



Daddy's
HIT LIST

A. N. STAUBER
MAE MALONE

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 Created with Vellum

*For the Christmas cookie lovers... We all deserve to be locked
in a cabin with a bakers wet dream of an oven. Noel and
Tomas are waiting for you with a buffet of sweets...*

*For the grinchies this season... May your wine glass never
empty and the batteries never die. Now it's time to come to the
jolly side this holiday season.*

Happy Ho-ho-ho-lidays!

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Foreword

Cover by Joe Satoria

Edited by A.N. Stauber

eBook formatting by M. Bonnet

Blur

Noel:

How does a late night testing recipes for the NYC Christmas Cookie Crumble-thon turn into getting kidnapped by a mobster? One minute, I'm comparing frostings. The next, I'm witnessing a murder.

As I stare down the barrel of a gun, the handsome, mysterious hitman tells me to go with him or else he'll shoot me. I have no choice but to listen, because there's no way my son can survive without me—I'm all he has.

Tomas:

I hate it when they run. My target owes a quarter mil to the Russian mob. He thinks he can get away. They all do. But they always pay in blood.

When I chase him into an alley behind a bakery, I can't bring myself to dispose of the only witness to my crime. Something draws me to him, and instead of adding him to my hit list, I take him home with me to protect him. Because now both our lives are on the line.

Before Reading:

Daddy' Hit List is a dual first person POV co-written gay Christmas romance by A.N. Stauber and M. Bonnet writing as Mae Malone, her mafia romance alter ego. It's a fluffy dark, humorous holiday romance. This is NOT a clean romance. We do NOT condone any situations or actions that take place in this fictional story. **This book includes but is not limited to:**

Fluffy-dark mafia themes, humor, Christmas vibes, insta-love, possessive hero, sweet single dad, force proximity, abduction, spanking, daddy/boy role playing, and violence.

One



Noel

My phone's timer blares through the kitchen, reminding me that my third test batch of cookies is done cooling. I pluck a cookie off the rack and take a careful bite.

"Hmmm," I muse. "I don't think I put enough vanilla in this batch." I take another bite, carefully chewing the crunchy cookie in an effort to identify each flavor. The warm, spicy vanilla. Mellow brown sugar. Bitter-sweet chocolate. The rich, butteriness of the walnuts. The balance from the flaky sea salt.

It tastes so good, but something is missing...

"Noel, what's with the frown? What can possibly be wrong with this batch? I'm sure you put enough nuts in there. Ya know, because you like nuts," my younger brother, Valentino laughs. He swipes a couple of cookies and gobbles them down one after the other. A warm, gooey chocolate chunk falls and smears on his uniform.

Yes, our parents were *that* unoriginal. They named me Noel because I was born on Christmas Eve, and Valentino was born the day before Valentine's Day.

I throw a cookie at him, which he catches and inhales. I'm not even sure if he finished chewing this one first. The heathen, who has no taste for the finer confections in life, has crumbs all over him. As long as he has sweets in his life, he's

happy. Packaged cookies from the store would be just as good. No taste, no palette.

After I'm done grimacing at how disgusting he is as he chews with his mouth open, I pack some up in a container for him.

"Ha, ha, ha. How original. The bi guy liking nuts. You should quit at the precinct, and pursue comedy."

"Nah, bro. Crime never sleeps, and someone has to watch over the city of New York," he says in a mock raspy superhero voice as he touches his badge. "You sure you don't want a ride home? I don't mind hanging around for a few hours."

It's already 10pm, and I know he's on morning shift tomorrow. I hate to inconvenience him. I'm so close to figuring out what's missing. As much as I appreciate his offer, I turn him down. "No, I have more work to do, but I'll make sure to lock up."

"You sure, bro? The holiday season brings out all the crazies. Not like the bag ladies and the street preachers yelling at you to find Jesus. I'm talking about desperate muggers, gangs of roving teenagers, and people who are dangerous."

He's so dramatic. "Val, I live three blocks away. I'll be fine getting home. You have to wake up early. So why don't you lay off the sugar and turn in for the night?"

He sighs, taking his box of cookies and the donuts he packaged up for himself earlier. After crushing me in a vise hug, he makes his way to the door. "Remember to lock up on your way out, okay. Promise you'll text me when you're home?"

Val means well, but ever since our mother's old apartment got robbed, he takes safety to a whole new level. He installed cameras at all the entrances of the store, upgraded the lock to a keypad one, and placed panic buttons in the kitchen and the front. "Yeah, I promise you'll get a text when I'm home."

"See you and my favorite girl tomorrow!" he yells on his way out.

I spend hours in the kitchen, trying to come up with the perfect cookie recipe for the Christmas Cookie Crumble-thon, the biggest annual baking competition in New York City. Professional bakers from all over the city and surrounding suburbs compete every year for the grand prize of \$50,000 and an hour-long special on the Fresh Network.

The first four years I participated, I didn't place. Every year I hustled harder and researched until I finally created a recipe to be proud of. Last year I got third place. Placing in the competition attracted enough business that Anisette and I were finally able to get an apartment of our own a few blocks over from here. We spent the past few years living in my mom's spare room in her tiny apartment while I got on my feet with my bakery, Sugar & Spice.

Now she can have her own space with enough room to live. My beautiful Ani deserves the world, and it took way too long to give it to her.

With thoughts of my girl swirling through my heart, I bake off almost a dozen different doughs I made the night before. After tasting a cookie from each one, I realize that none of them hit the mark. They're either too soft, or too crunchy. Some of them are way too sweet, while others taste too plain. One of them is so bad that I toss the entire batch into the trash. Aside from making notes on what I can do differently, there's not much I can do until I can make more dough tomorrow.

When I check my phone, it's already two in the morning. *Fuck*. Ani is going to be up bright and early, and she'll want to see me in the morning.

I shut the ovens down. Cleaning up the prep areas takes forever—there's flour everywhere, including my hair and brows. Even though the cookies aren't good enough for the competition, they're still sellable. They just don't have that spark I need to grab the grand prize. I package them up into grab and go cookie trays and vow to try again tomorrow.

After washing the trays, returning the frostings to the refrigerator, and wiping all the surfaces down, I'm tuckered out. I run this place alone, so there's no one else to pick up the

slack or do the dirtier chores. Eventually, I'll hire employees when I have the budget, whenever that is.

I'm barely paying attention when I bring the garbage to the dumpster in the alley behind the shop. As I reach the back door, I hear rustling outside and the clank of metal. It's probably the raccoon that lives out there and ruffles through the dumpster. I named her Trash Panda, because she's always eating stale sweets out of my dumpster. She's a sweetie, but I wish she'd move on and make a mess somewhere else.

"Get out of here little Trash Panda!" I shout as I open the door.

Except when I open the door, it's not a raccoon making all of that noise outside. It's a tall, stark man in a peacoat. He's tall, towering over me like a god on earth. His dark brown hair and beard contrasts to his stone cold, black eyes. Those little black holes stare into my own, probing right through to my soul. He's shrouded in a light shadow from the streetlight, which makes his grimace that much more severe. The tattoos on his knuckles stand out because his hand is wrapped around a gun...that he's aiming at another man who's cowering against the dumpster, covering his head with his arms as he grovels to be spared.

"C-C-Collector, please!" he cries, his snot and tears mingling as they run down his haggard face. "I can get you the money, I just need more time. P-please, give me more time!"

He breaks eye contact with me, switching his intense focus onto his victim.

"You've had enough time, and my hands are tied. This is what happens when you don't pay your debts, Dimitri. *Do svidaniya.*" His voice is raspy, deep. It reminds me of what dark chocolate would sound like.

A loud bang sounds throughout the alleyway, and the man's head explodes against the plastic dumpster. Bits and pieces of him fly everywhere. Some even hit my building. I'm frozen in place, breathing heavily as I try to understand what just happened.

That man—Dimitri—was in the alley. Now he's dead. There's a dead man in my alley, behind my store.

The gunman clears his throat, putting his gun into a holster on his belt. He takes a few steps toward me, with his arm outstretched. He's talking, but my ears are ringing, so I can't hear him. My mouth is dry, making it impossible to scream for help.

If he shot that man, what's to stop him from hurting me? I'm all Ani has....

He keeps advancing on me, step by step. My body finally unlocks, and I bolt, running back into my bakery. I'm a few feet away from the door that separates the front of the shop from the back area. My heart is hammering as I think of the worst case scenario. *Never getting to see my girl again...her being alone, without me...* My hand closes over the doorknob, but before I can open the door, I feel strong arms wrap around me and haul me backward.

“Slow down, my runner. We have a few things to talk about.”

Two



Tomas

My next victim kicks and claws against my hold in an attempt to free himself from his fate. I ignore his feeble attempts and drag him from the front of the shop back toward the alley. This part is always exhausting. Not because of the physical demand it takes to restrain a fighter. No, that's nothing for me anymore. Not when I do it daily. Years of practice, training, and experience make it simple to subdue a clawing wannabe tiger.

It's draining because of the screams, the false hope they have that they'll get free, and the denial that this is the end. It makes people do some stupid shit. Like cry, or offer sex for their life. Or beg. Dimitri begged. As if I could have mercy on lying sacks of shit who forget to clear their debt with the Bratva.

I don't make the decisions, I only follow through on the order of the Brotherhood. If they require your death, then death is what you'll get.

By my hands.

Dimitri was no exception. He owed, he didn't pay, I took his life. The only little hiccup is the green-eyed firefly now in my clutches. The answer should be simple. *Kill him.* But those pretty little lips seem to be my downfall. He caught my curiosity when he stepped out of the back of a shop muttering about trash pandas. His sweet innocence was so evident in the

way he stared at me with horror that I couldn't do what needed to be done.

He has a wholesome quality I want to strip from him. The thought of those O-shaped lips stretching around the thickness of my cock is clouding my judgment. I desperately need to feel the clamping of his throat while I shove so deep inside of his hot mouth that he's choking and begging me for the same mercy that Dimitri had.

I'd give it to him. I'd give my altruism, but only if he earned it. The difference between the two men? One is an innocent, and the other a sinner.

I know that there will be consequences for keeping him alive. But something deep inside me refuses to see him dead. I'll pay the price for sparing him, and that makes me want to puke. I shove it down, deep inside of me. Assassins don't vomit because of anxiety. We bottle that shit up and pull the fucking trigger.

"Ani. I need to get home to Ani," my little runner says, his hands trying to claw at my face.

I ignore him, shoving him through the door he came out of. A sweet sugary scent fills my nostrils when the heavy metal bangs shut. I press my nose into his hair, inhale the sweet scent, and let out a sigh of satisfaction. He smells like pure innocence. This man has probably never seen the bad in this horrible world. He's probably never witnessed someone being harmed or even fallen victim to a crime himself.

