of whiskey, I swallow down a chuckle.

Uncle Alexei's eyes rest on Mariya with absolute adoration.

Where all the other fuckers don't stand a chance of getting past him, I know it will be the least of my problems. My gaze settles on Mariya. I just have to convince her we belong together, and everything else will fall in place. I know it will be a virtually impossible task because she's stubborn as fuck and a proud woman.

"I can't believe she's twenty-six already. Time has gone by way too quickly."

I glance back to Uncle Alexei, and when our eyes lock, my lips curve into a smile. He watches me for a moment too long, telling me he caught me staring at his precious daughter.

Slowly, the corner of his mouth curves with a knowing grin, then he continues with the toast. “I’d give all my earthly possessions to turn back time to the day our Mariya was born so I can have the honor of being her father all over again.”

I watch as Mariya beams in the spotlight of her father’s attention.

Would I give everything for Mariya Koslov?

I inhale deeply, my eyes burning over her creamy skin, the elegant curve of her neck, her stunning-as-fuck body, and her silky black hair.

Yes. I would.

It’s time to make the bratva princess mine.

No matter what it takes.

No matter what I have to do.

During the short flight to Vegas, I check in with Lorenzo and Diego, who are part of the *la Famiglia*. They keep an eye over our European territory whenever I’m in the US.

Lorenzo’s father, Leo, was my mother’s personal guard, and Diego’s father, Franco, was Dad’s second in charge before Dad gave the two families each a seat of power in the mafia.

Needless to say, I trust the men with my life, having grown up with them.

Mariya spends the time updating her social media accounts while Viktor takes a quick nap.

Tucking my phone into the breast pocket of my jacket, I relax in the luxurious leather seat, my eyes settling on the beauty across from me.

She changed into a tight pair of jeans, a silk blouse, and fuck-me heels.

The perfect princess as always.

Love and the desire to possess Mariya in every way possible stir beneath my skin like a predator stalking its prey.

She glances up from her phone, her eyes touching on Viktor before locking with mine. Her gaze narrows slightly, then she tilts her head. “Already regretting coming along?”

“No.” A smirk curves my lips. “I’m actually looking forward to this weekend.”

So. Fucking. Much.

Her tongue darts out, swiping over her bottom lip, making her look like the goddess of seduction.

Jesus, she oozes sex appeal by the bucket loads.

Mariya lets out a sigh and glances out of the window. “It’s so damn hard to read you.”

The corner of my mouth curves up higher. “That frustrates you?”

“Of course.” She brings her gaze back to mine. “I like to know what people are thinking.”

Seems she didn’t inherit the skill from her father. Uncle Alexei has an uncanny way of knowing exactly what someone’s thinking. There’s no fooling the man.

Wanting to keep her attention on me, I ask, “Which club are we going to?”

Mariya thinks for a moment. “Hakkasan.”

Of course. Only the best for the princess.

Her lips curve up, drawing my eyes to them. “I’ve booked two Grand Lakeview suites at Bellagio, so there will be enough space so we won’t get in each other’s way.”

I don’t like the idea of two suites, even if Mariya will have her guards with her.

“That’s not happening. We’ll stay in one suite.”

“Don’t give me orders.”

I narrow my gaze on her. “It’s not negotiable, *principessa*.”

She lifts a manicured eyebrow at me. “There are only two bedrooms in a suite. Are you planning on sharing a bed with Viktor?”

I fully intend on sharing a bed with you, mia regina.

I’m already thinking of her as ‘my queen.’

Instead of answering Mariya, I offer her a taunting smile which pisses her off even more.

Brace yourself, principessa. You have no idea what’s coming for you.

Chapter 5

Mariya

I wish Viktor would wake up. It's unnerving keeping Luca company even if my guards are at the back of the private jet. Not that Luca would physically hurt me.

I usually get along with everybody. But not Luca Cotroni. The man rattles me like no other.

And I hate feeling anxious.

Because my parents always treat me like a princess, it's given me a world of confidence. I have the power of the bratva behind me. I'm loved by many and never struggle with my self-esteem.

Except when it comes to the man seated across from me.

In his presence, I feel no bigger than a gnat.

I can't stop my eyes from leaving the window and settling on Luca. Something about him draws me in like a moth to a flame. An overpowering magnetism.

Needing to break the uncomfortable silence, I ask, "Do you really like to dance?"

I hate how nervous he makes me feel. I swear it reduces me to an idiot, with no sign of the sophisticated woman my

parents raised. It's also pathetic how little I know about Luca, seeing as I've known him all my life.

What's his favorite meal? Does he have hobbies?

My eyes widen slightly.

He doesn't have a girlfriend... right?

"Yes," Luca answers, his voice so damn calm and deep it sends a wave of goosebumps erupting over my skin.

Before I can censor my words, I ask, "No girlfriend that's going to try and kill me for keeping you away from her this weekend?"

Damn, Mariya! Why don't you just tell the man you want to have his babies while you're at it?

Luca's eyebrow raises with amusement. "No." The corners of his mouth curve up into a sinful smile. "No girlfriend... yet."

I deflate like a pricked balloon. "You have your eye on someone?"

Slowly Luca nods, the left corner of his mouth lifting higher.

Shit.

"I should send her my condolences," I mutter. My heart squeezes painfully, and I quickly turn my gaze away from him. Reaching for Viktor, I shake his shoulder hard. "Wake up."

Viktor shoots up straight in his seat, his eyes scan the cabin area, then he scowls at me. "Are we landing?"

"Soon," I mutter, letting out a huff.

I should've canceled the weekend. It's going to suck being around Luca, knowing he has his eye on another woman. It's probably only a matter of time before the engagement is announced.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I glare at the darkness outside the window.

"Why are you pissed off?" Viktor grumbles while shifting into a more comfortable position.

"I'm not." I've never been good at hiding my feelings, especially from my family. Letting out a sigh, I say, "We can still cancel the trip and tell the pilot to turn the jet around."

"Not happening." Viktor tugs on my arm and pulls me into a brotherly hug. "This is your weekend. We're going to have fun."

I doubt that. Knowing Luca is practically off the market upsets me more than I expected it would. Of course, I always knew the time would come. He'd get married, and I'd have to stop fantasizing about him.

I just...

I didn't expect it to happen so soon.

Viktor presses a kiss to my temple, then frees me from the hug. He signals the hostess closer. "Champagne."

Yes, please. The sooner I get drunk, the better.

Taking a flute from the hostess, I swallow the bubbly liquid down like water and hold my glass out for a refill.

Viktor grins at me. "Careful. You know it only takes three glasses to get you drunk."

That's what I'm hoping for, brother.

I sip the second glass, and when my gaze touches on Luca's, it's to catch him watching me with narrowed eyes. He tilts his head, the corner of his mouth lifts, and holding up his flute, he says, "To the bratva princess and a weekend she'll never forget."

After checking in and dropping our luggage off at the suite, which overlooks the iconic fountains of Bellagio, we're chauffeured to Hakkasan.

Adjacent to the main dance floor is the Pavilion. The VIP section has an outdoorsy feel with its oriental garden, dance floor, and private spaces. I love the dark wood and lush plants, my gaze appreciating the luxury as I sit down on a leather couch.

The VIP floor has its own DJ booth, the air pulsing with an energetic beat.

Viktor talks with my guards, Lev and Ivan, who moments later leave the VIP area.

When Luca sits down next to me and Viktor slumps down on the seat across from us, I ask, "Where did Lev and Ivan go?"

"I gave them the night off." Viktor gives me a cocky grin as he drapes his left arm on the back of the couch. "You have Luca and me."

True. Anyone would be stupid to attack Viktor, never mind Viktor and Luca. Plus, I can hold my own in a fight with all the training my dad's given me.

A server brings a bottle of champagne, flutes, two tumblers of whiskey, and a cherry bomb shot.

A smile tugs at my mouth as I pick up my drink. There's nothing I love more than cherries. Even though I'm already tipsy-ish from all the champagne, I practically down my alcoholic beverage, looking for the courage to get through this weekend at the bottom of the glass.

Viktor lets out a deep chuckle, shaking his head. "At this rate, we'll have to carry you out of here in less than an hour."

Ignoring Viktor's remark, I settle my gaze on the server. "Two more."

"One," Viktor corrects my order. "Just one." He gives me a look of warning. "Slow down."

Letting out a huff, I get up and walk to the dance floor. I don't care that I'm alone as I move to the middle of the elite crowd. Finding a space to dance, I close my eyes and let the music take me, hoping it will carry me miles away from the harsh reality that Luca will soon belong to another woman.

I lose myself in the beat, a relaxing buzz bubbling through my veins. My feet feel light, my body supple, and soon my mind clears of all the negative thoughts.

This is my happy place. Just me and the music.

I wish Violet were here.

Hands grip my hips, and I'm tugged back against a solid chest. Warm air tickles my ear. "Stop moving your ass like a fucking stripper."

Sweet Jesus.

The low rumble of Luca's voice, his strong hands gripping my hips, and the solid muscle pressing into my back – sends me on a rollercoaster of emotions I wasn't prepared for.

Maddening lust. Desperate need. Hopeless dreams.

Sweet, sweet, Jesus.

Without any effort, Luca turns me around to face him. In a split second, I notice his sleeves are rolled up, exposing his porn-worthy forearms, his tie hangs loose, and the top two buttons of his dress shirt have been undone, exposing golden skin.

God have mercy on my ovaries.

Wanting to save face, I mutter, "Nice to know you're staring at my ass."

Luca's hands move up my sides, the feel of them on my body so freaking seductive that I almost let out a moan. Slowly he pushes my arms up until I rest my forearms on his shoulders, my hands inches away from weaving into his thick black hair.

"I'm not blind. I appreciate beauty as much as the next man."

In a torturously seductive motion, his body takes ownership of mine, forcing my hips to swivel with his.

My lips part, my eyes lift, and I'm instantly sucked into the intensity of his dark irises. "You think I'm beautiful?"

Promises by *EMO* fills the air, weaving a spell around us. It strips me bare, putting me at Luca's mercy as he moves my body exactly how he wants it.

"Looking for a compliment from me, *principessa*?"

My blood heats, my breaths growing shallow and quick.

Luca's right hand moves to my lower back, keeping me pinned to him. He lifts his free hand to the side of my neck, brushing my hair away from my damp skin. "You know you're fucking exquisite."

Breathe.

God, don't forget to breathe, Mariya.

His fingers wrap around the back of my neck, then he leans slightly down, totally crowding me.

This moment is what wild fantasies are made of.

I have the great Luca Cotroni's attention and hands solely focused on me.

Does he feel the magnetism between us? Is it just me? Wishful thinking?

Time falls away, and there's only the hold this man has on me. The feel of his body pressing and brushing against mine. His eyes burning on me.

I don't want it to end.

But it does. The intense bubble explodes in my face as Viktor places a hand on my shoulder. He leans into us. "Will

the two of you be okay on your own? The music and flashing lights are giving me a headache.”

Luca’s hands fall away from me as he leans closer to Viktor. “Will you be okay on your own?”

Viktor smirks. “Do I really have to answer that dumb as fuck question?”

We move off the dance floor and head back to our table. Viktor gives me a quick hug. “Behave. Don’t drive Luca insane.”

I almost roll my eyes. I’m pretty sure it’s the other way around.

Picking up my drink, I toss the alcohol back, which has Viktor telling Luca, “Don’t let her get drunk. She’s grumpy as fuck when she has a hangover.”

Luca reassuringly pats Viktor’s back. “Get some rest.”

“I’ll make it up to you tomorrow,” Viktor promises me.

When he walks toward the stairs, I sit down on the cream leather couch and pour myself a glass of champagne.

I have zero time to squash all the emotions Luca evoked in me on the dance floor because he takes a seat next to me, rests his arm on the back of the sofa, and settles his penetrating gaze on me. “Just you and me, *principessa*.”

The way he calls me princess simultaneously sounds like a curse and a caress.

I love it.

Chapter 6

Luca

Things couldn't progress any better than if I had planned it myself.

I have Mariya all to myself.

With predatory possessiveness, I watch as she downs another glass of champagne. Her cheeks are flushed, her eyes sparkling as the alcohol strips her of the pressure of being a bratva princess.

She still looks uncomfortable being alone with me, so I don't stop her when she picks up the cherry bomb shot the server just placed down.

When she's done downing the drink, I take the glass from her and set it on the table. Taking hold of her chin, I force her to look at me. "Just how drunk are you right now?"

Instead of answering me, she narrows her eyes. "Why aren't we friends?"

The way her words slur tells me she's drunk as fuck.

My eyebrow lifts. "Because you drew a line between us."

"I did?" Confusion mars her forehead as she leans closer to me, resting her shoulder against the couch. "So it's not because you don't like me?"

Baby, like is the understatement of the fucking century. You have no idea what you do to me.

Our faces are inches apart, her breath sweet, her lashes lowered as if she's the predator and I'm the prey.

So fucking breathtaking.

Suddenly Mariya closes the distance between us, and her mouth slams against mine. My hand instantly moves to frame her cheek, and it doesn't even take a second for me to react.

Fuck, I've wanted this woman for so long that all rational thinking comes to a dead stop.

My tongue thrusts into the sweetness of her mouth, light explodes behind my eyelids, and every muscle in my body tightens. I grow impossibly hard in a nanosecond.

Christ Almighty.

I was hoping to convince Mariya to give us a chance, but never did I imagine I'd get to devour her mouth so soon.

A satisfied groan rumbles from deep in my chest as the kiss grows borderline filthy. She tastes intoxicatingly good. Our breaths speed up, our tongues war, and I almost lose self-control.

Usually, I wouldn't give a fuck and take what I want, but Mariya Koslov is not a woman you use as a one-night stand. You have to be worthy of her.

Reluctantly, I pull back, and my eyes search her face for any sign that she might regret the kiss. She's breathless, blinking as if she's caught in a daze and looking downright fuckable.

Christ, she's going to make me lose my mind.

Then it hits that Mariya was the one to initiate the kiss. Even though she's intoxicated, it has to mean she's definitely interested in me.

Having had enough of the loud music, I pick up the tumbler of whiskey and toss the fluid down my throat. Setting the empty glass down, I grip hold of Mariya's hand, pulling her to her feet.

I grab my jacket and place it over her shoulders which has her mumbling, "I don't want to go to the hotel."

"We're not." Wrapping my arm around her, I hold her slender body tightly to my side as I guide her to the exit.

I'm not gonna lie. It feels incredible having her lean into me.

Once we're outside and passing the golden lion statue at the front of the club, I say, "Let's take a walk so you can clear your head."

There's no way I can have a serious talk with her about us dating while she's drunk out of her mind.

She leans into me more and places her hand over my abs. "Hmm..."

On the spur of the moment, I press her to my chest in a tight hug, and lowering my head, I take a deep breath of her scent.

Christ, it feels so good just to hold her.

My eyes keep scanning our surroundings, totally on guard for any threats.

Reluctantly, I free her from the hug, and we walk down a couple of blocks. Suddenly Mariya tries to pull away from me, her arm lifting as she points toward something across the street. “Look.” She squints as she reads, “Traditional... Elvis...” she starts to laugh. “A mob wedding. God, we have to do it!”

Grabbing hold of my hand, she pulls me toward the chapel. Before I know what’s happening, Mariya approaches a man dressed as Elvis and demands, “Marry us.”

What?

My gaze snaps to her flushed face because it’s the last thing I expected to hear out of her mouth.

“Do you have a license?” Elvis asks, not in the least surprised. This kind of thing must happen a lot.

I’m just about to tug her away from the chapel when disappointment tightens her features. “Damn. There goes my only chance.”

My eyebrow lifts as I keep staring at Mariya, and the idea starts to grow on me at the speed of light.

Elvis steps closer. “The marriage bureau closes at midnight.” He checks the time on his wristwatch. “You still have forty minutes. Get a license, and we’re good to go.”

A smile splits over Mariya’s face as she stumbles into my side. “Yes!” Her fingers splay over my abs, her eyes shining like stars as she looks up at me.

Christ.

My gaze flicks between Elvis and Mariya, and when she takes hold of my hand and starts to drag me to the road to hail a cab, the thought solidifies in my mind.

I can get away with marrying Mariya tonight and blame it on us being drunk.

Holy fucking shit.

Am I willing to go that far to make her mine?

Yes.

Without a fucking doubt. I'd do anything to make this woman mine.

We climb into a cab, and Mariya excitedly tells the driver where to go. Drunkenly she slumps against me, trying to give me a mischievous grin. “Whoever you have your sights on can go fuck herself. You’re marrying me.”

I wrap an arm around Mariya to keep her locked to my side, then murmur, “Whatever you want, *mia regina*.”

Money takes care of many problems when you’re in a rush to get married.

In forty minutes, I manage to get a marriage license and wedding rings. I’m sure as fuck not shoving just any ring onto Mariya’s finger and got her the biggest diamond I could find in Vegas.

Back at the chapel, Mariya keeps laughing, finding it hysterically funny that they’re officiating a mob wedding for

us – a bratva princess and the head of the fucking Italian mafia.

Wearing a simple white cocktail dress, she looks stunning. Then again, she'll look gorgeous in anything. A happy smile never leaves her face as she stares up at me, her eyes sparkling like polished stones.

I've never seen her like this – carefree. She's always been overly polite or downright cold. But not tonight. Not with the alcohol rushing through her blood.

If I didn't know any better, I would've mistaken the sparkle for love. Knowing that's not the case, I need to get this wedding done before she sobers up.

I impatiently gesture for Elvis to hurry the fuck up. He rambles through the practiced lines until I finally get to push my ring onto Mariya's finger.

It looks perfect on her.

I clear my throat, then lock eyes with Mariya. "You probably won't remember a word I say, but I'm going to say it anyway." My hand grips hers, and our fingers intertwine. "You're the only woman for me, Mariya. I've waited patiently while building my empire, and now that I'm the head of –" I catch myself before saying *Italian mafia* in front of Elvis. "Now that I'm at the top, there's only one thing missing from my life." I step closer to her as I admit, "You." My thumb brushes over the diamond on her finger. "Everything I have, everything I am, is yours, Mariya."

After I have to help her push the ring on my finger, she places a hand against my jaw and stares up at me again. "Do

you feel it, Luca?”

“What?”

She stumbles slightly into my chest, then leans against me, her right hand gripping my shoulder. I wrap one arm around her to keep her standing.

With drunken bravery, she says, “The pull between us?”

My lips curve up. “I definitely feel every spark and sizzle, baby.”

Her smile grows with satisfaction. “Good.” She lets out a chuckle. “It’s not just me.”

Grinning, I ask, “Are those your vows?”

She shakes her head, tears starting to shimmer in her eyes. Her fingers brush over my cheek and jaw, her eyes filling with a look I haven’t seen before.

“I can’t cook or do anything wives are supposed to do, but I love you, and I’m hoping that will be enough.”

The words hit like a Tsunami. Hearing Mariya say she loves me knocks the air from my lungs. I’m so fucking stunned, I can only stare at her.

How the fuck did I not know? How did I miss it?

“It drives me insane,” Mariya continues. “I’ve loved you forever.” Unsteady on her feet, she leans heavier into me. “Plus, I’m good in bed.” A mischievous smile tugs at her lips. “*Really* good.”

I’m still recovering from the shock of hearing she loves me when she chuckles, ‘I do,’ binding herself to me for life.

Slowly my mouth curves up, intense satisfaction flooding my chest.

Jesus Christ.

It's done.

Mariya actually went through with marrying me and said she loves me.

Guilt threatens to ruin the moment because I took advantage of her intoxicated state, but I shove that shit deep down.

Lifting my hands, I frame her face, the black wedding band on my ring finger, reminding me we're bound until death. "You're mine, Mariya Cotroni."

Christ, hearing my last name attached to her name is everything.

My eyes drift over her beautiful features, unbelief filling my veins. Every ounce of my love, the possessiveness she makes me feel, and my obsession with her are clear as fucking day in my voice. "My wife."

She scrunches her nose, looking happier than I've ever seen her. "I like that."

Lowering my head, I tenderly press my mouth to hers. I take a deep breath of the fresh scent always floating around her, and the moment her lips part, my tongue slips inside her heat, savoring her unique taste.

Unlike earlier in the club, I'm overly conscious of every stroke of her velvety tongue against mine. I imprint the kiss

deep in my heart, knowing it might have to last me a while before I get to kiss her again.

I have no doubt Uncle Alexei will probably lose his shit, and he might pull a gun on me, but Mariya's worth facing death for.

That's if Mariya doesn't try to kill me herself when she wakes up tomorrow with my ring on her finger.

I tilt my head, deepening the kiss until I'm devouring her.

None of that matters because she's mine.

All. Fucking. Mine.

The realization hits again, washing over me like a tidal wave.

Mariya's married to me.

Tomorrow all hell might break loose, but I'll face whatever comes my way because there's no way I'm letting her go.

It doesn't fully settle in that we got married until we're back at the hotel, and I lower my sleeping bride onto the kingsize bed. She passed out during the ride back to the hotel.

Sitting down next to her, I brush the silky black strands away from her face. "You're probably going to want to kill me tomorrow." I lean forward until my face hovers over hers. "But what I want, I get, and there's no other woman I'd choose to be my wife."

Mariya groans and turns onto her side to snuggle into a pillow.

I drink in the sight of her parted lips, her creamy skin, her soft hair. She's absolutely vulnerable right now, and it makes a

surge of power fill my chest.

She's mine to protect.

My lips curve up in a satisfactory smile as I brush my fingers over her flushed cheek.

Getting up, I inhale deeply before I undress down to my boxers. I take a moment to splash water over my face and brush my teeth before I crawl into bed behind Mariya.

Wrapping an arm around my wife, I gently pull her to me. I press a kiss to the back of her neck, then whisper, "I know I did a shitty thing and should at the very least feel sorry, but I don't. With time you'll get used to being my wife. There's no other way because now that I have you, I'll never let you go." My lips brush over the soft skin of her neck again. "And even though I'll have to pretend that I don't know you love me, I'll wait patiently to hear you say those words to me again."

Mariya lets out a sleepy groan and snuggles closer to me, and the moment feels so fucking perfect, I struggle to keep from crushing her to me.

Holding the love of my life, I close my eyes. "*Ti amo.*"

Chapter 7

Mariya

A pulsing ache in my head wakes me up. Feeling like roadkill, I let out a groan as a wave of nausea hits.

“Dear God,” I mumble.

Throwing the covers back, I almost fall out of the bed. Even my steps feel loud as I stumble to the bathroom.

Jesus, how much did I drink?

I can’t remember much of the night before.

I squint at the toilet, not sure whether I actually need it. I wait a good minute before deciding to brush the horrific taste from my mouth.

Still feeling awful, I shower, and keeping the water cool helps to clear my head a little. After I’ve dried my body, I wrap a towel around me and look in the mirror.

I look like death.

Something sparkles on my hand, and my eyes lower to the enormous diamond on my ring finger.

Wha...

I start to blink faster.

OH.

My breathing speeds up.

MY.

My legs go numb, and I brace myself on the counter with my free hand.

GOD.

Shocked out of my mind and struggling with the hangover from hell, I can only stare at the ring on my finger.

What did I do?

More importantly, who did I do it with?

Jesus, did I get married?

The pulsing ache in my head increases tenfold as I try to recall what happened last night, but the last I remember was Viktor leaving the club.

Rushing into the bedroom to get dressed so I can get to the bottom of what happened last night, I come to a sudden stop when I see Luca standing with two cups of coffee by the foot of the bed.

He's dressed in a crisp blue suit, his eyes resting cautiously on me.

"Ahh..." My tongue darts out to wet my lips, and it has Luca holding one of the cups out to me. When I take the beverage from him, I ask, "What happened last night? I can't remember anything after Viktor left."

He takes a sip of his coffee, then my eyes widen at seeing the black band on his ring finger.

Mother of God.

Shocked prickles spread over every inch of my skin.

“The last I remember, I was having drinks with you,” he says.

My eyes dart to the ruffled sheets, then back to the ring on Luca’s finger.

Did we...?

“Did we...” I inhale deeper. “Did...?” My breaths come faster, then I gasp, “You and me?”

Reaching into his breast pocket, he removes a piece of paper and holds it out for me to take. I set the cup down on a table, my eyes jumping between Luca’s indifferent expression and the paper as I take it.

Opening the document, it’s to see both our names on a marriage certificate.

Oh, God.

Breathe.

My eyes dart back to Luca’s face, and my voice is nothing more than a shocked whisper. “We got married?”

With numb legs, I move to the side of the bed and sit down, staring at the marble tiles beneath my bare feet while clutching the towel with one hand and the marriage license with the other.

I got married to Luca Cotroni?

I don’t know how to feel or what to think.

Closing my eyes, I try to remember what happened, but there are only jumbled flashes of me laughing and Luca

smiling.

“Are you okay?” Luca asks.

I shake my head. “I don’t remember any of it. How much did we drink?”

“A lot,” he mutters. He takes the certificate from my numb fingers and tucks it into his pocket. “Drink the coffee.”

The cup appears in my line of sight, and I force some of the warm liquid down.

If we got married, did we...?

“Did we have sex?” I ask.

“No.”

My eyes lift to his. “How do you know?”

“We were both dressed when I woke up,” he replies, then his eyes burn on mine. “Plus, you’d definitely still feel me inside you after I’ve fucked you.”

Jesus.

My eyebrows dart up at his confidence and arrogance.

Before I can comment on what he said, the bedroom door opens. “How was –”

My head snaps toward the doorway, and I watch as Viktor stops.

He looks from me to Luca, then back to me. “Tell me it’s not what it looks like.”

I let out a groan and press my free hand to my forehead.

“Luca,” Viktor snaps, his voice tight.

“It’s not what it looks like,” Luca says, then I groan, “It’s worse.”

“Worse?”

I get up from the bed to tell Viktor the news, but Luca steps partially in front of me. “We’re married.”

Jesus, I can’t believe it.

Is this really happening?

Viktor blinks a couple of times, then slowly tilts his head. “I don’t think I heard right. You’re married?” He gestures between Luca and me. “The two of you?”

“Yes,” Luca replies. “We got married while drunk.”

I expect Viktor to lose his shit, but instead, he bursts out laughing until he’s struggling to get air in.

“Seriously,” I mutter. “This isn’t funny.”

Viktor wipes a tear from his cheek, and shaking his head, he says, “Pack up. We’re going home.”

“What?” I gape at my so-called big brother. “We need to get this marriage annulled before we go home. My dad can’t know. He’ll kill Luca!”

“Just out of curiosity,” Viktor says, his eyes locking with Luca’s, “Just how drunk were the two of you?”

“Very,” Luca answers.

“I can’t remember shit,” I add.

Viktor keeps staring at Luca while my eyes bounce between the two men, then he turns around and leaves the room, saying, “Wheels up in one hour.”

“But we first have to get it annulled,” I yell after him.

“Get dressed, Mariya,” Luca orders before leaving the room.

I stare at the door as it shuts, trying to figure out whether I’m offended or turned on because Luca gave me an order.

Jesus, Mariya. Get dressed!

I drop the towel and quickly pull on underwear, a pair of jeans, a silk blouse, and my favorite Dolce and Gabanna heels.

When I brush my hair and tie it into a sleek ponytail, I pause as the realization hits again.

I’m married to Luca.

I hold my left hand in front of me, staring down at the diamond ring.

It’s pretty.

Shit, I can’t believe I got married to Luca.

Part of me wishes it was real. Under normal circumstances, this would be nothing short of a dream come true.

But there’s nothing normal about us having a wedding in Vegas while drunk out of our minds.

What will this mean for the business ties between our families? How will our parents react?

Dad’s going to lose his shit.

When I finger the platinum band, I notice the ring fits perfectly. Even drunk, Luca or I made sure they got the size right.

God only knows what I said in my drunken state.

Calm down. Even if you spilled your guts and admitted your feelings to him, he doesn't remember.

After I've put on some makeup, so I don't look as dead as I feel, I gather my stuff into my bag and drag the luggage to the living room.

There's no sign of Viktor and Luca as I slump down on a couch, staring at the ring again.

I have no idea how to feel about this.

It doesn't change anything. We were both drunk, so it didn't mean a damn thing.

Luca's still indifferent toward me.

We'll get the marriage annulled and go on with our lives. Luca will marry the woman he's interested in, and I'll probably get drunk again.

But truth be told, it hurts knowing the only way I could get his ring on my finger was by him getting drunk.

I hear footsteps in the foyer, and lifting my head, it's to see Viktor and Luca walk into the living room.

"Did you call your attorney?" I ask. "Can he get it annulled?"

Viktor shakes his head. "There's no annulment until you've told your fathers. I'm not going over their heads with this."

"But you're the heads of the bratva and mafia," I almost shriek.

Viktor pins me with a look of warning. "There's a lot I'd do for you, but pissing off your father is not one of them. Let's

go.”

My eyes snap to Luca as I climb to my feet. “Can’t you do something?”

“Viktor is right. Let’s meet with our parents and take it from there.”

Gaping at the two men, I can only shake my head as I drag my luggage to the door. “It’s your funerals.”

Chapter 8

Luca

Right after I woke up, I called Dad to tell him what happened. We agreed there would be no annulment.

Knowing my father has my back, I feel pretty calm as we approach the front door of the Koslov mansion.

The moment we step inside the living room, the conversation stops, and Uncle Alexei lifts a surprised eyebrow as he says, “You’re back early. What happened?”

I glance at Dad, who subtly nods at me while Mariya gives her Mom and Dad a hug.

She clears her throat, her eyes darting to Viktor and me.

Steeling myself for what’s to come, I step forward. “There was a lot of drinking last night, and Mariya and I got married.”

Dangerously slow, Uncle Alexei’s eyes narrow, then he tilts his head, his hawklike gaze flicking from me to Mariya while it darkens. “You got married.”

It’s not a question, but Mariya starts nodding. “I’m sorry. I can’t remember anything.”

“Jesus,” Aunt Bella, Mariya’s mom, mutters, shaking her head in disbelief.

Uncle Alexei's features tighten with anger as he pushes to his feet, his eyes locking on me. "And you? What do you remember?"

Everything.

"Not much," I lie. He keeps staring at me, and where a lesser man would break, I square my shoulders, keeping a cool head.

Finally, his eyes leave me, only to settle on Viktor. "Where the fuck were you when this happened?"

"Asleep at the hotel," Viktor answers while trying not to yawn. "I'll leave you to deal with this. I have business to take care of." He glances at me. "Call me if you survive today."

I almost let out a chuckle but swallow it back as Uncle Alexei snaps, "You fucking got married?"

"Calm down." Aunt Bella tries to keep him from losing his shit. "Yelling won't fix anything."

"I'm not yelling," he mutters as he sits down again, then he looks at my father. "Lucian, anything you want to say?"

Dad locks eyes with his friend. "Bella is right, it doesn't help if we get upset. I think this is a good thing for both families."

Uncle Alexei nods but then mutters, "Motherfucking married." Locking eyes on Mariya, he snaps, "How do you feel about this?"

She takes a seat near her father, shaking her head. "A quick annulment would be best, right? Luca was planning to marry someone else, and we barely know each other."

“You’ve known each other all your lives!” he barks, which has Aunt Bella patting his thigh to calm him down again.

“I had no intention of marrying someone else,” I say, wondering where the hell she got the insane idea. “I agree with my father, this will be good for both families.”

Mariya’s eyes widen on me with total surprise. “You want to stay married? To me?”

Without any hesitation, I answer, “Yes. It will solidify the ties between the bratva and the mafia.” There’s a flicker of hurt on her face, which has me quickly adding, “It would be an honor to have you as my wife, Mariya.”

She stares at me with disbelief, then shakes her head, whispering. “Sure it would.”

“Sweetheart,” Aunt Bella says to get her daughter’s attention, “What do you want?”

Still processing the events of the past twenty-four hours, Mariya’s lips part, but she doesn’t say anything.

I can’t read her facial expressions and have no idea how she feels. My heart beats faster as I impatiently wait for her answer to the million-dollar question that will either end my hopes of a relationship with her or solidify it.

Pulling her purse closer, she takes the ring out and stares at it.

I wasn’t happy when she took it off on the plane.

“Give it six months,” My mother says, her tone soft as always. “If you can’t make it work, then you can get the marriage annulled.”

Slowly Mariya lifts her gaze to her father. “What do you think, Daddy?”

“You don’t want to know what I think,” he mutters, clearly still upset. “You’re adults. How the fuck do you get so drunk you can’t remember shit?”

“You’ve done it many times when we were younger,” Aunt Bella reminds him.

“You’re not helping,” he grumbles.

“It was my fault.” I move to the couch Mariya is sitting on and take a seat next to her. “I should’ve kept track of how much we were drinking. It was relaxing, and we were letting off some steam. The next thing I knew, we woke up married.”

His eyes snap from Mariya to me, tension building in the room with every second he remains silent.

Every muscle is wound tight, prepared for the bomb that’s sure to explode over our heads.

Mariya shifts, and she swallows hard, clearly nervous. “Daddy?”

“Let me think!” Uncle Alexei snaps. From the anger darkening his gaze, I’m surprised he hasn’t pulled a gun on me. He takes a deep breath, shakes his head, then settles his eyes on Mariya and me. “You’ll remain married for six months.”

Thank fucking Christ.

Shocked, Mariya gasps, “But –”

Her father cuts her off with a stern look. “No buts. You’ll remain married to Luca for six months. You’ll live with him

and try to make it work.”

She almost chokes, “Live together? Here?”

Knowing it’s time to stand my ground, I say, “We’ll live in my apartment.”

There’s no fucking way we’re living with her parents.

Mariya turns her wide gaze to me. “I have to move in with you?”

Without hesitation, I nod. “Yes.”

