

DEVIANT VIRTUE

THE MASTERMIND
BOOK 1



KAT KING

DEVIANT VIRTUE

THE MASTERMIND I

Kat King

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*To all of my girls who aren't afraid
of embracing their dark side.
This one is for you, this is a safe place for you.*

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CONTENT WARNING

The entire Mastermind series will be dealing with darker themes. Deviant Virtue will definitely be the lightest book of them all yet still very dark.

This book contains gore, torture, alcoholism, abuse both mental and physical, sex scenes and it is very graphic.

Your mental health is very important, if any of these are triggering you please do not read this book, or proceed with caution at your own risk.

PLAYLIST

[Available on Spotify](#)

Ruelle – Game of Survival
Bad Omens – The death of peace of mind
Aespa – Hold on tight
Margo – Play pretend
Taylor Swift – Mastermind
Adele – Skyfall
Missio – Twisted
Egzod – Royalty
Halsey, SUGA – Diablo IV
Madalen Duke – Love into a Weapon
Astral – Half Light
Teya Dora – Dzanum

She was divinity, he was her cultist.

When Ekaterina Kalashnikova witnessed two men being murdered, she never could've imagined the culprit would become her worst nightmare.

Ekaterina lived her life, filled with men that thrived in the dark, yet none of them struck her quite like Davorin.

After all, when they first met, it resulted in an inevitable clash of their worlds. So magnetic, intense and compelling.

And before she knew it, her life was filled with only him. A masked man with serpentine eyes, secrets, and an obsession.

With coincidences continuing to pile on top of one another, his obsession fuels her ardor, and soon she begins to realize that she wants him maybe more than she should.

After all, a coincidence took a whole lot of planning.



ONE



WHY did people like this?

Loud music that promised permanent damage to my ears, yelling over the tables, obnoxious laughing, the stench of sweat. From time to time, I felt

someone accidentally push me, as our spot was close to the dance floor. People were grinding against each other, almost having sex in the middle of the club, and not a single person was sober.

The neon lights were flashing nonstop. I tried blinking, harshly, to prevent my eyes from throbbing, though it was in vain. I was no stranger to clubs and nights out; however, the places I usually frequented were a little... *cleaner*.

The club—Lunax—was located in one of the sketchier parts of the city, where no rules existed and safety was an alien concept. My friends had wanted to visit—they'd heard ages ago that if you needed any drugs, this was the place to get them.

It was laughable.

I had access to any drug they could think of, on speed dial, but I'd thought this might be a good change. Our table was filled with empty bottles, glasses, and cigarettes. The music was blasting, each second seeming louder than the previous one.

The songs that were played were unknown to me. Aside from my tedious hours at university, my family didn't allow me any opportunity to listen to music as a hobby. By the time everything was done for the day, I wanted nothing more than to sleep. And I liked to sleep a lot, at least ten hours.

"You're too stiff," Tiana yelled in my ear.

I took a step back, adding distance between us. My personal space was not to be invaded, by anyone, at any given time. People had lost their lives over much less, and until this point, Tiana had been good at following the rules.

"I think I just need to get some fresh air," I stated, keen to avoid any further argument.

She wanted to speak, but I grabbed my lighter and the pack of Dunhills I'd brought. Tiana's mouth closed when I walked past her, shutting down any possibility of her coming with me.

I could see everything, all the strangers having the time of their lives, and many of them got in my way as I moved towards the back exit of the club. I felt myself growing upset with the situation but, after a moment, reminded myself that I wasn't able to control it, therefore there was no point in getting agitated.

A few slow breaths slid past my lips as I pushed away a man who

wouldn't move out of my way. He was standing directly in front of the door , and since he was four times my size and wasn't alone, I was unable to walk around him and his buddies.

Also, why was I supposed to go around him? He stood at the exit—he should've been more observant of his surroundings—but given his attitude, body language, and clothes, he was someone semi-important around here and obviously didn't feel the need to bother with anyone else. His watch was expensive-looking and his aura told me he was trying to assert dominance.

I tapped his shoulders twice, then pushed him out of the way when he continued to ignore me.

I used all my strength, and although it did nothing to hurt him, it moved him four steps and would definitely leave a bruise or two. He seemed surprised to see me standing behind him once he recovered from the blow. His left eyebrow rose slightly, and he grinned, showing a row of crooked teeth.

I rolled my eyes, knowing damn well what hideous thoughts were running through his mind. For one, he was a man. No man ever saw a pretty girl in a club and didn't think about fucking her. And besides, I could see his erection from a mile away. Disgusting pig.

The moment I stepped outside, a chilly night greeted me. I took a deep breath, my lungs burning slightly from the cold December air. I shivered, and goosebumps rose all over my body. I'd forgotten to take my coat with me and was suffering the consequences.

I took a few steps towards a dark alley on the left. The club was soundproof, and the evening was quiet. I grabbed a cigarette and brought it to my lips, using the other hand to light it. The moment the nicotine was in my body, I leaned against the wall, closing my eyes when I felt my muscles loosening.

It was my own fault for indulging Tiana's fantasies about becoming more social, and also for agreeing to come to this place. Instead of having a great night's sleep, I was outside a trashy club after midnight with nothing but a minidress on.

I was easy prey, and I knew it.

Five days ago, it had been my twenty-fourth birthday. Tiana wanted us to spend the day at a spa or shopping, then have a nice dinner before hitting a club. She was more than disappointed when I told her I had a ball to attend instead, since my three brothers wouldn't allow me to spend the big

day in a club.

She was mostly disappointed about not receiving an invitation to said ball. How was I supposed to tell her that my oldest brother is the Pakhan of the Russian mafia, the middle brother the biggest arms dealer in Russia, and my twin a drug trafficker? And that the majority of the guests would be bribed politicians, more mafia men, and general criminals?

It was only an excuse. I hadn't been home for a long time, and each year, they held a ball in my honor. Tiana didn't know that though. I didn't want to reveal that part of my life and certainly didn't want her to pity me. And when I'd told her she wasn't allowed to come, after begging to go for over a week, she'd finally caved and stopped asking.

It wasn't a safe place for her, and her blood wasn't something I wanted on my hands, at any time. Unless I killed her myself. It wasn't because I would've felt remorse; more because she was yet to do anything inconvenient.

I got bored of people easily, and thus far, everyone had understood that I didn't want to have them in my life for long. Tiana was an exception, as she was handy to have around, and she told good jokes. I considered that a win-win.

My train of thought was interrupted by a sudden noise. I pushed myself off the wall, exhaling the nicotine-laced smoke in a series of nine circles. I chuckled to myself upon realizing that I'd just beat my previous record of eight.

I began to walk in the direction of the noise, but it took me a few seconds to understand that I was hearing human pleas, screams of agony. I blinked and paused. Was this truly something I wanted to get involved with?

I sighed and turned back around. I had no strength to deal with half-dead people, nor the desire to do so. However, I was curious as to who was doing all this work on such a cold night. I returned to my previous spot and lit another cigarette, patiently waiting for someone to come marching out of the dark alley.

It was almost pitch-black. The only visible thing was an overflowing dumpster that smelled worse than the sweaty people in the club, and the mystery had my head spinning. I was too curious for my own good, but once I started obsessing over something, there was nothing I could do to prevent it, until I found something else to consume me.

The vapor came out of my mouth unexpectedly. It was slow, and the

smoke managed to get in my eyes. It burned like a little bitch, but I was unable to blink, or to move from where I was standing. My gaze was glued to the dark-green eyes that were now shining through the darkness, lit by a slice of moonlight as the clouds parted.

Still, unmoving, without a blink. Like evergreens deep in the forest at night.

They sparked when our gazes met, and a deep electricity ran through my body, my mouth parting ever so slightly.

A minute passed.

Two.

Neither of us moved; neither of us broke eye contact.

I backed up against the wall, and the person decided to reveal themselves. My breath hitched in my throat, and the anticipation made my heart skip a beat. It seemed to be happening in slow motion, the steps they took stretching out over what felt like minutes.

A tall man emerged from the shadows, his white T-shirt completely covered in blood. Though its color was now unnatural—a dazzling crimson—it looked good on him, hugging his body like a second skin, his muscles perfectly in view. Who the hell wore a T-shirt in December?

His inked left arm caught my attention for a split second, but it wasn't what stuck with me, or what would appear in my dreams night after night following our encounter.

The man wore a mask. It reached just above his lips, with three holes, for his nose and eyes. The mask itself was fashioned like a skull, though it was more than that. I knew real white gold when I saw it—it had definitely cost more than two of my cars. The end of it, where his lips were, was made out of teeth. I wanted to believe they weren't real, but my gut told me differently.

He wore a pair of gloves that matched the mask, bones engraved on his fingers, made from the same material—except they were covered in red.

Why was he staying silent? I expected him to end my life there too, as I was a witness to his crime.

Instead of confronting me though, he stopped a few feet away. He was taller than me, at least a foot and a half. He took out a cigarette from his pocket and lit it with his bloody hands.

I tilted my head to the side as the first thought that occurred slipped past my lips. “Is the mask glued to your face?”

He blinked. Then he laughed.

His laugh was bone chilling, deep and thrilling. His white teeth shone beneath the moonlight, and his eyes twinkled with viciousness. I felt genuine fear as he took another step towards me.

“I don’t think that’s what you should be asking me.” His voice was everything I’d expected. Rough, dangerous, and villainous.

“Well, that’s my question.” My voice was shaky, and he caught on to that. A small smirk tugged on the corner of his lips as he lowered his head slightly, that murderous stare now directed towards me.

“Aren’t you afraid?” he retorted, ignoring my previous question.

I took in a sharp breath once he got too close to me. I was frozen in place, unmoving beyond a few shivers.

“I won’t tell anyone about what I saw.” Technically, I hadn’t really seen anything to report to the police, though given the influence of my family, I could easily have had him locked up anyway. However, I had no face to report.

He chuckled deeply. “That wasn’t my question.”

I provided no response. I was unable to take my eyes off his—they lured me in, devoured me from the inside out, until there was nothing left. The depth of his stare was all-consuming, too much for me to handle.

“What’s your name, little lion?”

The nickname caught me off guard. I swallowed harshly as he closed the distance between us. Slowly, as he waited for an answer, he took the cigarette from between my fingers and dropped it to the ground. His followed suit.

“Ekaterina Kalashnikova.”

It was as if someone had tipped an ice-cold bucket of water over him. He took a few steps back, almost as soon as the words left my mouth. Eyes wide, his lips pulled into a thin line, he stared at me, all traces of amusement gone. His eyes traveled down my body, before he returned his gaze to my face.

“Fuck!” he yelled, startling me. “Get out of here—now.”

He left no room for argument, though I didn’t want to challenge him. I simply returned to Tiana and the others inside.

The whole encounter stuck with me. I kept it on replay for the next fifteen minutes, before I told Tiana it was time for us to leave. As usual, she didn’t argue. She was the kind of person who knew better than to challenge

me, especially once I'd made up my mind about something.

I felt the hair on my neck rise at the thought of sleeping alone in my apartment, so instead, I took Tiana's couch for the evening.

But in the end, it didn't matter where I went—sleep wouldn't come. All I could see when I closed my eyes was his mask, his gloves, and that taunting smirk. The entire night I tossed and turned, shivers wracking my body, but when I opened my eyes, all that greeted me was a deathly silent apartment, a lone lamp the only source of light, yet I had a feeling, deeply inside me, that there was someone else there.

It was the first time in years I'd had a nightmare.

A nightmare I didn't want to wake up from.

TWO



TIANA tried her best at making a delicious breakfast. And it was a great meal—the best I’d had in a while. Cooking was one of the basic survival skills, but one I didn’t possess. I’d lived alone for the past two years and

mainly had takeout food, or I sneaked into my brother's house to eat the food his chef made for him.

I was raised by a woman named Nadia, and mainly, she was my nanny. She was the nanny of my siblings as well, and although she tried desperately to teach me how to cook, I was never interested, because we always had chefs when I was growing up. That was, until I started living alone and realized it would've been beneficial to pay attention.

I looked away from the plate and focused on Tiana, who was sitting across from me, with the same meal in front of her. Her eyes glinted with excitement while she waited for me to try her food.

It wasn't anything fancy, but it was tasty. Pancakes stacked together, toasted bread with some scrambled eggs. I tasted it, and the warmth filled my mouth as my stomach made an ugly sound. Embarrassed, I swallowed quickly and hoped she wouldn't comment on my blushing cheeks.

"Do you like it?" she asked, doubt lacing her tongue as the smile slowly faltered from her face.

"It's good. Thank you," I replied.

A look of relief washed over her soft features, and another smile appeared. Tiana was the only person outside of my family who'd stuck with me. Although her cheeky, bubbly personality had made me want to cut ties with her multiple times, I hadn't, simply because she wasn't trying to change me and accepted me for who I was.

"It's a good thing we left that place when we did," she mumbled, her mouth full of food.

Wincing at the sight, I couldn't help but be curious. "Why?"

She swallowed. "Because the cops busted it twenty minutes later. Apparently, a couple was going into the alley outside—to fuck probably—and they found two dead bodies there. The bodies were still warm." The last part was whispered.

"Why would anyone touch a dead body willingly?"

Tiana shrugged. "Beats me."

We were both quiet for a few minutes, but as time passed, I noticed her squirming in her seat. She'd hold eye contact for a few moments before her eyes returned to her plate. At this point, she was no longer eating, just playing with the leftover food.

"What is it?" I asked, getting annoyed by the way her fork was scratching the plate. It gave me goosebumps, and I didn't like that feeling.

“You know,” she said quietly, “sometimes I wonder why I’m even your friend. You’re always so... cold.”

I blinked. “No one’s forcing you. And that wasn’t what you wanted to ask, was it?”

Tiana rolled her eyes. “Yeah, you’re right. You went to grab a smoke last night and you were gone for quite some time...”

I tilted my head to the side, and my stare made her uncomfortable. “I didn’t kill anyone last night, Tiana.”

Her eyes went wide, mouth agape. She stuttered for a few seconds before she managed to get the sentence out. “Dear Lord, that’s not what I’m asking! Jesus Christ. I wanted to know if you saw anything?”

“Like what?”

“Anything about those two men getting killed, jeez.”

“Oh,” I said. “No.”

“Seriously?” Tiana sighed, and I was unable to understand the reason behind her disappointment. Not only was being a witness to a crime scene tiring, it would’ve meant I could’ve ended up just like the two victims.

And I was beyond confused as to why I hadn’t ended up like them.

That man’s demeanor had changed the moment I’d said my name, which pissed me off. I wanted to know what would’ve happened if I’d just been a stranger, with no relevance in this world.

Would he have spared me regardless, or would I have ended up in a ditch somewhere?

He knew who I was—or who my family was at least. I suspected he was smart enough never to approach me again, and I was never going to speak of what had gone down that night. It was going to remain a secret between the two of us, mainly because he irritated me.

“Tiana, can I borrow some of your clothes? I’m in a rush,” I asked, though it was a rhetorical question. Tiana waited for the day I asked her to do anything for me, and judging by the beaming smile she gave me, I was going to get my outfit.

My brother had texted me, asking to meet for brunch. Aleksei never allowed tardiness, hence I had no time to drop by the apartment and grab clothes of my own.

I despised wearing something that didn’t belong to me though, and Tiana’s clothes felt too tight. She was smaller than me, both in height and weight, and they suffocated me. I barely made it down the street before the

desire to rip the garments off my body nearly overwhelmed me.

Three blocks from Tiana's apartment there was a nice store. I walked in and got dressed head to toe in new things. It was a simple outfit—a black blazer with matching pants; a belt and blouse in the same color.

I paid for everything and had a new outfit shipped to Tiana, as a thank you for lending me her clothes. Sadly, they'd ended up in the trash, but the new ones would fit her better and were prettier—a win-win situation.

I left the store and started walking to the restaurant. A few minutes into the journey, I felt someone behind me. It was a busy street though, and I thought my mind might be playing tricks on me. I spun around almost immediately, but no one was in sight.

My instincts kicked in. A few slow, deep breaths slipped past my lips as I continued to walk slowly, aware of my surroundings. Someone's eyes burned into the back of my head, and I couldn't shake off the feeling of terror that crept up my body. Yet no matter how many times I turned around, no one seemed to be paying any attention to me.

I was afraid, yet I was thrilled too. It was a twisted infatuation that didn't seem to be dissipating any time soon.

And yet, as I continued to walk, those eyes were still on me, following me all the way to the restaurant.



The place Aleksei had chosen was one of the best in the Upper East Side, a place we often frequented. Usually, it was with our two other brothers, so it was a surprise to see him alone. I got chills as I approached the table, noticing my favorite dish neatly placed in front of the empty seat.

Two of his men, Ivan and Vladimir, were standing either side of him. They both greeted me before averting their eyes once more.

Aleksei tapped his finger on the table, and our eyes locked. His expression was serious—his lips were pulled in a thin line, his brows

narrowed. He didn't utter a single word as I sat down, and I returned the favor by blankly staring at him.

"Would you care to tell me what you were doing in that hole last night?"

I knew what this was about. Aleksei swore his men were tailing me solely for my protection, yet, when that masked man had appeared, none of them had been around. I felt myself growing displeased at the tone he'd used.

"No," I stated. "I just went to have some fun."

He raised one brow, amused. "Then you wouldn't know anything about your security vanishing from this world?"

"What are you talking about?"

He sighed before taking a sip of red wine. It was one of his favorite drinks, but I couldn't stand the taste of it. Like my favorite brother, Dominik, I favored whiskey. I wasn't a big drinker; however, a glass or two of good whiskey always gave me the extra push to pursue whatever had driven me to drink in the first place.

"You weren't answering your phone. When I called them, they weren't answering either. Ivan only found their cars, but not them."

I shrugged. "Maybe they just... quit."

He laughed. "You and I both know that's not the case."

I sighed and waved the waiter over. "I know. I haven't seen them since we came back to New York. I wouldn't be too worried though," I said as the waiter, whose name tag said Josh, brought the whiskey I always had here. "If something happened, you'll know. Dead bodies never stay hidden for long."

"You don't know what happened there, do you?"

I shook my head. "No."

I had an amazing poker face, and no one was ever able to tell when I lied. I'd had a few tells, but over the years, I'd learned to master them, which Aleksei wasn't fond of—he hated when things were out of his control.

To divert his attention, I turned the conversation around to him. "So, a little birdie told me Father wants to marry you off."

His jaw clenched. "I don't know who dared say that, but it's not true."

I laughed. "Father told me himself. Something about him giving you enough time to grieve."

If looks could kill, I had no doubt I would've been dead the moment Aleksei's eyes locked with mine.

Our father, the previous Pakhan, wasn't a generous man. When it was nearly Aleksei's time to rule the kingdom that had been in our family for generations, he'd found him a bride. Though it was more like Aleksei had seen a damsel in distress and decided to be her hero. It was an arranged marriage, a marriage of convenience, with a wonderful girl named Davina.

No one understood how she'd fallen in love with him. He'd taken her away from everything she'd known and loved, and yet, despite him putting her through hell, she'd fallen for him. And from the moment Aleksei saw her, she was his. It was a possessive kind of love, and when an attack happened, she didn't think twice before jumping in front of open fire to save my brother.

She died later in hospital that evening.

It had been two years since that event, but Aleksei still wore the wedding ring he'd chosen for her, as if wearing it would bring her back.

"That's not something you should worry about, Kaya."

The bastard knew how to provoke me—which strings to pull. Our mom was the only person who'd called me Kaya, because it was the name she'd always wanted to give me, and I never liked it when another person used it.

I ignored the flame of anger that had built inside me. "Isn't it? You're still my brother, and I don't want you and Father fighting."

"Leave Father to me, and let's talk about your return to Russia."

I choked on my whiskey. "I'm sorry?"

"Father wants you back in Russia before summer. You've had your fun here; now it's time for you to go home."

I wanted to kill him. Instead of acting upon the intrusive thought, I laughed it off. "I have a life here now. I'm not a kid anymore, and the only way Father will get me back home is in a body bag."

Aleksei remained quiet for the next few moments as we had our meal in peace. I wasn't hungry, given I'd not long eaten breakfast, but neither was he it seemed. He barely touched his food but continued to drink the wine—half of the bottle was gone by the time I finished my meal. I hated wasting food.

"I'll assign new guards to you, Kaya."

I ignored the nickname. "Is that necessary? I've been here for years and not once have I needed them."

"Recently, someone who was off grid returned, and he isn't a man to be taken lightly."

I hummed. “So, another person you fucked over who’s out for revenge?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Those people are all six feet under, but this one is unpredictable and as much as I hate to say it, good at what he does, and I don’t know what ideas might run through his mind.”

“Who is he?”

“A very dangerous man.”

My eyes were glued to the scar on Aleksei’s face. It started underneath his left eye and dragged down to his chest, a relic from the battle that had left his fiancée dead.

“He goes by the name of Davorin. We’ve never crossed paths, but I know he’s a highly intelligent trained hitman. Who knows who might hire him now that he’s active again?”

The name made me freeze. Aleksei noticed but, aside from giving me a skeptical look, didn’t comment further. It took no longer than two seconds for me to regain my composure, and I let out a small laugh.

“God of death? That’s the name he chose? Fine. If you think the guards are necessary.”

Aleksei spent the next hour and a half trying to convince me to silently go back home and not put up a fight. Once he realized there was nothing he could bribe me with, and that trying to manipulate me was useless as I saw right through him, he gave up. For the time being anyway.

The new guards were going to be assigned later in the day and wouldn’t bother me unless I requested their assistance or it became necessary. I never needed them—I was capable of taking care of myself.

The walk back to my penthouse was much needed.

The crisp air hitting my face was refreshing after having eaten so much in such a short amount of time. Tiana called me, and we talked for the next ten minutes. Apparently, she loved the new clothes I’d sent her, which, in a way, made me content.

By the time I arrived home, my fingers were frozen from holding the phone to my ear. It was a struggle to fold them—it felt as if they were going to snap.

The moment I stepped into my apartment, I turned towards the small cabinet to the left of the door. I was quick to pull out my gun and flick the safety off. My eyes narrowed as I took a few careful steps into the living-room area.

Someone was in my apartment. My body grew tingly, and the smell of an unknown cologne hit my nose.

The air shifted as soon as I closed the door behind me. I was silent, almost unmoving. I couldn't place where the twist in the pit of my stomach had come from, but the feeling had never let me down, so I wasn't about to ignore it.

Vile thoughts and images flashed behind my eyes, and my bottom lip trembled as shivers ran down my spine. I tried to push the fear to the back of my mind, yet it seemed impossible to get rid of it completely.

It was dark inside. I found the first switch and turned it on.

No one was in sight. I searched through my home, looking for any sign of a break-in. Aside from me and my housekeeper, no one had access to it—no one else had a key. I searched through my home with a fine-tooth comb—twice, because once wasn't sufficient. A small sigh of relief escaped me when I found no one.

The only place left to search was my room and guest rooms, which were located on the second floor, but I wasn't bothered. I had my gun, and I'd had enough practice that I knew I could pull the trigger faster than any opponent.

And as I started up the stairs, I felt a strange sense of safety and fear overwhelm me. It was a bittersweet feeling, one I couldn't explain. Was it possible to feel exhilarated by the possibility of an intruder being hidden in plain sight, in a place I called home?

It was dangerous to think like that, but danger brought me satisfaction. It was a darkness flowing through my veins; a delirium born of being so close to death. One I wanted to drown myself in, to become one with the sin.

A slow, wicked grin tugged on the corner of my lips as I found myself standing in my bedroom.

A set of pitch-black silk sheets were on my bed. The pillowcases matched them perfectly. It was Sunday, and my housekeeper had weekends off—and they weren't the sheets I'd put on yesterday before I went out. My eyes moved to the left, and I saw a candle burning. It looked like it'd been lit not long ago.

It smelled like freshly cut grass in the spring. I inhaled the scent, wanting to smell nothing else for the rest of my life. It was terrifying, yet it was satisfying to know I'd been right.

Someone had been in my apartment while I was gone.

In the middle of the bed, a small object, the size of my fingernail, shone.

It was a dice. It looked like it was made of pure gold, and the number on top was two.

My heart began to race. With shaky hands, I took it in my hands. The cold object made me flinch. So small, it could be destroyed within a second, yet so pretty that I wanted to keep it forever. A souvenir.

I took some time inspecting it, but I couldn't understand the meaning behind it. Whatever it was, I was eager to figure it out though. To see who was brave—or crazed—enough to play silly little games with me. No matter how long it took, I was going to find the person who'd done this, because there was nothing I loved more than games, and I had yet to lose one.

Didn't they know that the Devil always won?

THREE



WHEN I first moved to New York, I'd lived with Aleksei. I was only eighteen and had just enrolled in the university that had been chosen for me. Quite frankly, I hadn't cared which one it was, as long as it had a good

background. But instead of choosing medicine, as my family had wanted, I'd opted for psychology.

From a young age, I'd been able to read people, knowing almost exactly what they thought or felt, but my classes would teach me how to do it better, quicker, and how not to make any mistakes. I never planned on using the degree to work in the field, as dealing with people who needed help was definitely not something I wanted to spend the rest of my life doing.

It was tiring.

Since I graduated, I'd found myself easily bored. Nothing kept me occupied for long, not even the various new hobbies I found. I'd thought about getting a PhD, but that would require a lot of work, a lot of studying, and I didn't have the patience—or the need for one.

So aside from reading a lot of psychological thrillers, I'd been struggling to find a good pastime. That was, until the incident at the club—and what happened afterwards. It had been a day since I'd found the dice on my bed, and a new set of sheets, and I'd been unable to think of anything else. It had slowly become an obsession, and I couldn't help my fixation on the strange man I'd encountered.

My intuition was strong, and when Aleksei mentioned the name Davorin, something had clicked in my brain. It would've been too much of a coincidence to be anyone else. Something in my stomach twisted at the thought of him.

It was dark outside, a snowy night. The snowflakes filled my balcony and made a beautiful pattern on the glass door. I'd grown up in the mountains of Russia, so cold and snow weren't foreign to me, yet no matter where I went, the winters weren't quite as beautiful as they were at home. It made me nostalgic.

Those cold, winter nights had been the only thing that kept me alive. There was something special in the crisp air that made me feel safe. Perhaps it was why I loved seeing snow. It reminded me that no matter how cold it got, it would pass. Yet once it passed, every year, it was a reminder of how quickly my freedom was taken away from me.

A glass of whiskey with two ice cubes was in my hands. I sat on the floor, in front of the fireplace, my laptop on the small coffee table before me. The warmth of the fire provided me with a feeling of safety, for reasons unknown to me.

I had access to Aleksei's database, where all the important

information was kept. Of course, I was only given limited access, as he didn't want me to know everything there was to know. It was annoying, but I couldn't do anything about it, since I wasn't in the family business.

It took me a while, but I was able to find a file on Davorin, whose name still amused me. It was a pretty name, though it wasn't used as much today. I was surprised to know that he was Slavic, probably either Croatian or Russian.

I was disappointed by what I'd found, which was almost nothing. Aside from detailing his approximate age, height, and his signature mask, the database was a dead end. However, I was pleased to learn I'd been right about the masked man and Davorin being the same person.

His method of working included mainly handmade guns, and he worked independently, for whoever offered the most money, with half due upfront.

Davorin wasn't an expert in torture, but he was flexible, and for the right price, he would get information out of anyone at any given time.

Aleksei was right; not a single thing connected Davorin to my family. There weren't any records of them ever meeting, and since I'd now seen pictures of his victims, I was glad. Not that he would be able to kill any of my brothers—they were way out of his league—but he still wasn't someone Aleksei wanted as an enemy.

However, Aleksei wouldn't have warned me about him for no reason. I suspected that they'd met in the past, or even worked together, but it had never been recorded.

A nasty thought ran through my mind. What if Davorin had worked with my father?

As I took the last sip from the glass, I felt goosebumps rise on my arms, and I shivered. My brows creased as I took a good look around me.

Something in the air felt... off.

Brushing off the feeling of being in danger was never going to happen. The investigator in me had to check what it was about, though there was no solid evidence that something was, in fact, happening.

It was just a gut feeling, and it didn't seem like it would be going away any time soon.

I couldn't determine if the person who'd broken into my apartment was stupid or if they had some sort of long-term plan. After the dice had been placed on my bed, there had been nothing else. But now, as I stood up and

glanced around, I noticed a camera in the corner of the living room.

A camera that hadn't been there yesterday.

I approached it and whipped out my phone. I took a quick picture of it and googled it, and the results weren't disappointing. Of course it was a camera with a microphone. It was quite expensive too, and it came in a set of four, which meant there was a high chance of the other three being hidden somewhere in my home.

The second camera was located in my kitchen, right above the stove. The third was in my room, again tucked away in a corner. From that spot, everything in the room was in view. And the last one was in my bathroom.

That fucking creep. It gave me chills, knowing that someone had been watching me, all the time, even in my most intimate moments.

I paused for a moment, and my eyes went wide with realization. If it were me, I'd put a few bugs as well, because cameras weren't hard to find if you knew where to look.

I found bugs in three places I would've put them in, but Lord knew how many I'd missed. It was one of the rare moments I was thankful that Aleksei was paranoid—the bug detector he'd given me had come in handy.

I was getting irritated. I wasn't afraid, but I was curious as to who was stupid enough to do this to me. I wasn't active in the business, but people knew who I was—and what happened to anyone who dared to touch me.

I flinched slightly when my phone rang. Picking it up before looking at the caller ID wasn't the smartest choice, but I was distracted.

“Hey, are you busy?”

I sighed in relief at the sound of Tiana's voice.

“Not at the moment, why?”

“Well.” She dragged the word out. “Do you remember the guys who were with us at Lunax?”

I paused to ponder on the question. “Vaguely. Again, why?”

I could feel her anxiety over the phone.

“Well, one of them, Nick, asked me out. I freaked out and said yes, but it turns out it's a double date. So would you mind tagging along, just for tonight, please?”

“It's not like you're giving me much of a choice.” I rolled my eyes and removed the phone from my ear, her squealing too loud for me to handle.

“Okay, thank you! I'll pick you up in an hour!”

Tiana hung up before I could protest. I preferred getting places on my

own terms, but I let it slide—I was exhausted and had no desire to deal with her disappointment if I rejected her.

I glanced at my wristwatch, already full of regret about accepting the invitation. It was seven o'clock, and by the time the date was over, it would be past eleven. There was no chance I was getting my ten hours of sleep, as I had an important meeting tomorrow.

Tiana hadn't specified what kind of place we were going to, so picking what to wear was difficult. It was worse knowing I had a camera in my room. I could've taken them down easily, but who knew what they might then do to see what was happening in my home if I did?

I acted as if nothing was wrong. It was terrifying taking a shower, but after two minutes under the scorching water, I'd forgotten all about the camera. Hot showers were a way for me to release stress, and it felt like paradise.

Droplets of water fell down my body, the clear glass fogging up almost instantly, and a small sigh of contentment slipped past my lips as I closed my eyes, my mind blank as my breathing became heavy. Goosebumps appeared all over my body, shivers so delightful I never wanted to leave the shower.

Alas, all good things came to an end, and so did my forty-minute shower. I threw on the first pair of pants I saw, which were beige, and a matching blazer, with a black turtleneck underneath. My accessories consisted of a black belt, golden rings, and small earrings. I didn't do much with my makeup—I barely had time to put on mascara and concealer—and pulled my blonde hair into a neat bun.

Tiana was right on time. Another reason I liked her. She was never late without a proper excuse, and that happened rarely. Her bright-red car was right across the road from my apartment.

"Tell me about the other guy," I said to Tiana as soon as I'd buckled my seat belt.

"Do you not even remember his name?" She rolled her eyes when I shook my head. "His name is Luca, he's a few years older than us, and works as an IT tech."

"You're buying me dinner if this one doesn't pay out for me."

She burst out laughing, and then we took off.



These two men were as interesting as a pair of rocks on the side of the road.

Nick was polite enough. His auburn hair was curly, and a few strands fell over his forehead. His bright eyes seemed innocent, and overall, he was cute. However, from time to time, I saw something in his eyes change. They'd go from angelic to demonic, and Tiana was too busy chatting away to notice it.

Luca, on the other hand, was the true definition of a flirt. He had a few jokes up his sleeve that he'd definitely prepared in advance. His blonde hair was messy, giving him an "I just woke up" look that wasn't flattering at all.

If you went on a date, no matter how tedious it was, you were supposed to make an effort, to make it seem like you wanted to be there.

Although Nick and Tiana seemed to have hit it off, he was behaving strangely, and I monitored him closely over the course of dinner. He noticed me observing him, and in an hour and a half, his demeanor faltered only twice, though he tried his best to conceal it.

"Are you always this stone cold?" Luca interrupted my staring, and my eyes snapped to meet his. I blinked as the boyish grin on his face widened at my look of confusion.

"Probably," I replied.

My beverage of choice tonight was sparkly water, as the restaurant's selection of whiskey was terrible. It wasn't an expensive place, and since it was intended to be family friendly, they'd focused more on their food than the quality of their alcoholic drinks. I sipped from the straw, raising a curious brow at him.

"Ouch," he said, seemingly offended. "I prefer my women... with a little bit of emotion."

I chuckled. “I prefer my men successful and wealthy; I guess neither of us will be getting what we want tonight.”

His mouth fell open, and Tiana and Nick paused their conversation, all eyes on me. Trying to be discreet, Tiana kicked me under the table, which earned her a glare from me.

“All right then.” She tried to change the subject as fast as possible. Things had become awkward quickly, though I was unable to comprehend why. Luca had been asking for it. I’d noticed how he was ogling me and had no doubt that his main priority tonight was to fuck me.

How the hell did Tiana find these guys?

“So, how long have you two known each other?” Tiana asked them.

They both turned their attention to her, and she smiled in triumph at having made the situation less tense.

“Our dads went to the same high school and university,” Luca replied, his voice flat. “And they remained close throughout the years, so I guess that’s how.”

Nick shot the same question back. “How about the two of you?”

I smirked as I watched Tiana from the corner of my eye. She blushed; eyes locked on the half-empty plate of pasta in front of her.

“Well,” she said before she cleared her throat. “We were freshmen, and someone started a rumor about Ekaterina being in the mafia, and somehow, people thought it was me. Long story short, she beat me to a pulp until she realized it wasn’t.”

“Mistakes happen, and I apologized.” I felt the need to offer that disclaimer, given the odd looks the boys had thrown my way. “Which I guess wasn’t a great way to prove the rumors wrong, but oh well.”

The conversation dried up after that. I gave Tiana a knowing look, which she returned with an apologetic one. She was definitely buying me dinner.

Luca excused himself to go and grab a smoke—it was the first time tonight I’d found something in common with him. I remained seated for another few minutes, because it would’ve looked bad if I’d followed him immediately. Besides, I didn’t want to be alone with him.

My first stop was the restroom, to wash my hands. I hated the feeling of something being on them, so I cleaned them frequently. The female restroom was right across from the male one, and I stopped in my tracks at the sight of smoke coming out of the slightly open door.

Luca wasn't stupid enough to smoke inside a restaurant, was he?

I pushed the door open and whined in my head.

This couldn't be happening to me, not again. I wanted to punch myself in the face for agreeing to come here. I took a deep breath and leaned against the door frame.

Luca lay on the floor, in a pool of his blood, with the bottom of his shirt on fire. Someone had shot him in the chest, and he'd died on the spot. The pool of blood was growing bigger and bigger, his eyes wide—fear obviously the last thing he'd felt—and his mouth ever so slightly open.

It wasn't a pleasant sight.

I had two options—turn back around and pretend I hadn't seen anything, or notify the restaurant staff. Given that there were cameras outside the restroom, directly pointed towards me, the latter option seemed best. The first one would've made me look suspicious.

As I was about to turn around and leave, something caught my attention. With slow steps, I approached the body, brows creased. I bent down and picked up the small item that rested right beside the place he lay.

It was another dice.

And this time, it was turned to number one.

FOUR



THIS was getting out of hand.

Not only had I managed to attract a stalker, but the man had killed someone. I was unsure whether or not it was because of me or *for* me. Before

feigning distress and running towards the restaurant staff to alert them to the body, I picked up the dice and slipped it in my bra.

What? I didn't have a pocket.

The police officers came after about fifteen minutes. I don't know what annoyed me more—the questions that were irrelevant to the case or Tiana's muffled cries. Why the hell was she crying? She'd met the guy twice and hadn't seen the body. There wasn't much to cry about.

Two police officers—whose names I didn't bother to remember—were directing most of their questions towards me. Granted, I was the only person who'd seen anything, but the entire thing exhausted me.

They asked all the basic questions, and Nick provided no solid answers. No one, aside from me, knew who'd done it, yet strangely enough, the fact that Davorin—because that's surely who it was—had murdered someone in cold blood didn't faze me. Perhaps it was because I'd been surrounded by violence, death, and blood my entire life—I'd built quite a resistance to it. And something about it brought a sense of peace.

All three of us gave our contact information and would be called into the station to provide official statements. Not only was I never going to tire myself with that, but I wasn't going to let Tiana do it either.

She had a fragile personality. Although she tried to put on a brave persona, after a while, I could see right through her facade. She was crumbling on the inside, and I knew the mere thought of death, let alone a brutal killing, was tearing her apart.

It took them an hour to release us, and Tiana drove us home. I didn't care where Nick went, though I could tell Tiana was worried about him. She was silent during the ride, and as much as I hated starting conversations, I did try. She only offered short, emotionless replies. She was numb.

I offered to let her stay at my place for the night, but she declined and left to be with her parents for the evening. It was for the best—if she began to cry whilst in my presence, I wouldn't know how to console her. The last time I'd cried was when I was fifteen.

The first thing I noticed when I got home was that some of my things were misplaced. I never misplaced my belongings. Each item had its place and was always returned to the exact same spot when I was done with it. But now the TV remote that used to be on top of the mantelpiece was on the couch, alongside the book I'd left neatly on the coffee table.

Strange sensations consumed me. I walked up the stairs, silently

praying that my sheets hadn't been changed. The silk sheets he'd chosen were comfortable, but they weren't mine, and I didn't like the feeling of sleeping in someone else's sheets.

The sheets hadn't been changed. But a bouquet of red roses sat on top of my bed. I ignored the oddness of that as I approached. I was surprised another dice hadn't been placed somewhere, though I supposed this was just another game of his.

It was as if someone had flipped a switch in my brain. I froze, the small hairs on the back of my neck rising. I swallowed the lump that had formed in my throat and squeezed my eyes shut.

He was here.

This was no longer an amusing game we were playing. Everything became very real, very quickly, and the thought of meeting the man who entered my home and left as he pleased irritated me. I should've told Aleksei about this.

Inch by inch, I turned my head to the right. My eyes opened of their own accord, and a piercing scream left my lungs. I stumbled backwards, almost falling flat on my ass.

It was him. The man from the club. The one with the mask.

Davorin was here.

I'd been right. He was the one who'd killed Luca and broken into my apartment repeatedly. But why? I was too consumed with my own theories about what it all meant to truly understand that he was here, now, waiting for me.

I tore my gaze away from the floor and met his devil eyes. He had his mask on, a cigarette between his fingers, and was dressed completely in black; he was leaning against the white railing of my balcony, only a glass door separating us.

He tilted his head to the side, a callous smirk tugging on the corner of his lips. Slowly, he brought the cigarette to his mouth and inhaled the nicotine, not once blinking or looking away—as if he was afraid I'd flee the moment he was caught off guard. But this wasn't the kind of man who was able to be caught off guard.

I forced my feet to move forward. I didn't keep any weapons in my room, and chances were, he would get to me before I could get one anyway.

There was no time for me to come up with an escape plan, and I didn't want to provoke him anyway. I had no clue what his motives were, or

how far he was willing to take this... game.

The only truly idiotic decision I made was to approach him first.

I pulled the door open, and the cold December night hit me right in the face.

Davorin wasn't surprised. He threw the cigarette bud off the railing and took a step closer to me.

Neither of us spoke for what seemed like an eternity. My heart began racing like crazy, vexation slowly taking over me. The blood in my veins was cold, and I barely moved an inch. I wasn't the kind of person to be intrigued, yet this man, merely by his presence, managed to get my thoughts racing. I kept thinking how curiosity killed the cat, yet it was something I was unable to control, not when it had reached this point.

I shouldn't have gotten myself into this.

"Did you like my gift?" Davorin asked, breaking the deadly silence.

My brows narrowed, as my body chilled at the sound of his deep voice. It rang in my ears and made a permanent mark in my head. "What gift?"

He chuckled darkly. "The gift in the restroom." He paused, before adding, "And the roses of course."

"I don't appreciate unwarranted gifts from strangers."

"It's a good thing I'm no longer a stranger then."

I swallowed. "Why did you kill him?"

Davorin was silent, and an odd tranquility settled over us. It was piercing, like a knife had been embedded in my heart.

"He looked at you."

"So did Nick, yet you didn't kill him."

Davorin took a step forward, and I took one back. "Nick was more occupied with your friend, otherwise he would've met the same destiny."

"He looked at me," I repeated, a humorless chuckle slipping out. "That's the reason you killed someone? For looking at me?" I didn't realize that my voice had grown louder as I spoke, until Davorin gave me a threatening look.

"I don't like it when people look at what's mine."

My entire world came crashing down. It had only taken a few minutes for me to understand his personality. Davorin was a psychopath, and a psychopath was at his most dangerous when he was obsessed with something, over someone, and that someone was me.

Infuriation like I'd never felt before consumed me. I couldn't breathe; I couldn't see. Alarms went off in my head, telling me to run, to jump off the railing and die, because it would've been a better fate than being the object of Davorin's obsession.

However, I wasn't stupid, and I definitely wasn't naive. His dark-green eyes were terrifying—it was a color that could light up the blackest of places, yet the evil I saw there promised eternal darkness. And in that darkness, where Davorin reigned, there was only one spot left.

Mine.

And he was going to drag me down to hell with him, until I was completely his.

"I'm not an object," I whispered, my voice cracking as a silent tear slipped free. My nine-year record had been broken by a mere sentence from this masked man. Though perhaps it was because the wind was harshly blowing into my face, and my eyes were sensitive. "I'm not yours."

Davorin quickly closed the distance between us, his scent filling my nose until I was only able to breathe him. He towered over me, and the moment he placed his thumb on my chin and forced me to look up, I was gone.

"You can resist it all you want, my sweet Kaya, but by the time I'm done with you, you'll want nothing but to be mine, to live for me."

As my brain tried to comprehend his words, I felt an overwhelming sensation overtake my body, until blackness filled my vision.



By the time I woke up the next morning, nothing but a lingering scent of Davorin's cologne remained. I knew I was alone, his presence long gone. I sat up, leaned against the headboard, and pulled the covers tighter around myself.

I felt sick to my stomach.

Part of me wanted to tell Aleksei about Davorin. He would build me my own personal Fort Knox, and no one would be able to get inside, though it would mean I'd be shipped off to Russia and locked away until Davorin was found.

I doubted they'd be able to track him down with ease.

But another part of me didn't want to ask for help. It was my fault I was in this mess—surely I should be the one to get myself out of it?

I kept trying to figure out how while I got ready. Aleksei had called me and told me he'd sent a car for me. I felt no desire to get out of bed, let alone get dressed up; however, I had an image to maintain. I couldn't disappoint him.

We met at the same restaurant as the last time we'd seen each other. The same table, same staff, and same guards. Even the food and drinks he'd ordered were the same. It was exhausting really.

“How have you been, Ekaterina?” Aleksei asked, hiding a look of anger behind his wine glass.

Suppressing the desire to roll my eyes, I gave him a fake grin. “You mean since the last time you saw me, which was what, two days ago?”

“You know, I called you to discuss something else, but you keep stirring up trouble wherever you go.”

I remained passive. “Elaborate please.”

He raised an eyebrow, amused. “First two men at the club, and now a man in the restaurant bathroom. Are you killing these men?”

My hand trembled for a moment, and Aleksei's keen eye caught it instantly. “I have no reason to. It's just a coincidence.”

He turned serious quickly, and I noticed that the restaurant—which had been almost full when I'd arrived—was growing emptier by the minute. “I don't believe in coincidences. You're sweating, and you were shaking a moment ago. That doesn't happen to someone like you, so tell me, what the fuck is going on?”

“There's nothing going on,” I replied, though given my current state of my mind, I wasn't even slightly convincing. “Did you find out what happened to Misha and Sasha?”

Misha and Sasha were two guards who'd gone missing recently. They'd been assigned to me as soon as I'd turned eighteen, and although I wasn't attached to them, they'd been very capable—highly trained and fully dedicated to my safety.

“Yes, I found them in a ditch outside of the city, Ekaterina.” The timbre of Aleksei’s voice had risen, and the tone made me realize that, aside from his two guards, no one else was around. Not people, not staff.

“In a ditch? You should know me better than that, Aleksei. That’s not my style.”

“You understand that I will find out whatever it is you’re hiding from me, right? And it will happen soon. So I suggest you start talking while I’m asking nicely.”

Aleksei was the protector of us all. If a single hair on my head was harmed, people would pay with theirs, but I didn’t need his protection. It was a pure contradiction of everything that had gone through my head earlier in the day, but now that I’d had enough time to think about it, I’d reached a conclusion—I *would* handle this on my own.

Another contradiction was Aleksei’s behavior. He’d sworn to protect me, yet he was willing to ship me back to where all of my monsters had been born, where all of my nightmares were rooted—*home*. He might have had other plans, but that wasn’t a fantasy I was willing to indulge in. There wasn’t a chance in hell I was going back.

No, I didn’t need to tell Aleksei. Thus far, Davorin had yet to do anything to harm me, aside from staking his claim on me, but that was never going to happen. And because psychopaths had the tendency to find new obsessions, I was going to make sure he found one that wasn’t me.

My eyes found Aleksei’s angry face, and I realized the silence that had fallen had turned deafening. “Don’t worry about me. You and I both know I can protect myself, and nothing is actually happening.”

