



DIRTY
FLOWERS

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KENYA WRIGHT

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To my KW Patrons,

Dirty Flowers was intended to be a short bonus story bridging the gap between Book 7 and Book 8.

Your MANY comments on my Patreon caused the story to grow beyond what I'd initially envisioned.

The chapters kept springing up, one after another!

It is truly a testament to the power of our shared love for this world and its characters.

I want to extend my deepest gratitude to each and every one of you.

And to my beloved Diamond Divas,

Your unwavering belief in my work keeps me inspired, propelling me to explore new depths in our shared literary journey. Your generous financial support also ensures that I can devote my time and energy to doing what I love most—writing. Here's to many more shared adventures in the world we've come to cherish together!

L. Nichols N. Chatman

T. Cleaver S. Cohen

C. Carbon A. Burgett

A. Hush T. Paten

Prologue

Mystery Moans

Emily

What is going on?

I was on all fours in warm dirt. A hot, pulsing cock thrust in and out of my ass with fast, hard strokes that made my eyes roll back into my head.

Groaning, he gripped my hips and pounded into my ass, stuffing me with his throbbing cock.

The only problem with this situation was that...who the hell was *he*?

A haze of lust descended over me.

Unable to help myself, I moaned in ecstasy.

Where...am...I?

I tried to see, but it was difficult.

Darkness served as my only view.

But I could *feel* everything—the dirt smoothing against my palms and knees. The cock slamming into me. The sweat dripping down from my forehead. The muscles stretching in my ass to accommodate this stranger's massive presence. And, the body warmth and weight of the man on top of me, while his cock pounded my ass.

Oh, God. It feels so good, but...who is this?

It wasn't Kaz.

This man's cock was smaller and his pound had less strength.

Had Kaz been slamming into my ass at his speed, I wouldn't be able to walk for a week.

Erotic slapping and groaning rose around me.

It's just a dream. Wake up, Emily.

But, I couldn't open my eyes and I had no control of my body.

Is there no way out of this?

I didn't think so. Somehow I had turned into someone's blind fuck toy.

Just when I thought my orgasm would erupt from the cock plowing into me, the man tensed and roared. "Oh, Lunita!"

No! Why did he say that?!

Did she have control?

I tried to move and realized that I couldn't.

The man groaned.

Then, I or she moaned at his words.

I no longer knew where she began or I ended.

Is she in control? Or is this some living nightmare?

Hot, thick, cum spurted within me, and I felt the warmth of it leaking from my ass.

Fuck!

"Oh, Lunita!"

I shook uncontrollably as an orgasm spasmed through me.

No. I don't want this.

Still, ecstasy pulsed through my body and drummed down to my toes. Waves of pleasure rippled within me.

Oh! Oh! Oh!

"I am falling in love with you." Slowly, the man slipped his cock out of my ass. "Lunita, when will we run away?"

An odd voice left my lips. "Soon."

No! Who said that? I didn't say that.

The distant cry of a baby cut through the stillness of this sensual moment.

My baby.

The new love of my life.

Emilio.

Wake up! Wake up! Wake up!

Slowly, I gained control of my eyes.

They fluttered open.

Thank God.

I was not on dirt or being pounded into by some strange guy. In fact, I lounged in my plush leather nursing chair. My feet rested on the matching ottoman.

Emilio let out a blood-curdling cry that almost burned my eardrums.

Blinking, I shook my head. "I'm coming, baby. Just give me one minute to get it together."

Emilio didn't care as he cried some more.

Desperate, I attempted to stand, only for the searing pain in my backside to plummet me back down to the ground.

What the fuck? Why does my ass hurt?

My new nanny, Olga rushed into the room, whispering in Russian. "Oh, little cub is hungry."

Ow! What is going on?

I adjusted myself in the chair.

Olga reached into the crib, lifted my upset baby, and switched to English. "Don't worry, Emily. Rest. I'm bringing him to you."

But, why does my ass hurt?

I gritted my teeth, bearing the searing pain that burned through my anus.

What kind of dream makes the body actually hurt? I wish I could go back to sleep and kill that motherfucker.

With a final effort I shifted my weight, relieving the pain a little.

Olga hurried over with a very pissed Emilio. My little one was used to only crying for barely a second, before having my nipple stuffed right into his mouth.

He was just as spoiled as Kazimir, and I didn't give a damn.

Emilio sobbed.

Olga frowned. "Oh, little nana."

She'd told me that long ago *nana* was a title of respect in the Ashanti kingdom, one of the powerful empires in what was now Ghana. Many had used the title for the king and other members of the royal family as a way to show respect and honor to them.

"Here you go, nana." Olga lay him in my arms, making sure that I had Emilio in a football hold position. His eyes were closed as he cried out some more. Tiny tears spilled from his eyes.

I rubbed his arm. "Oh, baby."

Emilio's little head rested on my hand while his body faced me.

Obviously smelling me, Emilio shifted his crying to sniveling. But, he still didn't open those lovely eyes.

"It's coming, baby." I slipped the front of my night gown down, pulled my breast out, and placed my nipple near his lips.

Emilio whimpered.

"I told you it was coming." I popped that nipple into his mouth.

He instantly latched on, his gums bumping against my areola as he sucked.

Smiling, Olga gazed at me. "Would you like some lavender tea or do you want the special herbs from Baba's jar?"

I considered the pain throbbing in my ass. "Mix it all together for me, please."

She nodded and rushed away.

“Thanks, Olga.” Sighing, I leaned back in the chair and sank into the now familiar sensation of Emilio feeding from me.

What would I do without Olga?

I hired her days after birthing my son. I was supposed to pick someone before he came, but I was too nervous about having just anybody around him.

Thankfully, Boris’s mother, Fatuma arrived with her friend Olga to help me out.

Of course Emilio would have one of the most unique nannies in the world.

Olga was from a Russian and African background, and around 5’9 tall with brown skin and thick gray braids that fell to her waist. In good shape, she had seriously toned arms that made me jealous and ready to get back in the gym. Every morning, she ran two miles rain, snow, or sun. After lunch, I could find her in the garden doing her hundred daily push-ups.

She said that she wanted to make it to one hundred years old. Therefore, she maintained a strict vegan diet, no smoking, and the only time she had alcohol was when she hung with Baba in the mansion’s interior garden on Sundays. That was when they played cards by one of the garden’s statues and gossiped about the staff.

She not only had experience in child care, she was also proficient in combat skills.

The hard knock life on the streets of Kapotnya had left a deep impression on her. During her 20s, she’d led her own gang in the district.

Once she became pregnant, she somewhat gave up her street days and spent her 30s and 40s, raising four kids. Granted, she explained to me that she still kicked somebody’s ass every now and then, when they tried her.

Now in her late 50s, Olga could knock out two guys coming after in less than three minutes with no weapon but her

hands and assemble a gun together in two minutes.

Kaz and I had tested her on both.

Next, Fatuma helped me test her on true nanny duties—preparing the bottles, properly changing diapers, bathing, and all types of other stuff that I had no idea how to do.

In fact, during Emilio's first month of living, Olga spent countless evenings showing Kazimir and I how to properly take care of our son.

A few times, Max would peek in and laugh at Kaz.

Then, Olga would force him to join us which always caused an *idiot diaper changing contest* between Kaz and Max.

Now six weeks had passed and Olga remained calm and composed as she took care of Emilio and me. Although she was new, she felt like a part of us. She definitely brought light to our days.

She had an adjoining room to his nursery and loved to sing to Emilio early in the morning.

Currently, I wasn't ready to be too far from Emilio yet.

When I was, I knew Olga would be able to take care of Emilio with ease, as well as provide a sense of security and protection.

I gazed down at Emilio.

His eyes remained closed as he fell into rhythmic suckling.

The first few days of breastfeeding caused lots of discomfort. By now the discomfort had faded and my nipples were accustomed to him. Plus, there was this great sense of peace.

I let out a long breath and gazed at the room.

We are a long way from Harlem.

Kaz found us a mega mansion in *Rublevka*. The world called this place Moscow's "Beverly Hills." It was an exclusive and luxurious neighborhood situated to the west of

the city center, and had long been a symbol of opulence, power, and prestige. It was a place of lavish mansions and meticulously manicured lawns. Many of the estates cost hundreds of millions of dollars.

Long ago, this area had been a favorite retreat for Russian nobility. Then in the Soviet era, the neighborhood became a preferred residential area for high-ranking officials and prominent members of the Communist Party.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Rublevka continued to maintain its status as the epitome of Moscow's high society.

Now numerous Russian celebrities, politicians, and business tycoons made this neighborhood their home.

And my son will grow up here. Wow.

I drank in the beauty of Emilio's nursery.

Fine art covered the walls, displaying smiling lions and playful mice, hanging on rising colorful balloons or romping around in a majestic garden.

Misha had gifted us with a custom-made crib with intricate woodwork, plush mattress, and a monitoring system in the bars, giving us the ability to see Emilio sleep at any angle.

Valentina bought me the comfortable nursing chair that I currently sat in. It had a button on the side to provide various massage settings.

I considered pressing one to ease the pain in my ass.

Why is it hurting again?

That odd dream returned to me—some guy fucking the shit out of my ass in dirt and calling me Lunita.

That was a dream...Right?

A dark shudder ran through me.

Emilio must have felt it because he stopped suckling for a second and then whimpered.

I rubbed his arm. "It's okay, baby. Mommy is just... thinking about something."

He returned to feeding, and I shoved the dream out of my head.

Minutes later, Olga returned with a tray of steaming tea and three bowls. One held fruit. The other had tiny cakes, while nuts filled the last one.

“Here you go.” Olga placed the tray on the small table next to my chair. “I brought some snacks to keep you energized and nourished early this morning.”

“Thank you.”

“Would you like me to light the fire place?”

I shook my head. “No. I’m warm.”

“You look exhausted. The Lion wanted me to wake him when you fed this morning, I can—”

“Don’t. Someone needs to get sleep in this place.” I slowly closed my eyes. “What would I do without you, Olga?”

“I must say that my time here has been an absolute blast, and it hasn’t even been two months yet.” She lowered into the rocking chair next to us. “I am truly in love with this little one.”

“Me too.” I yawned.

“Emily?” Concern laced her voice. “Would you like me to wash your feet?”

I opened my eyes. “What?”

“I already told the maid downstairs to clean the nursery of all the dirt on the carpet later today, but—”

“Dirt?” I leaned forward and gazed down at the carpet.

Sure enough, there was a trail of muddy footprints leading from the door to my chair.

What the fuck?

I raised one foot and assessed it. Dirt coated the entire bottom. Then, I checked my hands. Earlier, I hadn’t noticed the dirt in my fingernails, but now I did.

No. What’s going on?

Olga gave me a sad smile. “I can just get a warm cloth and wipe your feet.”

“Umm...” I cleared my throat. “That would be nice. And...wake up Blue. Tell her to call Dr. Stovall and have him come here as soon as possible.”

“Are you okay?”

“Y-yes. I just need...him to check something.”

“I sure will.” Olga rose from the rocking chair and rushed away.

Fuck.

I blinked.

I don't think that was a dream.

Chapter 1

Clues

Emily

In Blue's bedroom and on her bed, I lay half-naked on my stomach with only my robe on. The fabric was yanked high up over my waist, exposing my ass to Dr. Stovall.

This was by far the most embarrassing and awkward medical examination that I had ever had.

Please, tell me that I'm bugging.

I glanced over my shoulder and spotted Dr. Stovall's red-tinted face as he gently spread my buttocks with his gloved hands, lifted his tiny flashlight, and looked at my anus. "Hmmm."

"Hmmm?" I quirked.

"There is some slight tearing on the wrong side of the anal sphincter."

"Does that mean I had sex back there?"

Sighing, Dr. Stovall moved his hands from my behind and rose. "Emily, as I explained before, there is no clear medical way to tell if a person has had anal sex."

I yanked the robe down, slowly rolled over, and sat up. "But, I've seen tons of detective shows where the doctor is examining the dead girl and is saying that she has been raped or just had sex—"

"That is clearly television."

"But you did say that there was some tearing."

Dr. Stovall shut off the tiny flashlight. "Yes. That does look new."

"Which would suggest that I had anal sex?"

"I would say there was a seventy percent chance." Dr. Stovall pulled off the gloves and slung them in the small trash

can. “However, Emily, I believe this...question distresses me.”

I stood, making sure the robe fell around me. “How?”

“Have you been recently...sexually violated?”

I waved his question away. “Don’t worry about that. I just needed to make sure that I am not going crazy.”

“Have you been having suicidal thoughts or—?”

“No. It’s not like that.”

“Listen, Emily. If you are experiencing pain, you must take it easy and allow your body time to heal.”

“I’m doing that. I have a whole staff helping me, so please don’t think I’m stressing myself out.”

“Well, I can also assign you some over-the-counter pain medications, such as ibuprofen, to help alleviate discomfort, but due to your nursing, I don’t want you to—”

“No drugs.”

“Then, I recommend the use of a heating pad as well as taking warm baths to help relieve muscle soreness in...that area.” Dr. Stovall pulled out a small notepad and pen. “Also, Emily, I know of a nice doctor that could help you with this situation.”

I headed over to my clothes. “She studies anuses?”

“N-no.” Dr. Stovall looked like he was about to faint. “She studies the mind.”

“Oh, so you’re saying I’m crazy?”

“No. No.” Dr. Stovall scribbled stuff down on the pad. “I’ve just found that when some women have babies sometimes they deal with large amounts of stress—”

“Cool, Doc.” I headed to Blue’s bathroom. “Give the *head doctor’s* number to Blue. I will see you later.”

“Emily,” Dr. Stovall called after me. “Please, take care of yourself.”

“I’m trying.” I opened the bathroom door, entered, and shut the door behind me.

I had anal sex. What other reason could there be for the tearing, the feeling of pain, and even the actual experience of feeling fucked? Plus, there was dirt on my feet.

I took off my robe and rushed with dressing. I had to sneak to get this examination because I did not want Kaz worrying about me or being nosy.

Of course, I wouldn't keep any secrets from him, but I also had to find out what was going on for myself first.

If I just walked up to Kaz and told him my worries, he might tear up all of Moscow trying to figure out what happened.

Fuck. What am I going to do? The guy moaned Lunita.

Common sense would say that she took over our body while I was sleeping and went to have some fun.

But with who and where?

She hadn't gone too far off because once Emilio cried, I was able to feed him.

Can she do that? I thought I had most of the control.

Additionally, Emilio had a serious schedule, typically nursing every 2-3 hours. Each feeding session was around thirty minutes.

I stepped into my pants and buttoned them, thinking about the last memory I had before waking up in Emilio's nursery.

Wasn't I sleeping in Kaz's arms?

I grabbed my bra and put that on.

I began to remember.

We had kissed for several minutes, wishing we could make love. But, Dr. Stovall had told me that I needed to wait six weeks for my body to heal.

I had less than a week and Kaz and I were both counting down the days.

Meanwhile, Lunita was having an absolute blast last night, getting fucked in the ass.

I put on my shirt and buttoned it up. “I can’t fucking believe you did that, Lunita.”

A shiver ran through me.

I didn’t know if that was my reaction or hers.

All dressed, I faced the mirror and stared at my reflection, hoping she was watching.

“You can’t just have sex with people! This is *my* body, not yours.” I trembled again. “And don’t you know that, Kaz... when he finds out, he’s going to...”

My stomach twisted in pain.

“He’s going to kill the guy and probably his family too.” I ran my fingers through my hair.

Does she even hear me? Am I talking to myself?

I headed out of the bathroom.

Blue stood in the center of the room, holding an electronic tablet. “I had Anastasia walk Dr. Stovall out the back.”

“You think Kaz or K.D. saw him arrive or leave?”

“I did my best to make sure his visit was secret, but,” Blue shook her head. “David is getting better and better with the security around here. I believe he will find out.”

“K.D. can find out.” I headed over to her. “He just needs to discover it later so I have time to figure out what happened to me last night.”

“About that?” Frowning, Blue handed me the tablet. “I believe I should return to doing night guarding for you.”

“No. You can’t do night guard duty.” I looked at the screen. The video was paused. All I could see was an image of me walking barefoot in my white gown. “I want you getting your sleep. You have the best aim and eyes on my team. You serve best during the day.”

Blue frowned. “However, we can do a temporary phase of my standing outside your door or at least being woken up whenever Lunita takes over.”

I looked up at Blue. “You really think she took over last night?”

“Yes.” Blue pointed to the tablet.

Nervous, I pressed the screen.

There, I walked down the hall, but it wasn't me. The pace was odd and fast. I kept placing my feet in haphazard ways. I appeared intoxicated on drugs.

Two of my guards followed me, glancing back and forth at each other.

They know something is wrong. Why didn't they wake up Blue or Kaz?

The video shifted to my stopping in front of the garden's double glass doors.

Then, I spoke, but it wasn't my voice. It was lighter, childish, and shaky.

“I...am going...in the garden.” I, or should I say Lunita, pointed at one of the guards. “So...you stay.”

The guards nodded.

A dark chuckle left her. “Bye bye now.”

Fuck. That's...Lunita?

Then, she disappeared into the glass double doors leading to the mansion's indoor garden.

That explains the dirt on my feet, hands, and even in the odd dream that was not a fucking dream.

I handed Blue the tablet. “Let's hit the garden. There must be answers there.”

Blue rushed to the door and opened it.

I left. “Thanks for letting me use your room for this secret mission.”

Blue got on my right. “No problem.”

Silent, Giorgio began walking on my left.

Usually, he had a pleasant morning greeting for me. Additionally, he had showed up late. This told me that something must have gone down last night between Blue and him, or even worse, K.D. and him.

I would have asked, but it didn't matter right now.

I had my own shit to figure out today.

I glanced at my watch. "Blue, I've got about an hour before Emilio will be hungry again. And maybe thirty minutes before Kaz will start searching for me and wondering why I didn't show up at breakfast."

Blue nodded. "Paolo will also be looking for you too."

I sighed. "The males in my life."

Blue smirked. "We'll get answers and then have you back with them in no time."

The garden, Lunita? Who were you fucking in there?

Chapter 2

The Garden

Emily

Knowing I didn't have much time, I hurried to the garden. With each step, I replayed that footage of Lunita in my mind.

How did you know that you could go to the garden by yourself and get fucked?

That was too much of a coincidence to stroll through an indoor garden and have dick in our *ass* minutes later.

You had been planning this for a while?

A shudder of terror went through me.

If Lunita had time to plan an evening sexual rendezvous, then that meant she had been out a few times courting some guy around the mansion.

Was he a staff member or the Brotherhood? No way.

My fingers shook.

Someone from Harlem Crew? Who could be so stupid to fuck me while the Lion slept?

I headed toward the double glass doors leading to the indoor garden.

When we purchased this massive property, the first thing that I wanted was an indoor garden placed inside. I thought nature would be a great space for Paolo and me to heal. Although it snowed on the outside, we could plant flowers and pretend it was spring.

K.D. had gone through great feats to rush with the huge project. Construction on the massive place started days after we moved in. Five hundred square feet was cleared away. It was the size of a small apartment. Also, the ceiling had been replaced with glass.

A week later, the space was ready for ten gardeners to do their magic.

Baba, Paolo, and I would show up with them during the day, trying to help. We did little things, but mostly got in the professionals' way.

So much needed to be executed—laying down soil, putting in plants, trees, bushes, and flowers. Once they created the miracle space, K.D. kept one gardener on for full-time to maintain the space—pruning, watering, and fertilizing.

The gardener had a small studio apartment with his door being within one of the garden's walls.

Wait.

I stopped in front of the glass doors.

Lunita...did you fuck the gardener?

I'd never given the man much thought. Every now and then, I caught the maids whispering about how sexy he was. Even Valentina had made a remark about possibly trying to fuck him one day.

Meanwhile, I had focused on getting the mansion ready for Emilio and making sure that Lunita didn't come out. Any other remaining time was given to Paolo and Kaz.

Please, don't say it's the gardener.

Blue reached out to touch the knobs.

“No.” I shook my head. “I'm going in by myself.”

Blue frowned. “Emily, I should be by your side—”

“I'm no longer pregnant. Men are guarding the house's outside perimeter. Plus, there's only a gardener inside. If he bothers me, I'm fucking him up.”

Blue glanced Giorgio's way.

He nodded. “The Mouse can definitely handle herself against a gardener.”

Blue frowned.

“Thank you, Butler.” I grabbed the knob, opened it, and headed inside.

Walking in was like entering a lush paradise of greenery, exotic flowers, and ornate water features. The garden was carefully manicured and pruned, with stone pathways winding through the plants and bushes that were carefully trimmed, with vibrant green leaves.

Soft grass covered the ground, feeling like carpet on the fingertips. Water trickled along elaborate lion and mouse statues scattered around the space.

Baba had a large bench in the far back where she enjoyed reading stories to Paolo in the afternoon. Further away, there was a small white table with chairs near the lilacs for Baba and Olga’s Sunday card game.

Some mornings, I brought Emilio out here to feed, enjoying the bright colorful view.

At night, the space was well-lit, with moonlight streaming in through large windows and skylights. Anytime Max was visiting, he chose to smoke in here rather than go outside into the snowy cold.

Today, bright sunlight flooded through the glass ceiling.

Off on the side, the gardener watered bushes of pink roses with no shirt on. He had his back to me as he whistled.

I slowly strolled down the path, keeping space between us.

Was it him?

I headed over to Kaz’s favorite part of the garden and put my attention there.

How do I figure this out?

I checked my watch.

I must hurry.

I gazed at the rare Russian flowers in this space. There was the Siberian Iris, native to Russia. It had tall stems with large, brightly colored flowers.

Next was the Russian larkspur which was Kaz's mother's favorite flower. It had spikes of blue, purple, and white blooms.

I glanced over my shoulder.

Shit.

The gardener now faced me as he watered. A wicked smirk spread across his face.

Am I tripping, or is he gazing at me like he knows how I look naked?

I swallowed and strolled along the Monkshood flowers, also native to Russia. These were the ones that Paolo loved to point at due to their hooded purple petals.

I glanced back at the gardener.

He was tall with blond hair and tattoos on his toned arms.

Everyone is right. He's not bad looking at all.

He had a square jawed face and his lips were sharpened by a blond goatee.

Okay. I see why everyone is whispering about him.

The gardener definitely had rippling abs and his eyes were these warm pools of brown.

Our gazes locked, and then he winked and licked his lips.

Oh. Hell no. You better stop that.

I widened my eyes.

With his free hand, he gestured toward the corner of the garden where several bushes of red roses were.

What?

A devilish grin spread on his face as he turned off the water, set the hose down, and headed over.

Fuck. Lunita...tell me you are not messing with him.

I didn't want to go over there and confirm it. Everything in me said to just abort the mission. But if she were fucking him

last night, then she would be doing it again and again. Soon, K.D. would discover it, and then Kaz would roar.

Damn it.

I dragged myself in that direction, feeling like a zombie in some surreal world.

Please no.

I got closer, gazed up at the ceilings, and spotted a camera on each wall, making it four.

But, there's monitoring in here. How could they have done it?

The gardener continued toward the rose bushes and then got behind them.

Once I got near, I spotted that a corner and small space was back there. It must have been ten feet long and wide. It was small and completely out of the cameras' view.

Well...that's how the cameras didn't catch them. If...I'm even right.

The gardener walked into that space and leaned against the wall.

Shit.

I increased my speed.

That devilish smirk deepened. A Russian accent laced his voice. "I did not expect you to come during the day, Lunita."

Motherfucker.

I blinked and headed over to him. "You...didn't?"

"No." He licked his lips. "But, then you must feel the heat of our love rippling through your heart too. Just like I did when I woke up this morning."

Oh fuck.

I held up my hands and stopped three feet in front of him. "Okay. So hold on. We really had sex?"

He blinked. "What do you mean?"

I tensed.

He walked over to me.

“Stay right there.” I placed one hand in front of me.

“Lunita, is something wrong?”

Oh God. Oh God.

My hands shook. I lowered it. “So...I...woke up this morning and my head was a bit...foggy on what happened last night.”

“Oh?”

“Yes.”

“Shall I remind you.” He tried to close the distance between us.

“Oh God no! Stay there.” Freaking out, I glanced over my shoulder as if Kaz somehow knew and was close to storming into the garden. “Okay. Okay.”

My heart pounded in my chest.

“Lunita—”

“Please, don’t call me that.”

“But, you told me to start calling you that.”

“Don’t anymore.” I trembled. “We had sex last night?”

“I would not call that sex.” He gave me a lusty smile. “I would say that we made love.”

Goddamn it, Lunita. Are you trying to get us killed?

I stepped back. “In the garden?”

“Right here.” He gestured around with his hands. “This is the magical place. It is where the cameras would not catch us.”

“And...” I looked at the ground. “You had sex in my... behind?”

“I did and I really enjoyed it.”

No. No. This can’t be happening.

I held the sides of my head with both hands. “H-how many times...have we—?”

“Made love?”

“Yes.”

“Last night was the first time.” The gardener gave me an odd look. “Are you okay, Lunita?”

“Yes. I’m fine.” I began to pace in that small space. “Okay. So, then...anything else?”

“What do you mean?”

“Kissing or licking or oh god...sucking?” I stopped and stared at him. “I didn’t suck your dick. Right?”

“You most definitely have—”

“Oh, God.” I doubled over and vomited. Sludge spilled from my throat. The taste of rotten fruit coated my tongue.

“Lunita, let me get you some water!” The gardener rushed away.

I didn’t even know his damn name and apparently I had his dick in my mouth.

What am I going to do?

The world began spinning around me.

This is so fucked up.

I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand.

This entire situation was very dangerous.

My heart ached for Kaz. We were beginning a new life together. He had been patient and understanding with my disorder and this whole horrible situation. He had wrapped me in his love.

And now Lunita was fucking the gardener!

How much more patience and understanding would Kaz have with this situation?

Fear rocked through my body. My eyes watered.

A few minutes later the gardener returned with a glass of water. “Here. Drink.”

I grabbed the glass, took a long sip and sat down in the dirt, several feet from my vomit. “I have to think.”

“About us running away?”

“Hell no.” I placed the glass on the ground next to me. “We are not running away together.”

“No?”

“Hell no.”

He touched his chest as if his heart were breaking. “But... what did I do?”

“Nothing. Well, you did do something but...” I rubbed my head. “Why would you fuck me? You know who the Lion is right?”

“You said that he never made love to you and that you were so lonely.”

“Lunita said that shit, not me.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Doesn’t matter.” I rose from the ground. “We have to act now, before things get really bloody.”

The gardener frowned. “Is he threatening you or—?”

“Listen. We have to get *you* the fuck out of here.” I pulled out my phone and dialed Blue.

“Why do *I* have to leave?”

“Because you fucked me.” I shook my head. “Were you suicidal? I don’t even understand.”

“I am in love with you.” He began to walk over to me. “*We* are in love—”

“No. No. No.” I backed up. “Stay right there.”

“Lunita, you’re scaring me.”

You should be scared.

Blue answered, “Yes, Emily?”

“It was the gardener. Get a lot of Harlem Crew to come in here and help him pack. We have to get him out of Russia in no less than an hour.” I stepped close to the rose bushes. “Don’t tell them shit.”

“Of course not. I am sending Giorgio to get them—”

“Fast, Blue. And when that is done, come in here.” I hung up before she could say anything else.

“I do not understand.” The gardener’s eyes watered.

Goddamn it. He really does love Lunita.

Chills ran up my spine.

If he loves her this much...does she love him?

I felt like it was even more reason to make sure the gardener was safe.

Of course many would disagree. He had disrespected Kaz that was for sure. That part pissed me off.

But Lunita...she must have loved him. She must have found some form of comfort in his arms. And Lunita was the dark part of me. Regardless of how violated I felt or wrong it was, her feelings needed to also be respected.

Tears left the gardener’s eyes. “Please, come with me. I can’t live without you—”

“I can’t do that.”

“I really don’t understand.”

“Listen. I don’t have time for you to understand.” I headed off to where his apartment door stood. “Get all of your stuff packed.”

With a confused expression, he followed me.

I put my phone in my pocket. “Pack as much as you can in fifteen minutes. I’ll have some people helping you—”

“Does *he* know?” His bottom lip quivered.

“He doesn’t know now, but he will know in a few hours
—”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I’m going to tell him once you’re out of Russia.”

His voice screeched. “Why would you tell him?”

“Because it’s fucked up and he must know.”

Right before we got to his door, he grabbed my arm. “Do not tell him. Pack and run off with me.”

“Boy, if you don’t get your hands off me.” I shook his grip away. “You need to focus on staying alive today. Do you understand?”