And that's saying something when we're currently sitting in one of the worst areas in the Bronx. When I've made it through a hallway, I release my catch of the evening. He falls before me on his knees, and peers up with precious green irises that remind me of the promise of spring. His smooth-shaven face has deep dimples and a cut jawline. His blond hair is tied in a low bun. He's an angel, even if he has no wings and isn't smiling.

Christmas music plays from a stereo, and I glance around to see the tiny area of a bakery. The cases are filled with cookies, cakes, loaves, and a variety of sweet desserts. None

of them look like the Russian sweets I grew up with. A whimper tears through the silence, and I focus on my little baker again.

A look of sheer terror fills his cherubic face. His fear is so...*beautiful*. So real. Something inside me shifts as he babbles, trying to save himself.

“*Ani*. I can’t leave her. Please. I need to get home. I promise. I promise I won’t say anything. I don’t know you. Just let me go home. Please. I’ll do anything. *Anything*. Let me go. Ani, Ani, Ani...” The name leaves his lips over and over in a soft whisper, a mantra to keep him going, no doubt.

I’m not sure who this Ani is, but I’ve decided she’s dead. I’ll find her and off her. *He’s mine. I don’t share.*

Mine.

I push aside that possessive thought with a slight shake of my head. *Clean this mess up and get the fuck out of here.* I pull out my phone and send a text for a clean-up crew to get rid of the corpse in the alley.

“Please,” he continues, frantic sobs pulling from his chest.

He’s so pretty when he cries, and that makes my dick throb with the yearning desire to shove his mouth full of me.

“What do you want? I don’t have much. I’m barely making ends meet. But I’ll give you anything.” He interrupts my dirty thoughts with more crying.

What a dangerous proposition to make to a man like me. He’ll give me *anything*? I can think of a few things I would take from him, the first being his moans and groans of pleasure when I eventually bend him over the counter and take his sweet ass. *All in good time.*

“Shh,” I croon. I reach for his chin and tug his gaze toward me. “What is your name?”

“N-N-Noel.”

Noel. How fitting for my innocent little baker boy. “Noel,” I repeat in a soft whisper, trying it out on my tongue.

He swallows. I wet my lips, my gaze traveling down his body to take in just how fucking gorgeous he is.

“Yeah. Noel,” he says, his head nodding up and down frantically.

My grip on his chin tightens, holding him firmly so that his firefly eyes don’t leave mine. “I won’t hurt you, Noel. At least, if you do what I say.”

“I will. I promise.”

I smirk. He’s so agreeable—submissive. It makes the beast deep inside me growl and claw at its chain to see just how far I can push his submissiveness. *Yeah, I’m going to keep him.* “Get your things. We’re going home.”

He gapes up at me, mouth flopping with uncertainty. Then, he nods and scrambles to his feet. “Home. Y-You’re letting me go?”

“Oh, *malysh.*” I chuckle, shaking my head. I reach for the winter coat hanging on a rack when he doesn’t make a move for it.

His entire body stiffens when I approach him and help him into the jacket. I zip it up, then squeeze his shoulders. A soft whimper escapes him. The sweet noises he makes are already intoxicating. I imagine my mouth claiming his and drinking up every sound. I bet he tastes as sweet as the treats he bakes in this shop.

“Let me make something clear for you, Noel,” I say. Satisfaction fills my veins as he nods. “When we go outside, you’ll walk in front of me. You’ll climb into the passenger seat of my car without a fight. If you struggle, I’ll blow your brains all over the street just as I did to Dimitri.”

He stares at me, wide-eyed, another squeak leaving him. “I won’t. I swear.”

I study him for a moment, and though I see nothing but honesty in those pretty eyes, I still don’t fully trust him. People do stupid things when they’re forced into fight-or-flight situations. And being held hostage by a Russian assassin is definitely one of those.

Noel listens. He doesn't run despite his uncontrollable shaking as he walks past the dead man in the alleyway, and when he reaches the getaway car, I don't miss the way he flattens his hand against the trunk to leave his fingerprints behind.

When he's situated in the car, I take my gloved hand and wipe the handprint away. As if I'd be stupid enough to let him leave any traces of himself behind. I'll punish him for that. Spank his tight ass until I've marked it red and he can barely sit.

Irrationality leaves the second I start the car. Rule number one of murder. Take the victim to a secondary site.

I should be taking him to one of our warehouses. Or out of the city and toward the Adirondacks. Not to one of my homes. Why do I have this overwhelming urge to see him in my personal space, amongst my things? I want to keep him for myself, so I head out of the Bronx, onto Washington Bridge, and head for my cabin in the Catskills.

Three



Noel

The further away from the city we drive, the more intense my panic gets, bubbling inside me at a rolling boil—moments away from overflowing. We're on a desolate road, in the middle of the woods somewhere. I feel warm as my sweat gathers at my brow. The doors and roof of the car seem to be closing in on me and I'm moments away from climbing out the window, even though the car is still moving.

What about my Ani? What will she do without me? She needs me.

Every time I try to speak, I clam up. The hulking, silent man in the driver's seat is terrifying. His sleek, designer suit, hand tattoos, and Russian accent scream *mobster*. So do his dead eyes and the deep scowl on his face. My gaze drops to the gun holstered under his arm, and I remember how lethal my captor is. The way he shot that man in the alley plays over and over in my mind as he takes me deeper into the woods.

He may be handsome with a square jaw, dark brown eyes, and chiseled cheeks, but that doesn't fool me. I'm under no illusion of safety—this man can end me in a split second, for whatever reason he chooses. And I don't even know his name.

I watched a crime special with my mom once, and the cop being interviewed said that if you're captured, it's best to connect with your captor. You need to make yourself seem like a real person so it's harder to kill you.

Maybe if I try to talk to him, he'll let me go?

“Ummm, what’s your name?” I practically whisper, my nerves crackling like a live wire.

He glances at me, his face expressionless. Readjusting his hand on the steering wheel, he takes several moments to answer me, as if he’s debating with himself whether or not he wants to tell me.

“Collector.”

A man of many words it seems...

He focuses on the road again, one hand gripping the steering wheel and the other resting on the center console. Even through his coat, I can see the outline of his muscled biceps. Most likely from all his illicit activities. He’s so relaxed and confident in himself, like he regularly abducts innocent bakers on a Tuesday night. The thought makes me sick. Will he hurt me? The woods are thick around us, and no one is out here. I can totally see him dropping my dead body in a shallow grave nearby when he kills me.

Finally, I find my voice. “Where are we going?”

“The Catskills,” he replies, with no further elaboration.

“Well, Collector, I love the w-w-woods—” I stutter, trying hard not to choke on my own fear, “But I need to go home. I have people who depend on me... My girl, my mom, my brother. My friends. The customers who come to the shop every day...”

He sneers, and stops the car in the middle of the road abruptly, causing my back to hit the seat. There’s no one behind us, and the only light comes from his high beams and the stars above. His anger, evident in his drawn brows and scowl, radiates through the car, and I stare at the floor, too scared to look at him. He reaches across the seat, and takes my chin in a bruising grip, forcing me to lock eyes with him. His dead eyes light up, a fire burning within them. A warmth I don’t understand spreads through me. My stomach knots with a heavy feeling that isn’t fear over what will happen next... I can’t explain it, but it’s intense and confusing.

He's my captor...so why is he making me feel so flushed and uncomfortable?

"Too bad for them. You're mine now, *malysh*. Get used to it," he growls.

His? What does he mean by *his*? I would ask, but I'm too tongue-tied to string words together.

We start driving again, and I contemplate what he could possibly mean as I stare out the window at the passing trees. Eventually, the car slows and we turn down a private drive. The trees clear as we continue down the long, narrow road, which leads to a beautiful two-story cabin. The windows are decorated with holly wreaths and a lone candle each. All the scene needs is a fresh coat of snow and it would look like something out of a Christmas story. It's not something I envision Mr. Russian Mobster residing in.

He parks the car in a garage on the side of the cabin, then turns to look at me. His hand rests on the handle of his gun, a clear threat. This man murdered someone in cold blood in my alleyway. I know he wouldn't hesitate to end me if I put even a single toe out of line.

"You're going to stay in the car, and I'll come around to get you. There will be consequences if you try to run. Then we'll go into the house and discuss the rules."

After he opens my car door, he grabs my arm, roughly hauling me out onto my feet. He keeps a tight hold on me as he maneuvers us through the door at the back of the three-car garage, into the house. It's gorgeous. When I look up, I see a high chapel ceiling with exposed beams. The walls are smoothed wood, with large windows that would let in beautiful natural light in the daytime. The furniture is sparse but cozy—two large, toffee-colored leather couches and a beautiful cream fabric chair. A fuzzy blanket is draped over the back of the far couch. I momentarily imagine myself snuggled underneath it while a roaring fire burns in the fireplace across from it, reading a book... Until I remember that this man abducted me. After murdering a man in my alleyway. And he thinks I'm staying here as his prisoner.

“You have a beautiful home.”

“*We* have a beautiful home,” he corrects me. “Let me show you the kitchen.”

Before I can remind him that I, in fact, don’t live here and have people who need me back in the Bronx, he tugs me into a gorgeous professional-level kitchen. All the appliances are stainless steel, with black marble countertops. Its open-concept plan includes an island with seating and a dining table in a nook that has a sliding door to an outside seating area. The double oven and eight burner range are straight out of the kitchen of my dreams.

Collector’s rough fingertips find my jaw and push it up, closing it. “I thought you’d like it. Open the fridge,” he purrs in his gravelly Russian accent.

The fridge is stocked with fresh food, and the pantry next to it has staples and baking supplies. I’m speechless. I grew up with a single mom who worked hard to make ends meet but never had an abundance of food like this, even as an adult. My eyes burn as I try to blink away tears.

“Don’t cry *malysh*, you can make whatever you want, whenever you want. After you have some rest, you can make us some brunch,” he comforts me. His smooth voice calms me somewhat until I actually think about what he said.

After you’ve had some rest... I can’t sleep here. Ani is at home—*my* home—and she needs me. I can’t just leave her back in the Bronx, waiting for me to come home. It’s just us...I’m all she has.

“Collector, I can’t stay here. I need to get home, Ani—” Before I can finish, he grabs me by my shoulders, hauling my body against his with lightning speed. He backs me up against the counter and loosely collars my throat, pinning me in place.

“Yes, you can. You’re mine now, little baker. This is your home, and you’ll make yourself comfortable because you will not be going back. Ever.” The threat in his voice is clear. He really wants me to stay here, forever. In his home, away from Ani.

I try to wriggle free of him, but his grip on my throat tightens. His leg comes between my own, his thick thigh cramming into the space. My groin rubs against it as I try to free myself from his hold, making my dick hard as a rock. What the fudge is wrong with me—I'm actually getting turned on struggling against this Russian mob monster.

He takes my hair tie out, fisting my hair close to the scalp as he tips my head back. We look at each other for a moment before he takes my mouth in a brutal kiss. When our lips touch, it feels as if the whole room is tilting. My whole body vibrates with need as his soft lips take my own in a forceful and claiming display of dominance, exactly how a man like him should kiss. I stop struggling and melt into him.