He didn’t respond.

“But I do need to ask a favor.”

His eyebrow raised, an encouragement to continue.

“I’m not going to the station to give a damn statement, and neither is Tiana. Fix it, make it disappear, I don’t care.”

“It was done this morning,” he announced, with a roll of his eyes.

I nodded, relief washing over me.

I ate my meal in silence, but Aleksei had something else to say. He gave me approximately five minutes of peace before his questions began, and the topic didn’t come as a surprise.

“Father wants you home for Christmas. Do you plan on going?”

“No.”

“Is it because of Mom?”

I stopped eating completely and took a sip of water with narrowed eyes; the stupidity of his question had thrown me off guard. “Why would it be because of her?”

He blinked. “Come on. You haven’t been home since she died.”

“So?”

Aleksei laughed. It was dry and humorless. He shook his head slightly and sighed, “Of course you wouldn’t be interested.”

The conversation died out after that. It was evident that Aleksei still viewed me as a child who was incapable of making decisions for herself. And he was wrong—I didn’t want to go back home because I’d practically run away from an arranged marriage that my father had set up for me. The moment I stepped into Sheremetyevo International Airport, I would be dragged towards the nearest church by my hair.

Father wasn’t mad at me for escaping, not fully at least—he was more enraged that I hadn’t found the man he’d chosen for me to be fitting. But though I’d never wanted to be married, it wasn’t having the man chosen for me that pushed me over the edge; it was the fact that the creep was in his late forties. I was barely seventeen.

Aleksei had been furious that I’d fled—and that Dominik had helped me escape—because it had all been done behind his back, and I’d been left with no guards to keep me safe. Another reason for appreciating my other brother more. In the end, Dominik had been forced to return to Russia, and I’d been stuck with Aleksei.

It had taken a long time for him to get over himself, and to realize that I was no longer a child, despite still being treated like one.

The fact that Aleksei had called for me twice within a few days was only because he intended to leave soon and wanted to try to change my mind about staying behind.

“Aleksei.” I grabbed his attention. “You know Mom isn’t the reason I refuse to go back. And if I do go back, it will happen again.”

He clenched his jaw. “It won’t. Father no longer has a say in it.”

“I’m still worried. He still has a lot of influence.”

“Don’t worry. I promise you—not a single man will lay his eyes on you unless they want them gouged out.”

I was fishing for something. Two out of three of my siblings no longer catered to our father’s needs; aside from my twin brother, who was a

spitting image of our father, no one cared about his opinion, especially not once Aleksei had taken the throne.

“How can you guarantee that?” I asked.

Aleksei’s eyebrows narrowed, and something shifted in the atmosphere around us. I had a lot of plans for my future, and the first one began right now. I stared at my older brother as he studied me. He couldn’t tell what was going through my head and he despised it.

“Fine. Prove it.”

It took him a minute to break.

He sighed. “What do you want, Kaya?”

And the nickname was back.

The only valuable thing my father ever taught me was that you only needed to knock down one domino—if it was the right one, the rest would fall.

I drank my whiskey, allowing an unbearable silence to fall upon us. I never broke eye contact with him; I simply tilted my head to the side, preparing to offer him the biggest decision he was yet to make.

“I’ll go home. Hell, I’ll stay there, but I want something in return.”

“What?”

“I want you to kill our father.”

FIVE



I was definitely out of shape.

I'd been on the treadmill for less than ten minutes, and I was already breathing heavily and sweating like the sun was right above me, melting me.

The last time I'd been to the gym was on November fourth, the previous year, and it definitely felt like it. I wasn't trying to lose weight—I was trying to release all the stress that had built up over the last few weeks.

It had been exactly one month since I'd seen Davorin at the club. After the conversation on my balcony—if it could be called that—he'd maintained radio silence.

I still felt eyes on me wherever I went. It didn't matter if I was spending time in Aleksei's house, which I'd done a lot recently, or in Tiana's apartment, I still felt him everywhere, at all times.

I'd taken the cameras down, and to my surprise, no more had been put up. Perhaps he'd given up on his delusions, or perhaps one of his jobs had got him killed. Either way, it was a great situation for me.

If I ignored the feeling of being followed all the damn time.

I was getting paranoid, and paranoia mixed with anger was a very dangerous combination for me.

My father called, but I never answered. The moment one of his voicemails began to play, I smashed the phone. Of course, each one was filled with threats, adjectives I never wanted to repeat, and threats that my time was running out—that he would be coming for me soon.

It pissed me off. Aleksei hadn't responded to my request, seemingly ignoring it, so it was only a matter of time before I took matters into my hands, because the world needed to be cleansed of Bogdan Kalashnik.

And that was where Davorin came into the picture. If I played it smart, I could use him to my advantage when I made my move. Would my father's death raise suspicion, even incite war within the inner circle? Absolutely, but the aftermath never preoccupied my thoughts. I'd take whatever consequences came my way with open arms, as long as it the consequence wasn't my death. I still had a long way to go, things to do before I died.

I hopped off the treadmill, using the towel I'd thrown over my shoulders to wipe the sweat from my forehead. I struggled to breathe, and the room-temperature water wasn't cutting it. I needed ice, though I knew how bad it was for my body.

My break lasted less than five minutes. I needed to get back on the treadmill before all my newfound motivation vanished. I put in my AirPods, and played one of the first audiobooks I found, *The Silent Patient*.

Listening to the book helped the time pass more quickly; I hadn't

realized an hour had gone by. I was so engrossed in the story that I'd blocked out the pain in my calves and feet. And by the time I was done with my workout, the gym was empty.

I wasn't afraid of the dark, though it chilled me knowing I was the only one there, and it was already past nine in the evening. Why was I doing this to myself? Why the hell was I exercising at night?

I felt appalled by the mere thought of having a shower in the gym bathroom. Lord knew how many people had been there before me, how many germs had been left behind, and how often it was deep cleaned.

I'd driven to the gym as I'd been bored out of my mind and driving always helped me to relax. Aside from coming up with vicious plans on how to end my father's life, and thinking about the stalker who'd gone off grid, there wasn't much else for me to do.

Tiana was still shaken up by what had happened at the restaurant. I didn't understand it. She wasn't the one who'd killed Luca; nor was she responsible for it. And for better or for worse, it had brought her and Nick closer together. They spent every waking minute together now.

When I reached home, I took the longest shower I'd had in a while. I was underneath the blistering water for over forty minutes, and by the time I was done, I only felt like having a drink before going to bed.

I wanted to do more research on Davorin. For whatever reason, the man was constantly on my mind, an obsession I couldn't purge. The paranoia of being under his surveillance twenty-four-seven had become deeply embedded in my brain, but so had a fear that excited me.

If Aleksei didn't do what I'd asked, I would need to get Davorin to do it. Money wasn't an issue—I had plenty of it. However, it wasn't something just anyone would agree to do.

But if getting his help meant indulging in whatever fantasy he had, I was going to do it.

What worried me was the possibility he would decline yet remain in my life. He was another person who came into my personal space unwarranted, and having no control over the situation vexed me to no end.

To get the upper hand—at least slightly—I needed to stop waiting for him and go to him first. But that was rather difficult, as he wasn't an easy man to track down.

I opened my laptop, set down a whole bottle of whiskey beside it, and dialed a number on my phone. There was only person who would be willing

to help me, at least as much as she could.

“Did I wake you?” I asked once she picked up. I didn’t really care if I had, but it was a polite conversation starter.

“Are you mental?” she retorted. “Of course you woke me up. It’s five in the morning here.”

I clicked my tongue against the roof of my mouth. I’d forgotten about the time difference between New York and Moscow, and Xenia wasn’t thrilled.

“Ah, I apologize.”

Xenia snorted at the lack of sincerity in my voice.

“Could you grab your laptop for a moment please?”

She was silent for a moment. “You’ve definitely gone mental. What’s so important?”

“I need you to give me full access to Aleksei and Dominik’s database. Only for an hour.”

“What have you gotten yourself into, Ekaterina?” She sounded more alert now. I heard some muffled noise, and assumed she’d gone to grab the device.

“I just need some information. Switch it back in an hour and delete my searches so no one finds out.”

“Fine,” she mumbled, a hint of anger in her voice. “But if the boss finds out, I’m throwing you under the bus. I value my life more than yours—sorry.”

I chuckled and waited.

Xenia hung up the phone, and four minutes and seventeen seconds later, the full database appeared on my laptop.

I wasn’t surprised to find that Davorin had no official address. The only one I was able to track down that had any connection with him was a small house in a very bad neighborhood. No known associates, no identity. What most frustrated me was that I didn’t know what he looked like.

There was a phone number. I assumed it was the one through which his clients were able to reach him, and I quickly typed it into my phone, saving it for later.

From my quick research, I found out that his birth mother had been found unfit to be his parent and Davorin had been taken by child protective services. His father was unknown, and the woman who’d raised him had been killed by a wealthy politician after their affair was discovered by the

politician's wife. His adoptive father had been very quiet about the whole thing, and after his wife had been killed, he'd never made a public appearance again.

However, there were no records on the person behind the mask, and that was what I really needed. He was estimated to be thirty-four, and I couldn't help but laugh at the small comments attached to his entry. It was definitely Xenia who'd written that he acted like a Gemini.

Exactly one hour after I'd opened his file, it vanished from the screen, and a message from Xenia popped up in the bottom corner.

"I don't know what you're doing, but be careful. He isn't a man you want to cross."

The only debate in my mind was whether to call him right now or wait until morning.

I was unable to wait of course, and I called before I'd been able to carefully think it through.

I put the phone on speaker and placed it on the coffee table in front of me. It rang twice before the call was picked up.

Immediately, I wanted to hang up.

"Now this is a pleasant surprise." Davorin's dark voice echoed around my apartment, and I froze for a moment, a look of disbelief flashing over my face. "To what do I owe this pleasure?"

It was as if the bastard was mocking me. His tone radiated amusement, whereas I could barely get any words out.

"You have my number?" Then I remembered who I was dealing with. "Of course you have my number," I mumbled.

"Of course I do, little lion."

There it was, that ridiculous nickname again. Anger sparked immediately, almost making me forget why I'd called him in the first place.

"I'm in need of your... services."

He was silent for a moment. Then: "No."

I blinked. "What do you mean no?"

"I mean no, little lion."

I laughed. "What kind of a stalker wouldn't kill for me?" *Especially since you've done it before, bastard.*

Davorin chuckled deeply. It was sadistic, almost to the point of making me nauseous.

"Don't provoke me, Ekaterina."

I didn't like being threatened, no matter how much fear I felt. "Or what? You'll break into my home—again? You'll put cameras in every corner—again?"

"Drop the fucking attitude before I fuck it out of you."

That was when I listened to the voice of reason and hung up—immediately. He called twice after that, but I shut off my phone. I tried to resume my evening, but my hands were shaking, and no amount of good books was going to help me calm down.

It was twisted, the thoughts that managed to squeeze themselves into my brain. I'd never been in a situation even remotely similar to this one, and it was eating me alive trying to predict his next move before I made mine.

He didn't want to help me? Well, a deviant plan flashed behind my eyes. But I couldn't do it alone, so the first thing I did in the morning was contact Xenia again, to extract the information I couldn't be bothered with a while ago.

I was curious about what was going to happen when Davorin's hand was forced.

How would he react when there was nothing else to do but help me? I knew for a fact he would be angry beyond belief once the realization dawned upon him.

And it was a scene I couldn't wait to play out.



If there was anything I hated more than tardiness, it was people getting in my way.

There was a signing today in my favorite bookstore. It was usually a quiet place, with only a few people, and a great book selection, but I hadn't been aware of the event or I'd have changed my plans.

I was itching to find a new thriller to read, though today, it seemed next to impossible to get through the mass of people crowding it. There could

only have been about fifty, but the place wasn't all that big. It took every bit of self-restraint not to turn back around and give up on my mission.

A lot of cussing and yelling followed me as I pushed my way through, but once people realized I had no interest in meeting the author and wasn't cutting in line, they slowly stopped talking.

It was a fantasy novel signing. I could read pretty much anything, from thrillers and horrors to erotica and romance, but fantasy books were too tiring. The idea of reading five hundred pages, filled with world building, only to be left on a poorly executed cliffhanger had never appealed to me.

As soon as I was through the mass of people, I made it to the relevant area quickly. Since there wasn't a specific book I was looking for, I took my time looking through the shelves, fishing for good books I'd never heard of.

The loud people in the background ticked me off though. If I had a bomb on me right now, I'd definitely set it off. It was a bookstore, not a goddamn playground.

To top it all off, I'd underestimated the weather today. It had seemed like it would be a lot warmer than the previous week and I'd dressed accordingly, only to be proved wrong as soon as it was inconvenient to turn around and go home again.

I reached for a book and pulled it out. It was called *A World of Curiosities*, and the synopsis intrigued me. It was more of a mystery than a thriller, but I didn't mind—anything would be good enough to take my mind off the issue at hand.

Davorin.

I found it especially irritating that I didn't know what he looked like. Anything could've been underneath the mask, and I was desperate to know who he was. He didn't seem like the type to reveal that though, and I knew that if given the chance, I'd need to snatch the mask off to put my curious heart to rest.

I realized then what was bothering me the most though. It wasn't that he was stalking me—I could've dealt with that easily. It was the fact he was constantly on my mind. Why had he chosen me? Why had he gone out of his way to insert himself into my life after that awful night?

I was broken out of those dangerous thoughts when my phone buzzed. I fished it out of my back pocket and furrowed my eyebrows at the unknown number. I'd received a text message, which I opened immediately.

It was a picture of me. Taken a moment ago, whilst I was reading the

description of the book.

Another text followed suit.

You look good enough to eat.

Chills spread all over my body as I turned around. At least fifteen men in the bookstore matched his height and weight. They were all dressed in coats or jackets, so I was unable to look for Davorin's tattoos, to identify him.

Another message came.

You're looking in the wrong places, little lion.

I shut the phone off.

A few minutes passed, and all I did was try to remain calm. After a lot of deep breaths, I took the book, paid for it, and left as quickly as possible. There was a red lightbulb flashing above my head, warning me how dangerous it was to be on my own.

But Davorin already knew where I lived; how to get in and out undetected. What if all of this was just part of his game?

Not once in a million years would I have thought that anyone could be this obsessed with me, and my contradictions were becoming harder to keep up with. One moment, the attention I was receiving didn't feel too bad and I wanted his help, and the next, I wanted Davorin out of my life forever, as if he'd never existed.

Aleksei would've bent the world backwards to grant me my wish if I ever decided to get rid of Davorin, but it would only prove my father's point that women were incapable of taking care of themselves, always in need of protection.

It should've put me at ease that Aleksei had assigned me new guards. I knew they were around, but I still looked over my shoulder after every corner I turned.

I got home quicker than anticipated, distracted by the irrational thoughts that filled my mind.

"Oh, you're home."

I screamed. I'd been too busy thinking of a man whose face I'd yet to see to notice that my door was unlocked. I took a deep breath, attempting to calm myself down, though it took some time for my heart rate to drop.

"What the fuck? How the hell did you get in?"

Xenia was sitting on the floor in my living room, happily sipping a mug of tea with a pair of glasses resting on top of her nose. Once she noticed that I had no intention of harming her, she grinned and rushed towards me,

opening her arms for a hug.

I stepped aside. “Never touch me.”

The smile faltered from her lips. “I forgot about your inability to experience happiness through human touch. My bad.”

“I don’t like your tone,” I told her, and she raised her hands in surrender before returning to her previous spot. I followed her like a lost puppy. “Why are you here?”

She sighed. “You might want to get a drink for this one—it’s not a social visit.”

I murmured, “It never is.” Then I went and made myself a shot of espresso. It was broad daylight, and day drinking at home, was a line I didn’t usually cross—until there was an occasion.

“Before you threaten to murder me and send my remains to my family,” she said and then carefully made more distance between us, “I’m telling you this against the boss’s wishes.”

“Out with it, Xenia.” I’d raised my voice slightly, and her lips thinned into a line.

She slid her glasses up onto her head, which pushed her short hair back. Her deep brown eyes stared at me, and I saw a flicker of doubt flash behind them before it vanished.

“When you requested full access to our database, I didn’t grant it. I couldn’t do it without the boss finding out, and if he did, he would ask a lot of questions. So I limited it, but I gave you more than the Pakhan does.”

“Still doesn’t explain why you’re here, Xenia,” I drawled, bored already.

“Well, the method you used to delete your searches wasn’t foolproof, and the boss saw it before I erased it completely. I’m here to warn you: Dominik is coming here within the next three days, and he’s both concerned and pissed. What the hell did you get into with Davorin?”

“Dominik is coming here?” A sense of happiness washed over me, a wide grin on my face.

“I don’t think you understand what I’m saying, Ekaterina. He’s coming here to put a bullet through Davorin’s head and drag you back home because of it.”

The smile fell from my face. “Not happening.”

“It’s happening. And you don’t have much time to actually do anything about it, aside from minimize the contact you have with that guy.”

“How do you know I have any contact with him?”

She snorted. “Please, you’re attracted to danger like moths are to flame. And I know your endgame here—it’s too dangerous.”

I tilted my head to the side, enjoying myself now. This conversation was fun, which was unusual, because Xenia never knew when to shut up. “Oh, what do you think is happening here?”

She flinched and visibly swallowed a lump in her throat. “What your father did to you was... inhumane, and those kinds of wounds never fully heal, but killing him will only create a mess.”

I stood up abruptly. Her comment had angered me. I’d forgotten that Xenia was one of the smartest people I’d ever met. Although she was mostly shy, reserved, and spoke little, she was extremely intelligent and had a knack for reading people.

“I don’t care about the mess,” I stated. “If it means giving up my life to end his, then it’s a price I’m willing to pay. Now, you can either make yourself comfortable in the guest room and avoid bothering me, or you can get the hell out.”

A small smile appeared on her face. “Not even with some information on Davorin?”

I sat right back down. “Spill or I am killing you.”

She laughed. “All right, he has no known addresses, right? But I did some digging and, on my flight here, watched a lot of street-camera footage, to try to catch a glimpse of him, once I narrowed down his most frequent whereabouts.”

I nodded and looked at the laptop in front of her as she began to type. “Now, this is the street where it all disappears. I tried tracking his work phone, and it worked enough to give me a building, but I don’t know which apartment it is exactly.”

I grinned. “Give me the address. Tonight, I’m going on a hunt.”

SIX



WHEN Xenia told me she didn't know which apartment belonged to Davorin, I hadn't fully grasped how big the building was. Since I knew for a fact he would never live in such a neighborhood—it was too fancy to match

his personality—I assumed it wasn't a full apartment and more of a studio.

From what I'd gathered from the internet, each of the building's six floors had two of them, all of which were currently being rented out; however, the names of their tenants weren't on any lists. Not that I'd expected it to be that easy.

I thought of coming up with a pathetic excuse, something like my husband cheating and using their studio to do so, so I needed a key to catch him in the act, but quickly dismissed the idea. Aside from the fact that he likely wasn't using his own name, I had no idea what he actually looked like, and describing his hair and eye color alone wouldn't get me very far.

"All right, I got all the names of the tenants." Xenia didn't wait for a greeting once I picked up the phone—she immediately got to work. "And the thing is... no one of his description matches any of the residents."

"How the hell did you find that out so quickly?"

"I called the landlord and had him email me everything. I made up some shit about someone being an addict and using the place to sell drugs, and he sent it right away," she stated as if it was an obvious idea.

I chuckled—her way had worked much better than mine would've.

"So what do we have? List them out for me please." I'd parked right across from the building, my engine still running, and had been watching it closely while I waited for her call. Not a single person had left or entered since I'd arrived.

"Four out of six studios are rented by university kids. I looked into them briefly, and they're all real people. However, one of them seemed... a little bit suspicious. A girl who, up until four years ago, didn't exist. I'm trying to see if maybe her records were sealed, but it seems the most likely explanation. She's in apartment number fifteen."

I hummed. "Fine. I'll check it out," I announced whilst unbuckling my seat belt and killing the engine. "In the meantime, find out when Dominik is coming and if Viktor is coming with him. I'd hate to be surprised."

"Aye aye, captain," she mocked and hung up the phone.

With a sigh, I slipped out of the car and locked it behind me. I checked, for the fifth time, to make sure I hadn't forgotten anything. My gun and a lock-picking set were tucked into my pants. I felt uneasy crossing the street, for way too many reasons; surprisingly, only one of them was related to Davorin.

The biggest concern was why the hell he'd got a lease under someone

else's name. And if that wasn't the case, and this girl was the key, who the hell was she to him? Of course, he might simply have been visiting someone, though his visits seemed too frequent for that. Unless it was his wife.

Was that son of a bitch married?

A low chuckle slipped past my lips, and I shook my head. There was no way a woman existed with enough sanity and patience to put up with that man. His insufferable personality mixed with the danger he brought wherever he went meant he wasn't exactly a chick magnet.

I went inside the building, politely greeting the doorman and an elderly woman who passed by. As great as this neighborhood was, it still lacked. For example, the elevator was out of order, and as someone who wasn't all that athletic anymore, taking too many stairs threatened to wear me out completely.

By the time I reached apartment fifteen, I was barely breathing. It took me a few moments to regain my composure, though my feet were numb. I shouldn't have worn heels. Louboutins were definitely only made to look at, not wear, and certainly not to climb stairs.

I took a deep breath and simply stared at the freshly painted door. The number was white, contrasting starkly with the deep brown paint.

I inched forward, repeating the mantra in my head. *Everything's going to be all right, Ekaterina*, I chanted. *You need to do this.*

Instinctively, my hand grabbed the metal doorknob. It was cold, as if no one had come here in a while. Though it was most likely wishful thinking, I prayed to God that Davorin wasn't in there.

Get in, snoop around, get out.

I tried twisting the knob first.

I didn't need the lock-picking tools—the door was unlocked already.

Shaking off the anxiety that was slowly building deep inside my stomach, I pushed the door open and let myself in. It was pitch-black, and I struggled to find the light switch for a while. However, the good news was that he wasn't home—I would've felt his presence.

I found the switch, flipped it, and fully closed the door.

I found myself in a small hallway. On my right was a slightly open door, revealing a bathroom, about the same size as the hallway, and in front of me hung a dark-green curtain that tumbled all the way to the floor. I tugged at it, not caring when it fell to the ground, and stepped inside.

Nothing could've prepared me for what was in that room.

I just stood there, blinking. Was this some sort of sick joke? But the moment I remembered who I was dealing with, a sarcastic laugh echoed around the room. Never in a million years could I have predicted this—not in my worst nightmares.

My throat was dry, and I felt fatigue wash over me. I didn't have the strength to push myself forward; instead, I took a small step back and sat down on the cold marble tiles. My heart was beating like crazy, threatening to leap straight out of my chest.

I licked my bottom lip to give it some moisture and simply stared. My hands shook uncontrollably. It was the first time such a feeling had come over me. It hadn't happened once during all of the catastrophes in my past, not even when I'd taken a life for the first time.

I'd never thought that at twenty-four, I could experience a first.

On the wall across from me were all of my academic achievements. From some silly papers I'd done as a freshman at university all the way up to my exams. A copy of my degree was framed, as well as a certificate from when my team won a national volleyball tournament, alongside a copy of the medal I'd received. This was information he shouldn't have had access to, especially since I'd thrown all of this stuff out long ago.

However, it was the right side that stuck out the most.

It was filled with pictures of me. Some were from the club where we'd met for the first time, whilst others were candid photographs of me out and about. All of them had been taken long before we'd known each other.

I would've known if he'd had me on his radar. It was impossible not to.

There were pictures with my deceased mother when I was four, and the most recent pictures of Dominik and me—from last summer—at the birthday celebration of a politician who worked closely with my brother.

I pulled my knees together, hugged them, and rested my head on top of them.

Just when I thought I'd seen it all. A dry laugh escaped my lips. With a sigh, I looked at the wall on the left and found myself completely speechless. And I wasn't someone who was left speechless often. In fact, this was only the second time it had happened.

The wall used to be as bright as a pearl, but it had been used as a canvas, and all over the vast expanse was me. There were multiple drawings glued to it, oil paintings, and some sketches. However, the closer I looked,

the more chills I felt.

Davorin had used chalk for some of his... *art*. And the piece I was staring at now was a rendering of my naked body. Even with chalk on a fucking wall, he'd managed to replicate it exactly—from the freckle I had underneath my left breast to the butterfly tattoo on my left hip.

My mind went into overdrive, and the knowledge I had on psychopaths resurfaced. There was a clear pattern here, and I was infuriated by how long it had taken me to see it.

All of the pictures had been taken from far away by security cameras, street cameras—none of them had been created by him personally—and that got my mind working.

I stood up and walked slowly towards the middle of the room, where a table with a single chair sat.

All of a sudden, when I drew close to the chair, something inside me snapped. It was a rage that had built over time, fueled by reasons unrelated to Davorin. It was hatred, and it was fury. A man whose face I'd yet to see cared more about me than my family ever had.

Granted, his way of caring was dark and vicious. It was an obsession, and obsessions were never easy to move past. Psychopaths had a tendency to get rid of people who no longer entertained the twisted fantasy they'd developed in their sick minds.

My blood ran cold in my veins, my body freezing at the sudden thought. This game had become far more dangerous than I'd ever thought it could.

Davorin was a psychopath. A dangerous man. A stalker. And his object of obsession was me.

Not a single thing here told me he'd get bored of me eventually. Perhaps he was enthralled by the fact I was from a world similar to his. Perhaps it was the chase that had lured him in so deeply, the fact that he couldn't have me. Or perhaps it was all of the above, and the answer was too deviant for me to believe it.

The front door closed with a loud slam, and I flinched. My mind had been so preoccupied with Davorin and his wicked personality that I hadn't registered someone entering.

I didn't need to turn around to know who it was.

He locked the door—I heard the jingle of his key as he removed it from the keyhole. He didn't say a word, and I blinked, a sudden wave of fear

washing over me.

“Snooping around, aren’t we, little lion?” he whispered against my ear then.

Goosebumps broke out all over my body, and I immediately turned around, shocked at how quickly and silently he’d moved.

Words stuck in my throat, and I struggled to get them out. I was terrified of the outcome if I let my tongue run loose. “There isn’t much to snoop around.”

Davorin tilted his head to the side, a ghost of a smile appearing. “Because it isn’t meant to be snooped around.”

I took in a sharp breath. “I’ll leave now.”

I brushed past him, heart hammering against my chest, though my victory didn’t last long. I felt his fingers wrap around my wrist, and then he pulled me right back to where I’d been standing. My back collided with his chest, and feeling his hot breath on my neck made me feel everything I wasn’t supposed to.

“Where do you think you’re going, hm?” His voice was sultry, and for reasons unknown to me, my body decided to react to his provocation, though my mind was still in charge.

“That would be impolite. First you break into my apartment, then you want to leave the minute you get caught?”

“I didn’t break in—the door was unlocked.”

He let out a low chuckle, and it was as if my entire body felt the warmth of his breath. Slowly, with the tips of his fingers, he took my hair and moved it over my right shoulder. I remained frozen in place, anticipating what was going to happen next.

In an instant, his hands were on my waist and he was spinning me round, catching me off guard for the second time.

My heel caught on the edge of the tile, and I found myself losing my balance. But Davorin was right there to catch me and pushed me against the table. His hands gripped the table on either side of me, blocking any chance of escape.

I dared to look in his eyes, the mask suddenly an obstacle I needed to get rid of as quickly as possible.

Davorin caged me in. His proximity made my body temperature increase rapidly, my cheeks flushing at the strong eye contact he held. It was as if a spell had been cast on me—alluring, manipulative, and destructive.

A menacing combination.

“Tell me, little lion,” he said, his voice low and deep, “what brings you here?”

I swallowed the lump that had formed in my throat as I searched for the right words. But picking and choosing what to say flew out of the window the moment his eyes hardened with evident lust.

“Take off that mask,” I demanded.

Davorin blinked slowly, a trace of shock on his face, or perhaps amusement, but it quickly vanished, leaving me to wonder if I’d imagined it.

“Avoiding my questions, aren’t we?” He hummed, pushing his hands nearer my body and leaning in closer. It was my defiance that had him intrigued.

“I said”—I licked my bottom lip—“take off the fucking mask.”

I gazed down at his hands—they were gripping the wooden table so hard that his knuckles had turned white. He was pissed, and I was irritated that I wasn’t speaking to him but to a phony.

“Didn’t I tell you to drop the fucking attitude?”

I blinked. “And I will as soon as you drop the mask.”

“No one has ever threatened me and lived to tell the tale, little lion.”

I snorted. “If you wanted me dead, I would’ve been dead a long time ago.”

Davorin blinked.

Then a loud laugh erupted from the depths of his throat, echoing around the room. It was enough to make anyone step aside and run, hide. Because I was no longer looking at a stalker—I was looking at a predator.

“Dead?” he repeated mockingly. “Death is the easy way. I don’t need to kill you or hurt you to have you fully succumb to me.”

My eyebrows shot to my forehead. “There’s no way I will ever succumb to you, Davorin.”

Chills ran up and down my body whilst I waited for him to respond. But he took his sweet time, torturing me with silence.

His finger traced over my cheek in a motion so slow, it made me desperate for more. He dragged his thumb across my chin until it landed on my bottom lip. I was barely breathing, and he knew he had me flustered.

“You already have, little lion.”

The words were so simple they made me snap. I hadn’t endured years of psychological abuse only to have someone like him come into my life and

flip it upside down in less than two months. I hadn't survived just to have a man come into my life and stake his claim on me, like I was some sort of doll.

Yet, why was it that all reason seemed to vanish from my mind as soon as our eyes met? It was beyond my understanding why such ridiculous emotions would run through me.

"No." I raised my voice, and his finger fell from my lip. "You can't tame me, Davorin. No one can."

He was so quick to respond that it had my mind spinning. "Are you sure about that?"

I nodded. But his low voice made my body tingle, and there was nothing I was sure of in that moment. He could've told me that the Earth was flat, and I would've agreed. That was how much power he already had over me.

"Your body doesn't seem to agree, my sweet Kaya," he murmured. "Because no matter what you say, as soon as I touch you, you lean into it."

I paused, removing my eyes from him for a split second to think about it. Shame came over me as soon as I realized he spoke the truth.

"Tell me," Davorin said, and as if he was my master, I immediately looked back up at him—only to find his hungry gaze lingering all over my body, "if I touched you right now, how wet would you be?"

Was it too terrible that a part of me wanted him to find out?

"I wouldn't be," I responded, my voice low.

A wide grin spread over his face, and it promised nothing but trouble. The more I talked to him, saw him, the deeper the grave I was digging for myself. The more I defied him, the more he wanted to defile me.

But there was nothing to defile. He didn't need to know that though. As long as I was enjoying this twisted game, he would be able to get whatever he wanted from me.

"Somehow, I don't believe you, little lion."

His words came out in a whisper, and it was decided. For the time being, he could do whatever he wanted to me, and I wouldn't complain. Hell, it took all my self-control not to ask for it myself.

His fingers touched my cheek once again, before he slowly dragged them down, stopping at my collarbone.

A thrill ran through my body, the anticipation almost killing me. It was becoming too much too quickly. I'd never been one to quiver under a

man's touch, yet only a slight move from Davorin was enough to turn me into a whining mess.

The sound of a key turning in the front door snapped me back to reality. I was quick to pull out my gun, turn the safety off, and aim. Davorin made no move to stop me—he just raised a curious eyebrow at me.

As soon as the door opened, I shot one bullet into the new arrival's shoulder.

The girl let out a scream as she slumped to her knees, her other hand grabbing at the wound. Blood oozed from it and ran down her arm, ruining the thin jacket she was wearing.

“What the fuck?” She seemed confused to see me, once she'd registered my presence. “Why is she here?”

I ignored her and turned to Davorin. “This is how I deal with intruders. And if you ever come to my home uninvited again, you'll face a fate worse than an injured shoulder.”

He didn't seem too pleased by my statement, though as soon as I walked past him and the girl, I couldn't stop the grin that spread over my face. Our cat-and-mouse game had just begun, and I was waiting for the little mouse to truly come out of hiding.

Perhaps this wasn't too bad. Everyone needed fun from time to time, and I'd just found mine.

SEVEN



XENIA was snoring too loudly. It was the only audible thing in my home, and it was pissing me off. Although the room she'd chosen was on the other side of the hallway, her snoring was still loud enough to keep me awake.

I hadn't slept a wink. I tossed and turned for hours, and all I thought about was Davorin. Of course, the girl had also come to mind often, bringing with her a feeling of displeasure. Something about her irritated me, though our meeting hadn't lasted more than a minute.

The whole thing was making me irked, and I didn't like feeling so uneasy. It never ended well. Someone always got hurt, and quite frankly, I never cared who it was or how badly I'd hurt them, as long as the feeling vanished.

However, I couldn't behave like that. Dominik was coming, and that was huge. I was afraid what our father might have entrusted him with, and once I saw a message from Xenia saying Viktor was coming too, my mood had changed drastically.

I took Xenia to get lunch whilst we waited for my home to be cleaned. It was a small diner, with only a few people around. Xenia had brought her laptop with her, because I needed her skills yet again.

"There's not that much information on her, I'm telling you," she repeated for the fourth time. I'd nagged her to find out everything she could about the girl from Davorin's studio, but she'd come up mostly empty-handed.

"It's impossible that she didn't exist until recently." I was visibly displeased with the lack of information. "And her name isn't helping me at all."

Brianne Emmerson was twenty-two years old, according to the information from the lease, but aside from an address in a building that had been torn down a year ago, there was nothing else to find on her. Not her academic achievements, her medical records, or even her parents' names. All we had was a picture of her, which was rather unflattering, and the fact that it was in her apartment that Davorin and I had met last night.

"Look, I'll keep digging, but only if you tell me why the hell she's so interesting? Aside from Davorin using her to sign a lease that is."

I raised an eyebrow, unimpressed. "Are you sure you want to try bribing me, Xenia?"

Most of the time, Xenia was tolerable, and her extreme intelligence in a field I found boring was helpful. However, no matter how much she denied it, Xenia's loyalty was to Dominik, and Dominik only. It didn't matter that he was the only family member I remotely trusted; he still wasn't a man to be taken lightly, and I knew if it came down to it, Xenia would sell me out to

save herself. Hell, she'd told me that herself.

She gulped. "Don't be mad. I just want to know how the hell any of this happened."

"None of your business."

Xenia sighed. "All right. I won't pry too much, but please, if you feel unsafe at any moment, tell someone. It doesn't have to be me—just tell someone."

I laughed. "I'm capable of taking care of myself, thank you very much."

"I know that," she fired back. "But you get too... hot-headed, princess. And if you get in too deep, you'd rather drown than ask for help."

"Every action has a consequence, and I always take those risks knowing how things might end up."

Xenia released a breath of frustration, and I was confused as to why she was getting bothered.

"If something happens to you, how do you think the people that care about you will feel?"

"Why would I care about their feelings?"

She stuttered for a second, disbelief covering her face. "Because they're your family, and you love them? I hope?"

"Love them?" A dry laugh slipped past my lips. "Absolutely not. I need them—that's the difference. The moment they become an obstacle, I'll have no issue getting rid of them."

I didn't mean killing them. That would be suicide, and at the moment, I had no desire to die. Xenia's eyes bored into mine, searching for any hint that I was joking. Disappointed, she sighed and looked away.

To ease the awkwardness, she returned to the topic of Brianne. "What do you plan on doing to her?"



Xenia knew me too well. I hid my smirk behind a glass of whiskey and took a sip. Our eyes met, and I could see terror flash behind hers when my silence lasted too long.

“Don’t worry,” I told her. “Nothing—yet.”

“You need to be careful though. One of these days, the Pakhan will stop letting your killing spree go unchecked.”

I rolled my eyes. “I wouldn’t call it a spree. More like... practice, to stay in shape, you know?”

“No, I don’t know, and I don’t want to know.”

Xenia’s response made me chuckle. Despite how long she’d been in the business, she still hadn’t grown used to all violence. It was amusing though, seeing her quiver.

Her comfort zone was her office. She used to never leave it, and had a bathroom and a kitchen built in, so she’d be able to keep away from everything else that was going on. It hadn’t worked out though, because things never worked out like you wanted in this world.

It was a world filled with venom, and the only antidote was death. No one left the Bratva alive, and the ones who tried met their maker at the hands of Aleksei himself. He dealt with traitors on an almost daily basis, and he had quite the temper.

Which was why I was getting anxious. Davorin wasn’t going anywhere, and I knew it must have been Aleksei who’d called Dominik—Xenia’s story about him seeing my search history in the database had made no sense. Dominik was a man of class, but Aleksei was a man of violence, and his involvement made the situation unpredictable.

Even so, I was pleased Dominik was coming, though I prayed I wouldn’t be left alone with Viktor, my twin. Physically, he was much stronger than me; mentally, he was a greedy bastard who only sought to further his own ambitions, and that made him the most dangerous of my three brothers.

There was no price he wasn’t willing to pay if it meant getting more recognition from our father. I felt chills at the thought of the lengths he’d plumb to drag me back home.

I could only pray that Davorin would change his mind and accept my offer. If not, I was on my own, and I was doomed.

The atmosphere was too weird.

It was suffocating sitting in silence. From time to time, forks would scratch plates, or someone would drink something, but no one had uttered a word since we'd arrived. I hated the way the air seemed to have thickened; the way their eyes rested on me.

Dominik and Viktor had arrived two days after I'd met with Davorin, but instead of going out and having dinner like normal families did, we'd got together in Aleksei's mansion. All of his staff were off the clock, aside from his guards, who clearly weren't impressed that they had to share their space with Ilya and Danila, two of Dominik's most trusted men.

The dining-room lights were dimmed, a huge candle holder in the middle of the oak table—which was too big for four people—our main source of illumination. Aleksei and Dominik sat at each end of the table, while Viktor and I took a side each.

The three of them were dressed practically the same. The shade of their dark-blue suits varied slightly, though it was noticeable only if you paid close attention. Viktor mimicked Aleksei's hairstyle, but it didn't look nearly as good on him as it did on Aleksei.

Dominik, on the other hand, was a man of his own. It was admirable how his gentle personality and class were never touched or dirtied by the job. His morals were high, and his principles weren't to be tested. He was a man of few words, but the words he did speak were always wise, often dark. It all depended who they were directed to.

An hour passed, and I waited patiently for any one of them to speak their mind and end this smothering silence.

The dinner had been prepared by the best chefs in the country. The table was full of steaks, salads, and desserts that no one was able to eat. They were too sweet. And I hated how much of this food was going to be wasted.

I could feel Viktor's gaze glued to my face. Aside from our eyes, we had nothing in common, despite being twins. I was the prettier twin though. My head hung low, but only because if our eyes met, I'd grab my steak knife and stab the son of a bitch for provoking me.

"Ekaterina." Viktor's voice was taunting. I snapped my eyes shut and tried to block out his words, though it was impossible. "I've heard that you want to kill our father. Is that true?"

My body froze. I opened my eyes, slowly raised my head, and looked at him. He had a smirk on his face and continued eating as if he'd asked me about the weather.

I blinked a few times, an endless well of anger threatening to surface. I'd never been great at dealing with emotions, especially when it came to Viktor, who was supposed to be the other half of me, yet wanted nothing more than to see me dead.

I tilted my head to the side and lowered my glass. I felt too close to losing it completely, and the glass would've ended up thrown at his stupid face.

"Now, is it smart to throw such accusations around without solid proof?"

Viktor's jaw locked when he realized I wasn't taking the bait, then he chuckled to himself and looked over to Aleksei, whose gaze was fixed on me. It made me want to roll my eyes so badly, but it was something he wouldn't let slide.

"Enough." Dominik's stern voice invited no argument. "The two of you bickering isn't what any of us need right now. We're here for a reason."

"Let me guess—you want to get me home?" I asked.

"Yes, but not right now," Dominik said and lowered his glass, ruling the dinner as if he was the Pakhan.

To this day, I remained convinced he would've made a better Pakhan than Aleksei ever could. Sadly, it hadn't been up to me.

Dominik nodded to Aleksei, who continued, "Four days ago, we received a request for assistance from Martin Emmerson. For the past decade, he's made quite a good business in arms dealing. In exchange for our help, he'll up our profit by thirty percent."

Emmerson. That was Brianne's last name. Immediately, my mind began connecting the dots. If he had even a remotely successful business in the underworld, it would have been easy to have their records wiped clean, though there had to be a reason.

I returned my attention to the conversation. "Since when are you doing charity work? Also, why the hell am I here? I'm not part of the business."

Aleksei cleared his throat. "Let me speak and I'll get to it."

I rolled my eyes, and he shot me a glare.

"I've worked with him for over five years and not once has he caused any trouble. And if his business went to hell because I didn't help, it would reflect badly on Dominik and Viktor as well."

I glanced over to Viktor, who seemed just as clueless as I was.

“Who’s after him?”

“I don’t know. I do know, however, who’s been hired to kill him.”

As if for dramatic effect, he paused, and his eyes traveled between Dominik and Viktor before they landed on me. I felt it in my bones—I knew what he was going to say and slid my poker face in place immediately.

“Davorin was hired to do it.”

I blinked. “And how does any of that have anything to do with me exactly?”

“You keep forgetting I have eyes on you at all times,” he retorted, drinking his third glass of wine since dinner had begun.

“Damn, I thought I lost them. I’m losing my touch,” I muttered under my breath, yet loud enough for Dominik to hear.

He chuckled and shook his head.

“So what do you want me to do?” I asked.

“Find out from Davorin who the contractor is.”

I leaned back in my chair, folded my arms in front of my chest, and grinned. “No.”

“What do you mean no?” Viktor had raised his voice, but it only took a glare from Dominik to calm him down. He was afraid of him and that was amusing to watch.

“I mean, there isn’t anything in it for me really.”

Aleksei was silent. I wasn’t one to be bribed easily, but he knew exactly what I wanted.

“If you do this, I’ll free you. You’ll be free to go wherever you want, do whatever you want, and you’ll never be forced to do anything for this family again.”

Viktor slammed his fist against the table, ready to protest. But before he could stand up, Aleksei had his hand on Viktor’s shoulder, daring him to voice his rage.

It sounded too good to be true, because it wasn’t as easy as he’d made it seem. Aleksei would never allow it, not as long as our father was alive, so he was silently giving me the green light to kill him. However, it had to be done in a way that wouldn’t implicate him, and that would be difficult.

I glanced over at Dominik, and he smiled. “I give you my word.”

Dominik’s word was the push I needed. He would never allow Aleksei to fuck me over, and giving his word meant he knew exactly what I wanted to do; that he was giving me his support.

I sighed. “What do I need to do?”

“I’ll arrange a meeting with him. You’ll go in my stead and get the answers from him. If necessary, offer him a bigger price to sell out his contractor.”

I paused to think about it, and the more I calculated the possible outcomes, the more alluring it felt to accept the offer, though watching Aleksei’s Adam’s apple bob up and down was entertaining enough.

“Fine. I’ll do it. Set a time and place.”

DAVORIN



BLOOD splattered on the concrete wall, and the man let out a piercing scream as he clutched the wound on his stomach. It didn't take long for his hands to become completely covered in blood. He fell to his knees, cussing

and muttering something incoherent.

“You need to start talking, because the next few bullets will go through your hands, legs, and dick, and that’s a messy kill. Too messy, even for me.”

His eyes widened slightly, fear consuming him. This was what happened to people like him who only wanted a slight taste of what this life had to offer—when the aftertaste turned sour, they all wanted out.

Michael Russell, a middle-aged man, bald, and now missing two teeth. He had a wife and two high-school kids at home. Recently, after he’d gone bankrupt because his mistress wanted real diamonds, he’d found a way to make a lot of money, without his wife suspecting a thing.

Spoiler alert: it was illegal.

He started working for my client shortly after that, and for a while everything was going well. He was getting the drugs from his boss, selling them at an arranged price, and getting a hefty cut from it. However, once he got too cocky and started taking money under the table, it had all gone wrong.

“Who did you give the drugs to?” I repeated. I wouldn’t ask a third time.

“I swear, I don’t know his name,” he uttered pathetically, clutching his wound as if it was going to help. It wasn’t—it was only a matter of time before he bled out and died like the rat he was.

“Now, why don’t I believe you?” I found his fear rather amusing. Although it was too late in the night, it was worth it—not because of the money I’d receive as soon as I sent proof that Michael being dead, but because the feeling of power that had consumed me was too great.

I was many things, but a coward wasn’t one of them. Once I caught the motherfucker, I’d given him the spare gun I kept with me. To offer him better odds, I’d even let him have a minute’s head start.

It was irrelevant. He could’ve run to Mars and I would’ve caught him easily. I had no issue fighting men with honor; however, this bastard was at the bottom of the chain. A cheater with a mistress who was the same age as his daughter. He had no loyalty.

In this world, being disloyal was punishable by death and, right now, I was the executioner.

I grinned from ear to ear. Perhaps he saw his imminent death—he crawled backwards, as much as it was possible. He glanced around, terror

twisting his features once he saw there was no exit. Not for him, at least.

I had him cornered in the dark alley of a terrible neighborhood. Even if someone saw us, or had heard the gunshots, no one would be brave enough to investigate—this sort of thing happened here every day.

I stepped forward, noticing the sweat dripping from his face. A few years ago, Michael had been an upstanding citizen of New York City, with many people worshiping the ground he walked on. He hosted charities, donated to multiple orphanages, and yet, there was no trace of that person within the man who lay in front of me.

“I-I swear, I don’t know who this man is.”

His pathetic stuttering in the face of danger was making my blood boil. I knew he would’ve ratted the buyer out before I’d shot him if he knew who it was, so even though I was having fun torturing him, I was also getting furious at how little information he had.

“I don’t care. Tell me something.” I inched closer. “You’ll die either way. However, if you tell me what I want to know, I won’t send your wife and children all the pictures of you and your mistress. Her name is Sophia, right? Or should I tell your wife and watch the drama unfold?”