“But—”

“There are no buts!” I grabbed the knob, twisted, and opened it. “And there is no *us*. Get your ass in there and pack your shit.”

More tears left his eyes as he stared at me in shock.

Fuck. This isn’t fair to him. He didn’t know...

I calmed myself. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have yelled at you.”

“Can we at least talk, Lunita?”

“No. We only have time for you to get out of here.”

Blue entered the garden and jogged our way.

I pointed to Blue. “She’s going to be working to get you out of Russia today. Just listen to what she says.”

He wiped the tears away. “And will you be coming with me?”

“No. I explained that already.” I gritted my teeth. “Listen. This is fucked up. Think of it like this...umm...like I’m a twin and you were with one twin, but now I’m the main twin and I’m shutting it all down.”

“What? You’re a twin?”

“Fuck. Forget it about.” I gestured at the opening to his place. “Just go pack everything.”

He dragged himself inside.

Blue got to me. “It was the gardener?”

“Definitely.”

She frowned. “I’m so sorry. I should have had more guards on you at night—”

“Don’t say sorry, just help me get this shit fixed. Lunita wouldn’t want him dead, and I don’t want her coming out taking revenge on us because he’s dead.”

“Okay.”

“Meanwhile, Kaz will not give a fuck about how Lunita feels. Therefore, we have to get the gardener out of Russia before I tell Kaz which means—”

“Making sure David doesn’t find out either.”

“Damn right. K.D. will snitch.” I looked inside, scared to enter. “Also, find out all of his close family members too—parents, siblings, children, and any ex-spouses.”

“Alright.”

“We need to get them out of Russia too.”

“Got it.” Blue took her phone out. “How much time do you think we have?”

“If we can truly keep this under Kaz and K.D.’s eyes, then I’ll wait to tell him this evening.” I checked my watch.

“Regardless, get the gardener out of the country first, use a fake passport if you can. Whatever it takes to make him disappear. Then, work on doing the same with any close family members.”

All I could picture was Kaz torturing his innocent relatives for information.

Jesus Christ. What is Kaz going to do? And, how is he going to take it?

I shook in fear. “A-and...um...call Dr. Stovall back here. Make sure that he has STD tests for a man and a woman. Bring him in through the garden.”

Blue began typing into the phone. “You want the gardener checked first?”

“Yes.” I headed off. “Then, grab me so I can do the tests. I have to go check on Emilio and Paolo. I must make everything look normal, but keep texting me and don’t say too much in the messages.”

Shit. Shit. Shit.

I rushed off, pulled my phone out, and dialed Max. If anyone could help me with this, it would have to be him.

Max answered on the first ring. “Yo. You missing me? Aren’t you?”

“Of course I am, but that’s not why I’m calling.”

“What did your ass do now?”

“It wasn’t me this time, Max.”

“Then, Lunita?”

“Well, yeah—”

“Same thing.”

I rolled my eyes and told him everything as I hurried to Emilio’s nursery. I did my best to give a few code words here and there, making sure no one heard me.

Before I could finish, Max shrieked on the other line. “You fucked the gardener?!”

“Would you lower your voice.”

“It’s not like the fucking Lion is next to me! Did you fuck the gardener or not?”

“Lunita did.”

“Yo.”

“So, I have our crew about to take him to the airport—”

“Fuck him. *You* need to be at the damn airport too—”

“What?”

“Man, get your ass at the airport. I’m about to be on the next plane in ten fucking minutes to grab you. We’ll go off to Nigeria. I know some people that will hide us.” A muffled sound came on the other side as if Max moved the phone from his mouth. “Eh, homey, can I grab your plane for a minute? Em is in some bullshit down in Moscow.”

What the fuck?

“Cool, man.” Max’s voice came back on the line. “Yo. Pack your bags as well as Lil P and Max jr. Then, get to the airport. I’ve got Misha’s plane.”

“Wait. Hold on. I can’t just leave Moscow with Paolo and Emilio. Kaz would know and if he wouldn’t let *me* leave long ago, he damn sure isn’t letting me go with his newborn son.”

“Goddamn it, Em! Just listen to what I’m saying—”

“Don’t yell at me.”

“I leave for a few weeks and you fuck the gardener. What kind of bullshit is that?”

I spoke through clenched teeth, “I didn’t do it. *Lunita* did.”

“Well, you better make sure Lunita’s crazy ass is the one who tells him, and she better be holding a knife because he’s not going to take it well—”

“Okay, you’re scaring me. I need advice not—”

“Boris and I are heading there on Misha’s plane. St. Petersburg to Moscow is only an hour and half. Don’t say shit until I get there.”

“Wait. I told you to not let Boris enter Russia—”

“I needed his ass to help me with some more of Misha’s shit so—”

“He has to stay out of Russia, if Kaz knows he is here—”

“You need to worry about saving *yourself*, not Boris—”

“Please, don’t bring Boris here. Promise me.”

“Come on, Em.” Max groaned in annoyance. “I need all the guns I can get.”

“No one is shooting Kaz.”

“You let the gardener hit that ass. Now, all types of bombs and shit are going off tonight. You need guns.”

“I didn’t let him hit it, Lunita did.”

“Unfortunately, Lunita and you got the same pussy, so return to my original statement of bombs happening. Damn, Em. Next time make sure Lunita fucks a bigger Russian boss. What the fuck is the gardener going to do, when Kaz come for him? Prune is ass to death?”

“There is not going to be a next time and...just...get here, Max.”

“You scared?”

My bottom lip quivered. “Yes.”

“Don’t worry. Papi’s coming.” Max hung up.

I rolled my eyes and raced up the stairs.

Chapter 3

Puzzle Pieces

Kazimir

On the TV screen in front of me, Misha sat there with his face contorted in a mocking scowl. “Are we done, Kazimir?”

You’re lucky you’re not in this room.

King David stirred next to me, clearly knowing I was close to throwing that TV screen out of the window.

Rage coursed through my veins.

“Are we done?” I placed my hands on the desk and threaded my fingers. “No. We are not.”

Misha let out an exasperated breath.

“I want you to do as I ask, that means instead of excuses, you say, ‘Yes, Kazimir. I will have it done by the end of the week.’”

“I am busy, and the request is the highest level of asinine impropriety.”

“Your use of big words will not get you out of my request —”

“*Asinine* means extremely or utterly foolish or silly and *impropriety* means a clear failure to observe reasonable social standards.”

“Who’s social standards?”

“The world’s standards.”

“I asked you to do *one* thing—”

“One thing?!” Misha widened his eyes. “You call me every day about this or that like I am your fucking technology wizard, demanding I do impossible things that only a genius could do, lucky I am that, However, I am done—”

“But, today it has been *one* thing—”

“Yes. One thing I will not do.”

I spoke through clenched teeth, “Why not?”

“I am not going to convince Maxwell to order Boris to return to Moscow.”

“Because?”

Misha raised his voice. “Maxwell doesn’t want Boris to die!”

I leaned my head to the side. “Who said I would kill Boris?”

“No one said it, but anyone with half of a brain could surmise that you do not plan to throw Boris a big surprise party.”

“It could be a party.” I shrugged. “One lathered in blood.”

Misha frowned. “Are we done?”

That fucking question again.

I wished I could rip it out of his throat and beat him with it.

I gritted my teeth, feeling close to exploding. “No. We are not done.”

Misha held out his hands. “What is the other manner of business?”

“What were you doing in Tokyo?”

Misha rolled his eyes. “We agreed that you would let me handle the Dragon—”

“I did not agree to you doing *anything* with the Dragon—”

“Perhaps, not with the Dragon, but we agreed that when I had complications outside of the Brotherhood—”

“You are not outside of the Brotherhood. Your bloodline is firmly rooted at the very center of the Brotherhood.” I raised one angry finger. “Thus, anything you do results in some sort of dangerous rippling effect coming my way.”

Misha’s expression of annoyance shifted to anger as he glared at me.

Good. Be mad.

Misha spoke, "I am handling it."

"Still?"

"There's some last things that need to be handled."

"The news reported bombs." I frowned. "Was that *your* handiwork?"

"Do you really want to question *me* about bombs?"

"You know what?" I gripped the edge of the desk. "Instead of Boris coming, perhaps *you* should come and visit."

Misha crossed his arms over his chest. "Is that some sort of physical threat?"

"Lions do not make threats."

Misha rolled his eyes. "Are we done?"

Hot fury boiled in my veins as I imagined smashing his head into a window, watching his eyes shatter and the glass raining down in a hail of razor sharp blades. A perverse smile danced across my face as I dreamed of how his blood would splatter on my office walls.

David stepped forward with caution, as if he were tiptoeing through a minefield, before finally mustering the courage to break the eerie silence. "Excuse me, Misha, but Kazimir does have a new task that needs to be strategized for this year, and he expects all the top people to be involved."

Misha turned his attention to David. "And what is that?"

David cleared his throat. "Kazimir wants to assassinate the Russian President and replace him with the rebel leader—"

"I am now ending this call."

David tried to talk.

The screen went black.

I glared at the TV. "I am going to kill him."

"That is your cousin. I believe that means that you cannot kill him."

“We will see about that.” I rose from the desk and headed off to the door. “Did you find out why Emily didn’t show up for breakfast this morning?”

“I have puzzle pieces, but not a clear and complete picture of what is going on.”

I stopped at the door. “Tell me about those puzzle pieces.”

“Emily had one of her people pick up Dr. Stovall and give her an emergency exam.”

“Dr. Stovall came here this morning?”

“Yes, but he assessed Emily in Blue’s room.”

I touched my chin and rubbed it.

This morning, I woke up to an empty bed. That wasn’t an odd occurrence. Emilio constantly required my mouse’s attention. Therefore, I usually washed my face and hands, and then headed to the nursery to help out where I could.

But when I arrived, Olga rocked a sleeping Emilio in her arms and my mouse was nowhere to be found.

Next, I checked Paolo’s bedroom. He slept in a ball folded up in tons of blankets. Yet, there was no mouse.

Confused, I checked all of the other places I’d found her before—the gym, indoor garden, the art studio, her office, and even the large barracks full of Harlem Crew at the far back of the estates.

Again, she was nowhere to be found.

What pissed me off the most was that I couldn’t scream for her as usual because I didn’t want to wake up Emilio or Paolo.

Therefore, I stormed around the property like an idiot in nothing but my pajama pants and leather slippers, searching for my mouse.

David met up me with later, vowing to take over my search so I could shower and get dressed.

Once clean and suited up, I went down to breakfast, confident my mouse would be there.

She wasn't.

Paolo and I ate our pancakes in mostly silence, covering them in blueberry jam and sour cream topping.

The only time the boy talked was when he turned my way, pouted, and muttered, "*Mysh?*"

All I could do was shrug in annoyance.

Baba grabbed him after breakfast, and I headed to my office, ready to kill someone. Unfortunately for her, Misha had not improved my mood.

Now David claimed that Emily was with Dr. Stovall. My heart sank in a pool of guilt. I'd been ready to yell at her when she showed up.

Still rubbing my chin, I turned to him. "You think she's dealing with...some...medical...lady situation?"

David nodded. "I considered that."

"Perhaps, she's embarrassed about whatever it is." I lowered my hand. "The pussy has all types of inner workings and magical things going on within the inside. It creates life."

David nodded again. "That was why I backed up on peering too deeply into everything when I heard about Dr. Stovall."

"O-kay."

"So, Dr. Stovall leaves, and I moved on to preparing your meeting with Misha, but then other things occurred."

"Other things?"

"Before Dr. Stovall left, Blue rushed to the security room and pulled video footage."

I quirked my brows. "What footage?"

"She ordered them to give her any video of everything happening last night. She also told them not to tell you or me that she got it."

"But they *did* tell you?"

“No.” David shook his head. “I have a secret set of people monitoring the security teams that monitor the estate.”

I blinked.

“Therefore, I watched the footage of her covertly going to get the footage.”

I smiled. “You may be worse than Misha now.”

“I believe so.” David put his hands into his pocket and let out a long breath. “The puzzle pieces get more confusing, Kazimir.”

“Tell me more.”

“Tons of Harlem Crew rushed to the garden.”

“O-kay.”

“And, instead of walking in through the garden’s side entrance, they took the old tunnels under the property connecting the house to their barracks.”

“You have cameras in the tunnels?”

“Yes.”

“My mouse asked you not to put cameras in the tunnel and threatened you with bodily harm if you did.”

“I was not going to do it, but then I thought of someone using those very tunnels to grab Emilio or her, and figured I could survive the mouse’s beating compared to your roar.”

“You figured correctly.” I nodded. “Back to the puzzle pieces.”

“Yes.”

I leaned my head to the side. “Harlem Crew didn’t want anyone knowing that they were coming into the house. Why not?”

“Again, another confusing puzzle making my mind spin.” David touched his head. “However, my secret monitors caught them hurrying into the garden.”

“The big one in the house?”

“Yes.”

“What would be the emergency in the garden?”

“Another puzzle.”

The line in my jaw clenched. “Anything else?”

David inched back, telling me that I wouldn’t like the next piece.

I growled. “What?”

“So...”

“Spit it out.”

“Dr. Stovall was called back.”

“For more...lady part stuff?”

“Not this time.” David took one hand out of his pocket and scratched his head. “Dr. Stovall was snuck into the garden. They even had a hooded jacket on his head and sunglasses as if I could not recognize short and portly Dr. Stovall in a clear disguise.”

Mysh, what are you doing? What are you trying to hide from me?

I gazed off at the window in front of me.

Outside snow fell, covering the ground in blankets of white.

David continued, “I have cameras in the gardener’s apartment.”

“Was Emily in there?”

“No. At this time, she returned to the nursery and fed Emilio. Paolo was in the nursery with her, drinking his milk.”

Once Emilio was born, Paolo made sure to be even closer to my mouse as if he were nervous he was going to be replaced. Therefore, if Paolo was up and Emilio was hungry, she let the boy lean against her in the nursing chair while she breastfed our son.

It was the only time Paolo wanted milk too. Perhaps, he wanted to feel like he was a part of the feeding as well.

I turned to David. “My mouse is in the nursery room while Dr. Stovall is in the garden?”

“Yes.”

“Then, who is Dr. Stovall examining? Blue?”

David shook his head. “The doctor was taking samples from the gardener.”

I raised my eyebrows. “What sort of samples?”

David cleared his throat. “The doctor pulled out this long stick with a thin swab on the end and then...”

“Yes?”

“It looked like he stuck it in the hole of the gardener’s penis.”

I stared at David, waiting for him to explain more.

When he didn’t, I glared. “David?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I am now very confused.” I looked around as if something in the room could give me an answer. “My mouse gets checked by the doctor this morning. Then, she has the gardener’s penis checked?”

“That is my understanding.”

I grabbed the knob, opened the door, and headed away.

I didn’t know what was going on, but my mouse and the gardener’s penis was never to be in the same line of questioning. I didn’t even want to think too much of what could be going on because I didn’t want to kill David or any staff member that happened to stumble by. And I definitely didn’t want to yell at my mouse without having the *full* picture.

But...

No. It’s not that. My mouse is loyal and smart. She would never. It will all make sense.

David got to my side.

I stormed down the hall. “First, we go to the gardener because my mouse is clearly playing some sort of game today —”

“We cannot.”

I growled. “Why not?”

“The gardener was rushed off the property.”

I stopped and turned to him. “What?”

“After Dr. Stovall’s examination, Giorgio and several of Harlem Crew rushed the gardener and Dr. Stovall away.”

I sneered. “But, do you have men on them?”

“Of course.”

My nerves flared. “Where are they now?”

“Airport.”

“My mouse is trying to get him out of Moscow?”

“Actually, she’s trying to get him out of *Russia*.”

No. Don’t think it. There’s a reason for this.

Rage coursed through me. “Do you know where the gardener’s plane is heading?”

David nodded. “They bought him a one-way ticket to Santiago, Chile.”

“South America?” I widened my eyes. “So, she’s trying to get him as far away from this continent as possible.”

Far away from me...

Whatever the mystery was, it wasn’t looking good for the gardener’s innocence in this situation. I knew my mouse well and never did she want me to kill someone.

And if she thought I was going to take the gardener’s life, then it meant that he had done something to her or my son.

Sneering, I fisted my hands at my side.

And she got the gardener's penis checked? Nothing about that can be good at all.

David wiped beads of sweat off his face. Clearly, his thinking was going down the same lane my brain was going.

I put my attention back on David. "Men are sitting with him at the gate?"

"They are. Five Harlem Crew soldiers and Giorgio. They purchased tickets to sit with him, but none of them checked bags or looked to be going anywhere."

"They just want to make sure he gets on the plane."

"I believe so."

"Any more tickets available?"

"No, sir." David gave me a sad smile. "While you were talking with Misha, I bought the rest of the seats up on the flight. We also have ten men dressed in casual clothing and heading to the airport. They will be waiting at the gate too."

I let out a long breath. "David."

"Yes, Kazimir."

"You deserve a raise, promotion, and a long vacation."

"I do."

"Back to the gardener."

"He will get on the plane. I do not know how far Harlem Crew will take things, but I doubt they will take it as far as still being on the plane during take-off. I am sure Giorgio will definitely get off the plane."

"They will probably walk the gardener on, watch him buckle up, and then head away."

"Then, our people will grab the gardener and sneak him off without the mouse knowing."

I placed my hand on David's shoulder. "You do that and bring this gardener back to the property, but hide him in the cells below the house."

"My thoughts exactly."

I patted his shoulder and walked away. “Good.”

David returned to my side.

I ran my fingers through my hair. “Also, have someone grab Dr. Stovall. I want to talk to him.”

“Once he took the samples from the gardener, Dr. Stovall disappeared from Moscow. I cannot find him anywhere. His wife is gone too.”

Very smart, mysh.

I picked up my stride. “Where’s my mouse?”

“She left.”

“Left the property?!” I walked faster.

“Blue explained that Baba, Paolo, and her went to a surprise orchestra concert. Apparently, she left several bottles of breast milk with Olga to care for Emilio, and there’s twenty men from Harlem Crew guarding the outside of his nursery.”

I spoke through clenched teeth, “A surprise fucking orchestra?”

“Yes. However, I had our team hack into the ticket purchases. There is an orchestra concert being held for children by the Moscow Philharmonic Society at the Tchaikovsky Concert Hall right now.”

“Get the helicopter ready!”

Chapter 4

A Dangerous Chess Game

Emily

As we entered the concert hall, haunting questions spun in my head.

Am I the original? Or is it Lunita who truly owns our body?

The very idea gave me chills, because then...that would mean that I was the alter.

That would mean that...I wasn't real.

I shouldn't even be thinking this way. It could drive me even crazier, but still it was hard not to wonder after what I had learned today.

She shouldn't have this much control? I thought it was only certain times when she would come out?

These questions had me fucked up in the head.

Forget about sex with the gardener. I couldn't get over the fact that Lunita had been taking control of my body under my nose once again.

Had I been too stressed, after having Emilio?

I didn't think so.

Granted, I'd been super exhausted with Emilio. Being a new mother had been taking a lot out of me. But I also had a chef, nanny, guards, and Blue. More than most new mothers possessed. Tons of support. That shouldn't have been the trigger to let Lunita loose.

Why does it feel like she has more control over my body than me?

I checked my watch. Max and more of Harlem Crew had already hopped on Misha's plane a while ago. They should arrive at the property in less than two hours. I didn't know

how Max could truly help, but it was always nice to have him by my side when facing something this scary.

What will Kaz do? How will he react?

I pulled out my phone and checked to see if Olga messaged me. The screen showed no missed calls or texts.

Will Emilio be okay? God, why did I do this? Better yet, why did Lunita do that?

There was quite a crowd in Tchaikovsky Concert Hall this afternoon. Tons of parents guided their kids into the massive space. Everyone was dressed to impress, even the little ones had the cutest suits.

Baba walked on my right, donning a nice black dress. She'd been shocked by my outing, but rushed to get ready.

I held Paolo's hand on my left. He had on a nice green suit due to that being his favorite color. Every few steps he licked the violin shaped lollipop he was holding.

I smiled at him. "Is that good?"

"Yummy." He held the lollipop up to me. "Taste."

"Oh, no baby."

I can't. We have no idea where my mouth has been.

Blue led us down the aisle, searching for our row. She had told me that David had already inquired about our whereabouts when we drove up to the Hall. The motherfucker was becoming too damned good to sneak around.

Clearly, that was bittersweet. I wanted Kaz to have the best number one in history. I just didn't want that number one to also beat me in maneuvering around Kaz.

Fucking K.D. How did he know we were even gone?

We had snuck through the tunnels. Baba thought it was odd, but she went with it, loving the idea of leaving the property for a while and getting a classical experience.

"Oh my." Baba smiled. "I have not been here since the 80s. You know it was named after the famous Russian

composer Pyotr Tchaikovsky?”

“I didn’t.” I checked my phone, wondering if Olga had anything to report. I’d told her to let me know every thirty minutes how Emilio was doing and even send a picture.

I should have said every ten minutes. He might need me.

Up ahead on the stage, the large orchestra tuned their instruments.

Paolo’s gestured with his lollipop at the musicians.
“Music, *mysh*.”

“Yes, baby.” I put the phone away. “It’s going to be lots of good music today.”

I glanced over my shoulder, making sure only Harlem Crew was behind us.

Kaz might show up. Or will he buy the whole surprise concert thing? Maybe, he doesn’t suspect anything is going on.

I gazed around at the space. The interior was quite unique, featuring distinctive curved ceiling and walls.

Baba’s voice held excitement. “This concert hall is the most prestigious in Russia. It holds the best events. How did you even find out about this concert?”

I checked my right. “Blue found it for me.”

“Really? You were interested in hearing music today?”

I glanced on my left. “Yep. I just needed an escape.”

A really big escape.

Baba chuckled. “Perfect. Me too. I had the most horrid nightmare last night.”

“Oh yeah?”

Finally, Blue stopped at the fourth row and gestured for us to get in.

I led Paolo forward. “What was the nightmare about, Baba?”

“Oh, Emily. I dreamed that my beautiful white bench in the garden dripped with blood.”

I froze at the front of the row.

Baba lowered her voice. “And all I heard was a man screaming over and over as more blood kept spraying. Then, Olga’s tea cup appeared and cracked in the center. Next, a woman sobbed.”

I swallowed. “T-the garden...umm in the mansion?”

“Yes.” Baba looked down at Paolo and spoke in Russian. “*Are you ready for a musical adventure?*”

“Yes, Baba.”

“*Give me that lollipop.*” Baba chuckled. “*You don’t need it. You are already too sweet.*”

Paolo chuckled and began to guard the lollipop with his life.

“Okay, Baba.” I turned to her. “About that nightmare. It was a man screaming—?”

“Yes, Emily.”

“Your seat is here, Baba.” Blue read the tickets and then pointed. “Emily and Paolo you are next to her. I have a few seats for our men on your left and right. We have the whole row.”

“Oh good.” Baba clapped and lowered into her seat. “Now we can all enjoy some class for today and get an escape from all the violence and guns.”

Paolo sat between us and licked on that violin lollipop.

I leaned in and whispered to Baba, “You had that nightmare last night?”

“Yes, Emily. But, when I went to the garden everything was fine. I didn’t feel anything, but romantic energy rising from the beautiful flowers—”

“Sure, but could that be a vision?”

“A vision of what?”

“Someone getting killed in the garden?”

Baba widened her eyes. “Emily, can we enjoy this lovely concert and not talk about this in front of tiny ears?”

She pointed to Paolo.

I rolled my eyes. “Was it a vision or not?”

“I have not had a vision pertaining to anything dealing with the Lion or you in months.”

“Then, what could it be?”

“A nightmare. You know that I have bad dreams just like anyone else.” She eyed me. “Unless...there is something on your mind.”

I pursed my lips together, faced the stage, and leaned back in my chair.

That was a fucking vision. What else could it be?

Blue lowered into her seat next to me.

I leaned her way. “Have you heard anything at the airport?”

“They’re with Konstantin at the—”

“Who the fuck is Konstantin?”

“That’s the gardener’s name.”

Jesus. I had a Konstantin’s dick in my mouth? What the fuck kind of dumb ass name is that?

Blue handed me a concert program. “Our men are with Konstantin in the airport. However, Giorgio thinks the Brotherhood is at the gate with them. Apparently, he claims they have a certain smell.”

“Fuck. For some reason, I trust Giorgio’s nose on this.”

“Me too. Therefore, I booked two more sets of plane tickets and had the flights monitored.”

“Anything come up?”

“Every time I book tickets, the flight gets sold out seconds later.”

“Please, tell me that’s not K.D. buying up tickets?”

“I think so.”

“Fucking smart son of a bitch. I wish he would chill the fuck out today, sit down, and eat a damn sandwich.”

“I agree.”

“K.D. must know we’re trying to get the gardener out of Russia, and if David knows, then Kaz does too. Did you get more tickets?”

“Yes. Between David and I, we have sold out several flights today. Some are going to various parts of South America. Others to Canada, and a few to Africa. Every time Giorgio and Harlem Crew moves Konstantin, Giorgio calls back, saying he smells more stinky Brotherhood men around him with dirty Russian hands.”

Jesus.

Blue gave me a sad smile. “At this point, I have no idea where Konstantin will be flying to this afternoon. He’s already missed three flights.”

“Just get him on a flight that doesn’t look like the Brotherhood are at the gate, but trust Giorgio’s nose.”

She nodded.

“Anything else, Blue?”

“My usual video feed on the cameras at the estate went dark. The only video that’s being displayed is Emilio’s nursery.” She showed me her phone.

On her screen, Olga fed Emilio with a bottle and looked to be singing. My heart ached. This was the first time I had ever been this far away from him.

Focus.

I blinked and looked at Blue. “Kaz is up to something, and he doesn’t want me to know.”

“I agree. Additionally, he knew you would want eyes on Emilio—”

“But everything else is up for grabs.” I let out a long breath. “Doesn’t matter though. I just need to get the gardener and his family out of Russia and then Kaz and I will talk.”

Worry creased over her face. “Should I be there when you both have this conversation?”

“No. We should be alone.”

“Then, I will be outside the door with both guns loaded.”

“Let’s hope that will be enough.”

A nicely dressed man walked onto the stage.

The audience went silent. The musicians ceased with tuning their instruments.

The man began speaking in Russian. A little too fast for my liking. Some words I caught. Some went over my head.

Then, he turned around and twirled his hands in the air.

The orchestra began to play.

Okay, concert is starting. Maybe, the music will calm my nerves.

“Oh.” Blue nudged my elbow and looked right.

I glanced in her direction and froze.

Kaz.

He stood at the edge of the row, towering over everyone and looking like he was going to tear the place apart.

David’s smart ass was at his side and signaled for my people to get up.

Really?

My men rose and headed away.

Blue frowned. “Should I go too?”

“No, but give Kaz this seat and let David sit next to him so you have some space between Kaz and you.”

He looks like he is in bully-mode.

Blue rose and scooted two seats down.

With a pissed expression, Kaz stepped into the row, walked forward, and then sat down next to me.

Music soared through the hall.

I gazed at Paolo. His eyes were popped open taking in everything, purely fascinated with the orchestra.

At least somebody will have a good time today.

I turned to Kaz.

He watched me. Mad or not, the man was still absolutely gorgeous. I would have kissed him if I didn't know he was entirely aggravated at me.

Just get the gardener on the plane and wait for Max to arrive.

Was it crazy for me to try and save the gardener? In my eyes, he had met a crazy woman with different personalities. Knowing Lunita, she had probably flirted with him. While it was wrong for this Konstantin to stick his dick in the Lion's fiancé, I still felt guilty as fuck for him being entangled with Lunita.

Next, I had to consider *Lunita's reaction* if Kaz killed him. That wouldn't be good.

Enough people had died from Kaz's and Lunita's hands, solely because of me. There would be no more.

I found my courage and spoke, "Good afternoon."

Silent, he gazed at me.

"I didn't know that you liked orchestra music."

Kaz's neutral expression didn't crack, yet he turned his view to the stage. "The Butcher cannot be the only mafia boss with class."

My nerves coiled. I didn't know what else to say but, "I love you, Kaz."

The words just came out.

What else was there to tell him? I meant it, and surely he was mad and possibly wondering why I was being erratic

today. Perhaps, he still needed to know that I cared, that my heart was still all his.

Kaz didn't look my way. "I love you too."

My nerves calmed, yet my stomach twisted. "Tonight...we should talk."

"About what?"

"I'll tell you later."

"Perhaps, you should tell me *now*."

"It would be better if I told you later."