When she inhales sharply, turning a pleading gaze to her father, he shakes his head. “You’ve made this bed, you will sleep in it. At the very least, for six months. We can’t have an annulment a day after you got married. It will make us the laughing stock of the fucking world. Over my dead body, will I allow that to happen.”

Reaching for Mariya, I place my hand over hers. When she locks eyes with me, I say, “Six months won’t kill us.”

“That’s what you think,” she mutters, pulling her hand free from mine.

“It’s settled,” Uncle Alexei says. Getting up, he goes to pour himself a drink. After downing the vodka, he mutters, “Luca, join me in the study.”

“Put on the ring,” I order Mariya before I get up and follow her father.

When I walk into the study and shut the door, Uncle Alexei pours himself another vodka. I wait for him to down the alcohol.

He sets the tumbler down, then turns to face me with a look that will make a lesser man piss in his pants.

“Explain to me how you got drunk,” he demands.

“Cherry bomb shots and champagne. I’m not one to mix my drinks, but I wanted Mariya to enjoy the night, so I drank with her.”

“The only reason you’re still breathing is because you’re my godson and the head of the Italian mafia,” he states, a deadly edge to his tone. “You know that, right?”

“Yes, sir.” Not once do I break eye contact.

He takes a deep breath and seems to calm down a little. “I saw the way you looked at Mariya at the party.”

“I know.”

“You’ll make her happy,” he demands.

“I will.”

“If you harm a hair on my daughter’s head, I’ll kill you without hesitation.”

I suppress the urge to chuckle. “I know.”

Uncle Alexei pours another drink, this time sipping it slower instead of downing it. “Make it work, Luca. Mariya is stubborn, and she’ll give you hell. Somehow you have to make her love you.”

She already loves me.

“I don’t want an annulment,” I say. “I’ll do my best.”

Uncle Alexei nods, then the corner of his mouth lifts. “I would’ve killed any other fucker who tried to pull a stunt like

that, but I'm glad it's you. I know my daughter will be safe because anyone would be stupid to fuck with you." He moves closer until we're eye to eye. "Treat my baby girl like the princess she is."

"I'll treat her like a queen," I vow.

My queen.

Uncle Alexei nods, then pats me on the shoulder. "Let's make the best of this situation."

"Yes, sir."

We leave the office, and the moment we return to the living room, Mariya darts to her feet. "When is all of this happening?"

Uncle Alexei raises an eyebrow. "It started the moment you said your vows, *printsessa*."

Her voice climbs as she asks, "So I have to move in with Luca today?"

"You'll be safe with me, Mariya," I try to offer her some reassurance.

"It's not my safety I'm worried about," she snaps at me before she storms out of the living room, visibly unhappy that we will remain married.

Chapter 9

Mariya

Pulling my phone from my purse, I dial Violet's number while I rush to my bedroom.

"How's Vegas?" she answers the call.

"You won't believe what happened," I growl as I slam the bedroom door shut behind me.

I still can't believe it.

"What?" my best friend asks.

I suck in a deep breath of air. "I got married to Luca."

"What?!"

"We got drunk, and I woke up married to the man."

"If you killed him, don't tell me because then I can't defend you."

"He's still alive," I mutter. "We have to remain married for six months before I'm allowed to file for an annulment."

"Holy shit, Mariya. I leave you alone in Vegas for one weekend, and you get married to Luca?"

"I know," I groan as I slump down on my bed.

"How does Luca feel about this?" she asks. "I mean, if he loves you, then this is a good thing, right?"

“He doesn’t love me,” I mutter. “He thinks this is good for business.” I let out a disgruntled huff, hating that I have to uproot my life and leave the only home I’ve ever known. “I have to move in with him and play wife to him. I’ll probably smother him with a pillow tonight.”

“Again, don’t tell me if you’re planning to off your husband. I can’t do shit to help you then,” she chuckles.

“I’m serious. How am I going to survive six months with him?”

“Maybe you can get some hot sex out of the deal and finally get over him?”

“I wish.” Falling back on the bed, I stare up at the ceiling. “How am I going to keep my secret from him?”

“Spend as little time with him as possible. Just because you have feelings for him doesn’t mean he deserves them.”

“You’re right.”

“Besides, after the first fart, the crush will die a quick death.”

I let out a burst of laughter. A knock on my door has me saying, “I have to go. Talk to you later.”

“Good luck!”

I end the call, then say, “Come in.”

The door opens, and when I see my mom, I sigh with relief.

She shuts the door and comes to sit next to me. Wrapping an arm around my shoulders, she asks, “How are you holding up?”

“I’m not sure.”

God, this is a clusterfuck.

“You don’t have to do this,” Mom says. “I know everyone else is demanding six months, but if you don’t want to give this marriage a try, then don’t. I won’t let anyone force you.”

I wrap my arms around my mother, hugging her tightly. “I’m not sure what I want, *Mami*,” I admit.

God, my emotions are all over the place. I can’t believe Luca and I got married.

She pulls back and locks eyes with me. “What do you mean?”

I hesitate for a moment, my thoughts jumping all over the place. I lock eyes with Mom, then say, “This has to stay between us.”

“Of course.”

My teeth tug at my bottom lip, then I admit my secret to her, “I love Luca.”

Mom’s eyebrows dart up with surprise, and she blinks at me. “Since when?”

“Since forever,” I sigh, my shoulders slumping. I let out a groan. “That’s why I’ve been so bitchy around him. I was trying to hide my true feelings.

“Oh, sweetheart,” she whispers. She brushes her hand over my hair to comfort me. “Isn’t this a good thing then?”

I shake my head, feeling downright miserable. “I don’t want a marriage of convenience. It would’ve been nice to have

the romance that usually comes before a wedding and to know the man I'm marrying actually loves me."

Mom wraps her arm around my shoulders. "You're my daughter, Mariya. If I could make your father fall in love with me, you can make Luca love you."

"How? I'm pretty sure I annoy him just by breathing."

"Do you really think a man like Luca would face your father's wrath for a woman he doesn't care about?"

I shake my head. "Luca only cares about the ties between our families. His decision has nothing to do with how he feels about me."

Mom gives me a tight squeeze. "I think he cares, but if that's not the case, then you show him what an amazing woman you are and make him fall for you. Take what you want, sweetheart."

If it were that easy, I'd have done it already.

Glancing around the room, I ask, "Do I have to pack everything?"

There are so many conflicting emotions swirling in my chest. I don't want to leave the only home I've ever known. This is my safe space.

But I can't help feeling a little excited that I might have a chance to make Luca mine.

Mom's right, maybe I can make him fall for me.

Maybe I can have a happily ever after with the man of my dreams.

And maybe we'll freaking kill each other.

Ugh.

Mom shakes her head. “Take only what you need. Your room will always be right here waiting for you.”

The door opens, and Dad comes in. Mom presses a kiss to my temple then leaves me alone with Dad.

Lifting my eyes, I meet Dad’s dark gaze. We stare at each other for a moment until I feel no older than sixteen. Darting up, I slam into my father’s arms and admit, “I’m scared.”

Dad holds me tightly and presses a kiss to my hair. “Luca won’t dare hurt you.”

I shake my head. “It’s the unknown that terrifies me.”

Pushing me backward, Dad leans down and looks at me with so much love it makes my throat tighten and tears burn at the back of my eyes. “You’ve known Luca all your life. He’ll be good to you.”

But he doesn’t love me.

Dad brings a hand to my cheek. “And I’m only a call away. You’ll have Lev and Ivan with you as well.”

For a moment, I contemplate turning on the waterworks, knowing Dad won’t force me to go through with this marriage if I’m one hundred percent against it.

But hope stops me dead in my tracks.

Feeling the effects of the hangover and emotional war waging in me, I let out a sigh. “Do you really think Luca and I can make it work?”

Without any hesitation, Dad nods. “I’m sure of it. Otherwise, you wouldn’t set foot outside this house.”

Dad's never wrong.

I stare into my father's eyes, and like always, I draw strength from him.

This is a chance to get the man you want, Mariya. Don't let fear and uncertainty get in the way.

"Okay."

The corner of Dad's mouth lifts. "Besides, I taught you how to fight, and you have your mother's temper. I pity Luca if he gives you trouble."

A smile spreads over my face. "I'll kick his ass."

"That's my girl." Dad gestures toward the walk-in closet. "I'll have your things taken to Luca's apartment."

Nodding, I inhale deeply.

This is it. For six months, I'll have to live with Luca, sleep next to him, and be a wife to him.

Dear God.

It's fifty-fifty whether we'll kill each other or give in to the lust. At least on my part, because I have no idea how Luca will handle being married to me, seeing as this is probably only another business deal for him.

Chapter 10

Luca

Not wanting to drag Mariya away from her parents like a damn caveman so I can have her all to myself, we stay for brunch with our parents.

The atmosphere is still a bit tense from the bomb that was dropped, but I have to admit it went a hell of a lot better than I expected.

Uncle Alexei didn't kill me, and I have a chance to make things work between Mariya and me.

That's all I wanted. Just a chance.

I know the woman is stubborn, but still, I'm disappointed by the strong reaction she had when our parents said we have to give it six months.

My eyes rest on Mariya, who's hardly touched the plate of food in front of her. I notice she's not wearing her wedding ring, and it has a frown darkening my forehead.

Time to go home so we can talk without any interference from our families.

"Thanks for brunch," I say as I rise to my feet. "It's time for us to head home."

Mariya keeps sitting as if she didn't hear what I said.

“Mariya.” Her eyes dart to mine. “It’s time to go.”

There’s a flicker of an emotion I can’t place, she inhales deeply, then finally gets up. “Right.”

Our parents walk us to the front door, where her overnight bag is the only item waiting for us.

“Where’s the rest of your belongings?” I ask while picking up the bag.

“I’ll have everything sent over,” Uncle Alexei answers. He pulls Mariya into a hug and whispers something to her.

I take a moment to say goodbye to my parents, then place my hand on Mariya’s lower back. As we step out of the mansion, she moves away from me and glances back to wave at her parents before climbing into the passenger seat of my G-Wagon. I shut the door and place her overnight bag on the backseat.

I smile at our parents crowding the porch, then slide behind the steering wheel. Noticing Mariya hasn’t put on her safety belt, I lean into her and pull the strap over her chest. Her scent fills my lungs as I push in the clip. Our eyes meet, and for a moment, she looks flushed before she adjusts the strap. “I can do it myself.”

“I know.” I settle back in my seat and start the engine.

Finally, I don’t have to share her attention with anyone.

Lev and Ivan follow behind us in an SUV as I steer the vehicle toward the iron gates. Just as I turn the nose of the G-Wagon onto the street, Mariya asks, “Why didn’t you put up a fight?”

“There was nothing to fight about.”

Everything worked out in my favor.

“So you’re just going to go along with this charade?”

“It’s not a charade.”

Not by a long shot, baby.

I hear her huff but keep my eyes on the road ahead.

Another huff fills the air, then she mutters, “I didn’t take you for a coward.”

My eyebrow lifts as I slowly turn my gaze to her. “Careful.”

I might love the woman, but I won’t have her disrespecting me.

She throws a glare my way. “You let our parents decide your future. For the head of the mafia, that’s weak.”

Anger starts to simmer in my chest. “I didn’t let them decide shit.”

“Oh please,” she scoffs, glancing out the window. She crosses her arms over her chest, then aims a mocking expression at me. “Are you going to sit there and tell me you’re happy being stuck with me for six months?”

Christ!

I yank the steering wheel to the side of the road and bring the G-Wagon to a stop. Unbuckling myself, I turn to face Mariya, leaning dangerously close to her. “It won’t be for six months.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.” A bitter-sounding chuckle escapes her, her eyes darkening. “How long are you planning to keep up the pretense before calling it quits?”

Plucking her purse from her lap, I open the damn thing and dig the ring out. I take hold of her left hand, and when she tries to yank away, I tighten my grip and shove the diamond back onto her finger. Pinning her with a look of warning, my tone states I’m serious as fuck as I say, “That ring will never leave your finger again.”

She lifts her chin and sasses me, “Never is only six months long.” She chuckles again. “Unless you back out sooner.”

Slowly, I shake my head. “There will be no annulment, *Principessa*.”

Instantly confusion flashes across her features. “What?”

Pulling away from her, I put on my safety belt and steer the vehicle back onto the road. “The one thing I’ll never give you is a divorce. Anything else is up for discussion.”

“You’re joking, right?” When I don’t bother responding, she gasps. “You’re serious? Have you lost your mind?”

“Never been saner,” I mutter.

“Why the hell would you want to stay married to me?”

I stop at a red light and glance at her. “You’re Mariya Koslov. The better question is, why wouldn’t I want to be married to you?”

“Jesus,” she mutters, shaking her head. “I’m not some bargaining chip you can use to solidify an alliance with my father.”

That's the last reason why I want her.

The light turns green, and as I pull away, a heavy silence falls between us. By the time I park the G-Wagon and we climb out, you can cut the tension between us with a butter knife.

I grab Mariya's bag and wait for Lev and Ivan to join us, then order, "Stay down here. She doesn't need you in our home."

Mariya follows me to the elevators, and when the doors slide shut, she mutters, "Like a lamb led to the slaughterhouse."

"You're no lamb, *mia regina*."

Her eyes flick to me. "What did you call me?"

The doors open, and smiling, I gesture for her to walk. "My queen."

She pauses, her eyes searching my face. With a shake of her head, she steps into her new home. "No way in hell am I calling you my king."

"We'll see about that," I chuckle. I watch as she glances around the living room with a flicker of curiosity.

The entire penthouse is decorated in black slate stone, the furniture matching shades of dark charcoal. I've inherited my love for all things black from my father.

"Not bad," she murmurs. She turns her attention to me. "Just show me to the guestroom, and I'll get out of your way."

Letting out another chuckle, I shake my head. I walk to the stairs and hear Mariya behind me. I ignore the four guestrooms

and don't even bother showing her around.

Entering my bedroom, now hers as well, I drop the bag by the foot of the king-size bed. "This won't be a marriage in name only." I turn around and capture her wary gaze. "You'll sleep in my bed."

She lifts an eyebrow at me while crossing her arms over her chest. Her chin lifts an inch, looking every bit the queen she is. "Is that so?"

I don't even bother nodding.

Uncrossing her arms, she slowly steps closer to me until mere inches separate us. Tilting her head back, her eyelashes lower in a seductive move that has a direct link to my cock.

"So we'll sleep next to each other." Her tone is low and sexy as fuck, making me harden even more. "We'll fuck like a happily married couple." She lifts a hand to my chest, trailing a finger down the row of buttons of my dress shirt. "And I'll cook and cater to you like a good little wife."

"No cooking." The corner of my mouth lifts. "I've heard you suck at it."

With a frown, she stares at me, probably wondering how I know that little detail.

I lift my hand and wrap my fingers around the back of her neck. Tugging her closer until I'm able to feel her warm breaths on my lips, I say, "There will be no annulment, and this marriage will be real in every way."

The same power that's made her father and mother such an unbeatable duo darkens her eyes. "You think you'll snap your fingers, and I'll be a good little puppet?"

“Give me credit, *mia moglie*. I’m not stupid.”

Her lips part, and it takes all my strength not to kiss her fucking senseless.

“As hot as it is to hear you speak Italian, it frustrates me.”

“My wife.” As the words leave my mouth, they tense the air around us. Anticipation, unadulterated lust, and a maddening need to force this stubborn woman to bend to my will – it’s all so fucking intoxicating and addictive.

Mariya stares at me for a solid minute before she steps away from me. She glances around the room, taking in the dark furnishings, the insanely neat walk-in closet, and the door leading to the luxurious ensuite bathroom.

When her eyes come to a stop on the bed, she says, “If you touch me without my permission, I’ll kill you.”

A spark of anger heats my blood. “I’m offended you felt the need to say that,” I mutter as I shrug out of my jacket.

Mariya lets out a tired sigh. “You’re the one who said this will be a real marriage.”

Remembering she has a hangover, I say, “We’ll both feel better after a nap.”

Her gaze follows me into the closet as I loosen my tie and unbutton my shirt. I don’t even look at her as I say, “I don’t expect you to spread your legs tonight, Mariya.” Grabbing a t-shirt and a pair of sweatpants, I turn to face her. “I’ll give you time to get used to us as a couple.”

Her eyes sweep over my chest, a flash of desire darkening her eyes. Then she mutters, “Don’t hold your breath while you

wait.”

Chapter 11

Mariya

It's exhausting. I'm doing everything possible to hide my true feelings, and at this rate, it might be the thing that kills me.

Being in Luca's home is unnerving, and it downright rattled me when he came out of the closet with his shirt unbuttoned. The strip of golden skin and hard muscle I saw... Jesus, no man should be allowed to look that hot.

He keeps saying there will be no annulment, and this will be a real marriage.

Seriously?

Why?

The only plausible reason I can come up with is that he only wants me because it will make us the new power couple to fear. We'll be the Alexei and Isabella of our generation.

None of it sits well with me.

I love my parents more than anything, and I have great respect for everything they've accomplished, but I don't want to be them.

Luca goes into the bathroom, leaving me standing like an idiot in his bedroom. I glance back to the bed when I hear the shower turn on.

Am I really going to do this?

Will I be able to keep the attraction I feel for him a secret?

I sit down on the bed and stare at the shut bathroom door.

What are you doing, Mariya? Luca sees this as the perfect business deal. Even if he sleeps with you or shows you any kind of affection, it won't be because he suddenly fell in love with you.

I've always wanted the kind of love my parents have. Dad loved Mom so much, he did everything in his power to get her.

I want a man who melts at the sight of me, who sees no other woman but me, who will burn down this planet for me.

I want a once-in-a-lifetime kind of love.

I'll never be happy knowing Luca only treats me as his wife because it's a good business decision.

Dammit! I want romance and seduction.

Screw this. The hangover is still kicking my ass. I need sleep.

Getting up, I grab my bag and stalk out of Luca's bedroom. I check the guestrooms and pick the one furthest from Luca's.

The whole place is decorated in blacks and grays, not a stitch of color to be seen. It's stunning but cold, just like the owner.

I set my bag down on the bed, and opening it, I remove a pair of shorts and a form-fitting sleeveless tank top. Once I'm dressed in the casual clothes, I chuck my bag on the floor and go to the bathroom to wash my face.

When I'm done, I close the curtains and crawl into the foreign bed. I try to snuggle into the pillow, upset that I forgot to bring mine from home.

Home. That's one thing this apartment will never feel like.

God, how am I going to get through the next six months? And what if Luca really refuses to give me an annulment?

Suddenly the door opens, and as I glance over my shoulder, it's to see Luca stalking toward the bed. He grabs the covers and tosses them back.

"Hey!"

With an angry glare that sends chills down my spine, he swoops me into his arms, bridal style, and stalks out of the room.

For a moment, I'm too stunned because having Luca carry me does weird things to my heart and ovaries.

Being so close to him feels amazing.

I shake my head hard to snap out of it.

Giving Luca a glare of my own, I demand, "Put me down."

I'm dropped on his bed, then he plants a hand on either side of my shoulders, his face inches from mine. The desire to kiss him comes out of left field, knocking the breath from my lungs.

Dear God. Fighting with this man is better than any foreplay I've ever experienced.

"You will sleep in my bed." His tone is deadly as if he's barely hanging on to his self-control, and it has my core flushing with heat.

His features are so tense that he looks deadly. “I fucking hate repeating myself.”

And I hate how you make me feel because it reduces me to a lesser version of myself, and it makes me act irrational.

I push up, but Luca doesn’t move, and it only puts our faces a hair’s width from each other.

“Move,” I hiss. “I want to take a nap so I can get rid of this godforsaken hangover that you are making worse.”

“Mariya,” he warns with suppressed anger, his tone downright dangerous. “You. Will. Sleep. Next. To. Me.”

Jesus, the man is hot when he’s angry.

I crawl out from beneath him before I do something stupid, muttering, “God, you’re infuriating.”

I yank the covers out of the way and lie down with my back turned to him. “Don’t even breathe in my direction.” With a huff, I punch the pillow, but it only makes Luca’s scent explode into my face.

Everything smells like him. It’s the sweetest freaking torture ever.

The room grows dark as the electric curtains slide closed, then the bed dips beneath his weight.

My spine is stiff, every inch of me way too aware of the man lying beside me.

I shut my eyes, trying to think of everything possible except Luca and the damn marriage. I even try counting sheep, but it doesn’t work.

“I prefer sleeping on my left side,” I mutter.

“Then turn around.”

“No. Swap places with me.”

“No.”

I glance over my shoulder at Luca, who looks relaxed with his right arm tucked behind his head. He lets out a sigh. “I sleep between you and the door.”

“Why? You think I’ll try to make a run for it?”

He turns his head to look at me. “If we’re attacked, it will be easier to protect you.”

There’s a weird melting sensation in my chest, and not liking it one bit, I punch the pillow again and shut my eyes.

Damn, that was kind of sweet.

Unable to fall asleep, I replay everything that’s happened since I woke up this morning until I remember he said he heard I suck at cooking. “Who told you I can’t cook?”

“Get some sleep, *mia moglie*.”

It sounds like he’s taunting me when he calls me his wife, but I’m not taking the bait.

Letting out an annoyed sigh, I try counting sheep again, but my thoughts constantly return to Luca.

I can’t believe how much my life has changed in less than a day. It’s crazy. One minute I’m pining after the elusive and indifferent head of the Italian mafia, and the next, I’m his wife and sharing a bed.

Jesus, what a crazy day.

I focus on my breaths and slowly start to calm down, my thoughts not running wild any longer.

It's just six months. You'll survive it.

Chapter 12

Luca

Hair tickling my face wakes me up. I wipe a hand over my nose and mouth, brushing silky strands away, then open my eyes and glance down.

Mariya's right leg is hooked over my thighs, and she's snuggled into my side, her face buried against my ribs.

She gravitated to me in her sleep. A satisfied smile tug at my lips.

So fucking stubborn but the moment you let your guard down, your true feelings take over. With time you'll get used to the idea of us, and I'll finally get to show you just how much I love you.

Pulling my right arm from beneath my head, I'm careful not to wake her as I pinch a couple of strands between my fingers, savoring how soft her hair feels.

I get to enjoy having her pressed against me for close to ten minutes before she stirs. Sleepily, she stretches, her body rubbing hard against my side. Her arm wraps around my waist, and she lets out a sigh, which only makes the smile on my face grow.

Suddenly her head pops up, she glances around her with total confusion, then stares at me. It takes another couple of

seconds before she yanks away and darts off the bed.

“Sleep well?” I taunt her, my eyes raking over her body. The tight-fitting shorts and top do nothing to hide her smackable ass and hard nipples.

Christ.

I grow instantly hard, the need for this woman burning through my body like a wildfire.

“Shut up,” she mutters, rushing to the bathroom and slamming the door shut behind her.

I chuckle while reaching down to adjust my hard-as-steel cock.

I get a feeling I’ll die of blue balls long before Mariya tries to kill me.

Just as I sit up, my phone starts to ring. Seeing Marco, my most trusted man’s name flashing on the screen, I quickly answer, “What’s up?”

“Just got word that the Albanians were spotted in San Diego.”

“Fuckers,” I mutter, getting out of bed. Walking to the closet, I ask, “How many?”

“Twenty strong.”

“Where the fuck do they come from? No matter how many we kill, the fuckers keep popping up in my territory.” I put the phone on speaker, so I can set it down and get dressed.

“Feels like whenever we off one, three grow in the fuckers place,” Marco says. “How do you want to handle it.”

I pull on my suit pants and grab a dress shirt. “I want surveillance on them twenty-four-seven.”

“Done.”

After buttoning the shirt, I step into a pair of brown leather shoes. “How are things in Europe?”

Usually, the Albanians would be Nikolas’ problem, seeing as Albania is right next to Greece, but for some fucking reason, they’re coming after me.

“Quiet after we took out the fuckers four months ago,” Marco replies. “Lorenzo and Diego have everything under control.”

I tuck my Heckler & Koch behind my back in the waistband of my pants and pick up the phone just as Mariya comes out of the bathroom. She stops to glance at me, frowns, then leaves the bedroom.

“By the way,” I mutter into the device, “I got married yesterday.”

“What?! To who?” Marco exclaims.

“Mariya Koslov. We got drunk in Vegas, and one thing led to another.”

Worry laces his words as he asks, “Christ, Luca. Do Alexei and Viktor know?”

“Relax. They know.”

“Fuck, my heart can’t handle that kind of shock. Dealing with the Albanians is stressful enough without you adding to it.”

Shrugging on a coat so the weapon behind my back isn't visible, I chuckle while walking out of the bedroom. "I have to go and deal with my wife."

There's a burst of laughter in my ear. "Good luck."

We end the call, and I tuck the device into my pocket as I reach the guestroom I found Mariya in earlier. It pissed me off that she even dared to climb into another bed.

Opening the door, I'm met with a shriek. "Do you freaking mind?"

"Not at all." I stroll inside as Mariya turns her back to me and quickly fastens the buttons on her silk blouse.

"Well, I do," she snaps. Once she's dressed, she swings around to face me with a scathing glare. "Just because there's a piece of paper saying we're married doesn't mean you can come and go as you please."

I tilt my head to the side, my gaze lazily sweeping over her body. I love the way she dresses, always looking like the queen she is.

Fuck, you can fit a diamond in the gap between her thighs.

"You better get used to it," I lift my eyes to hers, "*mia moglie*."

A flash of anger tightens her features, and it has me noticing she's not wearing any makeup. I was too tired to notice earlier.

Staring at her, I take in how vulnerable she looks without the *warpaint* covering her face.

Without hesitation, I say, “You look so much more beautiful without all the makeup.”

Her head snaps back as if I physically struck her, her lips parting in shock.

A compliment from me was the last thing she expected.

Her reaction makes me feel shitty, and I make a mental note to compliment her more.

Wanting to share an ordinary moment with her, I say, “Come on, let’s get something to eat.”

She glances at a small bag on the bed. “If we’re going out, I need a couple minutes to get ready.”

Stepping forward, I take hold of her hand and pull her out of the room. “You’re perfect as is, and I’m starving.”

“Luca,” she protests, rearing back against my hold. “You don’t have to drag me.”

“Apparently, I do,” I mutter.

She tries to free her hand again. “I need my purse!”

“No, you don’t.” I tug her down the stairs, and reaching the bottom, I glance at her. “I have a phone and wallet, so basically, I’m all you need.”

“You wish.”

When we step into the elevator, Mariya’s fingers flex in my hold as she sighs, “It’s going to be a long six months if you insist on being unreasonable.”

“Only if you keep being stubborn.”

Her eyes snap to my face. “You’re the stubborn one.” She turns her gaze to the doors, then adds, “And so freaking bossy.”

“I’m used to getting my way,” I chuckle.

The doors open, and when we step out into the basement, she mutters, “That makes two of us.”

Mariya’s guards, Ivan and Lev, climb out of the SUV.

“We’re heading out for lunch,” I call to them.

Instantly smiles stretch over their faces.

I’m going to have to show the two men around the apartment and the private escape stairs for when they’re guarding Mariya whenever I’m at work.

I open the passenger door for my wife and wait for her to climb into the G-Wagon. On the spur of the moment, I lift her hand and press a kiss to her fingers before setting it down on her lap.

A cautious light fills Mariya’s eyes, telling me she doesn’t trust my actions one bit.

She just needs time.

I shut her door, and walking around the vehicle, I slide behind the steering wheel and start the engine. As we pull on our safety belts, I ask, “Anywhere specific you’d like to have dinner?”

She doesn’t even have to think about it as she answers, “Fogo De Chao.”

“Good choice.” I pull out of the parking and steer the vehicle toward the exit. “I’m in the mood for steak.”

While I drive us toward the restaurant, Mariya stares down at her wedding ring, which has me asking, “Do you like it?”

Her eyes dart to me. “What?”

“The ring.”

“Yes, it’s beautiful.” Her gaze flits to my left hand. “Do you like yours?”

“Yes.”

It’s quiet for a moment, then she asks, “If we were so drunk that we can’t remember anything, how did we manage to get a license and rings?”

Shit.

My eyes dart to her before settling back on the road ahead. “Pure fucking luck.”

She stares at me for a moment. “Can you remember anything?”

Every single detail of last night. The way you tasted. The sound of your moan when you get lost in a kiss. Your smile. The way you looked at me as if I was your entire world when we said our vows. How it felt to hold you in my arms.

“No.”

She sighs, then stares out the window. “It sucks. I always thought I’d have a big wedding.” Sadness tugs at her mouth. “I missed out on what was supposed to be the most important day of my life.”

Guilt rears up, making me shift uncomfortably in my seat. I never thought of that. I stole the entire experience from her.

“I’m sorry, Mariya,” I murmur, the guilt evident in my voice. “We can always renew our vows, and you can still have your big day.”

“It won’t be the same,” she mutters, the sadness in her tone taking one hell of a swing at my heart.

Reaching for her hand, I give it a squeeze. “I’ll make it up to you.”

When she doesn’t respond, I silently vow to give her the wedding of her dreams once we reach the six-month mark.

Chapter 13

Mariya

The realization of missing out on the entire experience of my wedding hits hard.

I won't get to plan anything. No wedding dress. No shopping with Mom and getting ready with her and Violet.

Dad won't walk me down the aisle.

My heart constricts painfully in my chest, the ache so sharp I struggle to inhale.

It takes all my strength to keep the tears back.

In one drunken moment, I've lost so much.

My voice is hoarse, the sadness seeping through, as I say, "I don't think I can do this."

"It hasn't even been twenty-four hours." Reaching the building, Luca parks the vehicle turns off the engine, then turns to look at me. "Can you at least try to give it a chance?"

I take off the safety belt as I shake my head. Locking eyes with him, I say, "I'm not trying to be a bitch. There's just so much I'll miss out on if I stay married to you."

For once, he doesn't get angry with me, and I feel the full force of having his undivided attention on me.

Tingles spread over my skin. My heart beats faster, my breaths growing shallow.

“What will you miss out on?” His tone is patient and even a little caring.

“Everything. The romance. Dating. All the firsts that go hand-in-hand with falling in love. The proposal. Planning the wedding with my mom. Having my dad walk me down the aisle. Violet being my bridesmaid. The reception.” I sigh, my shoulders dropping. “And so much more. The list is endless.”

He stares at me for a moment, then reaches for my hand. Just like earlier, there’s a spark when his fingers wrap around mine.

“You can still have it all.”

My eyes drift over his handsome face. “You’ll agree to an annulment?”

Yes, I love him, but I’m not willing to torture myself by staying in a marriage where he doesn’t love me. In a perfect world, Luca would fall head over heels for me, he’d romance the ever-loving shit out of me, and we’d live happily ever after.

But the real world is far from perfect, and I’m starting to suffer from all the whiplash because part of me is hanging on to the mustard seed of hope that Luca will suddenly fall for me, while the other half knows it will never happen.

“No,” he answers, unwilling to see things from my point of view.

I start to pull my hand free from his, but he tightens his hold and says, “We can date over the next six months. I’ll

propose to you, and we'll have a wedding with our friends and families."

Frustration slithers through my chest. "You don't get it. I don't want a pretend marriage, Luca."

"I already said this marriage will be real in every way." He lets go of my hand and shoves the driver's side door open.

I have zero appetite, and the last thing I want to do right now is have dinner. Climbing out of the car, I slam the door shut, my eyes burning on Luca as he stalks around the front of the G-Wagon.

His features are tight with anger, his irises dark as night.

"You want romance, I'll give you fucking romance," he mutters right before his arm wraps around my lower back, and my body's yanked flush with his.

My hands quickly find his shoulders, then I'm stunned out of my mind as his head lowers. When I feel his breath on my lips, his eyes bore into mine with so much intensity I forget how to breathe.

Sweet Jesus.

Luca lifts his other hand and weaves his fingers into my hair, and the moment is so damn intense I can't even move as he closes the last of the distance and claims my mouth.

I swear the ground quakes beneath my feet. My thoughts and emotions instantly spiral into a chaotic mess.

There's not a single drop of willpower in me to push him away. Instead, my lips part, and the moment his tongue strokes

hard against mine, the ground gives way beneath me, and I fall into everything he makes me feel.

There's only the scent of his masculine aftershave, the feel of his lips, the sound of our breaths.

I've spent endless nights dreaming about Luca kissing me. Nothing prepared me for the real thing.

A hard tremor rakes my body, and my heart threatens to beat right out of my chest.

God, surely he feels the connection between us?

He kisses me with so much dominance and passion I can't keep up. His lips knead mine, his tongue lashes, and his teeth tug, drawing a moan from me.

All I can do is hold onto his shoulders as he possesses me in a way I've never been possessed.

His arm becomes a steel band around my lower back while his fingers fist in my hair.

I melt until I'm nothing more than clay in his hands.

When he ends the kiss and pulls back slightly, I keep my eyes closed. My breaths are embarrassingly fast, my heart still pounding a mile a minute.

"Look at me," Luca demands with a hoarse voice.

Slowly my lashes lift until I'm staring into his darkened eyes.

"One way or another, we're going to make this work."

With my emotions all over the place, I press close to him again and wrap my arms around his neck. When he returns the

hug, I squeeze my eyes shut, working to regain my equilibrium.

“I just need a moment,” I whisper against his neck.

“We can stand here all night, baby.” He presses a kiss to my shoulder.

The term of endearment makes goosebumps erupt over my skin, and I hold him tighter.

Please, God. Let this man fall in love with me. I beg you.

Luca starts to rub my back, and it’s so comforting, it eases some of the tension in me.

Pulling back, I say, “I’m good. Let’s have dinner.”

Luca takes my hand and leads me toward the establishment while I try to come to terms with the fact that he just rocked my entire world with a single kiss.

Dear God, I’m in so much trouble.

Chapter 14

Luca

I should've kissed her sooner.