He shook his head furiously. “No, please don’t tell my wife.” He was begging with his last breaths, and it made him even more pathetic than I’d thought possible. “I don’t know his name, but we were meeting in his hotel room at the Plaza. Room number nine. He’s short, with dark hair, and has a tattoo on his neck.”

I patted his bald head with my gloved hand. “That’s a good boy. That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

He gulped as I aimed my gun at his head. “Please tell my family that I love them.”

I laughed. “Do I look like someone who gives a shit about your family?”

This was getting boring. I rolled my eyes at the tears that slipped down his cheeks and shot him, right between his eyes. Michael slumped down, and his head hit the ground with a thud. I wiped off the faint spray of blood that had hit my shirt and put the gun in the back of my pants.

Before leaving the street completely, I removed my mask and put it in the inside pocket of my jacket, then whipped out my phone. I let my client know via text that the job was done then dialed Bri’s phone number.

“Are you done?” she asked as soon the call went through.

I chuckled. “I’m fine—thanks for asking.”

I could feel her eyes roll. “Of course you’re fine.” Bri paused for a moment. “The money came through.”

Bri’s voice was... unsettling, to say the least. Her tone indicated that something had very much disturbed her, and although I didn’t care about her or her feelings, my gut told me it had something to do with me.

“Why are you jumpy?”

She cleared her throat. “It’s best if we talk about that once you come home—it’s not something we should talk about over the phone.”

“Fine. I’ll be home in twenty.”

I hung up before she could say some shit about my driving. Driving recklessly brought me satisfaction, but I’d been behind the wheel for over a decade and had yet to cause any accidents. Sometimes, I came too close to killing her, but the urge never lasted long. I’d always remember how much I needed her—for the time being anyway.

Recently, however, Bri had become way too clingy. Always texting and calling me, for absurd reasons. Once, she’d almost compromised a mission by calling me repeatedly, despite me declining each and every single one of her calls.

I was home when I’d told her I would be and found her waiting anxiously for me at the door.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

She stepped aside to let me walk past her then followed silently behind me. The first thing I did was throw the jacket off my body and grab a glass of Scotch. Then I sat on the couch, stared at her, and raised a brow. Bri was fidgeting with her fingers, eyes glued to the ground.

“Speak, Brianne.”

She flinched at the loudness of my voice but nonetheless sat across from me and began speaking. “While you were out and about dealing with... that man, someone called your work phone and asked for a meeting.”

“You didn’t agree before you discussed it with me, did you?”

Bri shook her head furiously. “No, of course not! They said they’ll call again tomorrow.”

“So what’s the problem?”

She took a deep breath. “They never left their name, but their accent was Russian.”

That grabbed my attention, and a slow laugh passed my lips at the

irony of the situation. If it had been someone from her family, it would make all of this too good to be true—and would mean one of the two things.

They either knew about Ekaterina's relationship with me or what that relationship was about to become. It could've been a pathetic way of trying to protect her, but she didn't need any protection from me. At least, not in the way they would think.

Or they wanted another meeting regarding Martin Emmerson. The drama that was slowly unfolding was laughable. They'd contacted me, under an alias, and hired me to kill Emmerson. Once they realized I knew who I was speaking to, they'd offered me a deal I couldn't refuse.

I shut down the conversation quickly—Bri was becoming too curious, and getting rid of her before it was time wasn't in my plans. "Never answer that phone without permission again, got it?"

Bri nodded.

I began to realize that she was becoming more of a burden than she was useful. Soon enough, I'd be able to completely free myself of having her in my home.

But for now, it was time to visit my little lion.



Ekaterina's hair fell messily onto the silk pillowcase. Her soft breathing told me she was asleep, and the view I had of her half-naked body nearly drove me insane.

That tattoo on her hip was visible, the blanket barely thrown over her stomach and back. The mere thought of another man seeing what was mine made me want to murder every single male she'd ever had any contact with.

Her room definitely represented her personality—neat at all times, with a few decorative things but not so many that it was cluttered. She wasn't a sentimental person either. There wasn't a single photograph of herself with her family members anywhere in her spacious apartment.

I simply watched her sleep for a while. She tossed and turned, and mumbled something in her sleep, and I couldn't help but chuckle. Her right hand went under the pillow, whilst the left one hugged it closer to her body.

Everything happened too quickly. One moment, she seemed peacefully asleep; the next, a gun was pointed at my head. Her eyebrows narrowed, and a look of anger flashed over her beautiful face.

“Do you have a death wish?”

I chuckled. “I'll die gladly if it means dying by your hand, little lion.”

The gun was still pointed at my head, though I saw her eyes roll to the back of her head. It made my cock twitch.

“Could you stop with the little lion bullshit? Why did you choose that for my nickname?”

I grinned and boldly sat next to her. “Because on the night we met, anyone else would've cried, begged, or run away. But you were so fearless, just like a lion. The bravest animal.”

“That's incorrect. The most fearless animal is a honey badger.”

I laughed loudly, and she hushed me. “Xenia is in the room down the hall. She'll hear you.”

“Oh, so I'm your dirty little secret then?”

She stared at me, not a single emotion visible on her face. It fascinated me, how stoic she could be in any given situation—and how rarely she showed real emotion.

“A secret? Definitely. I'm not keen on people knowing I have a stalker who likes to watch me sleep. How the fuck did you get in anyway?”

I pulled out the key I'd had made and showed her. Ekaterina wasn't impressed, though she wasn't surprised either. Her big blue eyes stared at me without blinking.

It was those eyes that had first attracted me to her. They were like the darkest shade of the ocean, so deep I could drown myself in them. Fuck, all I wanted was to drown in them.

“Stop,” she said, and I forced myself to look away from her gorgeous body.

“Stop what?”

She sighed, suddenly breathless. “Stop looking like you want to fuck me, Davorin.”

My name coming out of her mouth was the most erotic thing I'd heard in my entire life. It was soft yet rough at the same time; a perfect mix of

frustration and need. Every time I'd heard her say my name, my cock had reacted to it, and I was growing impatient.

I chuckled. "Fuck you?"

I inched closer to her, placed my hand over hers on the gun, and lowered it, holding that wonderful, tension-filled eye contact.

Her eyes followed mine as I moved inch by inch into her personal bubble. I was surprised she'd allowed me to get this close to her without that smart mouth of hers protesting. But I didn't let my surprise show—I just tilted my head to the side and slowly took the gun out of her hand.

"No, my sweet Kaya. I want to worship every inch of your body. I want to kiss and taste all of you, to mark your entire body until every living man has seen that you belong to me, and me only."

And there it was. The reason I found her so alluring, so captivating.

That insane look in her eyes. She could hold so much intensity in a single look, and it was something no one else had. The way she was trying to pull herself away from the things she desperately wanted, yet was unable to, was driving her mad.

"That's... extreme." Her comment was soft, as soft as her hair.

"You haven't seen extreme yet, little lion."

NINE



“GO change your clothes, Ekaterina.”

Dominik’s stern voice echoed in my head. I turned around with a glare, a laugh of disbelief slipping past my lips. I was looking for any

indication of it being a joke; however, once I found none, I grew irritated.

“You’re not my mother, Dominik,” I told him and returned to the mirror. “And I’m not a child. I’ll go naked if I want to.”

“Not once did I comment on the way you dress. I do not care.” He paused. “However, this man is a known hitman. I don’t know what might go through his brain once he sees you wearing next to nothing.”

I grinned. “Don’t worry, I can deal with Davorin.”

Dominik had doubt written all over his face.

“And besides, Ilya will be with me at all times. He’s almost worse than Davorin, so no need to worry.”

“All right then,” he said grumpily as he fixed his glasses.

I wanted to use my body and charm to our advantage. I didn’t usually dress like this—it wasn’t my style—but I could endure it for one evening.

The dress was so short, it barely covered my ass. And the upper part of it wasn’t very good at covering anything. It was a deep shade of red, and I had a pair of black heels and a black leather coat thrown on. The coat reached just above my heels, and once I checked that my makeup and hair looked good, I was ready to leave.

However, Dominik stopped me at the door. “How comfortable would you be with being wired?”

“I wouldn’t. It’s not necessary. If you’re afraid of him hurting me, why send me at all?”

His expression almost made me laugh. He looked like a child whose lollipop had been taken away.

“Sadly, it wasn’t my decision. And Aleksei knew that if he offered you a deal you couldn’t refuse, your head would be right where it needed to be.”

I moved forward until I was able to hug him. He was the only person I was comfortable hugging, despite my burning hatred of human touch. “Stop worrying about me so much, all right? I can deal with Davorin, and you should be happy that I’ll finally be able to put a bullet through Father’s skull.”

He smirked. “And here I thought you planned on torturing him.”

“Don’t give me any ideas.”

Dominik walked me out of my home with a promise that he’d wait until I returned. Ilya’s SUV waited across the street from the building, and it didn’t take me long to get there.

The meeting was set to happen in an abandoned warehouse, which was both the worst and best choice. It had all the privacy we needed, yet it was too far away for anyone to be saved if anything were to happen.

“So what’s the plan, Ilya?”

He cleared his throat and looked at me through the rearview mirror. “Did the Pakhan not inform you?”

I nodded. “He did. I didn’t listen.”

Ilya shook his head and sighed. “You’re there to ask him to work with us. There’s a briefcase with five million dollars, which is twice the amount his client will give him.”

“That’s easy enough. What happens if he says no?”

“I’ll kill him, then and there.”

I began to laugh, though Ilya didn’t find it amusing in the slightest. He glared at me through the mirror, knowing it was the only thing he could do. Anything else would’ve ended up with his head being cut off.

“I’m sorry,” I apologized before another fit of laughter erupted from me. “But if it were that easy to kill Davorin, don’t you think he would’ve been dead long ago?”

He was focused on the road now, and his knuckles had turned white from gripping the steering wheel too tightly. It was amusing how it only took a slight jab at his masculinity for him to become so aggrieved.

“Perhaps,” he muttered, displeased. “However, it’s not impossible to kill him.”

“Of course not,” I told him with a deep sigh. “However, if it comes to that, I will kill him. Not you. Do you understand me?”

His jaw ticked. “Yes, princess.”

I despised that nickname. I grew up as the only daughter of the Pakhan, a man who quite literally ruled over the illegal—and most of the legal—parts of Russia, half of Europe, and most of the United States. They’d given me that nickname because they believed my father spoiled his little daughter, the princess of Russia.

It was the farthest thing from the truth, but as a child, I’d stuck it out. It was the only thing that had given me hope that my father wasn’t the monster I perceived him to be; that perhaps I’d misunderstood him. It took a lot of growing up for me to realize that he didn’t regret his actions—that he’d meant to hurt me. And he’d done it in the worst ways possible.

Ilya’s voice broke my train of thought as the car came to a stop.

“I’ll be right there. If you feel endangered at any time, look at me, and I’ll get you out of here.”

I came to the conclusion that Ilya was definitely one of the most annoying people I’d ever known. “Fine. Let’s go—I don’t want to be late.”

Ilya left the car and opened the door for me. Then he took the silver briefcase from the trunk of the car and walked in front of me.

We were three minutes early, which was enough time to think of the things I needed to ask Davorin. I had a gut feeling he wouldn’t accept my request easily, and with Ilya by my side, it would be difficult to engage in a proper conversation. I had an idea how to get him on our side, though it wasn’t something Ilya’s poor ears should have to listen to.

Most of the building had been torn apart. Mainly because it had gone unused for a long time and had started to decay. Aleksei used it from time to time when he needed a quiet place to torture someone, far from anyone who could overhear.

I’d tagged along once, and the old bloodstain on the wall made the pretty memories flash through my head. It was the first time Aleksei had allowed me to take part in torture, and it had felt great. I’d released so much of my stress that I’d begged him to take me again.

The motherfucker had declined.

The basement room had been renovated purely for this meeting. It had a functional door, freshly painted walls, and a new carpet, plus a table with one chair on either side of it.

It was laughable how careless Aleksei was with his money. None of this was truly necessary. This meeting could have happened in a goddamn park in broad daylight.

I stepped into the room first, and Ilya closed the door behind me. Davorin was sitting across from me, in one of the chairs, his mask on.

There was a ghost of a smirk on his face. He was surprised that Aleksei had sent me in his stead, and it showed. The fun was about to start, and I was aching to have it all play out the way I wanted to. Given how I kicked him out the last time we saw each other, he did not expect to see me again so soon.

“Ekaterina Kalashnikova,” Davorin said. The way he spoke my name—his voice low—gave me chills. “This is an unexpected encounter.”

I felt Ilya tense behind me. “Are you displeased?”

Davorin leaned back in his chair. “Absolutely not. This is way better

than I expected it would be.”

I took a seat on the empty chair and crossed my legs. The coat covered me fully, so if it came to it, all I needed was to take it off and, hopefully, my tits would make him change his mind.

Davorin took the initiative. “To what do I owe this... pleasure?”

He wasn’t looking at me; his eyes were fixed behind me, on Ilya. They were having some sort of staring contest, a childish game I had no time for.

“I’m aware that you were recently offered a hit on Martin Emmerson, and I know you accepted the deal.” I paused and snapped my fingers, and Ilya placed the silver briefcase in front of me. I opened it, inspected it for a moment, then turned it round and pushed it slightly towards the hitman. “I’m hoping this will change your mind.”

He didn’t even look at the briefcase before snapping it shut and pushing it back to me. “No. That is not how I deal with my clients. Once I accept, there is no going back.”

Alarms went off in my head. Something was very strange about this meeting. I paused and watched Davorin like a hawk as possibilities raced through my head.

In a second, everything clicked—all of this was Aleksei’s work.

He was the client who’d ordered a hit on Emmerson’s head, presumably with an alias. If Davorin accepted this deal, it would be a death sentence. It wouldn’t take long for everyone important in the underworld to find out that Davorin, one of the best contract killers, had changed his mind because of money, something he never did.

It would ensure Davorin’s inevitable death without my brother being implicated.

Was Davorin aware of it?

He wasn’t someone who could be tricked easily. If he was aware of my brother being behind all of this, the smart thing would’ve been to deny this meeting. However, if he’d known and gone ahead with it anyway, there must’ve been something bigger at stake.

But what was it?

Immediately, I knew that Ilya had to go. It would give me approximately an hour before the rest of Aleksei and Dominik’s men arrived, but sixty minutes would be just enough.

“Ilya, leave.”

I turned to look at him. He looked shocked. “What?”

“Did I stutter? No. I said *leave*.”

He heard the fury in my words, and though he wanted to deny me, he had no choice but to obey. When he’d accepted coming with me tonight, it meant he worked for me and had to listen to every order I gave him.

“I’ll be outside the door.”

“No. Go outside of this goddamn building, right now. Wait for me by the car—I’ll be out there shortly.”

Ilya looked at me as if I’d grown a second head. “I’m not allowed to do that.”

I sighed, barely suppressing the desire to kick him where the sun didn’t shine. “Get the fuck out, Ilya. I will not ask again.”

He took a step back. His eyes were on Davorin, but after a few moments of silence, he just nodded and left. Ilya was definitely pissed as fuck, and I had no doubt he’d have called both my brothers before he was out of the building.

“I like it when you’re angry,” Davorin commented with a chuckle, which I ignored.

“What’s going on?” My voice had returned to normal, the anger subsiding significantly as soon as our eyes met.

“You’ll have to be a little more specific, Kaya.”

I took in a sharp breath. “I mean, Aleksei is your client, and Emmerson is his employee. What’s going on with that situation?”

He tilted his head to the side. “It took you less than four minutes to figure it out. I underestimated your intelligence.”

“Isn’t it great that although you know everything about me, I can still surprise you?”

He laughed. “That’s true.” He stopped for a moment. “What are you offering me in exchange for the information?”

The reason for our meeting had flown out the window—now I was curious to know what the hell was going on. “The five million isn’t enough?”

He hummed. “No. It’s expensive information, Kaya. So what are you offering me?”

Standing up from the chair got him to do a double take. Slowly, I slid my coat off and let it fall to the floor. His eyes followed my every move, and somehow, I knew that showing him my tits wasn’t going to cut it.

And I was feeling a little bit... hot and bothered.

I sat on the table in front of him, a few inches separating us, and slowly spread my legs. My gaze never left his, and as those green eyes darkened, excitement and terror rushed through my body like a wave. It was a good thing I'd chosen not to wear underwear.

"What are you doing, little lion?" he hissed, almost as if he was in pain.

I saw the outline of his bulge in his pants and licked my bottom lip.

"Offering you a deal you can't resist," I told him before glancing at my wristwatch. "We have around forty-five minutes before my brothers get here."

His hands, which today weren't clad in his signature gloves, came to rest on my thighs. His touch was electrifying, sending shivers down my spine as I tried to suppress any embarrassing sounds that might slip from my mouth.

Davorin's eyes were on me at all times, his face still hidden behind the mask. It took all of my self-restraint not to push myself into his touch, to feel more of him.

"You have no idea what you've just done, little lion," he said, his voice sultry.

It was enough to make my heart race, to break something deep inside me. He gripped my thighs tightly and pulled me closer.

I grinned. "Bon appétit."

It was all Davorin needed. He was quick to push the dress up to my hips.

He took a sharp intake of breath once he noticed the lack of underwear, and then our eyes met. It was animalistic almost. Too dark, too intense, and overwhelming. He was hungry for me, and he didn't hide it.

"You came with no underwear, Kaya?" It was as if he was directing the question to himself. "Very brave of you."

"What can I say? It's easy access."

As the words left my mouth, his grip tightened, promising to leave a bruise. I saw a smirk tug on the corner of his mouth as he started to kiss my inner thigh. Slow, open-mouth kisses awaited, and my heartbeat increased.

Suddenly, Davorin sank his teeth into my skin, tearing a moan from my throat. He kissed it almost immediately, to soothe the pain, but it was the pain I particularly enjoyed. Tingles spread across my body, and goosebumps

followed suit.

He was taking his sweet time, as if we weren't on a clock, and I was aching for his touch. His fingers, his hands, were everywhere aside from the place I needed them most.

His mouth was drawing closer and closer. My fingers tangled in his hair, and I tried to pull him towards me, but Davorin's response was a low chuckle and a shake of his head.

Our eyes met again, and it was the first time I'd seen a man so hungry for me. It was an exhilarating feeling, and it embedded itself deep inside me, even in my bones. It was a feeling I was going to crave—a release only he could give me.

His finger teased my folds, never truly touching the part that was aching. Then a slow smirk appeared on his face, as if he'd decided to put me out of my misery.

His mouth found my clit, and I tugged harshly on his hair. He swirled his tongue around before biting down. A small scream of pleasure escaped my lips, and Davorin took it as an encouragement to continue.

"You taste like divinity, little lion," he breathed.

His hot breath made my skin tingle, and I wanted more. I was greedy for whatever he had to offer and didn't care what it was.

Hungrily, his tongue picked up the pace, and his hands moved to my outer thighs so he could pull me closer to him. He definitely wasn't able to breathe, but it didn't seem like he cared.

He was like a starved predator, devouring his prey.

My moans echoed around the room, and the louder I got, the harder he clasped my thighs. It was getting too intense for me to handle.

He groaned as he sucked on my sensitive clit. "Fucking hell, little lion," he muttered, and not once did he stop what he was doing.

One of his hands left my leg, and I screamed in ecstasy when he inserted two fingers inside me.

"Fuck," I breathed and felt Davorin chuckle against my skin.

His words were permanently stuck in my head, on repeat, like the perfect melody. My eyes rolled to the back of my head when he picked up the pace, the sudden change in rhythm throwing me off guard.

In a good way of course.

I tried to pull myself away from him as the sensation was overwhelming, but he only gripped me tighter. There was no way out.

Davorin wasn't allowing me to move an inch, and not once did he pause.

Our eyes locked, and it was the most salacious scene I'd ever seen Davorin in, the fire in his deep gaze, the need to bring me over the edge growing with each passing second. There was no coming back from this, and no matter how much I tried to deny it, I was loving every moment of it.

I was breathless, and he was breathtaking.

Time seemed to stop, and when he began to pump his fingers in and out with a violent tempo, my moans grew louder. He was doing all the right things at the right pace, and it didn't take me long to reach my climax.

I came crashing down in waves, my voice hoarse. He was drinking up everything I had to offer, looking at me from under his long thick eyelashes the whole time. I was struggling to breathe, and he grinned.

"This might be the worst decision of your life, little lion," he breathed. "I'm addicted, and there's no escaping me now."

T E N



“WHAT do you think about this one?” Tiana asked me, holding up a sweater.

It was a cropped black sweater with little sequins around the neckline.

I paused to think. Although it was something I'd never purchase, it fit Tiana's style and personality. I gave her a nod of approval and she placed it in her basket.

"It would look good on you," I commented. "How have you been?"

We hadn't seen each other in a while. Although I liked her, the distance between us was necessary. At times, she could be clingy or annoying, and it wasn't something I liked to deal with. Though now we finally had topics to talk about that didn't involve her trying to pry into my family's history.

She swallowed, nervousness flickering in her eyes, and placed another few items in her basket. I wasn't in the mood to shop; nor did I have the patience to try anything on. It was tiring, and it was an awful day outside, which made me slightly moodier.

A low sigh came from Tiana. "I've been doing all right."

My eyes narrowed at the blatant lie. She rolled her eyes as we walked towards the cashier and corrected herself. "I mean, as well as I possibly can after what happened."

She was still hung up on Luca's death? That had been weeks ago, and I'd completely forgotten he'd even existed.

"And I've kept in touch with Nick all this time," she said when I failed to reply.

"Why?" I asked, genuinely curious.

Tiana blinked, but before she could answer, we reached the front of the line. She paid for her items, and we decided to go to a small bakery down the street, as it was fairly early in the morning and neither of us had eaten breakfast yet.

"Well, I felt a little bit guilty, you know?" she said once we'd started walking. "I know it wasn't my fault, but I chose that restaurant. And Nick had just lost someone he loved very much and he needed the support."

"Oh, that definitely wasn't your fault," I told her, and she gave me a light smile. "And for what it's worth, if you think keeping in touch with him will make you feel better, I'm all for it."

Surprise laced her features. "You are?"

"I always put myself first—you should too. And if healing you means dealing with Nick, do it."

"How can you still act as if nothing happened? A man lost his life and the murderer wasn't caught."

I tilted my head to the side. “By now, you should already know that I don’t care or want to know any details about anyone who isn’t of use to me.”

Tiana switched topics, clearly offended by the tone of my voice, which was unreasonable, but I decided not to press further. The day was already cold, and I didn’t have the strength to argue with her about how the whole Nick situation had been doomed from the start.

“Where have you been though? I haven’t heard from you in a while, and I was worried when you didn’t respond to my texts.”

I shrugged. “My brothers came to visit, and I’ve been preoccupied with them.”

Tiana nodded. “Are you going home? I think you mentioned once that they’d like for you to go home.”

A dry laugh came from me as we crossed the street. “No, that will never happen. I have a life here now, and going back would only complicate things for me.”

She didn’t press further. All she knew about my family was that they held positions of power, and that I’d rebelled. Tiana was an understanding person and didn’t ask a lot of questions. Though if she started digging, it wouldn’t be too hard for her to find out who my family was, and that would mean I’d have to kill her to keep her silent.

I stopped. An odd sensation was running down my spine, and it wasn’t the wind. My eyes narrowed as I observed our surroundings. It wasn’t something I could pinpoint, yet I knew for a fact that someone was watching us. Watching me.

It wasn’t Davorin.

When he was tailing me, the chills always came with a little excitement. It was like an adrenaline rush, like being on a roller coaster, a sensation so great I couldn’t shake it off.

This one was different, and as I turned around, my eye caught a flash of movement.

I turned to Tiana. “Would you mind going inside without me? I’ll be there shortly—I just need to make a phone call.”

Her eyebrows narrowed, and her hair fell over her face. “Are you okay?”

Tiana’s concerned voice pissed me off. She had good intentions, but she was stalling, and that wasn’t good. I didn’t have a lot of time before whoever was following me disappeared, because they must’ve known I was

onto them.

I forced a smile. "I'm fine. Go, and I'll be there soon."

With a last reluctant glance, she walked past me, and I watched her until she stepped into the bakery. Although she turned around twice to see where I was, there were a lot of people on the streets, and I managed to escape her sight easily.

I pulled out my phone and called Aleksei. It took him longer to pick up than usual, which meant that he was still pissed off with me.

"Are you still angry with me?" I asked as soon as the call went through, a wide grin on my face.

I changed direction and slowly walked back the way Tiana and I had come.

"Angry, Ekaterina?" he repeated, his disbelief evident in his voice. "Of course I'm fucking angry. Not only did you kick Ilya out and leave yourself unprotected, you also allowed Davorin to walk out with five million dollars without getting the job done."

I chuckled at my dramatic brother. "He'll call me soon, and everything will work out in your favor."

Aleksei was silent for a moment. "You trust him?"

"Let's be clear—I trust no one but myself," I fired back. "However, I know that he'll come to me soon. I offered him a deal he couldn't refuse."

His voice dropped an octave, and a grunt slipped out. "How soon is soon, Ekaterina? It's been a week, and no one has seen him or heard from him."

Not strictly true. I'd received another dice, along with a gorgeous diamond necklace I never intended to wear. I preferred gold, perhaps even pearls if the jewelry was fashioned correctly, but diamonds weren't my best friends.

I'd spent the entire night after my last encounter with him second-guessing my decision. Then, once I'd received his latest gift, my mind had turned to questioning the meaning of the dice. This latest one had been turned to the number six, and it irked me that I didn't understand what it meant.

In the end, I gathered all the dice I currently had, took them to one of the best jewelry shops in the city, and had them turned into a bracelet.

"I said soon." He was getting on my nerves. "And as soon as he does, you'll be the second person to know."

"The second?"

“Of course Dominik will know first.”

I laughed when he hung up on me. He acted like a child sometimes, and to be frank, I might've forgiven him for what he did in the past, but it didn't mean that he didn't do. Dominik had broken me out of my chains, as much as it was possible, and suffered the consequences. Aleksei, on the other hand, had turned a blind eye to everything that was happening, and only stepped in after Dominik did.

I put my phone back in my coat pocket and pulled out a weapon. I hadn't brought a gun with me, so a small knife was going to have to suffice.

A few feet in front of me were two buildings with a small alley between them. I could see someone hiding in it. Whilst I'd been on the phone with Aleksei, I'd acted oblivious to my surroundings yet had been tracking every move they'd made. From the figure, it was obviously a woman, her hair tucked under a beanie, her face hidden behind big dark sunglasses.

Not suspicious at all.

With a slow breath, I started walking towards where she was hiding. The element of surprise was the only thing on my side, as I didn't know who she was, or how dangerous she was. The worst part was that I didn't know her motive either.

“Why are you following me?” I stepped into the small space between the two buildings where she was half-concealed behind a dumpster.

She took a fearful step back, but now I was closer, I recognized her immediately and glanced at the shoulder I'd hit, seemingly all better now.

“I wasn't following you.”

I inched closer. Her response had made me angry, yet she didn't seem to have noticed. It was like she didn't quite expect me to confront her, though any other outcome would've been absurd.

It didn't take me long to inspect her for weapons. She kept backing away as I moved forward, step by step, until there was no place left for her to run. Her back collided with the concrete wall, which managed to draw a laugh out of me.

“I'll ask again, and do think carefully about your answer. I don't ask the same question thrice.”

She visibly gulped but, a second later, tried to put on a brave face. It was adorable.

“Why were you following me?”

“I wasn't.”

Violence seemed like the only right answer. It was the only thing I was truly comfortable with. The blood, the terror of the victim... it was like the most peaceful painting—fulfilling and worth remembering.

But it was broad daylight, and there were too many people around, so killing her wasn't an option. I had to settle for a good blow instead. I whipped out my knife and jabbed the handle into her gut.

She doubled over in pain, her eyes wide with surprise. When she finally managed to look up and meet my gaze, she was still panting.

My best guess was that the emptiness in my eyes had scared her to the bone. I'd yet to meet anyone else who harbored no feelings in their gaze—or was able to hide them as well as I could.

"I'm sorry," Brianne breathed. "I don't mean any harm."

I stepped back, one eyebrow raised. "Then answer the goddamn question."

A few strands of hair fell out of her hat, and she tried to push them back in with no success. She straightened her posture and looked straight into my eyes, almost as if the fear she was feeling had vanished completely. It was interesting, though her poker face faltered whenever I made the slightest move.

"I was following you because you're the only person in your family I have access to."

"Elaborate," I drawled, and she quickly nodded.

"I know there's a hit out on my father; I know that he works for your brother. But I don't know why this is all happening, and Davorin won't tell me a thing."

A slow smile laced my face. Things were starting to get interesting.

"Why would he tell you anything about it? He's the one who took the job."

Brianne's eyes widened and her mouth slightly parted; otherwise her body remained frozen. She blinked a few times, searching for any indication that I was lying to her, which I wasn't. I wasn't surprised that she'd been unaware of Davorin's connection to her father, and it made all of this too amusing.

"He never told me that." Her voice was full of disappointment and disbelief.

"That's how contract killing works, Brianne." I gave her a moment to collect herself. "Why did you think I'd have the answers you sought?"

“Because,” she hissed, her words full of venom, “all Davorin talks and thinks about is you. Given the family you come from, and the fact that the apple doesn’t fall too far from the tree, it was a logical assumption that you’d have the answers I need.”

My laughter came out of nowhere, but it couldn’t be stopped. “It was a logical assumption that I’d tell you what you wanted to know?” I took a step towards her, thrilled to see her anger turning into terror.

“Oh, darling, you were so wrong. All you did was put yourself on my radar, and inevitably, you’ll meet the same destiny as your father.”

I left her to think about my words without offering her a second glance. Chills ran down my spine at the excitement of it all. Brianne hadn’t seemed like the sort of person who’d get in my way, but now I’d been proven wrong, I was determined to show her just how bad my family could get.

And I couldn’t wait for the chance to strike.



I stared at the bracelet I’d had made as I sat at my dressing table. I’d had the dice evaluated and had been shocked at the price. Davorin wasn’t holding back, because three of those dice were worth enough to pay off my penthouse at the very least.

I blow-dried my hair before allowing it to fall down my back, straight. The loose gown I wore felt suffocating. In the mirror, I stared at both myself and the bracelet I held.

It was too pretty to be worn all the time, yet too pretty to be kept for special occasions only.

The weather was bad today—the snow had started to melt and turn muddy. The wind was strong too, but I’d turned off the heating in my room. I felt as if I had a fever coming on, thus I decided to sleep in next to nothing and make sure that the room was cold.

My body shuddered as an odd yet familiar feeling crept over me.

I sighed and turned around, and there he was, standing outside my room, out on the balcony, whilst the wind whipped at him.

I folded my arms in front of my chest and stayed where I was. He had access to my home, so I wasn't going to trouble myself to let him in now, when he hadn't asked for permission numerous times before. Lord knew how many times he'd stared at me while I was asleep.

I could practically feel him roll his eyes before he pulled a set of keys from his pocket. I was flabbergasted—I could see that he had the keys to my car, home, balcony, and even the small summer house on Long Island.

“Took you long enough,” I said and sat on my bed, looking down at his muddy shoes. With a glare, he rolled his eyes again and took them off.

“Were you waiting for me, little lion?” Davorin teased, but I shot another harsh stare his way, and his expression faltered.

“Waiting for you? No. I was waiting for the information you have, and suddenly, you went missing in action.”

“I had a few loose ends to tie up.” He winked, and I found myself frowning. Why had he done that?

“Such as?”

“I can't tell you that,” he replied, his voice stern, leaving no room for further discussion. “So what do you want to know?”

I exhaled harshly. “Preferably all of it. How the hell are you and Aleksei connected? He told me you weren't.”

“I assume that back when he told you we had no contact, we truly had no contact.” He chuckled. “Someone ordered a hit on Aleksei, through me. Now, I usually don't care who my targets are, but Aleksei is a little bit... different.”

“Different how?” I asked, my mind racing.

There weren't many people who would've been brave enough to do such a thing. The Bratva had many alliances, and the fall of the Pakhan would mean war. It would mean all of them coming together for meetings that hadn't happened in years, all of their positions compromised. From the Italian Dons to the Greek Godfathers of the Night—all would be alerted, and all would rush to handle the threat. It would mean hundreds of thousands of people against one or, at best, a few hundred. It would invoke a war the underworld had never seen.

“He's your brother,” Davorin stated as if it was obvious. “And not only would I be hunted for the rest of my life, you would too.”

“Oh, if you’re worried about the fact that he’s my brother, rest assured, I don’t care.” I blinked as the latter part of his confession settled. “Why would *I* be hunted?”

A sly grin tugged on the corner of his lips as he suddenly grabbed my wrists and yanked me up, startling me. He inched closer, and his proximity blew the air out of my lungs.

“Because you’re fucking your brother’s killer,” Davorin murmured as he brought one of my hands up, his gaze locked on my bracelet. I hadn’t even noticed I’d put it on.

Tenderly, he brought my hand closer to his face, placing a small kiss on my wrist, just below the piece of jewelry. My whole body began to ache, as if I were on fire.

The most intimate moment we’d shared washed over my memory, on repeat for what seemed like hours. He wasn’t moving either, holding on to my wrist as if he were holding on to dear life, and staring at me, his eyes sparking with mischief.

“We’re not sleeping together,” I breathed.

He tilted his head to the side and released my hand. Slowly, he took a step back, and I saw how badly he was trying to control himself. My nipples hardened, and I couldn’t breathe properly. His eyes trailed all over my body, and I realized I’d forgotten about my choice of my sleepwear.

It was a light blue chemise, made of the finest silk.

“Not yet,” he corrected. “It might not be tonight or tomorrow, but it will happen, little lion. I’ve tasted you, and I’m never letting you go, even if it kills me.”

I decided to test his patience, to see just how much control he had over himself. “And if I want it to be tonight?” I inched closer to him.

He let out a low growl, hoarse and husky, that almost made my knees buckle. His gaze hardened as he stared deeply into my eyes. “That would be very dangerous, Kaya.”

“I happen to adore danger.”

It was an invitation, and Davorin accepted it.

How I found myself lying underneath him on my bed, with both arms pinned above my head was a mystery I didn’t care to solve. All that mattered was that this man seemed to know me better than I knew myself, because as soon as one of his hands began to trail up and down my body, I was gone.

“So tempting,” he murmured.

The moment his lips touched my neck I felt arousal like I'd never felt before. Hot, open-mouthed kisses trailed from my neck down to my collarbone. He sucked on the skin, yet it wasn't rough enough.

Harshly, Davorin tore apart the nightgown. Then his lips roughly attacked my nipple, my moans filling the room as he licked the sensitive skin.

His other hand was on my panties, slowly tugging them off. When that failed, he ripped the fabric apart with a deep growl.

I hadn't truly thought it would come to this, but I wasn't against it happening more than once. Because I couldn't deny what his touch did to me, how it affected my body and mind.

I shivered, a whimper escaping my lips as his cold finger connected with my clit. Davorin hissed under his breath, distancing himself from my breast and looking at me with nothing but hunger in his eyes.

"You're soaking wet, little lion." A small chuckle came from him as he slowly dragged his fingers up and down my slit. "And it's all for me."

Once he released his hold on my arms, he made his way down my body, and I moaned when his lips brushed my stomach. He wanted to tease me, but judging by how he gripped my hips, he was struggling to hold himself back. I didn't want him to either.

One of his fingers was at my entrance, and he didn't hesitate before pushing it inside. I arched my back slightly. The feeling of being filled by his thick finger made me almost orgasm then and there.

As soon as his eyes were back on mine, I realized how intense all this was. Almost as if the mere knowledge of him wanting me so deeply, so fervently, was lighting a fire inside me.

He pumped his finger in and out in a fierce manner before adding another one. Davorin's eyes were on me at all times, and I knew I was a mess: tangled hair, flushed cheeks, a look that betrayed how much I needed this—far more than he did.

A wave of disappointment washed over me when he removed his fingers. However, I didn't utter a single word—I simply stared at him as he took off his clothes. He managed to remove his shirt without the mask falling off.

I almost gasped at the sight of his hard muscles, at the tattoos winding around his body. Mouth slightly agape, I swallowed harshly and watched as he took off his boxers, letting his cock spring free.

He definitely wasn't lacking in size or girth, and my mouth parted at

the sight of it. It was definitely a surprise. He didn't let me in the state of shock for too long.

Davorin flipped me over, onto my stomach, and grabbed both of my pillows, placing them on top of one another underneath my belly.

“Ass up,” he commanded, and I obeyed immediately.

He gave my ass a small smack and I gasped. I was going crazy; however, as his fingers began to tease me again, I relaxed. Until his mask appeared next to me.

My eyes widened and I tried to look back at him, but he only turned my head back towards the bed, forcing it down before I managed to get a glimpse of his face.

A piercing scream tore from my throat, echoing around the room, as he thrust inside me harshly, without giving me time to adjust to his size. It didn't hurt, but I felt full—full of him, a man who stalked me, who'd broken into my home and staked his claim on me. It was pathetic, but I enjoyed every second of it.

“Fuck,” I managed.

His thrusts were fierce, powerful, and gut-wrenching. Each time he slid out of me, he pushed back with more severity.

“Fuck, little lion,” he groaned. “You feel so good wrapped around my cock.”

His words made me shiver. I could feel him pulsate deeply within me. His hoarse voice and his groans only made me wetter.

His mouth came down upon my back, slowly moving up until he reached my shoulder. He slowed down a little, infuriating me, then bit down on my skin. His proximity was killing me. If I could turn around, I could see him. I could see the face of the man who was fucking me better than any other man ever had.

It was as if he was reading my mind, because as soon as I thought about it, he loosed a low chuckle. His lips connected to my ear, slowly biting it. His hot breath made the small hairs on my neck rise.

“That's not how this game will be played,” he whispered in my ear. “You'll see my face when I allow it.”

Davorin returned to kissing my neck, sinking his teeth into my skin. His hands roamed all over my body, and despite it being cold in the room, I felt like I was on fire.

He caressed my thighs, and the roughness of his touch made me yearn

for more. I wanted all of him; I wanted it forever. It was our first time together, yet he knew exactly what I wanted and needed.

I was barely able to keep up with him. He was fast, rough, and hard. My screams pierced the room, and his hand came over my lips to muffle any further noises.

“As much as I enjoy you screaming for me,” he murmured, “I can’t have you waking up everyone in New York, little lion.”

And why not?

I bit down on my lip, deciding against voicing my question, and he continued fucking me like a wild animal. The pain mixed with pleasure I’d never known was bringing me closer and closer to the edge. Especially now he’d forced me to be quiet.

I could feel tears forming in my eyes from the intensity, but I adored it to the bone. I wanted—no, I *needed*—it to be more forceful, and much more extreme than it was.

“You squeeze my cock so well,” he said as he removed his hand from my mouth and used it to find my clit. The moment he began to rub it, I could feel my climax approaching.

I couldn’t form a sentence. I was too high, too addicted to the feeling of him being buried so deeply inside me.

“Fuck,” he groaned, and I couldn’t help but moan in response. “If I’d known your pussy was made to take my cock so well, I would’ve done this the moment I saw you in that dark alley.”

His words made my mind go blank. I could only focus on the pleasure he was giving me.

Slowly, he began to withdraw until only the tip of him remained inside, teasing me for a moment. Then his palm connected with my ass, promising to leave a bruise. I wanted him to mark all of me, to leave my body covered in traces of him.

In an instant, he slammed back into me.

“Holy shit.” My voice was hoarse, my eyes squeezing shut at the sensation.

“What’s wrong, Kaya?” he murmured against my skin, placing another few kisses on my spine. “Are you going to come for me?”

“Yes—please.” I had no idea why I was begging him for a release, but he laughed, so deeply, so viciously, it made me want to keep begging. His groans followed, making my skin itch.

“Then be a good girl and come for me.”

He didn't have to tell me twice. As if the command in his voice had forced me to obey, as if I was his toy to play with, I came undone on his cock, screams following the wave of release I needed so badly.

Davorin found his release soon after, however he was the responsible one out of the two of us in this situation. He pulled out and finished on my ass.

Our breathing was heavy, and I was pretty sure I wasn't looking my best right now. He was quicker to regain his composure, and put his mask back on before I had the chance to look at him.

I rolled over, and my eyes closed of their own accord. I would figure this all out in the morning, but I knew there would be no regrets. For now, I just let his heavy breathing soothe me and drifted off to sleep.

ELEVEN



THE blazing sun hit my face. Embracing it, I smiled into the sky, blinking rapidly. The sound of birds chirping filled my ears, and the tranquility of the warm spring day made me cheerful.

There wasn't another person in sight, aside from the two guards who kept their distance from me. I didn't truly understand the business my father was dealing with; however, my brothers had told me that a lot of bad guys hated Father, and that they might hurt me to get to him.

It was unreasonable to think like that, but I had no say in any of it. All I was allowed to do was be quiet and, from time to time, go outside.

Our garden was beautiful. Mom cherished her bright-red roses more than anything. The two of us watered them together, watched them bloom, and enjoyed the smell they provided. It was peaceful, fairytale-like, and all I dreamed of was having a garden of my own, of making it resemble Mom's as much as possible.

My father and I had never had the best relationship. He'd never expected a daughter nor wanted one. However, since he couldn't kill me—not because it was inhumane, but because word had already spread about the mafia princess being born—he decided to do everything in his power to turn me into a monster.

I remembered the day vividly—May 20, 2007.

Eight-year-old me enjoyed the time I got to spend with my mother. Often, Mom's face was expressionless, aside from the sorrow that sometimes appeared in her vacant stare. She'd stare out of the window for hours at a time without uttering a single word.

"Kaya, your brother is here," Mom announced, her angelic voice making me smile.

My gaze snapped to the path on our left, where Dominik, grinning widely, was approaching me. With a squeal, I jumped off the grass, tossing the plucked roses onto the ground, and rushed into his arms for a hug.

"How's my little princess?" Dominik asked, hugging me tightly.

Dom's hugs felt like home. All of my worries always disappeared the moment his arms were wrapped around me.

"I made you a bouquet," I told him, grinning widely, one of my front teeth missing.

Dominik laughed before he took my hand and walked me towards the small fountain in the middle of the garden.

"You mean the one you tossed aside as soon as you saw me coming?" he asked, ruffling my hair.

"Yes," I admitted. "Please don't leave for so long again—please."

At nineteen, Dominik was already much taller than me. Although all

four of the Kalashnik children were tall, it took me and my twin brother Viktor a while to grow. Dominik crouched on one knee and took my hands in his, noticing the tear that had slipped from my eye. Tenderly, his thumb brushed it away, and a sad smile took over his face. “Princess, I’ll have to go again soon.”

“For how long?” I mumbled, terrified at being left alone all over again.

Dominik sighed. “Another three years. I need to get my degree, but after that, I’ll take you with me. How does that sound?”

“But that’s a long time, Dom.” I blinked, and uncontrollable tears left my eyes. Dominik had been the only trustworthy person in my life.

Aleksei was twenty-one, studying abroad whilst taking over the American market from our father, and Viktor was never interested in me. He’d told me, on multiple occasions, how much easier his life would’ve been had I died at birth.

“I know, my princess.” Dom tried to calm me down as I continued to weep. “I promise it will go by quickly.”

My father made his presence known by clearing his throat. He had two of his men with him; they stood either side of him, a few steps behind. The moment we made eye contact, I felt in my gut that something was about to happen, and that it was something very bad.

His dark eyes held so much hatred for me, his lips thin. It looked like he was about to kill me, and I began to shake. I didn’t look at Dominik—I couldn’t. The mere thought of looking away from Father when he was this angry petrified me.

“What was that, Ekaterina?” Father asked and took a step forward.

I gulped, unable to respond, tears still streaming down my face. But now it wasn’t because Dominik was leaving me, but because I knew I was about to face the wrath of my father, something I never wanted to experience.

“N-Nothing,” I stuttered, and that was my biggest mistake.

Shock consumed me before the pain on my left cheek paralyzed me. He’d slapped me so hard it had forced my head to the other side. I knew pain and embarrassment were written all over my face as the sting from his slap only intensified.

“What the hell are you doing?” Dom’s eyes widened in disgust. His position meant there was little he could do, but he stepped in front of me, shielding me from the second blow my father was about to deliver.

“Step aside, Dominik,” Father ordered, his voice full of venom and menace, the worst combination. “I will not tell you again.”

But Dominik didn’t move. It took me years to understand, but Dominik, no matter how fearless he might’ve seemed, was terrified of our father too. However, he was willing to suffer the consequences if it meant protecting me. That was why he was my favorite brother.

Father chuckled viciously. “I see how it is.”

He nodded at his men, and they sprang into action.

One of them hit Dominik in the gut, and he doubled over in pain, taken by surprise. The other grabbed him by the hands as the first one hit him again and again until they were able to use a Taser to prevent him from interfering further.

I took a small step back, watching with wide eyes as Father pulled a big syringe from his pocket. He pushed the plunger, testing it, and as we made eye contact, the most vile smile I’d ever seen spread over his face.

“I told you, Ekaterina,” he reminded me. “Never show any emotions, because they always come with a price, and this is yours.”

I stood frozen in place as he approached me. I was crying, calling for Mom, calling for anyone to come and rescue me. But no one did. There wasn’t a single person brave enough to oppose Bogdan Kalashnik.

“Please, Father,” I begged. “Please.”

He let out a loud laugh that chilled me to the bone. “What a pathetic child you are, Ekaterina.”

I screamed as he plunged the needle into my neck, pushing harshly on the plunger. For a moment, everything seemed fine—until it wasn’t. My vision blurred, and a feeling of nausea overwhelmed me.

I closed my eyes, embracing the darkness, and my father made no attempt to catch me when I fell.

There was no way to know how long I slept. It took me a while to open my eyes—my entire body was aching, like I’d been run over by a truck, twice, and then glued back together with everything in the wrong place.