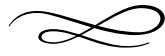
His tongue dances with my own, and electricity courses through my body. I whimper as he trails his lips down my jaw, to the column of my neck.

“I love the sounds you make, *malysh*. They're only for me,” he whispers in my ear. He peppers kisses, making his way back to my mouth. He bites my bottom lip, and I groan.

Then he pulls back, looking at me with wide eyes, pupils blown into big, black orbs.

I think I may be getting some early-onset Stockholm syndrome because I'm falling for my kidnapper.

Four



Tomas

Noel's mouth tastes just as sweet as he smells. His lips are soft, pliant like a half-baked cookie, so easily shaped for my pleasure. I didn't want to break the kiss. I'd wanted to take things further, but my little runner is still shaking like a leaf.

So, despite the deep desire burning within me, I force myself to pull away from him but not before biting down on his bottom lip. He whimpers when I release my grip on his shirt. His eyes snap closed, and I sense the turmoil of emotions fluttering through him.

I may be a murderer, but I'm not delusional even if the actions of the last few hours have erred on the side of insane. Okay, yeah I kidnapped a man. But he witnessed me killing for the Bratva. The way I see it, I saved him the trip to his early grave. He should be thanking me, begging me to keep him locked away in this luxurious cabin where he can bake to his heart's content. Instead, he keeps asking to return back to *Ani*.

If I let him return home to her, the Bratva will only have him killed once they realize what he witnessed. Even if I refuse them, they'll kill me then send someone else to do it.

White, hot rage surges through me at the thought of him with someone else. It's in his best interest to never bring *her* up again. Each time he does, my patience for whatever relationship he has with the woman withers into smaller

fragments. He'll have to stop mentioning her before I completely lose it.

I head for the cabinet above my elaborate coffee setup and pull out two mugs, filling mine halfway with Stolis. Glancing over my shoulder, I give my hostage a once-over. Something tells me he doesn't soothe his nerves with alcohol. While I make myself a hot coffee to mix with the vodka, I also steam some milk for him.

He remains frozen, staring at me intently while I prepare hot chocolate for him by dropping some of the cocoa powder into the milk. Then I hand him the cup, watching as he slowly takes a seat at the island. I remain standing across from him. His pupils are blown, body tense as he looks anywhere but directly into my eyes. He's still skittish, unconvinced that he is safe with me.

"This cabin sits on 150 acres. You won't come across civilization if you try to escape, so don't." I pause, bringing the mug to my lips.

A grin spreads across my face at the thought of chasing my little baker through the heavy treebanks. He'd be easy to find, the scent of his fear palpable, and the sound of his heavy breaths and whimpers would call to me. The hunt for my prey has always made me rock hard. Call me fucked up, but killing for a living for someone like me is like constantly popping a Viagra. I'm always rearing and ready to go after a blood spill. The messier it is, the more turned on I get. And the sight of Dimitri's brains splattered against the wall of Noel's bakery made my aching cock twitch beneath the thin fabric of my trousers.

"I'll enjoy chasing you, *malysh*. And I'll fuck you wherever I find you," I tell him.

His eyes widen with the threat and he gulps down his hot chocolate. I watch the way his throat bobs, the way his body is still stiff, still on edge. Then, my gaze drifts lower until it reaches the bulge in his pants, and a sigh of relief escapes me.

He enjoyed the kiss too.

I wet my lips, the taste of his mouth still there. “The house is yours. My office is in the library. You’re free to roam about, but if I’m in there with the doors closed, you must come back later.”

He watches me intently as I round the island. I grab his hand and tug him from the chair. He doesn’t fight me despite how hard his heart pounds beneath the delicate layers of bone, muscle, and flesh. I could easily slice him open and take him apart, but the thought doesn’t appease me like it normally does.

Maybe I’m growing tired of torture and death. Or maybe somewhere buried deep beneath the monster I’m beginning to find my conscience again. Perhaps the goodness in me hasn’t completely died and it has only been in a deep, deep sleep.

I lead Noel toward the window in the living space. The fire beside us crackles. Olga knew I’d be coming here tonight after work. It’s why the fridge had been stocked, why the fire was lit when we came home. Her cabin is in the distance, toward the back of the property so it’s not easily seen from the road.

“That house is Olga’s. She manages the property and is the reason the house is so homey. In the morning I’ll introduce you. If you need anything at all, you’ll let her know. She’ll go into town tomorrow and get you clothes or whatever else you need,” I say.

I turn my attention back to the view outside. The mountainscape is always a soothing sight, but even more so at night when it’s illuminated by the moon and stars. The wheels in my mind begin to turn. I’ve never kidnapped someone before, so I’m not sure how exactly to handle this. It’s not possible to keep Noel locked up here forever. He’ll have to come out at some point. *Once I’ve trained him to be compliant, and he’s not a flight risk.* Faking his death is probably not the best way to go about this.

He’s mine, and I want the world to know it. I loved the way he struggled beneath me in the kitchen, and I plan to have him naked and writhing, begging for me to take his sweet mouth

and ass. Oddly enough, the thought of him baking for me and feeding me makes me harder than granite. *I need to come.*

“My family. If I’m not at breakfast, they’ll know something is wrong. They’ll come looking for me.” Noel’s smooth voice breaks through my thoughts.

“They won’t find you.”

“*Please,*” he whispers. His arms fold over his chest, and he slumps over, closing in on himself.

The longing in his voice, the desperation, it tugs at my heart, and for once in my life I feel *something*. I don’t like the ache inside of me that comes with his sadness.

I sigh, already knowing this is a horrible decision, but nod anyway. “You’ll call them and tell them you’ve been seeing someone. That he picked you up and surprised you with a trip.”

“And if they ask about when I’ll be home?”

My teeth grind. When will he get it? He’s not going anywhere. “You are home, *malysh*. Stop saying that.”

“No,” he shakes his head. “My *home* is in the Bronx with my mother, my brother, and my girl.”

Fuck Ani. “Enough,” I shout, slamming my fist against the window. “We’ll discuss this tomorrow.”

Noel jumps beside me, a strangled noise coming from his throat. *Fuck, I’ve scared him.* Tomorrow. I’ll fix this tomorrow. I’m too horny and tired to deal with this now. “I’ll show you to our room.”

He follows me upstairs and down the hall to my bedroom. I show him around the large space. The main closet is off to the right and leads into a spacious bathroom fit with a double vanity, a claw foot bathtub, and a walk-in shower. The shower is my favorite place in the entire home. It’s got an overhead rainfall showerhead, pebbled flooring, and double-paned glass windows that allow you to look over the mountainside.

“Whoa,” Noel whispers beside me, stepping inside. He walks up to the window and presses his hands to the glass.

“This view is amazing.”

I step behind him, resting my chin on his shoulder. A low hum of desire escapes me, and I place my hands around his wrists, pinning him in place. “I’m going to fuck you like this.” I scrape my teeth around his neck.

That sweet holiday cookie smell swirls around me. It’s so uniquely *him*. I shove my groin into his ass. “When the snowfall is heavy, and the afternoon sun is gleaming down. You can take in the scenic view while I claim your tight ass as mine.”

His eyelids fall, long lashes sweeping against the glass, and when his mouth falls open, I slide my thumb inside, cupping his jaw with a finger. I don’t have to direct him, there are no orders or threats. He just wraps those soft lips around me and sucks. *Hard*. His tongue swirls around the digit inside of him, teeth clamping down to hold me in place.

“Such a good boy for Daddy.”

“Yes,” he pants, his hot breath fogging up the glass.

“I’ll take care of you, *malysh*. You’ll never have to worry about anything. Just let me.”

“Yes.”

I press my groin into his backside, allowing the friction to ease my swollen dick for just a moment before I step back. “Get undressed.”

He obeys, slowly taking each item off one by one. My gaze rakes over him, enjoying the show. I take his clothes, stepping out of the shower to undress myself. When I step back in, I turn on the water, letting it spray over us. Noel’s body is perfect, with a small patch of blonde hair on his chest, and a faint smattering on his arms and legs. His arms are toned, and the muscle around his pecs is lean, but there.

I drop my mouth to his chest and take a nipple between my teeth. He lets out a cry, a hand falling to clutch my hair. He holds me close to him while I continue to play—kissing, biting, and licking one hardened bud while my fingers pinch the other.

The velvet steel of his erection shoves into my stomach, his hips thrusting into me every time my teeth clamp down in a feverish bite. His mewling sounds dance through the air, spurring me on to bite him harder. My baker enjoys his pain, and I love to give it. The sounds he makes as his breath becomes ragged have my chest pushing out in pride.

“Look at you, my dirty boy. You’re a fucking mess for Daddy. I bet if I tortured you long enough, you’d come without your dick ever being touched.”

His fingers tug in my hair. “*Please*,” he gasps.

“Please what?” I trail my tongue along his chest, toward his neck until I reach his jaw. “Please keep torturing your tight nipples? Please wrap my lips around your cock? Please stuff your tight little ass? Tell me what you need, and I’ll give it to you.”

“I-I-I need to come. Please, Daddy. Suck my cock.”

Fuuuck me. No one’s ever actually called me that in bed before, and the sound of his pleas to come followed by *Daddy*? I’m surprised I’m not the one creaming already. I drop to my knees, ready to take him inside of me, because I meant what I said. I’ll give Noel whatever he wants, all he has to do is ask.

Anything to make him stay.

My fist wraps around the beautiful, veiny cock before me, pumping him slowly. He twitches against my touch, and like the greedy boy he is, begins to fuck my fist in a desperate attempt to get himself off.

I rest my forearm against his stomach to pin him against the wall. “Hold still, *malysh*.”

“Oh fuck,” he groans when I lap at a bead of precum dripping from the tip.

I lick him again, drawing circles around the slit before taking him deep inside of me. My throat clamps around him when I reach the base of his shaft, and then I hollow out my cheeks and suck him hard, deep, fast. I take all of him,

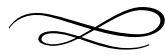
cupping his balls, and holding him in place so I can take him how I want.

“I’m close,” he pants when I dip a finger back to press against the entrance of his ass. I don’t slide inside, just apply enough pressure that it helps tip him over the edge.

Thick, hot spurts of cum coat the back of my throat. He’s salty and sultry and fucking perfect.

Mine.

Five



Noel

Fuck me. I just got the best head of my life from a Russian mobster Daddy in a shower that overlooks the most beautiful mountains and trees I've ever seen in my twenty-six years. And he *swallowed*. Collector is still kneeling on the ground, his dark eyes searing into me, holding so much passion for a man he just met. His dominance and power radiate throughout the confines of the shower stall, even as he kneels in a submissive position. There's no doubt about which one of us is in charge.

The water droplets roll down his skin, accentuating his bulging muscles. He's like a real-life Russian Adonis. Everything about him is male perfection. The thought of having this dangerous, perfect man on his knees for me sends a thrill through me...the things he could do to me...the ways he could dominate me.