I got to hold Mariya, which made up for all the arguing, and having her look for comfort in my arms is a huge fucking win in my books.

I wrap my arm around her shoulders and tug her to my side as we walk to the restaurant's entrance.

Once Mariya and I are seated at a table with Ivan and Lev sitting at another table nearby, I ask, "What are you having?"

She checks the menu. "I'm not sure. I'm not that hungry."

"You didn't eat much at brunch," I comment.

She sets the menu down, then leans back in her chair. "I'll have the same as you."

When the waiter comes, I order two steaks with steamed vegetables and sparkling water.

I turn my attention back to Mariya. "What don't you like to eat?"

"Fish." She scrunches her nose. "I can't stand the taste."

"What's your favorite food?"

She thinks for a moment. “Pasta. My mom makes the best Alfredo.”

The corner of my mouth lifts.

Her gaze rests on my face. “And you?”

“As long as it has meat in it, I’ll eat it,” I chuckle.

A server brings the chilled sparkling water and pours some into our glasses. When we’re alone again, I lock eyes with Mariya. “I think it’s time we talk about where to go from here.”

Mariya lets out a sigh, clearly not in the mood for this conversation. “Okay.”

“I want you to make yourself at home in the apartment,” I start with something easy which shouldn’t turn into a fight.

“It’s going to take a while before it will feel like home,” she admits. She thinks for a moment, then asks, “Can I add color to the place?”

“Sure. As long as it doesn’t look like a unicorn went to town on it.” I take a sip of my water, then relax back in the chair before I say, “We’ll share a bedroom. Even if we fight, there’s no sleeping in separate rooms.”

A nervous expression tightens her features. “What about intimacy? Where do we stand on that?”

“Were you okay with the kiss?”

Mariya stares at me until I start to worry that the kiss wasn’t such a good idea after all, but then she nods. “I’m okay with kissing.”

Thank you, Jesus!

Relieved, I smile at her. “Hugging?”

“A definite yes. I’m a hugger.” Her smile matches mine, setting me at ease.

“Good to know.” I tap my fingers on the table, then raise a more sensitive topic. “Sex?”

This time she glances away, but I can see she’s thinking, so I give her the time she needs. Finally, she locks eyes with me again. “Only if it comes naturally and actually means something. It’s not to be used as a weapon or tool to control me.”

I’m surprised by her answer. I expected a flat-out no from her. “I agree.”

Her fingers wrap around the stem of the glass. “Look at us getting along for once.”

“Miracles happen,” I tease, which makes a smile flirt with her lips.

Wanting to get to know all of her, I ask, “Do you like messages or phone calls?”

“Phone calls for conversations and messages if it’s just something quick.”

I nod, actually enjoying this moment of calm between us. “Pet peeves?”

She lets out a chuckle. “When someone bosses me around.”

Laughter escapes me. “Damn, we’re going to fight about that one.”

She keeps smiling, and it has me admitting, “You have a way of lighting up a room whenever you smile.”

Surprise flutters over her face, then she murmurs, “Thank you.” She takes a sip of her water. “What are your pet peeves?”

“Hold on,” I chuckle. “You only gave one.”

She thinks for a moment, then shakes her head. “Put down the toilet seat, always replace the toilet roll, don’t leave toothpaste in the sink, and don’t drink the last of the coffee, and we’ll be good.”

“Nothing huge.” I glance around the restaurant before looking at her again.

“Your turn,” she reminds me.

“Let me think.” A server brings our food and sets the plates in front of us. I wait for him to leave, then say, “Mind games. I can’t stand it.”

Mariya cuts a piece of her steak and pops it into her mouth. I watch as she enjoys the flavor, the looks of satisfaction on her face making my cock stir.

Shifting in my chair, I add, “Self-pity is off-putting.”

“Totally agree,” she murmurs, cutting another piece. She pauses and lifts an eyebrow at me. “Aren’t you going to eat?”

“Soon. I don’t like my food too hot.”

She smiles. “Noted.”

I enjoy watching Mariya eat. There’s something so pleasing about getting to provide for her. I pull my wallet out and place one of my credit cards next to her plate.

She frowns, then glances at me. “What’s that for?”

“Anything you need.”

“I have a credit card.”

I shake my head. “You’re my wife, which means I provide for you.”

Mariya sets down her cutlery and takes a sip of her water before saying, “I’m not sure how I feel about that.”

“It will reflect badly on me if I let your father continue to provide for you,” I explain calmly.

She worries her bottom lip between her teeth, then, to my surprise, she says, “I understand.” She gives me a look of warning. “Only for six months. And brace yourself, I love shopping.”

Chuckling, I murmur, “Noted.” Picking up my cutlery, I start to eat. When I’m almost done, I mention, “Whenever you leave the apartment, you have to notify me.”

“And we were doing so well,” she huffs. “I have Ivan and Lev.”

I shake my head. “I don’t care. I want to know when and where you’re going.”

Anger sparks in her eyes, but her tone is calm when she asks, “You don’t think that’s a little controlling?”

“No.” I capture her eyes. “I can’t do my job while worrying whether you’re safe.”

She seems to think about it, then agrees, “Okay, but then you have to keep me updated wherever you are at all times.”

I let out a chuckle. “Don’t complain when your phone blows up with messages.”

When we’re done with our meal, I settle the bill. I get up and hold my hand out to Mariya. She hesitates for a moment but then rests her palm against mine. I weave our fingers as we walk to the exit, Ivan and Lev taking the lead.

“Thank you for dinner,” Mariya murmurs once we’re seated in the G-Wagon.

Wanting to test the waters, I lean closer. “You can thank me with a kiss.”

Her eyebrow pops up, then she gives me an incredulous look. “Wow.”

“It better be wow,” I tease her.

She leans closer and presses a quick kiss to my cheek. “That’s all you get.”

Before she can pull back, I grab her by the back of her neck, hold her in place and claim her mouth.

Just like earlier, Mariya’s stunned for a moment. Feeling a tremble move through her, satisfaction fills my chest. She’s so affected by me, it gives me complete control as I devour her mouth.

Only when my cock strains against the zipper of my pants do I slow the kiss down. I savor her hurried breaths and the dazed look in her eyes, then brush my mouth over hers again before pulling back.

“Safety belt,” I order, my voice hoarse from the need pulsing through my veins.

Silence falls between us, and only when we're halfway home does Mariya comment, "At least you're a good kisser. Lucky me."

Chuckling, I shake my head.

No, mia regina. Lucky me.

Chapter 15

Mariya

The peace only lasts until I head to the guestroom so I can take a relaxing bath and change into my PJs, seeing as my overnight bag is still in that room.

“Seriously,” Luca says, a dark frown settling on his forehead from where he’s standing in the doorway. “I thought we had an understanding.”

“Jesus, I’m just going to take a bath.”

“My bedroom,” he practically growls.

I grab my belongings, and giving him a scathing glare, I shove past him. “Fine, I’ll use *your* bedroom.”

I knew the moment of peace was too good to be true.

Upset, I stalk into *his* bathroom and slam the door shut. I open the faucets, then suck in deep breaths of air to calm down.

I wish I were home in my own room. I hate being a guest here. It feels like I have to ask permission before I do something, which upsets me all over again.

This rollercoaster of emotions I’m on is going to drive me insane. One moment things are calm, and the next, everything blows up in my face.

He kisses me, making the mustard seed of hope grow, then stomps all over it with his expensive leather shoes.

I've never had to deal with this kind of tension before. My whole life, I got what I wanted, when I wanted it. Now I have to walk on eggshells.

I slump down on the closed toilet lid and bury my face in my hands, wondering how we're going to make this work. It's one thing loving the man from afar and a whole other thing living with him.

When the tub is full, I close the faucets and strip out of my clothes. I tie my hair up in a messy bun and sprinkle some bath oil into the water. When I climb in and lay back, I let out a moan from how good it feels.

Just relax. Don't think about the marriage. Enjoy your bath.

I focus on the balmy water caressing my skin while taking deep breaths.

My phone starts to ring, popping my meditative bubble. I reach over the side of the tub and have to stretch to hook the strap of my bag. Tugging it closer, I dig my purse out and finally get to the device.

"Hello?"

"God, woman, I thought he killed and buried you already!" Violet snaps.

"Close, but no." I relax back into the water. "We went out for dinner."

"Can we talk?"

“Yes. I’m taking a bath.” Only then do I think to ask,
“How is Oliver?”

“Better. He’s not hugging the toilet any longer, and I finally got some food in him.”

“That’s good.”

“How are you holding up?” Violet asks.

I scrunch my nose and twirl circles in the water with my free hand. “Ugh. We mostly argue. It’s exhausting.”

“Why are you doing this? Go home.”

“You know why I’m doing this,” I mutter.

“Do you think with time you can make the marriage work?” she asks.

“I have no idea.” I let out a sigh. “I’m going to try my best. We’re just off to a rocky start because we’re both stubborn as hell.”

“Just don’t put yourself through unnecessary torture.”

“I won’t.”

“Let’s talk about our spa day. When’s good for you?”

“You’re the one with the job,” I chuckle. “You pick the day.”

Violet’s quiet for a moment, then says, “Next Saturday?”

“Works for me.”

‘Love,’ I hear Oliver call Violet.

“Got to go,” she says.

“Thanks for the call.”

I set the device down on the toilet seat, then close my eyes and soak until I start feeling cold. Letting half of the water out, I add more until it's warm again before I wash my body and shave.

When I climb out of the tub, my skin's all wrinkly. I take my time lathering myself with my favorite cherry blossom lotion and applying my skincare products.

Wearing my buttery soft shorts and matching tank top, I open the door. There's no sign of Luca, and I quickly place my overnight bag in the walk-in closet.

As I turn around, Luca stalks into the bedroom. While I was in the bathroom, he changed into sweatpants and a t-shirt which doesn't make him look any less formidable.

"Finally, I was about to check if you drowned." Then his eyes slowly sweep over my body, and I swear I see a flash of desire.

Don't start imagining things.

I cross my arms over my chest and just stare at him, too tired for another argument.

His eyes sharpen on my face, then he tilts his head and slowly moves closer. It makes me feel like I'm being hunted, and I immediately uncross my arms and change my stance to a ready-for-anything position.

Instantly, Luca stops the expression on his face darkening even more. "Why are you assuming a fighting stance?"

I wave a hand at him. "You went into predator mode."

He takes a step back, actually looking shocked. “Do you really think I’d hurt you?”

No, I don’t.

My body relaxes, and feeling stupid, I explain, “All the tension is getting to me.”

Luca approaches me as if I’m a bomb that’s going to detonate on him. He reaches for my shoulder, then pulls me into a hug.

When he presses a kiss to my temple, I close my eyes and wrap my arms around his waist.

“I’m sorry I raised my voice earlier,” he murmurs.

Loving the feel of his arms around me makes me feel like it’s safe to admit, “This is harder than I thought it would be.”

“There are going to be rough patches, but we’ll work our way through them,” he assures me. He holds me a little longer, then pushes me back so he can make eye contact. “*Our* bedroom. *Our* apartment.”

I search his face, and appreciating that he’s trying, I say, “I just need time. It feels like I’m a guest who needs to ask permission for everything, which is something I’m not used to.”

He shakes his head, and lifting his hands, he frames my face. “I’m sorry. I’ll work on it.” He surprises me by pressing a tender kiss on my forehead.

“Thank you.” His phone starts ringing, and when he ignores it, I say, “You can take the call.”

“It can wait.” He pulls the device out, switches it off, and drops it on the display case containing his wristwatches and cufflinks. “You’re more important.”

Jesus, my heart.

Taking my hand, he says, “Let’s relax in the living room. I’ll let you pick a movie we can watch.”

Loving the sound of that, I chuckle, “Brace yourself for one hell of a sappy romance.”

Feeling much better after the tender moment we just shared, I grin as we head downstairs. I sit down on the couch, folding my legs beneath me, and take the remote from Luca when he holds it out to me.

“How does your TV work?” I ask while pressing a button to switch it on.

“*Our*,” he corrects me before patiently talking me through the process.

When I pick *Grown Ups*, Luca chuckles, “Thank God for small mercies.”

“See, I’m not a bitch all the time.”

He wraps his arm around my shoulders and tugs me to his side. “You’ve never been one.”

God, this is a refreshing change of pace.

This I can do.

Watching a comedy with Luca, the last of the tension eases between us, making space for the attraction to return full force. I’m overly aware of every breath he takes and the feel of his powerful body next to mine.

My eyes lower to his hand resting on his thigh, and I admire how strong and sure his fingers look.

I want to hold his hand but don't have the courage.

As if Luca can read my thoughts, his hand finds mine, and he interlinks our fingers.

I can't keep a smile from spreading over my face and try to focus my attention on the movie again.

If things remain like this, I can actually start to believe there's hope that Luca might love me one day.

Chapter 16

Luca

After the initial arguments, Mariya and I have been putting in more effort to get along.

I'm not gonna lie. I feel a hell of a lot more optimistic that we can make this marriage work.

It's only been two days, though.

On my way to the office, I catch up with all the calls I ignored so I could give Mariya my undivided attention. Knowing she's going to unpack her belongings and spend the day at our place, I don't have to worry about her, and I can focus on work.

I press play on a voice message from Viktor.

'I don't even want to think why you're not replying to my previous message. We're going to have a serious talk on Monday. I still can't believe you had the balls to marry my little sister, you fucker.'

I let out a chuckle which turns to laughter when I see Viktor leaning against a pillar in front of the office building we share with Uncle Alexei and his business partner, Tristan Hayes.

The moment I climb out of the G-Wagon, Viktor pins me with a raised eyebrow. "I see you finally fucking checked your

messages.”

“I was busy,” I taunt him. “Wedding night with my blushing bride.”

“You sure Mariya wasn’t red in the face from anger?”

Laughing, we walk into the building, and only when we’re in my office does Viktor say, “Tell me the truth because there’s no way I believe the shitty story that you got drunk.”

I take a deep breath, hoping my friendship with Viktor is strong enough to survive what I’ve done.

“I love Mariya,” I get the most crucial detail out in the open.

Viktor crosses his arms over his chest. “Since when?”

“It’s been a couple of years. We were focused on work, so I kept it to myself until I could offer her everything she deserved.”

He nods. “What happened Friday night?”

“Mariya got drunk.” I square my shoulders. “We were walking when she spotted a chapel. She wanted to get married, and I took the chance.” When Viktor takes a threatening step in my direction, I hold up a hand. “Hear me out.”

Anger tightens his features as he growls, “You have one minute.”

“I love Mariya. I’ll treat her like a queen, Viktor. You know this. Also, she admitted she loves me too.”

Surprise flutters over his face. “She did?”

I wisely leave out the part that she was drunk when she said it.

“Yes. Mariya loves me.”

He stares at me for a moment, then shakes his head. “You can be so fucking glad we’re best friends.”

Having dodged a bullet, I let out a breath of relief.

Viktor gives me a look of warning. “If you ever break my sister’s heart, our friendship is over. I’ll kill you.”

“You’ll have to get in line,” I mutter.

“Fine,” he chuckles. “I’ll finish off whatever’s left over after Uncle Alexei’s done with you.”

I reach out a hand to my friend. “We’re good?”

He takes it. “Yeah, we’re good.”

The door to my office opens, and Marco comes bursting in. “I’ve gathered the men. The Albanians are heading our way.”

“What?” Viktor asks. “I thought you took care of them in Europe.”

“Fuck,” I snap. “That’s what we thought as well.” Rushing out of the office, I explain, “Last week, the Albanians popped up in San Diego. Marco kept an eye on their movements. I’ll handle it with my men.”

My friend gives me an incredulous look. “You want me to stay here and miss out on the action. Have you lost your fucking mind?”

“Right,” I chuckle. “My mistake.”

Stepping out of the elevator, Viktor asks, “What’s their last known position?”

“Irvine. They’re an hour away,” Marco replies.

“Who do you have tracking them?” I ask.

“John and Andy.”

I nod. “Make sure they don’t lose sight of the fuckers.” Before I climb into the G-Wagon, I ask, “Where are the rest of the men meeting us?”

“The warehouse in Long Beach.”

Viktor gets into the G-Wagon with me, while Marco follows us in an SUV.

“At least I’ll get to kill someone today, seeing as you talked your way out of dying,” Viktor jokes while reaching behind our seats for the armored vests we keep there.

He puts his on and waits for me to stop at a red light, then hands me the other one. I quickly shrug out of my jacket and toss it at my friend. I’ve just pulled the armored vest over my head when the light turns green. Viktor takes the steering wheel, giving me time to fasten the straps at my sides.

When we reach Long Beach, we only stop to grab the stash of weapons from the secret compartment at the back of the G-Wagon, then head out to meet the Albanians.

As always, Viktor checks the clips of every gun before he cracks the muscles in his neck, his right knee jumping with excitement.

“Thanks for coming with,” I murmur.

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world.” His phone rings, and he answers it quickly, putting it on speaker phone.

Marco’s voice comes over the line, “Where’s your phone, Luca?”

“In my jacket on the floor. What’s up?”

“Ten minutes out. We’re meeting them head-on. A white GTR, a pick-up truck, and an SUV.”

Marco gives us the plates, which we don’t have to write down because Viktor has a photographic memory. That’s why nothing gets past the man.

The minutes tick away, and when we’re bound to make visual contact at any moment, Viktor lets down his window, saying, “You know the drill. Sharp left.”

“Got it.”

“Get ready,” he murmurs, his eyes trained on the cars up ahead.

Everything becomes still inside me as the distance grows rapidly smaller between the Albanians and us, then Viktor snaps, “Now!”

I yank the steering wheel to the left, the tires squeal, and Viktor opens fire on the GTR. The G-Wagon comes to a sudden stop, I grab a submachine gun from Viktor and shove my door open. Climbing out, I move to the front of the vehicle and open fire, covering Viktor so he can get his ass out of the G-Wagon.

The Albanians pile out of their vehicles, then all hell breaks loose as my men join the fight.

When I first took over as head of the mafia, my heart used to hammer in my chest and I'd end up drenched in sweat, but over time it faded. Now I hardly feel anything. It's just another day at work.

The other cars on the road swerve to avoid the gunfight, and I know it's only a matter of time before the highway patrol arrives on the scene.

"Let's finish this," I yell to my men as I push forward.

A lucky fucker's bullet clips my bicep, but that's where his luck ends as Viktor takes him out.

The three vehicles are shot up, and when I kill the last man, I shout, "Move, move, move!"

Between the mafia and bratva, we have half the law enforcement in our pockets, but that doesn't mean we stick around after killing a group of Albanians.

Viktor and I jump back into the G-Wagon, and I floor the gas, the tires screeching.

"Straight ahead. Turn off is in four miles," Viktor says as he quickly tucks the weapons back into the duffle bag.

With one hand on the steering wheel, I peel the armored vest off and give it to Viktor.

Suddenly he snaps, "Fuck, you're bleeding. Pull over."

"You know I can't," I mutter. I take the off ramp and turn down random roads until even I'm lost. Bringing the vehicle to a stop, Viktor and I dart out and quickly place the duffle bag in the hidden compartment.

Viktor reaches for my arm, which has me snapping, “I’m fine. My jacket will cover the blood.” I shrug it on, finally feeling the bite from the bullet digging into the muscle of my bicep.

Definitely more than a flesh wound.

“I’m driving,” Viktor says, his tone leaving no room for argument.

Once we’re back in the G-Wagon, he asks, “You sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah, it’s just a flesh wound,” I lie so he won’t worry. “Let’s head back.”

We have to take a longer route home because we shut down the interstate, and traffic will be backed up for miles. By the time we reach the office, my arm is burning something fierce.

“I’m going to head home,” I say when we climb out of the vehicle.

Viktor nods. “I’ll check for any news regarding the hit.”

“Let me know if you find anything.”

“Will do.”

Viktor heads into the building while I slide behind the steering wheel. Driving back to the apartment is a bitch, and I try to use my left arm as little as possible.

I pull into the basement and park in my regular spot, but the moment I climb out and don’t see Ivan and Lev, a frown darkens my forehead.

I yank my phone out of my pocket and see a missed call from Mariya, but she didn't bother leaving a message. Heading up to the apartment, I already know what I'm going to find, and after the gunfight, it's the last thing I'm in the mood for.

When the elevator doors open and I don't find Mariya in the apartment, unreasonable anger floods my veins.

Christ, she's testing me on the wrong fucking day.

Chapter 17

Mariya

The moment I walk into the foyer, Luca's voice is low and deadly, "Where the fuck have you been?"

I come to a sudden stop, my eyebrows darting up. "I went to the store." I hold up the bag of snacks and Ibuprofen I got.

He's leaning against the kitchen counter, his hands casually shoved into his pockets, his legs crossed at the ankles.

The pose might be casual, but I can feel the waves of anger coming off him from a mile away.

Slowly, he pushes away from the counter, his dark gaze locking on me.

A shiver shoots down my spine as I walk through the foyer.

"Where's your phone?" he demands, his tone unnervingly calm.

I point to the stairs. "Upstairs."

"Christ, you're hell-bent on driving me insane," he mutters.

"I tried to call you, but you didn't answer," I say in my defense.

“Then you send me a fucking text,” he shouts. “I’m out there waging a fucking war! The last thing I need right now is worrying about you.”

My head snaps back, instant anger flooding my veins.

No one shouts at me.

Stepping closer to Luca, I give him a look of warning. “Don’t shout at me! You’re not the only one at war. My ovaries are currently tearing down my insides, and it hurts like a fucker. I’m overemotional and moody as hell, and I just went out to get my favorite snacks because there’s nothing to eat in your damn house.”

Luca shakes his head, looking a little confused. “Your what is what?”

“I’m on my period,” I mutter. Pushing past him, I put the bag on the counter and take out the Ibuprofen. I pop two into my mouth and wash them down with some water.

Luca just stares at me as I grab a chocolate bar. “Get used to it, my husband. Blood’s going to flow freely for the next week.” I slump down on the couch, press my rechargeable heating pad against my abdomen, and let out a relieved sigh when I peel the wrapping back from the chocolaty goodness I’ve desperately needed all day.

Just as I take a bite, my abdomen decides it’s a good day to up the voltage of my cramps. I bring my legs up, curling into the corner and pressing the heating pad harder against my skin. “Jesus, the Ibuprofen better kick in soon,” I whisper to myself.

It was a shit show when Aunt Flo showed up. I was in the middle of unpacking and had no freaking idea where my

tampons were. I'm a heavy bleeder. It took me thirty minutes and half a toilet paper roll before I finally found the damn tampons.

I hear Luca take the stairs up to our bedroom.

Shit, the closet is a mess. He's probably going to yell at me. I didn't expect him home so soon, though. I check the time, noticing it's only two pm.

Definitely not my fault he came home early.

He's up there a while before he appears, dressed in a sweater and suit pants. Not even glancing my way, he heads straight for the kitchen.

I'm just about to start thinking he's giving me the silent treatment when he asks, "Have you eaten anything today?"

He sounds tired, but at least he doesn't look angry anymore.

Even though I'm cramping badly, I get up and walk closer to him. I extend an olive branch by being the first to apologize, "I'm sorry I snapped at you."

Luca opens the fridge and starts to take ingredients out. "We've both had a shitty morning. Let's leave it at that."

Worry starts to niggle in the back of my mind. "I'll leave a message next time. I was only out for fifteen minutes, and Ivan and Lev were with me."

"It's okay."

My eyes search his face, noticing he looks pale. "What happened today?"

Luca only shakes his head and carries on prepping for a meal.

My legs feel numb, so I pull out a stool and take a seat at the marble island. I watch him work for a couple of minutes, loving the way he moves. “You can tell me anything.”

For a moment, his eyes flick to my face before he turns his back to me, dismissing me like he always used to do.

It hurts much more this time, the ache spreading through my heart worse than the period cramps.

Being overemotional also doesn’t help because a sudden rush of tears threatens to burst free.

Slipping off the stool, I go upstairs, scared I might actually cry today, which is not something I do often.

I put my heat pack on charge and go to the bathroom. After taking care of business, I wash my hands. A flash of red catches my eye and frowning, I crouch by the slim waste bin.

That’s not my blood.

I pinch the toilet paper with my fingers, and when I lift it, something falls from it. The metal pins on the tiles.

Jesus.

I pick up the bullet, the sight of it making an icy wave of fear rush through me.

Oh, Jesus.

I dart up and run out of the bathroom. I fly down the stairs, and it has Luca’s head snapping my way. “What’s wrong?” he asks.

I almost barrel into him, my eyes searching for the wound. “Where did you get shot?” Panic coats my voice as I start to tug at his sweater, yanking the fabric up and over his head.

“I’m okay,” he mutters, watching me as if I’ve lost my ever-loving mind.

My gaze locks on the white bandage wrapped around his bicep, and a wave of nausea threatens to hit. “Jesus, Luca,” I almost whimper, my heart stopping at the thought that if the bullet was a couple of inches to the right, I could’ve lost him.

The thought rips the ground beneath my feet.

Sure, I’ve grown up in the *bratva*, but none of the men I love have ever been shot.

That I know of.

As careful as I can, I remove the bandage with trembling fingers. My eyebrows draw together, and I swallow hard on the urge to cry when I see the swollen, red hole that’s still seeping blood.

A strangled whimper escapes me. “Where’s the first aid kit?”

“There’s a bag in the closet by my suits.” Luca wraps his right hand around the back of my neck before I can turn away from him. He locks eyes with me. “Deep breaths, *amore mio*. I’m okay.”

“You’re not! I could’ve lost you today,” I cry and quickly losing control over my emotions, I pull free and run up the stairs. I find the bag where Luca said it would be and bundle it into my arms.

Calm down. Your parents trained you for this. Get your shit together.

When I turn around, Luca comes into the bedroom, his features tight from exhaustion.

“Sit on the bed,” I order as I rush to him. I plant the bag on the covers, and opening it, I start yanking bandages, antiseptic wipes, and anything else I can get my hands on from the large first aid kit.

“You need stitches,” I gasp, my emotions spiraling. “It’s been years since my mom showed me.”

As part of my training, my parents taught me how to take care of wounds, but none of that prepared me for this.

“There’s Dermabond in the bag,” Luca says.

When he reaches for the bag, I shove his hand away. “Don’t move. I’ve got this.” I take deep breaths to calm down so I can tend to my man’s wound. “I’ve got this,” I repeat.

“Stop, Mariya,” Luca orders.

My eyes dart to his face. “Have you lost your mind? You’re bleeding!”

Luca stands up, and wrapping his right arm around me, he yanks me against his bare chest. The warmth of his breath hits my ear. “Calm down, baby. I’m fine. It’s just a flesh wound.”

Feeling the heat and strength of his body, a hard tremble shudders through me. Standing in his firm hold, the shock finally sets in. Luca got shot.

I always thought my men were invincible, that nothing could touch them.

“Calm down,” he murmurs soothingly. “I’m okay.”

Get your shit together, Mariya.

I take deep breaths, filling my lungs with Luca’s scent.

That’s better. Now fucking take care of your man.

I pull back and look up at him. “I’m good.” I walk to the bathroom and wash my hands again, then order, “Sit down.”

A smile tugs at the corner of Luca’s mouth as he obeys.

I get to work, focusing on keeping my hand steady as I clean the wound and apply the surgical glue. I blow lightly on it and wait a couple of minutes to make sure I did a good job.

I lightly trail a finger around the wound, then wrap a bandage around his bicep. Feeling a little calmer now that the gunshot wound is no longer bleeding, I let out a relieved sigh.

My eyes settle on Luca’s face, only to see him watching me with one hell of an intense look darkening his gaze.

Feeling unnerved, I say, “You should get some rest.”

Luca shakes his head, takes hold of my hand, and tugs me closer. “Straddle me.”

My eyebrow darts up. “What?”

His hands find my hips, and then I’m yanked onto his lap and forced to straddle him. Shocked, my eyes meet his blazing ones, then he asks, “Why did you react so strongly to me getting shot?”

Oh shit.

Chapter 18

Luca

Panic flares in her eyes, and she quickly lowers her gaze to my bare chest, that she only seems to notice now, seeing as her lips part and a look of wonder ghosts over her face.

“Mariya,” I say to bring her attention back to the question I asked. “Why did you react so strongly?”

Her tongue darts out to wet her lips, and she glances at the bloody wipes beside me. “I’m always an emotional mess during my period.”

Frustration coils in my chest because she’s hiding the real reason. Lifting my hand to her chin, I force her to meet my eyes.

Uncomfortable with the conversation, she shifts on my lap. The instant her pussy rubs against my cock, I harden.

Mariya obviously feels it because she starts to blink faster while a flush creeps up her neck.

Christ, it’s the first time I’ve seen her blush, and it only makes me harder.

After the morning I had, I’m tired, and honestly, I’m running out of patience. “Tell me the truth.”

She shakes her head. “I did.”

Fuck her stubbornness and pride.

And fuck mine.

“You care,” I state the obvious.

A frown forms on her forehead. “Of course. I’m not a coldhearted bitch, Luca.”

I move my hand behind her head, my fingers tangling with her hair. Pulling her closer until our breaths mingle, my eyes keep hers imprisoned.

Fuck this. If we can’t admit our true feelings to each other, I’ll fucking show her what she means to me.

I possessively claim her mouth in a demanding kiss, willing her to give in to the love she feels for me. My tongue lashes at hers, my teeth tugging at her bottom lip until it’s plump.

Mariya lets out a moan, and I devour the sound as my heartbeat speeds up until it’s hammering in my chest. I let go of her hair, and wrapping my good arm around her, I lift her, turn, and push her down on the bed.

Ignoring the pain in my left arm, I shove the first aid bag and everything else off the covers and crawl over Mariya. When I stare down at her, the desire in her eyes has a direct link to my hard as fuck cock.

“Christ, I wish you knew what you do to me,” I murmur before I take her mouth again.

I push her legs open, and settling my pelvis between her thighs, the kiss turns wild.

When I thrust against her, our clothes frustrating the fuck out of me, she moans, “We can’t.”

“The fuck we can’t,” I grumble, peppering kisses down her neck, my teeth nipping at her soft skin.

She lets out a dreamy sigh, her hands weaving into my hair. “I’m on my period.”

I lift my head and pin her with an unwavering look. “I don’t care.”

When I lower my head and bite her nipple through her silk blouse, she moans, “Jesus, Luca.”

I grab hold of the silky fabric and yank it off her. My eyes feast on her creamy skin and the swell of her breasts peaking from the edges of the lace bra. “I want you now,” I demand as I unhook her bra and toss it to the side.

Fuck, her breasts are the perfect size as if they were made for me. I palm them in my hands and massage them with the urgency I feel to be buried inside her. “Christ, you’re beautiful,” I groan before I suck a nipple into my mouth.

I feast on Mariya’s breasts like a starving man, my hands exploring her slim waist and hips before I undo her jeans and yank them and her lacy panties down her legs.

“Wait!” Mariya darts into a sitting position as I throw her clothes onto the floor. “Seriously, I’m on my period. This will have to wait a week.”

I undo my belt, and when the leather wooshes through the loops, I slowly shake my head. “I’ve waited years for this. I’m not waiting a second longer.”

Confusion mixes with the desire on her face until I shove my suit pants and boxers down my legs.

Mariya's eyes burn over my body, and it gives me a chance to take in the perfection of hers.

"Fuck, I'm a lucky bastard," I murmur, in total awe of her beauty.

"Good God, Luca," she breathes, her eyes glued to my cock.

As I place my knee on the bed, Mariya quickly scoots off, saying, "Just give me a minute."

She darts into the bathroom and spends some time in there before coming out with a large bath towel. She spreads it over the covers before glancing awkwardly at me.

"Get your sexy ass on the bed," I order.

She's still climbing on when I reach for her ass and pull her to me so I can bite the one cheek.

"Luca," she exclaims, sounding both shocked and turned on.

I push her onto her stomach and kiss and lick my way all the way up from her ass to her right shoulder, where the words *Daddy's Girl* are tattooed in cursive letters.

Her daddy has no idea what I'm about to do to his daughter.

Flipping Mariya over onto her back, I brace my hands on either side of her head and stare down at her exquisite face that's flushed with desire.

I lower my head and tenderly nip at her lips while nudging her legs open. Lying down on top of her, I groan from how amazing it feels to have her naked beneath me.

“Fuck, I’ve waited so long,” I murmur before deepening the kiss.

With every inch of my skin touching hers, I frame her face with my hands and keep her in place as I fuck her mouth with my tongue.

Years. Fucking years.

Finally, I’ll make Mariya mine in every single fucking way.

Chapter 19

Mariya

I'm so overwhelmed by how fast everything has progressed, all I can do is feel.

And damn, it feels otherworldly.

Luca's muscled body pressing mine into the mattress. His warm skin rubbing against mine. His mouth turning my lips into nothing but tingles.

It consumes me.

My breaths are already short puffs, my heart fluttering in my chest. I gasp. I moan. I whimper for more, my fingers getting lost in his thick black hair.

But when his hand slips between my legs, my mind clears, and my thighs try to slam shut. "You don't have to do that," the words burst from me, my cheeks warming from the embarrassment of being on my period.

Also, I don't need any foreplay. Sex has always been more of an emotional connection than a physical one for me.

Luca lifts his head and locks eyes with me, then parts me and flicks a finger over my defective clit. I rarely, if ever, feel any kind of sensation down there.

His eyes sharpen on me, then he asks, “Don’t you want this?”

“Oh no, I do,” I say. “But you don’t have to worry about foreplay.”

Frowning, he shakes his head. “What?”

“I can’t orgasm. It’s about the emotional connection for me,” I explain.

Usually, when I tell a guy to just enjoy himself and not worry about me, he does just that. Unfortunately, it’s not the case with Luca.