Most importantly, I couldn’t see a damn thing.

The room was unfamiliar, and it stank. It smelled like a trash can that hadn’t been emptied in years. It was rather cold too, as if I were in a basement of sorts. I could barely breathe without gagging.

I felt myself lying on a mattress, but that was all it was. No bed, just a mattress that didn’t feel even remotely comfortable. It was almost as if it

were a wooden batten, uncomfortable and rough on my back.

I sensed a slight movement from the corner of the room and let out a small cry. I pulled my knees to my chest and hugged them tightly. This was my punishment for being a hideous child.

I flinched as sharp light filled the room. Once I'd blinked the soreness away, I saw that only one corner had light. It was my father, with a small flashlight in his hands, face as stoic as a stone, yet terrifying and monstrous.

I couldn't stop my body from shaking violently.

"Now, Ekaterina." Father's rough voice shook me even more. "I know you're scared and that your biggest fear is being alone in the dark."

If he knew, why had he done this to me? If he knew I was scared, why had he confined me in a room with no windows, no sunlight, no people? If he knew how afraid I was of being alone, why had he forced it upon me?

"To be quite honest with you," he sighed, "I never planned on having more children after Dominik was born. But then your mother found out she was pregnant, with twins no less, it would have been a sin to terminate the pregnancy. However, I never counted on having a daughter."

I continued to listen with attention, savoring the last human contact I'd have in a while. Although he'd yet to say it, I knew this was my punishment for not being born a boy, for being a disappointment.

"But there's nothing I can do about that, right?" A dry laugh echoed around the room. "So you need to stop wasting those emotions on useless things, Ekaterina."

My tears hadn't stopped falling since he'd begun his little talk.

"I can't have a daughter, not an emotional one at least, so here's what will happen." He approached me slightly, and I crawled back until I hit a wall—there was no way of escaping him.

"Today, you laughed obnoxiously loud for two minutes and cried for another three. That's five minutes of your life wasted on emotions that will not matter in a few years, Ekaterina."

A wicked smile took over his face. Bogdan had never been a warm family man, but I'd never seen him look as evil as he appeared in that moment. My blood ran cold, and his next words promised an eternity of suffering, for as long as I lived under his roof.

"For five minutes, you'll spend five weeks here. Your task every day is to control those emotions of yours. You're sad? Turn it into indifference. You're happy? Turn it into indifference. A few weeks in here should be

enough to teach you that lesson.”

That was the last time I saw anyone in weeks. That was the last time I saw light in a long time, and that night was the first time I learned how to stop my tears. But instead of those feelings turning into indifference, they grew into an immense desire for revenge.



Someone’s hands were shaking me, harshly. Even half-asleep, my fight-or-flight response was activated, and I managed to kick the person and throw them off myself.

My eyes finally opened as I took a much-needed deep breath. It was as if I hadn’t been breathing—as if my heart had stopped for the duration of the dream.

Only it wasn’t a dream. It wasn’t even a nightmare. It was one of the very first vivid memories I’d developed under my father’s roof—or rather, the tower he’d locked me in. My body was shuddering visibly, and a drop of blood fell down my chin. It’d been years since I’d had a nosebleed from stress, and it had happened whilst I was asleep.

“Why are you still here?” I asked, not a single thought in my mind.

Davorin seemed passive, from what I could tell—his mask didn’t allow me to see much. He didn’t question the blood as I wiped it away, which pleased me.

“You passed out—I couldn’t just leave you like that.”

He seemed unfazed that I’d kicked him not a minute ago. Slowly, he inched back towards me, and it was only then that I noticed he’d clothed me.

“What was the dream about?”

A knot formed in my throat. I averted my eyes, irritated that the memory had resurfaced. Being vulnerable wasn’t part of my game plan, and it hadn’t happened in years. I swore, whilst my eyes were glued to the floor, that it would never happen again for as long as I lived.

“We didn’t finish our conversation.” Before we’d got caught up in our desire, something I shouldn’t have allowed to happen but, for reasons I didn’t understand, had welcomed with open arms. “About Aleksei.”

Davorin sat next to me, his gaze on me. I didn’t want to be tempted again, so I kept staring at the floor. “Does Aleksei know who might be behind the hit and why?”

“Why?” He let out a sardonic laugh. “Your brother is either heavily respected or hated, never loved. Even those who respect him might turn their backs on him if they feel he isn’t fulfilling his role.”

“Then how did he find out about this?”

“After I started doing business again, a man reached out to me—no name—and told me the amount of money I’d receive for this one job would set my future great-grandchildren up for life. It didn’t take me long to connect the request to Emmerson.”

My brows creased. “Surely he wasn’t that stupid?”

A dry chuckle came from Davorin’s lips as he shook his head. “He wasn’t. He was only the messenger. I contacted Aleksei after that, told him everything, and he forgave Emmerson.”

I didn’t fall for that. “He isn’t the forgiving type.”

The sensation of his eyes on me made my skin feel as if it had frost all over it, and I snapped my head in his direction. That might’ve been my biggest mistake of the night, as the proximity was threatening, overwhelming, and overpowering.

“He isn’t,” he confirmed. “But Emmerson didn’t think it through. He lied about who his boss was, so to find him, Aleksei has spared his life for the time being.”

I blinked in disbelief. “Why hasn’t he just had him tortured?”

Davorin grinned widely, and it knocked the air straight out of my lungs. “That’s the thing. Emmerson has a tracker in his arm. If Aleksei tries to remove it and torture the information out of him, whoever’s behind this all would just disappear. And that’s not good enough for Aleksei.”

I mumbled, the dots connecting in my head. “Brienne was your opening, and that’s why you and she are acquainted.”

Acquainted wasn’t the term I would’ve preferred to use, but for lack of anything better, it would suffice for now. I didn’t want to use the word relationship in connection with Davorin where another woman was concerned. I wished I’d killed her when I had the chance.

“Yes,” he groaned. “It’s a hassle, but your brother is paying me very generously.”

“So why are you behaving so stupidly?”

He raised a curious brow.

“Stalking me? Do you think any of my brothers would be thrilled with that? They could kill you.”

“They could.” He cackled. “But I’m not afraid of your brothers.”

“That’s arrogant.”

He tilted his head to the side, a sly smirk on his lips. “Rest assured, little lion, not even death can separate you from me. Even in hell, I’d find a way to drag you there with me.”

Davorin’s smile was always half promise, half threat. A promise that now I belonged to him, no one could whisk me away—and a threat that anyone who dared try would meet the Devil himself, the Devil who served under Davorin.

A fervent sensation sneaked its way into my mind—soul-crushing, gut-wrenching thoughts and delirious, vivid images that threatened to drive me insane.

A few months ago, I would’ve laughed at the thought of this becoming my life.

A few months ago, I would’ve shot Davorin dead.

But a few months ago, I hadn’t known the hell he’d create for me was one I would crave—that all I’d want was to allow him to ruin me, until there was nothing left. Until all of it belonged fully to him.

T W E L V E



DESPERATE times called for desperate measures.

Throwing around accusations without proof was dangerous in my world. It would create a lot of further issues, none of which would be good

for me. The only person I truly looked out for was myself, and I needed to find solid evidence, because killing Aleksei would mean my protection vanished.

A short, off-the-shoulder dress hugged my body like a second skin. The color—a terracotta red—went well with my skin tone and set off my eyes, according to Tiana. My hair was straight, with two clips pinning the front pieces behind my ear so they wouldn't fall over my eyes.

Himeros was one of the most expensive places to eat in New York. It was owned by one of Aleksei's friends, the boss of the Godfathers of the Night, the Greek mafia. Many celebrities dined in the divine restaurant, yet none of them knew what truly went down inside it.

The Greek mafia's influence skyrocketed as soon as their alliance with Aleksei began, years ago, after he'd dethroned our father and forcefully taken his place. It had earned Aleksei respect; however, where respect reigned, envy hid in the shadows.

That was the reason for my visit tonight.

The main floor was open to everyone, as long as they'd been invited to dine inside. The list was filled with celebrities, politicians, and public figures. However, the establishment had two underground floors that were kept a strict secret from the public.

The first held an isolated club, where any kind of drug could be found. It was provided by their boss, Helios, with Aleksei taking a hefty cut of the profit.

Underneath that club was a gambling ring. It had everything, from slot machines, to roulette wheels, to poker. Millions of dollars came in each night, and not much money left the place. Their exclusive players were wealthy, and knew how to play, but from time to time, Helios would throw in a newbie just for kicks.

Helios's sister was the one who would be able to help me.

Rhea Karalis was the same age as me. We'd met when I first came to New York, following an incident in one of their clubs in Los Angeles. Since I was always with Aleksei back then, he'd taken me with him to business meetings.

His meeting with Helios had been unimpressive. However, the night had improved as soon as the cops had shown up to bust them on charges of drug possession. Someone had snitched, and the moment Aleksei and Helios got the name, the man had been murdered and left in a public place—a

statement that showed those who dared to oppose them would end up facing the same fate.

Rhea got arrested, and so did I. We'd shared a cell, then I'd bailed her out, so she owed me one. To this day, Aleksei had kept the evidence of her being arrested buried deeply, so Helios had no clue.

"I must say," Rhea greeted me after I showed the numerous security guards my invitation, "I'm surprised you called me."

I turned around and smiled. Her tan skin glowed under the lights, her long, wavy black hair falling smoothly down her back. The skirt and the shirt she wore matched and hugged her curves perfectly, though I would've expected nothing less from someone who resembled a goddess.

She wore diamond earrings, and a matching necklace decorated her exposed cleavage. She looked like a million dollars. Though, to be fair, she could have worn a trash bag and rocked it. She radiated beauty.

"Sadly, it's not a social call, Rhea."

She raised an eyebrow, unable to suppress her smile. "It never is with you. Let's take a seat—unless you wanted to play first?"

My gaze traveled around the spacious room, but I shook my head. "No. It's still early, and I'd like to play poker with someone decent."

She laughed. "Well, Helios is dropping by later—you could play with him."

That was a bad idea. I'd played against him twice and beaten him both times, but he was a sore loser. To this day, he claimed that I'd cheated, even though that was both impossible and unnecessary. We played for fun, not money. There was nothing to gain by cheating.

Rhea led me towards a booth located on the platform above us, secured by white rails. A big leather couch and a small table sat in the center. Four guards surrounded us as soon as we took our seats.

"I have a thirty-year-old Macallan for you, my lady." Rhea grinned and snapped her fingers.

One of the guards nodded and picked up a phone. Not even four minutes later, a bottle of Macallan sat in front of me. Rhea had opted for a cocktail.

I smiled. "Why, thank you."

Rhea was one of the most tolerable people to be around. Although she wasn't involved in her family business, she was always snooping around. Any information a person might want, she had it. It came with a price, but I

had the money to pay.

“I haven’t seen you around lately,” Rhea noted. “It seems like you’ve been otherwise occupied.” She tried to hide her smirk behind the cocktail glass, an intense flame in her black eyes.

“I’m not surprised you’re well informed,” I replied and took a sip of the whiskey. It felt refreshing, almost as natural as water. “I am surprised you’d care enough to find out.”

“Knowledge is power, Ekaterina.”

I finished the statement she always used. “And power belongs to those who take it.”

“Exactly.” Her dimples showed. “I don’t know who wants your brother dead.”

I glanced around. The people below paid no attention to us. It was the kind of place where you wouldn’t be seen even if you left millions of dollars richer. Helios guaranteed his clients exclusivity and confidentiality, and any incidents were kept strictly hush-hush.

Rhea’s eyes were glued to the side of my face, but we sat in silence. I drank two glasses of the Macallan while the place filled and the music grew louder.

Eventually Rhea clicked her tongue. “But you know, don’t you?”

I turned to look at her. “I have my suspicions.”

Her head cocked to the side. “Who?”

I gave her a knowing look and shook my head slightly. “I can’t throw out assumptions based on a gut feeling.”

“Oh, it’s someone big, isn’t it?”

Her intelligence was my favorite trait, but the similarities between us ended there. She was a woman of intellect, not action; whereas I thrived in chaos and was reborn in disasters. The feeling of being immoral in this corrupt world brought nothing but vanity. And that arrogance, after the *years* I’d lived in captivity, was deserved, it was needed. It was what freedom felt like.

I ignored her prying and instead steered the conversation in the direction I needed. “The man who took out the hit is called Martin Emerson; however, there’s someone bigger in the picture. He’s just a pawn.”

Confusion creased her features. “That’s information that’s easily accessible to the Pakhan.”

“Yes, but if the person controlling him is who I think it is, Aleksei will need hard evidence, and you work the quickest.”

“I might need your assistance.” Rhea threw the bone and I gladly took it.

“Of course.” I smiled. “Getting information out of people the hard way is my favorite pastime.”

Rhea straightened her back and poured me another glass of drink. She was in business mode, and her face told me she’d already decided on a price.

“I don’t want money,” she told me. “I owe you one; however, this is huge, and you and I both know I could easily get in deep shit with both the Pakhan and my brother.”

The last card was about to be dealt, and I was the winner. “I’m aware. Once all of this is said and done, I’ll grant you what you wish the most.”

Her eyes twinkled.

The few hours we’d spent sharing a cell had been filled with a drunk Rhea expressing her undying feelings for a certain man in my family. With a little bit of a push, I could make their paths cross in a way that wouldn’t be suspicious—though what happened after that would be out of my hands, and none of my concern.

“Then, my lady, you just got yourself a deal.”

We clinked our glasses together.

Rhea was more than comfortable chatting about recent events that had taken place within her household. At twenty-four, she was still living with her parents, though not by choice. They wouldn’t allow her to move out until she was married to a man they’d chosen for her.

She’d tried to run away but had been dragged home from the airport. The consequences hadn’t been nearly as terrible as the ones I’d encountered, but I still sympathized with her frustrations.

No matter how pretty a prison was, it was still a prison.

A small grin tugged on the corner of my lips. “And tonight’s entertainment just arrived.”

Rhea groaned at the sight of her older brother with a woman on his arm. “Please, if you do end up playing together, go easy on him. I don’t want to listen to how you beat him again for the next four months.”

“Go easy? Not a chance. I brought money this time.”

She winced. “Then at least don’t call him a sore loser, I’m begging you.”

I grimaced as I stared at my empty glass then poured another whiskey. I was on my fifth drink in an hour, and as resistant to alcohol as I was, I was still human—another couple of glasses and I'd be drunk.

The last time I saw Helios I hadn't been sober, and drunk me wasn't pleasant to be around. What was worse was that I'd never lived it down, but I had almost no recollection of what had occurred that night, aside from there being a lot of alcohol and marijuana.

I stood up and straightened my dress, my small purse in my hand, then walked slowly past the security guards, making sure I didn't trip. My heels were high—almost as high as my confidence.

I never dressed for the male gaze, but it was an ego boost to see the lust in their eyes when they looked at me. And yet, none of them were ever able to get even one inch close to me. Not only because I would've killed them, but because the guards Aleksei had assigned to me were nearby. I felt their presence, despite never seeing them.

“Helios,” I greeted him with a slight smile.

“Devil's sidekick,” he responded with a nod and a tight smile. “To what do I owe this pleasure?”

The last word came out through gritted teeth. Helios wasn't a big fan of me, but I enjoyed seeing him rattled. His dark eyes watched me carefully, as if I might do something bad as soon as he looked away.

“Sticking to that nickname? How tasteless of you, Helios.” A chuckle escaped me. “You should know that I'm no longer a sidekick.”

Helios clicked his tongue, his curly hair falling over his eyes. “I wouldn't expect anything less from you, princess.”

I looked towards a poker table. “Do you have time for a game or two?”

His lips thinned into a line as soon as he heard the mockery lacing my words. “I suppose one game wouldn't hurt.”

Helios apologized to his date and offered to get her a drink before telling her he wouldn't be long. I didn't take the insult to heart, embracing it with grace.

As soon as we sat down, the bets were placed. The lowest I could go was two dollars, so I did, just to agitate him further. Helios bet five hundred dollars. My poker face was on, and the moment the dealer began to shuffle the cards, I pulled out my pack of cigarettes—the nicotine helped me focus.

I exhaled a cloud of smoke, and Rhea, who was sitting alongside me,

had to pinch her nose. She found the situation rather amusing. She'd brought me another glass of the Macallan, and Helios wasn't impressed that his sister had apparently taken my side.

The game was shorter than I'd anticipated, and when I laid down my cards, there was a vein popping on Helios' face. I wasn't proud of how I'd won. It had been pure luck, but what Helios didn't know couldn't hurt him.

"You know," I mused, "for someone who owns a casino, you sure can't keep a poker face."

His response was immediate. "Fuck off."

His eyes were glued to me, and he was growing angrier by the second. A small yawn escaped my mouth, and I quickly covered it with my palm.

"I think I'm done for the night. This was fun," I announced and stood up.

Helios blinked. "What?"

Rhea just laughed as I made my exit.



Helios stormed off not too long after. Sometimes, he acted like a child—he was one of the most impulsive people I'd ever met. He rarely cared about consequences, and once a mess was created, he had no interest in cleaning it up himself.

Rhea went off to mingle with people and chat with clients. Even from across the room, the fake smiles and the forced laughter annoyed me. I left my empty glass on the counter and went upstairs to the club.

Each floor was soundproof, and as soon as I stepped inside, I was in awe. It had been renovated since my last visit and now felt more spacious, despite being crowded with people who wore nothing but designer clothes. I could smell Dior perfume everywhere.

Although the people were well put together, they also danced, had fun, and were drunk out of their minds. All of the bartenders were busy, and

numerous servers rushed around, making sure no one's glass was empty.

Davorin was there as well. I hadn't seen him—I had no idea what he looked like without the mask after all—however, I'd felt his presence long ago. I'd known who it was immediately, and it had made my stomach twist.

He wasn't approaching me, and I wasn't actively looking for him either. From time to time, I'd glance around, but no one stood out. I was disappointed—a part of me was certain I'd recognize his strong presence even without the mask, whilst another part told me that was impossible. I wouldn't be able to see him until he allowed it.

It pissed me off.

“Hello there!” a voice yelled over the music.

Suddenly, my vision was blocked by a tall man. I looked up with a raised eyebrow.

“Would you mind if I bought you a drink?”

The stranger flashed a set of pearly teeth. His hair was perfectly styled with a little bit of gel, his suit was Armani, and an expensive watch decorated his wrist.

If Davorin wasn't going to show himself willingly, I would have to force him.

“One drink,” I told him. “I've already had enough.”

The stranger, whose name I learned was named Josh, led me towards the bar and paid for our drinks. He wasn't very good company, though his looks definitely made up for it. We chatted for a bit, and I learned a lot of information I hadn't asked for, though by the time tomorrow came, he would be long forgotten.

One drink was all it took for him to try and lure me to his hotel room.

I accepted.

I was horny, and Josh was there—it was a perfect combination. Although he'd initially suggested we go back to my place, he didn't press once I refused. I never took men home for a one-night stand—a hotel room always sufficed.

By the time we arrived in one of the cheaper hotels, his lips were hungrily on mine. The alcohol I'd consumed was making all of my decisions tonight, so even though he wasn't a great kisser, I let him continue, hoping the night would turn better than that suggested.

Once we were in his room, he pressed me against the door, his hands steadily gripping my hips. I tangled my fingers in his hair, feeling myself

slowly getting into the mood. It wasn't ideal, but it was good enough for now.

"You're so fucking hot," he groaned and pulled away.

I froze.

Josh took a step back and shrugged off his jacket. Then a sharp object flashed in front of my eyes, and my mouth dropped open as I stared at the scene, unmoving. I was unable to prevent it from happening—though that sparked another kind of arousal inside me.

A knife had been pressed to Josh's throat, and a dark shadow fell over me as the blade was dragged slowly from left to right, blood gushing out immediately. Josh let out a gurgling noise, pure terror in his eyes. He wasn't too far from me, so I got splashed by his blood, spots on my dress and face. His hands reached for the wound, but it was already too late.

A few seconds later, his body thudded to the floor. Blood oozed from the injury, his eyes widening as he tried to breathe—until eventually his body stopped moving all together.

A low laugh filled my ears. Dangerously furious eyes were on me—unmoving, unforgiving.

"Now, now, little lion." His harsh voice rang through the room. "That wasn't very smart of you."

My heart skipped a beat. The rational side of my brain knew this kind of attraction was poisonous, hazardous, threatening. Yet, the irrational side, the one I never listened to, told me to enjoy it. The thrill brought me satisfaction, and the unknown of it all excited me.

Davorin took a step towards me, over the dead body.

My gaze finally landed on his face, and all the air was pushed out of my lungs. He didn't have his mask on.

His high cheekbones, thick eyelashes, and perfect jaw were like the most beautiful painting. It was as if he'd been crafted by a Greek god. Arrogance and confidence were written all over his face. There was a small tattoo underneath his right eye, but he was too far away for me to see what it was.

Davorin was beautiful, and he knew it.

I swallowed a small knot in my throat. "It was a spur-of-the-moment thing."

The excuse was dull, and Davorin's gaze hardened. His jaw was clenched, and I could smell the fury rolling off his body.

"A spur-of-the-moment thing," he repeated with venom. "Well then.

You'll just have to face the consequences of your actions."

He was by my side in a second, his hand gripping my wrist. We left the room and passed by a mirror. I glanced at my reflection and noted there was much more blood on me than I'd expected.

He pushed the door to another room open and locked it as soon as he'd hauled me inside. He didn't hesitate before yanking me towards the bed and ripping my dress to shreds. Arousal that Josh wouldn't have been able to provoke lit within me immediately.

Davorin's touch was rough, full of wrath. I was bent over the bed, my head on the cold pillow as he raised my ass up.

He chuckled as he undid his belt. "You're drenched, Kaya."

Slowly, he flicked his finger over my aching clit, and a moan slipped past my lips. He teased me slightly, touching every place but where I needed it the most. I pushed back, trying to force his hand onto the right spot, but it only made him laugh.

"Tell me, Kaya, were you going to let him fuck you?"

The question was expected. What I hadn't expected was the threat behind his words. He'd cornered me; I had nowhere to run, and a lie would be a catastrophe. A catastrophe I couldn't allow to happen.

"Yes," I breathed.

I bit my bottom lip, preventing another sound from sneaking out. I flinched forward in utter disbelief when Davorin slapped my pussy, but the stinging sensation only made me more of a mess.

He made a tsk sound, and I screamed as he slammed into me at full force. It felt as if I'd been split open, but the pain was giving me too much pleasure, and the bastard knew it.

"Let me be fucking clear, my sweet Kaya," he said through gritted teeth, his thrusts growing more vicious. "You fucking belong to me."

Davorin slid out of me and turned me around. He was naked now, but there was no time for me to inspect him as closely as I'd like because he immediately leaned over and slammed back into me, his hand covering my mouth.

I gasped as he removed his hand—only to put it around my throat and squeeze. Delirium fluttered in my mind as my air was cut off, and tears ran down my face.

"Your body? Mine," he hissed. "Your pussy? Mine to fuck and mine to toy with." A wicked grin overtook his features. A beast I'd never brought

out of him had appeared. It was hungry, and I was all that would sate it.

His words stirred something deep inside me. My stomach twisted in pleasure, and my screams filled the silent room. He was panting, and it was the most erotic sight I'd ever seen.

“Say it, little lion.”

It was an order I couldn't refuse. He gripped my throat tighter, and I felt dizziness slowly consume me. He stopped right when the high was getting too great, and a whine slipped my lips.

“I'm yours,” I exhaled.

Davorin plunged into me, animalistically, sadistically. I cried out; I couldn't get enough of the feeling. I wanted the night to last forever.

“That's my girl.” He chuckled as he pressed a kiss between my breasts then sank his teeth into my skin, leaving a mark behind.

Davorin picked up the pace then, and the look he gave me was all it took. It was dark, vicious, and dangerous—it told me I was nothing but a toy to him, and I enjoyed every second of being treated as such. It was one of the most liberating things I'd ever felt, and the mere thought of it becoming an everyday occurrence brought on the orgasm I'd been desperately chasing.

My eyes rolled to the back of my head, and his hand returned to my throat, cutting off my oxygen completely. My body jerked, and the orgasm came in waves. The overstimulation was too much for me to handle, and before I knew it, although I was more sensitive than usual, another orgasm hit. Muffled screams and cries came from me, my teeth penetrating my bottom lip.

Davorin found it amusing.

I was exhausted, yet he didn't care. He didn't give me a moment to regain my strength—he simply pulled out of me and grabbed me by the hands. Then we were off the bed and he pushed me to my knees.

“You came without permission, Kaya,” he taunted. “It's only fair to clean up the mess you've created.”

My mouth opened to protest, but he just pushed his cock inside it. Then his hands were in my hair, hauling me forward so I took him deeper.

Slowly, I ran my tongue all over it, eliciting a low groan from the depths of his throat before he unleashed himself fully, fucking my mouth as if it were my pussy.

He was harshly tugging on my hair, switching the rhythm whenever he felt like it.

“Fuck,” he hissed. “You’re taking my cock so well, baby.”

I felt him hit the back of my throat, and he paused, holding that position so I struggled to breathe. His darkened eyes were fixed on me, and a wild laugh escaped him. It was a mix of pure pleasure and greed, and I couldn’t get enough of it.

“You’re going to swallow every single drop of it. Do you understand me?”

I was unable to respond, my mouth too full of him. He didn’t like that and tugged on my hair until I was able to give him a weak nod. Content with that answer, he shoved his cock even deeper, before pulling it out completely.

He pushed it straight back into my mouth then kept my head where he wanted it. I felt heat on my tongue as he let out a low grumble and emptied himself directly down my throat, keeping me steady until he was done.

I swallowed all of it.

And the best night of my life ended with him putting me to bed. Yet again, I passed out as soon as my head hit the pillow.

By morning, Davorin was gone. The only evidence he’d ever been there was a set of clean clothes laid out for me and another dice.

Number six again.

THIRTEEN



I was sore all over. I hadn't noticed during sex just how many marks Davorin had left on my body. I had to wear a turtleneck, and heels were a big no given how badly my legs ached. For the first time in years, I was dressed casually,

in sweats and sneakers, which took me too long to find in the back of my closet.

The car ride to Dominik's house took forever. I managed to get caught in rush hour, and spent an hour and a half stuck on the highway. The radio offered numerous song choices, but none of them were to my liking, so I ended up shutting the entire thing off.

When I caught a glimpse of the familiar mansion, a sigh of relief slipped out. I contemplated sleeping over—I definitely didn't want to risk getting stuck in traffic again.

It took every bit of self-restraint not to murder a bunch of people who were honking.

I pulled into the gigantic driveway, parked the car, and turned it off. I didn't bother bringing the keys or locking it—no one was able to enter Dominik's domain without permission, aside from me. I'd had copies made of Dominik's gate keys. His guards were hidden, but it didn't take me long to notice them. One of them took a small step forward, but once our eyes met, he nodded and returned to his post.

"Good morning, Myra," I greeted Dominik's housekeeper with a smile. She was the only member of household staff he had, and she handled all of the chores except cooking. Dominik liked to cook for himself—he was afraid of being poisoned at the hands of someone else.

"Good morning, Miss Ekaterina." She returned the gesture and stepped aside, allowing me to walk past her.

"Is my brother in his office?"

Myra nodded. "All of them are."

"Thank you."

A bubble of suspicion arose inside me as I walked through Dominik's home. Undoubtedly, the cameras had caught me, so he knew full well I was here. Why the hell were the three of them meeting without informing me? Granted, I was usually uninterested in their business, but this was different. There was someone after Aleksei, and I'd chosen to show loyalty to him. This was the only time I wanted to know every little detail of what was going on, and the fact that they were trying to hide it from me pissed me off beyond words.

I pushed the door open with force. The usual study awaited—shelves filled with books I'd read years ago; the thick black curtains behind Dominik's wooden desk. His leather couch and whiskey collection. Even the

scent of raspberry was the same.

“Ekaterina.” Dominik showed no surprise at my sudden entrance. “I wasn’t expecting you today.” He sat behind his desk. My other two brothers were on the couch; each held a glass of whiskey.

“I can see that.” I approached the table and poured a glass of whiskey for myself. The burning sensation ran down my throat, and I grimaced as I remembered I’d forgotten to eat breakfast—alcohol on an empty stomach was a bad idea.

“Is everything all right with you?”

Aleksei’s voice made me snap my head in his direction. “Why?”

His eyes traveled from my high ponytail, to my bare face—I hadn’t bothered with makeup—then down to my outfit and shoes. “The last time you were down with a fever, you refused to go to the hospital without heels and makeup.”

I coughed, ignoring his statement as I sat down next to Viktor. He visibly froze, but after a moment acted as if nothing had happened. My eyes narrowed in distrust, but I let it go for the moment.

“So why have we all gathered here today?” I questioned. “And why wasn’t I invited?”

Dominik frowned. “You never wanted to be a part of the business. There was no reason to call you.”

“You’ve called me for much less. If it has anything to do with this threat to Aleksei, I want to be in on it.”

Aleksei was confused. “Are you worried about me?”

I choked out a laugh. “Don’t be ridiculous. I’m curious.”

He kissed his teeth. “Ah, of course.”

An uncomfortable silence fell, which Dominik finally broke. “Well, since you want to know, fine.” He glanced between Viktor and Aleksei, but neither showed any resistance. “Martin Emmerson was killed.”

I swallowed. “When?”

Viktor spoke for the first time since my arrival, though he didn’t so much as glance my way. His eyes were mostly glued to Dominik, only shifting to Aleksei from time to time. “Last night.”

“How was he killed?” I asked, a sense of danger stealing through my body.

Aleksei gulped down the rest of his drink, then slammed the glass onto the small table, before releasing a sigh of frustration. “He was hung

upside down with his intestines curled up beneath him.”

A laugh of disbelief slipped from me. “You’re telling me he was gutted?”

Dominik nodded.

“I’m not worried,” Aleksei announced. “Whoever it is, it’s a small fish, otherwise I would’ve been attacked by now. I have more pressing matters to worry about.”

“More pressing matters?” I repeated slowly. “You’re either insane or plain stupid, Aleksei. No small fish would ever dare to threaten you.”

“That’s enough, Kaya.” Dominik’s stern voice echoed around the room. Until he shut me down, I hadn’t realized I’d been yelling at Aleksei and Viktor had been getting ready to fight me. Fucking kiss-ass.

“He isn’t taking it as lightly as he’s letting on,” Viktor responded.

I was tempted to hit him—he always spoke to me in the same condescending voice, and the longer I let it slide, the bigger his balls were growing.

“We don’t want this to reach Father.”

I leaned back into the leather couch, arms folded in front of my chest. “Now that makes sense. Are the three of you afraid Father will call you incompetent yet again?”

Aleksei was angry. “Watch your tone, Ekaterina—I’ve had enough of you. You’ve brought me nothing but trouble these past few weeks, and you might be my sister, but you’re not a god. I won’t tolerate your bullshit anymore.”

I grinned. “Why, thank you. It’s been a while since you complimented me.”

Abruptly, Dominik rose from his chair. He was fed up with our arguments, though they were nothing but a pastime for me. I never took Aleksei’s words personally. After all, nothing he said could hurt me more than what he’d already done.

“Ekaterina, walk with me.”

Before slipping out of the room, I drank the rest of my whiskey and made a mental note to eat something before I left.

Dominik was walking a few feet in front of me. Silently, I followed him outside.

Once we were behind his house—an area that held nothing but deep forest—he stopped and allowed me to catch up before striding forward once

more.

“All right,” I began. “I’m sorry. I just think this should be taken a lot more seriously than it is.”

Dominik nodded in agreement. “And it is. There are plenty of things you’re unaware of.”

“Then tell me,” I pressed.

He sighed. “When Aleksei challenged our father and took over, this sort of thing happened frequently. People believed he wasn’t fit to rule, and the majority of the alliance agreed. Of course, Aleksei proved them all wrong and our connections are stronger than ever, but it doesn’t mean it can’t happen again. Showing panic and rushing our response would prove that Aleksei truly isn’t fit to rule, and after what happened with his fiancée, he has nothing left to lose. You need to understand—what happens next is his decision and his only.”

“Wow,” I breathed.

Dominik blinked. “What?”

“I think that’s the most you’ve ever said at once.”

His lips twitched. “Be serious.”

“I am,” I replied with a grin. “But I do understand—somewhat. Aleksei isn’t dumb, and he for sure won’t let it slide. I’m just trying to make all of this go away quicker.”

Dominik’s eyes narrowed in doubt. He stopped walking and simply watched me. “What do you know, Kaya?”

I shrugged. “Nothing.”

He grabbed my wrist, though it was a soft touch, just to prevent me from leaving. “If you know something, tell me now.”

I jerked my wrist back. “I’ll tell you once I know something definite. I’m not one to throw accusations without proof.”

His jaw clenched. “I’ll ask because I have to ask.” He swallowed harshly. “Are you involved in this?”

A dry chuckle left my lips, and my heart dropped to my feet. A twisted knot had formed in my gut, and I felt as if someone had slapped me—hard.

“I’ll ignore that unfounded distrust and respond. However, if this happens again, Dominik, if you try to force words out of my mouth, I’ll become your worst nightmare.” It came out too harshly, but I didn’t care.

With a deep breath, I turned on my heel and began walking back

towards the house. “But no. I’m not involved in this. I need Aleksei alive, Dominik.”

He caught up to me quickly. “I apologize. I had to make sure.”

I chortled. “Make sure of what exactly? That I don’t snap all of a sudden and cause a war?”

He rolled his eyes. “That’s too dramatic, even for you.” He paused. “And I’m not afraid of you going astray; I’m afraid you’ll do something without thinking it through.”

“I never do things thoughtlessly. But if I did, it would be because I was pushed beyond my limits, and I don’t like my limits tested. But yes, I have a vague idea of who might be behind this,” I admitted, leaving Dominik speechless.

A few minutes later we were back in front of his house, and I refused to rejoin the family gathering—the one I hadn’t been invited to in the first place.

Instead, I slid into my car and drove off. My knuckles turned white from the tight grip I had on the steering wheel, and fury filled my vision. I expected this sort of thing from Viktor, who hated my guts, or even Aleksei, who, despite trying his best to maintain a relationship with me, would rather watch his kingdom fall apart than ask me for help.

It had never crossed my mind that it would be Dominik who doubted me. It caused a chain of mixed emotions, and even his name on my tongue felt venomous.

It was true, after all, that the only person a human could trust was themselves. I’d learned that the hard way, so after they’d held up their end of the bargain, I’d be out of this family for good. None of them had ever truly cared for my wellbeing, and it was time to let that fantasy vanish.



Two uneventful weeks passed.

Dominik reached out on the night after our minor argument, with some takeout at my doorstep, but I slammed the door in his face, and he hadn't bothered me since. I was grateful I had one less idiot to deal with for the time being.

Aleksei tried to keep me semi-updated on the situation, but I got bored of that pretty quickly. Things weren't going the way I wanted them to, hence I was no longer interested in anything he had to tell me. Besides, I had other ways of finding information—and it would be more accurate than anything he could offer.

I was surprised, however, that Davorin had disappeared—aside from a phone call, which ended with me hanging up on him after he threatened to kill people if I didn't pick up more quickly. I had no strength to argue with him though, and told him to kill whoever he wished. It was none of my business anyway.

The most shocking occurrence was Xenia pushing me to keep her company whilst she shopped for an evening dress. She dragged me out of bed at eight in the morning and promised to make up for it. Apparently, she needed advice on which dress would suit her better, but I was irritated about being woken up so early.

“Definitely not that one,” I said with a yawn.

We'd already checked out four shops before landing on this one, and she'd yet to find a suitable dress.

“You're cruel,” she grumbled. “Nothing pleases you.”

A tear rolled down my cheek from my yawn, exhaustion washing over me. “Next time, don't ask for my advice and just pick out whatever you want.”

“I trust your judgment too much,” she said with a grin that made me want to knock her teeth out.

She was overstaying her welcome, but I didn't know exactly why she'd decided to stick around as long as she had. Dominik had multiple guest rooms she could've used.

“What's the occasion anyway?” I asked as I flipped through a magazine that had been lying on the small table in the shop's fitting room.

Xenia's brows creased. “The boss didn't tell you? It's for the Pakhan's birthday celebration next week.”

“Aleksei's still having those? Isn't he too old for that sort of thing?”

She chuckled. “It's free food and alcohol—no one hates that.”

“That’s true,” I muttered and continued flipping the pages.

I wasn’t surprised that I hadn’t been invited. It was to be expected given Aleksei’s petty nature. Most likely, I’d get a last-minute invitation with no other option but to attend. I hated those parties. They never ended on a good note, so someone was bound to leave in a body bag.

Xenia tried on a couple of dresses. If I liked them, she was uncertain. If I disliked them, they were exactly what she wanted. I’d known her for years, and today’s behavior was out of the ordinary. I would’ve caught on faster, but I’d been too tired to pay attention. Now though, I wanted answers.

“You have two minutes to tell me what’s going on or I’ll shoot you where you stand.”

She froze before trying to smile her way out of the conversation. But with the clock ticking, and knowing I wasn’t someone she could play with, she sighed and told me we would talk somewhere private. Immediately, I forced her to change out of the dress and dragged her to my car.

“Spill, Xenia—I’m getting impatient.”

She sighed, though the hint of fright in it didn’t go unnoticed. For a few moments, she was silent. She was clearly unsure what to tell me, and I was growing more and more irritated that she couldn’t use her goddamn words.

“Well”—she released a deep breath—“the boss asked me to keep you occupied today.”

I raised an eyebrow. “So there’s no party?”

Her eyes widened, and she shook her head furiously. “No, no, there is! It’s just that I didn’t really need a dress. I wasn’t going to attend. I hate crowded places.”

“All right then.” I turned on the engine. “Why do they want me out of their business so badly?”

She bit her bottom lip, as if she was trying to stop herself from revealing the information I needed. I remained silent, knowing it would break her eventually, and started driving towards Aleksei’s home. I assumed it had something to do with him.

Xenia quickly caught on. “You can’t go to the Pakhan’s house.” It wasn’t a statement—it was a plea. One glance at her desperate face told me I was right, and that I was headed in the right direction.

It was amusing. “Oh, please, do stop me.” I laughed at the terror on her face.

“Your father arrived unexpectedly last night. They’re having a meeting with him as we speak.”

Every single bone in my body felt as if it’d been lit on fire. The deeply rooted rage I’d hidden over the years resurfaced, twice as strong and twice as compelling. My breath shook, and my mind raced.

This man, the man I hated most in this world, the reason I’d become the person I was, had dared to show his pathetic face? His star might have fallen, but he was still well respected, and his death would cause an uproar. Though an uproar was on the horizon regardless.

My teeth ground together, my vision blinded by fury. If he was here, it meant that the entire situation with Aleksei was worse than they’d let on. But he hadn’t show up to help his children, to find out who was behind everything or to put a stop on it. No, he was here to watch it all unfold.

Bogdan Kalashnik was here to bury his son.

“Don’t be mad at me.” Xenia’s voice broke my train of thought. It was only then that I realized how afraid she was because I was driving like a maniac. I hadn’t done it on purpose though, and as soon as I slowed down, she relaxed.

“Why would I be mad at you?” I asked, not understanding where that nonsense had come from. I didn’t get mad at people, because when I did, I either cut them out of my life completely or buried them. Possibly both, depending on the severity of my anger.

The only exception to that were my brothers.

“Because I knew about this and didn’t tell you?”

Her question was unexpected. I shook it off. “You and I both know where your loyalty lies. There’s no need to pretend anything else, Xenia—it’s pointless and not worth my time.”

She was offended, potentially angry with me. I knew she viewed me as a friend, but to me, she was nothing but a tool I’d ship back to Dominik as soon as I was done with her services. And since she couldn’t refuse me, she had to keep her mouth shut.

“Get out of the car,” I told her when I pulled up outside my home and tossed her the keys. Slowly, she unbuckled her seat belt and, with doubt on her face, she opened the door.

“Where are you going?”

I blinked. “None of your business.”

I sped off immediately and picked up my phone. It didn’t take Rhea

long to answer. The first thing I heard as the call went through was her yawning—loudly. I removed the device from my ear and put her on speaker.

“It’s early, Ekaterina.” Her tired voice cracked. “What’s up?”

“It’s not early—it’s ten in the morning,” I retorted. “And how are you doing with the task I gave you?”

Another yawn. “I have some things to check up on, nothing for certain yet.”

I cursed under my breath, and my heart rate picked up. “How fast can you get it done?”

Rhea paused to ponder before responding, “I can get you at least something by Friday.”

“That’s perfect.”

It was just in time. My suspicions needed to be confirmed before Aleksei’s celebration took place, because that was when I was going to take action if proven correct. My gut instinct had yet to fail me though, so I knew I was right. All I needed was proof.

“Why are you in such a rush?” Her voice stabilized slightly, though she kept yawning.

I swallowed. “My father arrived last night.”

“Oh shit.” Her reaction was immediate. “Are you okay?”

Genuine concern laced her tone. Perhaps it was because of the favor I was going to do for her, or perhaps it was because she didn’t want to be caught up in this family war. Somehow, I had trouble comprehending if her worry was honest.

“Of course I am.” She never recognized my lies. “I always am. Text me when and where once you get everything I asked for.”

I hung up without waiting for an answer. The phone fell to the floor of the car and stayed there for the time being.

Many things were about to go downhill. I was itching to do something, to avoid my father at all costs. But that was impossible. Hiding from the monster wasn’t going to make the monster go away. It would only make him chase me faster.

Soon enough, I found myself in a park.

The children running around—their loud laughs and their baby language—was enough to ruin my day. I’d never liked children, nor wished to have any of my own, but I couldn’t help fixating on the parents—how they showed interest in their kids, played with them, smiled and laughed with

them.

My thoughts were becoming green. The more my mind dwelled on the topic, the more intense the color become.

Parental love was out of the question for me; it had never existed. I'd yearned to have a loving relationship with my parents, though but it was impossible.

I'd already killed my mother, and my father was next.

FOURTEEN



PARANOIA crept its way into my mind.

After I'd calmed down and realized what it meant that my father, a man who rarely left Russia, was here, I couldn't shake off the feeling of

nausea. Granted, I was going to confront him either way once I decided on the day his life would end; however, that would happen on my terms, *not his*.

I couldn't shake off the feeling of being followed, of being watched at all times. Even in the comfort of my home, I felt unsafe. Everywhere I looked, my mind tricked me into believing things were being misplaced, and not by me.

Father called me from time to time, and I picked up the calls. After he was done insulting me for what seemed like hours, telling me just what a useless bitch I was, he would shift to talking about my brothers. Although there were four of us, not one of us was ever good enough in his eyes.

He feared Aleksei, ignored Dominik, acted as if Viktor wasn't his child, and hated me. All of us had too many flaws in his eyes. He resented us, probably resented having us too. He'd been happy when our mother got ill, so she couldn't pester him for more children that would've been abused and neglected.

Mom got better over time, but his resentment never passed.

That was when his inhumane treatment of his children began. Aleksei and Dominik were unbreakable, and no matter what he did to them, they were able to endure it, for a long time. It was Dominik's idea to overthrow our father but to make Aleksei the Pakhan.

Viktor never had any part in it. Regardless of the harsh treatment, he believed that our father wanted to make all of us the best versions of ourselves, to force us into becoming the best soldiers we possibly could be. To this day, Viktor worships the ground our father walks on, and he'd betray all of us in a heartbeat.

There had never been a good reason for keeping Viktor in the business, alive even. Aleksei's best excuse was that he was family, but why was that so important? It was always more likely you'd be betrayed by a family member than a stranger.

To ensure my father couldn't approach me, I bolted the windows and the door of my apartment shut. No one was able to come in; no one was able to leave. I kicked out Xenia, and although she protested, she couldn't change my mind.

I was isolated and alone. It was pathetic. Years ago, I'd been begging on my knees for that torture to stop, yet right now, I was doing it to myself. All of my devices were disconnected, and I'd turned the internet off.

In the days that followed, I was all alone. It was something I'd grown

used to long ago, and I didn't mind it, because now, it was on my terms.

I was barely eating or drinking, my mind preoccupied with thoughts of everything that had happened.

I was having a manic episode. I was furious all the time. Not once did the rage subside. It kept growing and growing until I exploded, but luckily for my neighbors, my place was soundproof.

Screaming for what seemed like hours wasn't helpful. It only gave me a sore throat, and I had no medicine, which made it almost unbearable, yet I'd spent the past two days trashing my apartment.

I'd broken the TV and the glass table, the plates and glasses. I was walking over piles of clothes, on the mess I'd created, but that wasn't good enough. The need for chaos was overwhelming me, and after I'd destroyed everything that could be destroyed, I cried tears of anger.

I was on my bed, knees hugged to my chest. My body shook uncontrollably. I wasn't tired and couldn't remember the last time I'd slept. All of it was getting too much too quickly and I had no answer as to how to resolve my problems.

Of course, the easiest thing would've been to kill all of them and call it a day, but something was preventing me from doing that.

And I couldn't understand what it was.

Yet, the more I thought about it, the more I forced myself to figure it out, the clearer the answer seemed to become. I would never admit it, but *he* was the reason for all of it. Perhaps it was all the negative that Davorin brought, but even those negatives brought me closer to him. And I wasn't ready to let him go.

"What the fuck happened here?"

I flinched. I was too out of it to hear anyone coming in. How the hell did he get in? I could've sworn there was no way in or out—both Dominik and Aleksei had tried to reach me, to come inside, but to no avail.

I didn't know whether it was day or night. All of the blinds were closed, and my room was the darkest one, which is why I'd chosen to confine myself in it.

Yet, even in the darkness, I saw his face perfectly. He'd grown a whole lot cockier since removing the mask. As if he knew how torturous it was, how tempting it was. Davorin's face was right out of a magazine cover, and he had his eyes set on me. Only me.

"Go away," I whispered, my voice cracking.