Kaz turned his view to me. "I do not know what the gardener did, but you cannot save him."

I widened my eyes. "Leave him out of this."

"Tell me why I should?"

"How about this. Promise me right now that you will not kill anyone and we can go outside and talk about it all—"

"*Mysh*, I would never promise you that because I know my temper. With the way you're moving today, I know that somebody must die."

I pursed my lips together.

"Also, my spies in the Corsican say that Jean-Pierre has pansies on his private plane, heading to Moscow."

I blinked. "I...I didn't know Jean-Pierre did that. I never contacted him today."

"Then, the Butler did."

"Maybe."

"The Butler must have been worried for your safety." Kaz watched me with an intensity that made me want to jump up from the seat and run. "Why would the Butler be worried about your safety?"

My heart pounded in my ears. "I would like you to trust me and wait for our conversation this evening."

"Where's Dr. Stovall?"

I inched back.

Goddamn it, David. Can you just fucking take a break today, and stop doing your job.

I swallowed. “Dr. Stovall is relaxing somewhere that I thought he would enjoy.”

“So, you *do* admit to hiding him?”

“I wouldn’t lie about that.”

“But you would conceal everything else.”

“At this moment, it isn’t *concealing* it is more...delaying my telling you everything.”

“I do not like delays, *mysh*.” He leaned close to me so that his mouth was barely an inch from mine. “It has been a very long time since I have had to wait for anything.”

“Just give me some time.”

“Time?”

“Yes.”

“Hmmm.” He brushed his lips against my mouth.

I shivered in lust and fear.

Then, he leaned in further and whispered in my ear. “This is a very dangerous chess game you are playing with me today.”

I gritted my teeth.

He brushed his lips along my earlobe. “I hope you win because this game is not just about strategy and outsmarting *me*—your opponent—it’s about the delicate balance of power and control in the Brotherhood, Harlem Crew, and even in Moscow.”

“It’s not.”

“Yet, no one wants me to roar today.”

“Kaz, just give me some time—”

“One wrong move and all those pretty little chess pieces of yours could come crashing down and spilling into puddles of

blood.”

I frowned.

“But if you play this game correctly, you may lead to ultimate victory and everyone is safe. What do you think your odds are today, *mysh*?”

“I don’t want to tell you right now because I don’t want you to kill anyone.”

“That is clear, *mysh*, but the longer you wait, the higher the stakes.”

“Meaning?”

“While you’re trying to save *one* gardener, I may kill everyone else.” With that, he rose and headed away.

A cold chill ran through my body.

K.D. got up and gave me a sad look.

I almost flipped my middle finger at him, but I couldn’t. Poor K.D. was simply doing his job, excellently and was caught in the middle of us.

K.D. followed after the Lion.

I checked Blue’s expression. She appeared just as shaken. It looked like K.D. had told her something too.

Shit.

My heart broke as I watched Kaz leave.

Those last words played in my head.

“I may kill everyone else.”

Chapter 5

Kanga

Kazimir

When I returned, Emilio's shrill cries filled the mansion.

Son?

I wasted no time and raced up the stairs to check on him.

The sound grew sharper and sharper as I got closer to his nursery. My heart ached hearing him so displeased. The only thing that kept me from roaring was the fact that I knew Olga was with him.

Olga was by far the best hire Emily and I had made all year. Not only skilled in defense and taking care of children, there was a warmth in her eyes, the sort that only came from a mother's love. Through her gentle touch, my son was nurtured. That gave me great solace.

Some mornings when I headed to Emilio's nursery, I would catch Olga singing to my son, and I would remain in the hallway and lean against the wall, listening.

My mother would sing to Valentina, Pavel, and me. In fact, I couldn't remember when she had ever stopped. Once when I was shot in the chest, I'd woken up in a private hospital room with my mother wiping my forehead with a warm cloth and singing *Kalinka* to me. It was a nursery song about a young girl, Kalinka, who was admired by many but remained untouched and pure.

I swore I healed faster from those injuries just from my mother's voice.

Perhaps, because Olga reminded me of my mother, she wasn't just a nanny to me, she was family. Regardless of Emilio's age, I planned to keep her on. Forever, she would hold a special place in our family.

When I approached the door, I heard Olga's soothing. "Oh, my little nana."

Still, Emilio wailed.

Son, I am here.

I hurried into the room.

"I'm so sorry, nana." Olga rocked Emilio back and forth in the nursing chair, but he didn't care. He wailed and kicked. His little fists wagged back and forth. Tears spilled from his eyes.

I took off my jacket. "What's wrong?"

Olga rose and rocked him in her arms. "He fed from the bottle, but nothing can compare to his mother's breast."

Being that I missed my mouse's nipples too, I understood my son's annoyance instantly.

Emilio spotted me and calmed his crying to soft whimpering. Perhaps, he figured his mom would be right behind me.

"Come, son." I stretched out my arms.

Olga gave him to me. "I have an idea."

"You do?"

"This may be a good time to test something out. Maybe it will make our little nana feel better."

"I trust you."

Olga rushed into her adjoining room.

Now realizing that my mouse was not near, Emilio returned to crying.

I gazed down at my cub. "Shh. It is okay. *Papachka* is here."

Whimpering, Emilio pushed his lips out and twisted them. Crying, he moved his small head from side to side, uncomfortable and annoyed.

I switched to Russian. “*Never be sad. I am always here for you.*”

As I knew he would, Emilio quieted down from my switching to Russian. My mouse called it the verbal pacifier. Anytime she needed a few minutes to prepare things for changing his diaper or breastfeeding him, she called me in to whisper Russian in his ear.

Emilio’s bottom lip quivered and he looked close to crying again.

I returned with more Russian. “*You are my son. My blood. My life.*”

He widened his watery eyes and watched me.

I wiped the tears off his chubby cheeks. “*You are my heir. My hope. My love.*”

Olga headed back in with a large brightly colored cloth. “Now that he has good control of his head, we can start wrapping little nana up.”

“Wrap him up?” I rocked Emilio in my arms. “What do you mean?”

“My sister, Ama just sent this to me.” Olga spread the cloth out and raised it so I could take it all in. “Ama makes good money as an artist.”

“Is she still in Ghana?”

“Yes, in the Ashanti Region—the Southern part of the country. That region is known for its rich cultural heritage and its traditional textiles like *kente* cloth and *kanga*.”

Emilio glanced at Olga and stared at the cloth too. Perhaps, this was just the stimulation he needed to stay quiet.

“You think it is pretty, little nana?” Olga smiled at Emilio. “Ama spent several weeks on this cloth so I could use it on you. This is fit for a little king.”

I studied the bright vibrant colors—gold, blue, purple, silver, and white. Beads and cowrie shells dangled along the bottom.

Olga wore a proud expression. “Ama dyed and printed the design in natural dyes made from plants and minerals.”

I stepped in closer to decipher the intricate designs. “Is that a gold and blue bird among purple flowers?”

“It is the *Sankofa* bird which symbolizes the importance of looking back to the past in order to move forward.”

I curved my lips into a smile. “And the sword that the bird is perched on?”

“That is the *Akomfo Anokye* sword which symbolizes wisdom and knowledge.”

“I like this cloth a lot.” I nodded. “Your sister honors us. Be sure to give me her address. I too know how to give presents.”

“Ama will not take it. This is a cloth of love.”

“She will take *my* presents.”

Olga chuckled. “Okay, Mr. Dangerous Boss. Put Emilio in the crib so that we can get this on you.”

I quirked my brows. “On *me*?”

“Yes, Kazimir.” She gestured to the crib. “Come. Come now. While Emilio is still at peace.”

But how is the cloth going on me?

I placed Emilio in his crib.

She looked at my chest. “You should take off your shirt too.”

“Now, you have lost me.”

“Emilio drank all of the milk out of the bottle so he is not aggravated because he is hungry.”

“O-kay.”

“He is crying due to not getting the intimate bond.”

I gazed at my son.

Olga continued, “When he feeds from Emily, your son not only receives nourishment from the milk, but also this sense of

comfort and love from his closeness to her skin. Even breathing in her scent. This is a warmth that my giving him the bottle can never provide.”

I frowned at him.

I’m sorry, son. You will have your mother and her breasts back with you soon.

Still not sure what Olga expected of me, I began unbuttoning my shirt.

Olga straightened out the cloth. “The physical act of breastfeeding also releases hormones such as oxytocin—the *love hormone*.”

“That’s from skin-to-skin contact? That I can do.” I took off the shirt and placed it on the edge of the crib. “However, I won’t be putting my nipple into my son’s mouth.”

Sighing, Olga shook her head. “No, Kazimir.”

“I just wanted to make that clear.”

Olga chuckled. “Today, I am going to teach you how to wear the baby.”

I quirked my brows. “Now I am even more lost.”

“Today, you are going to learn how to carry this little one like a true Ghanaian mother.”

Surely, a hint of skepticism covered my face.

“Then, when the Mouse is gone, Emilio can get the *love drug* from you.”

“You are serious?”

“Don’t you worry. I’ve been doing this for many years.” Olga handed me the cloth. “You look scared, lion.”

Sighing, I took it and held the beautiful fabric in front of me. “I do not want to drop him.”

“Just listen to me.” She pulled down the side of Emilio’s crib. “Fold the kanga in half lengthwise so that the bird on the sword is facing up.”

“Alright.” Nervous, I did as she asked.

“Now come over here.” She picked up Emilio.

He gazed at us both, unsure of what was happening.

I know, son. She is a crazy lady. But, let us see where this will go.

I brought the folded kanga over to them.

“Lay it down in the crib.”

I did.

“I’m going to place Emilio on one end of the folded kanga, with his head closest to the folded edge.” She did just as she said. “Now, Kazimir, you take the end of the kanga closest to Emilio’s feet and bring it up over his back, making sure to tuck the kanga under his bottom.”

“I have no idea what you mean.”

“Let me show you.” She executed the actions smoothly, making me feel like a complete idiot. Once done, she unraveled everything and looked at me. “Now you try.”

Emilio turned his face to me.

Yes, son. She’s very crazy.

That being said, I figured it out, moving the cloth around just like she had done.

“Now we are going to take the other end of the kanga and bring it up over Emilio’s head.”

“This will not harm him?”

“Never.”

I followed her instruction.

“And make sure to tuck the kanga under his arms.”

“O-kay.”

She helped me lift him up and then brought a very confused Emilio to me. “I’ll help you put him on your back—”

“On my back? How will I know that he is okay?”

“I will be following you around. You think I will just leave my little nana alone?” She laughed. “Never.”

Soon, Emilio was placed onto my back. His cheeks pressed against my skin.

“Okay, Kazimir. Take the two ends of the kanga and tie them around your waist, but not too tight.”

I executed that part with ease, feeling the small weight of Emilio on me.

A soft cooing sound left him.

I raised my eyebrows.

It was the first time I had ever heard him do that.

“Aww. Emilio likes it.” Olga fidgeted with the fabric as if ensuring he was secure. “He makes that sound when he is absolutely content.”

I walked off to the mirror near the window, turned to the side, and gazed at the odd reflection. The Lion carrying an adorable baby on his back. What would the Brotherhood say... after they stopped laughing?

But none of that mattered in this moment. Emilio cooed again and his eyes began to flutter as he slowly fell asleep.

Olga grinned. “There’s nothing like a mother or father’s *love drug*. He’ll be out for a long time.”

“How long should I keep him on?”

“For as long as you are comfortable.”

“How long would...a Ghanian mother carry the baby?”

Olga chuckled. “For as long as she felt comfortable too.”

I turned around in the mirror. “It’s actually comforting for me to have him near.”

“Yes. That too. This tradition has a long history, dating back to at least the 19th century.”

“That’s a long time.”

“Many new mothers are gifted with a kanga. It is a symbol of motherhood.”

“That is why you had Ama make one for Emily?”

Olga nodded. “Emily tires herself out too much, trying to be the best mother in the world. I think she has been overstressed in these past weeks, but won’t admit this.”

I tensed. “I didn’t realize that.”

“It is impossible to be the best mother. Help her understand that she only needs to keep the child safe, loved, and fed. Still, sometimes she is too nervous about asking for help.”

“You are good for her and me.”

“I hope so.” Her phone buzzed. Olga hurried over. “That’s my cue to send Emily a picture of the baby. She wants one every thirty minutes.”

I frowned. “Surely, we are not going to show her this.”

“Oh, Kazimir, why not? It would make that new mother cry tears of joy. I can tell she’s been terrified about being away from him for this long. It is her first time.” Olga held her phone up. “Give us a warm smile, Kazimir.”

“Lions do not smile.”

She chuckled, took the picture, and delivered it.

That was the last thing Emily needed to see. I had scared her good in the Concert Hall. She should have been worried about my next move, not seeing a peaceful moment between Emilio and me.

Still, I didn’t want my mouse worried about Emilio either.

David entered the nursery as Olga snapped another picture.

“Oh.” Shock hit his face. David quickly backed up. “I-I can...return another time.”

With the way he looked, one would have thought that Olga and I were naked and about to have sex.

I frowned. “It is fine.”

David didn’t come inside. “A-are you...sure?”

I scowled at him. “Get in here.”

It was an ongoing joke with everyone on the property that King David was terrified of Emilio. He always kept five feet between him and the baby. Plus, David always rushed out of the room when Emily or I asked if he wanted to hold him.

Olga smiled at David. “Did Baba leave with Emily too?”

“Yes.” David only took one step inside the nursery and remained by the doorway as if making sure he had a clear path to escape.

“Okay.” Olga nodded. “Then, I will text Baba the picture too.”

My frown deepened. “Is that necessary?”

“This picture would make Baba’s day.” Olga headed into her adjoining room and called over her shoulder. “I will give you two privacy.”

“Thank you.” I crossed my arms over my chest. “Get in here.”

David widened his eyes. “I believe I am sufficiently inside the...nursery—”

“Why are you afraid of Emilio?”

“It is not Emilio that is the problem. It is the fragility of it all.”

“You will not break him by being closer.” I glanced back in the mirror and saw that Emilio was knocked out. Light snores left him. Meanwhile, the kanga appeared outrageous around my muscled frame.

I must make sure that picture goes no further than Emily and Baba.

David came further inside, yet still kept three feet between us. “I will be better when he’s walking. That’s a good age for me. *Now* he can easily be broken.”

I rolled my eyes at him. “Just get to the news.”

David cleared his throat. “Maxwell just landed with forty men—half Harlem Crew and the rest—”

“Belonging to Misha.” I rolled my eyes again. “No surprise there. However, it is funny that I can ask my cousin for help with killing Boris and he has no time to assist me, yet when his *homey* requests men, he has all the resources in the world.”

“What should we do with Maxwell?”

“Delay him. Shut down the highways and roads. Keep him stuck in his car, smoking, and pissed in traffic.”

“No problem.” David took out his phone.

You brought Maxwell into this, mysh? What are you hiding?

Anger rose in my core. “And the French plane?”

“It’s a two hour ETA.”

“Missiles ready to shoot it down at my command?”

“Yes, sir.” David sighed. “Although...I believe it would cause a national incident between Russia and France as well as shatter the stable peace treaty between the Brotherhood and Corsican.”

“And what do you think my response is to that?”

“You do not care.”

“Not at all.” My thoughts went to the man that my mouse thought she could save. “And what about the gardener?”

“He ended up getting on a plane headed to South Korea. It took off. In the air, our men pulled out their guns, burst into the cockpit, and had the plane land at *Ostafyevo*.”

“Good work.”

Ostafyevo was a B class international airport, located 14 kilometers to the south of Moscow Ring Road.

I placed my hands in my pocket. “How long until he gets here?”

“No longer than twenty minutes.”

“And my mouse?”

“They are heading back from the concert.” David showed me his phone.

I gazed at the picture.

Emily sat in the back of the limo as Paolo slept in her arms and Baba smiled and chatted about something.

Clearly, whatever Baba was saying hadn't eased or entertained her.

Worry covered Emily's face.

Mysh, what are you doing?

David took the phone back. “Also, the Mouse contacted the Chef. The kitchen staff is running around.”

“For what?”

“I was told that they are preparing a surprise dinner for you. The maids are in the dining area turning it into a romantic space. Candles, roses, and the best dinnerware.”

“Did you find out what dishes the chef was instructed to make tonight?”

“Pelmeni filled with lamb and onions, borscht, and blini stuffed with caviar.”

My favorite dishes. Are you trying to soften me up, mysh?

“Additionally, two of Harlem Crew headed down to the dedicated vodka room in the wine cellar.”

“Interesting.” I raised my eyebrows. “What did they pull out?”

“The Russo-Baltique.”

Vodka won't stop me from killing anyone, mysh, but very nice touch.

At \$50,000, the Russo-Baltique was one of the most expensive bottles of vodka I possessed. 7,000 Swarovski crystals covered all sides of the bottle, and it was kept in the cellar at a constant temperature of 45 degrees Fahrenheit, to ensure the quality of the premium-tasting vodka.

David touched his chest. “Emily then delivered me a message.”

“What did my mouse say?”

“Have Kazimir dressed in his best and in the dining area in an hour and half.”

“Then, game on.”

Chapter 6

The Dinner

Emily

After Dr. Stovall told me that the gardener and I were clear of all STDs, I searched for the sexiest thing I could find in my closet that represented both formal seductress and boss bitch at the same time. That was no great feat, yet I settled on a red corset dress that fell to the floor and had my arms and back out. A long split exposed my right leg and rose all the way to my hip.

I had to admit that the dress fit tighter than intended. I was clearly no longer the same size I had been before getting pregnant with Emilio.

My breasts poked out of the top, plump and jiggling. While I would never walk out of the house with my breasts out this much, I knew it would take Kaz's anger down a few notches.

Next, I placed a black wig on. I called her *Siren*. She had bangs, and was silky long, stopping at my hips. The tips were a bright red that went perfectly with the dress.

This could work.

I gazed in the mirror and applied my lipstick.

My phone rang.

I checked the screen.

Max was inviting me to a video chat.

I accepted. "Where the hell are you? You should have been here by now."

"In Moscow, but stuck in traffic." He sat in the back of a car and blew smoke at the camera. "This shit looks suspect too. Cops told us that the roads were shut down. You think your *kitty kat* did that shit?"

“You better not call Kazimir that to his face.”

“But, you think he did it or not?”

I sighed. “Probably.”

“Yo. Hold up.” Max gazed at the screen. “Pull the phone back a little for, papi.”

I grinned. “I’ll have Blue sneak the helicopters off and grab you.”

“I still want to see what you’re working with.”

I smirked and held the camera out.

“Fuck.” Max whistled. “Doctor okayed you for sex, yet?”

“Well, it’s some days until six weeks. Granted, some people have sex before six weeks with no complications. Dr. Stovall said a good rule of thumb is to wait until the bleeding has stopped.”

Max screwed his face up in disgust.

“The bleedings stopped and there’s been no vaginal tears —”

“Nobody asked you about all that.”

“Fine.” I sucked my teeth. “Just to be super safe, we have around five days.”

“Em, you’re not going to make it.”

I frowned.

“With the way you look now, he’s beating it up tonight.”

“Okay, Max. Let’s get back to what’s going on. Where’s Boris?”

“St. Pete.” Max smoked some of his blunt. “He’ll be safe there, Em. Don’t worry.”

“Get his ass out of Russia.”

“Let’s make sure *you’re* safe tonight.” Smoke left his nostrils. “Speaking of that, I called the Butcher to send some people.”

“Man, that was *you*? Kaz knows the French are heading here.”

“How the hell does he know?”

“I don’t know. Spies and what not. Just tell, Jean-Pierre to have the plane with his people turn around.”

“Man, I was hoping I could surprise Kazimir with them. Let his ass know that he won’t be bullying anybody.”

“Well, he’s prepared for them, so send them back so no French or anybody else die tonight.”

Max eyed me. “Em?”

“What?”

“You know *someone* is going to die tonight.”

“That doesn’t have to happen—”

“It’s going to. The point of my coming is to minimize the damage as much as possible.”

I set the lipstick down. “The gardener is far off, heading to South Korea. Once there, he is going to get a transfer to Chile. That should get him far away.”

“I don’t know why you saved him.”

“Lunita.”

Max shook his head. “Her ass is in trouble too.”

“Yeah, which is why I need to keep Kaz and her calm—”

“You can smoke now. Right? If I get you high, then Lunita is high too.”

I licked my lips. “No...I can’t smoke yet, but soon.”

“But, damn, Em. You’re not pregnant anymore.”

“I’m breastfeeding.”

“Oh shit. That’s why the titties are so big.”

I glared at him.

“I’m just saying. Those mamas are trying to speak to me.”

I lifted the phone higher, so they were out of his view.
“Just hurry up and get here.”

“Eh, don’t hang up.”

“What?”

“When are you going to stop breastfeeding? I’m trying to smoke with my sis.”

I smirked. “At least six months.”

“Goddamn, Em!”

“See you soon.” I hung up.

Kaz, did you block Max from coming?

I didn’t want to think it was him. Granted, I’d learned from being here that Moscow was known for having heavy traffic, especially during rush hour.

The city had a population of over 12 million people and a high number of cars on the road, which lead to constant congestion.

I placed red six-inch heels on and headed out.

Blue waited for me in the hallway. “You look beautiful.”

“I’m just hoping the dress remains on long enough for me to walk down those stairs. It’s close to popping open.” I shifted the corset a little. “Once this shit is done, getting a fitness trainer is top priority.”

Blue grinned.

“Also, I need you to get the helicopters and grab Max from the highway. He’ll tell you where he is.”

“On it.” Blue headed off to the roof.

I went in the other direction.

My men rose and followed me.

To say I was nervous to tell Kaz everything was an understatement. My stomach twisted into knots that I may never be able to unravel.

Once I made it to the bottom of the stairs and strolled toward the dining area, sweat beaded at my forehead.

I dabbed at it and let out a long breath.

Savory scents lured me forward.

It will be okay. He will...understand...and...somehow we will get through this.

The sound of helicopters roared off in the distance.

Thanks, Blue.

When I made it to the dining space, I placed a confident mask on my face and stepped inside.

Kaz had already been sitting on the other end of the long table, sipping on his expensive vodka.

The dining space was decorated perfectly. Fine linen covered the table. On top was crystal glasses, fine China, and polished silverware. The lit candles glowed softly illuminating the tons of vases filled with roses. The curtains on the tall windows were open, letting in the moonlight.

Perfect.

Kaz spotted me, set the glass of vodka down, and rose. Then, he let his gaze slip down my body. A dark groan left him.

Okay. This look is working.

He stepped around the table and placed his hands in his pockets.

Twenty feet ran between us.

Tonight, he wore a designer black suit with a black shirt and tie. It had truly been tailored with love, highlighting his muscular frame. His being in that suit did lusty things to my body.

I see I'm not the only one trying to tease this evening.

I swallowed.

Kaz slid his view to my breasts for a silent minute. He licked his lips, raised his view, and then locked his gaze with

mine. “Did you think that dress would be distracting me this evening?”

I tensed. “Yes.”

“Then, you were correct.”

I parted my lips.

He prowled my way.

I held up one hand. “Stay over there. We’re eating dinner first and—”

“This has gone on long enough.” Kaz continued my way. “I have been patient—”

“Have you?”

He stopped two feet in front of me. “I have allowed you to freely move around Moscow, instead of placing you in an elegant cage.”

I widened my eyes.

“All of Harlem Crew is still alive. No missiles have been shot at France. Maxwell was even allowed to enter Moscow with not one gun pointed at his head. I would say that I have shown a lot of growth today.”

“Speaking of Max, did you shut down the highway—”

“What are you hiding?”

“It isn’t hiding. It is delaying.”

He glared. “Tell me now.”

“Fine, but can you just sit over there so I feel more comfortable—”

“You want space so you can tell me?”

“Yes.”

“You will not get any.” He closed the distance between us to further his point. “Enough is enough.”

Several staff walked in with practiced precision, carrying Kaz’s favorite dishes. Steam rose from immaculate crystal bowls. One-by-one they placed them onto the table.

His intense gaze seared through me.

My heart hammered in my chest.

Once the staff left, I cleared my throat. “This is a really difficult situation. I need more of your patience this evening.”

“What happened and why does it involve the gardener’s dick?”

Oh shit. K.D. what kind of high-end detective have you become.

Beyond irritated, I let out a long breath. “I...umm...how the hell did you know it had something to do with the gardener’s penis?”

“You had Dr. Stovall test him for STDs.”

I really need to establish some set of boundaries with David.

“Okay. Here we go.” I inched back. “Last night, I had this odd dream about having anal sex.”

Kaz’s face twisted in confusion. To my surprise, he actually stepped back.

I grabbed my hands and twisted my fingers. “So...it was odd because it wasn’t you, and it felt so real and...we were in dirt.”

Kaz’s expression didn’t shift, yet I could feel hot power radiating from him. It was so surreal. The whole room heated.

More sweat beaded on my forehead. “At the end of this... odd dream, the guy orgasmed—”

“Oh, did he now?”

I trembled. “And then...he screamed out Lunita’s name.”

Kaz shot his hand up to his chest.

“Are you okay, baby?” I stepped forward. “How is your heart?”

“Stay there.” He edged back. “You are correct. Space is required for *this* situation.”

Fuck.

I edged away. “So...later I woke up in Emilio’s nursery and fed him.”

“When was this?”

“Really early this morning. It was still dark outside. But anyway...” I twisted my fingers some more. “So...umm... during the feeding, Olga noticed that my feet were coated in dirt.”

A pained expression covered Kaz’s face. He turned toward the table and placed his hands on the top of a chair as if needing help to stand.

“Once Emilio was fed, I put him in the crib and went to look into this further.”

Kaz didn’t turn back my way. “And what did you find out, *mysh?*”

I swallowed down fear. “Blue had footage of me, well *Lunita*, going into the garden last night.”

Cold silence served as his only response.

I stepped back some more. “Then...I spoke to the gardener and basically confirmed that *Lunita* and him had been having some sort of love affair?”

Kaz spoke through clenched teeth. “How long?”

“I’m not sure, but the gardener believes he is in love with *Lunita*.”

A thick heated silence filled the room.

Fuck. What is he thinking? Talk to me, Kaz. Please.

Slowly he moved his hands from the chair and placed them on the table. For another quiet minute, he looked down at the steaming food and then broke the silence. “Why did you not come to me immediately, after the dream and before the whole fucking investigation?”

I trembled. “I’m sorry. I should—”

“That is not an answer, *mysh*.” Kaz turned my way and raised his voice. “Why?!”

“I-I didn’t come because I figured that if you knew Lunita fucked some guy in the mansion, you would tear the place apart looking for him—”

“You’re damn right I would—”

“And I don’t want that. We have a newborn and a toddler in the house. No more violence can occur in our space.” I pointed at him. “We’re parents. So that means we will leave that gangster shit outside of the house.”

“Is that how this will work?”

My finger trembled. “Yes.”

“Once you knew it was the gardener why didn’t you tell me?”

“You know why.”

“Say it!”

I trembled. “Kaz...”

“Just say the fucking words. I want to hear it.”

“I didn’t want you to kill him.”

“Why not?” He leaned his head to the side. Dark rage decorated every inch of his face. “Is there part of *you* that loves him too?”

“What?” I shook my head. “No. I don’t know that man. I only love you.”

“Then, why save him?”

“I think *Lunita* loves him, and her feelings must be respected in this situation.”

“Is that what *you* think?”

“Yes.”

Kaz gripped the edge of the table. “This is what I think.”

With a single swift movement, he flipped the entire table over, sending shockwaves through the room.

“Ah!” I held my hands up.

Wine glasses shattered on the hardwood floor, splintering into a million pieces. Plates and cutlery flew in all directions. Chunks of pelmeni splattered into the borscht, looking like a kaleidoscope of spinning food. Blinis toppled over the roses. Expensive vodka dribbled down the fine art painting and walls.

And the table lay haphazardly on its side with the legs in the air and the fine linen bunched up on the other side of the room.

Jesus Christ.

In seconds, the space went from romantic excellence to angry shambles.

I stood frozen in shock with my hands raised in surrender.

“Do you understand?” Kaz scowled at me. “Or should I elaborate?”

The doors opened.

K.D. and two men rushed in.

Kaz growled. “Get out!”

David stepped into the space between us. “I will not be doing that at this time.”

Kaz sneered. “Excuse me?”

“As your number one, I am not only supposed to protect you from your enemies or...the Mouse, but I must save you from yourself.”

“Get out now!” Kaz tried to stomp around them.

David and the men got in front of him.

Oh, God. Kaz, don't slap K.D.

I headed over. “Calm down, baby.”