My eyes focus on his large cock, standing proudly between his legs, and I lick my lips reflexively. I've never seen one so big or thick before.

"Calm down, *malysh*," he rumbles, standing so I have to look up at him to hold eye contact. "Let's finish washing each other before we do anything else."

He soaps up a washcloth and stands behind me, rubbing it into my pecs and down my chest. He slowly, methodically washes my shoulders, then my arms. The texture of the soft

cotton cloth gives rise to goosebumps all over my flesh. He bends down to wash my thighs and calves next, avoiding the places I need him to touch me, even if it's only with a washcloth. The tension he creates has me on edge.

He stands back up again, kissing and licking his way up my neck to my jaw.

"Please," I moan, my head falling back onto his chest as I lose what little self-control I have.

"Please *what*," he demands. His teeth scrape against the shell of my ear and I shiver with lust. Fuck, I want him.

"Please, *Daddy*, use me to get off. Touch me." I'm not above begging. My cock thickens between my legs again, I would beg him for just about anything to get me off again.

I hear the wet cloth hit the floor, and the splatter of the water raining down on us as it mixes with our heavy breathing. It's just us here, at this moment, and I'm dying to feel him.

"You're a dirty little slut for Daddy, aren't you, *malysh*? You beg to be used so prettily. To wear my come on your soft skin, where it belongs," he growls, his dirty words making me melt against him.

He spins me around, so my hands are against the tiled wall, pulling my hips back. I feel his hands spread my cheeks, as a whistle of appreciation cuts through the steamy air.

"I'm going to wreck this hole soon, but not tonight," he promises.

I sigh, unsure whether it's in relief or disappointment. I have no clue how I could possibly take someone as big as him, but I want to so badly. I feel his hands grab my shoulder as his length moves between my cheeks. He thrusts his cock between them, sliding back and forth as he uses me to seek his release.

"Christ, my little baker, you feel so good, and I'm not even inside you yet," he grits out, quickening his pace.

I moan, turning my head to look at him in my periphery.

"You're so filthy for me, letting me use you. My cock is going to be inside you soon, stretching you as I claim your

tight ass for myself. You're *mine*, boy."

"Yes," I yell as he grips my cock, pumping me with every furious drive of his hips until my cheek is smooshed against the tiles.

"You're going to live here with me forever and be my little come slut. I'll fuck you every day and take care of you. You'll never want for anything. I'll never let you go," he says right before he takes his cock in his other hand and blows his load on my ass.

His dirty words and the hot spurt of his seed on my skin tip me over the edge. He works me until I beg him to stop, then takes my come he caught in his hand and rubs it in with his over my skin, marking me...claiming me just like he said he would.

"Mmm, *malysh*. The sight of our releases together, mixing into your skin. Makes me want to defile you all over again. Use you however I please."

After a few minutes of him admiring his handiwork, he rinses me off and leads me out of the shower. He dries us both with fluffy white towels, like the type you'd find in a hotel. I stand there, looking at my reflection as he looks in his bathroom cabinet for an extra toothbrush.

My fair skin is pink, and my eyes are glazed over. The smile on my face is beaming back at me. I don't think I've ever felt this satisfied before, and he wasn't even inside me. I shudder, wondering how amazing that will feel.

Wait...that means I'd have to stay here for there to be a second time...

His words come back to me. *You're going to live here with me forever... I'll never let you go.*

The sex bubble I was in pops, violently throwing me back into reality. *I can't stay here.* I have responsibilities. My family. Ani. My business. The competition. This man abducted me and whisked me away to this strange cabin in the woods. He's insane if he thinks he can hold me here against my will.

I rush out the bathroom door, into his bedroom. Rifling through his drawers, I find sweatpants that are a size too big for me and a t-shirt and throw them on. Right as I sit to put on a pair of his socks, he comes barreling in.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he asks me with accusation in his eyes—as if I’m doing something wrong when he’s the one holding me here against my will.

“I don’t care if you chase me or how many miles I walk, you can’t keep me here. I’m going home!”

Pushing up from the bed, I try to maneuver my way through the door, only to have him block my path. His sheer size alone is enough to fill the entire doorway. He grabs my arm, pulling me flush against him as he stares down into my eyes. His eyes are raging infernos, burning into me with a betrayal he has no right to feel.

“You saw me murder someone behind your bakery, *malysh*. Do you really think it’s safe for you out there? Do you understand why I brought you here?” he asks me, his brows drawn together in frustration.

I thrash around to ditch his hold, but he’s too strong. He only pulls me closer somehow, anchoring us together so I can’t escape. I don’t want to hear him. My life isn’t in this cabin, with this mysterious, dangerous man—it’s at home, waiting to see me bright and early in the morning.

“No one saw us! You’re being paranoid.”

“No, I’m not. Do you know who I am? What I do?” His hand snakes around my throat, his thumb brushing my pulse point.

He collars me tight enough to calm my frantic nerves, but not enough to cut off my breathing. I feel more centered. My mind takes in what he said.

“You’re... in the mafia. The Russian mafia,” I answer around a gasp.

“Yes, boy, I am. There are eyes and ears all over the city, and nothing gets past my Pakhan. I’m keeping you here for your own safety.”

My entire body crumbles, and the only reason I don't hit the floor is because he holds me up. I'm in danger...which means Ani is, too.

"What about Ani? She's alone, and that puts her in danger too," I try to reason with him. "She *needs* me."

The warmth I felt a moment before is suddenly ripped away. He unhands me, putting distance between us. Pulling back the covers, he fluffs a pillow before spearing me with his gaze again.

"Sleep. You wouldn't make it home for days if you escaped, and then what shape would you be in for your precious Ani? We'll handle everything in the morning."

I can't help but listen to the finality in his tone. It's an order I can't refuse. Aside from feeling exhausted, he makes a good point. There's no way I can walk the miles it would take to get back to the city. My mom will make sure Ani is good to go in the morning. They'll probably think I was too exhausted to come home or that I worked through the night. I work crazy hours during the holiday season.

I climb in, borrowing under the covers in the most comfortable bed known to mankind. It feels as if I'm lying on a cloud. Collector gets in behind me and then pulls me toward him.

I should rebuke his touch. He took me away from my home. Away from my girl. I should hate him. But I can't.

I melt into his touch as sleep quickly takes me. The last thought that crosses my mind is seeing Ani again.

Six



Tomas

Alexander: The Pakhan needs to see you.

Tomas: I've done my job. I'm off until the new year.

Alexander: You left behind a witness.

Tomas: I tied off all loose ends.

Alexander: Great, you can tell him that yourself. Tonight.

Tomas: Come on, Alex. You know I spend the holiday in Russia. He really expects me to stick around?

Alexander: When you leave a witness breathing? Yes, he does.

Fuck.

Jovial Christmas music plays from downstairs. It's so loud that the sound travels down the hall and into the closed bedroom door. I can hear the lyrics, so happy and bright. They're the complete opposite of my mood right now.

Olga wouldn't dare blast the stereo so loud. It has to be my sweet baker.

I'm not used to the sound of music in the house, and though I'm dreading the meeting, knowing my little baker is downstairs listening to cheerful music and most likely baking makes it seem less daunting.

I'll have the meeting, and convince the Pakhan that he saw nothing and everything will be fine.

My feet hit the floor and I climb out of bed, tossing on only a pair of boxers before leaving the bedroom. The moment I open the door, I'm hit with the sweet aroma of vanilla and that familiar sweet scent of browning butter.

I take the steps two at a time, coming to a halt when I'm met with Noel's back as he stands over the stove, singing. He's wearing a pair of my sweats and t-shirt, his hair pulled back in the familiar tie from the evening before. He must have swiped it from my wrist before he got out of bed.

I head for him, and my hand rests on his shoulder when I close in the distance.

He tenses for a brief moment before turning to me and offering me a smile. It's a forced one. I can tell by the way his eyes don't shine, and the tight way the corners of his lips curve. "Good morning. I hope you're hungry."

Even his voice sounds fake and cheery. He's trying to sweet talk me into being in a good mood so I'll do whatever he wishes, it won't work.

Not happening.

I reach around him, not bothering with a response as I grab the pot of coffee he's already made and pour it into a mug.

Noel shuts off the stove, plops pancakes onto a plate, then proceeds to add butter and syrup before cutting them up. I draw an inquisitive brow, unsure why he feels the need to cut food for me—a grown-ass man.

His eyes widen when he realizes I'm staring at him. Then a nervous laugh escapes. "Sorry. I'm used to cutting them for

Ani.”

My smile fades, and I let out a frustrated grunt before swiping my plate and heading for the table. Noel follows, quick on my heels. He sets his plate at the seat across from where I’ve dropped mine, but I pull at his wrist and tug him to the bench beside me. Here, we have a perfect view of the sunrise outside of the window.

Why is it that I’ve never noticed just how romantic my cabin in the woods is? Beautiful scenery, a warm fireplace, the heat of Noel’s shoulder rubbing against mine.

“For a killer, you sure do have a lot of natural light in here,” he mumbles.

I stab a piece of pancake and shove it in my mouth.

“You’re not worried someone will come out here? That they could see in?”

“I’d kill them before they even made it close enough to the house to see me,” I say through a bite full of food.

“Oh.” He pushes his fork around his plate but never actually takes a bite.

The meal is quiet. Noel is too nervous to speak, and I’m dreading the conversation we have to have. I don’t want to argue with him, but I’ve spent enough time with him between the shower and keeping him snug against me through the night to know that I’m not sharing him with Ani. She can’t come here and hog up my precious time with him. I don’t share. Never have, and certainly won’t be trying it now with my sweet Noel.

“Can we... talk about what’s going to happen?” he asks as he grabs my plate to take it to the sink. He scrapes the dishes free of food and then sets them into the dishwasher. I stay at the table, sipping the hot, bitter liquid.

“The Bratva already knows you’re still alive. It’s best you lay low for a while. You’ll call your family and tell them you’re going somewhere tropical for the holidays,” I say.

“They won’t believe that, Collector. I’m a family man, and I would *never* leave Ani for Christmas.”

“A family man,” I murmur behind the lip of the cup. “Noel, the husband?”

He shakes his head.

“Boyfriend?”

Another shake of his head.

“*Partner?*” I ask.

“*Father,*” he whispers, and the air swooshes from my lungs.

* * *

As soon as Noel said father, we got ready and drove back to the city. There she is, Ani. The girl I’ve been so fucking jealous of. She’s his *daughter*. Damn, I’m an idiot. My gaze travels toward the police officer she runs for outside of her school. He’s crouched low, a smile on his face and arms spread wide. When Ani reaches him, he scoops her up and squeezes her into a welcoming hug.

She’s familiar with him, and the way Noel keeps bringing up his mother and brother along with sweet little Ani, has me wondering if this is the brother.