He tilts his head, looking at me as if I’ve lost my mind. “I can’t tell if you’re joking.”

I let out an awkward chuckle. “Nope. I don’t feel much down there.”

“And when you masturbate?”

“Nothing. I don’t even bother.”

Luca looks genuinely concerned as he asks, “Is this a medical thing? Have you seen a doctor?”

I shake my head. “No. I’ve always been this way. The last thing I was going to do is tell some doctor my vagina’s broken.”

Luca stares at me for a moment then his features soften. He rests his forearms on either side of my head and gives me a tender kiss before saying, “Let me try. Okay?”

I scrunch my nose, the moment already gone with all the talking. “Honestly, I’m good. It’ll feel weird for me and ruin the moment for you.”

“Stop overthinking things,” he orders. “Just look into my eyes.”

Deciding to appease him, I stare into his intense irises.

His voice is low, the timbre hitting a super sensitive spot in my chest, when he murmurs, “Focus on me. Don’t think about anything else.”

Instead of going right for my clit and rubbing it until it hurts like some of the men before have done, Luca remains still, all his attention bathing me in a warm glow.

He presses another tender kiss to my lips, then brushes soft kisses along my jaw. When he reaches my ear, he orders, “Touch me, *amore mio*.”

I know the word has something to do with love, and it makes warmth spread through my heart.

Having Luca’s attention and him naked on top of me is more than I ever dreamt I’d have.

I lift my hands to his sides and trail my fingers over the muscles covering his back, savoring the moment.

“Relax.” He presses a kiss to the sensitive skin beneath my ear, and it makes goosebumps spread over my body.

When he talks again, his voice is deep and rough. “Christ, Mariya, you feel so good beneath me.”

I’m sucked into a bubble of intimacy I’ve never experienced before. I fall so hard into the intensity radiating off Luca, a bomb could detonate next to us, and I wouldn’t know.

His mouth claims mine, and this time the kiss is controlling, dominating me and demanding I submit. Desire burns hot through my body, and I moan to voice how he's making me feel.

His hands move down to my breasts, and he alternates between massaging them and squeezing them hard, stoking a fire in me that's never been lit before.

I get lost in the way he touches me, the way his mouth dominates mine, the way he consumes my very being.

And I give in to the love I feel for this man.

My hands move faster, becoming greedy to explore every dip and swell of the corded muscle in his body.

Luca's hand slips between my legs, and this time, when his finger strokes over my clit, I feel a sharp sensation.

Tearing my mouth away from his, I gasp, but before I can overthink it, Luca takes my eyes prisoner, saying, "Stay with me. Don't think about anything else. Focus on how it feels when I touch you. Focus on us."

I lock eyes with him and direct all my attention to his hand between my legs, his body covering mine, and how this man touches my heart and soul like no other.

He rubs circles around my clit, and when he starts to flick at the suddenly sensitive bundle of nerves, my back arches, and frustration slithers through me.

Luca pushes his left hand behind my neck, his fingers wrapping possessively around me. His eyes burn into mine, as he stays, "*Mia regina. Mia moglie. Amore Mio.*"

Sweet Jesus.

“More,” I gasp, the frustration retreating and my body melting into his touch.

“Sei il mio tutto.”

Oh, God. Luca speaking Italian is so freaking hot.

My body starts to quiver, every muscle tightening until I fear I might implode. “Luca,” I plead, my fingers digging into his skin.

He circles my opening, and my heart stutters, my body craving him inside me. When I feel his cock at my entrance, I lose control and lift my hips as an offering to him.

Luca nudges the head of his cock against my entrance, stretching me until he thrusts in hard, sheathing himself to the hilt deep inside me.

“Jesus,” I gasp. I’ve never felt so full before.

So complete.

“Fuck, Mariya,” Luca groans, his body shuddering against mine. “You feel like heaven.”

Luca keeps rubbing my clit as he pulls back, and when he enters me again, he hits a spot I didn’t know existed.

My body unravels at the speed of light, my emotions scatter to the four corners of the world, and all the light in the universe explodes from me.

“Luca,” I whimper as I cling to him, convulsions seizing me until I can’t breathe.

“I’ve got you, baby. Just ride it out.” His voice is so hoarse it opens a floodgate in my chest. My eyes mist, and when I blink, a tear escapes, spiraling over my temple and into my hair.

Luca looks at me as if I’m a miracle – as if I’m his entire world.

Pleasure keeps hitting me in waves, and when he begins to move, filling me with thrust after hard thrust, it only makes a fresh wave of ecstasy break over me.

I’m clinging to him so tightly, I’m pretty sure I’m about to draw blood from his skin, but I can’t do anything but experience the miracle this man is making me feel.

Luca seems to lose control, and he slams his mouth to mine, kissing me as hard as he’s fucking me. His cock strokes my inner walls until they tingle with aftershocks of pleasure, making me clamp around him.

There’s nothing but Luca.

In my body. In my heart. In my soul.

In my mind.

I’ve given him all of me.

Chapter 20

Luca

Christ Almighty, I've never experienced a more profound moment in my entire life.

Watching her fall apart and feeling her body convulse fills my chest with pride.

My woman is far from broken. Her body is so responsive to mine, every time I hit her G-spot, her pussy thanks me by clenching hard around my cock.

The moment Mariya gave in and submitted to me, the love she felt for me shining from her with the intensity of every star in the universe, she laid claim to every part of me.

The light and the dark.

The man and the monster.

As I pound into her glorious heat, she owns me in a way I've never been owned before. Her breaths become mine. Her heartbeats become mine.

With every thrust, she becomes my very source of life.

Our eyes remain locked, our lips parted and brushing against each other with every movement from our rocking bodies.

“*Ti amo tanto,*” I breathe the words *I love you so much* to her. Knowing she doesn’t understand Italian makes it easier for me to tell her how I feel until she’s ready to hear it in English.

Pleasure shoots down my spine, and not breaking eye contact, I growl, “*Il mio.*”

Mine. All fucking mine.

My body shudders, my fucking balls tighten, then I jerk uncontrollably as I empty myself in her.

“*Il mio,*” I hiss from the intense orgasm tightening every muscle in my body and forcing me to bury myself as deep as possible inside her.

The powerful force of the orgasm subsides until I’m able to move again, thrusting into her three more times before I still.

We’re both gasping, our bodies drenched in sweat.

My arm is hurting like a motherfucker, but it doesn’t matter. All I can focus on is the tear escaping her left eye before it disappears into her hair.

This is Mariya at her most vulnerable. There’s no bratva princess. There’s no queen. No feistiness.

There’s just the woman who loves me so fucking much it terrifies her.

I push my arms beneath her and hold her so fucking tight as I press kisses to her neck and jaw. I wait to catch my breath before I say, “I think it’s safe to say there’s nothing wrong with your clit.”

A breath sputters from her, her arms tighten around me, and she buries her face against my shoulder as she tries to work through her emotions.

“You came so fucking beautifully for me,” I praise her.

Even though she’s emotional, her pussy clenches around me, telling me her body loves the praise.

It takes a couple of minutes for Mariya to regain some control. Finally, she pulls back and meets my eyes.

There’s no sign of the vulnerable woman who loves me, the bratva princess back with her guard up so fucking high it probably touches the sky.

My stubborn wife.

“How do you feel?” I ask as I pull my arms from under her and rest them on either side of her head.

“I’m not going to lie.” A smile tugs at the corner of her swollen lips. “That was mindblowing.”

I grin at her, pride filling my chest again. “Yeah?”

“You definitely know how to satisfy a woman.”

I press a tender kiss to her mouth, then say, “You just needed to stop overthinking things. Once you let me in and submitted, your body did the rest.”

She tilts her head. “I so did not submit to you.”

I press a kiss to the tip of her nose, then smirk. “Yeah, you did.”

“Let’s agree to disagree,” she chuckles.

I pull out of her as I push myself back until I'm kneeling between her thighs. The moment I glance down, Mariya shoots up as if someone lit a fire under her ass.

"Don't look!"

"Too late," I grin as I stare at the blood coating my cock and her inner thighs.

Intense satisfaction spreads through me, and when my eyes flick to Mariya's, it tenses my voice as I say, "I think the blood is fitting for our first time together. The spoils of the war I waged to make you mine."

"Jesus, Luca," she mutters as she pulls her legs up and scoots off the bed. "Caveman much?"

"Definitely. I don't know why that surprises you," I chuckle as I get up and follow her into the bathroom.

I reach into the shower and open the faucets, then drag her beneath the spray with me.

"It's cold," she shrieks, trying to duck away, but I yank her body to mine and keep her locked to me with my left arm.

"I'll warm you up soon enough," I tease, slipping my hand between her thighs.

She gives me an incredulous look. "Don't push your luck. I'm dead sure I don't have another orgasm in me so soon after the intense one you just gave me."

"How intense?" I ask, my voice low and seductive as I lightly start to stroke her clit.

Her lips part, and her hands find my shoulders.

I watch droplets of water run down her skin while I massage her harder. “How intense?”

“Good God, Luca. You’re so freaking hot.” She pushes onto her toes and slams her mouth to mine.

It doesn’t even take five minutes before she’s clinging to me, breathless, trembling, and riding out the pleasure I’m giving her.

“How intense?” I murmur, my hands gliding over her skin, my lips brushing down the side of her neck.

Mariya keeps hold of me as she admits, “It’s unlike anything I’ve felt before. It consumed me.”

“Good,” I groan. I tilt her head back and nip at her lips. “So fucking good.” Pushing her back against the wall, I once again show her just how much I fucking love her.

I’ll keep showing her until she realizes she’s the only woman for me. Once that happens, I’ll finally be able to tell her I love her more than life itself.

Chapter 21

Mariya

After spending the most incredible night of my life with Luca and sleeping in his arms, I'm bummed when he leaves for work.

I go to the closet to unpack the rest of my belongings. It keeps me busy for a couple of hours, but once I'm done and staring at my clothes hanging opposite Luca's, the worry starts to gnaw at my heart.

As mindblowing as the sex was, it doesn't mean Luca's falling in love with me.

After I got to experience him in such an intimate way, I now fear the annulment. I'm just going to continue to fall more and more in love with him, and when it all ends, the heartache will be unbearable.

What if he can't return my feelings?

What if when the six months are up, he decides it was fun, but it's over?

Dear God, how will I survive the blow?

Panic seizes my chest, and it has me grabbing my purse and rushing out of the bedroom, where I gave too much of myself to Luca.

Hurrying down the stairs, I pull my phone out and send Luca a message that I'm going to visit my parents.

I leave the apartment as if hellhounds are nipping at my heels. The moment I step into the basement, Ivan and Lev climb out of the SUV.

"We're going to my parents' house," I tell them.

"Okay," Ivan replies, opening the door to the back seat for me.

I climb inside and type out a text to Violet.

Can we meet for lunch sometime this week?

Ivan slides behind the steering wheel while Lev gets into the front passenger seat.

Violet replies as Ivan steers the SUV out of the basement.

Sure. I'm free Thursday at twelve.

Thank God. I really need some girl time with my friend.

We're hit from the side, metal crushes, the force slamming me across the backseat and into the door. Glass shatters, and dazed, I hear Ivan shout, "*Blyad'!*"

The SUV flips, and I go airborne before slamming into the roof. We keep rolling, and I'm wildly tossed around until every part of my body aches, and I black out.

Coming to, I hear metal creaking. A copper taste fills my mouth, and I groan as I test my arms and legs.

Disorientated, I groan, "Ivan? Lev?"

They don't respond, and it has me pushing myself up. I glance to the front of the mangled SUV. There's no sign of

Lev, and Ivan is lying at an awkward angle, his eyes frozen in a dead stare.

No.

Jesus.

Shit.

My body aches as I push myself onto my hands and knees. I whimper from a sharp pain in my chest as I crawl out of the broken side window.

Once outside the wrecked SUV, I use the side of the vehicle to lean on as I climb to my feet.

The sight meeting me steals the breath from my lungs.

NoNoNoNoNo.

Lev's lying by the front of the overturned car, and men I've never seen before move in on me.

This was an organized hit.

Shit. Fuck.

Standing with my back to the car, I use the diamond of my wedding ring to write, hoping to God it will be legible.

When two men get dangerously close to me, I kick off my high heels and assume a fighting stance because there's no way I'm going down without a fight, even if I am outnumbered.

Dad thought me to always fight until the very end. There's no giving up.

Here goes nothing, Daddy.

Doing my best to ignore the pain from the car accident, I lunge forward, throwing the first punch. The diamond of my wedding ring slashes across the fucker's face as I spin to the side, grab hold of his shoulder and pull myself up until I can wrap my legs around his neck. Using all my strength, I flip, taking his ass down.

I land with a hard thud, roll away and struggle to my feet as my head starts to spin.

No. Don't you dare pass out. Focus.

I bounce back and threaten, "Do you know who my father and husband are? Do you have any fucking idea who my brother is?" I suck in a desperate breath, increasing the searing pain in my chest. "You're dead."

The one starts laughing, stepping closer to me. "*Koha përtë vdekur, kurvë.*"

I have no idea what that means, but it can't be anything good.

I bring up my arms as the men all attack at once. Wounded and weak, I know I don't stand a chance, but I give it my all. I manage to drop two men to their asses and headbutt another who tries to grab me from behind.

My heart's hammering in my chest, my breaths exploding over my parched lips. My fists ache. My chest is on fire. My strength dwindles until one of the fuckers gets in a punch. The force of the blow scatters my senses and sends me sprawling over the road.

One of them kicks me so hard, I hear the snap of bone a split second before debilitating pain engulfs my entire torso.

Air wheezes from me, and my eyes focus on the mansion across the road. I recognize it, realizing I'm only minutes away from my parents' home.

I force myself to my feet but stumble before falling to my knees.

I suck in a wheezing breath and close my eyes.

I tried, Daddy.

My chin drops to my chest then I slump to the side. When darkness engulfs me, my last thought is of Luca.

I hope he knows how much I love him. I hope he saw it in my eyes when we made love.

Chapter 22

Mariya

Bloodcurdling pain yanks me out of the dark. I shake my head, trying to make out my surroundings through blurring vision. The accident and attack flood my mind, sending a surge of adrenaline through my veins.

I find myself slumped on a chair, my wrists cuffed behind me.

They're so sure of themselves, they didn't even bother tying my legs.

Take the win. You need it.

Moving into a more comfortable position causes my entire chest to be engulfed in an inferno of pain. "Jesus," I whimper.

Let's hope it's only broken ribs, and you're not bleeding out internally.

A metal door creaks open, and two men come in. When they notice I'm conscious, they laugh.

The one comes to stand in front of me. Glaring up at him, I ask, "Who are you?"

"Names don't matter." His accent is thick.

I shake my head and chuckle, "Come on. I at least want to know who I'm going to kill." When he only stares me down, I

ask, “Why did you take me? What do you want?”

His upper lip curls as he sneers, “I only want your body parts which I’ll send one by fucking one to your husband.”

No negotiation. I don’t have time.

With my hands behind my back, they can’t see as I start to press hard on my thumb. I lower my head, so they won’t see the flash of pain as I dislocated my thumb. It’s sharp, feeling as if I’m ripping it off.

Dear God.

You’re okay.

Breathe.

No, that hurts too. Shallow breaths.

Focus.

Slowly, I pull my left hand free from the cuffs, and I push the metal over my right hand’s knuckles so I can use it to hit them.

I’m so thankful for everything Dad taught me. It puts me in a position to at least try to save myself.

Lifting my head, I lock eyes with the fucker who seems to be the leader. “Clench your teeth,” I say right before I dart up and slam the cuffs into his jaw.

I quickly move behind the chair, then take a defensive stance. “Don’t just stand there. Let’s do this,” I taunt them, my eyes flicking between the men and the exit.

The leader spits blood onto the floor, then pulls a gun from his pocket, aims it at my leg, and pulls the trigger.

The bullet slams into my thigh, and the splintering pain hauls my ass to the filthy ground. I bite back a cry, but it comes out as a whimper.

I hear footsteps, and as my head snaps up, the back of the gun slams into my temple, knocking me out cold.

Luca

I'm in the security room with Viktor looking over footage of Albanians getting off a private jet at LAX.

"The fuckers just keep coming," Viktor mutters. "Who the fuck did you piss off?"

"I have no idea. Next time keep one alive so we can find out."

Viktor lets out a chuckle as my phone rings. Seeing it's the number for the lobby's reception desk, I answer, "Cotroni."

"Sir, there's an envelope for you. The delivery guy said it was urgent. Should I bring it up?"

"Yes, I'm in the security room."

I end the call and only then notice a message from Mariya.

I'm going to visit my parents.

A smile tugs at my mouth. *Good girl.*

“If you’re sexting my sister while standing right next to me, I’m going to fucking rip your ballsack off,” Viktor mutters.

I let out a bark of laughter, then look at the screen again. There’s one Albanian fucker wearing a hoodie, and we can’t get a good look at his face.

“Anything on the other guy?” I ask as I look at the facial recognition software scanning his face through the system.

“No.”

A knock at the door has me straightening up, and when I open it, the receptionist from the lobby smiles politely at me. “The envelope, Sir.”

“Thanks.” I take it from her and shut the door. I tear the side open and frown when there are no papers. I tip it over, and something shiny falls from it, bouncing on the floor.

The blood in my veins turns to ice, and a hard tremor rocks the ground beneath my feet.

No.

As if in a trance, I crouch down and pick up the wedding ring.

“What’s that?” Viktor asks. I hear his seat squeak as he gets up. “Luca?”

Darting up, I yank the door open and call out, “Stacy!”

The receptionist startles, quickly turning back. “Sir?”

“Who gave you the envelope?”

“A courier guy.”

I swing to Viktor. “Pull up the security footage for the lobby?”

He gets to work, muttering, “Care to fill me in on why I’m doing this?”

My stomach bottoms out, and my heart shrivels to the size of a fucking pea.

God, no.

There’s a sharp pain in my heart as the raw fear knocks me back a step.

Mariya.

Lowering my eyes to the ring in my palm, my voice is hoarse as I say, “This is Mariya’s wedding ring. It was delivered to us.”

“What?” Viktor slowly gets up, shock tightening his features.

I pull my phone out and dial her number. When it goes to voicemail, the air wooshes from my lungs. “Fuck!”

Not this. Anything but this.

I try Lev and Ivan’s numbers, but the same thing happens.

“Motherfucking fuck,” I shout, anger starting to mix with the panic flaying my chest raw.

Viktor sits down and starts to type as if his very life depends on it. Seconds later, he says, “Tijuana. She’s in fucking Mexico.”

The relief that hits me in the gut is drowned out by the shock that she’s already been taken across the border.

“You have a tracking device on her?” I ask. “Please tell me it’s not something she can lose.”

“It’s embedded beneath her skin.” Viktor taps his shoulder. “Covered by a tattoo.”

Thank fucking Christ.

“Let’s go,” I snap, rage boiling in my veins.

I rush out of the office, and I’m just about to press dial on Uncle Alexei’s number when Viktor says, “Don’t do that. This is not something you tell him over the phone.”

“If I don’t let him know, I’m good as dead.”

“We’re heading to the mansion. We tell him face to face and get him and my dad to help. We’re dealing with this as a family.”

We hurry out of the building and climb into the G-Wagon. I floor the gas, not giving a single fuck about traffic laws.

When we enter the high-class neighborhood the mansion is in, we’re stopped because the road’s been closed due to an accident. I’m just about to put the vehicle in reverse when I recognize the SUV.

“Jesus fucking Christ.” I throw the door open and jog closer.

Three bodies are covered, and the SUV is on its roof.

“You can’t enter. It’s a crime scene,” a police officer shouts. I ignore the man and lift the first cover, which exposes a dead Albanian. The next is Lev and then Ivan.

Viktor talks to the police officers, and I have no idea what he tells them, but they leave me alone.

I look at the SUV, and my eyes lock on something that looks like chicken scratch.

Alive.

“Mariya,” I groan, almost dropping to my knees. Hurrying to Viktor, I say, “She’s alive. Let’s move.”

“Dashcam,” he says, jogging the SUV and pulling the memory card from it.

We take another road to the mansion and stop in front of it with screeching tires.

Viktor’s father yanks the door open, takes one look at us, then shouts, “Alexei get your ass out here. Something happened.”

“What the fuck is going on?” Uncle Alexei snaps as he appears in the doorway. His eyes lock on my face, then he takes a step back. “Don’t you dare tell me my baby girl’s...” His voice disappears, and he turns his back to us, sucking in deep breaths of air.

“Mariya’s been taken,” I say, my voice not hiding the worry. “On her way to you, they were rammed off the road. It’s a couple of blocks from here.”

“I have the dashcam’s memory card,” Viktor says as he walks into the house.

“I want to see what happened to my daughter and who the fuck dared touch her,” Uncle Alexei growls as we all follow Viktor.

My heart is still thundering in my chest, my mouth dry from the shock. It feels like I’ve been electrocuted, my mind

buzzing with energy, but I can't focus long enough for it all to make sense.

Viktor shoves the memory card into his laptop and accesses the dashcam footage. He fast-forwards to earlier today, and I get glimpses of the road. Suddenly everything's a blur as the SUV is hit, flipping three times before coming to a skidding stop, giving us a view of a truck and two sedans.

"Fucking Albanians," I mutter as the men climb out of their vehicles. Intense rage rips through me with the force of a hurricane.

Uncle Dimitri opens his laptop and starts to type, saying, "The house on that corner has a security camera by the gate."

Viktor glances at his father's laptop, reaches across, and opens an entirely different screen. "This way is faster. You're getting old."

"Fuck off," his father mutters as they access the camera, which gives us a better view of the street.

Horror washes over me as I see Mariya crawl out of the wreckage. She struggles to stand up.

"Broken ribs," Uncle Alexei groans. "My baby's struggling to breathe."

Lifting my arm, I grab a fistful of my hair as I watch my wife kick off her shoes and assume a fighting stance.

"Jesus Christ," I whisper when she lunges for the man nearest to her, taking him down in one swift move.

"That's my girl. Fight," Uncle Alexei cheers for her, his breaths coming faster. "I want sound!" he shouts when she

says something.

Viktor grabs the laptop from his father and rewinds, then types something in code on a different screen before pressing play again.

‘Do you know who my father and husband are? Do you have any fucking idea who my brother is?’ She sucks in a painful breath, then her tone is deadly calm as she says, *‘You’re dead.’*

‘Koha për të vdekur, kurvë,’ one of the Albanians says.

“Time to die, whore,” Viktor mutters the translation to us.

The realization that this happened after she scratched the message on the SUV rips my heart clean from my chest.

I can’t watch her die.

Fuck no.

I take a step back, but my eyes remain glued to the screen as I watch all the men attack the woman I can’t live without.

“I...” My breaths speed up as I watch her fight with everything she has. My emotions spiral out of control, and my throat closes up.

She fights off four men in her already injured state before one punches her. Both my hands fly into my hair, and I swear I can feel the pain she’s in as she falls to the road.

Still, my woman struggles back to her feet, she stumbles, then drops to her knees.

‘I tried, Daddy,’ she wheezes.

I want to rip the air from my lungs and give it to her.

Mariya slumps to her side, losing consciousness, and as a fucker drags her over his shoulder, everything stills inside me.

As I watch them load her into one of the sedans and drive off, anger replaces the worry, the fear, the shock.

Unadulterated rage sweeps through me as I lower my arms and inhale deeply.

I'm coming for you, my little fighter. Just hold on.

“Time to fucking hunt,” Uncle Alexei growls, death and brimstone brimming in his voice.

Chapter 23

Mariya

The fuckers bandage the gunshot wound to my leg so I won't bleed out on them while they torture me.

Just fucking great.

No matter how I brace myself, I'm not ready to lose any body parts.

My mind is flooded with panic and pain, making it hard to try and come up with an escape plan.

You just need to find a way to buy time until your family comes for you. They'll check the tracking device and see where you are.

The only thing I have going for me is that they once again didn't restrain me. They probably think I can't do anything, because of the wound to my left leg.

The fucker in charge gestures to two other men who joined us while I was unconscious, and they come to haul me to my feet. My body screams with agony, but all I can do is groan.

I'm dragged to a chair and shoved into it, then a wooden table is pushed in front of me. I almost slump over it, but manage to keep myself sitting in the chair.

A drilling sound makes every inch of my skin go numb with pins and needles.

My eyes lock on the fucker in charge as he grins at me, holding a cordless drill in his hand.

I'm not going to walk out of here alive.

I don't get time to process the devastating thought as my arms are grabbed by the two men. They force my hands onto the tabletop, but I fight with the meager strength I've managed to regain.

No matter how I struggle against them, I can't do shit as the fucker grabs my wrist and digs the drillbit into the back of my hand.

"No," I scream, my eyes wide, my blood on fire in my veins.

The sound is sickening, the smell of burning flesh hitting my nostrils. Then excruciating pain rips through my hand, tearing through flesh and bone.

Something deep inside me cracks right down the middle, and a darkness I've never felt creeps through my soul.

Everything slows down.

Time.

My heartbeat.

My breaths.

The drillbit being pulled out of my hand.

The drops of blood falling from the metal tip.

In slow motion, I blink. I breathe. I watch as my left hand is splayed open over the dirty wood.

Just as he presses the drill bit to the back of my hand, I yank free, shoot up, grab the drill from him and shove it into his eye.

I don't hear anything.

I don't feel the pain.

I steal his gun from behind his back and take out a man before an arm comes around my neck, yanking me backward.

I go with the motion, then grab hold of the arm, and when the third man is close enough, I kick up and climb him, flipping over the man behind me.

The moment my feet touch the ground, I run for the door.

I lack speed, and I'm tackled. I fall down a short set of steps, and it jars me out of the trance I was in, but I still manage to turn and shoot the man before he can get to his feet.

The adrenaline fades, leaving me drained of the will to live.

Only one thing keeps me from giving up – my love for my family. Luca. My father.

I somehow manage to struggle to my feet, but this time pain tears through me, and I have to drag my left leg as I try to make my way to the side of a building.

I have no idea where I am or how long it will take for my family to come for me.

My breaths sound strangled, and my vision grows spotty as I keep dragging my leg so I can get away from the room where

I was held captive.

The Koslov and Terrero blood in my veins refuse to surrender, and I keep pushing forward.

I take another strangled breath as I use a propane tank next to the building to keep my balance, but the pain in my leg has me falling onto my hands and knees in an open area. I start to crawl, stones digging into my palms.

Keep going.

Just keep going.

Koslovs don't give up until our last breaths.

I hear howling and maniacal laughter behind me. Easily ten men.

Pushing myself back to my feet, I struggle with the clip of the gun, my eyes still going in and out of focus.

One bullet. Shit.

One of the men lets out a sharp whistle to taunt me.

Go fuck yourself, asshole.

I stumble to the side, push the clip back in and train the gun on the propane tank.

At least I got the past couple of days with Luca. It's more than I could've hoped for.

As the men creep closer, slapping baseball bats against their palms and aiming their weapons at me, a broken sob escapes me.

I'm not ready to die. Jesus. There was still so much I wanted to do.

Another sob bursts over my lips.

I love you, Luca. So much.

Daddy, I hope I've made you proud today.

My finger curls around the trigger as I stumble a step backward, and then I pull the trigger.

Chapter 24

Luca

Fuck driving. We took a helicopter to Tijuana.

It's dark as we touch down a short distance from the building where Mariya's apparently being held. Everyone is armed to the teeth.

My eyes scour the area below, my fingers flexing around the submachine gun.

"Move! Move! Move!" I roar, and we spill out of the helicopter like the four horsemen of the apocalypse.

As we run away from the downwind chopping the air, I move to the side of the road and head for the building.

Nearing the dilapidated piece of shit, movement catches my eye by the side of the building.

Uncle Demitri lifts his rifle and checks through the scope, then says, "It's Mariya. Faster. She's got men on her tail."

Viktor shoves his weapon to his side and runs as fast as he fucking can, shouting, "Mariya!"

Fuck this.

I throw the weapon to the ground and push myself harder than I ever have, sprinting past Viktor for the first time.

With my eyes locked on my wife, I watch as she stumbles, pushes herself back to her feet, and turns to face the men creeping out of the shadows.

Horror rips a shout from me as she trains the barrel of her gun on a propane tank. “No!”

She’s too close.

Her body jerks as she takes the shot, and I swear my soul up and leave my body as the seconds tick by.

She misses and stumbles backward, letting out a wail before dropping the gun.

“Mariya!” I shout again, and this time her head snaps in our direction.

The sight of us has her dropping to her knees, extreme pain and relief mixing on her face.

Christ, what have they done to her?

Bullets start flying past me from Viktor, Uncle Alexei, and Uncle Demitri.

When I’m mere feet from Mariya, she slumps to her side, and I fall over her, shoving my hand between her head and the ground in the nick of time.

Her breaths wheeze over her lips, and she looks like she’s been to hell and back, but she still manages a crooked smile. “Just... in... time.” She lifts a bloody hand to my jaw, and I take hold of it, pressing a kiss to her palm. “Love...”

Her eyes flutter closed, and I lose my fucking mind.

“No!” Climbing to my feet, I pick Mariya’s limp body up and start to run back in the direction of the helicopter. “Don’t

you fucking dare give up now,” I order.

“I’ve radioed the helicopter to come to us,” Uncle Dimitri yells after me.

I stop running and watch the sky, holding the broken pieces of my life in my arms.

When the last of the gunfire dies out, Uncle Alexei moves in front of me. There’s so much pain on his face as his eyes take in the state of his daughter.

Slowly he reaches a hand to her neck, checking for her pulse. He closes his eyes, and I start to shake my head.

I refuse to face a day without Mariya.

Uncle Dimitri shoves Uncle Alexei’s hand out of the way and checks Mariya’s pulse, then mutters, “It’s weak but there.” He glances over her. “She’s lost a fuck-ton of blood.”

The helicopter touches down, and we hurry to get Mariya inside. I keep her in my arms as I take a seat, refusing to let go of her.

Uncle Dimitri pulls closer the emergency first aid kit he brought along and gets to work on stopping the bleeding.

Viktor helps his father, and every couple of seconds, the two men curse when they find a new wound.

I can’t believe what they’ve done to her.

Uncle Alexei places his hands on the sides of Mariya’s head and presses his mouth to her hair.

I swear it’s the first time I’ve seen the man pray to any god.

With the real possibility of Mariya dying in my arms, I can only stare at her face. Even now, I've never seen anything more beautiful.

"Three days wasn't enough," I murmur to her, hoping to God she can hear me. "We deserve a lifetime together, so you keep fighting, *amore mio*." A tear escapes, and rolling down my chin, it lands on Mariya's bloody silk blouse. "I love you so fucking much." My chest aches from the tendrils of loss gathering in the darkest corners of my heart. "Give me a chance to love you."

Touching down on the roof of the hospital Uncle Alexei had built after Aunt Bella had to receive medical care in an underground hospital, Viktor shoves the door open. I see two doctors waiting with a stretcher, their white coats flapping from the wind.

I'm careful not to jar Mariya's body as I climb out of the aircraft and carry her to them.

"Save my baby girl," Uncle Alexei begs one of the doctors while I lay her down on the stretcher.

"I'll do my best, Sir," she replies before they push her toward the elevators. We all follow behind them, and stepping inside, I take hold of Mariya's left hand. My thumb brushes over her empty ring finger, and I vow the next time I put my ring on her, I'll tell her how much I love her.

Right before the doors slide open, I lean over her and press a kiss to her lips. "Come back to me."

The doors open, and I pull back as they rush her out of the elevator and down a hallway.

We're stopped at double doors, and a nurse advises us to wait in the waiting room.

No one speaks a word, the magnitude of what happened hanging thick between us.

We never thought someone would take on the bratva and Italian mafia.

We thought we were invincible.

We were wrong.

I sink down on a chair and cover my face with my hands.

"They were Albanian," Uncle Alexei mutters.

"They've been trying to move into Luca's territory for months," Viktor informs our godfather.

She was only my wife for three days, which means they've been watching my every move.

"They've been planning these attacks for a while," I say. "This won't be the last." I lift my head and look at each of the other men. "Once Mariya is back home and better, I'm taking the fight to them."

"We," Uncle Alexei growls. He locks eyes with me. "We will take the fight to them."

Chapter 25

Luca

Aunt Bella and Aunt Ariana come rushing into the waiting room with my parents right behind them.

My mother was out with my aunts when shit went down, and Uncle Alexei only called them after we got to the hospital.

“What the fuck happened to my daughter,” Aunt Bella screams.

“She was taken by Albanians,” Viktor explains.

Aunt Bella’s eyes are wild with rage and worry as she goes to stand in front of her husband. “Why did this happen?” She aims her anger at me. “Why wasn’t she protected?”

As Viktor steps forward, I grab his arm and shake my head. “This is on me.”

Everyone’s eyes turn to me as I say, “I take full responsibility. She should’ve had more guards.” I shake my head, the regret thick in my voice, “I failed to keep Mariya safe, and for that, I’ll never forgive myself.”

“I trained Ivan and Lev,” Uncle Alexei mutters. “They were good.”

I shake my head. “Mariya should’ve had an entire entourage of guards. This is on me.”

“Dear God,” Aunt Bella cries. “Can we not have a pissing contest right now.” She gestures at me, Viktor, and Uncle Alexei. “You all failed my little girl, and I swear on all that’s holy, if she doesn’t pull through, there will be four funerals.”

“Baby,” Uncle Alexei murmurs, trying to take hold of her arm.

Aunt Bella yanks away from him, her Latino temper flaring hotter. “Don’t baby me.”

She comes to stand in front of me, her eyes cold as ice. “I want the head of the man who did this to my daughter on a golden fucking platter.”

I nod, silently vowing to find and kill whoever’s involved with the attack on my wife’s life.