Kaz turned his rage my way. “You went to great measures to save this piece of shit gardener—”

“For Lunita and because I don’t want any more innocent people to die—”

“Innocent!” Kaz barreled through David and the two men and headed for me.

I shrieked and stumbled back.

In seconds, Kaz was inches from me.

Am I going to have to knock his ass out tonight?

My chest rapidly rose and fell.

“Tell me something, *mysh*.” Kaz’s voice lowered to a murderous edge.

David and the men rushed our way, yet I had no idea what they could truly do.

Kaz glared. “What if you discovered that I was fucking one of the maids while you slept in our bed at night?”

Rage boiled through me. “Kaz, that is a completely different situation—”

“How?”

“You don’t have another personality!”

“Yet, you would be mad if I tried to save the maid—”

“Of course I would be, because she wouldn’t be innocent —”

“How is the gardener innocent?”

“He was fucking Lunita!” I yelled and hit my chest. “Not me!”

“But he thought it was you.”

I blinked. “And what if Lunita was flirting with him and —?”

“He dies!” Kaz screamed. “It does not matter what Lunita did! He fucking dies!”

My body quaked with fear.

“But...”

Kaz sneered. “But what?”

“But, how do you think Lunita will feel about this?”

“Speaking of her.” Kaz leaned all the way forward until the points of our noses touched. “Are you watching, Lunita? Are you looking at the fucking TV?”

“S-stop it.”

“I want you to know that Emily did not save your gardener today—”

“What?” I leaned back. “W-what are you saying?”

“I also want you to understand, Lunita—”

“I said stop it—”

“That I am now going to do my own ritual on your *lover*.”

Dark rage twisted inside of my core, and it wasn't mine.

I trembled.

No. Lunita.

My fingers itched for a knife.

“Kaz, stop this!” I headed away from him. “What do you mean I didn't save the gardener?”

More of the Brotherhood hurried in and gathered around me.

“Get away.” I tried to move around them. They didn't touch me, but they kept blocking my way.

Kaz snatched off his jacket and slung it over the toppled table. “David, find out who my mouse's guards were last night.”

“What? Why?” I twisted around one man, but another got in front of me. “Kaz, what do you need that information for?”

Kaz ignored me and kept his gaze on David. “Get the guards and lover boy, and then take them to the garden.”

“Those are my people! Leave my guards alone!” I shoved one of the men away.

Another grabbed my arm. I punched him in the jaw. One snatched at me on the left. I cracked his nose with my bicep and slammed him into another guy.

Another wrapped his arms around my waist and began dragging me away. One of my breast flopped out.

“Let me go!” I yanked a gun from another and shot whoever was holding me in his thigh.

He dropped me.

Kaz and David spun my way.

I yanked up the top of my dress and charged forward.

Two men grabbed my arm holding the gun. Two others had my legs and yanked them back. Fast, all four lifted me in the air.

God damnit.

Either I was out of practice or they had figured out my moves.

“Let me the fuck go!” I pulled the trigger, shooting one guy in the shoulder. But somehow another man wrenched the gun away from my hand.

The men carried me away and I screamed out, “Don’t kill my guards, Kaz!”

Yet, blind fury blazed in his eyes, telling me that he hadn’t heard one word I said.

Chapter 7

Lover Boy

Kazimir

I stood alone in the garden with my fists clenched tightly at my sides. My knuckles were bone white.

The air was heavy with a floral perfume, suffocating me.

The garden was filled with vibrant flowers and tall plants surrounding me, growing in careful rows and geometric designs. Their blooms were bursting with color, yet I felt their beauty mocked me.

This gardener had fucked her here around all this loveliness.

What did you think would happen, Lunita?

I couldn't escape the pain consuming me. It was a weight pressing down on my chest like a boulder.

I told you that you were also mine.

The glass doors opened.

One man brought in a small table and placed it in the dirt next to me.

Another man entered and carried my briefcase of torture tools—hammers and saws, various sized knives, a spiked iron ball on a chain, large iron hooks, and a blow torch.

Lunita, how can I help your twisted mind understand?

Next, David entered the garden, followed by two men who dragged the gardener behind them like a ragdoll.

I clenched my teeth.

Hatred boiled in my veins.

I wish you were here to see this, Lunita.

The fleeting whisperings of humanity and empathy that my mouse and Emilio had sparked within me was now smothered

under the blazing fires of my rage. Now any compassion that I had was only a distant echo.

What remained was an empty shell formed of murderous bloodlust and fueled by an unquenchable thirst for vengeance.

The men threw the gardener down on the ground ten feet in front of me.

David got to my side.

The next group of men guided in my mouse's two night guards. They wore dark blue suits, white shirts, and red ties. Their guns were gone.

One had an afro mohawk with blonde tips.

The other was bald.

No fear covered their faces, just regret.

Did you not know it was Lunita? Were you truly paying attention while you guarded my mouse?

My men stopped the two guards five feet in front of me. Together, the two men lowered and kneeled on the ground.

Like proper soldiers, they didn't beg for their life or shed tears. They simply stared off in the distance with their palms flat on their thighs. Perhaps, they were making peace with their God.

I hoped so because for me they would not be forgiven.

The squeal of a helicopter roared above the mansion.

I looked at the glass ceiling and spotted my helicopter flying over. Bright light spilled through. "Who the fuck had my helicopter out tonight?"

"Earlier, Blue left and grabbed Maxwell. Now they are returning."

"That was a waste of gas. Maxwell will not stop anything." I crossed my arms over my chest. "Where is my mouse?"

"After injuring six more of our men, she has calmed down and is in the master bedroom. I have ten men by her door and another five standing outside her window."

“Who is with Emilio?”

“He is wrapped around Olga’s back and sleeping. Baba and she are having a tea party with Paolo and Harlem in the West wing.”

“Good. Nice and far from here, so they will not hear any screams or gunshots.” I returned my attention to the gardener.

This is who you picked, Lunita? This is the man you allowed to violate my mouse?

Unlike my soldiers, he sobbed on the ground, muttering in Russian. *“Please, I will not touch her again, but my heart did not know any better.”*

The gardener looked to be in his early thirties. His blond hair was tussled as if he had been nervously running his fingers through those strands all day.

“My heart wanted her.” He clasped his hands in prayer. *“Love chooses us, we do not choose love. Any man may think he knows his heart, but it is love that ultimately guides it.”*

“Very poetic.” I looked down at him. *“Will you be as poetic when I am slicing your fingers off your hand?”*

His eyes went wide in fear. *“Please, spare me.”*

Delirious with rage, I curved my lips into a smile. *“I may.”*

He shook. *“Y-you may?”*

“Yes, but you will have to tell me everything.”

“I-I will. Everything.” He bowed over so that his forehead was touching the ground. *“Anything you want to know. Just save me. My mother is sick and she will need me.”*

I turned to David. “Speaking of his family.”

“I am sorry, Kazimir, but it is too late to grab his family. Giorgio got them out of Russia. Somehow, he did it while our men were at the gate and focused on the gardener. There’s no sign of what flights were taken.” David handed me a gun. “Do you still want me to find them?”

You think you saved them, mysh. We’ll see.

“Keep searching for his family.” I lowered my voice and grabbed the gun. “No one with his blood can live after this. An example must be made.”

Suddenly, the garden’s glass doors burst open.

Frowning, I placed the gun at my side.

“Hold up!” Maxwell raced into the garden. Sweat dripped down his face. “Yo!”

I groaned in annoyance.

What the fuck does he want?

Seven other Harlem Crew soldiers followed him inside.

David pulled out his phone and texted something to someone. It probably dealt with finding the gardener’s family.

Maxwell slowed down five feet in front of me. “Listen, man. You can’t kill them.”

“The gardener dies—”

“I don’t give a fuck about him. I’m talking about Em’s guards.” Maxwell gestured to them. “Harlem Crew is under Em’s and my jurisdiction.”

“Jurisdiction?” I leaned my head to the side. “You think the Brotherhood is a system of fucking laws?”

More of my men rushed in.

“Listen, man.” Maxwell glanced over his shoulder, rolled his eyes at the additional people, and directed his annoyance back at me. “I’m coming to get *my people* and then you can do whatever the fuck you was about to do.”

“*Your people?*”

“Yes, man. Why are you acting stupid right now? We had this talk back in Italy. Plus, Em told you to chill when it came to Harlem Crew.” Maxwell pulled out a joint from his pocket. “Now be a good lion and let them go.”

“Okay then. I do remember you both saying that.” I looked at my mouse’s guards. “You two. Stand up.”

Confused, they slowly rose from the ground.

“Whew.” Maxwell pulled out his lighter. “Thanks, man. Em was losing it on the phone. They’ve been with her for the whole pregnancy.”

I glanced at David.

He gestured for men to come closer to Max.

“You’re showing a lot of growth, Kazimir. I’ll just take them away and do my own reprimanding shit. Trust me on that.” Maxwell touched the end of the joint to the flame. “Easy peasy lemon squeezy.”

Lemon what? Whatever.

“You are correct, Maxwell. I must say that there has been a lot of growth with me these days.” Fast, I raised the gun and fired, sending a bullet smashing into one guard’s head.

Maxwell dropped the lighter and staggered back.

I pulled the trigger again, blasting a hole into the other guard’s forehead. Blood sprayed onto the flowers as the man collapsed to the ground, right next to his partner.

“Fuck!” Maxwell charged my way. The joint fell from his hand. “You bitch ass motherfucker!”

My men caught him before he could make it a foot from me. He wrestled against them, tossing one to the ground to only be grabbed by another. “Psycho piece of shit!”

I glared at him. “Will you need help taking the guards away to reprimand them?”

Seven men struggled to hold Maxwell back.

“You better have these bitch boys on me!” Spit flung from his lips. “Swear to God, when they let me go, I will fucking kill you!”

“Come on!” I roared. “Let him go! Let us see—”

“We are not going to do that.” David stepped between us and took the gun from me.

I fisted my hands. “Move out of the way, David, so I can have a conversation with Maxwell—”

“Perhaps, you would like to focus this anger on the gardener.” David gestured to the idiot groveling in the dirt.

I gritted my teeth.

Maxwell’s face contorted with rage. “On everything I love, Kazimir as soon as these motherfuckers let me go I’m going to molly wop that ass!”

Annoyed, I quirked my brows and turned to David. “What is a molly wop?”

“I am not sure. Perhaps, it deals with a mop and he is going to violently clean you with it.” David turned around and looked at Maxwell. “I understand that you are angry, but—”

“Fuck you, K.D. What you’re not going to do is talk me out of whipping your boy’s ass.” Maxwell slammed two guys into each other. Their skulls collided with a sickening thud, while the remaining five men grappled him to the ground. A storm of dirt and dust swirled around them as they wrestled. One man screamed in pain. I had no idea what Maxwell did to him, but it wasn’t good.

Still, Maxwell strained against them, his veins bulging from the effort.

Did she have to involve Maxwell?

David gazed down at him. “I will not let you get close to Kazimir. You know this, so calm down.”

“I guess *I* will need to do the *reprimanding*.” I looked at one of my men on the side. “Carry the dead guards out of here. Harlem Crew requires a clear message. Do it Brotherhood style. Grab some rope and hang the dead bodies from a tree in the back of the Harlem Crew building. I want everyone to know how serious—”

“I know you not about to lynch my people!” Maxwell screamed from the ground.

I glared at him. “Lynch? What?”

“You know what the fuck lynching is, motherfucker! You’re not stupid!”

“I was not going to *lynch* them. They are already dead. I am trying to send a Brotherhood style message to—”

“Don’t fucking hang black men from a tree with a rope. I don’t care if you usually do that shit with Russians, but not black ones!” Maxwell slapped one guy and rolled over him, trying to get back up. “I’ll burn this whole motherfucker down!”

David stepped back as the last two struggled to keep Maxwell in place. “I actually agree with Maxwell. The Mouse will not like the rope and tree either.”

I frowned. “I was not trying to lynch them. I hung Sasha naked and by a rope several months ago. As you know, in the Brotherhood, we do this all the time—”

“Still, there may be special sensitivities due to the Mouse and Maxwell’s history.”

Of course. It is different. I must remember.

“You damn right, motherfucker!” Maxwell flung a shoe at us.

Thankfully, it missed. Meanwhile, I had no idea who the shoe belonged to.

“You are both correct. No rope or tree.” I let out a long breath. “Still, *something* needs to be done with the dead bodies in an extreme way. The intention is for Harlem Crew to understand how serious I am.”

“Then, put them in a chair or something!” Somehow Maxwell had broken free from the two guys and limped to a standing position. “Where the fuck is my joint?”

David pointed to it on the ground, near his lighter.

“Thanks, bitch ass puppet.” Maxwell stomped that way. “You need to get the Lion’s hand out your ass!”

David ran his fingers through his hair. “To send a message. We can place the bodies for viewing to let—”

“I want them to be scared.” I shook my head. “A viewing sounds like we are giving Harlem Crew the opportunity to

mourn the men. I want them terrified and disgusted.”

“Sick motherfucker, everyone is already scared of you.” Maxwell reached down and picked up his joint and lighter. “Except me.”

I rolled my eyes and turned back to David. “Whatever you do with the guards do it tonight, before my Mouse gets up in the morning and shuts it down.”

“Shiiit.” Maxwell placed the dirty joint in his mouth and lit it. “I’m going to shut shit down tonight.”

“Are you done?”

“Never that, *partner*.” Maxwell took a hit from the joint and blew out smoke. “Keep that shit up, Kazimir. You don’t know me, but you’re about to.”

I blinked. “But, I do know you.”

“You don’t know me, motherfucker!”

“But, I do.”

“Naw, man. Your dumbass doesn’t understand.”

“I understand quiet enough—”

“*You don’t know me* is the phrase a brother says right before you die, motherfucker. Threat level 100.” Maxwell raised his hand in the air. “This is the most dangerous phrase you could ever hear from a brother.”

I frowned at him.

“It’s the ultimate statement of aggression, dispensing with any presuppositions of acquaintance and assumption.”

I looked at David. “Give me the gun so I can shoot Maxwell in the head.”

David didn’t make a move.

Maxwell wiped the dirt smudged on his forehead. “*You don’t know me* is when you see the thing that hides behind the mask.”

“Then, take off the mask and show it.” I sneered. “Or shut the fuck up!”

“Aww.” Maxwell glared and smoked more of the joint.
“You mad-mad now?”

“Maxwell, get your men out of here and send a damn message. If you do not want the rope and tree, then fine. Put them in chairs with a flower arrangement surrounding them or whatever you need. Fucking hats on their heads.” Tension gathered in my shoulders. “Just make sure that Harlem Crew understands that if they fuck up, I will kill them.”

“You think I’m your errand boy, man?” Maxwell spit on the ground. “I run Italy, motherfucker.”

“You run Italy because of me—”

“You got me fucked up—”

“No!” I pointed at him. “You got *me* fucked up!”

Whatever that means!

I glared.

Maxwell sucked his teeth. “Just kill your gardener and then tell your men to leave so you can catch these hands.”

“I would love to catch those hands, Maxwell. Catch and cut them up!”

“Whatever.” Maxwell turned to his men. “Get our guys out of here. Find out about their family, and let’s do the usual shit we do when the Lion gets psycho and starts killing innocent people.”

“What. Ever.” I put my view back on the gardener who was still sniveling in the dirt.

You can’t even die like a man?

I held my hand out. “Give me the blow torch.”

David cleared his throat.

One of my men rushed to get the blow torch and hurried with bringing it over to me.

The torch was heavy, with a cold silver handle and black casing. “Hold him down and make sure his legs are open.”

“Damn.” Maxwell whistled from the side. “You really got anger issues, man. You need to see someone about this.”

“My mouse was violated—”

“Naw. My understanding is that Lunita wanted some dick and went to the gardener.”

“Shut up!” I stormed forward.

The gardener saw me approaching with the blow torch. With his jaw hung open, he shot up to his feet and began running around the garden, stumbling through rows of daisies and lilies. Mounds of dirt and upturned soil were scattered around him.

My men chased after him.

“You are a hypocrite.” I turned to Maxwell. “You think I don’t know what happened in Nigeria and even Italy—”

“You don’t know me—”

“If you were in this situation, you would have killed him.”

“Of course, but I’m not going to sit there and barbecue a motherfucker’s dick. I would have just shot him in the head or sliced his neck. You’re about to flambé dude’s penis. What kind of psychotic shit is that?”

I glanced at his joint. “Give me some of that—”

“Fuck you. I’m not giving you shit. Killed my dudes—Ilya and Leo for no reason.”

“They let Lunita walk around at night for weeks. She was fucking dating and enjoying herself!” I glared at him. “You do not think that is dangerous? Think of your nephew!”

Maxwell pursed his lips. “Em is going to take their deaths hard.”

My heart ached.

I looked away.

My men dragged the gardener back to me and held him on the ground.

The gardener sobbed. “Love is not a choice, it is a force that chooses you!”

I switched it on. The torch blazed to life, bright orange flaming tongues licked the air. Gas hissed around it.

To my surprise, the gardener cried out, “A man may try to resist it, but ultimately, he is powerless against the one his heart truly desires.”

“Oh shit.” Maxwell bobbed his head. “You got to kill this motherfucker. Philosophy and shit. He’s being mad disrespectful.”

I kneeled down as they separated his legs. “Tell me about Lunita and you.”

“P-please—”

“Tell me!”

The gardener stiffened.

“How did it begin? I would love to hear the beautiful story.” I gazed at the torch as the flames shifted to blueish-orange. “Who approached who?”

“S-she would come at night j-just to dance in the garden.” The gardener’s bottom lip quivered. “She was beautiful.”

“Yo.” Maxwell shook his head.

“O-one night she...asked me to put flowers in her hair.” Tears spilled from the gardener’s eyes. “When I did, she kissed me.”

My vision turned red, with bright white lights flashing in the periphery. I felt my heart race, rushing blood faster and faster through my body.

My hand shook as I gripped the blow torch. “What else?”

“After that, she came to visit every other night and...more would happen with each visit.”

“Oh, he’s definitely about to die right now,” Maxwell said to someone behind me.

I spoke through clenched teeth, “How many times did you two have sex?”

“L-last night was the only time there was...penetration.”

I scowled. “Yet, you did other things?”

“Y-yes.”

“Touched her breasts.”

He slowly nodded.

“Licked between her thighs?”

“Y-yes.”

My anger boiled over, consuming me in a wall of raging hellfire.

A bloodcurdling roar ripped my throat as I lunged for him, slamming the flames into his crotch with a ferocity that shook my core.

“No!” His agonizing screams tore from him and echoed through the garden like violent thunder.

The malicious flames crackled and snapped, engulfing his crotch and clawing up his stomach. The aroma of roasted meat suffocated the air.

I glared. “Put the flames out on his chest, so he does not die too fast!”

My men did their best to put out the ones that spread, and still I kept the flames on his almost nonexistent crotch.

“Oh, man. I can’t look at this.” Maxwell headed out of the garden, leaving a trail of smoke behind him.

When I turned the torch off, only a blackened mound of crust remained in the center of his thighs. Steam billowed from the space.

Some of my men recoiled back in terror.

Horror bulged in the gardener’s eyes. He switched back to Russian. “*G-god, take me. G-give me your i-infinite mercy. T-take me.*”

I slung the blow torch on the ground. “No. God will not give you mercy today.”

The men let him go.

He collapsed to the ground.

Panting, I crawled to the gardener’s side and sat down next to him.

The man’s body quaked. With those burns in that area, I wasn’t sure how long he would survive. I almost asked David to get the gardener medical attention so I could have more time with him.

I gazed at the gardener.

Sweat drenched his face. He shook constantly, never lying still. Yet, he looked up at me with defiant eyes. *“I-I have no regrets.”*

“No?”

“Y-you think you will k-kill me, b-but our love is... eternal.”

“I hope you are wrong because if that is so, I will come to heaven or hell, wherever you are, and I will kill you again and again and again.” I grabbed the back of his head and turned him over.

The man screamed in horror, “Lunita!!”

Sneering, I slammed the front of his face into the dirt, over and over. Blood gushed out of his face and spilled into the ground, turning it into a death-tainted mud, and I continued to slam his head into the ground again and again.

Until his screams ceased.

Until his face was no longer recognizable, just a bone fragment, shattered, raw, unidentifiable stump of scarred meat.

Until I found some sense of calm and my rage simmered.

When I slung him down, there was barely anything left of his head.

Dirt and blood covered my face and clothes. I turned to David. “Have him buried in the garden. When I am angry, I want to piss on that area.”

Chapter 8

Steam

Emily

Stressed, I lay in bed.

Moonlight streamed in through the curtains and onto my face. All was still and quiet, save for the gentle sound of my breaths.

I'd talked to Maxwell for a few minutes, doing my best not to smoke with him. But, I really wanted to. My nerves were everywhere.

Here, I thought I could save people and like Kaz had said, more had died. What could I have done to save everyone? How could I have truly fixed it all?

I had waited on going to get Mrs. Delphine's help.

I wanted to wait until Emilio was six months before we headed to New Orleans. I needed time to get used to being a mother, and I wanted my son to be a little bit bigger.

Even more...I didn't know what type of healing would come from New Orleans. In that last moment of Fela's death he had talked about my personalities and who was the host with a knowing smile as if I weren't the original.

If I weren't the original and this voodoo woman healed my body, would I still be there? Or would I be gone and Lunita was left in my place?

Those were the thoughts that I was scared to speak out to even Kaz. And that was why I had been delaying the New Orleans trip more and more.

But, Lunita had forced me to rethink the delay.

If I continued to drag my feet on this, I may not have anything left of our love. Kaz had already been there for me, willing to deal with the craziness of my having this disorder.

But would this be his limit?

Did Lunita push him too far...push him away?

I shuddered in sadness.

A heavy thump sounded by the door.

My heart raced.

I lay still, hardly daring to breathe as I waited for Kaz to come inside.

What now? He was so damn angry. What will become of us? Will our love still be the same?

The door swung open, and his towering frame silhouetted the dimly lit doorway. I could not make out his features in the darkness. I had no idea if he was still pissed or calm.

Damn it, Lunita.

Kaz stood still for a moment, as if he were trying to make out my figure in the darkness.

Then, he stepped into the room, and moonlight illuminated his face.

I tensed, taking in the gruesome sight.

Dirt covered his skin.

Dried blood smeared his cheeks, arms, and shirt.

A chill ran down my spine.

Then, he moved silently, not speaking a word or even looking my way anymore.

I thought he was going to lay his dirty self into our bed. Instead, he prowled towards the bathroom and disappeared.

The door shut with a click.

Next, the sound of the shower filled the air.

In a daze, I lay motionless in bed. My body heaved with sadness. I was not sure of what to do.

I fucking hate this. I want us back to before I knew about all of this.

Sighing, I mustered up my strength, rose out of bed, and walked towards the bathroom. I didn't care if he was still angry with me or not, I needed to be near him. He was my strength. My anchor. My love. My lion.

Without him? What would I be?

Baby...I love you so much. I hate that you're hurting.

I opened the bathroom door and slowly strolled along the cold marble floor.

His dirty clothes lay in a pile by my vanity table and cushioned chair.

Steam left the glass shower.

Stepping closer, I took in his muscular form as he cleaned himself.

Baby, I'm sorry.

He kept his back to me, but I was pretty sure he knew I was in there. It was always hard to sneak up on the Lion, especially when he was *this* pissed off.

How will we change from this?

As he washed his body, his muscles rippled along his arms and back.

My heart pounded in my ears.

A wave of desire rushed through me.

Will he yell at me to leave? Or will he be okay with my being here?

Without taking off my white gown, I took in a deep breath and slowly opened the door. The glass felt cool and slick under my fingertips. The scent of lavender flowers permeated the air. He must have been using my shampoo again.

I stepped in.

The door closed behind me.

Steam from the hot water billowed and wrapped around me in a thick fog. I stood still, relishing in the heat against my skin.

Kaz turned around.

Please...don't hate me.

Trembling, I stepped forward. "I'm so sorry, Kaz."

Without a word, he reached out his arm and pulled me close to him. His lips found mine. Every nerve ending in my body pulsed with electricity.

Kaz...

The more he kissed me, the more I melted into him. Then, his lips slipped gently against my skin. He licked and sucked the curve of my neck.

I moaned.

To my surprise, Kaz slowly pulled the soft white nightgown over my head and let it fall to the wet floor. The warm water rushed over my bare skin, cascading down my body.

I closed my eyes loving his tender embrace.

He slipped his lips back to my mouth. "*Mysh?*"

"Yes."

"Do you know how dangerous it is to be in here right now?"

"N-no."

"Go back to sleep."

"No." I looked down at the wet floor. "I...am too scared to sleep."

"Are you scared of me?"

I looked at him. "I don't want to lose you because of her."

"You think you could *ever* be free of me?"

I swallowed.

"I will never let you go no matter what *she* does."

"What if..."

Fear filled his eyes. "What?"

“What if *she* is...the main personality? And I am—”

“It is you that I love. It is you that controls your body, your life. Never forget that. *You* are Emily. No one else.”

“But...” I shivered. “After what we’ve learned today, I think *she* has more control.”

He spoke through clenched teeth, “She has nothing.”

My bottom lip quivered.

Kaz slipped his finger along my wet cheek. “Go back in the bedroom. It isn’t good for you to be in here.”

“Why?”

“I want you. Badly.”

“Then, take me.”

“We agreed to six weeks.”

“It’s only in a few days. My body feels fine—”

“I won’t be gentle, *mysh*. Not tonight.” He lifted me up.

I clung to him and wrapped my legs around his waist. His cock grew hard between us.

I rubbed my pussy along it, daring and demanding him to bury himself deep into me. “Kaz...”

“Stop it, *mysh*.”

“Fuck me hard.”

A groan left him.

He slipped his mouth down to one nipple and licked the tip. I jerked away a little. My breast had become Emilio’s bottles for the past weeks, making my nipples super sensitive to the touch.

Kaz must have felt my reaction. His next touch shifted to gentle as he lapped at the tip again.

A moan left me.

Ripples of pleasure radiated through my body.

He drew a circle around the nipple with his tongue, then licked his way up to my other one. He tenderly sucked that nipple into his mouth, too. The feel of his tongue, sent a burst of heat right to my pussy.

I squirmed my hips against his erection, rubbing my clit against it.

“Wait a little longer, *mysh*.” Kaz looked at me, his eyes burning with wild intensity. His short hair clung to the sides of his head. “I know you’re ready, but I am not.”

I tensed. “You’re still mad at me?”

“I love *you* too much to still be mad at you. Something may be wrong with me, but I’m not crazy enough to hate you for what Lunita has done.” He slipped his gaze down my breast. “But, your body...that is another situation.”

“What do you mean?”

“I want to hurt it with my cock. I want your body to remember who it belongs to.”

Those words alone delivered sparks of hunger to my core. “Then, hurt my body.”

He spoke through clenched teeth, “Do not tempt me.”

I trembled. “Do it.”

A dark growl left him. With one hand, he grabbed the back of my head and tugged my hair. Then, he kissed me until I wanted to beg for his cock.

I shivered against him. “Please, Kaz.”

He groaned.

“Look at me.”

He sneered. “*Mysh*.”

“I hate what happened today...it was all fucked up... still...I need to end this night with you inside of me.”

He wrenched my head back, harder than before. “The things in my head right now.”

“You won’t *truly* hurt me.”

His eyes darkened with lust and flames.

“I need to feel you inside of me, baby.”

He tightened his grip on my hair. Then, his mouth crashed against mine full of wild hunger and rage, his lips lovingly bruising mine.

I moaned into his mouth. My body trembled with anticipation, and the ache between my legs pulsed.

His tongue pushed in. The other hand remained in my hair, tugging and pulling.

I whimpered in pain and pleasure, and he continued to ravish me.

I wanted him so bad.

I needed him to fuck the memories away and make me come so hard that my body forgot it all.

When he broke the kiss, I craved his cock more than ever. “Kaz, please.”

He gazed at me.

The steam thickened and rose.

Warm water continued to rain down on us.

He blinked through the dripping water. “Do you know why I killed him?”

“Because I’m yours.”

“And your heart is a divine work of art and your curves are a masterpiece.” He rubbed against me. “*My* masterpiece, belonging only to me.”

My heart fluttered in my chest. “I agree.”

“Your mind is *my* treasure. Your soul sets mine on fire.” His voice grew heavy and possessive. The heat of his gaze made me shiver. “All of you is forever *mine*.”

I groaned when the tip of his cock brushed my clit. “Oh.”

“You agree?”