My chin rested on my knees, which were hugged to my chest.

Instead of listening, he approached me. He was quick to sit next to me. In an instant, his cold hand was underneath my chin, forcing my head up. Davorin's eyes were narrowed, and not once did he look away.

"Jesus Christ," he whispered. "When was the last time you slept?"

My eyes must have been bloodshot. Instantly, my stomach grumbled. I snapped my eyes shut. Embarrassment washed over me as the grumbling continued for a solid minute.

"It's been a while," I breathed.

Davorin's jaw clenched as he slowly released my chin. He took in my appearance, which was terrible. My hair resembled a bird's nest, and I reeked of sweat. I'd been too hot for hours now and had been unable to lower my temperature.

"What—no, *who* the fuck scared you this much?"

I flinched at his words. It was something he didn't need to know, and it wasn't something I was going to tell him. It was my business and mine only—involving him would've brought complications later.

"No one."

"Bullshit," he spat. "It took me forty minutes to break down the door, and you didn't hear me at all. You're too observant, too smart for that. I won't ask again—who dared to hurt you?"

I shook my head. "No one. Drop it."

"Lying to me is useless, little lion," he murmured, his thumb grazing my cheek. "I'll find out who it was, and I'll hunt them down. No one gets to make you afraid."

Slowly, the anger seemed to return, twice as strong. "It's none of your business," I told him through gritted teeth. "Stop meddling. No one asked for your input."

He tilted his head to the side. "None of my business?" he repeated slowly. "Anything regarding you is my business. I've told you already—you belong to me. Mind, body, and soul. Your worries and troubles are mine to bear."

As twisted as it sounded, it made my heart flutter. I was never truly going to give into his warped fantasies. A part of me would never belong to him. Yet, the other part wanted nothing more than to be owned by him. It was almost a need.

After all, I did my best with toxic relationships. The toxicity was

thrilling. He wanted to possess me, and I was going to fight him, every step of the way, until he learned that no matter what I told him, I'd been his from the first moment I'd seen him.

"There are some things I can't tell you," I replied. "And quite frankly, I don't trust you."

"Trust me?" He laughed. "You don't need to trust me, Kaya. Whether you like it or not, I'm never leaving. And if I do leave, I'm taking you with me."

I blinked. "I can see that." Sarcasm dripped from my tongue. "You come and then disappear for weeks at a time."

Davorin's lips twitched upwards. "Did you miss me, little lion?"

My eyes widened, and my mouth dropped open. How the hell did he get that from what I said? Before I could add a snarky remark, he spoke again.

"Don't worry," he tried to soothe me. "I'm never leaving for that long again. And neither are you."

"I'm sorry?"

He grinned. "Did you think I came without a reason? I'm taking you with me."

I snorted. "I'd like to see you try."

His nostrils flared. "Must you be so difficult? It's happening regardless of whether you accept or not."

"Why does it have to be me? It could've been anyone else, Davorin—anyone else."

"That's where you're wrong, Kaya. No one else looks death in the eyes and thinks how handsome death is. No one else is so stupidly brave as to seek me out after I've let them live, and I don't let people live, little lion. You're the only exception."

I blinked. How the fuck did he know? Granted, he was stalking me, and would've possibly remained hidden for much longer had I not discovered his cameras and bugs. In the beginning, it had been curiosity. All of him was too alluring, too mind-consuming for me to let it be. Once I had my sights set on him, it was done.

Perhaps I was the stalker. Everything there was to find on him, I'd discovered in record time. And then I'd had the guts to call him a stalker, when in reality, I'd accepted our fate long ago. As possessive as he was over me, I was twice as bad. I just wasn't showing it yet.

“Why am I the exception?”

“Your brilliance, your bravery. Because for the first time, I’ve found my equal. You’re as twisted as I am. You’re selfish and greedy, and I want all of it. You know where your loyalties lie and will never betray them. You’re rare, Ekaterina.”

Oh, how wrong he was. Instead of telling him now and spoiling the surprise, I only shook my head. Perhaps he was a foolish man driven by his appetite.

“And you can fight me later, you can hit me, hell you can even shoot me dead. But do that once I know you’re safe and sound. Stop resisting me, Kaya.”

I pondered on the thought. There was a list of reasons I should’ve turned it down, why I should’ve found the nearest weapon and done what he’d told me to—shoot him dead. Yet, all reasonable thought flew out of the window as soon as I met his gaze.

His green eyes were a deep forest, paved with the path of forever. The darkness, the terror I saw in them made me feel safe. It made me feel like home, and that made me *feel*.

I nodded.

Not a second later, he picked me up in his arms and carried me outside. I hadn’t realized how much of my anger had vanished. My body stopped trembling as soon as the scent of his cologne curled around me. He had too much power over me, and eventually, I’d allow him to drown me in it.

I’d never been one to believe in soulmates, yet as he carried me, with my head buried in his chest, I couldn’t help but remember an article I’d once read.

Davorin and I shared the same shattered soul. From the moment we’d met, sparks had flown. A connection so strong, magnetic, and intense. An indescribable attraction, as if we were two sides of the same coin.

My twin flame.



I passed out as soon as he put me in the back seat of his car. The road always made me sleepy and at ease. It was strange how I was able to be fully relaxed with him, though I didn't question it further.

When I woke up, I found myself in an unfamiliar room. It didn't bother me that the sheets weren't mine, that the bed size was different or that I didn't have two pillows. Surprised at how well rested I was, I stretched my back, and the aching slowly started to ease.

A familiar scent filled my nose. This was Davorin's room. I took my sweet time exploring it, snooping through his drawers, through the closet. I even looked under the bed for anything that might reveal the mystery that he was.

His furniture was the same shade as the sheets he'd given me. His curtains were the same color too, and although it looked pretty, it was also morbid. It gave me chills. I was in his space and he'd allowed me to be. It shouldn't have made me as happy as it did.

His house was spacious, too big for two people. Probably because it wasn't just the two of us.

After I'd put on the clothes he'd set out for me—of course he knew my size—I strolled down the flight of stairs. It didn't take me long to find the kitchen, and there, sitting at the table, was Brianne. Irritation crawled up my skin at the mere sight of her.

“Good morning,” she greeted, though her voice was very low.

I brushed it off due to the fact that her father had been murdered recently, yet I couldn't find it in myself to feel compassion towards her. Lucky bitch—mine was alive and breathing.

Ignoring the greeting, I made myself a cup of coffee and sat across from her. Her cheeks were stained with days-old mascara, and her tears never seemed to stop. It ticked me off, crying so easily over the most inevitable

thing—death.

“Where is Davorin?” I asked.

She looked up from the cup she held in her hands and shrugged. Her mind was elsewhere, and the lack of words irritated me.

She replied after a minute. “He went to gather your things from your place and told me to pass on a message.”

“Which is?”

“Don’t leave until he comes back, or you’ll face a punishment.” Her cheeks turned pink.

That was exactly what I did. I got the address from Brianne, though it wasn’t easy. However, a few threats later and she gave in, and I used her phone to call Dominik. As much as I disliked him at the moment, he was useful. He’d sent me a car and one of his credit cards, no questions asked. Though I had no doubt he’d look into the place I’d called him from.

Being the intuitive person that he was, he’d also sent a package with some essentials. He knew my taste to the last little detail and, alongside the clothes, he’d sent me a new phone too. I think it was his way of apologizing for being an asshole the last time we’d seen each other.

As soon as the driver left with me in the back seat, the phone rang.

“Yes?”

“What’s going on, Ekaterina?” Dominik’s voice was half angry, half concerned. I was uncertain which one pissed me off more. Who the hell was he to get angry at me, after the shit that had left his mouth?

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” My voice was flat. I was glancing through the window, memorizing the neighborhood and the route back to Davorin’s house.

Something between a hiss and a grunt came from the other side of the call. “First you kick Xenia out, then you drop off the face of the Earth, and then you bolt your doors shut. And now, you’re calling me from an unknown number from an address three hours away from your home. What kind of trouble did you get yourself into?”

I blinked. “Why must you always assume I’m in trouble? I’m merely exploring other parts of the city.”

“Stop with the bullshit,” he slowly said.

I sighed. “I no longer trust you, Dominik. It’s none of your business, and quite frankly, even if it were, I wouldn’t tell you. Suffer a bit, won’t you?”

It was uncalled for, but my tongue worked faster than my brain at times. I knew that there was a possibility of hurting him, though he never would've admitted it.

He was silent for a moment. "Do you still have the tracker Aleksei put in your arm?"

"Sure." The answer was no. I got rid of that as soon as Aleksei left the room, though it had left a nasty scar I was contemplating on covering up with a tattoo.

"All right." Doubt laced his tone. "Call me if you need anything."

I hung up the phone then called Tiana to arrange an early lunch date. Her phone number was amongst the rare ones I'd memorized. She was shocked to hear from me. She berated me for fifteen minutes because I hadn't been answering my phone before she finally agreed.

Dominik's credit card had a limit of course, but it was always above three hundred thousand dollars. Not often did I allow myself to spend a lot of money; however, I was itching to agitate my brother as much as possible.

Usually, he was very well composed—a man of few words, who never spoke unnecessarily and never beat around the bush—yet I'd managed to piss him off three times in a month. I called that a personal record, so what was one more?

I'd opted for the Theo restaurant. I liked the exclusivity, and since I used to come in regularly with Aleksei, who always made reservations months in advance, I knew they'd let me in. There were only twenty-six seats, and the best experience was to sit at the bar and watch the chef—Theo—prepare the meals, though that option was two hundred dollars more expensive.

I would've chosen that, but I needed privacy as I knew I couldn't lie to Tiana any longer. It wasn't remorse or guilt I was feeling; more a burden that she was involved with me, yet wasn't. In the long run, I didn't need her to disappear unexpectedly. This was a perfect chance for her to either demonstrate her loyalty to me or leave, and both options were fine.

One would ensure I no longer had any obligations; the other would mean an ally, though I had yet to think how she might be useful.

Tiana freaked out once I'd given her the address and took her lunch break immediately—it would take her a bit of time to get here. I went ahead and took a seat in the most secluded area. It was still fairly early, and there weren't many people inside.

I was served a drink immediately and sat looking towards the door, but as soon as the next customer entered, my body froze.

Something inside my chest exploded. How was it possible no one had heard it?

A ghost of a smile traced his face. The closer he got to me, the better I could see his face. The wrinkles underneath his eyes indicated his age, and his gray hair and matching beard were thick, as if they weren't real. His fingers were decorated with golden rings, and he held a cane in his right hand.

Courtesy of Aleksei.

"You're a tough woman to track down," he said in English, which came as a surprise. His thick accent was still there.

Two of his men, who were just as old as he was, stood closely behind him. Their hands were at their side, a pair of dark sunglasses on each of their faces. I hated those motherfuckers almost more than I hated Bogdan Kalashnik.

"Father," I greeted. I hated how small my voice sounded. "What is it that you want?"

Bogdan didn't need any invitation to take a seat. He leaned his cane against the side of the table, his goons preventing anyone from coming close to us. Despite the restaurant not being empty, they still managed to seclude us, and my nerves were unable to relax.

He chuckled slowly. "Can't a father visit his daughter without ulterior motives?"

"A father can," I retorted. "But you can't."

My hands were under the table. I was struggling to regain my composure and he'd noticed. His gaze flickered to me, and it was anything but welcoming. He didn't try to hide his distaste towards me; however, he didn't speak on it.

"That's a little harsh." He laughed it off. "I just wanted to see you."

I nodded, swallowing the lump in my throat. "Okay. Why?"

A low sigh came from him. He shook his head in disappointment. "I see you still hate me. It's been years, and I regret my decisions now."

I blinked. "Was that supposed to be an apology?"

"No," he breathed. "But this is. I'm truly sorry for everything I put you through. I'm a changed man now."

My father sounded anything but apologetic. He was aware that I

wasn't buying his bullshit, though he refrained from speaking on it. Instead, he frowned at the sight of my expression. Mainly, I wanted this to be over with before Tiana arrived. They didn't need to meet.

"I don't forgive you."

He was taken aback. "But I apologized."

I raised an amused eyebrow. "So? When you're apologizing, at least try to fake being truly sorry for what you've done."

A wide grin overtook his face. "There's the daughter I know and loathe."

"Aw, showering me with compliments already?"

The smile dropped from his face in an instant. "Before the month ends, I'm dragging you back to that little room you love so much."

Something inside my stomach twisted, agony spreading through my body. Fear like I'd never known had taken over me, freezing me in place. I was never going to go down without a fight, and I hated how little time I had to get everything ready.

"I'd like to see you try," I muttered, my throat dry.

Bogdan tilted his head to the side. "I'm giving you a choice here." His voice rose. "You can either come with me, or your brother dies."

I laughed at his pathetic attempt at blackmail, and his brows creased. He'd thought I'd be more surprised, yet from the moment I'd learned there was a hit on Aleksei's head, I'd known it was him.

"You tried once when he was weak—it didn't work out. What makes you think it'll work out this time? It's a very delusional and groundless thought, Father."

"What was it that I used to tell you?" He pretended to think. "Ah, right. Even the most secure buildings have an exit—you just need to know how to get past it."

I snorted. "Not if you can't even enter the building. Do you think I wasn't aware of this? You're constantly calling me stupid, but are you smart enough to realize I'm not?"

Truthfully, I was pulling any strings I possibly could to piss him off. I didn't care how relevant to the conversation it might've been—if it angered him, it was good enough. And it was working. Aleksei had definitely inherited his bad temper from Bogdan.

"I'd watch my mouth if I were you," he advised, which earned an eye roll from me. "You're still inexperienced, and I can tell that you've yet to

learn how to be indifferent. Do not worry, my dear—your father will fix you.”

“Oh my God, I’m so sorry I’ve kept you—” Tiana shut up as soon as she saw the three terrifying men at my table. “Waiting,” she finished.

“Ah, a friend of Ekaterina’s?” Bogdan offered his hand for her to shake.

Reluctantly, Tiana accepted and glanced between us, her voice small. “Yes, sir.”

“Well then,” he announced and got off the chair, picking up his cane in the process. “I’ll see you soon, Ekaterina. Don’t forget about the offer, my dear. The clock is ticking.”

I watched them as they left. Tiana took her sweet time sitting down, eyes glued to my father and his goons until they were out the door. Slowly, her eyes found mine; confusion was written all over her face.

“Is that your father?”

I nodded.

“What a scary man,” she murmured.

“He is.” I decided to change the subject, but Tiana beat me to it.

“What the hell is going on with you lately?” she demanded.

“Elaborate.”

Tiana groaned, rolled her eyes, and leaned back into the chair. “I can barely get you on the phone, and then you vanish completely. I checked your apartment, and I’m hurt you never told me you were moving.”

I snapped my eyes in her direction. “Hold up—what?”

She shrugged. “I dropped by this morning before work and everything was just... gone, and the door was slightly open.”

I closed my eyes and took a sharp intake of breath. “Slowly, tell me what you saw.”

“I mean everything was gone. Not a single piece of furniture was there, not even that soft carpet of yours, no curtains, nothing, absolutely nothing. It was wiped clean, so I assumed you’d moved. And I’m hurt you didn’t tell me.”

I clicked my tongue to the roof of my mouth and smiled. “It all happened so quickly, I didn’t really have enough time to tell anyone.”

That was a lie. My heart was racing. I was unsure who had done it, but if they’d moved every single thing from my home, it meant they’d most likely found the little safe I’d kept under the parquet floor in the living room

—quick and easy to grab if anything went wrong, yet not obvious even if you looked closely.

My vision turned blurry. There was something valuable inside it. If it got into the wrong hands, that person would have too much power over me. The secret I'd kept hidden for years.

My personal Pandora's box.

And if it was opened, all hell would break loose.

FIFTEEN



BY one, I was back at Davorin's house. The same man who'd driven me to the city had been waiting to take me back. Aside from a brief greeting, I didn't bother chatting with him—it was the last time I'd ever see him.

The house was quiet, but I sensed someone was on the premises. I took off my shoes and put on a pair of slippers, his strong presence hitting my senses once I stepped into the kitchen.

He had a cup of coffee in his hands, his gaze on me. Something snapped inside my stomach; I couldn't shake off the feeling, and soon enough it spread through my body.

"You seem to have trouble understanding the basics, Kaya," he said. "Did I or did I not tell you to stay fucking put?"

I was amused, to say the least. "The next time you have a message for me, deliver it personally and I just might listen."

I approached him and took a cup to prepare coffee for myself, but he stood fast in front of the kitchen counter, blocking my way.

"Would you mind moving?"

He moved, and I began preparing the coffee. I didn't count on him coming closer to me again. I felt his chest pressed against my back, felt his every heartbeat. The proximity went to my head, and I struggled to breathe properly. Especially with that bulge pressed against my ass.

"Where were you, Kaya?" he murmured against my neck. A small kiss followed.

"Out and about." I tried to make it sound as nonchalant as possible. "Maybe I would've told you, but you weren't here. Your little sidekick was though."

He chuckled, his chin resting on my right shoulder. Making the damn coffee had turned into a challenge.

"Do you dislike her?"

"No," I lied. I hated that she was in the same house as me. This morning, I'd been close to murdering her, and I might've done it had I not been in a rush. The day was still young though, and if she pissed me off enough, I'd go through with it.

"Just say it, Kaya," he murmured. "Just say the word, and she's gone."

I paused. "Gone as in dead?"

"If that's what you wish."

It terrified me how fast his response came.

"No need," I concluded. "I can do it on my own if it comes to that."

He switched the subject immediately. I got the feeling that talking about Brianne was annoying him, which I liked.

“Tell me, do you enjoy disobeying me?” he asked, his voice dangerously low. “Because I’m trying to keep you safe.”

My ears perked up. “Safe? Me? From what exactly?”

He froze for a moment. “This world is a dangerous place for a woman so pretty, Kaya. And you’re attracted to danger. I’m trying to prevent anything bad from happening.”

I grinned and slowly turned my head to the right. I almost jumped at what I saw. He was too attractive for my sanity to hold. His cheek rested on my shoulder, and his eyes were fixed on my lips, alight with an emotion I couldn’t quite decipher. But adoration like I’d never seen was written all over his face.

“Why? You’re always so extreme.”

He laughed. “When it comes to you, yes I am. May the Lord forgive those who dare to touch you, little lion, because I sure as fuck am not the forgiving type.”

My mouth parted, and a shaky breath escaped. His words were too addictive—I wanted to tattoo them on my body. My heart skipped a beat as he stared at me. It was thrilling, and I was getting too excited.

Resist, Ekaterina. Damn it, resist this man.

I removed my eyes from him before I did anything stupid. Although lately, everything involving Davorin had resulted in stupid decisions, and I had yet to regret a single one. It terrified me how much control over my mind he had, and the bastard was well aware of it.

“What happened to my things, Davorin?” I slid to the side, feeling my lungs work properly again the moment I put a safe distance between us.

“I had Brianne collect most of them—why?”

I blinked. “I have a lot of valuable jewelry in there, and I do need my phone.”

He grinned. “All of that is in the guest room, which you won’t be using.”

“Why not?”

“Do you seriously think I’d allow you to sleep in any bed beside my own?”

“Isn’t that cute?” I deadpanned.

He ignored me. “As for the rest of your things, all of your clothes should be here before nightfall.”

“How about my furniture?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Why do you need that?”

His question only confirmed my suspicions. Someone else was entangled with this situation, and none of it made any sense—from the hit on Aleksei, to Dominik’s behavior, from my father’s sudden visits, to Davorin speaking in codes I had yet to crack.

They weren’t telling me everything. Or rather, they weren’t telling me anything. My mind went into overdrive as I began to plot how to get them to come forward with what was truly happening, before the celebration for Aleksei’s birthday.

The celebration I’d yet to receive an invitation for. I didn’t need one though—I planned on going either way. I wasn’t going to allow them to shake me off too easily. That brought my thoughts back to Rhea—we were supposed to meet days ago, and I itched to call her.

“Where did your mind go?”

I snapped back to reality with a shake of my head. “Irrelevant. I’ll need to get a hold of my things.”

“Let’s go,” he told me and started walking.

Following him, I tilted my head at the sight of his body—his broad shoulders, muscled arms, and great ass. It took me a moment to get my mind out of the gutter and realize that we’d reached the guest room.

A box sat on one of the white night stands. I didn’t wait another second before opening it. My phone, car keys, and my laptop, along with all the chargers, waited inside. But underneath all of that was my jewelry box—well four of them.

I pulled everything out, and a sigh of relief slipped out at the weight of the boxes. No doubt all the gold was still inside.

“Grab it and let’s go,” Davorin said from behind me.

I looked at him over my shoulder. “Where?”

“To our room.”

Like a mindless doll, I followed. It didn’t hit me until we reached the room I’d woken up in.

“What do you mean our room?” It was a stupid question, and I wanted to slap myself—the embarrassment made me uncomfortable.

“You didn’t think I was joking, did you?”

Truthfully, I had hoped it was a joke. I couldn’t be trusted alone in a dark bedroom with him. It was only a matter of time before we jumped each other’s bones, and that was only going to complicate things further.

I never gave my trust easily—after the life I’d lived, it was natural to always keep one eye open. And yet, the moment I’d seen Davorin at Lunax, a new feeling had been born. With him, no matter the situation, I felt at home. Not once had I truly feared for my life when I was with him, and that made me uneasy. It would be easy for him to break that trust and ruin me.

Yet, on some levels, he already had.

I’d grown too used to his attention, and if he decided to pull away from me, I knew I’d lose my mind.

And I’d be damned if I lost this man, when I was this close to finding happiness. Was it even possible for the two of us to truly be happy though? We’d done monstrous things, and neither of us had the words guilt or remorse in our vocabulary.

“Come here,” Davorin said, noticing the shift in my mood.

Brushing all delusions aside, I put my phone on charge and slipped into bed next to him without a second thought.

“Why are you so tense? I won’t eat you, Kaya.”

A laugh slipped from me. “I never said you would.”

He raised an eyebrow. Soon enough, his hand came to the small of my back and he tugged me closer to his body, until only inches separated us.

“You’re so tense.” He chuckled. “I won’t do anything you don’t want me to do.”

My eyes widened, but I knew in my heart that his words were honest. “I know.”

“In fact”—a teasing grin tugged on his lips—“I think you’ll be the first one to eat me.”

That earned him an eye roll. “Not happening.”

“Perhaps not right now,” he murmured. “Let’s sleep for a while.”

I blinked. “Sleep?”

“Yes. You do know what naps are, right?”

A pig-like snort came from my throat. “I meant, why are we sleeping now?”

“The bags underneath your eyes are too big, Kaya. You haven’t rested well in a while, so rest now.”

As another wave of safety consumed me, my eyes fluttered closed. Tenderly, as if he were afraid of breaking me in half, he tugged the covers over my body. He lay with me until I fell asleep, and by the time I woke up again, he was long gone.



I'd decided to tell Davorin to get rid of Brianne. She was invading my personal space. Though this house didn't belong to me, that was irrelevant—she was annoying and I wanted her gone. Something about the way she was watching me like a hawk, thinking that she was subtle, was pissing me off.

I walked past her, and she opened her mouth to speak, but I threw a sharp glance her way and her mouth closed. With an eye roll of annoyance, I slipped on my favorite pair of heels and headed out.

True to his word, by five in the afternoon, all of my things had been delivered. That included my car, though I was still going insane about what had happened to all the furniture in my home. It held no value, so why would anyone take it?

The first thing I did was contact Rhea, as soon as my phone turned on. I had a lot of missed calls and unread text messages, though they weren't from anyone important, so I didn't bother responding to them.

Our scheduled meeting place was, again, Himeros. However, this time, we'd be on the first floor amongst other people. It was earlier than usual, so being all alone in an underground club or casino, both of which were filled with cameras, would've raised suspicion.

I felt chills at the mere thought of wearing a dress and opted for dress pants instead. It felt refreshing to have a hot shower, to do my makeup and feel excited about getting ready.

Nevertheless, the reason for our meeting wasn't as exciting. I was terrified of finding out if I'd been correct, mainly because I didn't know how to proceed with the information, and I wasn't going to leave it up to Dominik or Aleksei to decide.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” I greeted Rhea, placing my handbag on the table. “Have you been waiting long?”

She shook her head. “Don't worry about it.”

Himeros was half filled with people, and we were in the middle of the crowd. I cursed at Rhea—she could've gotten us the most secluded table. A few celebrities I'd seen on television were there, yet no one interesting.

A waiter came with a bottle of Port Charlotte, and I raised an eyebrow.

Rhea simply frowned. "I'm trying to ease you into the conversation we're about to have." A sigh followed. "And this is me begging you not to make a scene."

Damn it.

"Fine, I promise I'll behave." I gave her a pointed look, and she slumped into her chair. "Now speak."

She snorted. "Yeah, I'll start talking on your third glass."

I knew she'd rather die than not have it her way, so I let it go. My gaze wandered around the restaurant, until I caught a glimpse of Rhea's brother. He was near the reception, chatting with one of the waiters. The girl, the same one I'd seen the last time I was here, was closely behind him.

I suppressed a chuckle and sipped away the first glass. It slid down my throat with ease. It had been a few days since I'd last drank, and I missed the taste of it. The burning sensation was all too familiar, and it made all of my problems vanish, even temporarily.

"Is that your sister-in-law?" I joked.

Rhea didn't bother turning around to see who I was talking about; she only rolled her eyes.

"Apparently," she grumbled. "She's sort of blackmailing Helios into a marriage, but why he's indulging her is beyond me."

I blinked twice before I laughed out loud. Helios was the kind of man who deliberately allowed women to chase him, knowing he'd never end up committing to them. To make matters worse, oftentimes he'd say it flat out, and they'd still be pining over him.

On my second glass of whiskey, Rhea pulled out a white file from her backpack. Slowly, she placed it on the table, gripping either side of it.

"Let me preface this by saying that I couldn't do it on my own. I hired a few people—which, by the way, you owe me money for—and although they're discreet, you have their names here in case you want to bye-bye them."

"Okay."

"I hired an ex-spy to infiltrate a few homes, to find anything relating

to you, and paid a hacker to give me continuous access to their phones and computers.”

“Whose homes, Rhea?”

She took a deep breath. “Your father’s home, and Viktor’s.”

“Why theirs?”

Rhea gave me a pointed look, though I didn’t bite. I needed to know her reasons for invading their homes, because my reasons for suspecting them weren’t hers.

“I just made a list of all the people you disliked, and checked out everyone who fit the criteria. I knew it was someone big, and I just took a shot with them.”

“That could’ve ended terribly for you, Rhea,” I seethed. “They aren’t people to be messed with. Regardless of your brother’s alliance with mine, they wouldn’t think twice before killing you.”

“I know, which is why after I give you this, my assistance ends here. I’m here if you need the usual stuff, but I can’t get into this much shit again.”

I smiled. “Understood.”

“I tracked all of their bank accounts, dating back two years. There was nothing suspicious until December first.”

My ears perked up. “What happened on December first?”

“Your father called you and you declined his call. After that, he paid someone two million dollars to keep an eye on you until he arrived.”

“Who did he hire?”

“I’ll get to that shortly.” She paused for a moment. “After that, it was quiet for a while, but then, on December twentieth, he paid an additional million.”

That was the night I’d celebrated my birthday in Lunax. I blinked. “That’s a lot of money.”

Rhea’s snort grabbed the attention of a few people, though it only took a glare from me to get them turning the other way. “Not for your father, it isn’t,” she continued, “but connecting people you dislike to people who dislike Aleksei was a lot harder than you might think.”

“Please, for the love of God,” I breathed, “just speak your mind.”

She swallowed visibly, her shoulders tensing. “The thing is, Ekaterina, I’ve found some weird shit. And none of it is related to Aleksei. All of it somehow leads back to you.”

My heart snapped in half. A long sigh slipped past my lips as I

continued holding eye contact. I knew what she meant—she knew I knew what she meant—but I needed her to say the words, to make it real.

“Say it, Rhea,” I breathed. “Out loud.”

“I don’t think the hit was on Aleksei. I think it was on you.”

“Continue.” I managed to keep my voice impassive, though it was difficult.

It wasn’t fear I was feeling; it was excitement. It’d been a while since I’d had that much attention on myself, and I was loving it. Because, for the first time in a while, I had somewhere to release all of my anger and suppressed agony.

“The phone calls I recorded made no sense if Aleksei was their target, but as soon as I thought of you, it all made perfect sense,” she sighed. “You have all the information here, aside from the person who was hired to kill you.”

“So, I’m only missing the most important part?”

Rhea tilted her head to the side. “Well, no. I’ll get you a name, and then, like I said, I’m out of this situation.”

A wicked smile tugged on the corner of my lips. Aleksei’s party was soon, and whoever was hunting me, it would be a perfect opportunity to get me alone. But they had no idea what kind of plans I had for them, and though my excitement threatened to slip out, I managed to remain calm.

Soon enough, they would fall straight into my hands.

DAVORIN



THE mansion was rather empty. I'd expected tighter security, especially for the Pakhan's primary home, but aside from a few of his hidden guards, which I detected before I set foot onto his property, I wasn't impressed with his

protection—or lack thereof.

One of the housekeepers gave me an odd look, which I chose to ignore. If the security for his home was this terrible, it was no wonder I'd managed to kill four of Kaya's guards with no fuss. Though the first two had been much more suitable for the job, and had been harder to kill.

It wasn't my first time in his house, and I moved swiftly towards his office. I didn't bother knocking.

He was there with his younger brother, Dominik. Whilst Aleksei always had a permanent scowl on his face, Dominik seemed unbothered, indifferent.

"You're late," Aleksei drawled. "Three minutes, to be exact."

"It took me three minutes to reach this floor. You're practically living in a castle."

Dominik released something resembling a chuckle. "You should see my home in Russia then. It's an actual castle."

I ignored him and sat on the leather couch on the right. Dominik was standing, inspecting some papers Aleksei had slid over the table, and neither of them uttered a word for the next five minutes. Why the fuck was I here? They were the ones that had called me.

"Davorin." Dominik turned to me as he put away the file and took off his glasses. "Does Kaya suspect anything?"

"Your sister suspects a lot of things," I told him. "But as far as the issue at hand, no. Thus far, she's unaware."

Dominik glanced at Aleksei, who spoke next. "How sure of that are you? Because she's been snooping around."

My brows creased. I'd been on a different job for the past few days, but I had my eyes on Ekaterina at all times. The moment she left my house, she was followed. That was only for her protection, but somehow I doubted she'd see it that way.

"Explain."

"Do you know who Rhea Karalis is?"

I nodded. When I'd started putting the pieces of Ekaterina's life together, Rhea Karalis had popped up on numerous occasions. They were friends, so to speak, and they'd spent a night in jail together. Learning about Rhea's brother, however, was when I'd almost lost my shit.

Helios Karalis was the current boss of the Godfathers of the Night, and he'd had his eyes set on Ekaterina for years. He'd wanted to marry her

and gone to Dominik to ask for her hand. Dominik had shut it down before the situation could grow any more serious, though I had no doubt that Aleksei would've put a bullet through his head if it had.

But that didn't make me particularly like Aleksei. I'd managed to find out a little more information on Ekaterina's life back in Russia, and according to the rumors I'd heard, Aleksei hadn't been the best brother. If they turned out to be right, I might just go ahead and kill him instead.

"Well, Rhea was caught... digging into things that she shouldn't have touched. And since it has to do with our sister, I know that they probably made an arrangement."

"In other words," I concluded, "Rhea found out and you think she's already told Kaya?"

Dominik nodded in agreement. "Yes, but I don't know exactly what Rhea knows."

"You want me to get the information out of Karalis?" I asked, filled with disbelief.

I had no issues torturing people for information, but Rhea Karalis wasn't just anyone. She was of no significance to me, but she was Ekaterina's friend. It wasn't an issue to get rid of her if she turned out to be untrustworthy, but so far, she was being a good friend, and killing her would raise an issue with Kaya. An issue I had no desire to create unnecessarily.

Aside from that girl Ekaterina went to university with, her circle was fairly small. I was certain she'd killed a couple of her classmates over the years, as a few of them seemed to have vanished without a trace, and she was the only connection.

A bubble of pride erupted in my chest. My girl was doing a great job of keeping all her dirty work deeply hidden. I was positive no one would ever be able to find the bodies she'd hidden, and that made her perfect.

"Not exactly," Aleksei said in a low voice. "I need you to find everything she gave to Kaya. Undoubtedly, it would be a file, a USB drive, something along those lines. And you have access to it."

I smirked at the sour grimace on Dominik's face. "Just to be clear, I'm against this... relationship."

He spat out the last word with venom, and a wide grin took over my features as I stared at him. It seemed to agitate him further, yet he was quick to mask his emotions, and soon enough, his face was nothing but apathetic.

"Then it's a good thing no one is asking for your permission, right?"

Dominik glared at me.

“For what it’s worth,” Aleksei said with a grunt, “I don’t trust you around our sister either. But I know for a fact she could outsmart you in a second, so her wellbeing isn’t my primary concern.”

“Do tell me what is, Pakhan.” My mocking tone echoed in the room, and Aleksei shot me a threatening look.

“My concern is why you did what you did. You knew damn well who she was, and avoiding her would’ve been a better option. And who knows how much longer she’ll indulge your sick fantasies before she snaps and kills you.”

“I’d welcome death with open arms if it came by her hand,” I retorted in a heartbeat. “And Ekaterina’s safety is my top priority. She is far safer with me than she ever was with you.”

If either of them were hurt by the statement, they didn’t show it. Dominik simply returned to his phone, typing away, whilst Aleksei seemed to be figuring out his next steps. A hit on the Pakhan was amusing, to say the least, but when someone from his family was targeted, he wasn’t about to let it slide. He didn’t care much about himself, after what happened to his fiancée. Or so I’d heard. But he truly seemed to care about Kaya, even though she’d never forgotten what he’d done to her.

“What are you going to do when she finds out?” Aleksei asked finally. “And I can assure you, she will find out. She’ll probably kill a bunch of people too.”

My shoulders tensed. “I’ll think about that when the time comes. For now, we should probably discuss the game plan.”

Aleksei nodded and began.

His birthday celebration was our opening. He’d already sent out invitations to many people, his father included, and no one of importance would miss the event.

“You have only one task, Davorin,” Aleksei told me sternly. “Keep Kaya away from this event. No doubt Xenia opened her mouth.” He shot a glare at Dominik, who didn’t bother acknowledging him. “And she’s already aware of it happening. But she can’t come or everything will go to shit.”

“Sure, give me the hardest task whilst expecting me to attend it,” I hissed. “But fine, I’ll get it done—somehow.”

“She’ll be safe if she does come,” Aleksei explained, “but if she doesn’t attend, it will raise eyebrows among those who wanted her there, and

I want to rile them up a bit.”

“Or I have another suggestion,” I replied. “How about I kill the majority of people there? Boom, case closed, the end.”

“Sure, if we want to have the entire fucking world turn against us, then yes, we could just let you kill everyone,” Dominik cut in.

It was the first time he’d seemed angry today, and I grinned.

“All right then, how do you propose I keep Ekaterina away for long enough?”

Aleksei rolled his eyes. “Figure it out. You convinced her to stay at your house—I’m sure you can think of something.”

That would be harder than he thought. Ekaterina possessed many qualities, but patience wasn’t one of them. If she was already suspicious, she wasn’t going to sit still and be backed into a corner.

No, my little lion was going to fight until her last breath, and that alone made her extraordinary. She was fierce, brave with no filter. It irritated me from time to time, though it was mostly because I couldn’t tame her.

It had taken me a while to understand Ekaterina was untamable. Yet, for whatever reason, I’d allowed her to tame me. But it was a dangerous game we were playing. If she wanted out, the only way for either of us was death. And not even that could keep us apart.

“On another note”—Aleksei shifted the subject, eyes glued on mine —“I might need you to act as my bodyguard for the celebration.”

I quirked a brow, amused. “Are you sure you have enough money to pay me?”

“Fuck off.”

I laughed. “Fine, fine. I’ll do it, but if your sister escapes and comes, I’m ditching you to be by her side, and I’m keeping the money.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything else.”

Dominik’s eyes danced between his brother and me, then, with a low sigh, he turned to Aleksei, as passive as ever. “I have a proposition, but before you say no, listen carefully.”

“No,” he said almost immediately. “I know what you’re thinking. I thought about it too. No way in hell I’m allowing that to happen.”

I cleared my throat. “Any of you willing to share with the class what you’re talking about?”

“No,” the brothers said in unison.

I was starting to get pissed off—my gut feeling told me it had

something to do either with me or their little sister.

They simply stared at each other. They were having a silent war, though their endgame seemed to be the same.

After a while, I grew bored of them killing each other with their eyes. Aleksei was the first to look away and focused all of his attention on me. His shoulders were rigid, and his lips were as thin as a piece of paper.

“We have a proposition for you.” He cleared his throat and added, “Well, Dominik has a proposition. I want to make it known I’m against it.”

“Go on,” I urged.

Dominik’s deep glare was focused on me as he spoke slowly. “How would you feel about marrying our sister?”

The only thing I could do was laugh. After all, that was the endgame I had for Kaya—I didn’t need their permission to do so. Yet I was intrigued as to what had brought this on, and as they began to elaborate, I felt another piece of the puzzle fall into place.

Because if Kaya married me, it would no longer matter that I’d been hired to kill her.

She was going to stay by my side until our last breaths. And being with me guaranteed protection better than any queen had. No one ever dared to mess with something that belonged to me—they knew they would never get away with it.

With a slight chuckle, I gave them my answer. “I’d be thrilled.”



Ekaterina was waiting for me in the living room. She had a random horror movie on, a bowl of popcorn in her hands. Her bare feet were on the coffee table and her hair was braided. I took a sharp intake of breath, my cock stirring in my pants at the sight of her wearing my clothes. My shirt, my sweatpants.

“What are you watching?” I asked as I slid into the room. She wasn’t

paying attention to me, and I was growing more and more angry.

“Just a random movie,” she explained. “It’s not really that scary. It’s definitely gory, but I’m used to seeing blood. Where have you been today?”

“I should be the one asking you that,” I retorted quickly. “Where were you?”

She placed the remote, which had been in her hands, on the table, removed her feet from it and paused the movie. Blinking, she turned to look at me with no expression. “Were you following me?”

Whenever Kaya was irritated, her lips would part ever so slightly. She was usually great at keeping her thoughts and feelings in check, but not with me. Never with me. I knew that from day one—I was her kryptonite.

Ekaterina had a heart of ice and a soul of fire. And both of those belonged to me.

“Yes,” I admitted.

She wasn’t surprised. Slowly, she turned back around and resumed her movie, once more acting as if I didn’t exist. She looked effortlessly like a goddess. Like someone had taken their sweet time sculpting every inch of her body to perfection.

“One of these days, I’ll kill everyone you send after me in cold blood, right in the open, and leave you to deal with the consequences.” Her voice was low, though a hint of anger flickered there.

“I’m surprised you haven’t yet.”

“That’s because so far they’ve done a good job of staying away from me. The moment the distance closes, their lives end.”

A laugh slipped from me, and she rolled her eyes. Her attitude had the most effect on me. I wanted to fuck it out of her badly, though not today. We had more important things to discuss.

The decision to leave her alone for the moment was hard.

I had never been a slave to primal needs—I wasn’t an animal—yet she wrecked all of my plans merely by existing. All I thought about, all I could focus on was her. Whether it was her with legs spread for me, or her just existing in my space, she consumed too much of my world too quickly.

“I’m going to need your help with something tomorrow,” I told her, easily sliding into the empty seat beside her. She stiffened for a moment before her body relaxed. Her lavender scent hit my nose, and I felt like dying. Dying from the need to have her bent over my lap and smack that pretty little ass of hers.

“Whatever it is, I’m not interested,” she sighed.

I ignored her. “You and I are going to get married soon.”

Ekaterina slowly shifted her body, positioning herself so she’d be able to look at me. She blinked but otherwise didn’t move. Her mind was elsewhere, her head tilted to the side, and not a word was spoken for what seemed like hours.

Then she laughed. Her laughter was something between a threat and wickedness—a melody so corrupt I wanted nothing more than to drown myself in it.

“Thank you for the proposal, but as charming as it was, I’ll have to decline.”

Another bubble of laughter filled the room.

“I wasn’t giving you a choice.”

Kaya’s demeanor changed instantly. It was as if she’d become a completely different person with a snap of my fingers. My eyes narrowed at the sudden alteration. I’d noticed a few times how she was able to alter her personality to her liking, but I had no more information on that—the only thing I didn’t have was her medical record.

It had either been wiped clean—though that was unlikely, because the digital footprint was a real thing—or she had always been attended by her family’s doctors, with any documentation kept safely in Russia.

“Oh, I apologize,” she seethed. “You’re right. Let’s get married, and then next week, we can have kids too!” Sarcasm dripped from her tongue.

I moved closer to her. Bravely, she challenged me with her eyes. An obscure look overtook her gaze, and her blue eyes darkened. Anger radiated from her, and it made me get another fucking boner. It was like I was a sex-deprived teenager.

“There’s a reason for it, little lion.” She shivered at the nickname, and I flashed her a grin. “I talked to your brother about this and—”

“You talked to Aleksei about this? Why the fuck did you do that?”

I gritted my teeth. “If you shut up for a minute, I’ll expl—”

“Fuck, I want to hit your goddamn face.”

“Do it,” I taunted.

Ekaterina blinked. “All right.”

Her fist connected with my face. She managed to get my head turning to the left, but only an inch. Fuck, I hadn’t expected her to actually hit me, but it made me adore her even more. The golden rings on her fingers had

made small wounds where they'd hit, and I took it all with gratitude.

I'd take anything she gave me with appreciation.

I looked at her, pride and shock on my face. Kaya's response was to shrug. Her anger was still visible, yet it was evident she'd felt good punching me. I'd be her personal punching bag if that's what she needed.

Anything for my little lion.

I cleared my throat. "Now let me fucking speak."

"No. There is no good reason I'd marry you."

I tilted my head to the side. "Aside from being insanely attracted to me?"

Her cheeks turned rosy, although only faintly. "Absolutely not."

My hands touched her cheek—this was the last time I held back. Never again.

"Your heart races when I'm close to you," I whispered, moving towards her mouth. "I give you orgasms no one will ever top. And you know that you're addicted to my touch already."

Our lips brushed. And then I smashed mine down on hers.

Ekaterina tasted like divinity and fury. Her soft lips were made for me to kiss, for me to fuck. Her sweet tongue made me go insane. A kiss so rough, so poisonous, and I welcomed it with open arms. It was deadly, and death by her kiss was the best way to go.

All of a sudden, I felt something pressed against my chest. A metal object. She distanced herself from me, holding a gun right where my heart was.

"I'm not marrying you, Davorin," she said loudly.

The way my name rolled off her tongue with ease made my chest burn.

"Why not?"

She swallowed. I maintained eye contact. It was deep, prying into her soul. Ekaterina was cornered, and she wasn't thrilled about sharing her thoughts with me.

"You make me feel. You make me *feel*. And I hate to feel, Davorin."

I'd never expected her to be so honest, so vulnerable. I grabbed her hand, which was safely wrapped around the trigger and brought the gun even closer, so it was digging into my chest.

"Then kill me right now, my sweet Kaya. I'm never letting you go, no matter how far you run. I'll catch you and bring you right back to my side. So

kill me right now and ensure your freedom. This is the only chance I'm giving you to escape. There won't be another time."

The look in her eyes told me everything. The woman who never thought twice about pulling the trigger, the woman who tossed people aside the second she didn't need them anymore, the woman who held so much power over me hesitated.

Ekaterina hesitated.

SEVENTEEN



I flipped the switch on and closed the door behind me. Aleksei's office was empty, and he was supposed to be home in thirty minutes or less. I hadn't told him I'd drop by, which had given me the perfect opportunity to search

through his papers.

After reading and listening through the conversations Rhea had given me, I was less and less convinced that all of this had anything to do with Aleksei. They wanted me dead. Uncertainty flashed in my mind. It made no sense to get rid of me though, because I was irrelevant.

Yet someone had hired a hitman to kill me. I was close to finding out who the motherfucker was, and Aleksei had the name. That was the only thing I was confident of—that my brothers were doing everything in their power to throw me off.

And it had fucking worked, for a while.

Martin Emmerson was irrelevant, and so was his daughter. Unless both of them had been part of a bigger scheme connected to ending my life, I failed to see why everyone had been overly attentive to an issue that could've been resolved in an hour.

I sighed and flipped through the papers. From time to time, I glanced at the clock above my head as I waited for my brother to return. Patience was a virtue, yet it wasn't one of my strengths.

Something caught my eye. It was underneath a stack of papers on the far corner of Aleksei's work desk. I knew which file it was—it was my medical record. I pulled it out, and all of the pieces glued together almost immediately. Pure rage consumed me.

"Snooping around, Ekaterina?" Aleksei's voice was nothing but tired. He loosened his tie before scratching the scar that ran from just below his eye all the way down to his chest.

"It's not snooping around if you left everything for me to find," I sighed and slammed the documents on his desk. His eyebrow rose slightly, though he decided to ignore my little outburst.

"Why did you remove every single thing from my home? Did you need the furniture?" I asked.

My brother was silent for a while, before he poured us both a glass of whiskey. It loosened me up a little, though I was still pissed at him.

"Because if I didn't get to wipe it clean first, our father might have found a lot of things that you didn't want to be found."

My brows creased. "There was nothing he could use against me." I paused for a moment, before continuing, "Speaking of which, when were you going to tell me that it wasn't you who was being targeted but me?"

"Ah, so you do know," he murmured. "Of course you know. I was

going to tell you as soon as I got rid of the people who ordered the hit.”

I sat in his chair, rested my feet on his desk, and sipped on the whiskey. “Shouldn’t you get rid of the hitman first? Or leave that to me. Give me the name and I’ll get it done by tomorrow night.”