Her chin quivers, then she asks, “Did you at least make her happy the past three days?”

“I loved her with all that I am.”

Aunt Bella’s face crumbles, and she turns to Uncle Alexei for comfort.

Needing a moment alone, I step out of the waiting room and aimlessly walk down the hallway.

Not even three days in, and I already failed Mariya. She was mine to protect. I should’ve had an army guarding her every move.

It’s such a bitter pill to swallow I almost choke on it.

I stop in front of floor-to-ceiling windows and stare blankly into the night.

Please survive this.

I feel a hand on my back, then my parents come to stand on either side of me. Mom takes my hand while Dad gives me a sideways hug.

“What the fuck did I do?” I groan, the guilt becoming an insurmountable mountain in my chest. “How could I let this happen?”

Dad pulls me into a hug. “No one saw this coming.”

“I should’ve.” I yank away from my father, my guilt morphing into white-hot rage. “I was so fucking sure no one would have the guts to take us on. It’s because of my arrogance the woman I love was tortured.” I lock eyes with him. “She can die.”

“She won’t. Mariya is strong.”

The air rushes from my lungs, and I remember how hard she fought.

“*Dio, Papà*. You should’ve seen her fight. She was so fierce.”

If I weren’t consumed with fear, guilt, and anger, I’d take a moment to feel proud of Mariya.

Finding the strength in my parents, I nod. “She’ll pull through.”

“Of course.” Dad gives my shoulder a squeeze. “She has Koslov and Terrero blood in her veins, and neither is easy to kill.”

I turn my gaze back to the window and just soak in the support and comfort my parents are offering me because I’m going to need it to get through the next couple of hours.

I've lost count of the hours, and by the time a doctor comes into the waiting room, it feels like I've lost my mind.

I dart up from the chair, my muscles tense and my heart hammering in my chest.

Uncle Alexei gestures to me. "This is Mariya's husband, Luca Cotroni."

The elderly woman turns her attention to me. "I'm Dr. West. The surgery went well. Miss..." She glances between Uncle Alexei and me, "Mrs. Cotroni is in the intensive care unit. We've put her in an induced coma so her body will have time to heal before she wakes up. The pain would be too much for her to handle right now."

Jesus fucking Christ.

"She's suffered four broken ribs. Part of her femur shattered from the bullet's impact, and her right hand suffered great nerve and bone damage. There's a long road of recovery ahead of her. With rehabilitation, she should regain full use of her leg, but I'm worried about her hand. With the nerve damage she suffered, we'll be lucky if she regains fifty percent use."

I can only stare at the doctor as her prognosis rips my heart to shreds.

In short, Mariya's going to suffer a great deal still, and there's nothing I can do to ease her pain.

“Can we see her?” Viktor asks, seeing as the rest of us are shocked into silence.

“Only two people at a time while she’s in the ICU,” Dr. West answers.

It feels like I’ve been thrown into an alternate universe where nothing makes sense anymore.

Uncle Alexei and Aunt Bella leave to see their daughter.

Viktor places his hand on my shoulder. “We’ll go after them.”

I sit back down, and leaning my elbows on my knees, I cover my face with my hands.

Mariya’s going to need rehabilitation. Her left leg will take weeks, if not months, to heal, and her hand is practically fucked.

Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I dial Marco’s number.

“Any news?” he asks.

“She’s in an induced coma. I need you to find a single-level apartment or house. Make sure it’s wheelchair friendly. Have our belongings moved to the new place and make it happen in the next two weeks.”

“Got it, boss.”

“Also, put every man we have on finding the fucker behind these attacks.”

“Yes, boss.”

“Thanks, Marco,” I say before ending the call.

I straighten my jacket and square my shoulders because I'll have to be stronger than ever to eradicate the Albanians and help my wife with her recovery.

Come hell or high water, I'll fucking carry her every step of the way until she's able to walk on her own again.

Emotionally, mentally, and physically.

Mom brings me coffee that tastes like lukewarm water and cream, but I force it down.

"Want anything to eat, sweetheart?" she asks.

I shake my head, then say, "You don't have to stay."

"We'll wait for Alexei and Bella," Dad replies.

I glance at Uncle Demitri and Aunt Ariana. They've been quiet.

"Thanks for the help, Uncle Demitri."

He nods, tightening his hold on his wife's hand.

Uncle Alexei comes into the waiting room and gestures for me to follow him. Once we're outside, he says, "We're staying the night with Mariya. The two of us will have to take turns because there's no way I'm getting my wife away from our daughter."

"I understand." We stare at each other for a moment until I shake my head.

"I know, son," my godfather... damn, my father-in-law says. "We'll all get through this for Mariya."

"We will."

His features strain with heartache. "Christ, Luca."

Not hesitating, I pull him into a hug. We embrace each other for a long while, then I promise, “I won’t let you down again.”

Pulling apart, Uncle Alexei takes me to the ICU, then says, “Third bed to the right.”

“I’ll try to make it quick.”

“Take your time. I’m going to talk with Viktor and Demitri to get the ball rolling on finding the rest of the fuckers.”

“Okay.” I walk through the doors, and I’m instantly bombarded with the sounds of people on life support. It’s so loud that I wonder how anyone can get sleep in here.

My eyes find Aunt Bella, who’s wiping tears from her cheeks, then I see my wife.

My feet stall from the shock of the tube taped to her cheek. Machines form a halo around the head of her bed, all working to keep her alive.

Christ, baby.

Slowly, I move closer, and I don’t even bother wiping the tear away as it rolls down my face.

Mariya’s right hand is wrapped in a thick bandage, and her left leg is suspended off the bed. She only has a sheet covering her, and there are ice packs on either side of her neck and beneath her arms.

Worried, I ask, “Why are there ice packs? Won’t she get cold?”

“It’s to keep the fever down.” Aunt Bella informs me.

“Oh.” My eyes drift over Mariya, hating that she’s so still and fragile. I lean over her, pressing a kiss to her forehead. Moving my mouth to her ear, I whisper, “I’m here, *amore mio*. You did so well during surgery.” I press another kiss to beneath her ear. “Don’t overthink things while you’re sleeping. Okay? Just rest so you can get better.”

I keep still, taking a deep breath of her, but I only smell antiseptic fluid.

Straightening up, I brush my fingers through her hair.

Seeing her so vulnerable shifts something in my chest until I’m trembling with protectiveness and possessiveness.

I don’t want to let her out of my sight. The urge to sweep her up in my arms and carry her to a place where no one can find us hits hard.

I don’t want to share her.

Christ, I wish I could tuck her safely inside me.

“You really love her,” Aunt Bella whispers.

My eyes dart to my mother-in-law. “I do.”

She nods, then adjusts some of Mariya’s hair with a trembling hand. “Don’t ever let this happen to her again.”

“I promise it won’t.”

She lifts her eyes to mine. “I’ll give you a minute alone.”

I nod. “Thank you.” I turn my attention back to Mariya and softly caress her shoulder.

I lean over her again, savoring the fact that she’s alive. “I’m fucking proud of you. Thank you for fighting so hard.” I

kiss her forehead and close my eyes, drinking in the feel of her warm skin. “Just rest, *amore mio*. I’ll take care of everything from here on out.”

Chapter 26

Luca

The past three days have been absolute torture.

They stopped the medication keeping Mariya in an induced coma, and said she'd wake up when she's ready.

It's been eight hours already.

The only saving grace is that Uncle Alexei got Mariya moved to a private suite where a nurse watches her around the clock.

I haven't left her side since she was brought to this room, my gaze constantly checking for any sign of movement.

If there's a hell, this is what it will be like.

Wake up, amore mio.

I kiss the back of her left hand, then stare at her face again.

Viktor comes into the room. "Let's talk outside. I've found something."

Just as I rise to my feet, Mariya's fingers twitch in mine. My eyes snap back to her face, and the relief of seeing her eyelashes flutter is so fucking intense that I sink back down in the chair.

"Sweetheart?" Aunt Bella coos.

I lean closer to Mariya. “Can you hear us?”

Slowly, she blinks. Her lips part, then her features contort with pain.

I dart back up and lean over her. “Mariya.”

She gasps, and tears start to sneak from her eyes. Her sight seems to focus on my face, then she groans, “Hurts.”

My head snaps to the nurse, who’s moved closer to check the vital signs on the machines. “Give her something.”

“Don’t worry, Mrs. Cotroni. You’ll feel relief soon,” the nurse assures Mariya.

My attention turns back to my wife’s face, and I watch as she becomes drowsy. Her eyes meet mine right before they close.

Fuck. The painkillers knocked her out.

“Sleep is the best thing for her,” the nurse reminds us.

Knowing there’s nothing I can do, I follow Viktor out into the hallway. “Please give me good news.”

“We’re dealing with two different syndicates.”

I frown at my friend. “What the hell?”

“It’s the reason we’ve been all over the place. Word is, whoever takes you down gets the seat of power for Europe.”

I give Viktor an incredulous look. “Are you kidding me?”

He shakes his head. “All of this is because of a fucking game between two gangs.”

A fucking game to see who can kill me first. What the ever-loving fuck?

“This is insane,” I mutter.

“At least now we know what we’re dealing with.” Viktor’s phone starts ringing, and when he checks it, he hands it to me. “For the love of God, talk to Nikolas. The man is worried about you.”

I take the device and answer, “It’s Luca.”

“How are you holding up?” He lets out a sigh. “Stupid question.” Then the head of the Greek mafia lays into me. “Why didn’t you call a meeting? The Priesthood is supposed to stand united during attacks. And why the fuck didn’t you tell me you got married?”

I wait for him to take a breath, then reply, “The wedding happened fast, and I haven’t had time to call a meeting.”

“I’ve called Liam and Gabriel. We’re all coming to LA.”

My heart warms, hearing they want to support me. Creating the Priesthood was one of the best things I’ve done in my life. At first, it was to maintain peace between the Greeks, the Irish, the Turkish, and us, but with time it became a brotherhood.

Not wanting them to travel while there’s no real plan in place, I say, “I have no idea how long it will take to deal with this problem, and I’m preoccupied with Mariya right now.”

“You don’t have to fucking keep us company. Just let us help you. You’ve been there for every single one of us. It’s time for us to stand united behind you.”

Knowing nothing I say will change Nikolas’ mind, I mutter, “Fine.”

“Luca, you’re the head of the Priesthood. If you fall, we all go down with you. We’ll see you tomorrow,” Nikolas says.

“Okay.” I take a deep breath. “Thanks. I appreciate the support.”

We end the call, and I hand the device back to Viktor, stating, “I should’ve made you the head of the Priesthood.”

He chuckles, then asks, “How long will Mariya be out for?”

I walk back into the room and check with the nurse, then tell Viktor, “Anything from four to eight hours.”

“That’s enough time to get you showered and fed. Let’s go.” I hesitate for a moment, and it has Viktor throwing his arm around my shoulders. “Come on. You’re going to need your strength.”

I spend the drive home checking all my messages, and the moment I walk into the apartment, it doesn’t feel like home.

That’s because your home is lying in a hospital bed.

“Shower while I fix you something to eat,” Viktor says.

I head upstairs, and walking into the closet, I stop and stare at Mariya’s clothes. I take hold of a silk blouse and press it to my face, so I can inhale her scent.

It has a calming effect on me.

I strip out of my suit, and walking into the bathroom, I open the faucets in the shower. When I step beneath the spray, I brace my hands on the tiled wall and bow my head so the water can hit the back of my neck, where the muscles are tightly coiled.

I close my eyes and let the memories of the three days I had with Mariya fill my thoughts.

Fuck, I'd give anything to have a fight with her right now because it would mean she didn't get kidnapped and tortured.

It would mean she's healthy and not in a fuck-ton of pain.

Christ, I wish I could turn back time.

My thoughts turn to the two gangs. The stupid fuckers have no idea what kind of hell they've unleashed on themselves.

Letting out a sigh, I wash my body. My actions are automatic as I go through my routine, my mind constantly jumping between Mariya and the gangs.

Once I'm dressed in a clean suit and I come down the stairs, Viktor points at a plate with grilled cheese sandwiches. "Eat up."

"I see you also can't cook for shit," I taunt him. I take a seat at the island and pull the plate closer.

"Yeah, but I can take you out in seconds," he mutters as he stares at his phone.

"What are you looking at?"

"Footage of Rosalie destroying her bedroom again."

"How long do you plan on keeping her locked up?" Viktor knows I'm not happy with him taking the Sicilian girl. When he just shrugs, I ask, "You don't think she's suffered enough. We killed her family. Let her go."

His eyes snap to mine. "And then what? Like you said, we wiped out her family. Rosalie has nowhere to go, Luca. I'm

keeping her because I fucking care. I'm not about to throw her out on the street at the age of eighteen with nowhere to go. *That* would be fucking cruel. With time she'll realize I'm only trying to help."

"I don't think that's going to happen. Put yourself in her shoes. If someone took out your family, would you ever trust a single thing they do for you?"

"I'm done talking about this," he growls.

We've had this conversation before, and it always ends with Viktor shutting it down.

Letting out a sigh, I eat the grilled cheese sandwiches just to fucking please him so I can get back to the hospital.

Viktor tucks his phone away, then locks eyes with me. "I just want to take care of her. Please leave it at that."

I nod and finish the food. "Let's go. I need to get back to my wife."

When we step into the elevator, Viktor glances at me. "I'm glad you married Mariya."

"Yeah?"

"She will need someone like you to get through this."

"Someone like me?" I ask.

"Yeah, a man who never backs down from a challenge."

I smile at my friend. "I don't consider Mariya challenging."

"I'm pretty sure you're the only man alive who would say that," he chuckles.

“I love her stubbornness.”

When the elevator doors slide open, Viktor pats me on the back. “Like I said, I’m glad she’s got you.”

Chapter 27

Mariya

I let out a groan, the pain in my leg making it feel like the limb is being torn from my body.

My right hand feels crushed.

And breathing hurts like freaking hell.

Jesus.

Slowly I open my eyes, and seeing Luca's handsome face staring down at me, has me trying to smile through all the pain.

"Hey, beautiful," he murmurs softly.

I can't find the energy to move as I whisper, "Hey."

He brushes his fingers over my cheek, the expression in his eyes something I've never seen before.

It's warm, wrapping me in a bubble of safety. It also makes the tears rush to my eyes.

Leaning down, he presses a tender kiss to my mouth, then locks eyes with me again. "I'm so fucking proud of you, Mariya. Christ, you fought so well."

Seeing the pride shining in his eyes, my tears come faster.

Luca gently wipes them away, his gaze glued to me as if he's scared I'll disappear.

The corner of his mouth twitches. "I have a badass wife."

I try to smile, but instead, a sob flutters over my lips as I remember what happened.

The car accident.

Ivan and Lev were killed.

The loss hits hard. They were my guards for over a decade.

Luca carefully sits down on the right side of the bed and leans over me, bracing a forearm next to me. He pushes a hand behind my head, and rains kisses down on my face. "Shh, I've got you, *amore mio*."

Now that I'm safe and don't have to fight for my life, I turn into an emotional mess, traumatized by what was done to me.

Breathe. You survived it. Breathe.

Flashes of the drill tearing through my skin make my heart rate spike, the machine next to my bed beeping like crazy.

"Shh." Luca locks eyes with me. "Breathe, baby. You're safe. I won't let anyone touch you again." Worry tightens his features, and he frames my face with his hands, his eyes burning into mine. "I've got you. I'm here."

I focus on getting my breathing under control as a wave of exhaustion washes over me.

"Luca," I whisper.

He gives me a comforting smile as he caresses the hair by my temple.

I stare up at the man I love. “I fought for you.”

His gaze dances over my face, then he presses another tender kiss to my mouth. He shakes his head and starts to look emotional. “I wouldn’t have survived losing you. Thank you for staying alive.” He kisses me again, then says, “You don’t have to fight anymore. I’ll take care of everything. Just rest and get better.”

I hear the door open, and Luca kisses me again before he rises to his feet.

The moment I see Dad, a sob sputters from me.

The intense pain throbbing in my body reflects in my father’s eyes as he leans over me. He presses a kiss to my forehead, then holds still.

I try to take a deep breath of his comforting scent.

Dad sits down on the side of the bed, picks up my left hand, and holds it in both of his.

I’ve never seen my father this emotional before, and it only makes me cry harder.

He stands up again, then leans closer and locks eyes with me. “Daddy’s here, baby-girl.”

“Hold me,” I sputter, trying to reach for him.

Dad carefully pushes his arms beneath my back, and gently lifts me to his chest. The moment I get to bury my face against his shoulder, I allow myself to break down.

“I love you, *printsessa*.” He peppers my hair with kisses. “I’m so fucking sorry you got hurt.”

I nod against his shoulder, then whimper, “I was so scared.”

“Christ, baby-girl,” he groans. “I wish I could trade places with you.”

Dad holds me until the wave of emotions passes, and I manage to calm down. He gently lays me back against the pillows and wipes the wetness from my cheeks.

Then Mom comes in, and the wave of trauma hits all over again.

From pure exhaustion, I drift off into a dreamless sleep.

When I wake up again, Luca’s on a call, murmuring, “Let me know the minute you have eyes on Kastrati or Tinaj.” He listens to something, then glances in my direction. Seeing I’m awake, he says, “Hold on. Mariya just woke up.”

Luca comes to press the phone to my ear. “It’s Viktor.”

“Hey,” I say.

“Hey, little sister. How are you feeling?” Viktor practically coos over the line, which makes me smile.

“Like road kill. They did a number on me.”

“Don’t worry. The fuckers you killed are worse off,” he mutters. “Remind me never to get on your bad side.”

I let out a chuckle, but the sudden movement hurts like a bitch. “Don’t make me laugh. It hurts.”

“Sorry. I’m just tracking the bastards behind the attack, then I’ll come to visit. Want me to bring anything?”

“No.”

“Love you, little one,” he murmurs.

“Love you too.”

Luca tucks the phone away, then gives me a quick kiss. He sits down in the chair next to the bed and smiles at me. “You look a little better.”

“I don’t feel it,” I mutter. Lifting my right arm, I look at the thick bandage around my hand and wrist.

I swear I can still hear the drill.

“Just keep resting. You’ll be back on your feet soon enough,” Luca tries to encourage me.

“What did the doctors say?” I ask as I rest my hand back on the covers. “How bad is the damage?”

Luca leans closer and brushes his fingers over my forehead. “You have a shattered femur from the gunshot, but with a little rehabilitation, you’ll be good as new.” He tries to give me a comforting smile. “The broken ribs should heal in a month or so. Just take it easy and let me cater to your every need.”

I almost chuckle but catch myself in time. “I like the sound of that.”

His eyes caress my face, then he admits, “I’ve never been so terrified in my life.”

“Me too.” Terrified is actually an understatement. I don’t think there’s a word for what I felt. There were a couple of

times I really believed I was going to die.

Luca kisses the back of my left hand, then takes something out of his pocket. I watch as he slips the diamond ring back onto my finger. His thumb brushes over it, then he kisses my hand again.

He rises from the chair, my eyes following his every movement.

I'm so thankful I didn't die, and I got another chance with this man.

Luca sits on the side of the bed and braces a hand next to my head, so his face is closer to mine, then he says, "I always thought I'd have all the time in the world." He shakes his head. "Turns out I was wrong. We're not guaranteed a tomorrow."

That's something I realized as well. This attack was one hell of a wake-up call.

Luca's eyes turn so freaking serious it makes my heartbeat speed up. He stares at me for a moment. Anticipation fills my chest because it feels like he's about to tell me something really important.

I hold my breath, my eyes glued to his.

"I have to come clean about something," he admits.

My stomach tightens into a tight ball.

Please don't tell me you want an annulment. Not now. It will break me. I can handle being tortured but not losing you.

"I wasn't drunk."

Huh?

What is he talking about?

“On your birthday, when we got married,” he explains. “I knew exactly what I was doing.”

The air wooshes from me, causing a sharp ache in my chest.

I’m not sure what it means.

Luca’s fingers caress my cheek. “I’ve always wanted you, Mariya. You were drunk, and I did nothing to stop you. I took advantage of the situation.”

Luca married me because he wanted to?

My mind tells me I should be angry, but my heart refuses to tolerate the emotion.

His features soften with such tenderness, it soothes the blow of the news. The intensity of his attention focused only on me wraps me in a hopeful bubble.

My heart stutters.

My breaths stall.

“I love you so fucking much, and when you came up with the idea that we should get married, I grabbed it with both hands.”

Holy shit.

It takes a moment for the words to sink in, then I burst out in tears as intense relief hits.

Carefully, Luca wraps his arms around me, holding me so gently as if he’s scared I might break. “There was a moment I thought you wouldn’t make it. My biggest regret was not

telling you how I felt about you. Especially because I knew you loved me. I tried to show you how much you meant to me, but too late, I realized I never said the words.” He kisses my temple, then the heat of his breath warms my ear. *“Ti amo tanto.”*

I recognize the words from when he said them to me during sex.

Luca.

I lift my left arm and grab hold of his side as I try to breathe through the magnitude of this moment.

I never thought it would happen. I hoped but never believed.

“So I’m not letting another day pass without you knowing there is no one more important than you,” he continues. “Everything I have, everything I am, is yours, Mariya.”

All I can do is cling to him as the words I never thought I’d hear settle deep in my heart.

Thank you, God.

Thank you for not letting me die before I could hear these words from Luca.

“Bastard,” I whimper. “I thought you hated me.”

“I love you.”

I slap his side, sobbing, “You should’ve told me sooner.”

“I love you.”

Happiness bursts in my chest, and I sob like a baby in his arms. Finally, free to say the words I’ve kept secret for so

long, I cry, “I love you... so much... it hurts.”

Luca peppers the side of my face with kisses and bathes me in his love.

Chapter 28

Luca

I'm gentle with Mariya as I lean her back against the pillows. Framing her face, I stare deep into her eyes as my thumbs brush the tears away. "You're my every breath. Every fucking beat of my heart is for you."

The relief on her face fills me with regret for not telling her sooner how I felt.

I'll never make that mistake again. From now on, there will be no secrets between us.

Mariya composes herself, then scowls at me. "If I weren't lying in a hospital bed, I'd kick your ass."

A grin forms around my mouth. "You can beat me up once you're better."

She slaps my shoulder lightly. Shaking her head, she lets out a soft chuckle. "We're such dumbasses."

"I'm not going to disagree."

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?" she asks, her gaze filled with her love for me.

The line between us has been erased, and I can't express how good it feels to be honest with her.

“I wanted to build my empire so I could give you the world.”

Her eyebrows draw together. “I only ever wanted you.”

“I didn’t know,” I admit. “You were damn good at letting me think you were indifferent toward me.”

“You’re one to talk,” she mutters. “You always made me feel like I wasn’t worth your time.”

I shake my head. “I’m sorry, *amore mio*.”

“What does that mean?”

“My love.”

A smile warms her face. “I have to learn the language.”

“We’ll have plenty of time while you recover.”

We’re wrapped in an intimate bubble, and I’m so fucking thankful I got the chance to tell her how I feel.

“No more secrets,” I whisper as I lean closer.

“Okay.”

I press my mouth to hers, and when she lets me in, I kiss her with everything I feel for her. I give her every emotion I’ve experienced the past week.

The fear I had when she was taken, the gutting heartache because she got hurt, and the absolute relief of coming clean with her.

I adore her with my tongue, my lips, my teeth, the kiss deep and filled with the intensity of our love.

“Parents in the room,” Uncle Alexei mutters.

I pull away, a broad smile forming on my face as I look at my in-laws.

Aunt Bella glances from me to Mariya, then relief softens her features. She walks to the side of the bed and brushes her hand over Mariya's forehead. "See, I told you not to worry."

Mariya looks so much better with her cheeks flushed.

I move away from the bed so her parents can greet her, but Uncle Alexei comes to stand next to me. He pats me on my back and whispers, "Thank you."



We only got to bask in our love for a couple of hours.

Then the nurse announced it was time for everyone to leave. I got to stay, seeing as I'm Mariya's husband.

"Once Mrs. Cotroni is released from the hospital, you'll have to assist her whenever she needs the bathroom."

Mariya's eyes widen. It's only for a moment. "I can go to the bathroom by myself."

The nurse shakes her head. "Your injured leg and hand will make that near impossible. You'll need help."

The woman pulls out a bedpan which has Mariya shaking her head. "Hell no. You bring that thing near me, and we're going to have a problem. I can get up."

"You have tubes draining the blood from your leg and a catheter," the nurse states. "When you need to move your

bowels, you'll have to use the bedpan." She gives Mariya a comforting smile. "We'll be discreet as possible."

Mariya's eyes flare with panic, and it has me stepping closer and taking hold of her left hand, but she pulls away.

"Leave the room," she whispers, her voice tight.

"Baby –"

"Both of you! Leave!" she raises her voice.

"I'll give you a moment," the nurse murmurs.

When we're alone, Mariya won't look at me, and she shoves the pan off the bed with her injured hand. Pain darkens her eyes, her features tense, and her breaths shallow.

"Leave," she groans.

"No." I sit down and brace my hand on the pillow next to her head. Taking hold of her chin, I force her to look at me. "I'm not going anywhere. I will be here beside you every step of the way."

She tries to yank her face away, which has me framing her cheeks with both my hands to keep her in place.

Shame fills her eyes, her eyebrows drawing together. "I can't..." She lets out a soft sob. "It's degrading."

I press a tender kiss to her quivering lips. "I love your stubborn pride, and I know it's going to be hard, but let me help you. This is what we vowed, Mariya. Through sickness and health."

"No," she whimpers. "I'm not letting anyone wipe my ass, especially not you." She closes her eyes, refusing to meet mine. "I want my mom."

As much as I want to push the subject, it's not about me.
"I'll call her."

I pull back and dial Aunt Bella's number.

As soon as she answers, she asks, "Did something happen?"

"Mariya wants you to come to the hospital." I walk away so Mariya won't hear the conversation. "The subject of bowel movements was brought up, and she's not handling it well."

"I'm on my way."

We end the call, and I walk back to the bed. "She'll be here any minute."

Mariya just nods, her left hand fisted in the sheets.

I sit down in the chair and cover her hand with mine. "I want to take care of you, *amore mio*. In every way possible."

She turns her face away from me. "No."

"I love you."

Her head snaps back to me, anger brimming in her eyes. "Yeah, until you have to clean my ass. That's the quickest way to kill the romance."

When I start to say something, she shakes her head and gives me a pleading look. "Please, Luca. Don't even talk about it. This is killing me."

I get up and press a kiss on her forehead. "I'll do anything for you, but I'm not going to let you suffer through this alone. I meant it when I said I'm here every step of the way."

Aunt Bella comes rushing into the room with the nurse right behind her.

Letting out a sigh, I kiss Mariya again. "*Ti amo tanto.*"

Leaving the room is not an easy thing to do. Every fiber of my being wants to help Mariya through this, but I know it will only upset her more if I stay.

Stepping into the hallway, I lean against the wall and close my eyes.

I get a feeling the physical healing will be the least of our problems. It's the humiliation Mariya will have to suffer when she has to depend on someone to help her that's going to be fucking hard.

I understand why, though.

Still, I'm determined to stand by her side every step of the way, and no matter how many times I have to clean her, it won't change my love for her.

Chapter 29

Mariya

I can handle being shot at, beaten, and tortured, but not this.

God, not this.

I'm dragged under swells of humiliation as the nurse wipes my body down, showing Mom how to do it.

And then there's the pain. Jesus, the pain is raw and icy, the sharpness stabbing at every nerve and bone.

By the time my body is covered with a sheet, I feel feverish, my teeth aching from clenching them.

"Give us a moment, please," Mom asks politely.

I hear the door shut and slowly open my eyes.

Mom sits down on the bed and pulls me into a tender hug. "I know," she whispers. "I know, sweetheart."

"*Mami*," I whimper, clinging to her with my left hand.

"I'll wash you from now on. Okay?"

I nod against her shoulders. "Please."

"Don't worry. *Mami* will take care of you."

I hold on to my mother until the exhaustion and pain drag me into a feverish dream where everything is black as night, the sound of drilling bombarding me from every direction.

An explosion rips me out of sleep, and I dart up.

The pain in my chest and leg is devastating, and my lips part, but I can't make a sound.

"Fuck," Luca snaps, worry lacing the word. He takes hold of my shoulders and helps me to lie back down.

I gasp for air. Strands of hair stick to my clammy skin, but I feel a breeze. Glancing around, I notice two fans are directed at me, and the sheet is gone. I only have two towels covering me.

I see tubes disappearing beneath the bandage around my leg. I see the ugly bruises on my torso. Then my eyes land on my right hand.

I swear I can still feel the drill ripping through my skin and bone.

I'll never forget the sound.

"Baby," Luca murmurs while wiping my forehead with a cool cloth.

I open my eyes, feeling weaker than I've ever felt.

He smiles down at me. "Christ, you're beautiful." The cloth caresses my neck. "You know what I love most about you?"

I shake my head.

Luca wipes over my shoulders and down my left arm. "How fucking strong you are."

I close my eyes again.

He keeps wiping over every exposed inch of skin, and it helps cool me down.

It feels good and comforting instead of degrading.

Jesus, I'm an emotional mess.

I blindly reach for his hand, and he instantly grips my fingers, pressing them to his mouth.

“Don’t let anyone see me like this,” I whisper. “Just you and my mom.”

“And your dad?” he asks.

I shake my head.

“Violet’s coming today. I can’t keep her away much longer,” he tells me.

“Violet’s okay. She’s seen me naked before,” I murmur while trying to focus on staying calm.

I can’t lose my shit every couple of minutes. It’s too exhausting.

Just take it one hour at a time. You can get through this.

“I love you,” Luca murmurs. His lips brush against my fingers.

I open my eyes and look at him only to see wonder on his face.

“Never stop looking at me like that,” I beg.

He gives me a loving smile. “Anything you want, *amore mio*.”

Luca just sits and stares at me and starts to trail his fingers up and down my left arm.

“That feels good,” I whisper.

“I love touching you,” he admits. “It was really hard keeping my hands to myself. I deserve an award.”

I let out a chuckle. “It’s your fault.”

Slowly the pain lessens, and my muscles relax. I dose on and off until Violet walks into the room.

Her face pales when she sees me, but she bravely swallows back the tears. Leaning over me, she presses a kiss to my cheek and gives my shoulder a squeeze.

“I would’ve come sooner if your parents allowed it,” she whispers.

“You’re here now.”

Violet pulls back, then her eyes sweep over my body. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“I’m okay,” I lie, not wanting her to worry more than she already does.

Only then does she glance at Luca, giving him a polite smile. “Hi.”

“Hey.”

My eyes flick between my husband and best friend, then I say, “You’re going to see a lot of each other in the future, so you better start getting along.” Luca frowns, which has me explaining, “Violet hates you by default because I loved you and you kept snubbing me.”

“Mariya!” my friend gasps.

Luca lets out a chuckle. “That makes sense.”

I grin at Violet while tipping my head in Luca's direction. "He fessed up and told me he loves me."

Her eyes widen then a grin spreads over her face. "I'm glad to hear that."

She visits for a short while before Violet gives me a gentle hug, promising to come again soon.

When it's just Luca and me, he rests his elbows on the bed and holds my hand. "Try to get some sleep, *amore mio*."

I stare at him, drawing strength from his love until I can't keep my eyes open any longer.

Chapter 30

Luca

While my in-laws visit Mariya, I take time to get work done.

With Nikolas, Liam, and Gabriel in LA, we skip having a meeting at our usual venue and meet at my apartment.

The three men will also stay at my place while they're in town.

When I walk into the marble foyer, I hear laughter coming from the living room. I find the men enjoying a drink.

Viktor notices me first and gestures in my direction. The other three come to shake my hand, Nikolas waiting until last. "How are you holding up?"

"Mariya's slowly healing, so I'm doing better."

"I can't believe you got married," Liam mutters.

"I thought Viktor would bite the bullet before you," Gabriel chuckles.

"Me?" Viktor looks disgruntled.

"To your Rose with all the thorns," Gabriel reminds him.

"You still have the girl?" Nikolas asks.

"Change the subject. Luca's the one who took advantage of my drunk sister," he throws me under the bus to get the

spotlight off him.

Nikolas lifts an eyebrow at me, but I shake my head. “You forced Tessa to marry you.” Then I grin. “Mariya dragged me to the chapel, and I just didn’t stop her.”

“Dragged,” Viktor chuckles. “Good one.”

“So what’s this about you being targeted by two gangs?” Liam asks.

“Arben Tinaj,” Viktor informs them. “Twenty-two years old and born in Selcë, and Erand Kastrati, twenty-five and from Tirana. The idiots got it in their heads that whoever takes down Luca gets control of Europe.”

Nikolas looks downright pissed. “I’m offended.”

“Me too,” Gabriel mutters. He looks at Nikolas. “Clearly, we’re doing something wrong.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Viktor asks.

“I own Greece and Cyprus. Gabriel has control over Turkey. But no, the fuckers only go after Luca.”

“It’s because he’s the head of the Priesthood. They think if he falls, we all fall,” Liam states.

“How are we handling this?” Nikolas asks.

“I’m focused on Mariya at the moment. I just need time until she’s released from the hospital.”

“Then we’ll buy you time,” Gabriel says. “Tell us where to go and who to kill.”

“I need you to stay here. Most of my men are in Italy, up to their necks in Albanian shit. I can’t trust anyone else with

Mariya's safety."

"And I'm fucking chopped liver," Viktor mutters. "I'll arrange an army to guard her."

"We can bring our wives," Liam says. "They'll see it as a vacation while we keep everyone safe until we can deal with the problem."

"Good idea," Gabriel agrees.

I look at the brotherhood. "We've been through some tough times together, and we've triumphed every time."

"This time will be no different," Viktor says, pouring everyone a drink.