“Yes, baby.” I rocked against him.

His hard cock pressed against my entrance.

“Do it, Kaz.” I shivered. “Please.”

Slowly, tenderly, he pushed into my pussy as if he were afraid to break my body. Still, his thick cock filled me, stretching and teasing me, until finally he was buried to the hilt.

Fuck.

I’d forgotten how big he was.

He groaned. “*Mysh.*”

A burst of heat exploded in my core as he pulled back. Then he slipped into me again.

“Oh.”

“Waiting to fuck you for these past weeks was torture. It is always amazing to be inside you.” Here he was, huge, hard, and so deep, pressing into the place I needed him most.

My entire body vibrated in this blissful erotic state. “Damn, baby.”

He slipped his lips against mine. “Am I hurting you?”

“No.”

Then, we moved together in the shower, steam curling around our wet, naked bodies. Our scents mingled within the steam.

He ran his hands up and down my curves as his cock slipped in and out of me.

Our bodies melded together in one groaning all-consuming motion. Dizzying waves of pleasure rocked inside me.

I cried out into the cascading water. “Oh, Kaz!”

The intense passion of our lovemaking soared to extraordinary heights of ecstasy.

Maybe, it was because we had gone so long without these moments.

Yet, with each touch, I felt an exquisite pleasure, as if he were awakening a hidden part of me that I hadn't known existed. And experienced a sense of completeness that I had never felt before.

Fucking my pussy slowly, he brushed his lips against my ear. "Are you going to cum for me?"

"Y-yes."

His cock pulsed. His thrusts deepened, becoming more urgent. And then, my body further surrendered to the sensual rhythmic motion of his cock.

"Oh!" Panting, I arched my back, my breasts thrusting forward. My pussy convulsed around him, gripping his cock.

He kept on fucking me.

"Yes." He groaned. "I love when that pussy tightens around me."

Every cell in my body felt like it was exploding in slow motion, as if I were a lit firework going off into bursts of red, gold, and orange.

"*Fuck, mysh!*" His cock jerked, sending tremors of electricity through my veins.

In my head, lights flashed. Colors swirled into a cacophony of brightness. My entire body flooded with a warm light.

Kaz let out a guttural groan as his cock erupted. Hot cum burst inside me.

He thrust into my pussy, again and again, spilling more into me. "Fuuuckk!"

My heart pounded in my ears.

Then, he sagged against me.

Our breaths mingled as one.

He kissed my shoulder, then my cheek, and then my lips. In that very second, I'd never felt so content, as if everything were right with the world.

I leaned back against the wet marble, a slow, lazy smile spread over my lips.

There was so much steam his face was barely visible. Still, I could see the wild possession in his eyes.

“*Mysh.*”

“Yes, baby.”

“With every breath I take, I promise to protect *our love.*”

“Our love doesn’t need protecting. It’s safe.”

“It must be.” He captured my mouth and then brushed his lips against my wet cheek. “Because your love is the light that guides me through the darkness. Without it, I would be nothing. I would destroy this fucking world.”

Chapter 9

Us

Kazimir

So much steam filled the bathroom. It wafted around the floor and even swirled up to the ceiling, dancing along the light.

The scent of lavender mixed with the fading aroma of our sex.

In front of me, Emily dried off in the steamed up mirror, and I towered behind her.

Silent.

Watching.

Wondering.

On the inside, my heart rumbled in my chest with an unstoppable rage—a fire smoldering beneath my skin, refusing to be doused.

On the outside, beads of water trickled down my naked body, running from my shoulders to my chest, slipping over my abs until it dripped down to my aching cock hanging heavy between my thighs, barely satiated and yearning for more.

Still, that ever-present rage throbbed deep in my core, burning hotter and hotter with each passing second.

I didn't hurt her pussy as much as I desired because in the shower *she* was Emily, and that was not the target of my anger.

How could she? No. Do not think about it.

I breathed in.

I breathed out.

The rage began to ebb, but not quite enough.

I returned my view to my mouse, assessing our reflections in the steamy mirror.

Her black hair was slicked back from the water. Her brown skin glowed in the bathroom's dim lighting. Since having Emilio, her ass had gotten wider, fatter. The mere view of it made me want to growl.

Instead, I raised my focus to those full breasts, bigger than ever. Heavy with milk to feed my son.

Such a small woman to have such an enormous impact in my life.

Even with Emily in front of me, I could still make out the contours of my body in the foggy mirror's glass—my chest heaving up and down, the sides of my abs, the bulk of my arms, my fists clenched on the side.

Just from looking at *us*, someone could think that I was the scariest person in the room. Surely, I had the most menacing figure.

Yet, they would be wrong.

It was my mouse who was the true terror.

When will Lunita come out to play?

I gritted my teeth, ready for her.

I was starting to think that love and insanity were two sides of the same coin. Weren't both born from the same mysterious depths of the human heart? Couldn't both trigger pain?

My mouse was madness captured within compassion and beauty.

But, one could never forget the madness.

And yet, in her I found a reflection of my own soul, fractured and flawed, but also capable of great depth and beauty. For in the end, it was the very madness of her love that made my mouse so compelling, so irresistible, and so utterly essential to my life.

But, what would I do with her dark side?

Why would you think there could be anyone else, Lunita? You both are mine. I told you this. There is nothing else to discuss.

The steamy condensation began to evaporate on the mirror, slowly revealing parts of Emily's face—left eye, some of her nose, a bit of her cheek, part of her mouth, a small inch of her chin.

A woman with another woman inside of her.

I didn't know much about love—the shadowy depths and secret surprises. But what I did know, was that loving my mouse meant that I would be wildly exploring a treacherous labyrinth.

With some steps, I would be lost, and many paths would have twists and turns.

From the moment I laid eyes on my mouse, I knew she was more than what she seemed. It was the reason why I fell in love with her in the first place.

I would *never* regret that decision.

But, Lunita... What will I do with her?

Emily stopped drying herself, but kept her view on her hands. “Do you need a towel?”

I said nothing.

She looked at me through the mirror. “Are you...”

I slowly leaned my head to the side.

“Are you still angry, Kaz?”

“Anger would be the wrong description for what is spinning inside of me.”

She widened her eyes.

“I would say that it is rage.”

She turned around and faced me.

“Many would say that rage and anger are the same word.” I gazed down at her. “However, I would argue that *rage* is an intense and uncontrolled anger. More extreme and potentially dangerous if not managed.”

“And how can we manage that, Kaz?”

“Giving me pussy helped.”

She frowned. “And what else?”

I sneered. “*Delaying?*”

She looked away.

“Delaying is not lying, *mysh* but it is still something we do not do. And...I still feel betrayed by you due to your delaying.”

She shivered and didn't put her view back on me. “I'm sorry.”

“That is not enough.”

“Kaz, I had no idea what to fucking do. I was still trying to understand what had been happening with my own body for several weeks. It was a mystery that I did not want to solve or deal with.”

Guilt sparked inside of me, but I wouldn't let myself go there.

Emily shook her head. “There is no set instruction book on how to deal with the fact that my personality had me cheat on you.”

“*You* did not cheat.”

She swallowed. “I feel like it.”

“It was Lunita.”

“I could have handled everything better, Kaz.”

“You should have told me *immediately*. There is never any reason to delay information.”

Still looking away, her eyes watered. “Do you understand why I delayed telling you?”

“I do.”

“Does that help?”

“It does not.”

She raised her view to me. “I'm sorry.”

I spoke through clenched teeth, “That is not enough either.”

“What do you want?”

“To tear this world apart.”

She inched back. “I can’t help you with that.”

“Where is the gardener’s family?”

She scowled. “They are innocent.”

“It does not matter to me.”

“They will remain safe.” She wrapped the towel tightly around her body. “That’s that.”

“Are you sure about that, *mysh*?”

“Very sure.” The scowl shifted to a neutral expression. “Did you...”

I watched her.

“Did you kill my guards?”

I raised my eyebrows. “Maxwell did not tell you?”

“No.”

“They are gone, *mysh*.”

She closed her eyes.

Any other time I would have consoled her. Not this time. I would not bend or compromise when it came to her or Lunita. If she didn’t know this before then she must finally figure it out now.

And soon Lunita...I will explain this to you.

Emily slowly opened her eyes. “I have to fix this. Lunita must be...controlled or erased...I don’t know.”

“No, *mysh*.”

“What?”

“*We* have to fix this. I will call this Delphine tomorrow and—”

“No, Kaz. *I* will call.” She began to walk off.

I grabbed her arm and brought her back to me. “This will never happen again—”

“It can’t.”

“Regardless of what comes our way, it is *us* against everyone else. We are never to be on opposing sides of the chess board again. Do you understand me?”

“Yes.”

I tightened my grip. A deadly edge laced my next words. “A day like this *never* fucking happens again.”

She trembled in my hold. “It won’t.”

Did she understand? Did she realize how close I had come to killing all of Harlem Crew and even Blue just because my mouse had me in the dark?

“Kaz...of course I didn’t want this. I wanted to tell you... everything, but...I was scared. You’re my best friend.” Her bottom lip quivered. “I love you with every fiber of my being, every breath in my lungs, every beat of my heart. There is no one else in this world I could ever love more, Kaz. No one.”

The rage within me stilled.

“But...” She moved her arm out of my grip. “You’re fucking crazy, psychotic, and dangerously petty.”

“Petty?”

“You want to kill the gardener’s family.”

“An example must be made.”

“It’s over, Kaz. You killed my guards and the gardener. That’s it. It hurts about my guards, but...”

“You understand.”

“I don’t want to understand, but I do.” She looked at the floor. “Now, I have to get in touch with this woman in New Orleans and somehow figure out how we are going to do this.”

“We will simply go.”

“But what about Emilio? Should he even be on a plane at his age? And Paolo is finally getting a sense of stability. This month he’s been sleeping through the night with no nightmares —”

“Enough!”

She widened her eyes and looked at me. “Kaz?”

“Enough about everyone else. What about you, *mysh*?”

“I’m fine.”

“Fine?” I glared. “Olga hinted at your being stressed. Lunita has been popping out to party. Clearly, you’re not fine.”

She walked off before I could grab her.

Pissed, I snatched a towel from the rack, wrapped it around my waist, and stomped after her. “Have you been stressed?”

“I wouldn’t say that. I’ve been uneasy and I maybe...have been struggling with fear a little...but not stressed—”

“That sounds like stress—”

“I have you, Max, Blue, maids, chefs, a nanny, and a whole crew to protect me.”

“What does that have to do with your being stressed or not?”

“How could I be stressed with so many people helping me?”

“I do not understand what you are saying?”

“I’m saying.” She held out her hands. “I have too much help to be whining and complaining.”

The rage rose within me again, and I couldn’t explain why.

I fisted my hands. “If you are fucking stressed, then you say something.”

“It’s not that I feel stressed, it’s that I don’t think I should feel stressed with so much help.”

“That is bullshit. Help is the fundamental aspect of the human experience. We all rely on others for guidance, support,

and encouragement.”

She sighed.

“I am the Lion, but I have you, David and many others to help. Thousands actually.” I headed over to my mouse and stopped a foot in front of her. “If I had pushed a baby out of my body...”

She blinked.

“I would have demanded people to carry me around for years. It looked painful. I don’t understand how you were able to do it. Every mother should have a team helping them.”

She gave me a sad smile.

“In fact, I was shocked when you jumped right to breastfeeding with no problem as if your body didn’t ache, as if you were born to be a mother. Night after night, sneaking out of bed in order to not wake me, never asking for my help—”

“I already have Olga—”

“I am Emilio’s father. I should be next to you while you feed him.” I raised my hand to her head and brushed my fingertips along her cheek. “I *want* to help. He is ours.”

She blinked. “I thought you needed your sleep.”

“For what? To roar?” I glared. “We are in this together. Are we not?”

Her voice grew weak. “Yes.”

“What is this need of yours to always handle everything on your own?”

“Kaz, I’m not doing it on purpose. It’s just...”

“What?”

“It’s just how I’ve always done it—”

“Now *we* are together.” I spoke through clenched teeth, “Enough.”

She opened her mouth, but no words left those lips.

I tilted my head to the side. “Have you been stressed or not?”

“Yes.”

Tension gathered in my shoulders. “Talk to me.”

“Sometimes...I’ve been really tired.”

“And?”

“And sometimes I get scared that I’m not doing enough for you, Emilio, and Paolo?”

My heart ached. “You are doing more than enough. You have made me a father. You gave Paolo a new life, and you are an amazing mother to our son.”

She hugged herself.

I eyed her. “What else?”

“Sometimes...I feel ashamed and embarrassed for having Olga and even Baba helping out so much.”

“They love Emilio and Paolo, but most of all they care for you.”

Her eyes reflected a kaleidoscope of emotions, each one a different facet of the same shattered soul. Her voice lowered to a whisper. “We’ve been so happy...and things have been so peaceful...*that* has scared me too.”

“Why?”

“Perhaps, I’m too used to chaos. It’s like I’m just waiting for the shit to hit the fan.”

“I understand that more than you know. At times, the peace has put me on edge too. But, it does not matter what comes if we are *together*. That is all you need to focus on. Us.”

Slowly, she closed the distance between us and placed her hands on my damp chest. “How do I repair this between us, Kaz?”

“Give me the location of the gardener’s family.”

She let out an exasperated breath. “Are you serious?”

“Why would I be joking?”

“Kaz, you have to let it go.”

“I will not.”

“I’m not getting a bunch of strangers killed to make you happy.” She embraced me.

I didn’t want to warm to her body pressed against mine, but I did. I fell into the softness of my mouse, and it was paradise.

She leaned her head against my chest. “Our focus needs to be on fixing my shattered mind, not murdering innocent people.”

“I can multitask, *mysh*.”

She let out an exasperated breath.

Someone knocked on the door.

She lifted her head. “Yes?”

Olga’s voice came from the other side. “Our little king has just woken up. No crying, but I’m sure he is hungry.”

Against my will, a smile spread across my face. It was impossible to be mad when my cub was near. “Come in, Olga.”

Emily let me go.

But, before she could walk off, I pulled her back and brushed my lips against her ear. “Remember, *mysh*. It is always *us*.”

“I will remember.”

I released her.

The door opened.

To my surprise, David walked through first and held it open for Olga. In her arms, Emilio looked around the room. Soon as he spotted my mouse, a whimper left him.

“Oh, baby.” My mouse hurried to him. “I’m sorry. Did you miss me?”

David got to my side.

I looked at him and lowered my voice. “Any status on the gardener’s family?”

“Giorgio apparently is a hobby magician because the entire family has disappeared.”

Interesting.

I looked up and put my focus on my mouse.

She now sat on the bed with several pillows behind her. Emilio suckled on one nipple. Olga placed more pillows around them.

Meanwhile, Emily kept her view our way, watching me.

Frowning, I didn’t move my gaze from her. “David, what about the neighborhood or city that he was from?”

“That information vanished too.”

I sneered.

David continued, “There is no Internal Passport nor international passport. We went deeper, searching for a driver’s license, health insurance card, taxpayer identification number, or even a work permit.”

“All gone?”

“As if he never existed.”

I scowled at my mouse. “Or as if *someone* got Maxwell to ask his homey Misha to get rid of the gardener’s information.”

Well played, mysh.

I turned to David.

He shook his head. “I apologize, Kazimir. I will do my best to—”

“Forget about it.”

“What?”

“This smells like Misha. If he truly did it, then we will be wasting our time and resources to get the information back.”

David nodded, yet worry spread across his face. He came closer and lowered his voice. “We have another problem.”

I tried to keep my anger down. “What?”

“Someone left a card on Paolo’s bed. Baba found it when she was putting him to sleep.”

Goddamn it.

I gestured for him to come with me. There was no way my mouse needed to hear this now. Too much was already going on.

We left the room, closed the door, and stood in the hallway.

I ran my fingers through my wet hair. “What did the message say?”

“It was just two words written in blood.”

I tensed. “What two words?”

“Traitor’s son.”

“Damn it. We do not need this shit right now.” I gazed at the door. “Does Blue know?”

“Not yet.”

“I cannot believe I am going to say this, but...”

“Yes, Kazimir?”

“Delay telling Blue. Keep this as quiet as possible. We all need a relaxing night.”

“Yes, sir.”

Chapter 10

Three for Three

Kazimir

In my dream, I walked on the beach.

Sand stuck to my bare feet.

Ten feet away, Pavel stood, wearing a gray suit. His long black hair flowed around him in the warm ocean breeze.

I headed his way. “Do you have more messages for me this evening?”

To my surprise, he began to frown. “I am sorry, but tonight *I* will not be the one that teaches you a lesson.”

I gazed around. “What do you mean?”

Then, something or someone violently shook me, but I couldn’t see them.

I stumbled back and batted at the air. “What is this?”

Pavel’s frown deepened. “I am so sorry, Kazimir.”

“Sorry for what?” And then, the dream faded and I jerked awake.

“Kazimir! Kazimir!” David shook me. “Wake up!”

Blinking my eyes, I shoved his hands away. “What?”

“Lunita is running around the mansion.”

No.

Panic surged through me. My head was still foggy with sleep. I looked to the left. My mouse’s side was empty.

Goddamn it.

“Are you up, Kazimir?”

“Fuck.” I stumbled out of the bed. “Just give me a minute.”

David stepped back and held my pants in his hand.

That was when I realized I was still naked. After the shower, Emily and I had simply dried off and passed out in bed.

I grabbed my pants from him and rushed to put them on. “Lunita is up?”

“Yes.”

“But, I put my best guards on Emily. Two men I trust with my life—”

“She tricked them for a little bit, heading to the nursery—”

“No.” I shivered and buttoned up my pants. “I-is Emilio okay?”

“He is safe.” David held up his hands. “Emilio is just fine. He is now with Maxwell.”

“Okay. Okay.” My heart hammered in my chest.

“Kazimir, when she made it to the nursery, she sliced the two guards necks.”

“W-where are my slippers. Never mind, fuck my slippers.”

“Kazimir.”

I rushed around him. “What?”

“Lunita went into the nursery’s adjoining room—”

“What?” I spun around. “W-why would she do that?”

“She killed Olga.”

My world imploded, every thought and emotion disintegrating in a single moment. It was chaos in my heart. There was only empty darkness in my soul.

“No.” I shook my head over and over. “Olga is not dead —”

David widened his eyes. “Kazimir—”

“Get a doctor right now!” I ran off. “Where the fuck is Lunita?! Still in t-the nursery—”

“No.”

I raced out of the bedroom. “Then, where is she?”

“In the garden.”

“Get a doctor for Olga!” I raced forward, left David far behind me, and passed a small army of Harlem Crew now guarding Paolo’s and Emilio’s rooms.

Olga isn’t dead.

I bolted down the stairs. Anxiety boiling in my veins.

Everything is going to be okay.

On the first level, I sprinted ahead, rushing by a sea of men gripping guns. It looked like everyone was preparing for war.

Then, I noticed drops of blood on the marble, leading to the garden.

Did someone hurt Lunita?

My heart plummeted.

They had better not. To hurt her, would be to harm my mouse, and that could never happen.

As I got close to the garden’s glass doors, loud giggling sounded.

Lunita.

Dread crashed into me.

If Lunita was happy, then what would be on the other side of these glass doors?

My trembling hands pushed through. The lights were off. Moonlight seeped in through the glass ceiling, illuminating some of the dark garden.

Where is she?

Still running forward, I gazed around and only made it ten feet inside the garden, when I spotted her.

Then, my heart seized.

What I saw, chilled me to the bone.

“No!” I collapsed to the ground, my knees dug into the dirt. Sorrow and terror rocked through me. “No, Lunita! No!”

There, she kneeled on the ground, planting Olga’s decapitated head amongst the rosses.

“No.” I stared in disbelief. Tears streamed down my face. “Why?”

Only Olga’s neck was in the soil as if that represented the stem of a plant. The rest of her face was at the top, showing the striking shock of her death—eyes wide open in fear, mouth gaping, cuts all over her face, blood oozing along her cheeks and ears.

I didn’t cry.

I sobbed.

I crumbled to the ground, almost burying my head into the cold dirt and shed more tears than I ever had in my life, even more than for my own mother. Because at least my mother had died in furs, diamonds, and holding a glass of expensive champagne. At least my mother had said her goodbyes and hugged me for days, whispering how much she cared. At least she had passed away in warmth and grace.

I am so sorry, Olga. You did not deserve this.

“No!” I wanted to get into the fetal position. I wanted to run away, but there would be no escape, no way to fix things.

So much pain slithered through my body like a thousand snakes, consuming and paralyzing me in heartbreak.

And Lunita giggled.

Trembling, I raised my head and screamed, “This is not funny!”

Although she had been giggling, no humor covered her face.

I glared at her, wishing I could fucking charge her way, grab that tiny neck, and snap it.

Remember. That is your mouse too.

I fisted my hands into the dirt.

Lunita rose from the ground and walked over to a silver watering can near a bush of white roses. “Three for three.”

I wiped away my tears, smearing dirt onto my face. “What the fuck did you say?”

She picked up the watering can and scowled at me. “Three. For. Three.”

“What does that mean?”

“You killed her two guards. I kill your two guards. You kill someone I love. I kill someone you love!” She stabbed a finger in the air. “Three for three.”

My chest rapidly rose and fell.

She headed back over to Olga. “I respected her and you.”

“How the hell do you think you did that?”

“I only did it in the butt.” She tilted the can and began watering Olga’s head.

I turned away, still hearing the water splash onto my beloved nanny’s head. “Y-you didn’t have to kill her, Lunita. She had nothing to do with—”

“Are *you* looking at the TV!”

I turned back and glared at her.

“Are you?!” Lunita slammed the watering can on the ground. Her shoulders rose and fell. Then, her angry expression cracked to sadness. “You didn’t have to kill my Flower Man.”

“You do not fuck anyone else!” I got up from the ground.

Lunita touched her chest with a shivering hand. “I am my own person—”

“You are mine!”

“I’m not. I’m not. I’m not.” She placed her hands to the side of her head and screamed some more. “I’m not!”

“You are.” I prowled her way with menacing steps.

She ran off into the darkness of the garden.

God damn it!

I raced after her, almost stumbling into a statue of a lion crouching on the ground.

Where are you?

I caught a glimpse of my mouse's white gown as she dashed and then ducked behind two huge bushes.

"Lunita, this cannot go on." I crept that way. "We have to talk about this or more people will end up dying in the future."

I picked up my pace and rushed behind the bushes.

She greeted me with a slash to my arm.

"Fuck!" I tried to grab her.

She darted away. "No talking!"

"We will fucking talk!" I touched the space on my arm where it burned. Blood dripped on my fingers.

Silence filled the darkness.

I stumbled away from the bushes, my eyes darting left and right.

*Where is she now? And when did she get a knife earlier?
Was it in our bedroom?*

David had said that she left our room. The guards followed. Then she sliced their necks outside of the nursery.

*She had a knife hidden somewhere in our fucking
bedroom?*

The very idea of that delivered chills down my spine.

Dangerous. So fucking dangerous.

It was no doubt that she could have killed me in an instant before David or anyone could have saved me.

There, I slept powerless on the bed, while she decided to wreak havoc.

A noise came from my right.

She jumped out of the darkness with the knife, trying to slice my other arm.

Ready, I dodged this one, twisted around, and caught her from behind. Dust kicked up around us.

“Get off of me!” She tried to stab my shoulder.

I flipped her to the ground, catching her by surprise.

“Ah!” She fell back.

Fast, I dived to the ground, grabbed her leg, and pulled her to me.

“Let go!” She kicked at me with the other leg. “Let go!”

Flowers and rocks flew around.

I crawled on top of her and battled for the knife. It glinted dangerously in her grip.

With a big heave, I managed to wrench it away.

The knife clattered next to us.

“Enough!” I grabbed both of her hands, pressed them down in the dirt, and hovered over her.

She panted and gazed up at me with wide eyes. “Three for three.”

“That is not how this will work—”

“It will—”

“It will not!”

“You kill Max. I kill Valentina.” She sneered.

I trembled. “What?”

“You kill Boris. I kill David.” Her bottom lip quivered. “I made a list. You better not mess with me, mean old lion!”

I let her hands go and rolled off her. “The gardener was not supposed to touch you—”

“He tasted like cinnamon gum!” She blinked and tears left her eyes. “And he put flowers in my hair!”

I inhaled and exhaled, trying to catch my breath.

“I wasn’t...” she lowered her voice. “I wasn’t trying to fall in love.”

I gritted my teeth.

“I just wanted to smell the garden with *my* nose.” She raised her hand and touched the tip of her nose. “And I wanted to touch some of the roses.”

“You could have touched roses without getting fucked in your ass!”

“His tongue tasted like cinnamon gum—”

“That’s enough!”

She hugged herself and cried, “He loved me...”

Sighing, I crawled over, got to Lunita’s side, and tried to hug her.

She punched me in the chest. She wasn’t my mouse, so it brought no pain. Still, I hated to see her so sad, so angry.

I kept my voice calm. “What did you think I would do, if I found out?”

“I...”

“Tell me.”

“I thought *she* would stop you, and save him.”

“When it comes to another man touching her and your body...not even Emily could stop me.”

Lunita faced me. Tears spilled from her eyes. “I didn’t get to say goodbye.”

My heart ached, but I wouldn’t give in. To do so, would be to change too much of me. The very idea of sharing Emily and Lunita made my jaw tighten and my fists clench.

I frowned. “You are mine.”

“I don’t want to be.”

“Why not?”

“You’re rough. He was soft. You’re mean. He was nice—”

“I can be nice.”

“You’re hers.” She pointed at me and then touched her chest. “He was mine!”

I unclenched my fist and rubbed my head.

Lunita’s voice cracked at the end. “He was my... Flower Man.”

Her saying that didn’t make me feel bad. It just made want to kill him again.

I turned to her. “How do I fix this?”

“You should have let him get on the plane and leave.”

“He still would have been gone—”

“But, then I could have called him and said goodbye.”

I didn’t want him to even hear your voice. That’s mine too.

As if hearing my thoughts, she scowled. “Stubborn, stupid, mean old lion.”

“You killed Olga.”

“I did.”

“Did you not like her?”

“I didn’t.”

“Why not?”

“She knew. I could see it in her eyes.” Lunita touched her head.

“Knew what?”

“She is like Boris and Blue and you and even Max.”

“In what way?”

“You all always know when I’m here, and Olga knew. She knew when Emily was gone, even if she didn’t know about me. She could tell. I know it. I could see the click in her eyes, even though she would pretend, but she knew...”

Of course. Olga was smart.

Pain blossomed in my chest.

I touched it.

Lunita watched me. “Now you know how I feel. Now your heart hurts just like mine.”

“That is one thing you are correct about tonight.” I rubbed the center of my chest. “Killing Olga hurt.”

“Good.”

“You did not have to—”

“I did.”

I dropped my hand. “How do I fix this?”

“It’s three for three.” Lunita hugged herself. “We’re good.”

I eyed her. “Where did you hide the knife? Where in our bedroom?”

A wicked smile spread across her face. “Scared?”

“Very.”

“Good.”

I sighed. “Why did you let me live? You could have killed me tonight.”

Lunita put her view on the ground. “Because *she* loves you so much. Bigger than the moon.”

“*You* love me too?”

“Sometimes.” Another tear left her eye. “Not tonight.”

I swallowed. “I love you too.”

“Where did you put his body after you killed him?” She put her view back on me. “Where’s my Flower Man?”

“Does it matter. He is dead.”

“Where is he? Did you move him?”

“He is here on the property.”

“Why?”

“I wanted to piss on his grave, when annoyed.”

“Mean old lion.”

I pointed to the large statue of the huge lion roaring near rows of tulips. “My men buried him behind there.”

Lunita rose from the ground. “Help me dig him out.”

“Lunita—”

“Now!” She walked over there. “I want to say goodbye.”

God damn it.

And that was how I spent the rest of the night.

David must have been monitoring the entire situation on the cameras because he later appeared with three shovels and helped us dig. At least the ground was damp, the gardener must have watered it earlier that day.

Sweat dripped down my chest.

With every scoop of dirt, my stomach tightened and twisted.

By dawn, we had the gardener’s body out and laying on the ground. There, Lunita clung to his cold form, sobbing into his chest, kissing his battered face, and whispering goodbye.

That image would haunt me for the rest of my life.

Chapter 11

The Mirror

Emily

I woke in a safe cocoon of Kaz's arms. He held me close and tight. His warm muscle encased me. The steady thump, thump, thump of his heart sounded beneath my ear.

God, I love him.

His skin was warm and smooth under my cheek.