“No.” His response was immediate. “There’s a reason I didn’t want you involved, Kaya.”

“I’m all ears, Aleksei.”

He gave me a knowing look. “I’m doing my best to protect you, and when I want you to know, you’ll know.”

“Does the protection part include Davorin taking me to live with him and not being invited to your birthday? Happy birthday by the way,” I fumed.

“Yes.” His honest response shocked me. “You will not come. I’m not telling you what to do—I’m asking you to honor the only request I have.”

“The event is in like three days? You have three days to give me the hitman’s name and I promise I won’t attend it.”

“Blackmailing me has never worked, Kaya,” Aleksei drawled, eyes fixed to my face, as if he was searching for the smallest hint that I’d drop the subject. He sighed when he found none. “And it won’t work now.”

“I’m not blackmailing you—I’m telling you. Besides, it would raise eyebrows if I don’t show up.”

“I’m aware of that, thank you.” He paused for a moment. “On another note, when I dropped by to see what needed to be destroyed from your place, I found Brianne Emmerson there. Apparently, she was grabbing most of your things in Davorin’s stead. I managed to snatch the most important documents, but I can’t guarantee that she didn’t see them.”

“Did you look inside?”

“Yes,” he said. “I won’t tell a soul what I’ve seen, Ekaterina. You can trust me on that.”

He threw the word trust around like it was a plaything. It was a serious matter, fully trusting someone, and I’d never had the luxury of experiencing it. We all had secrets, and we all paid the price. That was why the only person I could trust was myself. Dominik had been on the spectrum somewhere until recently, but not anymore—not ever again.

Trust was fragile, and once broken, it couldn’t be repaired.

“I don’t care if you tell anyone, as long as he doesn’t find out about it sooner than I want him to.”

Aleksei’s response was a nod, and another issue came up. The

documents had been kept securely inside my safe, though it wouldn't have taken a rocket scientist to open it. Brianne was already snooping too much, and I'd decided to get rid of her as soon as Aleksei's party was over. I didn't want any attention on myself prior to that.

"What happened to your knuckles?" His voice was flat.

Glancing down, I saw the slight bruising from the strong punch I'd landed on Davorin yesterday.

"Oh, I punched your future brother-in-law," I gritted out. "Who the hell do you think you are? Marrying me off?"

"I wasn't marrying you off—I merely suggested to him that it might be a good idea to marry you."

I snorted. "As if he would ever reject that. Are you insane?"

"He's the only person I trust can keep you safe at all times. This isn't a game, Ekaterina. It is very real and very serious. You've taken all of this too lightly, and who knows when they might strike? It's a miracle nothing has happened so far."

"And marrying a man who could snap at any moment is your solution? Seriously?"

"Temporary lapse of judgment. However, if you decide to accept his offer, you can get a divorce as soon as all of this bullshit is done."

"How about you work on this faster so I don't have to get married and divorced before I turn twenty-five?"

"I'm doing the best I can, with the little information I have." He paused and narrowed his eyes. "Unless you actually know something."

"I might."

"For the love of God, Ekaterina, speak."

It was the first time in a while I'd seen Aleksei so furious. It took me by surprise, though I only laughed in response.

"I'm waiting for factual evidence. I don't go around throwing accusations out for kicks. And since it's someone... well, someone big, you're going to need convincing."

"Is it our father?"

I blinked. "Yes. But, he's not the only one."

His jaw clenched. Right now, there wasn't any possibility of calming him down. He threw his glass against the wall, and a stain appeared as the glass shattered into a million pieces. No one spoke—I didn't dare to. Provoking Aleksei was one of my favorite hobbies, but not when he was truly

angry. Not now.

He was a terrifying person to be around when his rage overflowed.

“I’ll kill that son of a bitch myself.”

“You will do no such thing, Aleksei.” I waved him off. “I’ll do it myself.”

“How the fuck can you be this calm?” Pure rage laced his tone.

“Because I suspected this was coming. And if I need to take him out myself, I will. But give me the blessing to do it, Aleksei.”

Had it been a random moron who’d tried to take me out, I would’ve killed him without anyone knowing. However, when it came to people of influence, and people Aleksei worked closely with, I needed his blessing. And once the time came, he’d take all the blame and the fall for my actions.

He was silent, exhaling a deep breath. Our eyes were locked, and he was looking for any indication I might back down when the time came. He found none. There would be no hesitation, no going back.

“You have my blessing. Do it.”

A wide grin spread over my face. It’d been a while since I’d felt this good about murdering someone. Excitement rushed through my veins, and I prayed they’d make their move soon. I didn’t want to wait too long.

But, for now, I had to decide what to do with Davorin. He wasn’t letting me go, and I didn’t want him to. But marriage? It would be out of convenience, nothing more, nothing less. And it would only benefit me.

It didn’t sound too bad, so it didn’t take me long to reach a decision that, in the long run, might turn out to be a death sentence.



With Aleksei’s promise to put another tracker in my arm ringing in my ears, I left his house. The day was still bright, and there was a hint of spring in the air. It wasn’t warm enough outside to just wear a shirt, yet it wasn’t cold enough to wear a jacket. I hated this weather the most.

“No, not that one.” Tiana inspected the dress on my body, unimpressed. “I think you should go for emerald green.”

We were in one of my favorite boutiques. Their dresses were extremely expensive, but each one was handmade, from the best materials, and unique—which I loved.

“I’m not sure about that,” I commented. The dress I had on was black. It had a big slit on the right leg, and it looked pretty, but black wasn’t exactly the color I’d pick for such an event.

Tiana groaned. We’d been in here for the past three hours. She was hungry—as she’d told me four times since we’d arrived.

“Why not? I mean, you do look good in anything, but I really think emerald green will look absolutely terrific on you.” Her stomach growled.

I sighed and searched for another dress to try on. I’d tried black, red, even blue, and nothing was good enough. The dresses were nothing but outstanding, just like the woman who’d created them. However, none that I’d tried so far seemed to perfect.

“Let me see if they have anything in green.” I rolled my eyes at the wide grin on Tiana’s face.

“Okay, imagine this. A long emerald-green dress, your hair in a high ponytail, red lipstick, gold jewelry—since you never wear anything but gold.”

“I mean, that could potentially look pretty. But let’s worry about the dress now and accessories later.”

I searched through the numerous green dresses. A few of them seemed interesting, though one of them was too short, the other one had some patterns I disliked, and the last one was too exposed—a high slit, and a low cleavage with an open back.

Then, from the corner of my eye, I saw a long emerald-green dress, just like Tiana had suggested. I took it over to the closest mirror, cocked my head to the side as I held it against my body, and decided instantly it was the right one for me.

The cleavage was V-shaped and ended between my breasts. However, it was off shoulder with long sleeves, and the slit on the left leg wasn’t too big, so it wasn’t overly revealing. With a smile, I returned to the dressing room and put on the clothes I’d come in with.

“Could I have this shipped to this address?” I asked the receptionist, whilst writing down Davorin’s address on a piece of paper.

“Of course. I’m glad you’ve found something you like,” she responded with a smile.

With a small nod, I thanked the woman and didn’t miss the sigh of relief that came from Tiana as we left the shop. As if on cue, her stomach made another ugly noise and I decided to treat her to a late lunch.

I didn’t eat, as I wasn’t hungry. The whole conversation earlier Aleksei had drained me of energy, and my appetite was nonexistent. I had a glass of very bad whiskey while Tiana devoured her food. It took her less than ten minutes.

After that, I drove her home and mentally prepared myself for the two-hour ride I had to take to Davorin’s house.

My phone buzzed, and I connected it with the Bluetooth in my car. Davorin’s name flashed on the screen as I took a left turn.

“Well if it isn’t my soon-to-be husband, the apple of my eye,” I greeted him dryly.

A low chuckle came from the other end of the line. “Hello to you too. When are you getting home? There’s something serious we need to discuss.”

I glanced at the side mirror, my eyes narrowing. My gaze snapped to the rearview mirror and I chuckled. “Shouldn’t you ask your goons that? They’re right behind me, Davorin.”

He was silent for a moment. “What?”

“I mean the SUVs that are right behind me. They are people you hired, right?”

He took a sharp intake of breath. “Where are you, Kaya? Exact location.”

I told him, realizing that whoever those men were, they weren’t his—or Aleksei’s. They were closing the distance between us at a rapid speed. My chest tightened, as I swallowed harshly.

“Listen to me.” Davorin’s stern voice brought me out of the daze. “There is a big possibility of them catching up with you. Don’t hang up the phone, and drive faster, Kaya.”

I heard the door of his car slam shut and the engine roar to life. He was on his way to meet me halfway, and my heart fluttered at the worry that seemed to lace his tone.

I pressed the gas pedal with all the strength I could. Excitement rushed through my body, and I could feel adrenaline pumping. I’d always been an adrenaline junkie, and this was one of the best thing that had

happened in recent days.

“Uh, they’re getting really close to me, Davorin,” I told him as the cars split up. Two of them were closing on my sides, while the one behind me was trying to hit me, to push me off the road.

“How many cars are on the highway?”

“We passed maybe four in total.”

“Do you have any weapons on you?”

I used one hand to open the glove department. “A gun and a knife.”

Davorin hissed under his breath. “Fuck, okay, listen, I’m almost there, keep driving ahead, do not take any turns and for the love of God, do not make the first move.”

It was too late. By the time he’d finished speaking, I’d already rolled down my window and slid my right arm out. The call disconnected soon after. I used the side mirror as a guide, and aimed for the left tire of the car behind me. I missed the first time, but my second shot was successful.

The driver lost control of the vehicle, and the car spun around and came to a stop. I rolled the window back up when I heard gunshots. The bastards on my sides were trying to shoot me, not my car.

The window smashed, and it was a miracle the bullet didn’t hit me.

Then it was me who lost control of my vehicle. The speed was too great for me to handle, and the car on the left slowed down, whilst the one on the right came crashing into the passenger side.

I screamed as he managed to push me off the road, yet somehow, I felt at peace.

Everything around me was rolling, until I landed upside down. My breathing was heavy, and it hurt to inhale. My eyes snapped shut as I tried the counting technique to calm my heart rate.

The rolling of my car could’ve been deadly to me, yet I’d managed to survive.

The first thing I saw was blood oozing from my arm, and I prayed to God that my face was intact. After all, I had a party to attend soon, and I couldn’t go looking like a failed plastic surgery patient.

Then I heard a car door open and close with a loud thud. I couldn’t see outside very well, and all I managed to do was unbuckle my seat belt and grab my gun. Yet, it turned out that I’d been shaken up more than I thought—my hands trembled. The gun fell and I cursed—there was no way I could reach it given how I was lying. I managed to hide the small blade inside my

sleeve, in case an opportunity rose for me to use it.

The next moment, they opened my door, then two arms grabbed me and yanked me outside. I tried kicking them as soon as I was out of the vehicle, though I was unsuccessful.

The man threw me on my side, and I felt nausea rise. I blinked, trying to ease the pain, and glanced up to find five unknown men watching me.

They all looked pretty much the same—around the same height and weight, dressed in black sweatpants and shirts, with tinted sunglasses. None looked to be younger than forty, and I tried to crawl backwards as they approached.

“Who sent you?” I seethed, my voice filled with venom and pure hatred.

I wasn’t afraid, especially not of death. If it was meant to be, it would be, no matter how hard I tried to deny it. I was only curious to find out if my suspicions had been correct.

One of them stepped forward, whilst the other four pointed their guns at me, a wicked smile on his face.

“We were told you were an intelligent young lady—you can probably figure it out on your own,” the leader of their little group announced.

He came forward and crouched down so he was level with me. Slowly, he removed his sunglasses and tossed them aside. Nothing but malice lurked in the dark eyes that were fixed on my face.

“It would make all of this a lot easier if you just told me who hired you,” I responded, slowly taking in a breath or two.

“Sorry, princess, that’s not the way I work.”

And that was when all of my suspicions were proven correct.

I never broke eye contact as he inched his head closer to mine. “And it’s time for you to die—any last words?”

“Yes.” I grinned. “Get fucked.”

I managed to wiggle the blade out of my sleeve, and it perfectly fell into my palm. A look of confusion crossed his face, but I worked quickly, bringing the blade up and slashing it across his throat.

His eyes widened as soon as the blood started gushing out. It splattered all over my face, neck, and hair. Some even managed to get inside my mouth, and I gagged.

The others scrambled their asses towards us. When their leader fell on top of me, they picked him up and begged for him to speak, though it was too

late. He was already dead.

“You fucking bitch.”

The impact of a palm connecting to my cheek forced my head to the side. Slowly, I laughed and shook my head. “You shouldn’t have done that, because now, all of you are doomed.”

I might’ve gone easier on them and simply murdered them, but Davorin?

No.

I saw him approaching at a rapid speed, nothing but bloodlust and the need for a massacre radiating from him. It was one of the most attractive forms of him I’d seen so far. He had a gun in his left hand, and as the men began to turn to follow my gaze, he began to fire.

His mask was on and my heart fluttered. His muscles looked way too good in that shirt, and the gloves on his hands looked fuckable, as weird as that sounded. Davorin was the epitome of sex appeal, but when he was in murder mode? Oh, to be the object of his rage and to be fucked sideways whilst he was in such a manic state.

Not even a minute later, the men were all dead. Each one had a bullet right between their eyes, and I was surprised that he hadn’t tortured them further. Another wave of mistrust came from me, but I pushed it to the side for the moment.

“Fuck, little lion,” he cursed. “Are you okay?”

He began inspecting my arm; the knife was still clutched in my palm. Slowly, he took the blade and tossed it aside. His hands roamed my body for any sign of injury.

“I’m fine,” I announced.

He tried to help me up, but I only stumbled. His strong arms caught me, and the proximity was deadly. Rage began to subside as soon as I found myself in his arms, as if he longed to have me close.

My fucking heart skipped a beat—again.

“You’re not fine, Kaya,” he said, his voice loud.

I rested my head on his shoulders as he carried me towards his car. Once he made sure I was safely on the back seat, he made a few calls. One of them was to Aleksei. I rolled my eyes at the dramatic conversation.

Aside from a slight concussion and my arm wound, I was perfectly fine. Somehow, all of my ribs were fine, and no bones had been broken.

He got in the driver’s seat, and the engine roared to life. “I’m taking

you to the hospital. Aleksei will have people clean this up.”

“The hospital is a bit dramatic,” I told him.

In response I got a glare that shut me up immediately.

I couldn't help the faint smile that formed on my face. All of the attention, all of the feelings he was displaying towards me were making me feel too good. And I didn't like to feel, because not once had I ever ended up sane after allowing myself to feel.

And each time, it was worse—each time, it was those stupid feelings that brought me nothing but pain and anger. Deep inside, I knew that this was no different; Davorin was no different.

He might've displayed more affection towards me, and he was definitely both possessive and obsessed, but it wouldn't last long. It never did.

But for now, I shook off those feelings. When the time came for us to part ways, it would be through one of us dying, and I would be prepared for it.

EIGHTEEN



“OUCH.” I winced, visibly shaking. The nurse finished patching up my wound and smiled at me softly.

“The doctor will be right with you,” she announced.

“Why? I’m fine.”

“It’s just to make sure everything is all right.”

Davorin had a spare set of clothes for himself in the car and changed before we arrived at the hospital. However, all I had were some baby wipes to clean the blood off my face. The blood remained in my hair, but I wasn’t too worried about that.

Upon arrival, had Davorin informed them that I’d been in a car accident and some interns, alongside a few nurses, had rushed to my side then brought me to the room, whilst Davorin waited outside.

The doctor came through the door. “Good afternoon.”

Her long black hair fell over her shoulders and reached just above her hips. Her lips were plump, coated in a gorgeous shade of nude lipstick. My eyes narrowed at the sight. The woman was oddly familiar.

It wasn’t her face. That was unknown to me, but her aura... her posture, even her figure. I was desperately trying to figure out where the hell I knew her from.

She was reading through my chart and froze. Slowly, she brought her eyes to meet mine. They widened slightly, and it took her a while to shake off whatever feeling had gripped her. She gave me a bright smile.

“I’m Doctor Beckett,” she told me with a gulp. “Would you mind telling me what happened?”

“I was driving back home when another car hit me. It threw me off the road.”

Her brows narrowed. “And they didn’t stop to help you?”

I shook my head. “No, my... fiancé was close by and he saw what happened.”

“All right,” she noted. “Well, it’s nothing serious. You were very lucky today, Miss. But because you did suffer a slight concussion, you’re on bedrest for three days. After that, I’d advise coming in for a check-up.”

The door opened violently, and Aleksei rushed inside, looking pale. My eyes were on Doctor Beckett. The moment Aleksei came in the room, all the blood drained from her face. She looked like she’d seen a ghost.

She bolted out of the room, though Aleksei didn’t seem to notice.

“What the fuck happened?”

“I was attacked,” I mumbled. I was beyond ashamed that I’d needed to be saved. “They’re dead, so no need to panic.”

“How the fuck am I supposed to not panic?” he yelled. I shushed him.

“You could’ve died, Ekaterina. This is serious.”

“I know,” I sighed. “I also know who’s behind all of this.”

I searched for an indicator that he knew, but there was nothing. From time to time, anger would flicker behind his eyes. His lips pulled into a thin line, his brows narrowed. If looks could kill, I’d have been dead long ago.

“Speak.”

Slowly, I closed my eyes and released a deep sigh. “It’s Viktor.”

“Viktor as in our brother, and your twin, Viktor?”

“No, Viktor Bout.” Sarcasm dripped from my words. “Yes, my twin brother, Viktor.”

His expression was laced with doubt. I was Aleksei’s favorite out of the two of us; however, he trusted Viktor with his whole heart. Dominik was more reserved towards my twin but never showed it when we were all together.

“Why would he do that?”

“We all know I’m Father’s least-favorite child.” I chuckled, dark memories of my childhood resurfacing for a moment. “And Viktor was never too quiet about hating me.”

“Siblings hate each other from time to time—that’s normal.”

“It wasn’t normal for my twin brother to chase me with a saw when we were six; nor was it normal for him to fucking shoot me when we were seventeen, but here we are.”

Aleksei’s mind began to race—I could see it in his eyes. Slowly, all of the pieces were coming together for him. He believed me. With a deep sigh, he clenched his fists by his side, knuckles turning white from anger.

“I’ll kill that motherfucker,” he told me through gritted teeth.

“No, you promised I’d get to do it,” I retorted. “And you and I both know I’m more than capable. But could you? Could you watch your brother, your blood, die?”

I was looking for any signs of Aleksei potentially dropping out. I didn’t need to get Viktor isolated and then have Aleksei ruin my plans. And for my dear twin brother, I had a lot of plans.

“Yes,” he told me. “Blood doesn’t define family.”

“Call Davorin in,” I told Aleksei. “I have a plan.”

Davorin was by my side within the next minute, and both of them were ready to listen. I didn’t have enough time to wait for Dominik to appear, and he’d likely bring Viktor with him anyway.

So I began to tell them, and they reluctantly agreed. It wasn't the best plan, but the chance of success was high, and I trusted a flawed plan more than something that seemed flawless.

However, I should've known better than to push my instincts aside. While Aleksei was all ears and had given some helpful input, despite his arguments, Davorin had been oddly quiet. His face gave nothing away. Aside from the slight worry that appeared and disappeared quickly, he had nothing to say, and I found it extremely odd.

"Thank God you're all right." Dominik approached me, kissing the top of my head.

Just behind him was my twin, the man of the hour. As per usual, he displayed no emotions when it came to me, and that made perfect sense. I barely suppressed a laugh at the sight of his pathetic face.

"I'm fine," I repeated for what felt like the millionth time in the last hour. It was getting tiring.

"So, you're still kicking, huh?" Viktor mused.

Fury flashed on Aleksei's face, and he took Dominik out of the room, presumably to fill him in on the situation. However, Davorin remained unmoving, by my side, eyes locked on Viktor.

I tilted my head to the side. "Of course, I am. Did you expect anything else from me?"

I was taunting him, but he didn't take the bait.

"Of course not. I expect you'll be the last man standing among all of us."

I grinned widely.

Despite finding this situation rather amusing, I wasn't an idiot. Neither was Viktor. He wasn't someone to be underestimated. He was driven by rage and fury, and once his emotions became too bottled up, he had the tendency to snap.

It never turned out well for any bystanders, and this time, he had his eyes set on me. He wanted to get rid of me completely. On some level, I understood why. He felt like he'd been neglected by our parents, whose attention had been trained on me.

But I wouldn't wish that kind of attention on anyone. My mother had been a responsible person, with a kind heart. However, when I'd needed her the most, she'd turned her head the other way and simply closed her eyes to all the abuse I'd endured, just because I'd been born a girl.

And my father had a tendency to lock me up in the tower he'd built for me. No sun, no people, nothing. I was trapped for weeks, even months at a time. In total, I'd spent four years, seven months and twenty-two days in that prison, oftentimes chained to the wall.

"You're giving me too much credit, Viktor." I grinned like a lunatic. "Who knows when I might actually die? Could be today, could be tomorrow."

"I wouldn't count on that," Davorin said loudly from next to me.

It was the first time he'd spoken since he'd come into my room. His knuckles had turned white from rage. I grabbed his hand in mine, and immediately, he relaxed and gazed down at me. His eyes softened at the plea on my face.

"Well, I should probably leave now," Viktor announced. "I'll see you at Aleksei's party, Kaya."

He stormed off like a child right after.

"You're not going," Davorin said. "I'll lock you in a cage if necessary, but you're not going."

I blinked, pushing the trauma to the back of my mind. "Are you dumb? We talked about what needs to be done, and I need to attend in order to make it happen."

Davorin sat next to me on the bed, and I scooted over to give him more space. His fingers were in my hair, slowly twirling the ends of it. "I'm sorry, little lion—I can't let you jump to your death."

"Let me?" A low laugh slipped out. "You're not my father, Davorin. You can't keep me hidden and locked away."

"If it ensures your safety, watch me."

It was a lost cause arguing with him about something so trivial.

And no matter how serious he'd been about keeping me locked up, I had once been caged like an animal. It had turned me into a monster, a weapon meant only to cause harm. I'd embraced that, but what would happen if I was forced into the cage again?

I wasn't going to let it happen and find out.



“You’re not going” Brianne said as I stepped downstairs.

“Why the hell are you here?”

“Davorin told me to watch you for the night. And there’s like four guards outside the house.”

I gritted my teeth in frustration. I’d come downstairs to grab some alcohol while I was finishing getting ready. The dress had been delivered earlier in the day, alongside some heels I’d ordered online.

The only thing I’d managed to get done was take a shower and do my hair in a high ponytail, as per Tiana’s suggestion. She was right—the style suited me perfectly. I left two front pieces free to frame my face.

I approached Brianne, who was surprised. Each step I took towards her, she took one back. “What’s wrong, *Bri*?” I mocked. “Afraid?”

She stomped her feet on the ground slightly, and it made me chuckle. “No. You just caught me by surprise.”

I nodded. “Since we’re here, answer me something. Why were you snooping around my apartment?”

Shock flashed over her face before she was able to hide it. It was irrelevant—I’d seen it, even if it was for a split second.

She shrugged and sat on the chair that was behind her. “I only picked up some things for you in Davorin’s place.”

“That’s no excuse for going through my safe. Try again.”

“You’re wrong,” she told me sternly. “I didn’t do that. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I chuckled. I collected the drink I’d come for in the first place and glanced at her for the last time. “If you say so.”

I didn’t believe her, not one bit. However, tonight, I had bigger issues to deal with. My mind raced with numerous ways to get rid of Brianne as soon as tonight was over, and I found a very creative way that kept me going

whilst I was getting ready.

Four glasses of whiskey later, I was all done.

The dress looked even more perfect on me. The material was so soft, it made me feel great. I opted for a pair of gold earrings and a matching necklace. I'd had them made years ago. They were in the shape of a snake, with two emeralds for eyes.

My makeup was perfect—winged eyeliner, with a great base and bold, red lipstick. It was matte, though it made my lips feel too dry. I added a light coat of lip oil, which made everything look better.

However, probably the best part of the dress was its pockets. I hadn't noticed when I'd picked it, but I was grateful that I didn't have to take a handbag with me. It had enough space to hold my phone and a gun. The perfect dress did exist.

I put on my favorite perfume, Dior Poison, and walked downstairs. The dress dragged behind me, my heels clicking with each step I took.

Brianne stood at the door, as if to prevent me from leaving. I laughed—loudly—at the pathetic attempt. I needed to figure out why the hell she was still here. Her father was long dead, and she should've followed quicker than this.

“Move,” I told her. “And this isn't me asking. I'm telling you. I really don't want to resort to using force and risk ruining this dress.”

She blinked. “Even if I let you walk past me, Davorin took your car keys and credit cards with him. You have no way to get there.”

I cursed under my breath. A bad habit of mine was that I never had much cash on me, so I didn't have enough to pay for an Uber or taxi.

I sighed, hiding my anger. “Either move or die. It's really up to you.”

To make sure she got the message, I pulled out my gun, took the safety off and aimed it at her head. I didn't hesitate, not for a minute as I took another step closer.

Brianne reeked of fear. I could smell it and feel it as if it were happening to me. It was laughable. How was it possible to be this pathetic in the face of death? She should've either done something about it or not allowed it to happen. A third option didn't exist.

“You won't kill me,” she breathed uncertainly.

“And why is that exactly?”

“Because of what I found in your safe.”

I chilled. I closed my eyes, jaw clenched as I lowered the gun.

Indescribable rage overtook me, and I was barely able to breathe. I wanted this stupid bitch dead, tortured until her last pathetic breath.

“That was your first mistake, Brianne.” I took another step towards her. With each passing second, her brave persona faltered, and I was enjoying every moment of it. “Blackmailing me is signing your death certificate.”

Gulping visibly, she shook her head. “There’ll be consequences.”

“Do you seriously think I care about that? You see,” I mused, “I never liked you. I couldn’t really put my finger on why, but now I have. Not only are you nosy, but you’re also in love with Davorin.”

I was mostly trying to rile her up. The last part was bullshit, but as soon as her eyes met mine, I laughed. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to understand the flushing of her cheeks, the swelling of her eyes, and the way her lips thinned.

“Oh, you are.” My voice dripped with disbelief. “It was a joke, but now...”

She deserved to die a slow, painful death—for so many reasons—but I didn’t have time to draw it out.

“You’re delusional if you think he sees you as anything but a toy to pass time with,” she spat.

Oh yes. This bitch was dying tonight.

A low grin overtook my face as I stepped back. I moved quickly, unzipping my dress and stepping out of it. I placed it neatly on the couch in the living room and made sure it was out of reach. I was left in nothing but my heels and my matching underwear.

I moved to the kitchen where Brianne had remained. She looked unbothered—until she took in my attire; meanwhile I was looking through the kitchen utensils for something that would cause her pain.

“Okay, pick a number between one and seven,” I told her.

“What?”

“Are you an idiot? I’m telling you to pick a number between one and seven.”

I glanced at her perplexed face, her lips slightly agape as her hair fell over her eyes. She had wavy hair, which was pretty, but only if taken care of correctly. Currently, it looked like a bird’s nest.

“Uh, five?” Her question was filled with uncertainty.

“Perfect.” I beamed and turned around after picking a sharp butcher knife out of the drawer.

Brianne took a step back. “What are you doing?”

I feigned innocence. “Oh this?” I pointed to the knife. “This is number five. Very beautiful, might I add. You and she are about to become acquainted.”

Brianne’s fight-or-flight response activated, and she bolted. It was like a scene from a low-budget horror movie, where the main character rushes up the stairs, when the door to the outside was right there, as if they wanted to be killed.

Humming softly as I followed her, I inspected the knife. It was big but a bit dull. That posed no issue though because I knew which body parts to hit, and how to wield a dull blade. It wasn’t the first time I’d had to resort to barbaric methods.

“Oh, Brianne,” I sang out, “there’s no point in hiding. Unless you want to jump out of the window, it will end quicker if you just come to me.”

There was a hallway in front of me, with two pairs of doors on each side. All the doors were locked, so all I could see was the big window straight ahead of me. It was fairly early in the afternoon, just after four o’clock.

Davorin had left an hour ago. He’d told me he had to pick up his suit from the store, and the mere thought of that sent shivers down my spine. Meeting with my two brothers was next, and discussing another plan that didn’t involve me was their main topic; however, I couldn’t be stopped, and they fucking knew it.

In the other hand, I held my phone. As quietly as possible, I typed out a message, pressed send, and locked it. Then I put it on the floor and slid it towards the far window, to make sure it was out of reach.

The wooden floor squeaked underneath her feet. My eyes snapped to the left, just as she busted the door open and ran straight towards me. Screaming, she pushed me, and I stumbled. My gaze landed on the sharp object in her hand, a piece of glass. I had no idea where she’d got it from.

I hissed in pain when she punctured my right arm and used my left palm to hit her throat directly. At a loss for breath, she fell off me, trying to regain her strength. The opportunity was there, and I kicked her in the stomach with my heel, penetrating her skin.

The butcher knife was safely in my right hand, and as I managed to bring it up—the glass still in my arm—I hit her in her throat, where her fingers were clutching. Her fingers were sliced in half from the harsh impact, and they fell to the floor.

She wasn't dead yet, and the rage that had been building inside me for the past few weeks, months, even years resurfaced. Tonight, I had no intention of keeping my feelings hostage.

I remembered everything about her. How she'd snooped through my home, how she had information on me that no one else had. Well, Aleksei had got his hands on the documents, but he was never going to speak of what he'd read.

I brought my hand high before I hit her with the knife again. Her screams subsided as the life slowly drained out of her body. I wished I could have tortured her more, but all I saw was red.

I never would've admitted it out loud, but I was jealous of the time she'd spent with Davorin. Who the fuck was she to be by his side? No one. She wasn't me. That was my place, and all she'd done was stir up trouble since the day I met her.

Another strike, and her warm, thick blood was all over my bare stomach and chest. I'd ruined a perfect set of underwear, though I didn't actually care all that much. All that mattered was that my hair and makeup remained intact. I had no time to do it all over again.

Another slash and I exhaled loudly. Then I threw the knife to the side and watched the scene in front of me. She was no longer a recognizable person. The wounds I'd inflicted were brutal. She looked like an animal that had been hit by a truck, before a predator had found its body and started eating.

I didn't notice how much rage I'd put into the action. Her eyes were open, wide. Her head was almost decapitated, though I hadn't thought I had enough strength or a blade sharp enough for that. Blood continued to gush. It was everywhere—the walls, the floor, where it had become a pool very fast, and on me.

I'd created a hole in her stomach, her insides visible. I wasn't easily disgusted, yet this took the cake. I gagged then shook my head. Slowly, I turned around, but the buzzing of her phone made me halt.

I found it in her pocket, and my brows creased as I read the words on the screen.

100% complete.

I began to search through the app to figure out what it was. Another wave of fury overtook me, and a sarcastic laugh slipped free.

It was an app that sent a message to a chosen number at a pre-selected

time. Quickly, I found two voice notes, each around two minutes long, designed to be delivered to different numbers in four days' time.

I couldn't see the numbers, but I assumed one of them was Davorin's.

"Even in death, this bitch is causing issues," I muttered under my breath.

It was a problem for tomorrow. For now, I focused on the sound of the front door opening and heels clicking up the stairs. I gave their owner an apologetic smile that was anything but apologetic and she visibly gagged.

"What the fuck?" Rhea's mortified face was all I saw. "Ekaterina, this isn't what I signed up for."

She was wearing a long, puffy, princess-like dress in a shade of light blue with a lot of sparkles. Her hands covered her mouth, her eyes wide.

"I'm sorry." I shrugged. "But I do need your help."

Rhea did breathing exercises for a minute. Deep breaths in, deep breaths out. Slowly, once her hands stopped shaking, she swallowed and nodded.

"Okay, this is how we're going to do this," she announced and snapped her fingers. Two of her security guards appeared shortly after. "You two." She pointed at them with her index finger. "Take care of this." She twirled her finger towards the corpse. "And you." Her eyes were on me. "Get ready. My helicopter doesn't have unlimited fuel."

I blinked. "You flew a helicopter here?"

"How else was I supposed to come so quickly? Now hurry up."

I listened to her and rushed to the bathroom to take my underwear off and remove all the blood, along with the piece of glass that was still in my arm. It didn't hurt removing it, though stopping the blood and patching it nicely took a while.

When I checked the clock, I was shocked to see that it was past six o'clock and picked up the pace, finishing in record time. The night was still young, and all the monsters were about to come out of hiding.

NINETEEN



“I’M never forgiving you for this,” Rhea murmured as we made our grand entrance. “I’m definitely throwing you under the bus.”

I laughed but agreed. “And you should. Thank you for doing it for

me.”

We were at the top of a long staircase. Aleksei had chosen one of the most spacious, expensive, and well-known venues that fit around five hundred people. Of course, his invitation list wasn't as long, hence it wasn't too crowded.

A small smile spread over my face. The decoration and my attire matched—green and gold ran throughout the ample room, from the napkins and tablecloths to the candle holders and candles themselves. Even the ceiling had been decorated to perfection.

As we stepped down, slowly and gracefully, I noticed a wide grin on Rhea's face. One of the main reasons I liked her was because we were similar in this sense. I liked attention; Rhea thrived on it. She never sought it, but wherever she went, all eyes were on her. Her gorgeous face and radiant personality probably helped.

“Hey, Rhea.” I turned towards her as soon as we reached the end of the stairs. “You should look for Dominik. Tell him all about what I've asked you to do.”

She had blush on, but her cheeks turned even pinker. I suppressed a laugh and only told her to go.

“I'll catch you later. Do not, and I'm telling you this with a heart full of love, kill anyone.”

It was a threat. I rolled my eyes and shooed her off.

I recognized every single person in the room, from a lot of paid politicians that often kissed Aleksei's ass to the Don of the Italian mafia. His wife was on his arm, and both of them looked like they would rather be anywhere else. They were allies with Aleksei, but the relationship was rocky, given the multiple disagreements between our fathers when they'd ruled.

The Don nodded towards me in a brief greeting. I returned the favor and walked straight to the open bar. It'd been a very stressful day, and since Rhea's ability to fly a helicopter was rusty, I needed a drink or two.

“Isabella's Islay please.”

I'd inherited my drinking habits from Aleksei and Dominik. They cherished their whiskey more than anything and had no issue paying millions per bottle. The hidden gems were behind the bar, if you knew what to look for.

The bartender nodded and quickly poured me a glass, sitting it on top of a green napkin. I glanced around. People were chatting, the music wasn't

too loud, and the waiters were rushing to get everyone their drinks.

I sipped on the whiskey. It slid down my throat with ease, the rich taste of it sending shivers down my spine. Rhea and Dominik entered my sight. They seemed to be chatting. Rhea saw me from across the room and winked. I hid my smirk behind the glass.

“I thought you couldn’t make it.” Aleksei’s voice forced me to break eye contact with Rhea. I returned my gaze towards the bar and found my brother sitting next to me.

I chuckled. “As if I’d miss your birthday.”

“Where’s my present then?”

My eyes narrowed. “Your gift is life, because lately, you keep pissing me off.”

He let out a loud laugh, though he masked it with a cough, then ordered a glass of the same drink I was having. Whilst he waited for it to be placed in front of him, he spoke lowly.

“Dominik wants to take care of Father.” His voice was barely above a whisper. “He and Viktor have yet to arrive. Please don’t cause a scene here.”

“I won’t.” Why did people constantly keep thinking I’d go ballistic in front of so many people?

“Did you notice them?” Aleksei asked.

Slowly, I nodded—I’d spotted them as soon as I’d arrived. “Yes, five disguised as waiters, and three on the upper floor.”

The eight people were neither a part of Aleksei’s security detail, nor the waiters he’d been hiring for years to work at family events. They weren’t Dominik’s either, as he never meddled in Aleksei’s affairs. The upper floor of the venue had nothing but bedrooms, and my brother had paid for the overseas guest to each have a room, but they were all on the main floor right now.

“Why are they still here, Aleksei? Are you losing your touch?” I taunted him with a devilish smile.

He rolled his eyes. “My men will take care of them within the next thirty minutes. I don’t want chaos.”

I went to take another sip before frowning at my empty glass. Quickly, I ordered another one.

“Well, it seems like your Italian friend noticed them too. Tell him to behave.” I was referring to the Don himself, Antonio De Luca. He was notorious for his lack of patience—and his passion for killing. If anyone rose

to action quickly, it would be him.

“I’ll handle De Luca, but until further notice, either be with Davorin or Dominik if I’m not around.”

My brows narrowed. “Where is my man?”

It slipped out too quickly, and I was unable to comprehend the words I’d just spoken. It was the first time I’d even thought them, and yet it sounded so natural, so good.

Aleksei quirked an eyebrow, amused, but didn’t comment on my choice of words.

“He’s around. He’ll probably want to take them out himself, so keep him occupied while I arrange everything else. I doubt they’ll attack before Bogdan and Viktor arrive.”

Shock passed over my face. I blinked and realized this was real. Not once had I ever heard my brother call our father by his name. There had always been a line of respect Aleksei never dared to cross, even after he’d forcefully taken the throne. Perhaps I’d been wrong. Perhaps Aleksei was made to be the Pakhan. And the fact that he’d called him by his name, because of me, made me smile. It spoke volumes.

“Hey, can I talk to you for a moment?” Rhea’s voice came from my left side.

Aleksei nodded in understanding and placed his empty glass on the bar before he strolled away.

“What’s wrong, Rhea?”

She looked as if she’d seen a ghost—eyes wide, bottom lip trembling, palms sweaty. She glanced around to make sure no one was in the earshot and spoke lowly.

“I just spent some time with Dominik and that girl Xenia, and…” She gulped harshly. “You need to leave. You’re in much more danger than you think.”

“Speak.” I was as calm as a millpond. She was fidgeting with her fingers, twirling around her rings.

“Listen, we found out how everything is going down and—” Her mouth closed immediately, her eyes glued to the person behind me.

I felt his presence before I saw him. Slowly, I glanced over my shoulder and my mouth parted. His suit was luxurious, his hair was perfectly styled, and his inked skin peeked out from his collar and cuffs.

His face, however, told another tale entirely. The small tattoo on his

face looked incredibly good. His green eyes stared at me with nothing but obsession, and it was a deadly feeling I was trying to suppress. An emotion so lethal it promised to break me, until there was nothing left of my soul.

“Listen, Ekaterina.” Rhea’s voice snapped me back to reality. “Be fucking careful.”

Her lack of response to the question told me Davorin was a person she didn’t trust. I didn’t expect her to, but I was safest when I was with him—there was no one else who’d make certain I was unharmed.

Rhea left, but her absence didn’t matter. I stood up, and as if on cue, the music slowed. Without uttering a word, Davorin took my hand in his and placed a small kiss on the back of it, chuckling at the sight of my dice bracelet.

It matched the theme, though I rarely took it off.

“You look absolutely mesmerizing, little lion,” he breathed. “You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.”

I laughed it off; however, the butterflies in my stomach were too loud. I prayed no one could hear them. He took my hand and led me towards the dance floor, where couples were already gathered.

“I better be the only woman you’re saying that to.” It was mainly to tease him, but the sudden burst of emotion that swirled in my chest was hard to ignore.

He was quick to respond, and the way his green eyes darkened made my stomach twitch. “From the moment I saw you, no other woman existed.”

“Good.” I grinned. “Because I’d just have them killed.”

His chuckle vanished immediately. Eyebrows furrowed, he glanced at my arm. “What the fuck happened?”

The sleeve had slipped lower than it should’ve, because of the bandage. I quickly pulled it up and intertwined my fingers around his neck. One of his hands was on my lower back, pulling me closer to his body. The other was gripping my hip. It was sensational, it was exceptional. It was only his touch that was able to make me feel.

“It was me defending myself from that lunatic Brianne,” I lied. “She attacked me and well... may she rest in peace.”

A low sigh escaped his mouth as he brought his head closer to mine. An inch separated us. An inch was enough to throw away any rationality I had left. Nothing about this man was rational. It was extreme, and I never knew how much I liked extreme until this moment.

“Good.” He placed a small kiss on my forehead.

Involuntarily, a smile touched my lips. I felt giddy as a wave of excitement came over me.

“I would’ve made her suffer for even thinking of harming you.”

“No need—I took care of that.”

Davorin put some distance between us, and I instantly missed the proximity. Slowly, he twirled me around. The dancing made me breathe heavier, the feeling of his hands sensationally roaming my body making goosebumps appear.

“The guards you assigned didn’t do a good job of preventing me from leaving,” I noted.

Davorin was confused. “What guards? I only told Brianne to stall you.”

I blinked. The bitch had lied—but not entirely. As Rhea and I had been getting on her helicopter, I’d noticed two people in his yard, and they hadn’t come with Rhea. I’d passed it off as poor service from Davorin’s men.

“Well, someone was at your house.”

He hissed under his breath. “And if that’s not bad enough, your father and brother just arrived.”

Davorin spun us around, our fingers laced together as I rested my chin on his shoulder. I ignored the way his cologne made me feel and focused on the two men that had finally made their appearance. Bogdan walked a few steps ahead, with Viktor and two bodyguards closely behind.

Aleksei stepped forward and shook hands with both of them. As if they weren’t family, as if they weren’t blood. As if they were strangers that wished harm on the empire Aleksei had torn down and rebuilt with his own two hands and a lot of blood and sweat.

I tried reading their lips, my curiosity making me unaware of my surroundings. They were too far away, but I was able to perfectly observe the sour look on Viktor’s face once he noticed that the intruders he’d placed were gone.

“Stay by my side, Kaya.” Davorin wasn’t telling me; he was begging me, and it made my heart race. “Please. I can’t allow you to wander off and get yourself hurt.”

I smiled. “Thank you, but if you and my brother stick to my genius plan, nothing can possibly go wrong.”

Davorin sighed and led me back towards the bar. He ordered me

another glass of what I'd had earlier, and one for himself. "Yes, but your father is... a man who shouldn't be taken lightly. Viktor is an idiot, and I'd like nothing more than to punch him in the face, but I'll leave that to you."

I understood the meaning behind his words. "The chances of them predicting this are there, but not high. And if they did catch on, I would notice. I'll never allow myself to fall into a trap, Davorin."

"I'm not doubting your self-awareness. But I'm not doubting their abilities either."

I sighed and drank the whiskey in one big sip then returned the glass, slamming it onto the bar. The bartender flinched. I took a step closer to Davorin; his gaze had darkened at the sight of my fury.

All the memories and thoughts of my brother and father that I'd repressed had made their way to the surface. It had made me unnecessarily angry, and Davorin doubting my abilities only made the situation worse.

"I'm doing this." I took another step. "You can either back me up or back the fuck up. It's your choice, but don't get in my way."

"Yes, little lion—your wish is my command."

It was odd how Davorin was able to get me so riled up, furious, instantly, yet he was also able to make flames burst inside me. I needed him more than I needed oxygen, and he knew how much control he had over me. Which was why, with a mere kiss on the back of my hand, I knew what he'd chosen.

I shifted the conversation. "Since all of this will end soon, there's no reason for me to marry you."

Davorin's lips twitched upwards. Gently, he moved one of the loose strands of my hair, pinning it behind my ear. His soft touch made me lean into his palm, and the overwhelming feeling of safety calmed me down almost instantly.

"No reason? Little lion, you will marry me. You'll wear a wedding band around your finger, and you'll spend the rest of your life by my side. That's not a question—it's a promise."

The finality of his words cut me like a sword. Yet, the tranquil tone in his voice made the wound heal. It was cruel, it was gut-wrenching in the most twisted of ways. And it was something I looked forward to feeling for the rest of my life.

"I'll be off now. It would be rude not to greet my father." With a heavy heart, I took my hand from his. "You be on the lookout."

“Of course, little lion.”

My father was chatting with Aleksei. The moment my brother noticed me, he excused himself and gave us privacy. He beside Davorin in an instant, both watching us like hawks.

“Ekaterina.” His thick accent was full of distaste, yet he tried masking it with a smile. “You look just like your mother.”

I grinned brightly. “Aside from the fact that she’s dead.”

My father never knew how to appreciate a good joke. The smile faltered from his face, and he chose to ignore my words.

“You should have a dance with your father,” he mused. He extended one of his hands, and I took it, allowing him to lead me to the dance floor. Dancing with anyone who wasn’t Davorin was... dull—and uninteresting.

“Are you enjoying yourself?” Bogdan asked.

“Of course. Aleksei always knew how to throw a good party.”

He laughed it off. “Yes, you should enjoy it while you can.”

My brow shot upwards. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing, nothing,” he dismissed, “but you should be aware that you’re going back to Russia, one way or the other.”

“You mean either of my own free will or in a body bag?”

Bogdan wasn’t surprised. He’d sensed, likely as soon as we’d met in the restaurant, that I was onto him. He tried to be sleek, but the press of a button in his jacket didn’t go unnoticed.

The storm was finally here.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” He acted offended. “What kind of a father would murder his child?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. What kind of a child would kill their own mother?”

His face went pale. Until this moment, he’d been unaware that I had executed my mother’s murder. I was curious what reason Viktor had given him for hating me with the intensity he did, because if Bogdan had known I’d killed her, I never would’ve left Russia.

He gritted his teeth, desperately trying to hold his anger back. Quickly, he spun me around, and another pair of hands caught me.

“Looking good, little sister.”

Viktor’s voice surprised me.

“You’re a minute and nineteen seconds older, Viktor.” I glanced around, and my heart dropped to my feet. Somehow, the crowd seemed much

bigger now than it had a minute ago. I couldn't spot Davorin, Aleksei, Dominik, or even Rhea.

He chuckled. "And I will never let you forget."

We remained silent for the duration of the song. Immediately after, another song started and many more people joined the dance floor—we were surrounded. I began to feel irked. Viktor, on the other hand, seemed relaxed, and that wasn't good.

He broke the silence. "I need to talk to you about something."