Once we have the tumblers in our hands, I toast, "To eliminating the fuckers who dare come after us."

I've just swallowed the alcohol when Nikolas says, "Now tell us in detail how you landed yourself Alexei Koslov's daughter, and he didn't kill you."

"He's my godfather."

Viktor lets out a burst of laughter. "That doesn't mean shit. The only reason why Luca's still breathing is because he loves Mariya."

"Does she feel the same?" Liam asks.

I nod, a grin spreading over my face. "I'm a lucky bastard."

Viktor takes a seat on the couch and opens his laptop. "You can say that again." He brings up the footage of Mariya taking on the group of Albanians. "You need to see how badass my little sister is."

We all gather around as Viktor projects the footage onto the TV.

I can't watch it a second time and walk to the kitchen.

Nikolas starts cheering my wife on as if he's watching a live fight.

"Christ," I hear Liam mutters. "I wouldn't have gotten up if she did that to me."

"Right?" Viktor brags. "She's dynamite."

The corner of my mouth curves up, and pride fills my chest.

She's my dynamite.

When I get back to the hospital, it's to find Mariya's room empty of guests.

She's so deep in thought she doesn't even hear me until I say, "Hey, how long have you been alone?"

She shakes her head as if she's in a daze, then smiles at me. "Only an hour. I think."

"You should've called me."

"I don't need a babysitter twenty-four-seven. I'm out of the woods, remember?"

I take a seat in the chair and press a kiss to her ring finger.

She's lost too much weight the past week. "Have you eaten?"

“Yeah.”

It looks like something's bothering her, so I ask, “What's wrong?”

She shakes her head. “Nothing.”

I move to sit on the side of the bed. “I thought we agreed no more secrets.”

Mariya lifts her eyes to mine. “I'm just thinking about what happened.”

“Want to tell me?” I take hold of her hand and brush my thumb over the wedding ring.

“It's surreal.” She looks at our hands, and I watch as she slips away. “Like a bad dream. The car rolling. Crawling out of the wreckage and seeing the men.” She shakes her head, her silky black hair falling over her shoulders. “Even though I knew I didn't stand a chance, I just kept fighting.”

Mariya locks eyes with me again. “I don't know where the strength came from. It just... it just rushed through my veins. The harder it got, the harder I fought.”

It's because you're so fucking strong, my dynamite.

“After they shot me in the leg, I was dragged to a table.” The trauma comes alive in her eyes, darkening them to midnight black. “The sound of the drill is something I'll never forget, but watching it rip through my hand, something snapped inside me. It felt as if I was moving in slow-motion.”

When she keeps quiet, I remind her, “With a shattered femur, four broken ribs, and a hurt hand, you still fought your way out of that room.” I wet my lips with my tongue, then say,

“If you hadn’t missed that shot, the propane tank would’ve killed you.”

“I know.” Mariya sucks in a harsh breath. “But I’d rather die a thousand deaths by my own hand than have one of those fuckers put a bullet in my head.”

“Jesus Christ, baby,” I rasp as I pull her into my arms.

“Do you know my mother was known as the princess of terror?” she murmurs.

“Yes.”

“My father is the most feared man, even after he retired.”

That’s true.

“I felt their blood in my veins.”

When Mariya meets my eyes again, I see the power of her bloodline in them – intense, ruthless, and fucking breathtaking.

I inhale deeply, savoring the sight of my badass wife. “You’ve never been more beautiful than in this moment. Fuck, Mariya, I wish you could see what I see when I look at you.”

“What do you see?”

“A queen.” I press a kiss to her mouth. “My queen.”

Chapter 31

Mariya

At least one good thing came from the entire ordeal.

Luca and I have grown closer.

He sets a bowl of steaming water down on the bedside table and rolls up the sleeves of his dress shirt.

I drink in the veins snaking beneath his skin, and watch as he soaks a washcloth.

He locked the door, and it's just us in the room.

Earlier, when the nurse gave me a sponge bath, it was degrading, but it already feels different with Luca.

It was wrong to send him away and call for Mom. I should've given him a chance.

When he pulls the sheet away from my body, he gives me a wink. "Just you and me, my little dynamite. I'll try to control myself."

I let out a chuckle as he starts to gently clean my body.

"You better control yourself. I think it's going to be a while before I'm able to have sex."

"There are other ways," he murmurs, the warm cloth brushing over my breasts.

“Tell me.”

The corner of his mouth lifts. “Your mouth, *amore mio*.”

I let out a soft chuckle, appreciating that he’s making this sexual instead of clinical.

Luca takes his time washing me, his eyes filled with adoration.

“You make me feel precious,” I whisper. The cloth moves down my right leg, and when he reaches my foot, he starts to massage it. “Oh God,” I moan, my eyes drifting shut from how good it feels.

“What do you say? Do I get the job?” he teases me.

“Yes, definitely.”

“You won’t ask me to leave the room again?”

I shake my head.

“Once we’re home, I’ll carry you to the bathroom and give you privacy while you use it,” he assures me.

My chin starts to tremble. “Thank you.”

I feel his breath hit my lips, then his lips follow, kissing me tenderly. “I’ll do anything for you, Mariya, that includes protecting your pride.”

Opening my eyes, I murmur, “I love you so much, Luca.”

He continues to wash my body, and by the time he’s done, the pain has lessened, and I feel relaxed.

“Have you done this before?” I ask as he takes a seat in the armchair next to the bed.

“No, everything just comes naturally with you.” A smile spreads over my face, then he says, “Once you’re back on your feet, I want you to plan the wedding of your dreams.”

“We’re already married.”

He nods, “We’ll renew our vows and celebrate with our family and friends.”

“So, no annulment?” I tease him.

“I said I’d never let you go, and I meant it.”

“What’s your dream wedding?” I ask him, loving how easy things feel between us.

“You, standing at the altar,” he chuckles. “Tell me how you pictured yours.”

“I want a black and rose gold wedding.”

The corner of his mouth lifts in a hot grin. “That sounds exactly like you.”

“All the décor must be black, including my wedding dress, and Violet and my mom will wear rose gold dresses.”

“What will I wear?”

“A black tux with a rose gold tie and vest.”

He nods, seeming pleased with my choice of colors.

“Where do you want to go for our honeymoon?” he asks.

Happiness bursts in my chest. “Anywhere.”

“How many kids do you want?”

“Two,” I answer without hesitating. “I want them to be close like Viktor and me.”

Luca leans forward, resting his elbows on the bed. “You know I spend half the year in Italy. Will you be okay moving between two homes?”

“You’re my home.”

My answer pleases him so much, he darts up and kisses the living hell out of me.

“Christ, I hope you heal fast,” he groans against my mouth. “I’m going to die of blue balls.”

“The door is still locked,” I remind him.

Luca lifts his head, giving me a look as if I’ve lost my mind. “There’s no way I’m fucking you.”

“Yeah, but you have a hand and five fingers.”

Luca sits down, shaking his head as he silently chuckles.

“Don’t tell me you’re shy,” I taunt him. “I’m in the hospital and in pain. The least you can do is give a show I’ll never forget.”

“You want to watch me come, *amore mio*?” His voice is low and deep, making heat pool in my abdomen.

“Yes.”

Luca keeps his eyes on me as he undoes his belt and pants. I lower my gaze as he pulls his hard, thick length out.

“Like what you see?”

“Oh yes. Fist your cock, babe,” I order. My breaths grow shallow as I watch his strong fingers wrap around the velvety skin stretched around his shaft.

Pre-cum beads on the head, and I lick my lips. “Swipe it up with your finger and let me taste you.”

“Christ,” he groans, catching the drop on his thumb. He leans over, and my tongue darts out to take it from him.

“Hmm... you taste just as good as you look,” I praise him, keeping my voice seductive.

Luca relaxes back in the armchair and spreads his legs. His lashes lower half over his eyes, and his lips part as he starts to stroke himself.

“Jesus, you look so hot right now,” I moan, wishing it was my fingers wrapped around him. “As soon as I’m better, I’m going to suck you so hard and swallow every drop.”

“Fuck, Mariya,” he groans, his hips and hand moving faster as he thrusts hard into his fist. His body tenses, and he grabs the washcloth, catching his release as it shoots in hot streams from him.

“Now that’s the hottest thing I’ve ever seen.” My lips curve up with satisfaction. “Was it as good for you as it was for me?”

Luca chuckles as he cleans himself while catching his breath. After he’s tucked his cock away and fixed his clothes, he sits down on the side of the bed and presses a tender kiss to my mouth. “I’m pretty sure it was a hell of a lot better for me.” He gives me another kiss. “Thank you, *amore mio*.”

Chapter 32

Luca

Over the past two weeks, Mariya's healed quite a lot.

I finally get to take my wife home. Well, to the temporary apartment Marco organized for us.

Luckily, I got her to agree to a couple of things. I'm allowed to bathe, dress, and carry her around. When she needs to use the toilet, I give her privacy until she's done. So far, it's working out well.

Honestly, I love it and feel our relationship has become much stronger.

"Where are we going?" Mariya asks when she notices I'm not driving in the direction of our apartment.

"I got a new place, so it's easier for you to move around. I didn't want you struggling with stairs," I explain. "Also, the men from the Priesthood are staying at our place to help catch the fuckers who did this to you."

Mariya stares at me for a moment, then emotion washes over her face, and she glances out the window.

I reach for her left hand, giving it a squeeze. "You okay?"

"Uh-huh," she mumbles.

"But?"

“No buts.”

I stop at a red light, then demand, “Look at me.”

Locking eyes with me, she says, “I’m just emotional because I’m finally out of the hospital.”

Smiling, I turn my attention to the road and steer us to the new apartment building.

It’s a two-bedroom place with an open-plan living room, kitchen, and dining area.

Parking the G-Wagon in the basement, I climb out and retrieve the wheelchair from the back before pushing it to the passenger side. I lift Mariya out of the vehicle and gently place her in the chair.

“I can get used to being wheeled around,” she tries to joke.

I know she hates not being able to move freely.

I press a kiss to the top of her head and walk to the elevator.

When we enter the apartment, Mariya lets out a burst of laughter before cringing with pain. “You just couldn’t bring yourself to add color, could you?”

“You have something against my décor choices?” I ask as I lift her into my arms.

God, I need to feed her so she can pick up all the weight she lost. I can feel her bones.

She wraps her left arm around my neck. “I love your décor choices. All that’s missing is some color. A splash of rose gold here and there.”

“You can take care of that,” I say as I carry her to our bedroom. “I have another surprise for you,”

Mariya glances around the open space. “Thank you for arranging this. I appreciate it.”

I set her down on the bed, careful not to jar her left leg. “You good?”

“Yes.”

I walk into the closet and grab two of the dresses I got her. When I show them to her, Mariya says, “They’re pretty.”

“It will make everything easier if you wear dresses for the time being. It’s easy to put on and don’t have to be tugged over your leg.”

“Come here.”

I walk closer and lay the dresses down on the bed.

Mariya takes my hand and tugs me down, so I’m leaning over her. Her eyes lock on mine, wonder shining from them. “Why are you so good to me?”

I crouch down in front of her, and lifting a hand, I tuck some strands behind her ear. “I love taking care of you.”

“Why?”

This time I’m the one looking at her with awe. “It’s empowering having a badass woman dependent on me. You can fight and save yourself from hell, but here, right now, you need me.” I place my hands on either side of her hips and press a kiss to her mouth. “You’re vulnerable, and it makes me feel powerful.”

“I’m not going to be vulnerable forever.”

“I know, but I’m hoping you’ll always need me.” I grin at her. “Like when it comes to cooking.”

She scrunches her nose, “Yeah, I’ll always suck at that.”

I give her another kiss, then murmur, “And making you orgasm.”

She lifts an eyebrow. “You’re the only man who got that right.”

We lock eyes, and an intense moment builds between us before I say, “Thank you for choosing me.”

“I didn’t have much of a choice in the matter. The day I discovered hormones, they took one look at you and said, yep, he’s the one.”

I tilt my head and ask, “Since when have you loved me?”

She thinks for a moment. “I was fifteen. It was the summer we visited your family in Italy. I woke up and heard someone in the pool, and when I looked out the window, I saw my first set of abs. I was a goner after that.”

I chuckle, loving the memory she’s sharing with me.

She gives me a curious look. “And you?”

“I came over to meet with Viktor when you and your father pulled up on motorbikes. You wore black leather. That was it for me.”

She wraps her arm around her ribs, trying not to laugh. “You really have a hard-on for black.”

“You have no idea,” I growl as I take a fistful of her hair and tug her head back. I claim her mouth, my cock rock hard behind the zipper of my pants.

Sigh, no sex for weeks.

I break the kiss, then walk into the bathroom to open the faucets in the shower. “Last surprise for today.”

Her eyes are glued to me as I come out of the bathroom with the waterproof cast cover I got for the shower. This way, her leg won’t get wet.

“Damn, I loved having you wash me,” she mutters, not looking too happy.

“I’m still going to wash you,” I say, quickly moving closer to her. “But with the cover, you can sit in the shower. I thought you’d like that.”

Mariya tugs me down for a kiss. “I do. You just spoiled me the past week.”

“I plan on spoiling you a lot more now that you’re home.” I take hold of her shirt. “Arms up.”

A smile spreads over her face as she lifts them. I pull the fabric off, then wrap my arm around her lower back to lift her body against mine so I can shove her sweatpants past her butt. Setting her back on the bed, I carefully pull the fabric over her cast and press a kiss to her right knee. I tug the waterproof cover over the cast and secure it with medical tape.

Picking her up, bridal style, I carry her to the bathroom and set her down on the bench I placed in the middle of the shower with her back to the spray.

While undressing myself, Mariya tilts her head back and smiles as the water wets her hair. “Damn, this feels so good.”

Stepping into the shower, I grab the shampoo bottle and squirt some into my hand. When I massage it into her scalp, Mariya grins up at me.

While I let the conditioner soak into her hair, I focus on the rest of her body. When my hand slips between her legs, I give her a wolfish grin.

“You copping a feel?” she teases me.

“Every chance I get. Why do you think I love bathing you?”

Mariya leans forward, pressing a kiss to my lips. “Thank you for making this intimate instead of embarrassing.”

I lock eyes with my wife. “Things will always be intimate between us, *amore mio*.”

Chapter 33

Mariya

Luca keeps pressing kisses to my mouth where I'm lying on the couch with my leg propped up on a bunch of pillows.

"I hate leaving you, but I need to check in with my men," he says against my lips, then holds me tightly.

I don't like that he's feeling bad because he has to go to work, and try to reassure him, "My mom's here. I'll be fine."

"Still." He presses more kisses to my neck, then takes a deep breath of me. "I love your perfume."

"You better. It's expensive," I chuckle.

I drag my fingers through the dark stubble on his jaw, savoring one last sweet kiss.

"Text me a heart emoji every thirty minutes, so I know you're okay," he orders.

"Yes, Sir," I tease him.

His eyes darken on me. "Don't make me hard. Your mother is here."

"Oops."

I watch as Luca walks to the elevator and keep eye contact with him until the doors shut between us.

“Is the AC working because it just got hot in here?” Mom teases me from the kitchen where she’s making coffee.

She carries the cups to the living room and hands me one before taking a seat on the other couch. “Spill the beans.”

The happiness Luca has made me feel since he declared his love to me is clear in my voice. “There won’t be an annulment.”

A smile curves Mom’s lips.

“Luca wants me to plan a wedding so we can renew our vows.”

Mom’s eyebrows dart up. “That’s a lovely idea.”

“So we have a lot of planning to do.”

She drinks some of her coffee, then asks, “When will the wedding be?”

“As soon as I can walk down the aisle,” I mutter. “Definitely after the cast comes off.”

“That gives us three months, give or take a week.” Mom pulls her phone out of her bag. “That’s not a whole lot of time. We better start planning.”

She stands up and comes to sit behind me, letting me lie back against her chest so we can both look at her phone.

“I want a black wedding dress.”

We search through hundreds of dresses until I shriek, “That one!”

Mom enlarges the photo, then reads the description, “The epitome of softness and drama with a plunging neckline, the

lace detail accentuates the body.” I feel her take a breath.
“That’s one hell of a plunging neckline.”

“It’s just a little cleavage.” I point to the skirt of the dress.
“I love the gold shimmering through the black lace.”

“Is this the one you want?”

“Yes.” I tilt my head back to give her my cute face she can never say no to.

Mom chuckles at me. “What my baby wants, my baby gets.”

“Thank you, *Mami*.”

“What colors do you want for the décor?”

“Black and rose gold.”

She searches for weddings with the same color scheme, and we repeat the process of searching through endless images for ideas.

The new phone Luca got for me, seeing as I lost my old one in the accident, starts to ring where it’s squashed between the couch and me. I pull it out then whisper, “Oops.” I quickly answer, “Sorry, babe. I got swept up in planning our wedding.”

“My heart,” he breathes.

“You worry too much. I’m safely at home with my mom, and there’s half an army situated in and around the building.”

“There’s no such thing as too much when it comes to you.”

My heart melts.

The elevators open and Dad walks in. “My dad’s here. Now you can really relax. No one will get past him.”

“Thank God,” Luca mutters. “How do you feel? What level is the pain?”

“I feel fine, and it’s at four. Totally manageable.”

“Call me if you need me.”

“I will.”

“Love you, *amore mio*.”

“Love you too.”

I end the call then smile at Dad as he leans down to kiss my forehead before pressing one to Mom’s lips.

“What are my women up to?” he asks as he takes a seat.

“We’re planning a wedding,” Mom informs him.

Dad’s eyebrow pops up. “Is that so?”

“Yes.” I give him my sweetest smile. “We’re renewing our vows.”

“Hmm...” Dad pretends to give me a stern look, then asks, “Are you sure you want to spend the rest of your life with Luca?”

There’s zero hesitation in my voice. “With all my heart.”

Dad nods, then says, “As long as you’re happy, *printsessa*, you can have anything you want.”

“Show Dad the dress, *Mami*.”

Mom retrieves the image she saved, then hands the phone to Dad.

He stares at it for a while before muttering, “That’s a fuck-ton of cleavage.”

“That’s what I said,” Mom adds.

“Fine, I won’t have the V neckline plunging so low.”

Dad hands the device back to Mom. “You better not. I’ll wrap you up in my jacket if you try to pull that one on me.”

“So overprotective,” I playfully grumble.

“Of course.” Dad gets up, then asks, “Is there food in this place?”

“Luca made Alfredo last night. The leftovers are in the fridge.”

“Let me see if his cooking is good enough for my daughter.”

While Mom and I continue to browse ideas for the wedding, Dad wolfs down all the leftovers, then walks through the apartment.

“I like the black plates on rose gold tablecloths,” I mention to Mom.

“Me too. The colors stand out more.”

Dad comes back to the living room, and softly rubs his hand over the cast on my left leg before he goes to stand in front of the window, his sharp gaze scouring all the buildings across the road.

“Luca already had all the buildings checked,” I mention.

“Hmm...”

“And there’s a sniper posted on our building’s roof.”

“Hmm...”

“Daddy, I’m safe here.”

“I know.”

Which means he checked up on everything himself.

“Ooh,” Mom coos, drawing my attention back to the phone. “I love the black roses and rose gold baby’s breath.”

“That’s so pretty,” I agree. “Take a screenshot.”

Enjoying my parents’ company, my dream wedding starts to take form.

I can’t wait for our wedding day because it means I’ll have the cast off and my mobility back.

And Dad will walk me down the aisle.

Chapter 34

Luca

After hearing Uncle Alexei's with Mariya, I manage to relax a little because nothing will get past him.

Uncle Alexei and Uncle Demitri will watch over Mariya until I've taken care of the threat that's only fifteen minutes away from us.

In the past two weeks, we found out the men who attacked Mariya were sent by Erand Kastrati – the older and, as it would seem, dumber one of the two fuckers. After two failed attempts in LA, the idiot has sent more men to die.

They're currently sitting ducks in a house near downtown Pasadena.

We're busy checking our weapons and pulling on armored vests. While the other men joke about who'll kill the most people, my thoughts turn to other new developments.

Word has spread like wildfire through underground channels that Mariya is just as dangerous as her parents. She's quickly gaining respect in the criminal world.

Before the hit, she was only seen as the spoiled daughter of Alexei Koslov, but now she's made a name for herself.

I hope to God it means no one will try to attack her again.

I've also had Viktor spread the news that she's married to me. I want every eligible fucker out there to know Mariya's my wife.

"Ready?" Viktor asks. He has two stun grenades strapped to his waist, a submachine gun in his right hand, and his favorite Glock in his left.

"Leave one of the men alive this time," I remind him.

"Yeah-yeah."

I glance at Nikolas, Liam, and Gabriel, who are ready to head out. Between the three of them, there's an army guarding their wives.

"Check earpieces," I instruct. When everyone nods, I shove my Heckler & Koch behind my back and pick up the submachine gun and Baretta. "Let's kill some fucking cockroaches."

We leave our office building, and forming a convoy, we travel the short distance to Pasadena.

We don't bother taking the stealthy approach as we stop with screeching tires in front of a typical suburban house. Jumping out of the G-Wagon, I know I don't have to check who's behind me as I run for the front door, knowing the other men have my back.

Just as I train the barrel of my gun on the front door, I notice Viktor darting around the side of the house for the back entrance in case a fucker tries to escape.

I pull the trigger, blowing the lock off. The wood shudders and squeaks as it swings open. With the submachine gun's

strap hanging across my chest, I lift both my arms and hold the Baretta steady in front of me as I stealthily enter the house.

Gunfire erupts from somewhere in the back, then Viktor's voice comes through the earpiece. *'I'm in. Two down.'*

"Don't kill them all," I remind him again.

"Yes, sir," he chuckles.

A man partially exposes himself by a doorway, only the right side of his body visible. I fire two shots, one to his hip and the other to his shoulder. He staggers back against the doorjamb then slides down to his ass.

As he reaches for his gun with his left hand, I fire another shot. While he cries from the pain of the bullet tearing through his hand, I kick his weapon away.

Nikolas, Liam, and Gabriel move past me to search the rest of the house while I crouch in front of the fucker.

"You're losing a lot of blood," I mutter.

He rests his head against the doorjamb and tries to look impassive, his features tight with pain.

"Where's Kastrati?"

"Don't know," he mutters.

I press the barrel of my gun to his forehead. "Where's Kastrati?"

The fucker locks eyes with me. "Fuck off."

I pull the trigger, and as his chin drops to his chest, I rise to my feet and resume my search for the next Albanian fucker who'll hopefully talk.

Viktor comes through a doorway, takes one look at the dead body, and shakes his head at me. “And I’m not allowed to kill. So fucking unfair.”

I let out a chuckle, and when I walk past him, Viktor takes position behind me. With him matching my every step, we move as one.

I see Nikolas and the other guys heading up the stairs, so I walk into the living room. Empty food containers are scattered everywhere.

“Looks like we interrupted lunch,” I say as I kick a box of spilled fried rice out of the way.

“Shitty last meal if you ask me,” Viktor mutters.

We hear gunfire from upstairs, then bullets fly from the direction of the dining room. I shove Viktor down behind the couch, and his ass lands in the rice scattered across the floor.

“You had to fucking kick the shit this way,” he complains as a spray of bullets slam into the couch we’re taking cover behind.

“Yeah, I just knew your ass would be sitting in it a couple of seconds later.”

“Are those peas? Who the fuck eats that shit?”

“Focus,” I chuckle.

“Right.” He moves into a crouching position, then I indicate with my fingers, *‘Three. Two. One.’*

We dart up and open fire on the Albanians. Side by side, we push forward as one after the other soldier tries to get in a shot at us.

The moment we enter the dining room, Viktor takes out two guys while I shoot a third in the knee, dropping his ass to the tiled floor.

I quickly step on his wrist, then crouch and yank the weapon from his hand. Tossing it to the side, I press the barrel of my gun to the fuckers junk. “Let’s try this again. Where’s Kastrati?”

“Wait! Wait!” he panics, his eyes glued to his pelvis.

Viktor keeps guard in case there’s anyone still hiding who decides to attack.

“All cleared upstairs,” I hear Nikolas say. “No woman for you to take, Viktor.”

“Fuck off,” Viktor grumbles, drawing chuckles from the other men. He takes his anger out on the Albanian, kicking the fucker’s shot-up knee. “Start talking before I decide you’re not worth keeping alive.”

Growing impatient as fuck, I shout, “Where’s Kastrati?”

“Bucharest!” The man’s breathing comes fast. “He’s in Bucharest.”

“Address,” I demand.

The fucker rambles off something I don’t understand, but Viktor seems to because he mutters, “Got it.” He crouches next to the terrified man, who can’t be much older than twenty-one. “What do we do with him?”

“Let him go,” I say.

The command has Viktor giving me an incredulous look. I gesture for him to step out of the dining room while Nikolas

and the others watch the Albanian.

“Are you serious?” Viktor asks once we’re out of earshot.

“Yes. We let the fucker go and track him.”

Viktor shakes his head, then mutters, “If he slips my surveillance, it’s on you.”

I let out a burst of laughter. “Like anything ever gets past you.” There’s no way the Albanian will give Viktor the slip. The man is part bloodhound.

Walking back into the dining room, I wait as Viktor takes a couple of photos of the Albanian and checks his wallet to make tracking the fucker easier. “Kreshnik Xhelilaj. That’s a fucking mouthful,” Viktor says.

I gesture for the Albanian to get up, then nod at the doorway. “Go.”

He gives me a wary look as he slowly limps toward the exit.

“Before I fucking change my mind!” I shout, wanting him out of my sight.

He darts away like a frightened deer.

“Let’s get out of here,” Nikolas mutters.

“Are we taking a trip to Bucharest?” Liam asks as we leave the house.

“No, you’re taking your wives and going home,” I say as I open the driver’s door of the G-Wagon. “Viktor and I will handle the rest from here on out.”

“Sure?” Gabriel asks.

“Yeah. I’ll call if I need you.”

We all climb into our respective vehicles and drive back to the office.

Over the excitement of the attack, Viktor sighs, then says, “We have a shipment coming in on Friday and a new arms dealer to meet. Are we flying to Peru, or is he coming here?”

“Would be best if we went to him. I don’t think he’ll get through customs with a modified Heckler & Koch,” I mutter. “Also, I want to see his place of operation.”

Viktor glances at me. “Good idea.”

I let out a sigh. “We’ll have to take the war to Kastrati before we can deal with Tinaj.” I frown and glance at Viktor. “Honestly, I’m starting to think Tinaj doesn’t exist. There’s been no trace of him.”

“I’m not sure.” That’s a rare thing for Viktor to say. “But I’ll find out.”

Chapter 35

Mariya

Sitting in Dr. West's office, I struggle to remain calm on the outside while I'm freaking out on the inside.

My eyes are locked on my right hand.

I can handle the scar.

Jesus.

I've lost the function of my pinky and ring finger, and none of the physio helped. They're forever stuck in a slightly bent position.

"We're lucky. At least you have eighty percent function of your hand." Dr. West says.

I nod, the sound of drilling almost drowning out her voice. I push it to the deepest corner of my mind so I can focus as she gives me instructions on how to take care of the wound while it heals completely.

The moment she's done, I say, "Thank you." I look at Luca. "Let's go."

Now.

Get me fucking out of here.

Luca shakes Dr. West's hand and thanks her before pushing the wheelchair out of the office.

Faster.

The hallway feels too long, the overhead lights too bright.

Closing my eyes, I picture myself floating on the ocean, swells gently rocking my body.

Breathe in.

Hold for five seconds.

Breathe out.

I repeat the process, doing my best to block out the sounds around me.

“Mariya?”

I feel Luca’s hand on my cheek and open my eyes to his worried gaze.

Slowly, I look down at my trembling hand. The swollen skin where the stitches were removed doesn’t hold my attention. I stare at my fingers, willing them to move.

Only three curl and straighten, the other two doing nothing.

My blood still flows through them.

The light blue nail varnish is chipped, and my nails need a trim.

They’re no longer a part of my body.

My brain can’t connect to them.

“*Amore mio?*”

I lift my eyes to Luca’s face, and God knows where I get the strength, but I somehow smile at him. “Let’s go home.”

We're next to the G-Wagon, but Luca doesn't move. He remains crouching in front of me, his worried gaze searching my face.

"Talk to me."

"I'm fine." There's no sign of distress in my voice.

No sign of the chaotic emotions warring in my chest.

I've never lost anything before. I don't know how to process the loss of my fingers.

Luca takes hold of my right hand, and before I can stop myself, I yank it away from him. I press my hand to my chest as if I'm guarding what function I have left with my life.

"Baby," he murmurs. He rises to his feet, opens the passenger door, then lifts me from the wheelchair. I'm carefully placed on the seat.

Luca frames my face, forcing me to look at him. "I'm here. You don't have to be strong right now."

The words *I'm fine* are on the tip of my tongue, but I can't say them.

My mind tells me I'm stronger than this, but my heart weeps for the loss of my fingers.

My lips part, and I try to take a deep breath.

A sob escapes, my left arm wraps around Luca's waist and grabs hold of his shirt. I rip my face free and bury it in the crook of his neck.

My pride is stripped away as my body shudders, and sobs break free.

Luca's arms engulf me, and he holds me to his chest as I break.

I mourn Ivan and Lev. I purge the fear I felt while being tortured from my soul. I draw strength from Luca's arms to help me get through the loss I just suffered.

He rains kisses down on my neck and shoulder. "I've got you. Let it out."

"I... hate... being... weak," I sob against his skin.

"You're not weak, baby. You're just leaning on me while you process everything." His hand brushes up and down my back, and it feels soothing. "You've been through hell, and I was starting to worry because you bottled everything up."

When I'm a little calmer, I pull back and wipe the tears away with the back of my left hand, my right one still clutched to my chest.

"I can't feel them," I whimper, my chin quivering. "I see them, but it's like they're not there."

Luca pulls my hand away from my chest and presses a kiss to the numb fingers. "I'm so fucking sorry, *amore mio*."

I'm surrounded by the most powerful men and women in the world, but none of that power can give me back the use of my fingers.

It's a sobering thought.

I'm just another human being and not the invincible princess I always thought.

My spirit refuses to go down a path of self-pity and depression. Just like when the drill bit bore into my hand,

something shifts deep inside me, and strength pours through my veins.

I could've lost so much more. I still have my leg, and as soon as it's healed, I'll walk again.

I can still use my right hand. It might not look as elegant as it used to, but I'll cope.

Lifting my chin, I swallow the tears back. "I'm good."

Luca's eyes search my face, then he shakes his head. Awe tightens his features. "Do you have any idea how incredible you are?"

I shrug my shoulder. "It's either suck it up and move forward or wallow in depression. I have a lot to be thankful for, so I'm choosing to focus on that."

Luca presses a hard kiss to my mouth, his respect and love wrapping around me and making me so much stronger.

"Christ, I love you so fucking much, Mariya Cotroni."

A smile splits over my face. "I forgot about that. I didn't have time to get used to my married last name."

Luca gives me another kiss before he tugs the safety belt over my chest and clips it in. "Just for future reference," he says as he pulls back so he can see my face, "Don't hide your feelings from me. I want you to feel comfortable leaning on me. We're a team."

"Okay."

I brush my left thumb over the numb fingers to remind myself they're still there. I might not have function, but at least they're still there.

Chapter 36

Luca

I place Mariya on the couch and make sure her leg is comfortably propped up on the pillows.

“I’m going to make an early dinner. Okay?”

She nods, pulls her phone out, and looks through wedding images.

“How’s the planning coming along?” I ask as I walk to the kitchen.

“Good. My mother found a designer who’s able to make the dress in the next three months.”

My eyebrow pops up as I open the fridge. “You’ve already decided what dress you want?”

“Yes, and you’re going to love it.”

Setting two rib-eye steaks down on the counter, I glance at Mariya as I tear the packaging open.

She seems to be fine, but I’m still worried. I’m not sure if she’s bottling everything up or just fucking superwoman.

She catches me watching her and smiles. “I’m really okay. There’s nothing to worry about. Well, unless you don’t feed me soon.”

Superwoman it is.

I was actually relieved when she had the panic attack and cried. No one can go through what she did and not break down.

But if it's one thing I've learned, Mariya doesn't cry easily. I hate that she sees it as a weakness because it's not.

The Mariya I thought I knew before we got married and the one I've gotten to know are two different people. She comes across as a spoiled socialite, but once she lets you in, you see the confident, strong woman she is.

My little dynamite.

Wanting to do something special for her, I ask, "What's your favorite thing to do?"

"Shopping." Her eyes are glued to her phone, a glow of excitement on her face as she plans our wedding.

"Just shopping?"

"Yep. Sorry for you, but you got a wife who loves a life of luxury."

I let out a chuckle as I roll up my sleeves to my elbows. "I don't mind."

I cut the steaks into thin slices and panfry them in olive oil and garlic. I add some Italian herbs and let the meat simmer in its juices while rinsing the vegetables.

"What are you making?" Mariya asks, her voice sounding different.

I turn my attention to her, and seeing her flushed cheeks, I ask, "Are you feeling okay? Feverish?"

"No. I'm fine."

“Pain?”

“Nope.”

“Why’s your face flushed?”

“I’m turned on from watching you cook,” she admits without batting an eye. “I love it when you roll up your sleeves.”

“Yeah?” I grin at her. “If I had known making stir-fry would be a turn-on for you, I’d have made it much sooner.”

I turn off the gas and rinse my hands. While drying them, I pin Mariya with a look. “Do you want another show, baby?”

“Hmm...” She tugs her bottom lip between her teeth. “No, I want you to make me come.”

Christ. I love how direct she is. There’s no having to pry information out of her.

Slowly I walk closer until I’m standing next to the couch. “You sure you’re up for an orgasm?” I gesture at her ribs.