I breathed in and caught the scent of cedar, sharp and clear, like a new pencil or a Christmas tree. Kaz smelled like a forest and I couldn't stop myself from drawing in one long breath, pulling his scent deep into my lungs. Underneath lay the softer smell of sage, but only a hint of it.

Wait. Why does he smell like the outside or...a garden?

That made my whole body tense.

His scent didn't make any sense. We'd made love in the shower last night. The whole time he doused himself in my expensive shampoo.

When I fell asleep in his arms, a lavender fragrance radiated from him.

Slowly, I opened my eyes.

Daylight filtered through the slightly opened curtains.

I spotted a bandage on one arm.

Excuse me?

I widened my eyes.

What happened? He didn't have that on before.

Slowly, I slipped out of his hold, making sure I didn't wake him.

There, just under the crook of his elbow, was a bright red mark. It looked like a small bruise.

But that is impossible. Unless...

A chill surged up my spine.

Did Lunita show up?

I gritted my teeth.

She better not have hurt him.

I was about to slowly lift the big bandage on his other arm, when I caught Emilio's crib next to the bed.

What?

I rubbed my eyes to make sure that I was seeing the right thing. We never kept Emilio in here. He had his own big room with his nanny next to him.

My goal was to keep our bedroom as our sensual space of love.

I slowly sat up and confirmed that Emilio slept within it.

What's going on?

I looked around.

Paolo?

My little one slept in a curled up ball right next to me.

Wait a minute. Why would Kaz have Paolo in here with us too?

That was when I saw Maxwell knocked out on the floor by the bed with several pillows and blankets. Lemonisha stood proud in the corner, bigger than ever. Lemons dangled from her branches.

Okay. Something happened for sure. Lunita showed up.

Terror rode my heart.

And...

I looked out all of the males in my life sleeping around me.

Kaz wanted me surrounded by love when I woke up. Which meant that Lunita did something that would be impossible for me to forgive.

What could it be?

My mind raced with dread, imagining the worst.

I slipped out of bed. Whatever had happened it had exhausted the hell out of Kaz and Max. I placed my feet on the floor, stepped over Max, and touched my head.

Fuck.

Someone had braided my hair into five thick cornrows.

Max.

Fear and guilt clashed inside me, begging for some sort of release. I had enough of this bullshit—her coming out at night and causing chaos, the men in my life cleaning my body up of blood and taking care of my messes.

Enough.

I tip toed toward the door. With trembling fingers I grabbed the knob.

What the hell did you do this time, Lunita?

I slowly twisted it, opened the door, took a deep breath, and snuck out.

Blue, David, and Giorgio were slumped in chairs near the door. Each had been close to sleep.

They all looked at me.

Good. I didn't kill any of them.

Relief washed through me.

I shut my bedroom door behind me. "What happened?"

Blue jumped up. "We were ordered not to say anything."

Yawning, David rose. "Kazimir stressed that he wanted to tell you himself."

"Lunita showed up?"

Neither said anything.

Giorgio nodded behind them.

Thanks, Butler.

I scanned the space, not getting any clue of what could have happened.

“Okay. I’ll respect that.” I stepped deeper into the hallway. “I’m just going to walk around.”

And figure this out on my own.

David got in front of me. “Let me wake up Kazimir.”

“How much sleep has he gotten?”

“He wanted us to wake him when you—”

“David.” I frowned. “How much sleep did he get?”

“Barely, two hours.”

Goddamn it.

I gritted my teeth. “Don’t you fucking wake him. Do you understand me?”

“Emily—”

“Do you understand me?”

David scowled. “I understand.”

I gazed at the three of them. “And what about you all? Have any of you slept tonight?”

“We are fine.” Blue pursed her lips.

Giorgio slowly rose. “We haven’t slept at all tonight.”

My frown deepened. “Go to sleep.”

Blue shook her head. “Not happening.”

David crossed his arms over his chest. “I really should wake Kazimir.”

“Please, David. I don’t know what happened, but I do know that Kaz deserves some peace.” I was about to say something else, but a noise sounded further down the hall.

I turned that way.

Two men from the Brotherhood carried a mattress and headed out of Emilio’s room.

What?

I studied the mattress. Blood stained the front in a huge, crusted circle.

No.

I rushed off.

Blue followed and got to my side. “Emily, you should stay by the—”

“Is Olga okay?” I sped up to a light jog. “Is that why Emilio is in our room? Is she in the hospital?”

“Let’s go back to the bedroom.” Blue tried to grab my arm.

I dodged it and shifted to a sprint. My legs ached like I’d been running all night.

What did you do with our body, Lunita?

This unsettling sensation swirled through me.

Terror filled Blue’s eyes. “Emily—”

“What happened to Olga?”

“I can’t tell you.”

Fear gripped my heart like an icy hand wrapping around it, squeezing and constricting.

The men saw me heading that way and hurried off.

*Please let Olga be okay. She’s too good of a person.
Please, Lunita.*

I got to the nursery and rushed in.

No!

My feet glided to a stop on the wet carpet. My heart plummeted to the deepest depths of despair.

Blood.

This horrid dread coursed through my veins.

My stomach twisted. I looked down at the thick, red trail from Olga’s room to the doorway. The scent of death and iron filled my nostrils, making my head dizzy.

“T-too much blood.” Reluctantly, I walked further in. Cold, sticky blood clung to my skin like tree sap. Most of the trail had dried and hardened. Each step, I took was punctuated by an eerie and terrible crunching noise.

“L-lunita...” Chills surged up my spine.

I didn’t want to keep going forward. The blood trail suggested an inescapable probability of carnage and death.

I couldn’t take anymore horror.

I should have turned around.

But I had to walk forward.

My eyes watered. “L-lunita, tell me...you didn’t... please...”

I got closer. The scent of death coated my nose. I didn’t even want to breathe anymore.

Bile rose in my throat.

I paused in the doorway, trying to gain control of myself and bracing myself against the inevitable horror.

No. There’s no way...she did it...there would be no... reason for it...

On the left, three men worked around Olga’s bedroom, folding her clothes and placing them in boxes. Shock etched their scarred faces as if they’d seen a lot, but never anything this bad.

I turned to the right, and that was when I saw the true horror. Two men slowly picked up cut up body parts that had been organized on the floor in a...

I looked closer.

The body parts had formed some oddly shaped flower.

I drowned in sadness. “Olga.”

A heart gripped by pain, was a train stopped dead in its tracks. And with me, the tracks were collapsing. The rails snapping. The train careening into a ravine. Smashing down and tumbling. Flipping and falling.

Tears spilled from my eyes. My voice grew hoarse.
“Olga.”

Some of the men stopped what they were doing.

My chest tightened. I forced oxygen in and out of my lungs.

I stumbled into the room. “Why Olga, Lunita? Why?”

Blue made it to my side. “Emily, let’s go—”

“Don’t say anything.” Feeling nauseous, I turned away from the body parts and staggered off to Olga’s bathroom.
“Just...give me a minute...”

Lunita, why Olga?

More bile rose in my mouth. Acidic and bitter. Coating the back of my tongue.

“G-god d-damn it.” I hurried into the bathroom, shut the door, and locked it.

I didn’t want to throw up.

I wanted to scream.

Scream in terror.

Scream in anguish.

Scream until the noise tore out of my heart.

Why, Lunita? Why?

I stumbled to the toilet, but no longer felt like vomiting.

Just tell me that.

My tongue was now numb. My lips tingled, and my throat felt coated with sand.

I caught my reflection in the mirror and gazed at it.

Helpless.

Horrified.

Devastated.

The world had transformed into a desolate wasteland, stretching out in all directions. Devoid of life. Empty, yet suffocating in despair.

Could I ever fix this? Or would I keep allowing her—me—to ruin my life, Kaz's life, Paolo's and even Emilio's?

Trembling, I dragged myself closer to the mirror. “Things were fine. Emilio was born, and ended up being perfectly healthy. Kaz and I found a rhythm that held peace.”

My palms grew sweaty. Somehow, my skin felt hot and cold at the same time.

Was that her rising inside of me?

Or was it all my imagination?

“Why fuck it all up for us?” I leaned my head to the side. “Did it make you nervous to be so happy?”

Like a mad woman, I stood in front of the mirror, staring at the reflection gazing back at me. In my head, I felt trapped in a maze with no way out.

“Are you there?” Tears streamed down my face. My chest heaved with the sobs that wracked my body.

The woman in the mirror appeared lost in an abyss of sorrow.

I couldn't even recognize myself.

Still, I placed my hands on the sink, leaned forward, and got even closer to the mirror.

The details of my reflection became clearer and more defined.

I could see it all—the lines and contours that made up my features, the different flecks of brown in my eyes, the many hairs forming my lashes, the curve of my lips, the shape of my eyebrows.

“Are you fucking there?” I inched closer. My reflection began to loom before me. It became this unknown entity, sliding towards me like a predator stalking its prey.

My nose nearly touched the mirror.

Barely two inches ran between the glass and me.

“Lunita?”

My breath fogged up the mirror’s surface, creating a hazy mist that obscured some of my features.

“Lunita?”

The air thickened around me.

“Just tell me why?” I fisted my hands on the sink. More tears streamed from my eyes. “Haven’t we killed enough?”

Rage filled me.

I closed the few inches and pressed my nose against the cold glass. “Why? Why? Why? Why? Why! Why! Wwwwwhy!”

Someone knocked on the door.

Blue’s voice sounded as the door knob twisted from side to side. “Emily, let me inside.”

I remained pressed against the glass, glaring at my reflection. “You fucking bitch. We had nothing as a kid. Nothing but horror. That’s what you want our adult years to be?”

“Emily!?” Blue knocked on the door. “Emily!?”

I moved a few inches from the glass and looked over my shoulder. “I’m fine, Blue! Give me a fucking minute!”

The knocking ceased.

I turned back to the mirror. “If I could just...go inside of my head and fucking kill you I would. Wrap my hands around your throat and fucking push all of the oxygen out of your body.”

Fear shivered through me, and it was not mine. I had no fear in this moment. Just hot, blazing rage, unbridled and threatening to consume me.

The fear is hers.

“There you go.” I pressed my nose against the glass and wildly gazed at the up-close reflection. “There you go. I feel you.”

The fear shifted to terror.

“Oh yeah.” Slowly, I inhaled, taking in the scent of the glass. It was a faint smell of cleaning solution mixed with the metallic tang of the reflective coating.

I exhaled slowly.

Once again, the mirror fogged up around my nose.

I could sense the vibrations of my breathing and the sound of my heart beating in my ears. Meanwhile, the silence of the bathroom was almost deafening, making the sound of my breathing seem louder.

She's here. She's watching. I know it.

I lingered there for a moment, lost in the sensation of being so close to my own reflection and feeling Lunita rising inside of me.

I breathed in again.

How I wished I could step right through the glass and into the other side of us.

“Good.” I unfisted my hands and placed them against the mirror. The cold glass smoothed against my palms. “Lunita.”

Her terror twisted around my fury.

I whispered at the mirror. “Just tell me why?”

No answer came.

“Lunita. Lunita. Lunita.”

Only the sound of my own voice echoed back at me.

“You killed Olga.” I spoke through clenched teeth. “You hurt Kaz. Not just doing whatever to his arms. You fucking hurt his heart!”

I fisted my hands. “You fucking bitch!”

And then, my rage consumed me.

“Bitch!” I lashed out at the mirror, striking it with all my strength.

It cracked in the center.

The glass warped and twisted, reflecting back an image of me that was distorted and fragmented.

“Why?!” I slammed both fists into the mirror. The glass shattered into thousands of pieces. And I didn’t care. I kept on beating at my reflection. “Why?! Why?!”

Sharp pain came as a shards cut into my skin.

But I didn’t stop.

I kept hitting the mirror, watching as the fragments broke apart and fell to the ground around me. The pain in my hand was nothing compared to the agony in my heart. I punched and punched. The sound of shattered glass rang in my ears, like the chime of a thousand broken bells.

Sobs caught at my throat. “W-why?”

All of her terror turned to sorrow, and my rage drowned in it.

Desperate, I cried out, “O-olga...w-was the mom...we n-never had...”

Blood dripped along my fists. “She was the g-grandma... Emilio and Paolo...c-could have loved.”

Suddenly, her sorrow faded away, as if the connection broke off.

Was it too much for her to deal with?

Was she fleeing from the truth?

Or had it all been in my head?

“Lunita?” Without her presence, I was left feeling almost... disoriented, as though I’d just woken up from a dream, but also more aware of myself than ever before.

I gazed down at my bleeding hands. Tiny, jagged edges of glass had embedded in the sides of my fingers.

“I can’t run from this anymore.” My blood dripped on the sink and counter. “I have to get rid of you.”

The scent of copper rose to my nostrils. “Maybe...I was scared to do so...cause...we are...one.”

I looked up.

The mirror was no longer there.

The glass was nonexistent in some parts, and shattered everywhere else.

Unease gathered in my shoulders.

I studied the intricate patterns of the cracks, each one branching off in a different direction like a spider’s web frozen in time.

My reflection in the broken glass was even more distorted and fragmented. It was a jigsaw puzzle with pieces missing, displaying my cracks and flaws.

“Maybe...I was scared to get rid of you...or me...” I shivered. “But, now you’ve forced us to heal. Host, alter, or even the fucking original, *you* have got to go.”

My heart boomed in my ears. “I don’t give a fuck anymore. This is *my* body. *My* life. *My* man. *My* baby. *My* fucking nanny! Go!”

I scowled at the broken reflection.

My deep rooted rage simmered.

All my life I had been more than one part of a person.

I just never knew it.

But, there was a sense of something inside of me, even though I couldn’t put a name on it. I’d always felt like a stranger within myself. Plus, I damn sure knew I wasn’t okay. Wasn’t sane. Normal. Mentally healthy.

But in this moment, as I wildly gazed at my shattered image, I realized that I was the doomed, lost ship and I was also the raging storm the ship tossed and turned in.

I was the confused maze and the trapped traveler trying to find a way out of it.

And Lunita, she was me, and I was her.

Both lost.

Both desperate.

Both in need of healing.

Together, we would have to find our way out of the darkness.

Or one of us would die.

Suddenly, the door crashed open.

Kaz stepped through. "*Mys*h!"

And I turned to him, covered in tears, shattered glass, and blood, wishing I could change it all. "I'm sorry, baby."

Chapter 12

Divine Madness

Kaz

Plato said that love was a kind of madness.

A divine madness.

The more I spent time with my mouse, the more I understood the truth of that quote.

Plato's talk of love as divine madness spoke to the idea that love was a powerful force that could transcend the boundaries of the physical world.

When we were in love, we experienced a heightened sense of emotion and a deep connection to our lover.

This connection could be transformative, inspiring us to be better versions of ourselves and to seek out higher truths.

I'd experienced that with my mouse.

Had I not grown?

Become better?

Had she not reminded me of the beauty and wonder of this world?

However, as with any powerful force, love could also be destructive.

Irrational.

Madness.

But I couldn't let us become that.

Never.

Our love had to be the bright light in the darkness, illuminating the path towards a better future.

It was just that life was making it hard.

Why would she hurt herself like that?

In my downstairs office, I paced back and forth, my anger building with each passing second.

Dr. Stovall used his tweezers to pick out another piece of glass.

Emily winced.

I glared at her and increased the speed of my pacing. Cold fury simmered just beneath the surface.

I wanted to help my mouse, to make everything better, but I was also furious that she put herself in harm's way.

Goddamn it. She could have bled out or something.

As I watched her wince again, a deep ache filled my chest.

It was a pain that I knew all too well, the ache of love and worry and fear all rolled into one. It was a thunderstorm raging inside of me, all lightning strikes and torrential downpours.

Divine madness.

My mouse had showed me that love was a force that was both beautiful and dangerous. A wild animal impossible to tame.

Still pacing, I glanced at her every few steps and saw the pain etched into her features.

Goddamn it, mysh!

It was a pain that I would do anything to take away, to make her whole again.

Burning rage bubbled up from my core, so close to exploding onto everyone.

“Alright, Emily.” Dr. Stovall’s voice remained calm and reassuring. “It looks like we have one more piece.”

“O-okay.”

“This is the last one.” He took that one out.

She winced again.

Giorgio had grabbed Dr. Stovall. Apparently, the man had been hidden in Giorgio’s room because somehow the pansy

had figured out a way to disrupt the footage. No doubt he had his cousin Louis do something to our security system.

I slowed down my pacing.

Dr. Stovall turned over each hand and inspected all the cuts. “No more glass.”

A dark groan vibrated through my chest.

Emily didn’t look my way. “Thank you, Dr. Stovall.”

“My pleasure, Emily.”

“After this, your wife and you can go home.” She gave him a sad smile. “I hope I have well compensated you with the check, but I know—”

“It was fine.” Grinning, Dr. Stovall began to examine each finger one by one. “My wife enjoyed the presents, masseuse, all the caviar, and champagne. Actually, I may have to drag her away from your mansion.”

Emily whispered, “Thank God.”

I stopped pacing and glared at them.

Bloody pieces of glass filled a metal bowl next to the doctor.

“Now we will clean the wounds.” Dr. Stovall raised her hands and placed a large bowl under them. “Have you ever heard of the story of Miriam, the candlemaker?”

“No.”

“Once upon a time, in a far-off land, there was a mother named Miriam who made candles all day and night to sell them at the market.” He poured water all over her hands. The liquid shifted to red and streamed into the bowl. “Miriam made these candles to earn enough money to feed and take care of her two children.”

“O-kay.”

“Miriam was a skilled candle maker, and her candles were always in high demand. Therefore, one month the king requested her to make hundreds of them for his festival that

was going to be held at his palace.” Dr. Stovall softly patted her hands with a small towel and then placed the blood stained material next to the bowl. “Miriam agreed, hoping to earn enough money to give her children a better life.”

I quirked my brows.

Where is this going?

“For weeks, Miriam worked tirelessly, making candle after candle.” Dr. Stovall lifted up a bottle full of a clear solution and poured it over both hands. “Miriam worked during the day. She labored all night. Hardly sleeping. Barely eating.”

Emily widened her eyes.

Dr. Stovall set the bottle down. “She worked so much and for so long that the wax from the candles began to form around her body, sticking and hardening all over. One would think that she would stop, but she ignored the wax as well as the pain, and continued to work.”

Emily parted her lips.

“The whole time, she pushed and pushed, wax stuck to her hair, face, neck, arms, body, legs. Everywhere.” Dr. Stovall grabbed antibiotic ointment from a container and began applying it to each cut. “When she finished the last candle, she froze.”

Emily leaned her head to the side. “Froze?”

“She was stuck completely in wax and couldn’t move.” Dr. Stovall grabbed sterile gauze and began bandaging her hands. “Finally, the day of the festival comes. The king’s assistant arrives at her house and sees this large spectacular candle in the center of the kitchen. It is the shape of a woman, frozen in shock and pain. So real. Almost as if alive.”

“It’s Miriam.”

“Yes.” Dr. Stovall finished bandaging her hand and went to the next. “Miriam became a candle.”

I rolled my eyes.

“But the assistant didn’t know it was her. He thought it was a real candle. Therefore, he ordered his men to gather all the small candles, but especially the huge one that was her. He decided that she would be the festival’s centerpiece.” Dr. Stovall used medical tape to secure parts of the gauze. “That night, the guests danced around Miriam as she glowed and slowly burned away.”

Stop telling her this stupid story.

I scowled.

Idiot! Just tell her to stop fucking punching glass.

“Meanwhile, her children starved and died alone in their house, waiting for her to return.” Dr. Stovall patted her bandaged hands and smiled. “All done.”

Emily widened her eyes. “What kind of story is that?”

“The story of Miriam is a metaphor for the dangers of burning yourself out.” Dr. Stovall rose from his chair. “It teaches us that we must take care of ourselves, both physically and *mentally*.”

Emily stood.

“We should not sacrifice our own well-being for the sake of others.” He frowned at her. “In the end, it is only by taking care of ourselves that we can *truly* care of others.”

“You’re right.”

“I am.”

I crossed my arms over my chest.

Dr. Stovall sighed. “Your cuts are not too deep, but they will take some time to heal.”

Emily glanced at the bandages. “Okay.”

Dr. Stovall continued, “It’s important to keep the bandages clean and dry. You can wash your hands, but make sure to avoid getting the bandages wet.”

“I understand.”

Dr. Stovall looked at me. “If they do get wet, be sure to have someone change them right away.”

I nodded.

“I would like to check on those hands in a week to make sure everything is healing properly.” Dr. Stovall gazed back at her bandaged hands. “I am also leaving Ibuprofen with you for the pain.”

Her face turned serious. “What about breastfeeding and taking the pills?”

“It is generally considered safe to take ibuprofen while breastfeeding.”

“Are you sure?”

“In general, the amount of ibuprofen that is excreted in breast milk is very low, and it is unlikely to cause any harm to Emilio.” He smiled. “Just follow the recommended dosage and not exceed the daily limit.”

“Got it.”

Dr. Stovall nodded and headed away.

Slowly, Emily turned to me.

Once the door shut, I scowled. “What the fuck was that?”

“I was upset.”

“Clearly. Blue said you were screaming.”

“I was yelling at Lunita.”

I gestured to her bandaged hands. “And how did that work out for you?”

She frowned.

A sudden realization hit me. Tension gathered in my shoulders. “Did Lunita talk back?”

“No.”

I didn’t know why, but relief hit me.

Would it have been wrong if Lunita and Emily could talk to each other? Maybe, it would help things. Or perhaps, it

would push Emily further over the edge.

I walked over to her. “You fucking hurt yourself.”

“I know. It was stupid and reckless.” She looked up at me. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry isn’t enough.” I stopped in front of her. “I don’t ever want to find you like that again. Your blood all over the place. Your sobbing. Your...trembling—”

“I saw Olga’s cut up body and I knew it was my hands that did it—”

“Her hands.”

“Same thing in some ways.”

“It is not.”

“I felt so overwhelmed and lost. It was like the only thing I could do to feel anything was to fight her.”

I glared. “You mean to fight the mirror.”

Emily looked away.

“You should have woke me up. And don’t say that I needed to fucking sleep because *you* are the only thing on this earth that truly gives me energy.” My voice trembled.

“Without you, there’s no need for fucking sleep. Do you understand?”

Tears left her eyes. “Yes.”

“You should have talked to me. You did not have to injure yourself.”

“Clearly, I wasn’t being rational.”

“Clearly.” I stepped forward and gently captured those bandaged hands. I slipped one finger along each of her arms, making sure there were no cuts there. “*Mysh.*”

She closed her eyes.

And, I relished in the warmth of her skin, the softness of her touch. “I would do anything to keep you safe. Come to me.”

She opened her eyes. “*I* am not the one that we need to protect.”

I sighed. “Lunita and I had a conversation.”

To my shock, pure anger decorated her face. Never had I seen this reaction from my mouse when I mentioned Lunita.

I swallowed. “Lunita said that if I kill someone she loves, she will murder a person that I love.”

“The hell she will.”

I raised my eyebrows. “*Mysh*...does she not have a point?”

“She killed Olga.”

“I killed the gardener.”

“Olga was *more* important.”

“To us.” I shivered, not allowing Olga’s face to flash in my head. “But to her...the gardener deserved to live. That was why you were trying to keep him alive. You knew.”

“Now I wished I killed him myself and then you had taken me far away from everyone. Locked me somewhere for the night.” She shook her head. “From now on, I can’t be in the house with everybody when things are tense like that. I am a fucking liability to the safety of everyone around us—”

“*Mysh*—”

“When I’m asleep, I want to be away from you, the baby, Paolo, Max, Blue—”

“Absolutely not—”

“I don’t want anyone else to die that we love!”

I tensed. “Lunita knows there are certain people she cannot kill.”

“You’re defending her?”

“I believe she would never hurt Emilio, Paolo, and me.”

“Why not?”

“Because she had the chance and did not.”

“Kaz, that doesn’t make me feel all warm and cozy. Fuck her. I want to be put in a fucking cage at night.”

“I will not—”

“No more!” She screamed and then looked away. “No... more.”

“Damn it.” I pulled Emily to me, wrapped my arm around her, and held her close.

Love was a force that couldn’t be reckoned with.

It was the tide crashing against the shore.

Something that was always present.

Always there.

Even when it felt like it was tearing everyone apart.

“I’m so sorry, Kaz.” She sobbed against my chest. “So sorry.”

“Do not apologize, *mysh*. It was my fault. I should have listened to you, instead I went and tortured the gardener.”

“Lunita shouldn’t have fucked him in the first place.” Emily leaned away and stared up at me. “I can’t lose you, Kaz.”

“You will not lose me.”

“I can’t lose anyone else either.” She swallowed. “New Orleans is now a priority that cannot be ignored. I don’t know if this woman can help or not, but I will not sit around, letting Lunita wreck our fucking lives anymore.”

I pursed my lips together.

“Her taking Olga’s life has now drawn a line in the sand.”

I raised my brows. “What do you mean, *mysh*?”

“She has to go. I don’t care if I have to spend the rest of my life figuring it out, but we cannot do this anymore. That bitch needs to die.”

For some reason, the words frightened me.

But, why am I scared?

Emily left my hold and shook her head. “If we let Lunita live inside of me, then she—I—will only cause more chaos and pain.”

My voice grew unsteady. “What do you want me to do?”

She backed up some more and hugged herself. “We have to put some rules in place.”

“What rules?”

“When I sleep, I need to be locked away.”

I stiffened. “You mean *we* need to be locked away.”

“I don’t want her to hurt you, Kaz.”

“Lunita would not harm me.”

“Why do you believe that?”

“I asked her as much.”

“I don’t trust that bitch.”

I blinked.

“Regardless, we’ll figure more out later.” Sighing, she headed away. “For now, I have to check on the kids and then call this woman in New Orleans. Could you get everyone together?”

“Everyone?”

“Max, Misha, David, Giorgio, Blue. We should even call in Jean-Pierre and whoever else.” She opened the door, stopped, and looked at me. “We need to meet and plan Operation: New Orleans.”

“Operation what? Excuse me?”

“Operation: New Orleans. We go. We fix me. This ends with Olga.” She headed away.

Chapter 13

The Art of Diapers

Emily

Jazz filled the lemon-scented air.

“Naw.” Max shook his head and pressed on his phone, switching to a new song. “Maybe, we should do some Duke Ellington. What do you think, nephew?”

From the changing table, Emilio curiously gazed up at his uncle and wriggled those little legs.

Another song filled the air. This one had lots of saxophone.

“Nope.” Max pressed on his phone and zipped to another song.

I got ready to get up. “Max, I could have already changed the diaper and—”

“Would you sit your ass down?”

Sighing, I lowered back into the rocking chair. Giorgio had grabbed the chair from Emilio’s nursery room and placed it in our bedroom, close to Lemonisha, who was the main reason a sweet lemony perfume saturated the space.

The Butler had also helped me pick my outfit for this afternoon’s meeting.

Granted, I never asked him to do it.

Giorgio simply walked into the closet with me and perused all my garments.

After a few minutes, he grabbed some items, lay them on the small velvet chair near the entrance, nodded, and left me there.

And, I had to admit that Giorgio didn’t do a bad job, picking items for me.

The clothes had to allow me to breastfeed and feel comfortable dealing with this difficult topic in the meeting.

Therefore, Giorgio settled on a black nursing tank top. It allowed easy access for nursing while still providing coverage of my breasts.

Then, he paired the top with black skinny jeans to allow for ease of movement.

He also placed a gray jacket with the items.

I put it on and thought the jacket gave the outfit a smidgen of formal.

Next were flat ankle boots to provide support and stability while still looking chic.

But, the most interesting part of the ensemble was that he included black leather gloves.

As I stood in the closet by myself, I wondered if Giorgio put the gloves with my outfit, just because he was used to wearing them himself.

Or did he think that I should hide my bandaged hands to not raise questions at the meeting?

Either way, I put the gloves on, and felt good that he had included them.

After dressing, I fed Emilio in the rocking chair while Paolo lay next to me with his sippy cup full of milk.

Harlem slept by my feet.

Max awkwardly looked away as I fed Emilio. First, he thought it was the respectable thing to do. Second, he always talked about how he didn't want to get sprayed with milk and how he heard that could happen.

Regardless, once I was done, it was time to change Emilio's diaper and head to the conference room.

However, Max was adamant about changing the diaper himself.

Paolo stood on the bed to get a view of Max and Emilio. Harlem—who knew he wasn't supposed to be on the bed—jumped around Paolo's feet, attacked his shoelaces, and wrestled with them.

Paolo would be asking about Olga soon, and I had no idea what I would say.