I scrub a hand over my face. Leave it to me to bring home a single dad whose sibling is involved in law enforcement. I’m normally one to think before I act. Yet Noel makes it impossible. Impulse control comes naturally for me at this point, after years of intense composure. Yet, I didn’t stop to think of the ripple effect my actions could cause.

Stupid, reckless, beginner move.

You’d think I learned my lesson. But no. Here I am debating on kidnapping a little girl. As if holding up my little baker and his daughter in my cabin in the woods is a perfectly normal and acceptable response toward him witnessing a murder.

“Where is her mother?” I ask, my grip on his wrist keeping him planted inside the car with me.

Noel’s gaze stays on her as his brother sets her on the sidewalk, and they begin to walk away. His green eyes sparkle, a tight smile in place, and one shoulder hitches in an indifferent shrug. “We were high school sweethearts, until one day we weren’t. She chose drugs over us.”

I run my finger along the back of his hand, soothing the heartbreak I can feel through his stern tone. “She’s missing out.”

“She is.” He forces a slight smile, then turns to me. “Are you sure we will be safe? With you?”

I don’t let myself be offended by the question. He isn’t asking me if I’m *able* to protect them, because he knows I can. He’s asking because he knows deep down he shouldn’t be able to trust me. I’m a mafia hitman. Yet, the tie between us is something neither of us can deny.

It’s beyond the physical attraction, or how good he feels in my arms. It’s the tension in the air when our hands touch, the crackle of energy that comes whenever we make eye contact. It’s the way that, even though we don’t know each other, I yearn to make him happy, to give him anything and everything in the world that he could ever need or want.

It’s me standing here, trusting him enough to know that he’ll grab Ani and come *home*.

We discussed as much. After he revealed his true relationship with Ani, we came up with a plan. He’ll go in and pick her up from their home when his brother leaves. He says it’ll be easier to convince just his mother that his new boyfriend bought a weekend trip in the Adirondacks for him and Ani.

Then they’ll both come home with me. I’ll worry about how I can convince him it’s best to stay for good once we’re back in the cabin. Right now, I just need to keep him happy and alive.

I nod. “No one will hurt you as long as I’m here to keep you safe.”

He presses his lips against mine. It’s a quick peck, but it says everything he’s not.

“Thank you.”

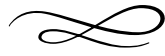
“You’re welcome,” I whisper.

“So I’ll go home after Val leaves her with my mom. And then we will just go back to the cabin. And when the threat is gone, we can come home, right?”

My throat tightens because I know I’ve made a promise I don’t intend to keep. I don’t want to give him back. *Ever*. Even after I handle the mess with the Bratva, and he’s safe. I’m too much of a selfish bastard to let that happen.

Still, I nod. “Yes, *malysh*. Let’s go get your daughter and bring her home.”

Seven



Noel

“You’re what?!” my mom asks, even though I know she heard me just fine the first time I told her.

I shove Ani’s clothes in a pink, sparkly overnight bag, taking care not to forget the items she absolutely has to have, like her unicorn sweatshirt and her light-up sneakers. Oh, and her ballerina tutu. She’ll cry if we leave it behind.

“Ani and I are going to stay with my boyfriend at his mountain cabin for the holidays, Ma,” I repeat, exasperated because the longer we’re here, the more danger we’re in. Collector made it very clear that we had to hurry, pack the essentials, and get going as quickly as possible before word spread that we’re here.

“You’re taking my Ani-Bear away for the holidays?” Her raw voice almost makes me cry. I’ve never spent a Christmas without my mother or my brother before, and since Dad died, we’ve all stuck together. “Can’t you just bring him to the house so he can meet the whole family?”

“No, Ma, I can’t.” I know she won’t drop this. My mom is stubborn and is used to getting her way because Val and I cater to her constantly. Thinking quickly, I try to come up with a reason why we need to have alone time.

“But—”

“Ma, you know I spend long days at the bakery, working hard to make sure it stays profitable. I barely have any time with my daughter, and I’ve never been able to take her on a vacation. I need some time to myself, away from the city. Away from work. I also want to see if Ani likes him because this is serious,” I lie to her. She doesn’t have to know this isn’t even a relationship.

I can always tell her later that we broke up.

“We’re really going to go to the mountains?!” Ani squeaks, handing me her Christmas pajamas and fuzzy socks. I thank her, making a mental note to grab my own matching pair and shove it in my bag before we leave.

“Yeah, my Smart Cookie. We’re gonna go sledding and sit in front of the fire to make s’mores. You’re going to love it!” Thank God Ani is only five so my false cheer easily has her excited for the vacation.

“I want to meet this boyfriend before you both go away with him,” my mom demands, shuffling around to find her coat. “Why can’t he pick you up here and introduce himself like a gentleman? I don’t like the sound of him.”

“Because the drive to the Catskills is going to take some time. We don’t want to hit traffic on the way,” I lie, leaving out that vicious mobsters are coming after us while we sit here and waste time talking.

A knock on the apartment door makes me flinch. My mom goes to answer it, and I quickly jump up from my crouch on the floor and rush to the door. I don’t think killers would knock first, but who the fuck knows? I knew nothing about organized crime until Collector barreled through my life and changed it forever.

I check the peephole and see him standing there, in a dark gray three-piece suit. His hair is combed back, and he checks his watch while he waits for me to open it. I let him in, locking the door behind me.

“Where is she?” He peers around the small apartment, frowning slightly. I’m sure he keeps a bigger apartment in a

swankier part of the city if his cabin is anything to go by. “I couldn’t wait at the bakery anymore to meet her so I came to pick you up here.”

“Oh, look who decided to come around,” my mother says with an attitude, having no clue who she’s actually talking to. “So nice to meet Noel’s random boyfriend.”

Collector ignores her barbs and turns on the charm, taking my mother’s hand and kissing the back.

“It’s wonderful to meet you, Mrs. Lombardi. My name is Tomas,” he croons, his Russian accent thick. It sounds like honey being poured over fried dough. It’s almost enough to distract me from noticing that he knows my last name, even though I never gave it to him.

“Likewise,” she says in response. “I thought you were making him and Ani slum it all the way over to the bakery to pick them up?” Her voice is accusatory, and I cringe.

I don’t know why I’m so nervous for them to meet. He isn’t even my real boyfriend... right? This all ends after the threat is neutralized.

“No, I think Noel misunderstood me. I said we have to stop at the bakery before we leave. I love your son’s donut holes,” he says with a chuckle, wrapping his arm around me and kissing me on the forehead. I think back to when he ate me out in the shower and my face heats. “Noel must have been preoccupied with thinking of what to pack and planning out every moment of our getaway.”

“He was always a planner,” my mom muses fondly. She takes in his three-piece suit, a million thoughts swarming behind her eyes like buzzing bees. “What do you do? Noel’s never mentioned you before, just that you met in the bakery.”

“I work in the business sector. I take down useless entities and neutralize threats to profit for large corporations that mainly focus on imports and exports.”

I mean, he’s technically not lying...organized crime is a business...and he takes down useless people...I’m sure the

Bratva imports and exports a lot of things. She doesn't need to know most of them are illegal.

“Hello!” Ani shouts cheerfully, running into the living room.

She changed into a winter green tracksuit with Santas on it and rain boots. Her crazy curls are tied to a top bun and she has shimmer powder all over her face. The girl is a fashionista, just like her mother. It's the only trait she got from her, fortunately.

He bends down so he is eye level with her. “Hello, *zayka*. My name is Tomas, and I'm so excited to meet you.”

She turns her head as if she's assessing him, then looks at me as if to say *'What do you think, Dad'*. I smile at her, giving her a silent *'He's good'*, and she smiles back. Ani and I have always been able to have silent conversations. I think it's a product of being a single dad since she was four months old.

“What does *zah-ka* mean?” She tries to sound the word out, butchering his native tongue.

He laughs good-heartedly, before saying, “It's *zay-ka*, and it means bunny in Russian. It's something you call a very special, adorable child.”

She giggles, and just like always, the sweet sound makes my chest warm with how perfect she is. “I love bunnies! They're my favorite! Dad says you're taking us to the mountains?” she asks.

“I am. We're going to hit traffic if we don't leave soon,” he reminds me, looking at his watch. “It was wonderful to meet you, Mrs. Lombardi, and I hope we can all spend the new year together.”

My mom hugs Ani, then me. “Call me or your brother if you need anything. He'll come pick you up in a heartbeat if you want to leave.”

She hugs *Tomas*, whispering something in his ear low enough that I can't hear it. I do hear his response though.

“I'll always take good care of them,” he assures her.

It's going to be rough leaving him when this is all over.

* * *

"Your name is Tomas?" I ask him in a low voice as we walk to the elevator.

"Yes, it's Russian for Thomas," he says as he squeezes my hand. He has such a serious tone normally, that I'm not sure if he's being sarcastic or not.

The minute we leave the apartment building, the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. Grabbing Ani's hand, I look at Tomas, and he steps in front of us, scanning the streets and windows around us. My whole body trembles. He said the Bratva doesn't tolerate insubordination, and that they would come looking for us.

He taps my arm, then pointedly looks at an idling black SUV across the street, a few buildings down from my own. The windows are tinted, making it impossible to see inside. But we both know someone is watching us from inside it.

"Okay, *zayka*, it's time to get in the car," he says firmly, with no hint of fear or urgency in his voice. You'd never know that anything was amiss with the tone he uses.

Tomas sets the car seat in the back, and I shove him away gently. I've always been a bit of a nervous wreck and want to make sure it's installed properly. My nerves have me fumbling with the buckle and a drop of sweat beads at my temple before it snaps in place. I triple-check it's in tight then, help get her in while Tomas places our bags in the trunk.

When we pull away from the curb, the SUV follows us from a few cars behind, and I start to panic. What if they follow us all the way to the cabin, and kill us? What if they hurt Ani? I know it wasn't one hundred percent safe for her at home, but maybe it's not safe for her at the cabin either.

"Ani, how old are you?" Tomas asks in a strangely calm way as if he isn't worried that an assassin could be following us right now.

“I’m five,” she replies.

He takes a sharp turn, but the SUV does too, coasting a couple of cars behind us now.

“Oh that means you’ll start first grade next year!” he exclaims. “Are you excited about that?”

She perks up, talking a mile a minute. “Oh yes, I love school. I like my teachers and my friends. We color and learn about spelling and the moon cycles. My class has a gerbil named Petals and...”

I tune out my daughter, choosing to stare at the window at the car who’s now one car behind us. Tomas makes another turn, going the wrong way on a one-way street. Thankfully Ani is so busy telling him about how we got Petals for two weekends in a row that she doesn’t even notice.

“Carly was sick, so she had to stay out of school, and I jumped on that and offered to take her place. Nonna let me bring Petals home again and it was awesome!” she shrieks. I cringe at the shrillness, but he laughs.

“You’re a smart girl, *zayka*. Maybe I can talk your Dad into getting you a gerbil—or better yet, a kitten—so you can have your own pet.”