“They’re fine. It’s been a month already. I have cobwebs that need clearing out.”

I take my time undressing for my woman, watching as desire darkens her eyes.

When I’m naked in front of her, she licks her lips. “Come closer and brace yourself over me.”

I press my right knee in the space between Mariya and the couch, and brace a hand on the armrest above her head. My cock is inches from her face.

“I’ve been dying to taste more of you,” she purrs. Her lips part, and I slowly push into the heat of her mouth.

Holy fucking shit.

Our eyes are locked as my cock jerks against her tongue.

The sight of her lips wrapped around me is so fucking erotic I know I’m not going to last long.

Mariya’s left hand grips my ass, and she tips her head slightly back. Her tongue twirls around my sensitive skin right before she sucks me deeper.

I thrust forward, and there’s zero gagging from my woman as I hit the back of her throat. She breathes through her nose, watching my every move with lust-filled eyes.

I grip the couch tighter and start to thrust, with each one hitting deeper until I’m fucking her throat.

“Christ,” I rasp, breathless as my balls tighten. “Fuck. Fuck.” I bury myself to the hilt, my body jerking as my wife takes every drop of me.

Pulling out, my mouth slams against hers, and I fucking kiss her senselessly before kneeling by her right leg. I shove her dress up and rip her panties from her body, then bury my face in her pussy.

Mariya lets out a cry, her left hand grabbing hold of my hair. I feel her rip a couple of strands out as I suck her clit and bite her sensitive flesh.

I brace my arm over her injured leg, careful not to hurt her as I go down on her so hard, she starts to orgasm within a

minute. Not easing up on her, I push my finger inside her, stroking her hard to prolong the pleasure.

“Luca,” she cries. “Oh my God.”

I lose more hair, my wife’s a wildcat as she keeps my face locked between her legs until she’s had her fill of the orgasm.

Her breaths rush from her, then she flinches. “So good, but need painkillers, stat.”

I’m up on my feet in a flash and get her a glass of water with two tablets.

Once she’s taken them, I press a kiss to her abdomen before adjusting her dress. Leaning over her, I ask, “You okay?”

“I’m more than okay,” she smiles. “But you owe me panties. I liked that pair.”

“I’ll buy you all the panties you want,” I chuckle before claiming her mouth in a tender kiss.

“Food,” she mumbles against my lips.

When I reach for my boxers, Mariya says, “I want you naked, chef.”

I lock eyes with her. “You’re a fucking wet dream.”

“I know,” she chuckles, looking much happier.

I head back to the kitchen and finish preparing the meal. Not bothering with two plates, I carry one to the living room and sit down behind Mariya. She leans half against my chest and half against the couch.

I load a bite onto the fork, then bring it to her mouth. I watch as her lips part, and I feed her.

Having my wife eat from my hand, satisfaction fills my chest.

I take a bite, then feed her again, the corner of my mouth lifting.

I love the balance between us. Mariya's direct and fucking strong, but she never tries to compete for absolute control in our relationship. It's a give and take that's hot as fuck.

There's no doubt in my mind this woman was made for me. She's my soul mate in every way.

When I pull up to the harbor, I see Viktor already talking with the men.

I climb out of the G-Wagon and walk to them. "Everything okay?"

Viktor glances at me. "Yeah, the shipment just came in. They're offloading."

"Good." My eyes scan over our men, hard at work to get the job done as fast as possible.

"How did the doctor's appointment go?" he asks.

"As well as can be expected. Mariya lost the function of her pinky and ring finger."

Viktor lifts an eyebrow. “That’s better than the original prognosis.”

“Yeah.”

“But?”

“She’s handling it well.” I lock eyes with him. “A little too well.”

Viktor shrugs. “She’s always been like that. Once she fell off a bike. The woman ate gravel, knocked her head open, got up, and wanted to continue riding. Uncle Alexei lost his shit, but she gave him lip, saying it’s just a little cut.” He lets out a bark of laughter. “She needed five stitches.”

“So she’s not bottling everything up?”

“Nah, Mariya deals with shit and moves on. If she says she’s fine, then she means it.” He gives my shoulder a squeeze. “Unless you pissed her off. Then fine means you better run.”

I let out a bark of laughter. “Noted.”

We walk toward the crates. “Update me on Kreshnik’s whereabouts.”

“Last I checked, he landed in Germany,” Viktor says. “He hasn’t moved since, which makes me think he lied about Bucharest.”

“That’s why I let him go.” I glance at Viktor. “So he’d take us straight to his boss.”

“Yeah,” Viktor agrees. “The fuckers are young and stupid. I’m keeping an eye on the apartment and will let you know if I see any movement.”

Knowing my in-laws are with Mariya, I spend the next five hours checking some of the weapons while our men make sure the order is correct so it can be delivered to Nikolas.

By the time we're done loading the crates onto the back of the trucks bound for Canada, Viktor yawns loudly. "Fuck, I need sleep."

"Go home. I'll finish up here."

"Home's a war zone right now," he mutters, a worried frown on his forehead, which is not something I see often.

"Trouble with Rosalie?"

He nods. "I swear, every fucking day, it feels as if she hates me more."

I keep quiet because Viktor knows how I feel about the situation.

He lets out a harsh breath. "But come hell or high water, I'll figure out a way to get through to her."

I give him a pat on the back, then signal for the first truck to leave the yard.

"At least everything went well with the shipment." I turn my attention back to Viktor. "Next week it's the meeting in Peru. Will you be able to make it?"

"Yeah. I'll get everything arranged for the meeting."

"Thanks."

Viktor rubs the back of his neck. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Try to get some sleep."

"I will."

I watch my friend walk away, wondering how long he's going to carry on with this madness of keeping Rosalie locked up.

It's not your problem, Luca.

I signal for the last truck to leave, then walk to my vehicle so I can get my ass back home.

Chapter 37

Mariya

I'm not going to lie, the past eight weeks have been long and hard. Physio for my leg took up a lot of the time while trying to plan a wedding.

I'm allowed to walk with crutches, which was a learning curve and a half because of my right hand, but I'm learning to manage with the permanent injury.

Luca still insists on carrying me around, which I don't mind because the downtime helps my leg heal.

Even though it's still there, the pain has decreased substantially. It's a hell of a lot better than those first two weeks.

Slowly but surely, I'm getting better, and the excitement of the wedding has kept me in good spirits.

Luca's been under a lot of pressure with work, though. Still, not once has he taken it out on me. The man has been a saint.

I can't believe how much everything has changed.

Yes, I've suffered trauma but finding out Luca's loved me all along and finally getting to be honest about my own feelings is what pulled me through.

How can I not be happy when the man of my dreams says I'm his entire world?

Just one more month, then the cast will come off my leg, and I'll be able to walk down the aisle with Dad's help.

I can't wait.

"You look miles away," Luca murmurs, pressing a kiss to my temple. "What are you thinking about?"

"Our wedding day," I grin at him from where I'm lying on the bed.

I watch as he towel-dries his hair, my eyes roving over his bare chest, hard abs, and the delicious V dipping into the low-hanging sweatpants.

Dear God, I've got good taste.

"You keep looking at me like that, and I might forget you have a broken leg."

"Are we seriously not going to have sex until the cast comes off?" I pout, not happy with that idea.

Luca crawls onto the bed and presses a tender kiss on my lips. "I don't want to hurt you, *amore mio*."

"My leg is practically healed and doesn't hurt so much anymore." I give him the cutest face I can conjure. "Please, my love."

The corner of his mouth lifts, his eyes warming with affection. "I like when you call me that."

Lifting my hand to his chest, I follow the lines between his defined muscles. "We can figure out a comfortable position."

I can see I'm going to win, so I add, "I need the emotional connection with you."

Luca glances at my cast, then pulls my shorts and underwear off before slowly spreading my legs open. He kneels between them, wraps an arm around my back, and gently pulls me until I'm sitting on his thighs. He makes sure my right leg is still propped up on the pile of pillows, then asks, "How's this position?"

The muscles in my thighs are straining, but I'm sure as hell not telling him that cause then this is over before it's gotten started. "Perfect. The only problem I have is your sweatpants. They're in the way."

He lets out a chuckle. "So impatient."

"To have you inside me? Hell yeah."

His eyes grow intense until my stomach tightens with anticipation. "Look down," he orders.

I watch as his fingers brush over the V between my legs and how his thumb teases my clit.

I've never watched a man touch me before, and there's something so intimate about it that my abdomen clenches hard with need.

"This is mine," he growls, cupping my sex before pushing a finger inside me.

"So hot," I moan, enjoying the sight a hell of a lot.

Luca starts to alternate between massaging my clit and stroking inside me with his middle finger. My breaths speed

up, and my hands cling to his shoulders, our foreheads still touching.

“I need you inside me,” I beg, wanting him right now. “Please.”

Luca pushes his sweatpants down, his cock springing free. When he takes hold of himself, I moan because it’s such a turn-on seeing him touch himself.

He pumps himself once, heat flushing through me like a tidal wave, then he positions himself at my entrance.

Jesus. This is so erotic.

A moan escapes me as he pushes forward until half of his hard length is inside me. Both our eyes are locked on where we’re joined.

Luca’s arm tightens around me, his abs so defined it has my mouth watering.

“Christ, Mariya. Going slow might just kill me.”

I let out a chuckle that makes him groan. “You squeeze my cock like that again, and I’m not going to last.”

“My poor sex-deprived husband.” I tease him, my hands caressing his shoulders and brushing over his biceps. I revel in the feel of his strength beneath my fingertips.

“Sex-deprived is the understatement of the fucking year,” he growls, then Luca thrusts so hard inside me, I swear I see stars. A cry rips from me, my back arching as he stretches me to the max.

“Fuck,” he breathes as he presses his forehead against mine again, our lips softly touching. “Fuck, I’ve missed being

inside you.”

I’ve missed having him inside me. This intimacy we can only share with our bodies joined.

God, have I missed connecting with Luca on such a level that I feel him in my soul.

Luca grabs a fistful of my hair by the nape of my neck, then pulls out and slams back inside me.

We both groan, the feel of our skin rubbing and his cock hitting me so deep making me delirious.

“Who do you belong to?” Luca demands, his eyes so intense it sends shivers rushing through my body

“You,” I breathe, which turns to a moan as he drives into me again. “Only you.”

There’s a rumble of satisfaction in his chest as he pulls out, and then I’m holding on for dear life as he hammers into me, owning every inch of my body.

It’s aggressive, dominating, and all-consuming.

“*Il mio*,” he rasps against my lips, his arms keeping me imprisoned to him as he fucks me raw.

Chapter 38

Luca

Done fucking around, Viktor and I touched down in Germany after sunset, hoping the cover of darkness will conceal our arrival.

When I told Mariya about my plan to attack Kastrati, she didn't take it too well. But she understands. I spent the weekend with her, teaching her how to make Alfredo and watching romance movies. I did everything I could to keep her mind off the planned assault and to show her I love her above all else.

What gutted me was when she clung to me last night, begging me to promise I'll come back in one piece.

I plan on honoring the promise I made her.

"You okay?" Viktor asks.

We're sitting in a shitty hotel in some bumfuck town going through the attack one last time.

"Yeah." I glance up from my Heckler and Koch as I put the last piece back into its place. "Just thinking about last night. Mariya's been so strong through everything, but she didn't handle me leaving well."

"It's because she loves you. She can take anything thrown at her, just don't touch the people she loves," Viktor explains.

I figured as much.

Not much scares Mariya, but the possibility of her losing me paralyzes her. It's fucking upsetting leaving her at home in such a state.

Letting out a sigh, I say, "Let's focus on the plan. We can't fuck this up."

We walk into the small living space where Marco and my best men are waiting.

"Listen up," I say. "Viktor's going to walk us through the plan one last time."

Everyone settles down, their full attention on the wall where Viktor stuck a map of the area.

"We have fire escape stairs at the side of the building and the staircase in the middle," Viktor says. "Marco, your group will take the middle staircase, while Luca, me, and the rest of the men will take the fire escape." He lets out a sigh. "There's only one entrance, which is shitty. We break down the door and kill everyone. No survivors."

I point at the photo of Kastrati we managed to get. It's only a side profile shot of his face, the scar on his neck the only real identifying marker we have of the man. "Whoever brings this fucker alive to me gets a bonus."

Only I get to kill him. I want to rip his heart out for what his men did to Mariya.

I turn my attention to my most trusted men. "Everyone ready?"

"Yes," Marco answers on behalf of the group.

“Good. Let’s roll out,” I order.

Dressed in a pair of black cargo pants and a tight-fitting long sleeve shirt, I pull the armored vest on, strapping it in place.

“Hold on,” Viktor says. He pulls his phone out and takes a photo of me.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

“Chill, it’s for Mariya,” he mutters as he sends the image to her. A couple of seconds later, he grins and shows me her reply.

Holy freaking hotness. You shoot any woman who looks at my man.

“Enough fucking around,” I chuckle. “Let’s move out.”

We arranged cars that fit in with the town so we won’t stand out like a sore thumb. I want to see the looks of surprise on the fuckers faces when we break through the door.

I stick to the speed limit, my eyes scanning every inch of the road ahead. When I pull into the parking area of the apartment building across the street from the one where Kastrati is hiding, I turn off the engine. I climb out of the cheap car and casually glance at the second floor.

Light shines through a small window, and there are no people hanging around outside the room.

“Let’s move,” I say into my earpiece.

Viktor gets out of the car, slams the door shut, then we run across the road and darts down the alleyway next to the apartment building Kastrati is in.

I jump, and grabbing hold of the fire escape, I pull it down. When I'm sure all the men are gathered behind me, I take the stairs up, pulling the two Heckler & Kochs from behind my back. My fingers flex around the engraved handles, the weapons a gift from my father for my twenty-first birthday. I only use them for special occasions.

When we reach the second floor, I wait for Viktor and my men to join me before I creep down the corridor.

'In place,' Marco's voice comes over the earpiece.

"Kill anyone who manages to escape," I instruct as I near the door. Marco and his men will guard our backs, so we don't have to worry about a surprise attack while taking care of the job.

I take up position in front of the door, and train the barrel of my gun on the lock.

My heartbeat slows down, and all my focus is on the mission as I fire a shot. I kick the door open and storm inside.

With both my arms raised, I send two bullets flying toward two men sitting at a kitchen table. Playing cards scatter everywhere as the first man falls, a shot to his neck leaving him to choke on his own blood, and the second dropping down dead from the bullet to his head.

"Show off," Viktor mutters, moving past me. Gunfire erupts between six Albanians and us.

As I head into a bedroom, a man breaks the window with the back of his machine gun and fucking jumps out. Not thinking twice, I dart forward. I only take a second to glance

out the window, and seeing the man splash into a pool below, I step onto the windowsill and leap into the air.

The plunge is fast, I suck in a deep breath of air, then hit the water hard.

The moment my feet touch the bottom of the pool, I push my body back to the surface. My arms cut through the water as I swim after the fucker, and when he tries to pull himself up on the edging around the pool, I fire a shot, hitting him in his right shoulder blade.

He falls backward with a cry, then I'm on top of him. Letting go of my weapons, they sink to the bottom while I wrap my left arm around the fuckers neck, dragging him to the shallow end.

I hear music playing somewhere, the water lapping at the sides, and our harsh breaths.

I let the fucker break free from my hold, and as he turns to face me, my fist connects with his face. My fingers wrap around his throat, and I start hitting him with all the rage I've kept bottled up from what they did to Mariya.

My fingers dig into his skin, and the urge to crush his windpipe is overwhelming, but not wanting a quick death for the fucker, I ease up a little. I allow him one gasp of air before shoving him beneath the water, keeping him there until I feel his strength start to fade. I yank him back up, allowing him a couple of seconds to sputter and cough.

Viktor stalks toward the pool. "Need help."

"Yeah. Drag his ass out."

He grabs hold of the Albanian, hauling him out of the water.

I step out of the pool, and as more of my men arrive, I mutter, “My guns are at the bottom of the pool.”

I hold my hand out to my soldier, and he quickly hands me a Glock before diving into the water to retrieve my weapons.

“Turn the fucker around,” I tell Viktor.

He rolls the man onto his back, looks at his neck, then smiles up at me. “Erard Kastrati in the flesh.”

Finally.

Chapter 39

Luca

We've driven Kastrati out to a field where we won't be disturbed.

By the scruff of his neck, I haul his ass out of the car before letting go.

"You know who I am," I state.

Tipping his chin up, he gives me a hate-filled look as he growls, "Cotroni."

"You've got two choices," I get right down to business. "Tell me where to find Tinaj, and I'll consider killing you quickly or don't, and I'll do to you what you did to my wife."

Viktor shakes his head, clearly not happy with the choice I'm giving the man.

I lock eyes with Viktor. *Trust me, brother.*

He nods, leaning back against the vehicle.

Kastrati smirks, then chuckles, "What makes you think I'll tell you anything?"

I smile at the man, then slowly nod. "Viktor, would you be so kind and hand me the drill?"

"It would be my pleasure."

Kastrati glances between Viktor and me, then looks over his shoulder. He's probably wondering if he can outrun us.

As Viktor hands the drill to me, I say, "You're welcome to make a run for it. It will add a little excitement to the night."

There's a flash of panic on the Albanian's face, which satisfies me.

I start the drill, the sound making me clench my teeth.

This is the sound Mariya heard when they fucking drilled into her hand.

Nodding at Viktor, he darts forward and swipes Kastrati's feet from under him. The fucker drops to his ass, and before he can move, Viktor shoves his knee into the man's chest, pinning him to the ground.

"I'm not sure whether you've heard," I say as I crouch next to the man, "but my wife is fucking badass." I lock eyes with Kastrati. "You won't survive what she survived."

"Tinaj," the fucker spits. "He's in Bucharest."

I let out a chuckle. "How fucking stupid do you think I am?"

"I swear!"

"Your word means nothing to me," I grit out before pressing the twelve-inch drill bit to the fuckers left thigh. The sound of drilling mixes with his scream as the metal bores straight through his leg.

This is for you, mia regina.

As slow as I fucking can, I pull the drill bit out, drawing more cries from Kastrati as he struggles against Viktor's hold

on him.

“You know what the name Kastrati reminds me of?” I ask Viktor.

“Oh yeah, I like where your mind’s at,” he chuckles. “Maybe start with his left testicle.”

Our taunting of castrating Kastrati has the fucker shouting, “I don’t know! No one knows!”

Walking around him, I grab hold of his right hand, and stepping on his wrist, I pin it down.

“Not the answer I’m looking for,” I mutter as I shove the drill bit to his palm and mercilessly bore a hole through his skin and bone.

More screams echo into the night, and it has me saying, “A bit louder. No one can hear you.”

“I don’t know who he is,” Kastrati sobs like a fucking baby.

“My wife didn’t cry once while your men tortured her. In fact, she fucking killed them.” Stepping off his wrist, I gesture for Viktor to let him go.

Kastrati has zero strength to get up as his blood seeps into the grass and sand beneath his body.

“I don’t know... I don’t know,” he weeps.

No one fucking knows anything about Tinaj.

“How did you come to the agreement that whoever takes me down gets Europe?”

“I met him... at St. Monarch’s... during... training.”

My eyes flick to Viktor. “Make the call to Uncle Carson.”

“When did you attend training?” I ask.

“Last... year,” he gasps. His eyes are fixed on me, his last breath creeping closer. “He was the... best...”

Aww fuck.

I watch as the life drains from the fucker before he can complete his sentence.

Viktor kicks at the corpse of the Albanian. “Your fucking timing sucks!” Then he says, “Hi, Uncle Carson. Missed me?”

I stare at the dead man as I try to remember the results of last year’s auction.

Every year the best men and women are trained as custodians and assassins, and the highest bidder gets to hire their services. It’s been an ongoing tradition for close to a hundred years. Uncle Alexei bought St. Monarch’s from Madame Keller, the previous owner, and Uncle Carson, his younger brother, has been running it in his stead.

It’s where I received my training in arms, smuggling, and hand-to-hand combat before I took over from my father as the head of the Italian mafia.

“Who was the best last year?” I hear Viktor ask, then he frowns, his eyes locking with mine. “Bojan Pavlović? Who is he?”

Viktor puts his phone on speaker, so I can hear as Uncle Carson says, “Pavlović is Serbian. He joined a Hungarian syndicate in his late teens, grew bored of living hand to mouth, and enrolled here. He trained as a custodian and showed great

potential. He's intelligent, so don't underestimate him. Although there was a bid for twenty million on him, he declined and walked away, which surprised me. I haven't heard from him again."

"Thanks, Uncle Carson," Viktor says. "We'll see you at Mariya and Luca's wedding, right?"

"Yeah. I'm looking forward to it."

The call ends, and Viktor lifts an eyebrow at me. "At least now we know who we're dealing with."

"Yes." I actually feel relieved and chuckle, "Got to hand it to the man, it was a clever move."

"What was a clever move?" Viktor asks, giving me a confused look.

"Pavlović's been laying low, letting Kastrati keep me busy and tire me out. He probably roped the fucker in to distract me."

"Why the fuck do you look happy about this?" Viktor asks.

"If Pavlović is as good as Uncle Carson says, then he's a worthy opponent and not just some snot-nose kid in over his head." I pat Viktor on the shoulder. "I'm taking it as a compliment."

I toss the drill into the car, then signal for Marco to set the vehicle and body on fire.

As Viktor and I walk to the SUV that will take us to the airport where my private jet is waiting, I say, "At least you have the right name to search for now."

"I'm actually curious about what I'll find out."

“You know what they say about curiosity,” I chuckle.

“Fuck, now I’m thinking of pussy.”

I let out a bark of laughter. “Not surprised.”

We climb into the SUV, Viktor sliding behind the steering wheel, and as he drives us to the airfield, I pull out my phone and dial Lorenzo’s number.

“You know it’s two am in the morning,” my second in charge mutters.

“This is the only time I have to check in with you. I’m in Germany. Do you need me for anything while on your side of the world?”

“No, Diego and I’ve got everything covered,” he mumbles.

“Send me the sales figures for the last quarter,” I instruct.

“You don’t trust us?”

I let out a chuckle, joking, “Just want to make sure the two of you aren’t fucking around while I’m not there.”

“I’m offended.”

Deciding to let the man continue sleeping, I say, “I’ll be home after the wedding.”

“Can’t wait,” he grumbles. “I need a vacation.”

“We’ll talk about it when I’m in Italy.”

I end the call, and feeling better after checking in with Lorenzo, my thoughts turn to Pavlović.

The man played his cards right. We were chasing the decoy while he probably watched and learned a fuck-ton about me.

Cudos, Pavlović. Cudos.

But now it's time to end this cat and mouse game.

Chapter 40

Mariya

I'm enjoying a day out with my mom, Aunt Elena, and Violet.

I've missed this so much. I don't hate being at home, but damn, a girl needs her shopping time.

Especially this girl.

I'm grinning from ear to ear as I step out of the fitting room with Violet's help.

Just one more week, and the damn cast comes off. I can't freaking wait.

Mom and Aunt Elena stop talking, and their jaws drop as they stare at me.

"You look gorgeous, Mariya," My mother-in-law breathes.

Mom's face crumbles. "Nooo, *Mami*," I coo as I hold open my arms. "Come here."

Mom rushes into my arms, hugging me tightly to her as she's overcome with emotion from seeing me in my wedding dress.

The dress is everything I wanted it to be. Feminine yet badass. Classy yet sexy. For Dad's sake, I didn't let the V neckline dip too low.

Mom pulls back and holds me at arm's length as she looks at me. "You look absolutely breathtaking, sweetheart."

"I do, don't I," I beam, my hands caressing the lace. "Help me to the mirror."

Mom wraps her arm around my lower back, and careful not to step on the dress, she helps me onto the small podium in the bridal boutique.

My eyes drift over the stunning dress, my heart full of happiness.

Mom and Aunt Elena take photos while Violet pours us each a glass of champagne.

"Luca is going to love the dress," Aunt Elena mentions.

"Right," I chuckle.

She comes to stand next to the podium and says, "I'm so glad the two of you decided to make the marriage work."

"You've raised an amazing man, Aunt Elena. I'm lucky to have him."

She presses a hand to her heart and gives me an affectionate smile. "When are you going to call me mamma?"

My eyes dart to Mom, unsure if I would offend her, but she waves a hand at us. "Elena is right. You can't call your in-laws uncle and aunt all your life."

I give Mom a grateful smile, then grin at my mother-in-law. "I guess that answers your question."

"Champagne time," Violet calls out.

“Not with the dress on,” Mom says before Violet can hand me a flute. Mom helps me back to the dressing room and out of my wedding dress.

“I’m so glad we’re getting to do this,” she murmurs as she hangs the dress up.

“Me too.” I quickly put on the silk blouse and skirt I chose to wear for the day’s outing.

When Mom and I step out of the dressing room, we take our flutes filled with bubbly.

Violet holds up her glass, then says, “To Mariya and Luca not killing each other, and to getting drunk and finding true love at the bottom of their glasses.”

“Jesus, Violet,” Mom chuckles. “Remind me not to let you speak at the wedding.”

We all laugh as we enjoy our drinks before leaving for the cake tasting.



Lying face to face in Luca’s arms, I let out a happy sigh.

“What’s the sigh for?” he asks while brushing his fingers up and down my back.

“Just thinking about today. I had fun with our moms and Violet.”

“I’m glad you spent some time with them.” He presses a kiss to my forehead. “Thank you for including my mom. She called to tell me how much she loved it.”

“It was my pleasure. I love spending time with her.” I grin at him. “She asked me to call her mamma.”

A wide smile spreads over his handsome face. “And?”

“I’m going to call her mamma, of course.”

I’m rewarded with another brush of his lips against my nose.

“Violet said something today that got me wondering about something.” I start trailing patterns on his bare chest and circling his right peck. “You said you weren’t drunk the night of my birthday.”

A frown starts to form on his forehead. “Yeah?”

“Tell me what happened.”

“You got out of your mind drunk,” he chuckles, looking relieved.

“Everyone knows that part,” I roll my eyes at him. “I want to know the rest.”

Luca moves onto his back, his arm tightening around my shoulder. I wait for him to get comfortable before resting my cheek on his chest.

He inhales deeply, then lets the breath out slowly before saying, “While we were at the club, you got brave because of the alcohol and asked me why we weren’t friends. I said it was because of the line you drew between us —”

I lift my head and frown at him. “I didn’t draw a line between us. It was you.”

He lets out a chuckle. “We both made the wrong assumptions about each other.”

I lie back down, muttering, “Assumptions are the mother of all fuck ups.”

“Couldn’t agree more.” He resumes brushing his fingers over my back. “Anyway, one thing led to another, and you kissed me.”

My eyebrow darts up. “Good for me.”

Laughing at my remark, he continues. “We took a walk. I was hoping to clear your mind enough so we could talk about us, but then you spotted a chapel, dragged my ass there, and ordered Elvis to marry us.”

“Elvis?”

“Yep. It was very romantic.”

“I’m sure.”

“Anyway,” Luca says. He takes hold of my chin, nudging my face up so I’ll look at him. “We had a mobster wedding, which you found hilarious, said our vows, kissed, and on the way back to the hotel, you passed out.”

“A mobster wedding,” I deadpan. “Seriously?”

“Hey, I wanted the Dracula theme, but you insisted we get the mob one for the shits and giggles of it.”

I let out a burst of laughter. “Damn, I wish I could remember it.” Then my facial expression grows serious. “What were your vows?” My eyes widen. “Shit, what did I say to you?”

Luca has a broad smile on his face as he says, “You told me you can’t cook to save your life but that you’re amazing in bed.”

“Really,” I mutter. “Those were my vows?”

“It was cute.” His eyes warm on my face. “You also told me you loved me.”

My lips part with shock. “You knew all along.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t say anything because I wanted to hear the words from you when you were ready.”

I pull a disgruntled face. “That’s cheating. You knew about my feelings while I had no idea about yours.”

“I got lucky,” he jokes, then he gives me a look that’s filled with all the love he feels for me. “You’re the only woman for me, Mariya. I’ve waited patiently while building my empire. The only thing missing from my life is you. Everything I have...” He presses a kiss to my mouth. “Everything I am...” Another kiss. “Is yours, Mariya.”

An emotional smile tugs at my lips. “Were those your vows?”

He nods, then tilts his head. “Will you marry me again, *amore mio*?”

My chin starts to tremble as I nod. “Yes, Luca. I’ll marry you again.”

He pushes me onto my back, moves over me, and bracing a forearm beside my head, his mouth nips at mine. “Christ, how’s it possible to love someone as much as I love you?”

“I don’t know,” I whisper, lifting my hands and cupping his jaw. “Sometimes, it feels like I might explode from all the love in my heart.”

“I know another way to make you explode,” he grumbles playfully as his hand slips between my legs.

“Hmm, I like the sound of that.”

His fingers begin to massage the sensitive bundle of nerves between my legs that only responds to his touch.

The way he touches me makes me feel intoxicated. My mind empties of all thoughts, my attention one hundred percent on my husband and what he does to me.

When the needy whimper slips over my lips, Luca’s eyes darken until they’re black.

My hands brush down the expanse of his back, enjoying the feel of his muscles rippling with every move.

Our eyes lock, and the possessiveness in Luca’s makes me feel protected and loved. He makes me feel like a queen.

His queen.

“Luca,” I whisper, the warmth of having his attention solely focused on me spreading through my entire being. “I need you inside me. Now.”

He grins, knowing precisely what he does to me. He moves over me and settles between my legs, then thrusts against my needy core.

“Without clothes,” I mutter.

“So impatient,” he breathes, but then he gives me what I want as he pulls my panties down my legs and removes his sweatpants. He crawls back over me, and our eyes lock together before he enters me with a long, hard thrust.

“Yes,” I moan, sparks of ecstasy already rippling through me.

God, I love connecting with Luca on such an intimate level.

He grinds his pelvis against mine, and staying buried inside me, the thrusts are short and hard. The orgasm hits hard, the power of it rendering me speechless. My nails dig into his skin, my lips part on a silent scream, my body unable to move.

“Christ,” he rasps. “I love the way you come for me, baby.”

Luca’s chest presses against mine, squashing my breasts, his lips brushing over mine as he starts to hit that spot inside me only he can find.

Another wave of pleasure crashes over me, my vision going spotty from how intense it is. I manage to whimper, and Luca inhales the sound.

He keeps fucking me until I’m a boneless mess beneath him, and when his orgasm hits, my body jerks from how hard he takes me.

Jesus. So freaking hot.

I watch as ecstasy washes over his features, his jaw clenched, and his eyes burning with the inferno of love he feels for me.

“Christ.” His arms tighten around me, keeping me locked to his body as he rides his orgasm.

Once he comes down from the high, he slowly fills me one last time. “*Mia regina.*”

I shake my head, then murmur, “My king.”

Chapter 41

Mariya

Staring at the wedding dress, hanging against the wall in my bedroom at my parents' house, I feel super emotional.

Even though Luca and I are married, I'm anxious. I've worked hard the past three months to make sure the wedding is perfect, and now that everything is out of my hands, and the day has arrived, I'm a nervous wreck.

When Dad comes in, he takes one look at my face, then holds his arms open. I rush into his safe embrace and give in to the nerves.

As if I'm not emotional enough, Dad says, "No matter where this life takes you, you'll always be my baby girl, *printsessa*."

"Oh, Daddy," I sob like a baby.

He cradles me tighter to his chest, his voice hoarse as he says, "The day you took your first breath... Christ, Mariya," he inhales deeply, trying to compose himself, and it only makes me cry harder. "You had me wrapped around your little finger from day one. There's nothing I wouldn't do for you."

I nod against his chest, sniffing, "I know. I'm so lucky to have you as my father."

“You’ve chosen well, baby-girl. Luca will give you the world while killing anyone who threatens you.” He takes a deep breath. “You chose well.”

“I know. I’ve got good taste,” I chuckle. Pulling back, I look up into my father’s eyes. “I’m glad you approve.”

Dad lifts a hand and tugs on one of the soft curls I styled my hair in. “If you ever need me, I’m just a call away.”

I nod, a tear rolling down my cheek again.

“Besides your mother, there isn’t a soul alive I love more than you. You’re my world, Mariya.”

“Jesus, Daddy,” I mutter as the tears come faster, then I hug him again. “I love you so much.” My dad holds me until I manage to calm down again, but I have to swallow hard as I look up at him. “Thank you for being the best father in the world and spoiling me rotten.”

“You’re welcome, my little *printsessa*.”

I grin at him as I wipe the tears away from beneath my eyes. “You haven’t called me little in a long time.”

“Because you’ve grown into an amazing woman.”

“Only because of you and *Mami*.”

Just then, Mom comes into the bedroom. She takes one look at Dad and me, then points to the door. “Alexei! Stop making Mariya cry. Look at her face! The wedding is in two hours, and you’ve got her sobbing.”

Dad chuckles as he walks to Mom and silences her with a kiss, then he says, “I love it when you get all bossy. It’s a turn-on.”

“Daddy,” I shriek. “I don’t need to hear that.”

“How do you think you were made?” Dad chuckles as he walks out of the room.

“God, the older he gets, the more impossible he becomes,” Mom mutters as she grabs a tissue and starts to dab it at my cheeks. “You’re all blotchy.”

“The makeup will cover it,” I assure her.

Walking to my dressing table, I sit down. Then I pause and look at Mom. “Is there anything emotional you want to tell me that will make me cry?”

Mom lets out a chuckle as she comes to stand behind me. She adjusts some of the curls falling to the middle of my back. “No, sweetheart. Just enjoy every second of your big day.”

A sudden burst of excitement hits, and I jump up to hug Mom. “I’m getting married,” I shriek.