Are we going to get a new nanny?

I wasn't ready to ask Kaz yet. He didn't look like he was dealing well with Olga's death, just like I wasn't.

Max switched to another song. "Naw. Armstrong's trumpet playing might be a bit too loud for your sensitive ears."

He went to the next song. "Hell no. You're not ready for Miles yet, nephew."

Oh my God.

Max swiped through his phone. "I thought I had some Charlie Parker on this playlist."

I checked my watch. "I should have done it myself. By the time you change this diaper, Emilio will be ready for college."

"Stop rushing me."

A new song came on. The piano played a simple, yet elegant melody that moved at a relaxed tempo. Then, a soft trumpet accompanied.

"Alright." Max looked down at Emilio. "Are you feeling that?"

Emilio gurgled. A little bubbled spit came out the corner of his mouth.

"Yeah. You like that." Max placed the phone down. "There we go. And we were able to pick something even with your mommy's bad attitude hovering in the background."

I crossed my arms over my chest. "Well, I'm glad you finally found *the proper* song. We have to consider the priorities after all."

"I wish you would stay in your lane." Max rolled up his sleeves. "I don't assess how you breast feed. Therefore, you don't challenge my perfect execution of a diaper change."

"You just take the dirty diaper off, wipe him up, and then put another one on."

“And that’s why Emilio is always crying when you do it.” Max wagged his finger at me. “There’s an art to diapers. Watch.”

“Whatever.” I listened to the song and recognized this one. It was *In a Sentimental Mood* by Duke Ellington.

Max bobbed his head. “You and Kazimir never play music. That’s important.”

“Oh, really?”

“Ellington is a great choice when you want to add a touch of *elegance* to your diaper changing routine.” Max put his focus on Emilio and opened the dirty diaper. “Damn, nephew. You’re testing me today.”

Paolo pointed. “A lot.”

Max nodded. “A whole hell of a lot, P-dizzle.”

I groaned. “Max, we’re trying to teach Paolo English. You can’t keep confusing him with all these different nicknames you are giving him.”

“I haven’t set on one nickname yet. Therefore, I’m trying a couple out until one really sings to me.”

“I thought P was just fine.”

“P is not enough. It needs to have some flash to it.” Max winked at Paolo. “Isn’t that right?”

Paolo bobbed his head and went back to bouncing on the bed.

“Hmmm.” Max stared at him. “What about...Polo? Close to Paolo, but with that East Coast swagger. Polo?”

“Too close to his name. It might confuse him as he figures out Russian and English.”

Max turned back to Emilio. “What about P-Money?”

“Absolutely not.”

Clapping with the song, Paolo bounced on the bed.

Harlem let go of Paolo’s shoelaces and barked at him.

“Shh.” I smiled at them. “You both already shouldn’t be on the bed.”

“For real. We don’t want the lion coming up in here and roaring over Duke Ellington. That would be a crime.” Max smiled down at Emilio. “Alright. We are about to begin.”

“I should think so.” I leaned back in the chair.

Emilio squirmed and gazed past Max’s head.

“You know what.” Max looked up at the ceiling. “I bet he can see the notes.”

“And I bet his butt is on fire because his uncle hasn’t wiped the poop off it yet.”

“I’m ignoring you, Em.” Max winked at Emilio. “Don’t worry, nephew. I’ve got the song on repeat so you can really experience it.”

“Man, if you don’t change this diaper.”

Whistling with the melody, Max unfastened the diaper tabs. “Ellington wrote this in Durham, North Carolina in 1935.”

Emilio put his view on his uncle, appearing completely captivated with him.

“The Duke himself had just finished playing at a dance in some tobacco warehouse.” Max held Emilio’s ankles gently but firmly with one hand, and used the other hand to lift Emilio’s bottom off the diaper. “Afterwards Duke’s friend threw an after party.”

Paolo giggled with Harlem and collapsed to the bed. The puppy jumped on top of him and licked his face.

“But, dig this, Emilio.” Max kept Emilio’s bottom in the air and grabbed a moist wipe. “At the party, Duke is back on the piano playing, but his homey now got girl problems. Two chicks are fighting over his friend at the party.”

I quirked my brows.

Max began wiping Emilio. “One girl is on the left side of the piano. The other chick is on the right. Duke’s friend is in a

tight situation. What is he going to do now that both ladies are there?”

What kind of story is this for a baby?

Max slung the dirtied wipe into the trash and grabbed diaper cream. “To keep the chicks from fighting, Duke began improvising a song in front of them. It kept them distracted. And that’s what we have right here. The song that saved his boy from getting his eyes scratched out.”

“Are you sure about this story, Max?”

“X told me. Later I looked it up.” Max gently slid the dirty diaper out from under Emilio and did a quick fold. “Yo, P-Train. Come over here and help me out.”

Paolo looked up, but didn’t move as if unsure Max was even talking to him.

I really wish he would stick with one nickname.

Max gazed over his shoulder. “Your job is up, P-Train?”

Paolo chuckled, rolled off the bed, and headed over.

Harlem hurried behind him.

“Yeah.” Max nodded. “P-Train might be the answer.”

I smiled. “I’m not feeling P-Train.”

“Why not?”

“It sounds like the name of a hustler on the corner of East Harlem.”

“Paolo needs something dope. With his life and the people raising him, he’s going to end up being the baddest motherfucker that ever lived.”

I watched Paolo rush to Max, grab the folded diaper, and put it in the trash. “Good job, baby.”

Paolo clapped.

“Yeah, man.” Max winked at him. “You did that.”

Paolo rushed back over to the bed. Harlem raced that way as if desperate to beat him. Soon they both crashed onto the

bed and returned to playing.

I turned to Max and Emilio.

The song started over.

“Back to story time, nephew.” Max slid a new diaper under him. “So, the unspoken lyrics to this song is a conversation between two lovers lying together on a starry night.”

This may be the longest diaper change of his life.

But, Emilio didn't care one bit. The whole time he watched Max in utter amazement.

“In the song, the singer is in disbelief that such an amazing person would be his lover.” Max squirted a little cream on his bottom and smeared it on. “But more important, the two chicks from the party didn't fight that night. I often wonder if they thought Duke was writing the song for them.”

Emilio furrowed his brow.

“Now listen.” Max placed the cream to the side. “The song's instrumentation is understated and minimalist. There's a focus on the interplay between the piano and trumpet.”

Emilio parted his lips.

“The piano provides a soft and steady rhythm, while the trumpet solo adds a touch of warmth and emotion to the song.”

I wish he would finish with this diaper?

“Meanwhile, the mood of the song is melancholy and reflective, with a sense of longing and nostalgia.” Max whistled and brought the front of the diaper up to Emilio's waist. “When you take the love of your life out to eat, nephew, this is the song you have the band play in the background.”

Paolo giggled as he wrestled with Harlem on the bed.

“You play it because this is a smooth and sophisticated sound. It lets your lady relax, but also feel emotionally moved.” Finally, Max fastened the diaper tabs securely and gazed down at him. “There you go, nephew. How was that?”

I rose from the chair.

Max slowly picked Emilio up, gave him a kiss on the cheek, and then cradled him in his muscular arms. “You know what, nephew? Someday you will look back on these moments and thank me for keeping your booty clean and fresh.”

I rolled my eyes, but couldn’t help but laugh. It was moments like these that reminded me of the healing power of the people I loved.

Maxwell handed Emilio back to me and I couldn’t help but feel grateful for the love and laughter that he always brought into my life.

“Thanks, Max.”

Emilio snuggled into my arms.

“You know I got you, Em.” Max studied me. “How are you doing?”

“Better.”

He gazed at my leather gloves. “How are those hands?”

“Good.”

“That was stupid.”

“I know.”

“Don’t fight a mirror again.”

“I won’t.”

Someone knocked at the door.

Then, it opened.

Blue entered and headed to me. “Baba is here to take the kids.”

I kept my voice low. “How is she doing?”

“I could tell she was crying all morning, but David thinks her taking the kids for a walk around the garden will help her with grieving over Olga.”

“But, will it though?” Max twisted his face. “Personally, I’m not ever going back in that garden again. It’s probably ghosts and shit there.”

I handed Emilio to her. “Can you make sure guards are with Baba, so they can help her out with the kids? I don’t want it to be too much for her today.”

“I will.” Blue smiled at Emilio.

Max waved over Paolo. “Come on, Pauly-Wauly. Time to go.”

Paolo gave him an odd stare and remained there.

“Yeah. That nickname doesn’t stick either.” Max shook his head. “What about Paolito? Little Spanish flair.”

“You really are going to confuse him.” I gestured at him. “Come on, Paolo.”

He slid off the bed and hurried forward.

“P-Master or P-man? Oh no. Hold up.” Max smirked. “Pacman. That could be dope. No one is messing with a dude named Pacman.”

Blue carried Emilio away.

Paolo and Harlem trotted after her.

Max put his hands in his pocket. “Yo, Blue.”

Paolo and Harlem rushed out of the room.

Meanwhile, Blue stopped and glanced over her shoulder. “Yes?”

“What’s up with the *managing*?” Max gestured at the door. “David or Giorgio?”

I raised my eyebrows. “Or both.”

Max sucked his teeth. “Shit. After what I saw, it won’t be no both. I’m telling you that right now.”

Blue shook her head and continued off with Emilio.

“I see she’s going to avoid the answer.” Max rolled his eyes.

The door shut behind her.

I held out my hand. “I’m ready to call Mrs. Delphine.”

“Fuck.” Max gazed back at me. Worry hit his eyes.
“You’re ready, but I’m not.”

“Why aren’t you ready?”

“I told you that she spooked me out when I met her.”

“Actually, you never really told me anything about her.” I frowned. “And why haven’t you told me what’s up with Ufuoma—”

“Oh, here we go—”

“Why don’t you tell me things anymore?”

“Don’t even try that, Em. I tell you everything else. Let me have a few things to myself.”

“What happened with Ufuoma?”

“I feel like Delphine is more important than that.”

“Yeah, but I’m nosy.” I eyed him. “The way I look at this...if you’re not telling me what happened with Ufuoma, then you think I would kill her.”

He stirred.

I tapped my foot. “Did she break your heart? Disrespect you? Did she—”

“Drop it, Em—”

“Why? I’m not Kaz. I won’t go ballistic.”

Max hit me with a skeptical look.

“What? I’m not Kaz.”

“Em, there’s a reason you and him are perfect together. You both carry the same violence inside of you.”

“Lunita carries that violence. I’m calm and collect—”

“Bullshit.” Max laughed. “Who do you think you’re talking to right now? Some chump on the street. You’re fucking crazy, Em.”

“I’m not crazy. Lunita is crazy. I’m the sane one.”

Max leaned his head to the side. “The fact that you even have another person in your head that kills people still makes you crazy.”

Good point.

“Well,” I swallowed. “Are you not going to tell me about Ufuoma because you think *Lunita* might do something to her.”

“Man, I think *you* would do something to her, before *Lunita* could even come out.”

I glared. “Then, what did that bitch do?”

Max frowned. “Don’t call her a bitch.”

I groaned in annoyance.

“And leave it alone.”

When I find out, I’m going to knock her head off.

Max sat down on the bed and gestured at the rocking chair. “First we talk about Delphine, then I’ll give you the phone. Okay?”

“Fine.” I lowered into the rocking chair. “Go ahead.”

“Alright. So...let’s get to the toughest part first.” He rubbed his face with both hands and then lowered them. “Delphine is my aunt.”

Shock hit me like a ton of bricks. The world around me froze. It took me forever to speak and when I did, all I could say was, “What?”

“Well...she’s really my *grand* aunt because she’s my grandmother’s sister.”

My head spun with tons of questions. “How the hell?”

“I know right. I’m not even going to lie to you. The whole trip to New Orleans fucked me up.”

I swallowed, trying to get my head around what he was saying.

“Even crazier, Delphine is related to Ava.”

I blinked. “Misha’s Ava?”

“Exactly. And she’s related to this other chick you don’t know. This black woman with a huge afro. Her name is Gwen. J.P.’s cousin was all up in her ass. They call him the Comedian, but he’s not as funny as he thinks.”

“Rafael.”

“Yeah.”

“Then, I think I know Gwen.”

Max raised his eyebrows. “How?”

“When J.P. kidnapped me, we hid in these women’s apartment. One of them was Gwen. I’m pretty sure.”

“Well you’ll see her again and Rafael.”

“And...Gwen and Ava are related to you?”

“Yeah.”

“What the fuck?”

“I know.”

“But then...” I held up my hands. “How?”

Max shrugged. “People fucking and having kids and shit.”

“No, Max. I mean. On what side of your family are you related to them?”

“Oh.” He cleared his throat. “On my...father’s side.”

No.

Shivers of fear ran up my spine.

Max looked away. “By the way...Aunt Delphine knows about that.”

My bottom lip quivered. “What do you mean?”

“She told me she knew.”

“Knew what, Max?”

“You know what.” Max scowled at me. “Aunt Delphine knew what my father did to you. She said my bloodline was tainted and I was going to fix it. She also knew Lunita’s name before I even returned to Italy. I had no idea who she was

talking about until I heard Kazimir say the name Lunita much later.”

I widened my eyes. “She knew it all?”

“Exactly.”

“But...how?”

“This is why I have no doubt that she has some power. And you know I don’t fuck with shit like that. Spirits and demon worshipping stuff. But, check this. She’s Baba, but like multiplied by a thousand.”

Tension gathered around my shoulders. “And, you think she could fix me?”

“Listen. J.P. and I brought Timur to her. And I’m telling you right now, Timur was out of his fucking mind.”

“He seemed fine in Italy.”

“Yo.” Max held his hands up. “Swear on everything. When I first met that motherfucker, he was butt naked talking about an Eagle religion.”

I widened my eyes. “Say what now?”

“Well, actually the first time I met him, he put me to sleep with some shit and then he got me naked too along with J.P. and Boris and was preaching about the eagle.”

“Okay. Hold up.” I shook my head. “I don’t even know what question to ask first about what you just said.”

“Doesn’t matter. Timur was on the highest level of fucked uptivity and after a night with Aunt Delphine, dude was regular.”

“It sounds weird that you’re even calling her your aunt.”

“I’ve given this all time to let it grow on me. And even chilling with Mrs. Jones and Ava has helped...I’m cool with it now. I like having family.”

I pursed my lips at his mention of family.

“Look at your ass.”

I rolled my eyes. “What?”

“Getting jealous.”

“I’m possessive of you.”

“At least you know that.” Max pulled out his phone, but kept a good grip on it. “When I arrived at Aunt Delphine’s house for the first time and went into her basement, she got in my head, Em.”

I stiffened.

“She made me see all types of crazy shit. It fucked me up for days, but...it also made me...”

“What?”

“It also put me on a path to changing my life.”

“So, you think she helped you too?”

“I do, but scared me also.” Max stared down at the phone. “She’s going to scare you, Em. She’ll probably go in your head and talk to Lunita or something. Might put you in your own head and get you lost. I don’t know.”

“But, you really think she could help?”

Max looked at my gloved hands. “Anything has to be better than this.”

I held out my hand again. “I’m ready to meet your family.”

The phone rang.

Max jumped and dropped the phone. It fell to the phone.

I swallowed and stared at it as it rang loud. “What’s... wrong?”

Max shook his head. “I bet you a hundred dollars that’s her. She’s fucking creepy like that.”

The phone rang again.

“Can’t be, Max.”

“Every time I’ve thought about her, the phone rings and it is her ass trying to talk to me.”

“Do you talk to her?”

“Hell no. I hang up and focus on not pissing in my pants.”
He pointed to the phone. “Answer that shit.”

“You answer. It’s your phone.”

“Yeah, but she wants to talk to you.”

I swallowed. “I bet it’s just Misha calling to tell you how much he loves you.”

“So jealous.” Max rolled his eyes. “Answer it.”

The phone rang again.

I bent over, picked it up, and turned it on. “Hello?”

A woman’s voice filled the air. “Spring is coming.”

Holy shit. Not Misha.

Max opened his mouth in shock, and then shook his head.

This is her.

The woman continued, “It won’t be as cold as Russia. Bring light layers, so you won’t be sweating in my house.”

I cleared my throat. “Mrs...umm...Delphine?”

“Bring both the little ones. I want to show them my garden. Tomatoes, okras, and peppers already popped up. By the time you all show up, the little boy will be able to grab some strawberries and put them right in his mouth.”

What the hell is going on?

I blinked. “You’re talking about...Paolo?”

“Bring him and the baby. It won’t be safe for Paolo in Russia, until your people are done finding the Shadow, but they’ll find him. Kill him good, and Paolo will be safe when you all return to Russia.”

“W-wait.” I shivered. “What do you mean? I don’t understand.”

“You got to stop breastfeeding too.” Delphine crunched on something as if she were snacking on chips or nut. “What I’ll be giving you and putting inside your body, you don’t want

that to seep into the milk and have that baby grow up different.”

“What will you be giving me?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“I think it does.”

“See you soon.” The line clicked.

I looked at Max. “Holy shit.”

“I told you that she’s fucking scary.”

“But...”

“If you have questions about what she just said, I can’t help you. I have no idea either.”

“Wait. She said Paolo is in danger.”

“And something about a Shadow.”

“And not to breastfeed while I’m down there.”

“Which means you can finally smoke weed with me.”

I rolled my eyes. “Because that is my top priority.”

“Keep you high. Keep Lunita high.”

I leaned back and considered that. “You think that’s true?”

“Hell yes. I think if you’re mellowed out, then Lunita would be too. I don’t remember lots of Tinder Killer incidents when you would smoke with me.”

“Hmmm. Okay.”

He grinned. “Okay?”

“We’ll test that out, when I stop breastfeeding.”

“Wow. It’s time for my nephew to get regular milk?”

“Or I could get a wet nurse. Valentina had some.”

“I bet Valentina *had some* alright.”

“What does that mean?”

“Nothing.”

I rose from the rocking chair. “Then, we’re really doing this.”

Max stood too. “I guess so.”

I handed him the phone. “I hope this is a good idea.”

“If not, Em, I’m going to pick your ass up and run away, and I won’t stop until we get out of New Orleans.”

A cold shiver ran through me. “Bet.”

Chapter 14

Who Want It?

Emily

I put on my holster over the gray jacket and added my guns.

“Hold up.” Max reached his hand out. “Let me see one.”

I gave him one. “You like them?”

“These motherfuckers are pretty as fuck.” He studied the gun.

An elaborate filigree pattern adorned the gun. It was delicately etched into the metalwork. I thought it added a touch of artistry to the designs.

Best of all, the stunning gold finish enhanced their beauty. Light sparkled off it.

Max whistled. “Elegant and sophisticated.”

“That’s what I’m saying.”

Max handed it back to me. “When did you get these?”

“My baby gave them to me on the day Emilio was born.”

“Guns?” Max shook his head. “Kaz stay trying to get killed by you.”

“What?”

“Dude could have just gave you some jewelry.”

“He did that too, but I love these most of all.” I turned the gun around and showed him the engraving on the side. “You see that?”

“The shit is in Russian. What does it mean?”

“It means, *you are my half.*”

“That’s how Russian dudes be talking to their chicks?”

“Yes. Basically, he’s saying that we’re more than a relationship. We’re a partnership.”

“Until the gardener starts fucking your personality—”

“Max.” I scowled.

“I’m just surprised he didn’t put you in a cage or something.”

“I’m ignoring you.” I placed the gun in the holster. “In my closet, he installed several velvet-lined, glass cases for my guns.”

“You mean *our* guns?”

“I’m not sharing these with you. Especially, since you’re so stingy with Lemonisha.” I chuckled and happily patted my guns.

It had been a long time since I’d carried a weapon. There had been no need to touch one since returning to Russia from Italy.

Moscow was the Lion’s lair.

All enemies knew to proceed with caution.

Max watched me. “Feels good to hold guns?”

“Yeah. For some reason, they calm me.”

“And you think you’re not crazy?”

Chuckling, I headed out of the room. “Whatever. Anyway, time to focus.”

“On what?”

“We have to get things in order before we head to New Orleans.”

“What do you need from me?”

“Blue can handle most of the admin and baby stuff, but I need you to figure out what the fuck Delphine was talking about.”

“The whole Paolo and Shadow shit?”

“Yes.”

Max and I headed to the door.

“She said that Paolo won’t be safe in Russia, so he’ll have to come with us.” Max opened the door for me.

“Paolo was coming regardless.” I walked through. “I can’t be too far away from him, Emilio, and Harlem.”

Max followed me out and got to my side. “Well, Lemonisha is coming with me.”

I smirked. “Let’s hope your aunt doesn’t take Lemonisha and plant your special lady in her garden—”

“Man, don’t even play like that.”

“Speaking of that. I want some of Lemonisha’s seeds to plant in *my* garden.”

“Hell to the no.”

“What? Why not?”

“Kazimir killing all types of people in there and setting their cocks on fire. Blood and death sinking all in the dirt. Lemonisha’s seeds will have no part in that shit. Plus, I’m not eating any fruit or vegetables out of there.”

“Don’t say that.” I frowned. “What happened wouldn’t bother the fruits and vegetables.”

“Yo, I read that Japanese farmers sing to their crops in order to encourage growth and improve the taste. They even play classical music to help their plants grow.”

“That sounds dope.”

“Now consider the fact that Kazimir got men screaming in horror all by your plants.” Max shook his head. “Your vegetables are going to be nasty as fuck because mentally they’re fucked up.”

“Maybe, Baba can cleanse the garden or something. And I’ll have the *new* gardener play some jazz in there.”

“Needs more than jazz, Em. Plus, Lunita was up in the garden too.” Max sucked his teeth. “Might want to play some gospel first. Get the devil out of there.”

“There is no devil in my garden.”

“Something in that motherfucker now.”

A scream sounded far down the hallway, well past the staircase.

We stopped and scanned the space.

Then, the loud noise of running feet came next.

Max took out his gun and headed off. “Never a dull moment at the Soloniks’ house.”

I followed his lead, pulled out my gun, and took it off safety.

Two figures appeared, running from the hallway. They were dressed in black from head to toe—long shirts and pants. Black ski masks covered their heads, barely showing their eyes. Black gloves hid their hands. I had no idea if they were men or women, black, white, etc.

Their long black guns looked like part of their bodies.

They sprinted forward, moving as fast as lightning.

“Who the fuck?” Terror spread through me. I sped forward. “Be careful with shooting, Max—”

“I know. Not sure where the kids are.” He raced ahead and raised his voice. “Eh, motherfuckers!”

Their black masked faces turned our way. Fast, they looked at each other. Then, pointed their guns and shot our way.

We dove to the floor.

Gunfire blasted over us.

No!

Another person shot behind them.

I checked, not sure who it was, but the person had to be on our side.

Those shots from behind made the two figures stop and race away.

I jumped up from the floor and raced off. “Max?!”

“Not one scratch.” He got to my side and matched my pace.

I gripped my gun harder. “These shitheads don’t leave the house.”

“Facts.”

The two figures hit the top of the staircase and they didn’t run down the stairs. Instead, they hopped on the railing and slid the fuck down like they were in some damn action movie.

“Yo!”

“Fuck them!” Running toward the stairs, I shot at the railing and missed them. The kickback came as the gun erupted into a furious staccato.

Tricks or not, you can still bleed.

I shot again.

My bullets kept missing them.

Goddamn it.

Their feet hit the marble with a hollow thump and then they headed off in the direction of the garden.

“Fuck!” I gritted my teeth and continued over.

Coming from the hallway, Blue and Giorgio appeared and raced to the stairs too.

We all met and hurried down.

I called out to them. “Who the fuck is that?!”

Breathless, Blue rushed ahead of me. “No idea.”

Giorgio panted. “They were in Paolo’s room.”

“Say what?!”

That was all I needed to hear to speed down, taking two steps at a time. My feet barely touched the steps. My heart raced. I almost tripped over.

Who want it?

“Em, be fucking careful!”

Up in my baby's room? Naw.

I hit the bottom before everyone else and raced toward the garden.

How could they have even gotten in the house?

“Come on!” I sped up with the gun pointed, hoping I gained some distance.

The garden's doors were wide open.

In there.

I ran that way, gun up and ready.

Max and the others followed, but I was the first one inside.

The two figures stood in the center, their faces still hidden behind the masks. Their guns were waiting for me.

Shit!

Before I could even fire, one of them shot at me. The bullet flew past my head.

I twisted to the side, dove to the ground, and rolled back.

Max and Blue raced to either side of me, both shooting at our attackers with expert precision.

I got off the ground, rushed behind a small tree, and shot their way.

Giorgio got to my side and pulled his trigger.

It clicked.

Grunting, he dropped the gun, pulled out his knife, and slung it forward.

What the fuck is that going to do?

To my shock, the knife slammed into one of their shoulders.

Oh. Okay.

The figure screamed in pain, sounding like a woman.

The other assassin tried to run away but ten men from the Brotherhood raced up behind them and pointed their way.

About fucking time.

Our men must have entered from the garden's back entrance.

The two figures stopped, but didn't lower their guns.

"Don't kill them!" I hurried over, pointing my guns at them. "Drop your guns, you two!"

Blue rushed next to me.

The two figures looked at each other. Fast, they pointed the guns at their faces, ready to kill themselves.

Hell no!

Running their way, I shot one's arm.

Screaming, the motherfucker dropped the hand holding the gun.

Blue fired at the other's arm. This one already had Giorgio's knife in her shoulder. Still, she tried to lift the shot arm to kill herself.

"Naw." I got to her fast, slammed her in the back of the head.

She stumbled forward.

I kicked her hard in the leg.

She dropped to the ground, but not before trying to reach for me.

I backhanded her.

Max made it over and quickly grabbed the gun from her. "No easy out for you today, sweetie."

The other one charged for me.

Blue grabbed and threw the motherfucker to the ground. The gun dropped along with the person.

Giorgio got to them, lowered, and snatched off that one's mask.

A brown haired woman glared back at us. Her eyes showed no fear.

I stared at her. “You’re not scared.”

She spat at the ground.

“I’ll change that, sweetheart.” I turned to the other person.

Max took off her mask.

Another woman like I figured.

She had blonde hair and blue eyes that were calm, cool, and deadly.

“What were you all doing in my son’s room?” I gazed at both of them.

They remained silent.

Time to bring out the knives.

More of our men entered from the sides.

David and Kaz arrived next.

I looked at Blue. “Where are Baba and the kids?”

“She said that she was getting a bad feeling about the garden, so decided to have the kids make cookies with her in the kitchen.”

I sighed.

Baba, you’re getting these visions back. You need to tell us when you have these feelings.

I planned to have a conversation with Baba later tonight.

With a tense expression on his face, Kaz walked up to me and gazed down at the women. “*Mysh?*”

“Blue said they were in Paolo’s room.”

Kaz put his gaze on David, but there was no surprise in either of their gazes.

I quirked my brows. “What’s up?”

Kaz cleared his throat. “I planned to tell you today.”

“Tell me what?”

“Someone left a threatening message in Paolo’s room yesterday.”

Rage boiled in me. “Excuse me?”

Kaz frowned. “They wrote the message in blood. It was two words—Traitor’s son.”

“When the fuck were you going to tell me that?”

“It was a small delay due to the—”

“Fuck your delay.” I pointed at him. “We said we weren’t doing delays anymore!”

Kaz gave me the look—the one that said don’t talk to him that way in front of his men.

Seething, I pursed my lips and lowered my hand. Meanwhile, a furious fire blazed within me.

Kaz turned to David. “Put the women downstairs in the cells. Separate and far away so they won’t talk to each.”

David nodded. “Anything else?”

“Have someone fix any wounds. I want them healthy for when I talk to them later.”

No. I will talk to them later. And by talk, I mean stomp my fucking foot on their vaginas over and over until they give me answers about why they were in Paolo’s bedroom.

David gestured at our men. “Get it done.”

Several men went over to the women, yanked them up, and dragged them away.

Kaz looked at Max, Giorgio, and then Blue. “Give us some privacy.”

“Smoke break time.” Max nodded and gestured at the garden. “By the way, you all need to burn this place and put a heated pool in here or something. It’s haunted.”

Kaz growled. “Get the fuck out of here.”

Max winked at me and headed away.

Blue and Giorgio left next along with the rest of our men.

David checked his watch. “Fyi, the meeting starts in thirty minutes.”

“The meeting starts when I enter.” Kaz put his view on me.

David nodded and left.

I put my gun back in the holster.

He gazed at the weapon. “How did it shoot?”

“Perfectly, but I’m a little out of practice.”

“You will get your skill back soon.”

I spoke through clenched teeth, “Back to your *delay*.”