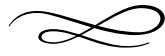
The car is right behind us now, and the hammering of my heart in my ribcage is making me want to puke. He turns into a parking lot, driving behind a gas station and out the other side, narrowly missing getting T-Boned by another car. Turning onto another street, he takes an exit for a highway. The black car is gone.

I take his hand on the center console and peer up into his dark eyes, barely holding back my own tears.

Thank you, I mouth to him over Ani’s chattering.

You’re welcome, he mouths back.

Eight



Tomas

I keep a sharp eye as we make our way to the cabin. I took us onto the wrong highway to lose our tail, so by the time I corrected our course *zayka* was already fast asleep. Noel breaks the silence, with a random question.

“How did you know my last name?”

“I researched you the night I took you, after you fell asleep. It wasn’t hard.”

He nods, then hits me with another obvious question.

“How did you know she loves rabbits?” He meets my eye for a second before I look back onto the road.

“There was a stuffed rabbit on the couch when I walked in, and I took a wild guess. The fact that little rabbit, or bunny, is a Russian endearment for kids is a happy coincidence.” I smile at him, but his frown seems to be a permanent fixture on his beautiful face.

“How do you even know how to talk to children?” he asks, his tone accusatory. “You’re a hitman.” He crosses his arms and pouts.

“While you were packing and getting Ani ready, I researched how to meet your boyfriend’s kids. I told you, you’re mine. That means she is, too. You’re a package deal, and I want to be the best man I can be for both of you.”

The pout falls from his face, replaced by confusion and a slight anger I don't understand. He's silent for a few moments.

“This isn't grade school, Tomas. You can't just lick me and say I'm yours. You can't just take a man and his child into the dangerous web of your life and expect it to be that easy, or for me to be okay with it.”

His words lack conviction, and I smile again. Noel may not want to admit it, but he wants me—craves me—just as badly as I need him. He just won't come to terms with it yet, because it's not the direction he anticipated for his life.

I squeeze his hand harder, to emphasize my point. “Listen, *malysh*, because I'm only saying this once. You're both mine to protect. Mine to love. Mine to spoil. That's how it is now and that's how it will always be. When this is over, you'll both move into my place in the city, where it's safer. Ani will go to a better school, and she'll have a family—us.”

“And what about my bakery? What about the Christmas Cookie Crumble-thon I'm supposed to compete in next week? I have my own life, my dreams. I'm not letting some hot guy come in and ruin everything I've worked for.”

From the corner of my eye, I can see his pout is back. Those soft, pink lips shouldn't be pursed like that. They should be stretched around my cock or pressed against my own lips. He glares at me, waiting for my response.

“I told you, you're mine. That means your hopes and dreams are, too. I'll never keep you from doing what you want to do. As for the competition, I'll try my hardest to resolve this in time, but I cannot make you a promise about it. You and Ani's safety will always come first.”

His face and posture soften, and a small, cautious smile blooms across his face.

“Thank you, Tomas.”

The sound of my name on his lips stokes the ever-burning fire I hold for him.

“You're welcome, Noel.”

* * *

“Do you have to go?” Noel asks me. His anxious energy is palpable, and I frown. I hate seeing him like this.

“Yes, I do. I can’t ignore a summon from the Pakhan. I’ll be home before you know it, and will keep you up to date.”

He gives me a hug, kissing me on the cheek. I love touching him, but when he touches me, it makes my stomach flutter. It means he’s falling for me. Maybe just as hard as I’m falling for him.

Once little Ani is all settled in at the cabin and Olga is making dinner for her and Noel, I head out, praying that Noel doesn’t escape into the night. I think I’ve convinced him that the safest place for him and Ani right now is tucked away in the mountains.

No one knows of my cabin. I bought it under a false name, ensuring it didn’t link back to me, but the thought of someone finding and hurting them has me activating the security system I usually leave unarmed. It’ll alert me of any movement within the area and from there I’ll be able to put the house on lockdown. Olga will see them to the safe house until I can neutralize the hostels.

Now, I have to sweet talk my way out of the hole I dug myself. I climb the stone steps to the Pakhan’s home, one heavy step at a time. I don’t have to knock. The door swings open, a scowling Alexander glaring at me.

I offer a devilish grin before giving him a firm handshake and turning it into a friendly hug.

“I’ve talked him down from a boiling rage to a simmering heat,” he murmurs before pulling away. “But there are no promises, Tomas. He doesn’t like anyone trying to sway his opinion, and while he takes mine to heart, he knows we’re close.”

I dip my chin in a silent thanks. Alexander took me under his wing when I was a young boy. My father had left my

mother before I was born, and when my mother died, I'd been alone. Until Alex took me in from the cruel Russian streets and brought me to the United States. He molded me into the stone-cold killer I am now, and though he has always been tougher on me than the others, he still has a soft spot for me.

Once I deposit my gun into the safe in the foyer, he guides me wordlessly down the hall and toward the formal dining room. Konstantin Petrov sits at the head of the table. His wife sits to his right, her head bowed as she sips the soup in front of her. I stifle the outward cringe that threatens to show on my face.

This meeting is a power play. I'm to rush to his side, kneel before him, and beg forgiveness. The act will remind his wife just how powerful he is while also knocking me down a notch or two. Meanwhile, the only man I want to be on my knees for is sitting two hours away in a secluded cabin with his daughter, waiting for me to make things right for him. To make it safe to leave the cabin, so he can win his cookie competition. I haven't had the heart to tell him that may not happen.

Konstantin doesn't acknowledge me as I enter, heading for my seat. He sips vodka from a tumbler, and when I approach, he continues to ignore me until I drop to my knees. The current Pakhan in the States is so full of himself that all this will take is some apologizing and a lot of telling him how amazing he is.

Power has gotten to him.

I wait patiently—despite the burning in my chest—until his hand drops and he spares me a glance.

“Stand, Tomas.”

“Yes, Pakhan.” I do as I'm told and he nods to the seat beside him. My throat clears as I slide into the chair and then turn to his wife. “Good evening Mrs. Petrova. I hope all is well for you.”

The corners of her lip tug into a smile and she nods. “Yes, Tomas. Though I hear the same can't be said for you.”

The evil bitch always did have a thing for watching the soldiers fuck up. Konstantin's punishments can be cruel because of his *creativity*. My Noel would never be as vindictive, would never get off on seeing others tortured or punished.

"I'm well, thank you," I say, despite the gnawing feeling in my gut and the strong urge to return home.

Alex takes up the seat next to me while Konstantin snaps his fingers and servers approach with a plate of *kartoshka*. They're little chocolate cake balls that look like potatoes. Not the prettiest, but surely the most delicious dessert from the motherland.

"I'm afraid you've missed dinner, Tomas. Your time management is exceptional," Konstantin says with a dry tone.

I dip my chin, a silent apology, and reach for my wine glass once someone fills it. "Traffic was tough," I lie.

"Where is the witness?" he asks, cutting to the point.

My teeth grind together. "Secure."

He draws a brow as if to ask why I have the audacity not to give him a real answer. I don't fear him or his punishments, though. Sure, there is a certain order to things, but I'm not above murdering the person at the top of the food chain to protect what's mine.

It would mean chaos for the Bratva, but I'll do whatever it takes to keep Noel and Ani safe from my mistakes. I should have double-checked the shops. They were all dark from the front street view, so I just assumed no one was there. Now, Noel and Ani are paying the price—*my* family.

I fold my hands in my lap and turn my attention to him. "The witness is in a safe location, isolated from everyone. I have his word he won't go to the police, and that's all that matters."

"No, Tomas. What matters is that you made a mistake." Konstantin's voice raises, his bass tone deepening. "You left us vulnerable, and instead of neutralizing a weakness, you've taken him back to your cabin for what? To keep him as a pet?"

“Sick.” His wife scoffs, her tone filled with disgust, though her eyes twinkle with amusement. “Next you’ll say you’re in love with him. Or worse. You’ll tell us murdering people is above you, when it’s your *job*, Tomas.”

Konstantin laughs, and Alex must feel the tension in my body, the stiffening of my shoulders because he chooses now to come to my defense. “Surely Tomas has a reason behind his madness.”

I inhale an intentionally slow breath, then exhale. I’m going to have to play this the right way, or I’ll be me with a blood bath. “The reason is I just didn’t feel like it. Maybe I’m bored, Konstantin. Maybe I’m growing soft. It could be either choice.”

I slide my hand into the pocket of my dress pants and pull out a tactical knife. My gaze falls on the black-painted blade, and I press the tip into my thumb. A drop of blood spills out. I bring it to my lips and my tongue drags along it, lapping up the droplet. “Which do you suppose is worse?”

I make eye contact with the wife across the table, her eyes are fixated on the blade. “Mrs. Petrova?”

Her chest rises and falls and her dilated pupils remain transfixed on the knife. “Boredom,” she says breathlessly.

I turn to Konstantin. “She’s a smart woman.”

Alex pinches the bridge of his nose, exasperated with my nonsense. The truth is, I’m just fucking pretending, making it up as I go. Whatever I’m doing is working, because I’ve rendered the Mrs. speechless, and Konstantin stares at me with curiosity.

“Boredom wreaks havoc,” I say, turning back to his wife. “Or maybe, I just thought he was pretty. They both have the same outcome.”

“How so?” Her eyes narrow in on me.

“Well, a bored murderer will hunt to kill anyone, anything, not giving a fuck about the consequences. But if I just found the boy and wanted to keep him for myself, and harm comes to him, then I would just kill in response.”

Alex lets out a fake huff of laughter. “Stop joking, Tomas,” he says nervously. “Surely, he is joking, Pakahn.”

“Surely he is not,” Mrs. Petrova says. She crosses her arms over her chest. “Are you threatening to have me killed if Konstantin doesn’t forgive you for sparing the witness?”

I smirk, then aim the knife. When I throw it, it lands directly where I aimed—into the back of her chair—but not before tearing the material of her dress by her shoulder. “It’s not a threat, Mrs. Petrova. I will do it, and I will succeed.”

Konstantin’s fist slams into the table. “You will not scare my wife in *my* home.”

I can’t help the smug grin that spreads on my face as my gaze travels to the woman in question. “Why, Pakahn? It’s clear she likes it.”

Mrs. Petrova glares at me, her cheeks turning a deep ruby color. Her panting breath is shallow. Once she composes herself, she scowls at me, clearly upset that I’ve called her out.

I slam down the rest of the wine before pushing out my chair. Then I stand and fasten the top button on my jacket. “This evening was useless. Well for me, at least.” I turn to Alex. “I can see myself out.”

“I’ll wal you.” Alex scrambles to his feet and follows me out of the dining room. “Stupid,” he scolds when we’re close to the front door. “You’re lucky he let you walk out of there. You were so disrespectful. And to call his wife out like that.”