She lets out a burst of laughter, then shoves me back down on the stool. “Makeup time.” She scrunches her nose. “I should’ve hired someone to help you with your hair and makeup.”

I shake my head. “Hell no. I want to do it myself and know it’s done right. I’d kill the person for the slightest mistake.”

“Just like your father,” she mutters.

I chuckle, finding it amusing because I’m actually more like her.

Violet comes rushing into the room. “Sorry, I’m late. I totally overslept.” Her eyes land on me. She hugs my mom and gives my shoulder a squeeze.

“It’s okay.” I smile at my friend.

Luca’s mom joins us, and together we spend the rest of the afternoon getting ready.

My heart is full, and the tears keep threatening to fall as the time to walk down the aisle comes closer.

The past three months have been both difficult and extraordinary. When my cast came off, I was given a leg brace for support. It was a huge relief and although I can’t stand for long periods, being able to walk is fantastic and something I’ll never take for granted again.

Some function has returned to the ring finger of my right hand. I can’t straighten it all the way, but anything is better than nothing. I took the win and made peace with the rest.

Even though there were hard times, Luca never wavered. Instead, his love for me grew, and he made a point of showing me every day that I’m the only woman for him.

I’m lucky.

I have everything my heart desires and so much more.

After our mothers and Violet leave the room, Dad appears in the doorway. Our eyes meet in the mirror’s reflection, and my throat instantly tightens with overwhelming emotion.

“I can’t cry,” I warn him. “Don’t say anything. Just walk me down the aisle...” When I turn around, I have to breathe as Dad’s eyebrows draw together and tears start to shine in his eyes.

“Christ, *printsessa*,” he rasps. “You look like a vision.”

I suck in deep breaths, fanning my face with my hand.
“My makeup.”

Pride fills Dad’s eyes as he holds out his arm for me to take. I place my hand in the crook of his arm, and we leave the room, both doing our best to breathe through the emotions.

We stop just shy of the sliding doors.

“We’re ready,” he tells Violet, who quickly gestures to the intimate orchestra Dad arranged for today.

The opening notes of Pachelbel, Canon in D Major, start to fill the air.

“Oh God,” I groan, blinking furiously.

Dad sucks in a deep breath. “It’s been my greatest honor raising you, Mariya.”

“Daddy,” I whimper, the tears starting to flow.

“I might be giving you to Luca, but you’ll always be mine.”

I can only nod as we step through the sliding doors. My eyes lock on Luca, and then there’s no stopping the tears.

Chapter 42

Luca

I fidget with the rose gold cufflinks and glance at Viktor.

“You’ve got this,” he offers me some encouragement.

Mom comes down the aisle, and seeing her, has me swallowing hard. She takes a seat next to Dad, then waves at me.

I smile at my parents, so glad Mariya and I are getting to celebrate this day with them.

When Aunt Bella comes to take a seat, my stomach tightens into a ball of nerves.

“Fuck, you can face a group of armed men, but marrying Mariya has you looking like a nervous wreck,” Viktor mutters under his breath.

I let out a chuckle right as elegant piano notes silence the guests.

I turn to face the aisle, and when my eyes settle on the sliding doors, Mariya and Uncle Alexei step out. A cello joins the pianist, the music so fucking perfect as my bride takes her first step toward me.

The punch to my heart knocks the breath from me, and for a moment, I sway from the intensity.

God, she's so beautiful. I try to memorize the sight of Mariya in the black wedding dress, but I can't focus on anything but her face and the emotion clearly visible with the tears spiraling over her cheeks.

My throat strains again, and when the woman I love more than anything locks eyes with me, I can't hold the emotions in.

A tear escapes, but I couldn't give a fuck. I'm marrying Mariya Koslov, the badass princess, the strongest woman, my vulnerable love.

Uncle Alexei stops right before the end of the aisle, which was not planned. Knowing what he wants, I step down the small podium and walk toward them.

When I stop in front of them, he says, "I'm giving you my life, Luca."

"Which I'll guard with my own."

Mariya lets out a sob as her father takes hold of her hand and holds it out to me. "I'm not losing a daughter but gaining a son."

Christ.

I take my bride's hand, and locking eyes with her, I can only stare at her. "You take my breath away, *mia regina*."

I lead her to the podium, where Viktor looks just as emotional as me.

When we're facing the priest, I give Mariya's hand a squeeze. A shortened version of the ceremony starts, so we

don't keep Mariya standing for too long.

When it's time for our vows, we turn to face each other.

She flicks a tear away from her cheek, then says, "I don't know why brides wear makeup we cry it all off."

There's a wave of chuckles from our families and friends.

Mariya lifts her gaze to mine, and overflowing with love, she says, "I want you to promise me that every morning when I wake up, you'll be there because I won't survive a day without you." She pauses as she sucks in deep breaths, her voice straining as she continues, "I don't want the sun to rise without you, so could you please stay with me until we're old and we've lived every day this life gave us." A tear trickles down her cheek. "And when our time comes, I want you to hold my hand because I'm certain God negotiates, and we can get another life together out of the man upstairs."

While the guests chuckle again, my eyes rest softly on my wife, her vows filling every inch of my heart.

"Eleven years ago, I fell in love with an Italian boy. I spent night after night weaving fairytales around him."

Another tear escapes my eye, and Mariya reaches up to brush it away.

"Thank you for giving me the fairytale love I never imagined I'd have."

We both breathe for a moment before I say, "I promise to share every sunrise with you because no day would be worth living if I don't see your beautiful face." I take hold of her hand and, holding it in both of mine, I swallow hard on the intensity of the moment before I continue, "I'll never let you

go, Mariya. I'll follow you to the highest heaven and the deepest hell. I'll fight all the gods and all the demons who might stand in our way, I'll burn down this Earth and give you the universe."

She gasps past a sob, tears falling from her chin to land at our feet.

Stepping closer to her, I wrap my hand around the back of her neck and rest my forehead against hers. "I love you with all that I am. My heart. My body. My entire being." I press a tender kiss to her trembling lips. "You are the light of my life, and I promise to treasure, protect, and love you all the days I'm given until my last breath."

We exchange rings, and once we're declared husband and wife for a second time, I sweep Mariya up into my arms, bridal style, and demand, "Kiss me, *amore mio*."

She wraps her arms around my neck, and with a world of happiness shining from her eyes, she takes my mouth with all the passion and love we'll share until the end of our days.

Cheers and applause break out, and I feel Viktor patting my back.

When the kiss ends, I stare into Mariya's eyes and stepping off the podium, confetti rains down on us.

I watch as Mariya laughs and catches a piece of black and rose gold confetti, and too soon, we're swept up by guests congratulating us.

I put her down on a vacated chair and take a moment between people clamoring for our attention to ask, "How's your leg?"

She beams up at me. “It’s fine, my husband.”

I grin at her like an idiot as I crouch in front of her. “Thank you for marrying me again.”

“I’ll marry you a million times, Luca. Only you.”

“*Il mio*,” I murmur, so fucking proud that I get to call her mine.

Mariya’s hands frame my jaws, and she leans forward, sealing our mouths together.

Not giving a single fuck about our family and friends watching, I kiss my love possessively, desperately, and with the inferno of emotions only she can evoke in me.

Chapter 43

Mariya

We arrived at Luca's family home early this morning. We spent our wedding night sleeping on the private jet. Sure we could've delayed the departure by a couple of hours, but we were both in a hurry to start our honeymoon.

I stare out the window at the vast lawn that ends on a cliff. The Mediterranean sea is a stunning shade of blue this morning.

God, I love Italy.

Hearing a splash down below, my gaze lowers to the pool. I watch as Luca swims a couple of laps before he lifts his powerful body out of the water.

A smile spreads over my face.

Yeah, it was definitely the abs that made me fall head over heels for the man.

With Luca's parents visiting mine in LA, we have the villa to ourselves. I strip out of my shorts and tanktop, then leave the room butt naked.

When I walk through the wide-open glass doors and take the steps down to the lawn, Luca's eyes land on me. He stops patting the waterdrops from his chest and drops the towel.

“Christ, now that’s one hell of a sight to see first thing in the morning,” he grins.

“Morning, my husband,” I say as I reach him. I wrap my arms around his neck and stare up into his darkening eyes.

“*Mio marito.*” He tilts his head. “Italian for my husband.”

“*Mio marito,*” I repeat after him.

Luca wraps an arm around my lower back, lifts my feet from the ground, then falls into the water with me.

The moment my head breaks through the surface, I laugh, “Shit, it’s cold.”

“I’ll warm you up soon enough,” he growls, his hand slipping between my legs.

“Let’s make the water sizzle,” I moan before slamming my mouth to his.

I savor his lips kneading and tasting mine as he slowly slips his middle finger in and out of me.

I brush a hand down his chest until my palm lays flat over his abs, drinking in the feel of the muscles rippling as he moves us to the side of the pool where it’s not so deep.

Luca shoves his swimming trunks down, and freeing his deliciously hard length, he enters me hard, the water splashing over the edging.

I hold on tight as my husband fills me with his love, and we connect on the intimate level I need more than the physical touch.

His pace is relentless, his lips parted, and the drops trailing over his face, making him look hot as sin.

The things this man does to me. No one would understand even if I tried to explain.

Only he can make my heart thunder in my chest. Only he can make me gasp for air. Only he can give my body pleasure.

It's always been Luca. From the very start, he captured my heart.

My soul chose this man long before my heart knew he would be the love of my life.

With Luca filling me with punishing thrusts, the tension in his features making him look like an Italian God, my orgasm sweeps through my body.

I hold eye contact with him as I moan and whimper, relishing in our special connection.

"Thank you for making my dreams come true," I gasp, my lips brushing against his.

Luca comes hard, his arms locking around me like steel bands. I feel his groans on my mouth, his cock jerking deep inside me, his body pressed hard against mine.

Once the pleasure fades, he tenderly nips at my lips. "I'm so fucking glad you fell in love with me."

I smile against his mouth, our breaths one. "Have you seen your abs?"

Luca lets out a chuckle as he pulls out of me. "Christ, I better not let myself go."

We move through the water that now feels warm, caressing our bodies with soft fingers. "Don't be silly. I don't just love you for your abs."

He raises an eyebrow at me. “Yeah?”

Slowly I shake my head, then I start to pepper his face with kisses. “I love your arms and hands.” *Kiss*. “I love your cock. A lot.” Luca laughs, then I continue, “I love your brilliant mind.” I lock eyes with him. “I love how ruthless you are when it comes to our enemies and how gentle and loving you are with me.” *Kiss*. “I love that I’m the only woman you look at.” *Kiss*. “How possessive you are of me.” *Kiss*. “But above all, I love the way your intensity wraps around me until you’re all I can think about.” *Kiss*. “Having your attention on me makes it feel like a spotlight shining on me.”

His eyes are filled with satisfaction as he stares at me. “You fill me with so much awe, Mariya.”

I hug him, just floating with him in the water as the sun rises higher in the sky.

“You know what my dad said before the wedding?”

“Tell me.”

“That I chose well,” I murmur. “I always get what I want, and for years I thought you’d be the one thing I couldn’t have, but my soul chose you, and I just couldn’t let go.”

“I’m glad you never gave up on your love for me,” he says as he brushes wet strands from my face. “If I had known how you felt, I would’ve married you the day you turned eighteen.”

I scrunch my nose. “And miss out on all the *fun* of pining after each other?”

“Fuck yes,” he chuckles.

Chapter 44

Luca

After I checked in with my men here at home and showed Mariya some of my favorite sights, we took our private jet to the Netherlands.

The past couple of days has been pure bliss. Although I'm constantly on guard and worried about when Pavlović will make his move, I'm doing my best to hide the worry from Mariya.

Lying in bed with my wife, safely in my arms, my thoughts revolve around the Serbian man, who's as elusive as fuck.

Mariya presses a kiss to my throat, then to my jaw, groaning, "I want to feel you deep inside me again."

The worry vanishes like mist before the sun as she moves over me, straddling my hips.

"What my woman wants, my woman gets," I chuckle, loving how sexual she is. Even if we argue, she doesn't withhold sex. She allows me to fuck her while she gives me a piece of her mind.

Her eyes are dark with need as she rubs herself on my cock that's ready to please her. I love that we can't get enough of each other. We've spent the entire night naked in bed, and this probably won't be the last time before sunrise.

Our desire for each other is insatiable.

“So good,” she moans, tilting her head back. Her firm breasts and toned stomach are on full display, my hands burning over her skin.

I'll never get enough of her body.

She takes hold of my cock and positions me at her entrance. Our eyes are locked on each other as she sinks down an inch, only allowing the head to push inside her.

“Christ, are you trying to kill me?” I growl, my hands gripping hold of her curvy hips.

“Do you need me to move?” she teases, her eyes sparkling.

“Fuck yes,” I groan as I thrust up, sheathing myself to the hilt inside her exquisite heat. “Fuck.” I sit up and wrap my arms around her, holding her tightly to me, chest to chest.

Mine.

Mariya wraps her arms around my neck, then purrs, “Fuck me hard, Luca.”

My mouth slams down on hers, and I begin to move while she swivels her hips, meeting me thrust for thrust. We set a punishing pace, her nails clawing at my shoulder blades.

I claim her mouth while pounding harder into her, wanting to devour her cries and moans.

She whimpers, and it has me framing her face, our bodies moving as one.

Her nails dig deeper as she whimpers again, and it only makes me increase my pace until sweat beads on the back of my neck.

I feel her clench around my cock, her pussy greedy for every inch of me. I push my hand down between us and start to rub the ever-loving shit out of clit.

“Oh God,” she whimpers. “Luca. Yes.”

Mariya cries into my mouth, and I swallow the sound as I force her to the edge where she explodes, her body convulsing and her inner walls clenching the fuck out of my cock.

She starts to sob against my lips from the intense orgasm tearing through her, and it fills my entire being with satisfaction and pride.

Only I can make Mariya orgasm. Only I will hear her cries and whimpers as I make her fall apart.

Pulling my hand from between us, I lock eyes with my wife while I fill her with deep and slow thrusts, relishing in the intimacy we’re sharing.

“*Ti amo*,” I breathe as I lose myself in every thrust. “So. Fucking. Much.”

Her eyes are filled with everything she feels for me as she breathes, “It’s always been you. Only you. My heart has never and will never belong to another.”

My orgasm sizzles down my spine before taking control of my body and rendering me powerless.

Mariya watches as I ride the wave out, a look of awe on her face. “You’re so hot when you come for me.”

With one last thrust, I bury myself all the way inside her, keeping her body imprisoned against mine until the last of the pleasure fades.

With Mariya's fingers weaved through mine, we walk from stall to stall in a market where various foods and items are on display.

We sample pastries, cheeses, and meats, and Mariya purchases the weirdest shit we'll probably never use. But I let her be, knowing she's happiest when shopping. I'll get a storage facility to keep everything if I have to.

One of my guards drops to the left of us, and I react, grabbing Mariya and shoving her behind a table. Marco is right behind me, pushing at my back so we'll move faster.

"What the hell?" Mariya gasps. She takes one look at me, then her face pales. "Oh, Jesus."

I pull the two Heckler & Kochs from my back and mutter, "Stay down, baby."

Only then does my heart explode into a wild beat while the shock of the attack shudders through me.

People start to scream, and a shopper is shot in the head while he tries to run for cover, falling face down on the ground. The other shoppers run, some stepping on the lifeless body in their panic.

"Is it a random shooting, like back home, or do you think we're under attack?" Mariya asks.

"He's after us," I breathe as I quickly glance around the table, looking for any possible positions Pavlović could be

shooting from. Just as I pull back, a bullet tears through the table cloth near the spot where I was.

“Luca!” Mariya shouts as she yanks me closer to her. “Don’t do that again! Jesus Christ!”

I pull free and, keeping my voice calm, I say, “I’ve got this, baby. You need to trust me and let me do my job.”

Mariya takes deep breaths, calming down as much as she can under the dire circumstances.

“Don’t yank me, and just stay next to me,” I order, my voice firmer so the words will register with her.

“Okay. Just be careful.”

Locking eyes with one of my soldiers, where he’s taken cover by a table opposite from ours, I shout, “Find out where the fucker is.” Turning my attention to Marco, I order, “No matter what happens, you stay with Mariya.”

“Yes, boss,” he agrees, taking a position behind my wife.

“Give me a gun,” Mariya says, her voice tight with tension.

I nod at Marco to hand her one of his guns, then ask her, “When were you last at the shooting range?”

“Last week. It’s a weekly date I have with Dad.”

Dad. No longer Uncle Alexei.

I almost grin, but then another body drops near us.

I can’t let more innocent people die. “Mariya, get ready to move.”

“Okay.”

I stay behind the table as I move toward the other corner, then glance up at the buildings surrounding the market.

I see a glimmer of light reflect from a municipality building, then yank back just as a bullet slams into the table.

Remembering the escape routes I subconsciously planned out the second I brought Mariya to the market, my eyes lock on the busy street where cars are still moving, oblivious to what's happening.

"We're going to make a run for the street." Mariya presses closer to me. "Don't look back and run for the mall."

"Okay," she murmurs, looking much calmer now that some of the shock has faded.

Fuck, her leg's still healing.

"Duck and run zig-zag," I say as I shove my guns back into the waistband of my pants.

"Okay."

I take a deep breath, then ask, "Are you ready, baby?"

"Yes."

"Now!" I shout. Mariya's up like a deer, sprinting as fast as she can. I'm right behind her, mirroring every step she takes while keeping my body between her and Pavlović's scope.

When we reach the street, cars swerve to avoid us, horns blare, and glass shatters as Pavlović takes shots at us.

I hear a grunt behind me, and knowing Marco was just hit, I grab hold of Mariya and drag her down behind a large trashcan.

So fucking close. Just a couple more feet.

I quickly glance around the trashcan, my arms locking my wife to my chest. Seeing Marco's body on the pavement, anger floods my veins.

Get Mariya to safety, then you can avenge your friend.

"One last sprint, baby," I say. "Straight ahead. Just make it into the mall."

"Okay," she breathes, her face showing signs of pain from the extreme strain on her leg.

"You can do this," I encourage her.

Mariya nods, her tongue darts out to wet her dry lips, then she trains her eyes on the entrance to the shopping mall.

Pushing to my feet, I yank her up and shove her forward. I stay behind her to take any bullets flying our way while we sprint as fast as Mariya can.

Fire spreads down my arm.

Almost there.

Another bullet hits my lower left side, and knowing the fucker is only playing with us, makes rage explode in me.

I shove Mariya inside the mall, glass shatters, and I hear her scream.

Chapter 45

Mariya

When the glass shatters, I scream from pure frustration.

Luca grabs hold of my arm, and then I'm airborne as he throws me over his shoulder. Without me holding him back, he runs faster than I can with a healed leg, shoving anyone and everyone out of his way.

My eyes land on the crimson stain soaking through his shirt.

"Blood," I cry as I strain against his hold. "Luca, you're bleeding!"

He keeps running until we exit via a different entrance. Finally, he stops, and breaking the side window of a random car, he unlocks the door and shoves me inside.

Luca slams the door shut, and as he runs around the front, I quickly unlock the driver's side door. He climbs behind the steering wheel, and luckily the vehicle is an old model, so he manages to hotwire the engine.

Only when the tires are screeching and we're peeling down the road does he mutter, "I'm fine. He didn't shoot to kill. They're only flesh wounds."

"They? How many?"

His eyes sweep over every inch of me to ensure I didn't get shot, then he answers, "Two, but I'm fine."

Now that we're out of immediate danger the shock of what happened hits. Marco was killed, and who knows how many of the other men.

It's just Luca and me.

My breaths are shallow, while Luca is deadly calm.

He used his body as a shield to protect me. Jesus.

I don't know why it surprises me. I know he loves me but seeing with my own eyes that he's willing to die for me ... that does something to my soul

"What do we do now?" I ask. "If we can get to St. Monarch's, we'll be safe."

"I'm going to make sure you get safely on the jet, then I'm going to hunt the fucker and put an end to this."

My eyes widen. "I'm not leaving you!"

"Mariya," he snaps, his eyes locked on the road. "I can't do my job and protect you."

"I can help," I argue. "I've trained for this all my life."

When Luca remains quiet, frustration coils in my chest. "I went up against a group of Albanians and survived. You've seen what I can do. Let me help."

He thinks for a moment, then much to my relief, he nods. He pulls the car to the side of a road, a channel of water to our left and a neighborhood to our right.

Taking out his phone, he pulls up a photo. “This is Pavlović. It was taken a year ago. We’re going to arm ourselves to the teeth and hunt the fucker down.”

“Okay.”

Together we can take out the threat so we can enjoy the rest of our damn honeymoon.



Watching my man load a clip into his gun is so freaking hot.

Now’s not the time, Mariya.

But, damn, he looks badass in black cargo pants and a long-sleeve shirt.

Luca lets me clean his flesh wounds and bandage them. I didn’t even broach the topic of going to the hospital, knowing he wouldn’t stand for it.

Luca’s phone starts ringing. “It’s Viktor,” he tells me before taking the call.

Thank God.

We’ve been waiting for Viktor to track Pavlović, which he’s able to do now that the man has surfaced from his hiding place.

Coward. He doesn’t have the balls to come face to face with my husband.

Luca puts Viktor on speaker, so I can hear.

“I’ve tracked him from Amsterdam to Utrecht. The last footage I got of him was at a traffic light on Voort... fuck I can’t pronounce it. I’ll text you the name of the damn street.”

“Thanks,” Luca replies. “We’re hitting the road now. Let me know if you get new info on his whereabouts.”

“I can be there in ten hours if you want to wait for me.”

“No, I’m not giving him the chance to get away,” Luca snaps. “We’re ending this today.”

“And Mariya?” Viktor asks.

“I’m going with,” I answer.

“Kick ass, little sister,” he growls. “Empty your gun in the fucker for me.”

“I will,” I promise.

Ending the call, Luca and I take our luggage to our rented SUV, then go back to the suite to arm ourselves to the teeth.

Not giving an ounce of shit what the other guests in the hotel will think about the two of us carrying weapons and wearing armored vests, we leave the suite again.

“You look so hot,” I mutter as the elevator doors shut behind us.

Luca chuckles as the doors slide open on the third floor, and an elderly lady blinks at us before they shut again.

I let out a sigh, “We definitely won’t stay here again.”

“Yep,” Luca agrees.

The elevator doors open on the first floor, and we step out. People move out of the way, whispers following behind us.

Just like my parents, we'll become the power couple to fear after taking care of Pavlović.

Once we're in the SUV, Luca drives us to Utrecht, only twenty to thirty minutes away.

Viktor sends us an update.

Van Deventerlaan. The Express Holiday Inn.

I type out a quick reply.

Got it. Thanks.

When Luca stops at a red light, I show him the name of the street where Pavlović is. With the help of GPS, we find the motel and slowly drive past it.

"I can go to the reception and pretend I'm a whore. They might give me the asshole's room number."

"There's no fucking way," Luca growls.

"There are easily a hundred rooms in that building. How will we find out which one he's staying in?"

"We're going to wait and watch."

Chapter 46

Luca

We only wait two hours until I finally lay eyes on the man who's shown more skill than most in our world.

"Ground floor. Corner room," I mutter.

"I see him," Mariya replies.

"You ready, baby?"

"I was born ready," she mutters as she shoves her car door open.

The sun throws colors across the sky as it starts to set, and there aren't many people moving around.

In the back of my mind, I worry why the fucker decided to make an appearance now.

After getting out of the SUV, I say, "Stay behind me."

"Okay."

I love how Mariya obeys my commands without question. Well, besides, when I asked her to leave me so I could focus on hunting down Pavlović. But she was right, I've seen her in action and know she can hold her own.

Not bothering to take a stealthy approach, I walk toward Pavlović. His eyes lock on us, and slowly he comes to a stop,

his hand reaching behind him. Mine flies up, and the fucker darts to the left.

I break out in a run, my finger squeezing the trigger repeatedly. One bullet slams into his back, but he's wearing an armored vest, the force of the shot only making him stumble before he ducks around a corner.

Mariya manages to keep up with me, and as my shoulder slams into the brick wall when I take cover, she's right behind me.

"You good, baby?"

"Yes. I'll keep up. Do your thing."

I peek around the corner, and not seeing Pavlović, I move forward, my arms up with a gun in each hand.

Movement on a small hill behind the motel catches my eye, and I break out into a run again, setting after Pavlović.

Crossing a quiet street in a residential area, the fucker ducks behind a tree.

Mariya and I take cover behind the low wall of a house on the corner.

"It took you a while," I hear Pavlović shout.

I take a deep breath of air before I reply, "Good move using Kastrati as a decoy."

"Thank you. I thought you'd like it."

I peek over the edge of the wall, and only see Pavlović's head pop out from behind the tree for a second.

Wanting answers to the many questions I have, I ask, “Why go after Europe when you don’t have an army to rule it with?”

“I don’t want Europe.” There’s a moment’s silence. “I only want your life.”

I frown at Mariya, who looks confused as hell. “Maybe you killed someone close to him?”

“Fuck if I know,” I mutter.

Then Pavlović shouts, “You killed my father six years ago.”

“I’ve killed many people,” I say as I rise to my feet, done with this fucking cat and mouse game.

“Luca,” Mariya hisses, then she stands up, training her weapon on the tree.

“Why stay hidden for so long, only to give your position away today?”

“I wanted you to find me, or you still wouldn’t have a fucking clue where I was,” he chuckles. “I want to meet face to face so that I can get my revenge.” Pavlović quickly peeking around the tree.

“Well, you’re shit out of luck.” With the barrel of my gun on the tree, I say, “Today, you’ll join your father.”

Pavlović darts out from behind the tree, and then a fuck-ton of shots are fired between us.

Bullets rattle his body, and he drops to his knees, blood spurting from his mouth in a cough. I keep my weapon trained on him as I walk closer.

A smile spreads over Pavlović's face. "I won't be going alone."

Too late, I see the detonation device in his hand.

It's not an armored vest.

Christ.

I turn around and run for Mariya, shouting, "Down, baby! Get down."

"Luca!" she screams, darting toward me.

A wave of heat blasts into my back as I grab hold of Mariya and dive over a low wall with her. A second. That's all I have before debris flies everywhere, bricks from the wall slamming into me.

I cover Mariya, not feeling the pain immediately.

A hissing sound fills my ears, and disorientated, I lift my head, glancing around us as burning leaves and bark rain down on us.

I push myself up, the movement jarring my body. It feels like my back was shredded.

Not thinking of myself, I search my wife's body for any wounds. When I'm sure she's okay, I sit flat on my ass, sucking in deep breaths of air.

People come out of their homes, the owner of the house where we took cover gaping at us with wide eyes.

Mariya lets out a shocked burst of laughter, shakes her head, then focuses her eyes on me. Her lips part, a gasp tearing from her.

She darts up and crouches behind me. “Jesus. Jesus. Jesus.”

“I’m okay.” My back hurts like a fucking bitch.

“The armored vest has been shredded,” she tells me before she starts to peel it from my torso. I feel her hand brush over my back, then her arms wrap around me, and she presses her face into the back of my neck.

I take it as a good sign. If I were hurt badly, she’d be screaming my head off right now.

Climbing to my feet, I groan, pretty sure the force of the blast cracked a rib or two. “Come, baby, we have to move.”

Mariya glances around us, then quickly picks up our guns before gluing herself to my side.

As if nothing happened, we walk away from the scene.

“I guess that means we can’t come to the Netherlands again,” she mutters as she checks over her shoulder.

“Nah, I’ll pay a couple of people to cover it up.”

“Oh, good. There was still a lot I wanted to see.”

I chuckle, then flinch.

“I saw that!” She starts to inspect me while we’re heading over the hill.

“I think I broke a rib. Or two.”

She lifts my shirt, making sure I’m not wounded, before saying, “You feel fine otherwise?”

“Yeah, just banged up.” As we near the SUV, I ask, “How are you liking your honeymoon?”

Mariya grins up at me. “Dodging bullets and killing our enemies? It wouldn’t be our lives if it were any different.”

I tug her closer and press a kiss to her mouth. It quickly grows wild until we’re devouring each other in front of the motel for all to see.

Another enemy is dead.

With my wife by my side, we’ll face whoever else comes at us. We’ll win every time, and together we’ll rule.

Epilogue

Mariya

Three months later...

Holy shit.

I blink at the monitor, not processing what the doctor said.

Luca is just as shocked as I am as he asks, “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” Dr. Matthews points at the screen. “Those are two heartbeats.”

Twins.

We’re having twins.

“But...” I frown. “There’s no history of twins in our families.”

Not that I know of.

“You’re having identical twins. One egg split into two. The odds are one in two-hundred-and-fifty.”

Slowly I look at Luca. His eyes meet mine, and a second later, his hands frame my face, and he kisses the ever-loving shit out of me, not caring about the doctor.

When he lifts his head, he whispers, “Christ, two babies.”

“We wanted two kids,” I mention. Not at once, but what the hell, we’ll be fine.

He kisses me again, then peppers the doctor with questions.

We only stay a couple of minutes longer before we leave, both silent as we walk to the G-Wagon.

Once we're seated in the vehicle and Luca drives us home, I mutter, "So much for taking turns getting up."

"Right." It looks like he's still in shock.

"I'm hiring a nanny. If they start crying at the same time, I'll have a panic attack. Who would I pick up first?"

"We'll get a nanny. Let's just process the news, then we'll plan everything."

Unlike me, Luca needs time to absorb our new reality.

"Okay," I murmur, my right hand brushing over my baby bump.

I have two little beating hearts inside me.

My lips curve up. "If they're both boys, we can call them Lucian and Alexei."

"What if they're girls?"

I think for a moment. "Alexis and ... shit, what sounds like Lucian?"

"Lucinda?"

"Hell no," I mutter.

"Lucy?"

"Nope." Pulling out my phone, I start Googling names. "Oooh, Lucien is the female form of Lucian. It means light. Also, Lucienne."

Luca doesn't look impressed, then he asks, "What about Elena and Isabella? We name boys after our fathers and girls after our mothers."

A smile splits over my face. "Yes! That will be perfect."

"It's a pity we couldn't find out the sex today," Luca mentions.

"I don't mind. I'll decorate the nursery in white and yellow. Neutral colors."

Luca pulls the G-Wagon into the parking bay, then turns off the engine. A minute later, when we walk into our apartment, he asks, "What do you want for lunch, babe?"

"Stupid question," I chuckle.

"Right. Vegetable bake it is."

I can't stomach meat at the moment and have been craving vegetables like crazy.

I take up my usual spot by the counter and watch my man prepare our food.

Watching him cook is one of my favorite things to do. And, of course, when he's in action mode. All badass and ruthless.

Sigh.

"I need some tender, loving care."

Luca drops the knife and hauls me off the stool. My butt hits the counter, and my legs are shoved open.

"What my wife wants, my wife gets."

Luca

Six months later...

Mariya's amazed me a lot over the past year we've been married, but fuck, having her carry our children and giving birth to them... I have no words.

We're both staring at our baby boys. Lucian Viktor Cotroni and Alexei Demitri Cotroni. We obviously named them after the most important men in our lives.

Watching our boys sleep, I'm filled with emotions so powerful, all I can do is go with the wave constantly crashing in my chest.

Now I know how my father felt when he looked at me for the first time.

Unconditional love.

"I can't tell them apart," I mutter. "I'm going to keep confusing their names."

Mariya points to the crib on the left. "Lucian, and that's Alexei."

"How do you know?"

"Lucian's birthmark is rounder than Alexei's."

I stare at the feint brown mark on each of their forearms, and then I see the slight difference. "Thank fuck."

The door to the private hospital room opens, and our parents come in. Our mothers head straight for the sleeping babies while my father comes to hug me.

Uncle Alexei wraps Mariya up in his arms.

“Congratulations, son,” Dad murmurs as he pulls away, looking at me with pride.

I rub a hand over my chest, the sharp ache of love hitting again as my eyes keep bouncing between my sons.

“It’s overwhelming at first,” Dad says.

“Yeah.”

“At first, you watch them so they won’t get hurt. Then you watch them in awe as they develop. Once their adults, you watch them with respect as they become the men they were meant to be.”

I lock eyes with Dad before yanking him into another hug.

“What did you name them?” My mother asks.

I move closer so I can see their birthmarks, then gesture at each of my sons. “This is Lucian, and that’s Alexei.”

Both men are instantly overcome with emotions, looking with pride at their grandsons.

We all dote over our newborns until it’s time for their first feed.

I clear the room out with a promise they can visit again later.

“Who do I feed first?” Mariya asks the nurse that came in to assist.

“You feed them both at once,” the nurse chuckles, picking up Lucian to place in Mariya’s right arm. When she has Alexei nestled against her, as well, the nurse helps the boys to latch onto their mother.

“There we go,” the nurse says before settling her gaze on me. “Make sure your wife drinks lots of fluids while breastfeeding. She’ll get very thirsty.”

I nod and step closer to the bedside table to pour a glass of water for Mariya. “Just say when you want a sip, baby.”

“Uh-huh.” She lets out a quivering breath, her eyes flitting between our sons as they drink from her.

“You okay?”

“Just emotional.”

Leaning over her, I press a kiss to her temple, then hold the glass in front of her lips. “Drink. I don’t want them sucking you dry.”

She lets out a soft chuckle. “Pretty sure that’s not possible.”

I watch as she drinks half the glass, then I place it down on the table. I brush my hand over my sons’ tiny heads, and sitting down on the side of the bed, I lock eyes with my wife.

“Thank you.”

“For?”

“Making all my dreams come true.” I push a couple of wild strands behind her ear. “For choosing me.”

“There wasn’t much of a choice to be made. You were it for me.”

Careful not to bump our babies, I lean closer and steal a tender kiss from Mariya. “*Ti amo, mia moglie.*”

“I love you too, *mio marito.*”

The End.

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