My gaze met his, and I saw nothing but danger there. It made me still for a moment. Before he was able to catch on to my slip-up, I threw a fake smile on my face. A look I'd mastered over the years.

"Sure, what is it?"

"Not here." He looked around. "Too many people. Come with me."

He didn't give me a chance to reject him. His hand was on my wrist, and although the sentiment wasn't rough, I knew that things were about to become truly fucked up. I felt a lot more at ease knowing I had a gun in my pocket.

I didn't question where we were going—I just followed him in silence. Realization hit me once we started up the stairs towards the rooftop. Usually, it was used for summer parties. It had a big pool and one of the best views in the city.

The moment a cold breeze hit my face and my eyes scanned the area, I laughed to myself. His men were all waiting for us. Each had a gun, and each gun was pointed directly towards my head.

Viktor swiftly moved to stand in front of them, putting space between us. He was obviously afraid I had something up my sleeve.

"Seriously, Viktor?" A low sigh came from me. "Hiding behind these goons?"

He wasn't amused; nor was he wasting any time. "Get on your knees, Ekaterina."

"Oh, executioner style? How outdated."

Viktor snapped his fingers, and every single person took their safety off. I felt a gun pressed to the back of my head. My eyes closed for a brief moment, and the sharp breath I took didn't help soothe my nerves. I wasn't afraid by any means—I was merely irritated by the dramatics.

"Get on your fucking knees, Ekaterina," he gritted out.

Slowly, I got on my knees. In my head, I came up with eight creative

ways to end his life just because I'd ruined a very expensive and extremely beautiful dress. And all because my brother was pissy.

"All right," I said. "Let's hear it. Why am I getting killed tonight?"

Viktor laughed. He was slowly walking towards me now, lowering himself to my eye level. "So many reasons that I don't have time to get into." He paused for a moment and made eye contact with the man whose gun was pressed to the back of my head. "I can give you one though."

I raised an eyebrow.

"Our mom. You killed her—slowly. She never saw it coming and you? Not once did you feel remorse."

"I'm incapable of that."

"I'm aware." His response was quick. "But that doesn't mean you shouldn't be held responsible for your actions."

I blinked. "You're acting as if I did it because I was bored and had no reason."

"Oh please." He was growing angrier by the minute. "You had to put up with Father's methods, which I agree were extreme, but she never did anything."

My anger couldn't be held back.

"Never did anything?" I repeated, disbelief lacing my words. "I didn't blame her for Bogdan's actions, but when she had the chance to do anything, to speak up, she turned her head the other way. I was just a child, yet I was chained, isolated from the world, and beaten whenever I so much as smiled."

I had been creative in my mother's murder. She'd been ill previously, for years, and it had left her immune system weak. She'd cherished her roses more than anything, but she'd had various other plants too—some of which were toxic in the right quantities. Chemistry had always been a strong subject of mine, and I'd extracted their poison and put it in her tea, twice a day until she'd died.

"We all had difficult childhoods, Ekaterina. Dominik was struck with metal whips for standing up for you, Aleksei was thrown into a room of ten armed men and came out alive, despite being the only one without a weapon. And me? I fucking had to prove my worth day after day, because I wasn't as rough mentally as Dominik, or as perceptive as Aleksei, or fucking intelligent like you."

"Sucks to suck, I guess." I shrugged. "None of that changes the fact that our mother deserved to die."

His fist unexpectedly closed around my hair. He pulled it back, and I yelled in agony. His face was too close to mine.

“Who the fuck are you to decide who dies and who lives?” he yelled, eyes full of rage.

“I’m divinity,” I simply responded, eyes locked behind him, “and that is my cultist.”

Davorin emerged from the shadows, ending a man’s life with each step he took. It was all crystal clear to me—the yearning to bathe in blood, the immense need to kill for each other made me love him.

The man behind me fell, following in the footsteps of his comrades. Viktor was quick on his feet and pulled out a dagger. It landed on my throat, whilst his other hand held a gun to my temple.

Shivers ran down my body. The closer Davorin came, the more excited I got. The night was still young, and I had plenty of plans for how it would end.

The ghost of a smirk decorated Davorin’s face, his eyes as cold as the wind that blew in my face. Viktor was pressing the blade harder against my throat, and by the time Davorin was in front of us, I felt relaxed all over again.

“I’d advise you to remove your filthy hand from my future wife, kid.”

His voice had never sounded like this. It was deep, threatening, and terrifying. Viktor froze, Davorin’s words embedding into his brain.

“Take another step and she dies,” Viktor warned, but Davorin only cocked his head to the side and challenged him.

Another step forward made my twin slowly back up.

“That isn’t very smart,” Davorin said. “I can see that she’s the smart one out of you two.”

Realization slowly dawned on Viktor. While he’d been busy trying to get rid of me, Aleksei and Dominik had been getting rid of our father, putting the trash of our family to rest for good. No one was coming to help him—the loud music from downstairs made it impossible for anyone to hear what was happening here.

“You can’t kill me—I’ll pull the trigger before you get the chance to,” Viktor breathed.

He hadn’t counted on me having a gun of my own. I’d pulled it out the moment his had touched my temple, but he hadn’t noticed.

I looked up, meeting my brother’s gaze, and it made me still for a

moment. It reminded me of my own, many years ago. That was the look I'd had whenever my father had called for me, whenever he'd thrown me into that fucking cage. It was a look of pure terror—a silent plea for help.

I didn't grant it.

Viktor was very impulsive and always went head-first into a problem. He never thought things through properly, and when it inevitably came to bite him in the ass, he regretted it. That was the main difference between us. I never had the luxury of regret, but it was all he knew.

Two gunshots echoed. Both came from Davorin, who'd lost his patience; however, he'd honored my request not to kill Viktor himself.

One of the bullets had pierced the arm that had been holding the gun to my head. Immediately, it dropped to the floor. The second was in his shoulder. It loosened the grip on the blade just enough for me to grab his wrist, twist it, and steal the weapon from him. He groaned, pain visible on his face. I didn't waste any time and headbutted him.

He fell flat on his ass.

Davorin rushed to my side and pulled me up. His hands were on my face whilst he inspected the slight bruising from where I'd hit Viktor. His jaw clenched and his eyes landed on Viktor; there was nothing in them but murderous intent.

"I'm fine," I said softly. "Let me handle this."

Davorin wasn't thrilled by the request. "Fine," he grumbled once he saw my determination.

I turned to Viktor and, with the knife he would've used to slice my throat, I stabbed him, right in the chest. His eyes widened, and he struggled to breathe, or comprehend what was happening.

"I should've ended your life when I had the chance," he spat.

I nodded. "Yes, you should've, because unlike you, I don't hesitate, and I don't second-guess my decisions. I follow through with them."

"So what are you waiting for then?" His gun was within reaching distance, yet because Davorin's was pointed at his head, he didn't attempt to grab it. He wasn't that stupid.

"I thought of many creative ways for you to go, and I was very excited about executing them. However..." I paused and got on my knees, moving closer to him. "I won't do that. Not because I care about you, and not because you don't deserve it, because you do. It's just too time-consuming, and time's the one thing I'm lacking right now."

“You’ve gone soft, Kaya.” He laughed, and I plunged the knife deeper into his body. His laughter turned into a coughing fit.

“Six months ago, you would’ve tortured me without any regard to time or place.”

“Yes, but six months ago I was unaware just how much of a coward you were.”

“It’s a shame, really,” Viktor breathed. “You had the potential to become a great warrior, Ekaterina.”

“I’m not a warrior; I’m a weapon. I’m destructive and I cause nothing but chaos and grief. And I happen to like that.”

“You’re insane.” His eyes widened even more.

The wicked grin never faltered from my face, and I was feeling very relaxed and excited.

“You’ve exhausted my patience, Viktor,” I told him, gripping the handle of the knife tighter. “I do hope you understand that what is about to happen is me being merciful. Something no one else has ever been granted. So look at me, at your god, as I send you to hell, where you’ll be reunited with our beloved mother.”

“I’ll save a spot for you.”

I grinned. “I’m counting on it. I’ll kill you in hell too.”

I pointed the blade upwards and plunged it into his heart. A loud scream pierced the air before silence fell.

Heavy rain began to fall as I removed the knife from his heart. Blood dripped on the floor as I stood up and glanced at him for the last time, making sure that the dead would remain so.

I was soaked and growing wetter with each passing second. Davorin shook the jacket off his body and threw it over my shoulders. My body shivered from the sudden cold, and the warmth his jacket provided made my heart flutter.

“Are you okay, little lion?”

I blinked, confused. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

Davorin shook his head before grabbing my hand. Electricity ran through my veins at his touch, the tingling sensation filling my senses. It had been a very stressful day and I hadn’t noticed how little I’d eaten until now.

Fatigue came over me, and Davorin immediately caught me. In a split second, I was in his arms and he was carrying me inside. I snuggled closer to his chest, slowly closing my eyes.

As we passed through the entertainment space, I noticed the music had stopped, but that was Aleksei's problem to deal with.

Davorin took me to one of the rooms my brother had paid for and immediately locked the door behind us.

Slowly, he set me down and began to undress me. Every inch of my skin that he touched felt on fire, every caress brought nothing but arousal, and it felt divine. It was as if he was using those gentle touches to worship my entire body.

He was on his knees now, intent on getting my heels off. He undid the strap on each foot before slowly sliding each shoe off. His eyes were on me at all times, and the hunger we felt for each other was undeniable.

Without thinking, with no plan for the night's ending, I bent down and placed my lips on his.

TWENTY



DAVORIN'S lips tasted like the sweetest cherries. It reminded me of spring, the warmth of the sun against my face, the soft breeze against my skin. Davorin tasted like freedom. The kind that was liberating, carefree, and had

always been out of my reach.

Until I met him.

He'd stormed into my life, twisted it upside down and, in the process, taken what was left of my soul. He'd tainted my already dark heart, until I was molded to his desires. And I wouldn't have it any other way.

His tongue swirled against mine roughly. None of this was romantic. It was selfish, greedy, and thrilling. My arousal was through the roof, the feeling of his hand around my throat causing a moan to slip loose.

I felt him laugh against my mouth, before he slowly started placing kisses down my neck. "Patience, my sweet Kaya," he murmured, his low voice making something in my stomach twitch.

"I need all of your clothes off," I groaned.

Davorin brought my dress up to my hips, his fingers on the hem of my underwear as he lowered himself to his knees. Yet again, this was for me.

"We don't have that much time, little lion." He glanced at his wristwatch. "Someone is bound to be looking for us."

"I don't care," I whimpered. "Please just... do something, anything."

I've never been one to beg, especially for a man's touch. Yet, he made me so vulnerable, so needy. All I wanted was to be in Davorin's arms, and for it to last as long as possible.

Slowly, he trailed his finger over my clit, only the fabric of my panties separating our skin. Shivers ran down my spine as our eyes locked. He saw me as his god, his touch worshiped me, and I would allow him everything that happened after.

"You're soaking." He took a deep intake of breath before he slowly moved my panties to the side and touched my most sensitive spot.

A small scream slipped out as soon as his mouth was on me. He was devouring me, taking everything he could and more. He pushed me beyond my limits and then sought redemption. His tongue flicked over my clit, and my hands laced through his hair, tugging on it.

"You taste so fucking good, little lion," he murmured against my skin. Not once did he break eye contact, and the tension was driving me insane. I struggled to breathe properly, whilst he seemed unbothered.

Davorin's pleasure was a siren that lured me to experience more.

Gradually, he picked up the pace. His hands gripped my hips because I tried to move, the overwhelming sensation too much for me to handle. He didn't allow me. He held me in place, and then slowly bit my aching clit.

Davorin set the tune and I played it. As soon as he felt that I was nearing release, he removed himself from me, and a wicked smile spread over his handsome face. He let out a low chuckle and picked me up before putting me on the bed gently.

His belt came undone quicker than I was able to blink.

The tip of his cock rested at my entrance. He brushed it against my clit twice, and twice I was barely able to suppress the need to put it inside myself.

“Don’t tease me,” I groaned. “Please.”

Another low chuckle before he placed a small kiss on my collarbone. He grazed my skin with his teeth before he suddenly entered me, with full force. A scream pierced my lips before his hand was on my mouth.

“Fucking hell,” he hissed, “your cunt feels so good wrapped around my cock, Kaya.”

His thrusts were intense—as was the look he’d given me. He didn’t give me any time to adjust to his size, and the slight ache turned into pleasure instantly. Repeatedly, he hit my sweet spot, and each time he realized I was about to come, he paused, torturing me in the worst possible way.

He slid the upper part of my dress down, exposing my breasts. Slowly, his mouth settled on the right one, his tongue twirling around the aching nipple, before he sucked on it harshly. Another scream came from me, followed by a chuckle from him.

“That’s it, little lion,” he taunted. “I love it when you scream for me.”

Davorin was merciless, ruthless, slamming into me as hard as he wanted. I could feel his cock in my stomach and the severity of it made my toes curl.

He was definitely good at multitasking too, because he never stopped his cruel thrusts whilst sucking on my breasts. He switched sides, giving both of them the attention they craved.

I clenched myself on his cock and he hissed, “Stop squeezing my cock, little lion—it’ll snap in half.”

It made me laugh, though it was muffled, and he didn’t like it. He removed the hand from my lips, put it on my throat and squeezed, cutting off my oxygen. Delirium filled my vision, black spots appearing, but I was enjoying every second of it.

“Oh God,” I rasped.

Davorin chuckled. “No, little lion.” He brought his lips an inch above

mine. “You are my god, and I was born to worship the ground you walked on.”

His words did something to me. I was unable to decipher it, though the pleasure I felt was immense—and good enough for the time being.

Davorin distanced himself from me, and a sigh of disappointment followed. However, he was quick to put my legs on his shoulders and start thrusting once more, getting deeper than ever before.

I gripped the sheets on the bed as my back arched. I was seeing stars, and I felt my eyes burn with tears as I tried to catch my breath. He knew exactly what he was doing to me when he pressed just below my stomach, and another moan slipped out.

“That’s it,” he praised. “Let me hear your voice, Kaya.”

He flipped me onto my stomach. Instinctively, I raised my ass up and squealed when his palm landed on it. He chuckled before driving himself back into me. His groans sent shivers down my spine.

“I fucking love your body,” he muttered, pausing for a moment to place kisses on my back. Slowly, he tugged the dress down, exposing more of my skin, which he covered with soft kisses. It felt almost too good.

“You’re so perfect.” His words were exactly what I needed. “I love the way you taste, the way you’re so breakable under my touch.”

I’d never been fragile. Yet he made me want to be nothing but a piece of glass that he could shatter whenever he wanted, in any way possible.

“Please.” I looked at him over my shoulder. “Go harder—and deeper.”

Davorin grinned. “Your wish is my command, princess.”

He didn’t change the rhythm; however, he complied with my requests perfectly. Hard, deep strokes that were at the same time slow and sensual made me lose my mind. He clutched my hips and pulled me onto himself, going deeper than I’d ever thought possible.

I was nearing my climax, and he knew it. He continued doing exactly what he’d started. That was probably what I liked the most—the fact that he knew what I needed and wasn’t holding back on giving it to me in the best way possible.

“Fuck,” I gasped as my orgasm came in waves. An exhilarating feeling overtook me, and I couldn’t see or think straight. I tensed around him, but he didn’t stop. He was determined to find his release after he’d given me mine, and it only provoked another orgasm from me.

My eyes rolled to the back of my head as I slumped down, feeling him filling me up completely. Nothing but our rapid breathing filled the room, and as I turned around and lay on my back, a sight I would never forget was revealed to me.

Davorin's curly hair was ruined. A few droplets of sweat fell down his forehead, his plump lips parting ever so slightly as he tried to regain his composure. His deep green eyes were nothing but hungry for more. It was as if this had been only the first step in the game we were playing, and for a moment, I contemplated whether or not to indulge him.

Some of the blood that had splattered on me from Viktor had transferred onto his white shirt. It was alluring—the sight of blood on him made me want to kill more, to give him the satisfaction of a massacre through me.

My perfect partner in crime. Someone who liked to torture and take lives as much as I did. Someone who liked the stench of fresh blood. The other half of me.

He lay on bed next to me and did nothing but stare at me.

His gaze softened; his eyes like a beautiful field of clover in May. Home was a feeling—something much more than just a residence—and after years, I'd found mine. A forever home of darkness, wickedness, and terror. A home so perfect I'd never thought it was possible to find.

He was mine.

I was his.

And no one was able to change that. Not even the Devil himself would be able to take him away. And Lord help those who dared to try. I was prepared to keep him at all costs. No matter what that meant—even if it meant taking his life down to hell with mine.

“Are you feeling okay?”

I melted at the question. Though my face remained impassive, I weakly nodded. With everything that had taken place over the past few hours, I was beyond exhausted. He was the first and only person I was comfortable sleeping in the same room as.

“I'm okay,” I replied. “Ask me again tomorrow though, because I'll probably be sore.”

Davorin laughed. He took my hand in his and placed a small kiss on my wrist, below the bracelet. “Do you know what the dice were for?”

I shook my head. I never had figured it out.

“Tell me,” I demanded, eager to hear the story.

“When I chose the first dice, the gold reminded me of your hair. It’s luxurious, yet soft. I had a feeling you’d prefer it over a diamond, and I was proven right because you’ve yet to wear the necklace I bought you.”

I chuckled. “I’m not really a diamond type of girl. The necklace is pretty but not something I’d wear.”

“I know.”

“And the numbers?” I pried.

His mouth opened to answer, but before he got the chance, the door opened harshly. I jumped at the sudden motion, my eyes narrowing as Rhea bolted into the room.

“Where the fuck were you?” she yelled. “We need to go—now.”

“What happened?” Davorin asked before I was able to.

However, she didn’t grant him so much as a glance. Her eyes were on me, and as she took a step closer, I saw that she was a mess—makeup smeared underneath her eyes, hands shaking and coated in blood.

“Rhea, whose blood is that?” Something inside me snapped as if I knew the answer would make me furious.

“It’s Aleksei’s,” she whispered.

Both Davorin and I rose to our feet. I straightened my dress and walked out of the door barefoot. Rhea was right beside me. We neared the exit, and across from it was the flight of stairs that led towards the entertainment space.

I sucked in a deep breath.

The place was trashed. Bullet holes in walls, windows smashed, plates thrown off the tables, numerous bodies on the floor. A couple of Aleksei’s men had started to clean up the mess.

Ignoring the scene, I followed Rhea towards a car, got into the back seat, and began to think. Rhea, visibly displeased, tossed the keys to Davorin, who caught them with ease.

We were off the moment the engine roared to life.

“What are you thinking about?” Davorin asked, looking at me in the rearview mirror.

I hadn’t noticed that I’d zoned out. My mind was elsewhere, overwhelmed. Was this godforsaken night ever going to end?

“Just thinking,” I murmured. “My plans are ruined.”

I’d planned to run away as soon as Viktor and Bogdan had been put to

rest, and take Davorin with me. It wouldn't have been for long, just a brief escape before we returned to the madness of our world.

“What are you talking about?”

Rhea's voice startled me. Something was off, but I couldn't place it. I felt almost too tense.

“If Aleksei dies, there will be a vote on who'll take over as Pakhan. I might not be involved directly in the business, but I still have a seat at the table, and it would be a hassle. It takes months to get that shit done.”

“Are you interested in the position?”

I turned to face Rhea, removing my gaze from the window. “Dear God, no. Having to deal with all those dense men would cause all of my brain cells to die, or I'd snap and kill them. And one of them is bound to kill me eventually, so no, I'm not interested.”

Rhea swallowed a lump. “The Pakhan won't die.”

“He better not,” I gritted out. “I don't want to deal with the shit he'd leave behind.”

Davorin was awfully quiet during the ride. Rhea gave him the hospital address, and soon enough, we were in the parking lot. It almost made me laugh. We looked like we'd just left a fairytale ball that had gone terribly wrong.

Rhea's dress was torn in multiple places, and her hair and makeup were a mess. I had no shoes, and there was blood all over me. Davorin wasn't in great condition either. Though it added to his sex appeal—the messy hair and the lipstick stains on his mouth.

We walked through the emergency entrance, and the first thing I saw was Dominik with Helios. The two were visibly angry, and they looked worse than we did.

“What did the doctor say?” I asked.

Dominik turned to look at me, unsurprised by my appearance. “The doctor refused to operate on him and now we're waiting until another surgeon arrives.”

I blinked. “What?”

His jaw clenched. “Yes, the same doctor that treated you after the car accident—Doctor Becket—said she'd rather treat Satan than Aleksei, and that for all she cared, he could drop dead.”

“Do we know who she is?”

My brother shook his head. “No. I had Xenia check her out. The only

connection she has to our family is that she was friends with Davina.”

It was likely she used to be friends with my brother’s late fiancée. Davina had been a first-year intern when she was murdered, and she’d done her internship at this hospital. They were probably in the same program, and although I understood her resentment towards Aleksei, as it was his fault Davina had been killed, she was still a doctor.

“Where is she?” I asked.

Dominik motioned with his head to the right hall. “The last room on the left. She locked herself inside.”

I nodded and strolled towards said room. My feet ached, and I realized it hadn’t been the smartest idea to leave expensive heels in a venue that would be tomorrow’s front-page news. I shook the thought off, embraced the pain in my feet, and knocked on the door.

“Leave.” Her voice was shaky, and I didn’t have time to play games.

“You have three seconds to open up before I break the door down.”

In exactly three seconds, the door swung open. Her black hair was pulled into a high ponytail, and she’d been crying—I could tell from the puffiness around her eyes and how red they were. She stepped aside and allowed me to walk inside.

I closed and locked the door behind us.

A small smirk tugged on the corner of my lips. Doctor Beckett remained unmoving, leaning against the wall. Another tear slipped down her cheek.

“Oh, you and I are going to have so much fun together.”

My laugh terrified her, and that was how I knew I had her cornered.



I returned to Dominik and Davorin soon after. Helios took Rhea home with a promise that they would drop by tomorrow morning. More than anything, Helios was the biggest gossip and had to know everything about

everyone. Rhea took after him that way.

Dominik handed me a cup of warm tea and I despised myself for not bringing my flask. The only thing that would've been able to calm my nerves was alcohol, not damn tea.

"Any news?" The waiting chairs were oddly comfortable, though it could've been because I was sleep deprived—it was taking all the mental strength I had not to pass out.

Davorin moved to my side and placed his hand on my shoulder, before giving it a light squeeze.

"Another doctor is operating on him as we speak. The bullet barely missed his heart."

"Oh shit." The words slipped out before I could stop them. Dominik gave me a glare before he sighed.

"What happened?" Davorin asked.

"After Ekaterina left with Viktor, Aleksei made his yearly speech before he announced that the party would be ending earlier than usual. The guests were shocked of course, but as soon as Bogdan fired the first shot, it didn't take them long to bolt."

"Was he the one who shot Aleksei?"

Dominik nodded. "Only a handful of people remained outside of our family—the rest didn't want to get involved in our feud. De Luca and Karalis remained and took out most of the men that Bogdan sent."

I swallowed the lump that had formed in my throat. "So where is Bogdan?"

You could've cut the tension with a knife. Silence surrounded us, Dominik's gaze glued to the wall in front of him. He didn't utter a word, but he was beyond angry. His ways of displaying fury were always silent, and that was why he was the deadliest one of us all.

It took him a long time to snap, but once he did, anyone who got in his way would suffer the consequences of merely existing.

"He fucking escaped?" My voice was loud. "You let him escape?"

"Do you think this is what I wanted to happen?" His tone matched mine.

As if to protect me, Davorin stepped between us, murderous intent clear in his eyes as he fell into a staring contest with Dominik that was filled with fury and distaste.

"So what happens now? Where is he?"

I grabbed Davorin's hand and pulled him towards me, which ended their little game. He glanced at me, making sure I was fine, to which I nodded. It wasn't my first time dealing with one of my brother's tantrums, and it wouldn't be the last.

"We lost him. It seems he thought he might lose this game, so he was already prepared to flee the city."

I gulped. "So he's still alive and kicking. And will come after me as soon as he wishes?"

Dominik shook his head. "No, you're no longer his concern."

I raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that you should've seen Aleksei. He disrespected and called him out in public, amongst people who used to work with Bogdan. He was furious, and if Aleksei makes it out of the surgery alive, he has a war coming."

"Oh, as long as I'm no longer a target, I really don't care about that."

"You don't get it, Kaya," Dominik said loudly. We earned a few strange glances from people, and he lowered his voice. "Bogdan is a piece of corrupt shit, but he isn't the only one. I can count several people just like him who can't wait for a war to happen, because they'd rather serve under Bogdan, who never thought twice about killing innocent people, than Aleksei, who still has some morals."

I sighed. "Still, it's of no concern to me."

"Do you think any of those men won't jump at the opportunity to kidnap and torture you just to get to Aleksei? Or worse, hand you to Bogdan on a silver platter to ensure their safety."

"Shit."

Davina was one lucky bitch to be dead at times like this.

"That won't happen," Davorin said, and my eyes snapped in his direction. "No one will lay a single finger on her. They can try, but luckily for me, chaos is something I fucking enjoy."

I grinned.

"Or they can kill you too," my brother added.

I was positive none of this had anything to do with tonight's events. He wanted to piss Davorin off, and I was getting tired of them bickering like two grandmas.

"Many have tried; none of them succeeded," he pointed out. "And if they want to come for Kaya, they're coming for me. Let them fucking come."

I'll carve out their eyes and send them to their families.”

“Oh, can I join in the fun?” I asked, but they ignored me.

“You best keep her safe, Davorin,” Dominik threatened. “Because I don't want to keep worrying about her.”

“Understood,” Davorin replied, and the conversation died out quickly.

The surgery was taking way too long. Davorin drove us home in Dominik's car, because he was determined to stay through the night.

Davorin asked me about the bloodstains on the wall and carpet, and I told him I'd had some fun with Brianne, which reminded me of the message Davorin would receive in a few days.

It was too tiring to think about now, so I went straight to the bathroom and slipped out of the dress that looked nothing like the one I'd put on only a few hours earlier.

Davorin came to the bathroom and closed the door behind him. He loosened his tie before taking it off, followed by the rest of his clothing. In silence, both of us entered the shower. It was as if he knew me too well.

The hot water dripped down my body as I reached for the shampoo, but he snatched it out of my hands. “Let me do it.”

It wasn't a question or a request. It was a demand.

He squeezed some shampoo onto his hands then began to massage my scalp. My eyes closed of their own accord, and I relaxed under his touch. He took his sweet time with the shampoo, before he rinsed it out and put on my conditioner.

Body wash followed, but it wasn't sexual—it was intimate. It was one of those rare moments we'd never experienced together. His gentle touch scrubbed the blood from my body, before he bent down and cleaned the dirt from my feet.

We made eye contact. For the first time, his gaze was completely soft, nothing but admiration and adoration awaiting me, and it was as if the shade of green was lighter. He was slow, tender, as he rose to his feet and placed his lips on mine.

I reacted immediately, intertwining my fingers behind his neck. His hands were on the small of my back, pulling me closer to him. The water dripped down on us as we kissed. It was different, full of affection.

Slowly, our lips moved in sync. It was gentle, tender, a moment I never wanted to end. Despite finding it hard to breathe, I couldn't pull away. The power he had over me had intensified with a mere kiss, leaving me putty

in his hands.

He shaped and molded me into the person he wanted. And all I wanted was to be the perfect person for him, to be *his* person.

In our world, love was highly unlikely. And when it did occur, it ended in death. Tragic, terrible death that the other lover never saw coming. This world was so filled with grief and darkness that sunshine never had the chance to shine through.

And despite my gut telling me that Davorin and I weren't different, I held on to the small hope. The hope that we could be the sunshine that managed to break through the thick barriers of our twisted world.

But was it possible for two villains to get their happy ending?

We were falling, but this was no fable, and love didn't conquer all.

TWENTY-ONE



EKATERINA, 12 YEARS AGO

AFTER a month of being in complete and utter darkness, I was allowed to leave. My body was weak, and I felt nauseous the moment a hot summer day

greeted me. Chills ran all over my body as the sharp light blinded me for a moment.

Two of my father's guards walked behind me, monitoring every move I made. No one else was in sight, and as I turned around to look, my eyes went wide. The tower that he'd built for me was high, and it was heavily secured. Not only did it have the best security system, there were metal doors protecting the entrance.

A harsh hand landed on my shoulder, pushing me forward. Over the weeks I'd spent alone, I'd had a lot of time to think and had done nothing but that. My thoughts had started to drive me insane, but I hadn't had a single idea how to put a stop to this.

I was unpleasantly surprised that the guards weren't taking me to my father's study, or to see any of my brothers. Instead, they took me to the basement of Father's house, which was just as spacious as the house itself.

This was my first time inside, and all I wanted was to scream and beg for them to let me go. It wasn't dark, but the smell made me want to vomit. It looked like an old hospital hallway, with patient rooms on each side.

"Move it," one of the guards commanded before he pushed me yet again towards the door on the left side, all the way at the end of the long corridor.

The door swung open, and I was shoved inside before the door locked behind me.

I bit my tongue harshly to prevent a scream from slipping out, and I tasted blood in my mouth. Immediately, I hid my hands behind my back. They were shaking uncontrollably, and I tried to put off the moment he noticed. I couldn't allow myself to be taken back to the prison.

My father wore all black. He had a pair of leather gloves on, and my eyes traveled to the left one. A small whimper escaped my lips, my eyes threatening to tear up.

On the left side was a man, who'd been forced to his knees. His arms were bound behind his back, and he had a black bag over his head. He was shivering, muffled noises coming from beneath the bag.

"Do you know why you're here, Ekaterina?" my father asked, voice raised.

I shook my head.

His voice grew even louder. "Words, Ekaterina, words."

"N-No." I closed my eyes as soon as the stuttering slipped out. My

bottom lip quivered, and a small tear escaped. I braced myself for the blow that was bound to come.

“I’ll ignore that pathetic stuttering because we are about to fully shape you into the person you should’ve been born as.”

Slowly, he lifted the bag from the man’s head and tossed it aside. The man was gagged with tape, his eyes swollen. Tears freely streamed down his face. He tried to squirm, free himself somehow, but it was pointless.

“Do you know this man?” my father asked.

Forcefully, I detached my gaze and looked at my father. Evil like I’d never seen before flashed behind his eyes. I took a small step back, terrified. I was no longer able to control the fear that had overcome my body, mind, and soul.

When I remained silent, his lips thinned into a line, a vein popping out on his neck. He gave me a knowing look.

I swallowed harshly—my throat seemed to have closed. With a shaky breath, I shook my head and weakly responded, “No.”

A smile spread over my father’s face. It was nothing but vile, terrible, and wicked. He pushed the man, who fell to the ground with a thud. Another muffled scream came from him, but he was too weak to defend himself or stand up.

“Go and pick a gun of your choice.” It wasn’t a request—it was a command. He pointed with his eyes to the right.

It took me a minute to force my legs to move. I couldn’t think straight, because a part of me knew what he wanted me to do; I just refused to believe it. My legs felt wobbly, and the moment my back was turned to my father, tears streamed down my face.

I was petrified, and I was disgusted. I couldn’t find the strength to yell, to scream. Lord knew what he would’ve done to me if I’d been too loud. I blinked, but the tears never stopped. My hand trembled as I reached for the first gun I’d seen.

The weapon felt heavy in my hands, and I almost dropped it in shock. My stomach twisted and turned in agony that I would never be allowed to display. My father had told me I was going to be a weapon, and weapons didn’t weep.

“Any time now, Ekaterina.”

His deep voice shattered my soul.

I turned around, and an expression of pure fury twisted his features

when he saw my tear-stained face. My eyes were puffy, my lips bruised from biting on them harshly, and I was barely moving—inch by inch, slow steps, until I returned to my previous spot.

“Now, I want you to look into this man’s eyes.” He grabbed the poor man and pulled him back up, holding his head still. There was nothing but fear and misery on his face as he tried to shake his head, silently begging me not to listen to my father. “And I want you to shoot him right between them.”

I raised my hand, and it was shaking as if we’d been hit by an earthquake.

“I taught you how to take the safety off.”

I saw the memory clearly. I’d refused to do it, and then he’d taken me to a room that had nothing but a chair inside. The chair had been enormous, made out of wood. It had restraints on it, and it didn’t take me long to understand that I’d be sitting in it.

His men had forcefully strapped me to it, my arms and legs immobile. It was irrelevant how many times I’d begged them to let me go, or how many tears I’d shed. My father had remained passive, not uttering a single word until I’d calmed down, and that had taken me a while.

“Do you know what kind of a chair that is, Ekaterina?”

There had been a certain wickedness in his tone that I’d prayed to God I’d imagined. But as soon as our eyes had met, the devil had jumped out and I’d known he wasn’t going to treat me nicely.

I’d shaken my head furiously and swallowed all the weeping that had threatened to slip out.

“That, my dear child”—he’d laughed as if it were the funniest joke in the world—“is an electric chair.”

My whole body had frozen, and then I’d blinked, allowing a salty sea to fall from my eyes. I’d barely managed not to throw up and had tried to keep a brave face. I’d heard of the chairs of course, and known what they were for. Yet, no matter how brutal and twisted my father as, I’d never imagined he’d do this to me.

“The more you disobey my commands, the more you’ll feel nothing but pain until you learn how to utilize that pain and make it your biggest advantage.”

It was the last full sentence he’d spoken to me. Everything else was commands I couldn’t follow. He’d told me not to cry, so when tear became visible, I got electrocuted. He’d told me to stop trembling, so when I was

unable to control my body, I got electrocuted.

It was the worst kind of pain imaginable. Being punished for something I was unable to control, for something I'd been truly afraid of. My father hadn't cared how much I'd begged, sobbed, or thrown up.

He'd told me I was nothing but a useless child, a useless woman, and that he was beyond ashamed to share his last name with me.

And then, all I could do was beg to be killed. I couldn't deal with being locked up anymore, with being treated like the worst kind of beast for something that was beyond my control. I begged and begged for him to put me down, yet every time I did that, it made him punish me worse.

The stupid tower I'd been locked in was a cage, and he loved to isolate me from the world.

From the moment the metal door was locked, I was given little to no food to survive. My body was weak, and I was getting sick often. His personal doctors would come to the tower to treat me, but only after I'd been put to sleep with medicine.

My father made it very clear that I was never to set foot into the world again, not until he retired, and he had no plans of doing that anytime soon. Even during winter, when Russia was extremely cold—one of the coldest countries in the world—he barely allowed me any warmth, but as the months passed, I got used to the cold and the frostbite.

He made sure that none of my brothers knew what was happening. From what I'd heard him say to his men on the rare occasions I was visited, they thought I was in some youth camp for the gifted.

Once, I'd tried telling Dominik what was happening after he'd let me out for a while. But the moment my mouth had opened, one of my father's guards had appeared and warned me. If I told anyone, they'd die. And I didn't want my brothers to die—I loved them more than anyone; I would've rather suffered and put up with all the punishments and solitude than have them being hurt.

“Any time now, Ekaterina,” my father gritted out furiously.

It broke me out of my trance, sorrow and agony overwhelming me. The poor man, whose face was covered in dried tears—and fresh ones, as they never stopped falling—had closed his eyes.

He was embracing what was about to happen, and if I didn't do it, my father would—definitely.

My hand was trembling as I raised the gun. Slowly, an idea popped

into my head. It wasn't the smartest, but it might be the only way out.

I stared at the metal object in my hand. As soon as I'd thought of it, my hand had stopped shaking. Tranquility was all I could feel, as if it would bring me peace, as if all of this could finally be stopped.

Slowly, I raised the gun and put it against my temple. My eyes closed of their own accord, and I kept rewinding happy memories from when I was younger. Back when Mom loved me, all the stories Aleksei had told me before bed, all the board games Dominik had taught me how to play, all the times Viktor and I had actually got along.

A small smile appeared on my face, and my tears stopped.

I pulled the trigger.

A loud laugh erupted from my father. He pulled out a gun of his own and shot the man dead. I jumped in fright and dropped the gun I held. It hit the marble tiles with a loud thud. I took a step back, fear blooming inside me yet again.

"I had a feeling you would do that, Ekaterina."

Slowly, he pulled out a syringe from his pocket and tested it before stepping closer. I let out a loud scream as my knees gave out, and I slumped to the ground, eyes wide.

"No, Father," I begged, "please, please don't do this. I'll be good—I'll do whatever you want me to do, just please."

My cries intensified the moment he slapped me. The loud impact echoed around the room and my cheek stung—a bruise promised to appear later.

"You had your chance," he said calmly. His voice was scary when he was angry; however, when it was as calm as a millpond, it was the most terrifying thing. "Only the weakest people in the world take their own lives. And until you learn how to be a strong woman, I have no other option but to train you just like I had to train your brothers."

I knew that wasn't true. None of my brothers had ever been treated like this. They'd been born strong, born leaders. It was only me who was a weak link, who was the abomination of the family.

"Please, please don't do this to me anymore." My pleas were desperate, but he didn't care.

Soon enough, the needle was in my neck, and I felt myself losing consciousness almost instantly. The last thing I felt before my mind went blank was immense pain from hitting the tiles—and that I'd rather hang

myself with my sheets than go through this again.



I woke up in a cold sweat. It'd been a while since I'd last felt this cold. My body quivered, and I struggled to catch my breath, but realization hit as I felt warmth fill me.

My eyes opened, and I found myself in Davorin's embrace. He was holding my head close to his chest, his other hand on the small of my back. My cheeks flushed; thankfully, it was too dark for him to see the embarrassment on my face.

His breathing told me that he was awake, but he didn't say anything, and I appreciated it.

Back when I had been living with Aleksei, and the nightmares were stronger, I'd awakened forcefully from the dreams. He'd found me tossing, turning, screaming, and even harming myself whilst asleep.

It had taken him hours to fully bring me back from the hell I'd been trapped in. Yet, it only took one hug from Davorin, and I was already feeling much better. No one else had ever made me feel as secure—every man in my life that should've protected me had failed.

"Do you want to talk about it?" He kissed the top of my head, his fingers massaging my scalp. My eyes closed again, but sleep was out of my reach.

"Not now," I replied. "Maybe sometime."

Davorin didn't pressure me. He had a very strange personality. From the research I'd done on him, I knew that he was a diagnosed psychopath. Yet he didn't act like one. After watching him during the time we'd spent together, I realized that it was only me who'd never seen the insane side of him.

He'd never let me see it.

It made me curious. What was he like when he lost his shit? How

would he act if I'd been the one to make him go truly insane? On some level, I'd never believed he was capable of truly harming me; however, I was aware of how dangerous he could be, and it was the only thing stopping me from trying to bring that side out of him.

"Can't sleep?" he asked. His voice was low, his eyes closed. He was tired, yet not once did he complain about it. It was as if he'd written off all his worries and, instead, taken on mine.

His hand caressed my back, and tingles spread through my body. It made me relax, as if time had stopped—nothing but us was relevant.

I glanced up at his angelic face. His thick, long eyelashes looked pretty, and a lock of hair had fallen over his forehead, the smallest curl in my sight. His plump lips were slightly parted, and the small tattoo looked even sexier up close.

"No," I murmured, pressing my face deeper into his chest, embracing the warmth it provided. "Whenever this happens, I can't sleep for nights after that."

"Then let's take your mind off things," he replied, and after placing another kiss on the top of my head, he removed the covers from his body.

I was going to reject his advances, because I wasn't in the mood for sex. But this man still managed to surprise me. Slowly, he walked over to his closet and took out a set of clothes for both of us.

"Arms up," he commanded, and I complied.

Davorin put one of his hoodies on me, before gently pulling on a pair of his sweatpants. I glanced in the mirror hanging next to the closet—I looked ridiculous. He threw a matching set on his own body and tenderly took my hand. In his other hand was a blanket.

I didn't ask questions as he led me down the stairs. I put on a pair of sneakers that he'd bought for me, as I barely owned any, then Davorin opened the door and we slipped outside to find dawn was approaching.

I'd never explored what was around his house, in his yard or behind the home—I'd never had time. His fingers were intertwined with mine, and I stared at his back. He looked like an angel in disguise—my fallen angel.

We were at the back of his house, and even the back yard was spacious. I blinked as I saw a flight of big stairs. They weren't visible from the front, and as soon as we climbed them, I was in awe.

There was a small table with a couch on top of his roof. He paused and motioned with his head for me to take a seat before he covered my

shivering body with the blanket. It was cold, and the scent of his hoodie and blanket immediately put me at ease.

Davorin took a seat next to me, and I leaned into his body, my head resting on his shoulder. We didn't speak; we just existed in each other's embrace. It made the darkness appear less frightening.

This dawn was a second of pleasure, and it refreshed my mind and soul. For a moment, it felt as if the darkness in me was afraid of the light that had forced its way through, the fences that I'd built over the years slowly being torn down.

Davorin was the first to break the peaceful silence. "He might be the beast that haunts you, but I'll be the monster that ruins him. I will stop at nothing until he is six feet underground and he's met the Devil himself, and even the Devil will continue what I started."

A sad smile touched my lips. "I know."

Davorin was the kind of person who didn't need to be told what to do. Somehow, he knew exactly what to say and do to put me at ease, as if he knew my soul—all the ups and downs, all the falls and triumphs.

"And let it be known." His voice was gentle, as if he was afraid his words would break me. "I only need a single word from you, and your brothers will meet the same fate."

I glanced up at him to see determination written over his face. "That would be suicide. Even if you managed to get to one, the other would kill you."

His body vibrated as he chuckled. "Don't worry. I'd make sure both were dead before I died too—that way, every man capable of hurting you would no longer walk the Earth."

"What happened about that whole we're-together-till-we-both-die speech?"

He turned his head to the side and placed a soft kiss on my forehead. "It took some time for me to realize that the two of us won't be going to the same place after our death. I was born this way—you were forced. But I have a feeling, if soulmates exist, we'll find each other in another life."

He couldn't have been more wrong. Yes, I was made to be the way I was, but he'd only seen a glimpse of who I truly was. Some information was untraceable and had been destroyed long before he'd appeared in my life. Unless he had the ability to raise the dead, he would never find out.

Some monsters were made, but if they'd been truly pure, they

couldn't have been turned into the worst of the worst. The predispositions had been there for me all along—Bogdan just knew how to take advantage of a child who was nothing but gullible, innocent, and seemingly happy.

He'd noticed the dark spot in my soul when I was six years old. Mom had been playing hide and seek with Viktor and me, and we had been hiding behind the same wall. Behind us there'd been a big flight of stairs, and right across from that was a small piano room that Dominik used for practice.

I hadn't thought twice before I'd pushed Viktor off the stairs. His screams and yells had brought help, but I'd been able to hide. He'd ended up breaking both arms and a leg, and I'd been the winner of the game.

Bogdan had watched the scene unfold. He'd noticed that I hadn't cared about harming my brother as long as it brought victory, and unbeknownst to me, that was when he'd decided he wanted me to always be like that—cold, indifferent, and inattentive to other people's emotions.

However, at the time, I hadn't known the severity of Viktor's wounds. Immediately after he'd been admitted to the hospital, I regretted it. I'd spent night after night crying myself to sleep, but the damage had already been done. I'd felt awful, guilty, and remorseful.

“Does that mean you'll keep finding me, wherever I go?”

He responded without missing a beat. “I'll hunt you down if you ever try to leave me, little lion. Now that I've had you in my life, I will never experience not having you in it.”

I smiled, my heart skipping a beat. “Something tells me I'll never want to escape.”

As we sat there in silence, watching the sun rise, I felt too much inner peace. As if his words had healed a part of me I'd never thought could be healed. Not even the best doctors had a cure for my diagnosis, yet this was the calmest I'd felt in years.

The tranquility was defeating. Our heartbeats were synchronized—the thought of having him this close until the day I died made me feel comfortable. He'd kill for me; he'd live for me. He was made for me. There would never be another person that matched yet clashed against me this much.

Yet, the moment the soft April breeze hit my face, something felt heavy, as if some weight had been dropped onto my heart. The feeling of security slowly began to vanish, leaving nothing but a trace of what it used to be—like a warning.

Nothing was ever easy in life, especially not for me.
Not for us.

The sun wasn't too warm, just like the thoughts that sneaked their way into my brain. My mind was my biggest enemy. Whenever something started going right for me, it was there to remind me how unworthy and undeserving of good things I was.

And after hours sitting in silence, our proximity speaking for us, I realized just how bad all of this was. My gut feeling was telling me to brace myself for what was about to happen.

Because this was just the calm before the storm.

TWENTY-TWO



AS soon as Davorin's hand was on my back, slowly tracing random patterns, I dozed off. I didn't dream of anything, but I managed to get a good five hours of uninterrupted sleep, which was better than I'd ever slept.

Rhea woke me up, and if she hadn't been so anxious and scared, I would've killed her. She refused to tell me over the phone what the issue was and suggested we meet for a late lunch in her restaurant.

I hadn't been hungry until she mentioned food and hung up the phone with a groan. It took me longer than usual to get ready, mainly because my feet were still sore from the party two nights ago.

I'd found it odd how Davorin was never to be found most mornings. His jobs were done late at night, and he hadn't been accepting any of late. I was growing suspicious, because as far as I knew, being a hitman was his primary—and only—source of income. The possibility he had another job had never truly crossed my mind.

He'd yet to return by the time I left, and he wasn't answering his phone either. I was getting irritated that I was unaware of his whereabouts, and the fact that I was losing my touch.

"Where's the fire?" I teased Rhea, who was staring off into space as I took a seat across from her. A steaming plate of food was waiting for me, and I smiled in delight. The amazing smell hit my nose, and my stomach growled.

Rhea snapped out of her daze and looked at me. "I'm fucked."

"Figuratively, I'm assuming."

She threw me a stare. "No, I meant literally." Her voice was filled with sarcasm. "Helios is leaving."

I was taken aback. Slowly, I chewed and swallowed a mouthful of the delicious chicken that was coated in cheese. It had more cheese than chicken, and it was my favorite thing to eat in their restaurant. It was simple, but simple food was always the best.