I shrug, grab the gun I’d left in the safe by the door, and give my old friend a wink. “He’ll thank me for it when she’s on her knees sucking him off.”

His mouth drops in awe. “Who are you?” his fingers snap in front of my face. “What have you done to my Tomas?”

“There’s time for him to retaliate,” I say, pressing my hand to the doorknob. “He could have me shot down the second I open this door. Or he could wait months from now. You’ll keep me posted on his decision?”

He nods.

“And you give your word that even if I’m to die, my boy and his daughter are protected?”

“Olga will care for them, Tomas. You know that.”

I exhale a timid breath, offer my thanks, then open the door. When I reach my car, I pull my phone from the center console and check the messages left to me from Noel.

Noel: Good luck. Please tell me when it's over.

Noel: Oh God, you're taking forever. What's wrong?

Noel: Are you dead?

Noel: Fuck, does that mean we're dead?

Noel: You won't answer my calls. If you don't call back, I'm calling my brother.

Noel: Where are you, Tomas?

My poor little baker is sick with worry. I text him immediately, so he can calm down.

Tomas: Shhh, malysh. I'm heading home now.

Noel: Thank God. What happened?

Tomas: I spoke with him. Now we wait for his decision. I'll be home soon. Tell little Ani a bedtime story and get her all tucked into her new room.

Nine



Noel

The bedroom door creaks long after I read Ani her bedtime stories, and my heart beats a mile a minute as I pray it's Tomas. I've been on pins and needles all night, wondering if he was going to make it home in one piece. He texted me earlier that he was on his way home, but I've seen the mobster movies. These people are ruthless, and no matter what he says or does, I doubt they're going to take kindly to a murder witness walking around.

Tomas walks into our room, a warm smile on his face as his eyes rake over me. I watch him strip down to his boxers, cataloging all the scars on his legs, arms, and torso. He has deep slash marks on his back. There's a story behind them, and I'm not sure I want to know. His lifestyle scares me.

He slides into bed and immediately envelops me in his warm, hard body. He smells like a cigar, and the earthy, tobacco scent soothes me. I'm always the strong one—the strong father, son, business owner, brother, and friend, albeit they're few and far between nowadays. It feels nice having someone hold me for a change, even if he was holding me hostage in his winter wonderland cabin.

“What happened? Is it over?” I ask him.

He nuzzles his face in my neck, licking and nibbling on the skin. He peppers kisses over my cheek and jaw, and I'm almost distracted enough that I forget what I asked him.

“Hey,” I roll over, trying to get his attention. “What’s going on?”

“I have it in hand, *malysh*. Don’t worry,” he rasps before grasping the back of my neck and bringing me in for a deep, drugging kiss.

His tongue invades my mouth, dancing with mine in a rhythm that has me panting against his lips, on the cusp of begging him for more. He sucks my bottom lip, then pulls away.

“Know that I’ll do whatever it takes to keep you and Ani safe. I told you, you’re both mine, and I protect what’s mine.”

“I’m yours, huh?” I ask, astounded at how easily he decided I was his minutes after chasing me through my bakery.

“Yes, my little baker, you are both mine.”

“Hmm, why don’t you show me?” I ask him, rolling onto my back and taking him with me.

He settles on top of me, kissing his way down my neck, across my chest. Taking my nipple into his mouth, he bites down hard, making me cry out. He puts his hand over my mouth and gives me a wild look.

“Shhh, you better be quiet,” he orders me. “Or do I have to gag you?”

The thought of being gagged during sex should be odd to me, but the image of Tomas stuffing my mouth to silence me while he gives me mind-numbing pleasure has my hard dick leaking. I nod, and he laughs softly

“That look on your face will be the death of me, *malysh*, but I won’t be gagging you tonight. I want you to be able to talk, in case it’s too much.”

I don’t think anything this man can do to me would be too much. I went from an overworked baker who never got any to a man who rolls around in the sheets with a mobster who makes orgasms feel other-worldly.

“I want you,” I whimper as I stroke my hard cock.

“Show me that ass,” he growls, knocking my hand away. “Don’t touch yourself.”

I roll over, getting on my hands and knees, my ass in the air while my cheek rests against the sheets. He smacks my ass hard, the burn coursing through me like blazing fire. *Fuck*, it feel so good. He smacks me a second time on the other cheek, and a soft moan escapes me. I didn’t know pain could feel so good.

“Who do you belong to, boy?” he asks me in a low, menacing voice.

“Daddy, I belong to you!” I say again as I revel in the heat of his hand, the loud *crack* it makes when it strikes my skin. The thought of him using something other than his hand one day takes my breath away.

“Your ass looks so pretty with my handprints, my little baker,” he croons, rubbing my stinging flesh as he kneads my cheeks, pulling them apart.

“Daddy’s gonna have so much fun, eating your greedy little hole until you cry.” His Russian accent is thick, his breaths heavy.

I feel his wet tongue taste me, licking me as his fingertips dig into my skin. With each pass of his tongue, I melt. All the walls I built up around me are crumbling so fast that I should be holding a caution sign. The obscene slurping noises he makes have me holding on to dear life. I don’t want to come yet, not until he’s inside me. He probes his tongue into my hole, and I groan, trying to muffle it in the sheets. Christ, it feels *amazing*—I’m going to combust all over his king-sized bed.

“Fuck, Daddy. *Please*,” I beg, “I need you inside me.”

He reaches over me to grab lube out of the bedside table drawer, grinding his cock against me before flipping me over.

“I want to see your face as I wreck you, *malysh*,” he rasps as he drips lube onto my hole, slicking his fingers with it too. “You’re mine. I don’t care how much you deny it, or how fast

this is moving. Once I'm inside you—once I claim your sweet ass, there's no going back. You understand me?"

"Yes," I say, desperate for more, to feel him so deep I'll never forget it.

His eyes lock onto mine in a stern concentration. He sinks one finger inside me, then two, scissoring them to open me up. Working them inside me until he finds that spot that makes me want to scream.

"Fuck, oh my god," I whine. "Do it again."

"So bossy, such a slut for it. You want Daddy's cock inside your holiday hole?" He brushes it again and my legs start to shake.

"Yes, please. Please."

He pulls his fingers out, and the emptiness only lasts a few seconds, until I feel his cockhead at my hole. As he pushes in, the intense burn brings tears to my eyes. Inch by inch, he stretches me, until the burn turns into a mind-bending pleasure.

"That's right, *malysh*, take me like a good boy. You're doing so well," he praises me. I crave his praise—it feels almost as good as his cock. He bottoms out. "You're so *tight*."

I pull him to me and kiss him, consuming him like a madman as I try to tell him all the things I should have said earlier. Taking over the kiss, he pulls all the way out, then slams into me. He keeps a relentless pace, fucking me slow and deep as he plunders my mouth, overwhelming me in the best way. He sits up and puts my legs over his shoulders, hitting my spot with every thrust. My eyes swim with tears. If he keeps going like this, I'll blow.

"I want to hear you say it, little baker. Tell me who you belong to again."

His hand wraps around my cock, and the added sensation is too much. I'm going to come soon.

"Yours. I'm yours, Daddy."

"Come, now," he growls.

I bust so hard that my ears ring. Hot white ropes of cum splatter on my stomach and chest. He follows me over the edge, collapsing on top of me. As we lay there, I can't help but think to myself how right this feels.

He may be a dangerous mobster, but he makes me feel cared for, safe. I'm barely able to keep my eyes open as sleep pulls me under. Tomas pulls me into him, spooning me from behind.

"Sleep, my little baker. I have some fun planned for tomorrow."

* * *

After breakfast, Tomas announced that he and Ani would be building a giant pillow and blanket fort in the living room. She wanted to build snowmen, but the wind is too high for playing outside. They're sitting on the couch with their paper and pencils, drawing the plans for their dream fort. The open concept space gives me the perfect view of them, sitting with their heads together, focusing on Ani's drawing.

"No, Tom-Tom, they need a skylight. How are they gonna see in there without one?" she asks him, in the most serious tone she can muster.

"No worries, *zayka*. I have fairy lights for the inside." He smiles at her, and she looks at him like he's a hero instead of a dangerous assassin for the Russian mafia. He's so good with her that I see a hero too.

"You think of everything!" she squeals in excitement. "Daddy! How are the cookies coming along?" she yells over to me. After they're done building their fort, Ani will host Tomas and I for tea.

"Um, I'm just finishing the dough," I lie.

I'm supposed to have cookies ready for the occasion, but I burnt the first batch and messed up the dough for the second one. I'm a baker, for Santa's sake, and I can't even make a batch of cookies. How am I supposed to win a cookie-baking

competition against some of the most fierce bakers in the country if I can't even remember all the ingredients to make the correct dough?

Tomas said everything was 'in hand' but he didn't say it was resolved. I heard him talking to someone on the phone this morning when he thought I was sleeping, another voice with a Russian accent, and it didn't sound like the issue was resolved. The stress of worrying about our safety, lying to cover up our random vacation, and thinking of the impact this will have on Ani is driving me up a wall.

Every time my mom or brother texts me, I feel a lead weight sinking in my stomach. Val knows something isn't right, and he keeps checking in, asking to speak to Ani. My mind runs wild with anxiety, at the thought of what could happen if the mob finds us. I'm father of the fucking year for cracking under the pressure. How could I let this happen to my baby girl?

I sigh, scraping the dough into the trashcan on the other side of the island. Tears burn in my eyes, and I try my hardest not to cry. Ani is just in the other room, and I never cry in front of her. No matter how hard times have been, or how overwhelmed I feel, I hold it in and wait until she's asleep or I'm alone.

"Ani, why don't you go with Olga, and she can show you the nutcrackers in the front room, yeah?" I hear Tomas say with a very convincing level of excitement. He walks over to me, coming up behind me and resting his hands on my hips.

"What's wrong, my little baker?" he asks as he rubs my sides, the purr of his accent thick. The concern in his voice hits me in the heart, and I start crying on the spot. "Oh, *malysh*."

He turns me around, crushing me against him while I soak his nice dress shirt with tears. His large, calloused hand rubs my back in long strokes until I stop crying like a baby.

"I'm an awful father. I can't bake for shit, so even if I'm able to go to the competition, I'll probably lose. I lied to my family. I'm fucking around with a guy I just met, living in his

house because dangerous mafia people are after me and my baby girl,” I ramble on, unable to stop myself.

He puts a hand over my mouth, stopping me. I breathe in through my nose, and his dark, cold eyes warm slightly as we lock gazes.

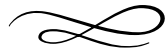
“You’re making the best decisions you can to ensure the safety of your child and yourself. That’s being a good dad and much more than my own father ever did for me. As for fucking around with a guy you don’t know...”

He backs me up against the countertop, digging his hard length into me as he holds my throat. “Last night I made you mine. I don’t care that we haven’t known each other for a while, we’re right for each other. I’ll be the best man I can be for you and a good father to *zayka*. The quicker you accept it, the better.

He kisses my neck, then my cheek then presses a light kiss to my lips. I swallow hard, following his lips and kissing him again when he pulls away. We stand there for minutes, hours, maybe even days, kissing each other. So many things are said between us with every clash of our lips, and I realize that there’s no use in castigating myself for falling for Tomas, because I already fell. *Hard*.

For better or worse, I’m in love with a Russian mafia assassin.

Ten



Tomas

Noel presses a kiss to Ani's temple as I lean against the frame of her bedroom. It used to be a guest room, but she and I are talking about how she wants to redesign it. She wants a lot of glitter, maybe a canopy over the bed. I told her whatever she wants, we can make it happen as long as it's okay with her dad.

She's nestled into the twin bed beneath red and black checkered flannel sheets and a gray and green chevron comforter, peacefully asleep. She was knocked out after the third story, and I've been watching from a distance as a new layer of Noel peels itself away.

He's a good father. And I'm a piece of shit for taking away their safe, predictable lives. This lifestyle isn't feasible for raising a child. For a moment I debate letting him go when this is all over, but that thought is quickly shoved away when a sinking feeling in my gut returns. I made him mine, and I can't live without him.

I don't care if it makes me selfish.

My phone vibrates in the pocket of my trousers, and I pull it out as Noel stealthily frees himself from Ani's grip.

Alexander: In the clear. He wants a marker for later.

Tomas: Fine. He'll have to pull me from retirement. I'm dissolving.

Alexander: For the baker?

Noel comes by my side, his hand resting on my cheek. I don't bother responding to the text. I slip my phone into my back pocket and turn my attention to him. I offer a forced smile. I should tell him, but I don't want to. Telling him means freeing him.

"Have you heard anything yet?" he asks.

Instead of lying, I grab his wrist and lead him to the oversized chair by the fire. A subject change will be better. My silence may be a lie of omission, but it's better than the alternative. I sit in the chair and pull him into my lap. He feels good there, like he's always belonged here, in my cabin with me.

"I don't understand what the issue is," he says, getting comfortable. He lays his head on my chest. "Why are they taking so long? You apologized, right? Maybe I should go. I can prove to them I'm trustworthy."

"No, I won't put you anywhere near them. It's not safe."

"I just want to go *home*, Tomas."

My hand grips Noel's blond locks of his hair. I cup his cheek with my other hand, rubbing my thumb over his soft lips. He licks them, almost reflexively, and I realize how awful I am. He's so beautiful, so innocent. And he's also a good man, to his daughter and to me. All I've done is bring trouble to his doorstep and take him away from what he cares about.

"I'm supposed to be in the Christmas Cookie Competition," Noel mutters. "I need that money. I have to win. For my girl."

I need to be a man. Tell him the truth, even if that means I'll lose him.

"It's safe for you to go... If you want something, *malysh*, all you have to do is ask."

He gulps, peering up at me. Then he smiles. “Tomas... please... Can we go to the competition?”

My lips twitch, the closest to a smile I’ve been in a long long while. He wants me to come with him? “Yes, if you’re my good boy, we’ll go to the competition.” His cheek nuzzles against my chest, and I stroke the silky texture of his hair. “If I have to punish you even once this week, you won’t be able to go.”

His mischievous grin fills me with a happiness I haven’t felt before. “Well, then I guess I’ll have to be good for you, *Daddy*.”

He hops off my lap, then pulls me up, leading the way to the kitchen.

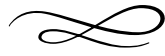
“What are we doing?” I ask him as he rifles through the pantry, pulling out ingredients and lining them up on the counter.

“I have less than a week to get this right, Tomas. I’m going to bake, and you can taste-test them for me.”

How can I say no? I’d give my litter baker the world, anything he asks for.

“Alright,” I say, pulling out the measuring cups. “Let’s get started.”

Eleven



Noel

Tomas, Ani, and I drove back to the city for the Christmas Cookie Crumble-thon. I spent the whole drive with a queasy stomach, worrying over whether or not my recipe was good enough. My anxiety was so bad that I barely talked the whole ride there, but Tomas told me not to worry. He said I'll always be his little baker whether or not I win.

He may be an ex-assassin for the Russian mob, but he's the sweetest man I've ever met. He may be a caveman, but he protects us and gave up his career so he could be part of our family. The past week at his cabin has proven to me just how much he cares about Ani and I, and I can't imagine not having him in our lives.

"Bakers, take your positions. Competition begins in two minutes," the announcer says over the loudspeaker.

Standing at my designated station, I look out into the stands and see the two people who mean the most to me cheering me on. Ani holds up the glitter sign she and Tomas made last night that says "MY DAD IS THE BEST BAKER!" She adores him and includes him in everything—cartoons, tea parties, dress-up, and even Daddy-Daughter movie night, which used to be a thing only she and I would do. Watching them bond has been magical.

I wave to them, and Ani waves her sign and stomps her feet, her smile reaching her ears. Tomas mouths *good luck*,

malysh, and my heart feels as if it will burst. He's so supportive. It feels good to finally have a partner in my life who believes in me.

The buzzer sounds, and I get to work mixing my dough. I bake my heart out, using the entire two-hour time period. I plate my cookies just as the final buzzer goes off. When the three judges taste my cookies, I feel like the floor is going to open up and swallow me whole. My stomach rumbles, my palms sweat, and I can barely stand on my own two feet. What if they hate them? What if I dragged Tomas and Ani all the way here and I don't even place in the top three?

The scores come up on the dashboard, and I have to grab the counter to stay upright. 10-10-9.8. They're the highest scores so far.

After they're done tasting everyone's cookies, the bakers go back to sit in the stands with their families. I sit between Ani and Tomas, and he brings me in for a hug, kissing my forehead gently. I love how he knows exactly what I need.

The judges take the stage. The first judge is Mari Wentz, a famous chef from the Fresh Network. She announces third place. "Third place goes to the Cowboy Confection Crew from Dallas, Texas!"

The crowd cheers as all four of them go to the stage to get their ribbon and prize. I came here alone, and I doubt I'm going to be able to outdo them. Their Everything-Under-The-Sink cookies looked amazing.

The second judge, a social media baker I'm not too familiar with, announces second place. "Second place goes to Chocolate Chariot from Jacksonville, Florida!"

The husband and wife team run to the stage, crying as they take their second-place ribbon and prize. They've entered the competition for years. I remember watching them on television when I was in high school before I ever opened my own bakery. They deserved to place this year.

The third judge is Carlie McCloskey. She's the owner of Sweets to Eat, a national chain of bakeries that started in

Queens. She is the queen of the baking world. The woman has done multiple specials for television and even bakes for celebrity clients! Her silver hair is tied back in a severe bun, and her face is stone cold.

I feel like I'm going to throw up. There's no way she'll announce me as the winner.

"Before I announce first place, I wanted to thank all the competitors for coming out today," she starts. "Some of you have traveled very far to bake with us and we appreciate it, especially with Christmas being two days away."

She goes on to say how baking is important, and how it brings people together. But the longer she talks, the more I vibrate with anxious energy.

Enough. Please just say who the winner is!

"Without further ado, the first place prize of \$50,000 and an hour-long special on the Fresh Network goes to Noel Lombardi of the Bronx's Sugar & Spice."

My brain explodes and the whole world freezes. My white chocolate, macadamia nut, and cranberry cookies won first place. I beat out professional bakers from all over the country.

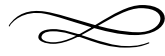
Ani screams with excitement and Tomas gathers us all in a group hug. He kisses my cheek.

"Little baker, go. Get your prize," he whispers, nudging me to the front of the stage.

I get up there, barely holding back my happy tears because I feel like I'm on top of the world. I have an amazing daughter and a man who's perfect for me. We're all safe and sound, and I just won the opportunity of a lifetime.

I'm not sure life can get much better than this.

Epilogue



Noel

New Year's Eve is always better when you get to wear your first-place ribbon. Tomas, Ani, and I spent Christmas at his—sorry, *our*—cabin. Tomas is insisting we move in with him right away, but I want to take it slow.

We met up with my mom and Val to bring in the new year and decided to tell them an abridged version of events, minus him murdering someone. My brother wasn't thrilled to welcome an ex-Russian mobster into the family at first, but once he saw how happy he made Ani and me, he changed his mind. He's much more open-minded than he gives himself credit for.

My mom loves Tomas, which isn't a surprise. She thinks he's the perfect partner because of how serious and protective he is. She told me he's just like the possessive, growly alpha heroes in her romance books.

I love Tomas too. He barreled into my life and changed it for the better.

"The ball is going to drop soon," he tells me, pulling me out of the kitchen and toward the TV. He hands me a glass of champagne, and I watch the bubbles fizzle.

"Thank you..."

"For what?" he asks in that thick, sexy accent.

“For coming into my life. You were unexpected, but I’m so glad you’re part of our family now.”

He wraps me in his strong arms as we face the TV.

“Oh! The ball is gonna drop!!!” Val shouts.

We all count down from ten together. Halfway through, he breaks away from me, drops to one knee, and takes my hand in his.

“*Malysh*, I want to be with you for the rest of my life. The day I saw you in the bakery, I knew you were mine. We can raise Ani together, run the bakery, and have so many more moments like this. Make me the happiest man alive. Please say yes?”

Without even thinking, I know my answer. “Yes!”

I can’t say I’m stunned. Tomas moves a mile a minute, and I should have seen this coming. Ani jumps up and down, clapping her hands.

“Tom-Tom!” she screams, jumping into Tomas’ arms. “I can’t wait to watch cartoons together every Saturday morning!”

“This is so exciting!” Ma gushes.

My brother shakes Tomas’ hand, welcoming him to the family.

“Are you happy, my little baker?”

If you would have asked me this question a month ago, I would have said no. I was a single dad who struggled to balance everything. Who never thought he would find love.

“Yes, I am. I love you.”

Tomas kisses me, holding my face in both his hands. “I love you too.”

The End

Watch out for next year's book. Valentino gets his own HEA
<3

About The Authors

A.N. STAUBER

USA Today and International Bestselling author, A.N. Stauber, is a wife and mother to three children. She enjoys writing dark romance novels with strong female leads, always with a HEA. When she isn't reading and writing, she spends her days with her family. Other passions include: crafting, horseback riding, and procrastinating.

You can find more information on her works and social media platforms here: <https://www.linktr.ee/authoranstauber>

M. BONNET (MAE MALONE)

M. Bonnet is a calamitous, chaotic catastrophe on a literary rampage. She started her writing journey because she wanted to see more women like herself in romance books—curvy, sarcastic, and slightly off kilter— so she jumped into paranormal why choose with MM romance.

Now she also writes MM romance and mafia romance under Mae Malone, her other pen name.

Check out The Yule Log, an MM holiday novella. Get it here:
<https://books2read.com/TheYuleLogMBonnet>

Check out her work here:
<https://books.bookfunnel.com/bonnetmalone>

Follow her: [https://linktr.ee/mbonnetauthor?
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