"Leaving where?" For the first time in a while, I had water with food. It didn't feel as good as I'd thought it would.

Rhea's eyes found mine, and all I saw in them was panic. She was reluctant to tell me, and I didn't force her. As long as it had nothing to do with me, I didn't really care about what was happening in her family. It was her issue, not mine.

"He's going back home." She swallowed. "Something happened recently and... he's leaving for a long time."

I blinked. "What happens to the business?"

Over the years, Helios had expanded his businesses into at least thirty US states. They involved illegal gambling, auction houses, and, at times, even theft, but he pulled in millions of dollars a month, and he had yet to be

caught.

Helios was no fool, despite acting like one at times. He was clever and knew where to plant seeds. Over time, those seeds had bloomed, but his business was strictly need-to-know. None of his clients ever spoke out, because they were all forced to sign non-disclosure agreements, in which it was stated that if anything were to leak, all of the clientele list would go public.

I knew that because I'd signed one years ago.

"That's the thing..." She hesitated. "He wants to leave the business to me."

I leaned back in my chair and raised my eyebrows. "What's the problem?"

"What's the problem?" she repeated, though it was a hiss. "The problem is that I don't know how to run an illegal empire, Ekaterina."

"Weren't you the one dealing with all of the paperwork?"

"Yes," she was quick to respond. "But doing paperwork and actually leading the business are two completely different things."

"I don't see how this is an issue," I told her and waved a waiter over. "You already know most of the clientele, you know how to do paperwork, and you like to travel. You'd be on the road all the time. It's a win-win situation."

The waiter came, and I didn't miss the disapproving look on Rhea's face when I went to order a whiskey. With an eye roll, I settled for a shot of espresso instead.

Rhea waited until the waiter was out of earshot. "It's a huge responsibility, and I'm not sure I'll be able to handle it."

My mind raced with thoughts, trying to come up with a solution for her. Suddenly, an idea popped into my head, and a small smile appeared. Her brows creased but she didn't speak.

"Tell me, Rhea," I began, "how much money does the business earn monthly?"

"I can't tell you that."

I gave her a blank stare, to which she rolled her eyes.

"Fine, let's say it's below fifteen and above eight million of clean money every month."

"Well, you sure have to question how clean it is," I murmured. "But that's beside the point. How about you offer someone thirty percent of

monthly income to help but the catch is you have to marry them?”

“I don’t like where this is going,” she groaned.

“No, no, listen,” I urged. “I’m not saying propose this to the first man you see on the street. You need help from someone with experience in our world, but you also need to marry someone of your choice, someone you actually have feelings for.”

Slowly, realization dawned on her soft features. A streak of rosy blush fluttered on her cheeks, and she looked away in embarrassment. Despite her thinking about it deeply, I knew she wanted nothing more than to accept the deal.

“He’ll never agree to that,” she commented.

“Are you sure?” I retorted. “Because I happen to think it’s an offer he wouldn’t refuse, not now.”

She was uncertain. “Why?”

“His business is in Russia, but…” I swallowed at the nasty memories. “With everything that happened with our brother, and having a funeral for him, he can’t leave until Aleksei is fully recovered and Bogdan is put down. This’s your opening.”

She decided to think about it and changed the subject. “Speaking of Aleksei, have you visited him?”

I shook my head. “Not yet. After I’m done with you, I’ll drop by the hospital to see if they need anything.”

Rhea was shocked. “You still haven’t checked up on him? How much time does it take to make a phone call? Jesus, you’re heartless.”

To be fair, Dominik had tried reaching me, but I wasn’t responding to his messages and calls. I needed time for myself, and Aleksei was in great hands. If he lived or died was beyond my help, hence there was no need for me to be constantly around him.

“That’s one way to view it.”

“What are you going to do if he dies?”

I blinked. “Attend his funeral.”

Rhea choked out a bitter laugh. She tried to show empathy, but the gesture was ignored. My brothers and I didn’t have a relationship like she had with Helios. The two were glued at the hip, would kill for each other in a heartbeat. Hell, he’d entrusted her with a million-dollar business.

Aleksei had never put that much trust in anyone, let alone me. Our circumstances were far different. He’d tried a few times to improve our

relationship, but I hadn't allowed it. I didn't believe in second chances.

People who were willing to hurt me once would do it twice.

I checked the time and noticed it was getting late. I paid for our food, despite her protests, and, with a promise to call her soon, I took my handbag and left.

The drive to the hospital seemed to take forever.

When I stepped inside, the smell of the building hit my nose. I'd never been the biggest fan of such places and decided to get in and out within fifteen minutes. There were no reason for me to stay beyond that timeframe.

"What do you mean he was discharged?" I asked the receptionist a few minutes later.

She typed on the keyboard before she gave me a smile. "I'm sorry, Miss, it looks like he left as soon as he woke up from surgery."

I rolled my eyes. "Thank you."

I turned on my heel and walked out of the hospital. I'd forgotten he had a whole medical wing in his mansion, and of course that was where he'd relocate. It was safer than the state hospital, that was for sure.

The trip to his home took longer than usual, and I felt fatigue wash over me mid-drive. It was rather strange, because I'd had a good few hours of sleep. I ignored the twisting sensation in my stomach and slowed down but didn't stop. It could've been because I'd had way too much food and not enough alcohol.

I barely made it past the gate. It was so heavily guarded that they checked me seven times and took the gun I always had on me. The guards, many of them, escorted me to the door, where another two took over.

It was Dominik's doing.

He wasn't taking any chances. More than anything, he didn't want to be stuck with the role of Pakhan. A low laugh slipped free whilst I was being led towards Aleksei's medical wing, which was as big as a small hospital.

Dominik was on the phone with someone and hadn't seen me walking in.

However, I noticed someone else from the corner of my eye and turned sharply towards them. My steps were slow, my brows narrowed. There was a small kitchen, and it had one of the best coffee machines. I noticed immediately the black hair, the white coat, and the build.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I asked.

Doctor Beckett flinched, and the cup of boiling-hot coffee fell from

her hands, the cup shattering on the tiled floor. With a sigh, she bent down to pick up the pieces, before she wiped the spilled coffee with paper towels.

Once she was done, she leaned against the kitchen counter and sighed. “It’s not like I’m here because I want to be.”

“Then why are you here?”

She bit her bottom lip. “He said he’d pay for my children’s tuition if I agreed to help him out.”

I tilted my head to the side. “How old are your children?”

She swallowed. “They’re seven.”

I shrugged. “You care a lot about them.”

Eliana Beckett had accepted a deal from the devil, only to do what was best for her children. She’d swallowed her pride and joined hands with the man she loathed. It made me jealous beyond my understanding.

I’d never asked my mother for anything. I’d thought that every child was deserving of a loving mother, or at least, that they should be protected by the person who’d given birth to them. Fury blurred my vision.

Why the fuck hadn’t Natasha done the same for me? Why the fuck was I unworthy and undeserving of affection and attention?

My mother wasn’t the mother Dominik and Aleksei had experienced. She’d showered them with affection and love until her dying breath. She would’ve taken a bullet for each of them; she would’ve allowed herself to be thrown into a lion’s den if it meant saving her precious little boys.

My anger drifted when a palm touched my shoulder. I jumped, unaware of my surroundings, and turned to find Dominik there, a concerned expression on his face. He didn’t say it, but his eyes told me everything.

“Aleksei wants to see you now,” he announced and left.

Without another word to Doctor Beckett, I followed Dominik.

Aleksei’s room was no different to a regular hospital room—aside from the smell and the fact he had a king-sized bed in there, which was only to be expected.

“You look like shit.”

He tried laughing, but it turned into a cough. He had an unknown nurse by his side, who rushed immediately to give him some water. Two guards were there, but they were unmoving, not caring about anything other than Aleksei.

“That’s very funny,” he rasped. “I see you’ve made it out alive.”

I tilted my head to the side and took a seat on the edge of his bed. The

nurse gave me a disapproving look, but I ignored her—it was easier than killing her with my bare hands for daring to even glance my way.

“Of course I did,” I mused. “Did your men pick up Viktor’s body?”

He weakly nodded. He looked terrible. His chest was bare, and there was a huge bandage over his wound. Now he’d have a scar on his chest to match the one on his face.

The bags under his eyes were big, and this was the first time I’d ever seen his lips chapped. His hair was a mess, and the color of his face wasn’t that great either.

“Yes, we’ll have a burial for him as soon as I recover fully.”

I couldn’t ask not to have a burial. No matter how much of a bastard my twin had been, he’d been brainwashed into doing what he’d done. He deserved to be buried, but not to rest in peace. There was no peace for people like us.

“I’m here for a reason, Aleksei.”

He tried rolling his eyes. “Of course you are.”

I inched closer to him and took his hand in mine. I never broke eye contact—I needed him to know just how serious I was. “Things might not have gone the way we originally planned, but I got Davorin to work with you.”

Realization dawned on his face. He closed his eyes, and a sharp release of breath filled the room. No one spoke; no one moved. I was holding on to the hope he’d grant me what he’d promised.

“What about Davorin?” he asked, his eyes remaining closed.

“I haven’t talked to him about this yet, but I will soon.” I paused. “I have every intention of taking him with me, Aleksei. Don’t I deserve that?”

My voice was barely above a whisper. Manipulation was a great tactic. Usually, not a single person would’ve been able to manipulate this man into anything; however, after everything, I knew he had a slight soft spot for me.

His eyes opened and then widened in shock.

For dramatic effect, I forced myself to cry. It was a trick I’d learned years ago, and although it wasn’t full-on sobbing, a small tear was enough for him.

His breathing turned uneven. If it hurt him to see me like this, he didn’t voice it. Instead, his gaze was glued to mine. I saw a reflection of myself there—our eyes were the same shade—and then that gaze softened.

Something stirred deeply inside me.

Perhaps I'd been wrong about my brother all this time. Perhaps we shared a connection far beyond my understanding. For a split second, a second too short, it was as if we were young again. Him carrying me on his back and picking cherries for me to eat, or when he taught me how to draw.

It was like we were kids all over again, and before I knew it, a real tear slipped free.

Immediately, I pushed those thoughts and feelings to the side. They were irrelevant. They were pathetic. My gaze hardened when he wasn't speaking, and I grew irritated at his quietness.

"Free me, Aleksei." It came out more like a command, but I didn't care. "I want to see what this world has to offer, and I fucking deserve it."

I could've walked out any time. I didn't need his permission, but I wasn't ready to give up his protection. Now that Bogdan's focus wasn't me, and Viktor was dead, I no longer feared anyone. I wanted to be free; I wanted to take control of my life, and I couldn't do that while being tied to this family.

"I'll free you if you promise to keep in touch, at least every two to three years."

I smiled. "Don't worry—I'll call on your birthday."

Slowly, he squeezed my hand, and that was all I needed. It was as if a big weight had been lifted off my chest and I was finally able to breathe properly.

I remained by his side for another hour, until he fell asleep. This was the last time I'd see him until the day I died, because I wanted to be buried in our family's tomb in Russia. It was contradictory, given how hard I'd fought not to go back there, but that was where I'd been born, and that was where I wanted to be committed back to the void.

I placed a soft kiss on his forehead and slowly walked away without another glance. They no longer had a sister, and I was no longer tied to this godforsaken family. It was an easy decision, yet why did my heart stutter, even if it was only for a minute?

"You're leaving," Dominik commented. He was leaning against the wall, his newest pair of glasses resting on the bridge of his nose.

"Yes."

"When?" His question came quickly. His voice was flat, but I knew he wasn't pleased with my decision.

“Soon. I still have some loose ends to tie up.”

He nodded. “And what are you going to do next?”

I shrugged. “Who knows? I’m a very well-educated woman—I’m sure I’ll figure it out.”

He remained quiet, so I joked, “I can always start killing people for money.”

“That’s not funny. It wouldn’t get you far from the world you’re trying to escape.”

“That’s true.”

I looked at him, knowing it was the last time I’d see him too. He was going to do just fine without me. He was too smart for his own good, and I was hoping Rhea would follow through with the suggestion I’d given her.

Rhea and Dominik would suit each other.

“You can still use the credit card I gave you.”

I grinned. “Oh, I will.”

He rolled his eyes.

He didn’t approach me; nor did I want him to.

“Take care of yourself, princess.”

The nickname tugged something in my heart, but the feeling vanished just as quickly as it had come. With a nod, I turned and walked away—away from the only life I knew; from the only people I knew. It was a good thing. I felt relieved; I felt overwhelmed.

I glanced at Aleksei’s home for the last time before I drove off, leaving all my memories there. I didn’t need them where I was going.

Now all that was left to do was tell Davorin about my plans and bribe him to come with me. No matter what it took, we were going to live and die together.

TWENTY-THREE



IT was difficult bringing up this topic to Davorin. Mainly, he was on edge the entire day. He was in contact with Dominik—the two of them were trying to track down Bogdan and spent every waking hour on that.

He was irritated by the fact that Bogdan had gone completely off grid. He was trying to calculate precisely when his next strike would be, but by the time that happened, I would be long gone.

Each time I tried to tell him about my plans, I failed. My mouth went dry, my throat tightened, and no words made it out. I couldn't understand why. It was a plan I'd had for two years at least, and Davorin appearing in my life didn't change it.

It shouldn't have changed it.

Yet the mere thought of him not coming with me, or asking me to stay, made me pissed. No one was going to prevent me from leaving, and no one was going to make me stay. I finally had the chance to escape, and I'd be damned if I lost it.

Meanwhile, whilst I was trying to figure out how to tell Davorin about it, I met up with Tiana. She was nosy, and she would've poked around. I didn't need anyone tracking me down, let alone her curious ass.

"I need to tell you something," she said, biting her bottom lip.

I raised an eyebrow as I sipped on my martini. The bar had no good whiskey options, so I'd settled for a Martini instead. "What is it?"

"I'm dating Nick," she blurted out.

I tried to remember who Nick was. It took me a solid thirty seconds before I raised both eyebrows in surprise. I'd told her if it was good for her to keep seeing him, she should. However, I never imagined she actually would.

"Seriously? The dead-friend guy?"

Her face was serious. "Please, that's very... brutal of you to say."

"It's the truth," I defended.

Her shoulders slumped. "Still. Try to be considerate at least sometimes."

I gave her a knowing look. Not once in my twenty-four years had I been considerate of anyone other than myself. Humans were predators, the worst of the worst. If I didn't put myself first, no one else was going to, and I didn't intend to stop thinking like that now.

"Sure," I replied, trying to get her off my back.

Tiana was one of the very few people who hadn't properly pissed me off. Usually, those people ended up dead. I'd have had no problem doing the same thing to her; however, over the few years I'd known her, she'd proved to be worth my time, and those people were rare.

"So?" she urged.

“So what?” I was confused.

“I need your opinion on him. You’re someone who knows how to read people well, and I’m not sure he is who he says he is.”

I thought about it for a moment. We’d had two encounters. The first had been on my birthday, at Lunax, where I’d met Davorin for the first time. Nick had been fine, not causing any issues. His eyes had been on Tiana the whole time. And the second had been when his friend had met his inevitable end, and I hadn’t noticed much about him, aside from the fact he was boring as hell.

“No, he won’t hurt you,” I reassured her, before adding, “Although, if you’re uncertain about him, maybe you shouldn’t be in a relationship with him to begin with.”

“That’s true,” she murmured. “But I really like him, and I want to give him a chance.”

“By all means, do it. It’s your life.”

She grinned. “Thank you.”

I sipped on my third Martini in an hour as we continued to chat. Most of it was her telling me how she and Nick had started dating, what their dates had been like, or how he’d kissed her. I had to suppress a yawn.

“Hey, listen,” I interrupted when the topic of Nick began getting on my nerves. “I have something to tell you.”

She paused immediately. “Okay.”

“I’m leaving.”

She was shocked. “Leaving where?”

I tried to come up with a good lie that would stop her from asking unnecessary questions I had no desire to answer. “I got offered a job overseas, and I’m taking it.”

Tiana beamed with happiness. “That’s great! When do you leave?”

I shrugged. “I’m not sure exactly when, but soon.”

Sadness overtook her features. She tried to hide it with a wide grin, but her eyes told me everything. Tiana was a very sensitive person, and the implication of my leaving hadn’t hit her immediately.

“You don’t plan on coming back, do you?” Her voice was barely above a whisper.

“Not for the foreseeable future, no. But I don’t know what will happen in a year or two.”

That was a lie. New York had become a home to me, but it was time

to let it go and find that home elsewhere. Perhaps it was because I hated how it felt like being caged all over again, despite it being an enormous city.

Tiana laughed. “Well then. I’ll be here when you decide to come back.”

I spent another hour with her. I allowed her to talk about things that were of no interest to me. I was never going to see her again, so I let her have the moment she desperately needed. I was the only friend she had, and although I didn’t care if I had friends or not, that was very important to her.

The moment I was back in my car, a strange feeling washed over me again. It took me a moment to realize it was excitement. The mere thought of being out of this place soon was bringing me nothing but happiness.

My phone buzzed, snapping me out of my daydream. Slowly, still watching the road, I picked it up from the passenger’s seat. My brows narrowed. It was a voice message that was way too long. The number was unknown, and suddenly, realization hit me.

It had been four days since Brianne’s death—since she’d sent those messages from her phone. However, I’d never expected one of them would be for me.

Without a second thought, I connected the phone to the car speakers and brought the volume up.

“I know you must be surprised that you’re hearing my voice, since you were the one who killed me.” Nothing but bitterness laced her tone. “And make no mistake, I’m not telling you any of this because I actually give a shit about you.” She chuckled.

My hands gripped the steering wheel as I continued to listen.

“I’m just sad I won’t be around to witness your fit of rage once I’m done with this message.”

I rolled my eyes and murmured, “Get on with it.”

“You see, I found that precious little file in your safe. And I wasn’t going to use it, because it really wasn’t any of my business, but why not? As far as to why I’ve sent this message to you... well, you’d be surprised to find out some things about the man you’re sharing a bed with.”

I took a deep breath, disliking where this was heading.

“But I’m also furious. My father didn’t deserve to be gutted, to die. He might’ve been a bad guy towards others, but he was the best father in the world, something you’d never understand.”

I was pissed that she’d managed to disturb my peace despite being

dead.

“You see, Bogdan, your father, wanted to hire my dad to track you down and follow you. Of course, that wouldn’t exactly be easy because you’re observant. So when my dad rejected that, Bogdan offered him a deal he couldn’t refuse—five million dollars for your head.”

I laughed. That was impossible. An assassin had tried once and failed. I had the bullet wound as proof.

“He agreed but only if he had professional help. Of course, your father told him absolutely not, and eventually, Bogdan got to him and gutted him. Well, I’m assuming one of his men did that. But you want to know what the best part of all this was?”

Her loud laugh made me wince. It hurt my ears.

“The man who was later hired to kill you—and accepted for five million dollars—was Davorin.”

It was as if everything stopped. As soon as his name left her lips, I froze. Nothing could’ve prepared me for that, and nothing could’ve prevented my reaction.

“Ironic, isn’t it? How you never saw that coming, considering...” She paused, and I knew what she meant.

“Oh, also, you probably should know this by now, but the assassin who tried to kill you in Russia? Also Davorin.”

I took a sharp intake of breath.

“Of course, you don’t have to believe me by any means, but I found your email address, and the proof should be with you now.” She was quiet. “Oh, and fuck you, bitch.”

I slammed on the brakes, despite being on the highway, and ignored the honking behind me. If any of those people tried to approach me right now, they would end up with a bullet between their eyes.

With shaky hands, I unlocked my phone, and just as Brianne had said, I had an email waiting. Immediately, I opened it and began reading.

Every single meeting between my father and Davorin, every single record of their phone calls, and every single money transaction was detailed in the document Brianne had sent me. I skimmed through it, as I wasn’t in the right state to read it properly, but she had everything in there.

When I was sixteen, my father had given me a little more... freedom. I wasn’t as locked up as I used to be, and I learned how to be indifferent, just like he’d told me to. However, that freedom had come with a price.

On a hot August day, I'd been training with Aleksei outside. We tried our best not to ruin Mom's rose garden, though we were able to salvage only so much—one of us always ended up tangled in the thorns or crushing the flowers.

My instincts had been heightened. I'd sensed that something was very wrong, but it had been too late. By the time I'd detected the sniper, who was positioned far behind me, unable to see more than a sliver of my face, the bullet had pierced my chest. It missed my heart but barely, and only because Aleksei pushed me to the ground after the bullet left the gun.

The hitman was good, and if I hadn't moved, I would've been dead.

Everyone assumed it was Aleksei he was after, but it had never been proved. The hitman had disappeared, with his gun, and was never heard from or seen again.

And as I stared at the file, I understood why. Bogdan had been the one who was supposedly tracking him down, and when Aleksei and Dominik had wanted in, he'd given them false information to throw them off the trail.

"You motherfucker," I breathed.

I couldn't think, and I couldn't see. My eyes were filled with tears of anger. My jaw was trembling, my teeth gritted together. No amount of breathing techniques could calm me down. The more I tried, the worse it became.

Blood boiled in my veins, fury like I'd never felt before filling my mind and soul. Hell, my bones were coated with an indescribable amount of rage, every part of me screaming to just kill him and get it over with.

I'd made a mistake. It hadn't been easy, but I had ended up trusting him. I should've known he wasn't the person I should've entrusted my heart to. Within a minute, it had shattered to pieces.

Slowly, I started the car again. The tears never stopped falling, and the rage intensified the faster I drove. If this reckless driving didn't kill me, then Davorin would. That bastard had a lot of nerve, and it only reminded me of who'd I become.

He'd managed to tame me, to poison my mind into thinking I wanted to be someone he'd like. A loud scream pierced the air at the mere thought of my stupidity. Oh, how did I allow myself to fall into his trap?

I was breathing heavily—it was as if someone had their hand around my throat, preventing me from getting enough air. I placed my hand on my heart and was terrified by how fast it was racing.

My whole body was shaking, and my mind kept telling me that it was all my fault. I'd known there was something weird about him, yet I'd ignored it. Whenever I'd grown suspicious, he'd given me the attention I craved, and it had made all of my doubts take a back seat.

I laughed loudly.

"Oh my, oh my." A wide grin spread over my face, the bloodshot eyes I could see in the rearview mirror only bringing me satisfaction. "How quickly things have changed."

An idea popped into my head. The fury wasn't going to leave my body, not any time soon. It was a decision I made impulsively, but I didn't care. I needed to end his miserable, pathetic life.

No one toyed with me and got away with it.

I laughed again.

It pained me how stupid I'd been. Davorin, on the other hand, was a very calculating man and he must've seen this coming. This wasn't something he could've kept from me forever. And when I remembered that I'd planned to invite him with me when I escaped, a whole new level of rage burned in me.

I was mad at myself, mad at that motherfucker for thinking he'd be able to play with me then kill me once he got bored.

My knuckles turned white from the grip I had on the steering wheel. I made a detour and returned to the city. Davorin only cared about one person, and that person was dying sooner than I'd thought I'd be forced to make it happen.

I dialed a phone number I never thought I'd have to use again. After a minute of ringing, my anger growing from impatience, the call went through.

"What do you need?"

Xenia's voice was flat. A moment later, I heard her munch on something whilst she waited for me to respond.

"Listen to me very carefully, Xenia," I threatened. I heard her gasp at the tone of my voice. "You're going to do something for me, and I swear to God, if you so much as even think about telling Dominik, I will detour and come kill you. Do you fucking understand me?"

"Yes."

I wasn't surprised. She wasn't dumb enough to ignore the threat I was perfectly capable of executing. I left her to sweat for a moment or two before I laughed.

“Perfect. So this is what you’ll do, and you only have thirty minutes.”

She stayed quiet as I explained—she knew better than to ask questions or provoke me further when I was in a state of rage. She’d tried once and almost lost an arm. I’d broken it in three places, and ever since, she’d known her place.

My fury mixed with excitement. It was time for me to show Davorin what I was made of—who I was before he’d decided it wasn’t good enough.

Well, now he’d have no other choice but to see me as the monster I was.

DAVORIN



GALINA Ivanova had a terrible upbringing. Her parents, my grandparents, were Russian immigrants who'd managed to find shelter in New York, after being homeless for years. My mother wasn't planned, and since my

grandparents were homeless drug addicts, no one had batted an eyelash at the child they brought into the world.

It was no surprise she followed in their footsteps. That kind of lifestyle was all she'd known. I wasn't planned either, conceived after a one-night stand in her mid-thirties. Galina had never wanted to be a mother, because she'd never had one herself. She didn't know how to act like one, and for a long time, she didn't.

Child protective services took me when I was a baby, and soon enough, I was adopted by Melissa and Greg Rivers. They came from a wealthy background, owning multiple chains of restaurants and a handful of other businesses on the side.

I was a reserved kid who never looked for trouble purposefully. However, when trouble came knocking, I didn't slam the door in its face. Instead, I welcomed it—before I killed it.

It was Galina who never gave up on me. I never loved her, but I was grateful for everything she'd done for me and all the sacrifices she'd made. That was the only reason I didn't leave her on the streets and found her the help she needed.

I drove past the familiar street. It was close to the house I'd grown up in, a little up the hill. Trees surrounded me, the sun piercing small gaps in the thick canopies. I readjusted my sunglasses so the sun wouldn't bother me and parked the vehicle in the spot I'd paid for.

The tall metal gate opened. Visitation time varied from month to month. Today, I was almost late to visit Galina. I'd been caught up in some unfinished business with a motherfucker who couldn't take a goddamn hint.

I'd ended up killing him just to get him to shut the fuck up. Getting rid of the body was another hassle, but it needed to be done. I only disposed of bodies when I killed for my pleasure—when my contractors had me kill, the body was theirs to deal with.

“Good afternoon, Ricki,” I greeted the receptionist as I strolled into the lobby. I waited a few minutes before I approached her desk—she'd just arrived and was taking over the shift.

Ricki was a woman in her late fifties. She'd been on call when Galina had first been admitted, and she was the most pleasant member of staff to work with. I didn't trust anyone in the facility, but Ricki had always called me when there were issues, hence my favoritism—if it could be called that.

“Hi, Adrik!” She smiled. “How are you?”

Ricki was the only person who used my real name, aside from Galina. Though Galina was mostly out of it now and could barely remember she had a son, let alone his name. But when she did, she would reminisce about when I was a child.

“I’m good,” I responded. “Is Galina asleep?”

“I’m not sure—let me check.”

I nodded and tapped my index finger against the wooden counter while Ricki picked up the phone and called one of the nurses. I zoned out and observed the people around me. Many patients had their families visiting, and the crowd was irritating me.

I forced my gaze away from the irrelevant people and brought it back to Ricki. My facial expression mimicked hers—brows narrowed, confusion written all over. Slowly, she hung up the phone and took a seat behind her desk. Not a second later, she began typing.

“Is there a problem?”

Her brows creased even more. “It looks like someone took her out during visitation hours.”

“I’m the only one who can do that.”

Ricki sighed, her eyes moving from left to right as she read what was on the screen. Out of the first drawer, she took a big, thick notebook and flipped a few pages, until she reached today’s date.

“According to my data, you gave the rights to someone else.” She paused before she turned the notebook around and pointed. “There, the time and signature of the person who took her out.”

The blood in my veins chilled, and a bubble of anger sneaked through my harsh demeanor, my lips thinning into a line. I’d never told anyone about Galina’s whereabouts, let alone given someone the right to take her outside.

There was a reason she was kept in the institution and had no contact with the outside world.

Galina had been a kind woman before her illness. The only time I’d tried to take her outside since, she’d become violent. All of the bad memories had rushed back to her, and she’d had to be sedated. Of course, even when she was with me, there were two nurses who accompanied us, in case anything went wrong.

My eyes skimmed the paper briefly, until they landed on a name. Swallowing harshly, and trying to contain the pure fury I felt, I smiled at Ricki.

“There must’ve been a misunderstanding. Can you tell me when I supposedly granted her the right?”

With a look of doubt, Ricki motioned for me to come round to the other side of the counter.

“This is very strange.” The older woman fixed her glasses. “I can’t see the exact date, but everything is here, from your signature to hers.”

I closed my eyes with a huff. Of course she had the resources to hack into the poorly protected security system, but what was her goal? Up until this morning, everything had been just fine. No petty arguments or bad comebacks.

Ekaterina was fine when I saw her this morning.

“Don’t worry, Ricki,” I forced a smile. “It’s fine. She’s in good hands.”

Ricki looked uncertain, but with a sharp glare from me, she released a deep sigh. “Fine.” She was quick to glance at the big watch behind her. “But if Galina isn’t back within the next two hours, I’ll have to report it.”

I nodded. “She’ll be back.”

Within two minutes, I was back in my car. The engine roared to life, and I tore off down the road, my mind racing. How the fuck had Kaya even found out about Galina?

More importantly, what the fuck was she going to do to her?

I searched for my phone, and it seemed like it took hours to find it. I dialed her number, but before I pressed the call button, I noticed a missed call that had come through with a voice message. With narrowed eyebrows, I played it through the car’s speakers.

“Hey, so you’re probably shocked to hear my voice, huh?” Not really. “And I promise I’ll make this as quick as possible. Ekaterina was the one who killed me, for God knows what reason. This is pre-recorded and made to be sent when I die, so I’m not really sure how I died, but oh well, that’s life.”

Brianne’s annoying voice filled my car. I could barely stand it when she was alive; it was far worse now I was being haunted by a dead girl.

“When you asked me to go and grab her things and move them to your home, I found something... something very interesting.”

My ears perked up, my eyes narrowing.

“When she was eighteen years old, Ekaterina was diagnosed with ASPD. The reasons are unknown, but that’s not the worst part.” Brianne sighed slowly. “That girl has been stalking you for the past six years,

Davorin. Six fucking years.”

I’d had my suspicions about Ekaterina not being neurotypical for a long time now. However, since there didn’t seem to be a single medical report of hers in existence—though I’m sure if there was, she was the sole owner of it—I could never know for sure.

However, the stalking part came as a complete surprise to me. A lazy smile quirked my lips, and a laugh followed. I knew almost every single detail of her entire life, yet she’d still managed to surprise me, in the best way possible.

It was ego-crushing that I hadn’t noticed it over the years, but this was Kaya. She knew how to be sleek and mischievous, and she knew how to remain hidden.

That thought brought a doubt to my mind. Sociopaths were unpredictable. Nothing about them made sense to me, and her kidnapping my ill mother wasn’t a turn I’d thought this would ever take.

“There’s a file attached to this message. This is a parting gift, Davorin. Be careful.” She sighed. “Ekaterina is a very dangerous person. Not only is she a sociopathic bitch, but she has an entire family with too much power backing her up.”

I cut the message short and pulled over. If she were alive, I would’ve killed her for speaking badly of Kaya. Though it was strange, all of it.

I was growing more pissed off as the minutes flew by. Did I truly want to open a box of worms? I stared at the document awaiting me. Everything in me told me not to open it, to continue as I was without any knowledge of it.

I despised change. And this was going to change everything.

Before I could blink, my thumb pressed the document, and it opened almost immediately. My eyes scanned the contents, an unsettling twist embedding itself in my stomach. The more I looked, the angrier I grew.

I hadn’t grasped the concept fully until I saw what was in front of me. This was supposed to be my game. And Ekaterina had fucking stolen it from me.

Pictures of me, tracing back all the way from six years ago to this past January. The pictures were too good, too clear to have been taken from any security-camera footage. She’d taken each and every single photograph herself, without being noticed.

Some were of me on the job, some were of me at the gym. Many of

them were with Galina at the facility, outside on a bench. Fucking hell, some had even been taken in my own home, and I'd been so damned lost in my own world that I hadn't noticed.

Ekaterina hadn't stolen the game. She fucking started it.

This wasn't how it was supposed to go. Ekaterina was supposed to be terrified of me—so much so that the fear would gradually turn into an obsessive love. And I was going to worship every fucking step she took.

On some level, the game was just that. However, she was far from afraid. She was cocky and arrogant and had no terror when it came to me. Ekaterina held power so high it almost made me die.

And that infuriated me the most. My knuckles turned white on the steering wheel, my jaw locked, my eyes narrowed. Nothing about my current state was pleasant, and she was about to fucking learn that I wasn't a man she should've messed with.

I let out a loud laugh. Filled with venom, it ignited a deep flame within—a flame so powerful, nothing would ever be able to put it out.

It was Ekaterina's flame against mine, and I was going to make sure hers dimmed first. It was the only way to reshape her and reform her into the person I wanted her to be—needed her to be.

Another wave of laughter slipped out as a realization dawned upon me—she wanted to end the game because she'd found out about everything. However, I wasn't going to let her drag my mother down to hell with us. Because if someone was going to die, it would be the two of us. It was kind of poetic, dying for the same blood we wanted to live for.

I shook my head—the shock was still there, lingering. How the fuck had I not noticed it sooner? She'd spent years learning everything about my life, then acted innocent.

Ekaterina had fucking stalked me into stalking her.

TWENTY-FIVE



ADRIK Ivanov.

I knew everything about the man, from his birthplace to his latest victim. I knew the day he became Davorin, and I knew how his first kill had

gone. Those records were sealed, but I'd accessed them years ago.

So how the hell had I not seen this coming?

It was probably because it was my father's doing. I never paid close attention to him or his shenanigans. If my father wanted something buried, it would remain buried until he decided it was time for it to be brought into the world.

Perhaps that was how Brianne fit into the story. I doubted she'd sent me that message about Davorin's work relating to my family just to get her revenge. That wasn't going to do much for her—she was already dead and buried somewhere no one was ever going to find her.

It crossed my mind that she too was a part of my father's schemes and that her role had lain elsewhere. But I didn't bother to keep thinking about it, and after a last glance at my phone, I threw it away.

I'd bought myself a burner phone with Adrik's number in it. He no longer deserved to be called Davorin. It was the name he'd chosen—God of Death—as someone who'd never failed to kill one of his targets. Now he had, and it was me.

And he was never going to be able to kill me.

I had to admit, at first I was uncertain what I'd be getting with the woman in the back seat. I glanced at her through the rearview, and she looked pretty much out of it. Her eyes were locked on the window, and she rarely blinked.

When five o'clock in the afternoon hit, I grinned widely. I waited for another ten minutes, with some low music playing in the car. I hummed to the song whilst trying to contain my anger. Soon, it would be time for me to unleash all the wrath I had within, but not yet.

I dialed his number, contentment filling me when he picked up after the first ring.

“What the hell are you doing, little lion?”

His voice was way too calm for someone whose mother had just been taken. I remained silent for a little while, before a low chuckle slipped out. I glanced at his mother again, but she was unresponsive.

“Oh, I'm not doing anything.” I laughed. “You should be asking me what I *am* going to do.”

He paused. “Let her go.”

“The only way she'll leave is in a body bag. And you, Adrik, have less than an hour to find us. Tick-tock.”

I hung up on him. The window opened with the press of a button, and I threw the phone out. I didn't need it anymore, and although it couldn't be traced, I didn't want to receive numerous phone calls from him. A wicked smirk crossed my face—the real game was about to begin.

“Hey, Galina,” I called to the woman in the backseat. Slowly, with a blink, she turned her head to look at me. “How would you feel about taking a walk in the park?”

Her eyes brightened, and a smile appeared. From her medical file, I knew she enjoyed walks in the park, in springtime especially. The weather was good today—no rain, no mud. It was a perfect opportunity to get her to talk to me.

Galina Ivanova suffered from dementia—Alzheimer's to be precise. She was heavily medicated, and I was positive she didn't know what day it was, or where the hell she was. Most of the time, she was lost in her own thoughts, kept to herself, and rarely talked, even to the nurses.

I needed some information on Adrik's younger days, to fully understand his youth, back when I didn't know him. Anything might be helpful in putting an end to his miserable life; however, if that failed, I had his precious mom to kill. It was a win-win situation.

I couldn't refer to him with the name I'd known him by. Granted, I hadn't known his real name until now, but Adrik Ivanov wasn't the one who'd harmed me—Davorin was. And the mere thought of him brought all my anger right back out.

I couldn't allow that to happen before the time was right.

I parked the car near the park. We had another fifty minutes to wait. The location I'd chosen for our meeting was where I was supposed to die on Aleksei's birthday, four days ago. It seemed like the perfect place to end everything.

I linked my arm with Galina's, providing her additional support. This woman hadn't set foot outside on her own in years and was barely able to walk a few feet. I took her to the nearest bench and pulled out a juice bottle. It was her favorite, and I used it to bribe her.

Galina took it with gratitude, her wrinkled eyes lighting up at the sight of it.

“Galina, would it be okay to talk about your son?” I needed to approach her very carefully. One wrong word and she'd throw a fit. We were in a public space, and I couldn't allow that to happen.

“Oh, my baby boy, Adrik,” she whimpered. For a moment, I thought I’d blown my chance, but then a soft smile appeared on her face as she looked up at the clear sky. “I didn’t want to leave him. I really didn’t want to, but they took him from me, and there was nothing I could do.”

She’d been a hardcore drug addict, taking anything from cocaine to heroin—whatever she could get her hands on. She’d never planned on having children; however, she’d got knocked up by a one-night stand when she was thirty-five, and decided she wanted to keep the baby and get clean.

It hadn’t worked. She’d stayed clean during the pregnancy, but the moment she’d given birth, she’d returned to her old habits. Child protective services had taken Adrik from her when he was six months old, and he’d been adopted into a wealthy family.

The family had promised to allow contact between Galina and Adrik if she got clean, and a few years later, she’d managed it. But it was too late to get her son back, and she didn’t want to take him from the great upbringing he was going to have anyway, so she settled for visiting him monthly.

Galina was one of the rare people who’d remained in his life after he was diagnosed as a psychopath. His adoptive parents had hidden it like it was some sort of spreadable disease and tried to provide him with the best care they could—and it had worked, because he knew how to keep that dangerous side of himself hidden and tamed. He didn’t often unleash it, which was ironic, considering what he did for a living.

“I know you didn’t.” Slowly, I placed my hand on hers and squeezed it softly. It earned me a smile.

Galina was too quiet, so I added, “Would you like me to take you to see him?”

Her face sparkled with happiness. It was atrocious. I swallowed the feeling of anger, and once she nodded, I put her back in the car and drove off. A gun wasn’t something I was going to need, so I opted instead for a pretty blade. It was as big as my palm, and the blade was thin. It had snowflakes engraved on it, and the handle was made from white gold. It had been Bogdan’s parting gift before I’d left Russia. I’d never used it and thought this would be the perfect opportunity to use and then dispose of it.

When we arrived, I helped Galina out of the car. Her slow walking began to piss me off beyond words as we stepped inside the venue.

It was exactly how we’d left it—bloodstains on the floor, broken tables and chairs. It was a mess. The only thing that had survived was a bottle

of wine. I despised the taste, but it was the only alcohol I had, so I didn't think before opening the bottle and sipping from it.

Galina sat on one of the chairs. She looked serene, patiently waiting for her son to arrive, but all my nerves seemed to be kicking in. My hand trembled slightly, and the more I thought about him, the angrier I grew.

I checked my wristwatch—he should be here soon. He was a smart man; I had no doubt he would be able to find us.

I couldn't wait to meet him for the last time.



It was as if I could hear the clock ticking. The steady rhythm echoed in my head, my eyes glued to the small device on my wrist. It was the only piece of jewelry I wore on a daily basis that wasn't made out of gold.

Galina began to tap her foot on the floor loudly, and my head began to ache. Her palms gripped her long skirt as she glanced around the room—she was clearly getting impatient.

The clock struck six o'clock and ten minutes. I heard a car pull up, and then, as if he were the Flash, he appeared at the door a few seconds later. He was evidently ready for what was going to happen as he'd put on that goddamn mask of his.

“And the man of the hour has graced us with his presence,” I announced. I drank the last few sips of the wine before the bottle flew out of my hand and shattered on the floor.

He walked a few steps forward then stopped. I was quick to get behind his mother, who was uncertain who the masked man was. Slowly, I pulled out my knife and placed it against her throat.

“What is it that you think you're doing, Ekaterina?”

Adrik's voice was filled with venom, my stupid nickname long gone. Good. I hated the way it made me feel.

He took another step forward, but I simply pressed the blade deeper

into her skin, and he paused immediately.

“I needed some leverage.” I looked towards Galina. “And if you comply with my... demands, you’ll be free to go.”

He blinked, something between a snarl and a hiss slipping from his lips. It seemed he wasn’t going to hurt me unless I made the first move, which was why he hadn’t taken his gun out yet.

“What do you want?”

I sighed, seemingly content. “Did you try to kill me six years ago?”

“Yes.” His response was cold, quick and, just like the next step he took, calculated.

I felt a sharp pain in my chest.

“Were you hired by my father to kill me now?”

“Yes.” He took another step.

I knew what he was doing, but he wasn’t doing it correctly. To someone who hadn’t met him, this probably would’ve seemed innocent enough. He was trying to get closer to me, to try and disarm me.

I gave him a knowing look and he froze.

“Why didn’t you kill me?”

“Because I never intended for you to be... you.”

A loud laugh flew from me. It was bittersweet. On some level, I knew it was true, but the betrayal didn’t hurt any less. Had my father had his way, I would’ve been the one lying on the ground dead, instead of my twin brother.

“Oh, please,” I mused, “I want the truth.”

“The truth?” His voice was dangerously low. “The truth is, Ekaterina, that from the night I saw you at that club, you were all I could think of. If I skipped a day without seeing you, I went on a killing spree to release my anger. If I didn’t know that you were safe, it made me lose my fucking mind.”

“Aw,” I mocked. “That’s very cute, but not the answer I was looking for.”

“I can’t read minds,” he told me.

“All right then.” I inched closer to his mother, ignoring her whimpers. If she tried to release herself, it would only get her killed quicker. Galina wasn’t an issue.

I tilted my head to the side, a small smile appearing on my face. “And what made you change your mind about killing me now?”

The moment he’d found out I’d taken his mother, he’d have been

planning my murder. But as dangerous as he was, the second he'd stepped into the room, I'd realized that plan had long since been discarded.

"Because, Ekaterina."

He stepped forward boldly. Only a few feet separated us, but it was a few feet too short a distance. I got as close as I possibly could to his mother. If she moved even so much as an inch, she'd kill herself.

"I know. About everything. I know about the dirty little secret you kept in that safe."

It was as if all the air had been knocked out of my lungs. My mind went back to the voice message Brienne had left me. I'd been right about the second one being for him, and she'd told him everything I'd kept hidden all these years.

"So it's the attention you liked?"

He shook his head. "No, little lion. The fact that we're the same is what I liked."

I interrupted him immediately, anger rising from the pit of my stomach. "You and I are not the same, Adrik." I spat his name out like it was venom. "You were born that way—I was made. Nothing we lived through is any kind of similar, let alone the same."

His eyes lingered dangerously on my face. His demeanor hadn't changed from the moment he'd arrived, and he wasn't revealing any of his feelings. Fucking hell, his poker face was amazing.

"That might be true, but you know that there isn't a single person in this world who will understand you as much as I do. We were made for each other, little lion. There's no escaping that."

It finally hit me what he was trying to do. If I knew anything, I knew when someone was trying to manipulate me. And sadly for him, it didn't work.

Tears fell freely down my cheeks, but it was pure fury I was feeling—a deep rage that had built over years and threatened to leap straight out.

I didn't stop it, not for one minute. I wanted him to know how much his betrayal angered me. I wanted him to know just how much of a sociopathic bitch I could be. And more than anything, I wanted him to have something to remember me by.

It had to be a feeling of deep hatred. Nothing ever stuck around as much as the thoughts of the person you loathed the most. I needed to be that person, and I needed him to know that what he'd done to me was something

he'd never get the chance to do again.

I laughed like a maniac. My grin would have been blood-curling to any normal person—to him, it was a challenge.

“For a second there, you almost got me,” I finished with another laugh. “Key word being *almost*.”

Adrik's eyes turned dark—nothing but evil resided within. My heart hammered against my ribcage as I recognized it. It was the same look my father always had right before he'd lock me up for weeks at a time.

I was terrified of that look.

And yet, it only managed to make me more furious with him. How the fuck had I allowed myself to get into this predicament? The moment I'd thrown myself on his radar, my stalking had dropped drastically. I hadn't wanted to risk making him suspicious, but now I sure as hell wished I had.

My hands trembled, but my fingers gripped the blade handle tighter. Galina tried to speak, but it was muffled. I could smell her fear—it was always had a signature stench, and I enjoyed it most when I'd been the one to cause it.

“And I wasn't lying, Ekaterina,” he said and took another step forward. “It was the truth. You know that you belong next to me.”

I ignored him and focused on the fear that was spreading through my body like a disease. My whole being ached. My eyes felt swollen—I knew they must be red from all my tears—and the blood boiled in my veins. It was now or never.

This bastard needed to know his place, and he had to know that he couldn't simply do what he'd done and get away with it. I would've rather died than allowed that to happen.

Before he'd come into my life, I had been calm and collected. Before he'd appeared, I'd lived a life that many could only dream of. The only regret I had was that I hadn't put an end to this sooner.

But pure and terrifying obsessions weren't something I could easily rid myself of. I'd stalked him for years and dreamed of having him all to myself every single goddamn night. And once I'd got what I wanted, it was like my fixation on him had only intensified. I'd wanted to know him, to know who he truly was, beyond the papers I had on him.

He'd ruined it all. He'd ruined the perfect little life I'd laid out for us.

“You will not kill her, Ekaterina.”

It was half-threat, half-statement. I didn't do well with threats and

merely laughed. It was sadistic, and it made the hatred I now held for him grow even more.

I grinned widely. Then I sliced his mother's throat.
Let the fucking games begin.

BOOK TWO COMING SOON.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kat King has always been passionate about writing and storytelling. She describes herself as a multigenre author who enjoys intense plotting and planning.

When she isn't writing, she's most likely watching thriller shows, burying her head in a great book, or spending time with her family.

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