“*Mysh—*”

“When did you hear about it?”

“When...” Pain showed in his eyes. “When... Olga brought us Emilio last night.”

Seeing how hard it was for him to mention Olga’s name, I calmed myself down.

He rubbed his forehead, telling me that he was stressed. Then, he dropped his hand. “I did not think you needed to hear about the message last night. I wanted both of us to get sleep, which...didn’t happen anyway.”

I wanted to yell at him, but so much had fucking happened. He was correct. I wouldn’t have even gone to sleep had I known. Or Lunita could have did more damage after hearing it.

I swallowed down my anger.

“Also, I was confident David had control of the situation.” Kaz scanned the garden. “Security has been precise. There is no way these women recently sneaked in.”

“They were probably our maids for several months, then decided to act now, and do whatever mission they had planned.”

Kaz nodded. “There is logic in that. They could have remained in our house for months until they thought it was a perfect moment to attack.”

“There’s enough hysteria going on today. If I were them, I would think now was a perfect moment to grab Paolo or... whatever.” My nerves flared.

“*Mysh*.” Kaz closed the distance between us and embraced me. “They would have never gotten Paolo.”

I shivered against him. “Thank God he was with me the whole time and then with Baba. And thanks for making sure Paolo was in our bedroom last night.”

“Even if he was not, his security is top notch. The women would have never grabbed him.”

“Still, if they infiltrated the house, then they studied his guards.” I shook my head. “Had we not switched stuff this morning...”

“Do not do that.” He grabbed my arm and pulled me close to him. “We have these women. That is your only focus.”

I looked at him. “After this meeting with everyone, *I* talk to them.”

“You can, but with clear rules.”

“What rules?”

“No knives.”

I frowned. “Why not?”

“Are you serious, *mysh*?”

“Fine, but I’m fucking them up.”

“Do what you like, but you will not start unless I am there. Do we have an understanding?”

I let out a long breath. “Yes.”

He leaned his head to the side. “You chased them?”

“I may have assisted Blue and—”

“Stop running after people.”

I frowned.

“We have people for that. Where could they have gone, *mysh*?”

“My tunnels.”

“Has cameras.”

I quirked my brows. “Excuse me?”

Kaz rubbed his forehead. “I...ordered David to do it.”

“You’re lying, but that’s fine. David is safe for now. You’ll get the ass whipping.”

He smirked. “I will be patiently waiting for that.”

I left his arms. “I talked to Delphine—the woman in New Orleans.”

“And?”

“On the phone, she mentioned that Paolo was in danger and something about the Shadow. She said that we should take Paolo with us to New Orleans while our people get rid of this Shadow. Then, when we returned, she said it would be safe for Paolo.”

Kaz widened his eyes and stepped back. “She said this before you saw the women?”

“Yes.”

“Do you think this Delphine and the two women are connected in some way—?”

“No way. Max says Delphine has crazy power. I think that’s what it’s about.”

Kaz held up his finger.

“What?”

“Shadow? That is what she said?”

“Yes. Have you heard that name before?”

“Yes.” He lowered his hand. “But, not since I was a kid.”

“What do you know about that name?”

“This cannot be the same person, *mysh*. It was so long ago. The Shadow was this man that bothered Uncle Igor and my father.”

“Did they ever figure out who he was?”

“Never. Shadow was mysterious and elusive. In fact, it was not even clear if it was more than one person or not. Rolan guessed that it was an organization acting as one person.”

I tensed.

“Regardless, this Shadow operated in the shadows of Moscow’s criminal underworld. Little was known about his past or his motivations, but he had a reputation for being ruthless and cunning.”

“You keep saying he, but...”

“What?”

“How do we know the person isn’t a woman?”

Kaz blinked. “We do not. Could be possible. But I doubt it is the same person. This was long ago.”

“Then, maybe the person is related to the other Shadow or has some connection and wants revenge.”

“Regardless, I will tell David. This will be his top priority. In fact...”

“What?”

Kaz rubbed his forehead again. His head must have been hurting.

I stepped his way and hugged him. “Are you okay, baby?”

“I am exhausted and want everything solved.”

“It will be soon.”

“I do not know if this Delphine knows what she is talking about, but I hope she is correct. Therefore...David will remain in Moscow to handle this.”

I leaned back. “No.”

“*Mysh*, we cannot return to Moscow with danger to Paolo hovering over our house.”

“I like David by your side.” I gritted my teeth.

“I do not want David gone from me either, but New Orleans will not be a danger to me. If there is any trip he does not need to be on, then it is this.”

I let out a long breath.

He studied me. “Do you agree?”

“It makes sense. Plus, I would feel better if David is on it. He’s been impressing the shit out of me.”

“Me too. I think he could have this fixed in a week, maybe two. He may have to fly to New Orleans.”

“Then, Blue jumps on this too and remains in Moscow.”

“No. That is your number one.”

“Max will be with me. The French will be there—”

“You think that would make me feel better? A bunch of pansies? My son will be there, mysh. An army will be with us.”

“Then, so be it, but Blue remains here with David.”

Kaz shook his head. “If that happens, then the Butler will remain in Moscow too.”

I sighed.

“Am I wrong?” Kaz tilted his head to the side. “Do you really think the Butler came to Moscow because he is loyal to you?”

I frowned. “The Butler, David, and Blue remain in Moscow? Do you think they will find this Shadow or fight?”

“All three know I will kill them and their families if they fail.”

I blinked.

“There we have it.” Kaz hugged me back. “One more rule.”

“Why are we doing so many rules with me?”

“While we are in Moscow, you are to stay out of their way.”

“Meaning?”

“Your place is not out in the streets of Moscow chasing people down and shooting them up.”

I left his arms and crossed my arms over my chest. “If they get a lead while we’re here, I’m going with them—”

“You will be in New Orleans.”

“What?”

“New Orleans is our priority. The jet is being gassed up as we speak.”

“W-when are we leaving?”

“Three days.”

My heart boomed in my ears. “I have a lot to do.”

“Then, do it. You have an entire staff ready to move at your command.” He reached his hand out.

I gave it to him. “Three days?”

“Yes.”

“I was hoping for a week.”

“Three days, *mysh*.”

Terror hit me, and I wasn’t sure if it was mine or Lunita’s or if it was just overall fear surging from the both of us about what the future held.

Kaz guided us forward. “Also...”

“Yes?”

“I want to do a...memorial service for Olga before we leave. I want to say goodbye.”

“Okay.” I walked forward with him. “Blue made sure Harlem Crew packed her items. Everything will be delivered to her sister this evening, along with...her body and head.”

“Except her heart.”

I stopped and looked at him. “What do you mean?”

“I am keeping her heart and having it buried in the garden.” Sadness covered his face. “Emilio should have something of Olga here.”

And you want her here too.

“Okay, baby.” I gave him a sad smile. “Let’s just not tell her sister that part.”

“Time for the meeting.” He led us to the conference room. “I was told that there will be a surprise.”

“What surprise?”

“You will see, *mysh*.”

Chapter 15

Two Thrones

Kazimir

I held Emily's hand, guiding her away from the garden and toward the conference room.

David, hurry up and find out who is terrorizing Paolo.

An endless string of questions buzzed through my mind.

Who could be bold enough to send female spies into my house?

Then, I also considered that stupid fuck of a gardener sleeping with Lunita. I was getting tired of people thinking they could disrespect me.

Did the world now assume that the Lion was a little kitty? Had they forgot who I was? Did I have to roar to remind everyone?

A red-hot intense fury boiled up inside of me.

I had the violent urge to unleash immense devastation to the globe. Just start bombing random locations in Russia and throughout the world—put cities into ruins—just to shove everybody back in their place.

But, my mouse will not let me.

Walking past the staircase, I gazed at Emily.

Dread weighed heavily in the air like a dark cloud.

My mouse's silence was deafening. It spoke volumes to the violence that could come from her if Paolo's terrorizers weren't found.

At this point, I did not know who's temper was worse—mine or hers.

When it came to the ones Emily loved being hurt, she transformed from clever, gentle mouse to a fierce lioness—her

heart still full of love and compassion but her deadly claws sharpened and ready to strike.

And that was just Emily.

Then, there was Lunita's wrath, blazing with unrivaled fury and uncontrollable rage.

David, find the person, and do so fast.

I turned my view back to the path ahead of us.

If not, my mouse and I will destroy this world.

Emily let out an exasperated breath. "What's on your mind, baby?"

"I am thinking about how we make a perfect pair. How our love is indestructible. Your softness meets my strength, your tenderness my fierceness." Continuing forward, I glanced at her. "And our combined insanity will protect us from any storm."

"And may even cause a storm." Some of the worry left her eyes.

"Correct." I nodded. "Do not worry about Paolo's safety. Everyone is on it."

"Nothing can happen to him, Kaz." Her voice cracked. "Paolo has already been through too much."

"And you have too." I frowned. "Now let us make sure that you *both* are properly protected and heal."

"I'm an adult. Paolo is a child."

"David, Blue, and Giorgio will be on it."

And, they better find them or someone will die.

We stepped into our new conference room.

A pleasant, woodsy scent lingered in the air, as if the staff had just finished polishing the black hardwood floor.

In the back, a glowing digital map of the world dominated the entire wall and displayed all of the Brotherhood's territories and assets. The map was the latest in high-tech cartography. Its bright and vibrant colors pulsed with life,

giving me constant real-time updates to show changes in territory, borders, and any possible disputes.

Gold had been assigned to any area under my control—unchallenged and unquestioned. And there was a lot of glittering gold.

Other colors represented various enemy territories—dark violet for the Dragon, blushing pink for the Perfumed Pansies, and so on.

Black went to the regions that had yet to be claimed.

The vast oceans that encircled the continents sparkled in brilliant sapphire blues.

Let us begin.

We continued forward.

A large walnut table stood in the center—twenty feet in length. Along the sides lay intricately carved lions leaping onto unsuspecting antelope.

Two thrones served as Emily's and my seats. A dazzling array of jewels decorated their gold frames—diamonds, emeralds, pearls, and rubies.

The cushions were large and burgundy.

The thrones had once belonged to Emperor Nicholas II and his wife Empress Alexandra—the last rulers of Russia before the Revolution.

Once the monarchy was abolished, the thrones were lost in the turmoil of the revolution.

Later, their whereabouts fell into the possession of a Russian Oligarch owing money to the Brotherhood.

There, I stepped in and took them for myself.

Meanwhile, Emily thought that placing the thrones in the conference room was over the top.

I had to override my mouse. Thrones symbolized power. When it came to these meetings, there could be no doubt about *our* place.

Leather chairs surrounded the rest of the table for the others.

Everyone had already begun entering the space and getting into their seats.

The Brotherhood resided on one end.

Many of Harlem Crew had seated themselves on the other side of the table.

Blue chatted with Max as he gestured to that stupid lemon tree lounging next to him at the corner of the table.

I frowned.

Emily noticed where I was looking and lowered her voice. “Leave Lemonisha alone, baby.”

“There is absolutely no reason for the tree to be in here.”

“Lemonisha is Max’s ride or die.” Emily curved her lips into a smile. “Accept it.”

My frown softened at how tickled she looked by the tree’s presence.

At least, the idiot makes my mouse happy.

We passed Max and Blue.

I caught Giorgio sitting across from Blue and watching her the whole time like some deviant stalker—all raw hunger and animalistic desire. His gaze never left her face.

His eyes should be on my mouse, not Blue.

I leaned Emily’s way. “You need a new number two.”

Emily pursed her lips.

“Giorgio being by your side has gone on long enough. I allowed it to be nice and for the sake of your having a peaceful pregnancy.”

She looked up at me.

“Emilio is here. Lunita has come out—”

“That is not Giorgio’s fault—”

“Find a new number two, before I assign someone for you.” I guided Emily to her throne and spoke through clenched teeth, “Do you understand, *mysh*?”

“Yes.”

“Your safety—”

“Is your top priority.” She raised on her toes and kissed me on my cheek. “I’m on it.”

I raised one eyebrow. “You are not going to fight to keep Giorgio in Russia?”

“No one said Giorgio is *leaving* Russia.” She lowered into her throne. “He just won’t be my number two.”

Gritting my teeth, I sat down on my throne. The thick burgundy cushion sank deep beneath my weight.

I frowned. “Why do you want him here?”

“Because Blue deserves time to make her decision.”

“Blue’s only focus should be you—”

“Which is why I’m focusing on her.”

Knowing it was a lost battle, I groaned in annoyance and looked ahead.

Ten high-tech TV screens adorned the massive wall in front of the table. Five were on top. Another five were on the bottom.

Already, Misha sat on the top left screen. A chess board was on the table in front of him. Not realizing that I had entered, Misha studied the board, picked up a chess piece, tapped the top with his finger for a few seconds, and then placed the piece on another part of the board.

A beep sounded by the other side of the table.

What was that?

I turned in that direction.

The beep came from Max’s phone.

“Hold up, Blue.” Max pulled out his phone, gazed at the screen, and nodded. “I see you, Mosquito.”

I quirked my brows.

“Hmmm. Motherfucker took my knight.” Max rubbed his chin.

Misha spoke from his screen. “Your move, homey.”

Max grinned and gazed over his shoulder. “Yes, yes, I see. That was a bold move.”

“I thought you would appreciate it.”

“Don’t get too cocky just yet.”

Idiots.

I rolled my eyes and checked the other screens.

Oh.

Valentina waved at me.

I smiled.

Natalya sat on her lap. Her tiny fingers played with the curly ends of my sister’s hair.

My heart warmed. I raised my voice and switched to Russian. “*Little Natashka. How is my precious ballerina?*”

She turned my way. Her face brightened. She touched the screen as if to grab my cheek. “*Uncle!*”

Valentina sighed. “*No. No. I said you can be on my lap if you are quiet.*”

Natalya pointed at me as if trying to get her mother to understand. “*Uncle!*”

All resolve and rage melted away from me.

My niece gazed around. “*Emilio?*”

“*No, Natashka.*” I smiled. “*He is not here.*”

She loudly giggled. “*Baby sleeping?*”

“*Emilio may be. If he is, I will send you a picture.*”

She laughed and looked around. “*Polo?*”

I smirked and slowly pronounced his name. “*Paolo is not here either.*”

“*Eating ice cream?*”

“*He may be or munching on cookies.*” I made a fast motion of eating tons of cookies like a mad man. “*Yum. Yum. Yum.*”

My niece shrieked and then doubled over with laughter.

Valentina grabbed my niece’s attention and placed a finger on her lip. “*That is enough. Shhh.*”

I glared at my sister and switched to English. “We are talking. Do not shush my niece.”

“Kazimir, I am teaching her manners—”

“My niece does not need manners.” I pointed at their screen. “She is a lioness!”

“Actually she is a mosquito.” Misha assessed his chess board and then stared my way as if daring me to argue the point further. “And if her mother wants her to be silent, then I support that.”

I sneered at him and was about to respond.

Emily whispered, “Leave it alone, baby.”

Lioness.

David entered the room with several men from the Brotherhood.

I spotted Roman and Tisha walking behind him.

I nodded their way.

It has been a long time, cousins.

At ten, I’d already had a little gang. Of course, Valentina was in it. My five cousins were a part of it too—Pavel, Zahkar, Abram, Tisha, and Roman.

That gang had given me my few happy childhood memories of winter in Siberia.

We would stand around a trash can full of fire and sneak sips of vodka that we had stolen from our uncles. There, we boasted about all the money we would one day have.

In our adult years, the gang shifted to real power with me at the helm.

Now there was barely any members from my earlier gang.

Before we left for Italy, Emily had stabbed Zahkar due to his murdering her man, Yuri.

Then, *I* got rid of Abram. Emily discovered that he had a disgusting brothel of little girls within my mouse's Kapotnya district.

Honestly, I had done Abram a favor by slamming the back of his head into the ground over and over until his skull had misshaped into nothing.

Had Emily or Lunita been there...

Then in Italy, I shot Pavel for being a traitor and putting my mouse and unborn baby in harm.

Now you two are the only ones left from the gang?

I watched Tisha and Roman head over to the table.

I assessed Tisha. He had been born Tikhon. When we were barely five, Pavel had been the one to start call Tikhon, Tisha.

Perhaps, Pavel couldn't get a handle on the proper pronunciation.

Either way, everyone else followed suit, until many nowadays didn't even know that Tikhon was his actual name.

Tisha never cared about the feminine sounding nickname, and there was no need to defend his masculinity, when he was always drowning in women.

Girls always flocked to him in school.

I never understood why. He was tall with black hair and blue eyes. He had a bright red rose tattooed on the left side of his neck with his mother's name written in script underneath the stem.

But, I never knew what made certain men a female magnet.

Regardless, many in the Brotherhood always whispered about his exploits and how women constantly fought over him.

I thought back to the last time I had partied with Tisha. We had been in a strip club, drunk and surrounded by women.

In that moment, Tisha told me that he would die a bachelor.

I had smiled and agreed that I would too.

Now look at me?

I was beyond ready to drag my mouse down the wedding aisle if necessary.

And soon I must talk to my mouse about having our second baby. It is time.

A wicked smile spread across my face.

Across the table, Tisha nodded at me and then lowered into his seat.

A few of the women in Harlem Crew glanced Tisha's way.

He winked.

Some blushed.

I turned to Roman who walked over to a different side of the table.

Like Tisha, Roman had served me well, never seeming to have any real ambition with the brotherhood, always remaining loyal.

Since we were kids, he had a slim frame and was never able to put on muscle. Usually, he had wavy brown hair. Today, it was all shaved off, revealing a clean bald head.

Instead of gazing my way, Roman took in all of Harlem Crew on the other side of the table. He was probably wondering why they were here.

It is a new day, cousin.

Nikolay entered the space next.

Dark tattoos covered both of his hands. They were symbols of crosses all over his fingers and palms. Each cross was different in some way. Some were very small. Others somewhat big. Many had names or words written in them.

Emily leaned close to me. “You know what?”

I turned to her. “Yes, *myssh*?”

“Do you think that your cousins would be so upset about Pavel being a traitor that—”

“They would terrorize his son?” I shook my head. “No, *myssh*. They loved Pavel. I believe...once they meet Paolo, they will love him too.”

“And protect him?”

I nodded.

“Okay.” She tapped the table’s polished surface with her fingertips. “I just feel like the person knows us.”

“Why?”

“I’m not sure.” She stopped tapping. “What about Zahkar’s wife?”

I blinked. “What about her?”

“She always looked at me weird, and many times I caught her watching you.”

“I do not think Irina is a problem.”

“Why not?”

“There would be no reason for her to bother Paolo.”

“I killed her husband.”

“Correct.”

Emily eyed me. “And why is she always looking at you weird?”

“Surely, it is not always.”

“My catching her once was enough.”

“Perhaps, because...Irina and I had a...small history.”

She frowned and then tilted her head to the side. “You fucked her?”

I did not like the way she asked as if the answer could trigger Irina’s death.

She raised her eyebrows. “Kaz?”

“It was a long time ago.”

“How long?”

“A few times as teens and then later in our early twenties.”

She rolled her eyes.

“This was before you.”

“That’s why she was checking me.”

I quirked my brows. “Checking you?”

“Next time she looks at you like that again, I’m going to take her eyes out.”

“She will not be looking at me anymore. She is Zahkar’s *widow* now. There will be no need for her to be present.”

“I hope not because if I catch her gazing longingly at you again, she’ll be in the Earth with Zahkar.”

I smirked. “Is that right?”

“Yes.”

It shouldn’t have, but my cock came to life.

I licked my lips. “I love it when you get jealous.”

“You shouldn’t.”

“Why not?”

“It could be very dangerous.”

Suddenly, David came to the chair on my left and sat down.

I leaned his way and whispered, “The surprise?”

David gestured to the TV in the top right. “Coming.”

I turned that way.

The screen came on.

Jean-Pierre appeared, sitting next to his flute player. There, she smiled and held an adorable baby girl. I raised my eyebrows, studying the old scars on her face. Then, I checked Jean-Pierre's face.

They are matching. Why?

I began to wonder, and then gave up. The man was psychotic. For all I knew, he had put scars on his face to match hers.

No. He is not that insane.

Regardless, Emily happily gasped when she saw them.

All tension left me.

Good. The psycho came through.

Chapter 16

Plans

Kazimir

Jean-Pierre kept his attention on my mouse. “The Lion told me that you were having difficult days, I thought it would be a nice time for you to meet my lovely queen Eden and your niece, Princess Marcella.”

Emily’s eyes watered. “Nice to meet you both.”

Marcella gurgled.

I studied the little baby.

I must admit. She is a pretty baby.

Marcella blinked those long black eyelashes. Her hazel eyes sparkled above her plump cheeks. Long curls covered her head, but there were hints of blonde strands here and there. Her skin had a bronze hue.

Yes. It is time for a second child.

Emily leaned forward on her throne as if she were about to jump out of it and rush over to the screen.

Eden rocked Marcella in her arms and then looked at us. “Nice to meet you too, Emily. Jean-Pierre has told me so much about you.”

“I hope not all bad.” Emily let out a nervous chuckle. “Because...I want to...meet you both in person one day. Umm...I have a son that is Marcella’s age.”

Eden nodded. “I was told that they were born on the same day.”

“Yes.” Emily bobbed her head. “They are twins.”

Jean-Pierre cleared his throat.

Emily sighed. “I mean birthday twins.”

Eden smiled. “Yes. They are.”

The women continued talking, while most remained silent.

I caught Roman frowning and whispering to his number one next to him. Surely, Roman was not used to a Perfumed Pansy sitting in a Brotherhood meeting.

Do you have a problem with my alliance with the French?

Suddenly, Roman saw me watching him. Fast, he straightened up in his seat and stopped whispering.

Marcella whimpered.

I returned my view to the screen.

“Oh, she is hungry again.” Eden gave Emily a sad smile. “Well, nice talking to you. I just wanted to say hello before you begin your meeting.”

“That’s great.” Emily waved at them. “Jean-Pierre give Eden my number so we can talk.”

A strained expression settled on his face. “I will need time to consider that.”

Chuckling, Eden rose with Marcella. “He will give it to me after this meeting, and I will call soon, Emily.”

“Awesome.” My mouse sounded more excited than I’d heard her in a long time. “I can’t wait.”

Eden and Marcella left.

Jean-Pierre turned his gaze to me.

I nodded.

Thank you, Butcher.

One of my men closed the conference room door.

Everyone turned their attention to me.

“I called you all here today to discuss my plans to go on vacation.”

Many raised their eyebrows in confusion.

“We will be leaving Moscow and going to the United States. New Orleans to be exact.” I put my view back on Jean-Pierre. “I believe that is *your* territory.”

“It is.”

“Fair warning. I will have a small army with me.”

“Warning noted.” Jean-Pierre crossed his arms over his shoulders. “What will you need from the Corsican?”

“I need them to stay out of my way.”

Annoyance wrinkled around Jean-Pierre’s eyes. “You must understand that the city of New Orleans has a very nuanced criminal underground deeply rooted in traditions—”

“Do you not have control of the city?”

“I do, but respect must be shown to many of the local bosses that reside in the area—”

“My respect will be not killing them.”

Some of the Brotherhood chuckled.

Jean-Pierre rolled his eyes.

I quirked my brows. “Is that not good enough?”

“New Orleans’s criminal underground is a very...spiritual system. We are talking about...voodoo and folk magic. Herbs and charms. Animal sacrifice and ancestral worship. To have a relaxing trip, you must be willing to not only introduce yourself in a proper way, but there are required rules—”

“I do not need a history lesson. Let them know that the Lion is coming.” I sneered. “And perhaps show them two pictures.”

“Two pictures?”

“A picture of the moment before I came to Paris, and then the moment after.”

Jean-Pierre frowned.

A couple of the Brotherhood snickered.

I moved my gaze to the table. “Although I will be taking Wassily and many with me, even more must remain.”

The room went silent.

“King David will stay in Moscow to oversee all operations. Remember.” I raised one finger. “When David speaks, it is as if the words are coming from my very lips.”

Valentina spoke, “Why would your number one be in Russia? He should be off with you.”

Misha nodded on his screen. “I agree, Kazimir. Your number one should be by your side.”

“David will be picking others to accompany me—”

“That is not enough.” Valentina glared. “If David is staying in Russia, then *I* am coming.”

I blinked. “No. I already took you away for too long with Italy. I must think of my niece.”

Valentina waved my comment away. “She will be with me in New Orleans—”

“She will not.” Misha turned left.

I was sure he could not see her, but still he scowled in that direction.

“If you must go off to New Orleans, Valentina,” Misha said. “Then, my daughter will be with me in Saint Petersburg.”

“Things have changed. My brother has gained many new allies. Due to that, the Brotherhood’s empire has greatly expanded.” Valentina sighed. “New Orleans will be safe.”

“Safe?” Misha snorted. “Kazimir and Emily will be there, therefore, the city will not be safe for *anyone*.”

Maxwell laughed.

Emily shook her head. “Thank you, Misha.”

“It was not intended to insult you, Emily.” My cousin shrugged. “However, my daughter will not be in New Orleans for this trip.”

I held up my hand. “You two figure that out later. For now, I am fine with my sister being my number one in New Orleans. If that ends up being the case, Valentina, then inform David.”

My niece waved at me but remained silent like a good little girl.

I grinned and waved back at her.

Oh, my little lioness. Your mean father will not let you come. How will I get him back for this crime?

Hopefully, Valentina could convince Misha to change his mind. But these recent days, Misha had been more dominant than ever when it came to my niece.

“I am confused.” Misha commented as he studied me. “Of all places, why did you pick New Orleans as your vacation spot?”

Not now, cousin.

“Next line of business.” I turned to the Brotherhood. “All by now must know that I have brought Pavel’s son back with me from Italy.”

To my surprise, a few of them frowned and whispered among themselves. Others stirred.

Few are happy about this.

Emily tensed on her throne. I could feel the anger radiating from her.

Be a good mouse.

She gripped the edge of the armrests but remained quiet.

I scanned my men’s faces around the table. “Someone has plans to bother the little boy. Already, two spies have been found in *my* home.”

Valentina’s face twisted in rage. “Where are these spies now?”

“Below. I will talk with them soon and update you later, sister.” I leaned back in my chair. “However, finding out who is behind this is my top priority. Which means it is *your* top priority.”

Tension filled the space.

“Therefore, you will possibly find my mouse’s people inside of your territories, asking questions and looking around.”

Tisha spoke, “Only our territories in Russia?”

“Anywhere in this world.”

Tisha widened his eyes. “I would like to head this team.”

Why? Are you hiding something? Or do you simply want to protect our cousin’s son?

“We already have enough leaders on this one.” I gestured to the other end of the table. “Blue and Giorgio will remain in Moscow to head this, and assist David with discovering—”

“Oh no. Blue will not be in New Orleans?” Valentina pouted.

Maxwell chuckled to himself.

Blue opened her mouth in shock. Like a good number one, she would not want to be away from Emily.

Meanwhile, David’s face contorted in pure irritation. He surely wanted to argue for Giorgio to go to New Orleans, but he would not do so in front of everyone.

“I do not like this, Kazimir. This is another security issue.” Misha shook his head. “Now, Emily will not have both of *her* people as well? This may put stress on my people with keeping their eyes on you and her.”

“Then, so be it.”

“Cousin, it is not a simple factor of *so be it*, there will need to be special monitoring—”

“If anyone has any problems, have them bring their issues to me.”

Misha let out a long breath. “Perhaps, Rolan should accompany you both on this trip.”

The Bear? No need.

Meanwhile, Maxwell nodded.

I eyed him. “What are *you* bobbing your head about?”

Maxwell looked around and then cleared his throat. “Mrs. Jones is related to some of the...people we will be *meeting* in New Orleans. It may be good to have her around.”

“What does that have to do with Rolan?”

“Where Mrs. Jones will be, Rolan will be too.” Maxwell shrugged. “I’m just saying. Respectfully, this could be a good idea to have Rolan around Em. What if the threat to Paolo follows us to New Orleans? Then, we have more skilled people around that we trust. I like the idea of having him by my side when looking out for Em and the kids.”

I turned to Emily. “*Mysh?*”

“I like Rolan.” She smiled. “And I trust him.”

Jean-Pierre cleared his throat.

We all looked at his screen.

“My cousin is also in New Orleans with his people. Your sister mentioned that you gained allies, and on that I agree. With your permission, I would like my cousin to stand in Giorgio’s place and provide escort—”

“Which cousin?” I frowned.

“The Comedian.”

I frowned. “Absolutely not.”

Misha spoke, “Rafael is annoying, but I do like the idea of his escorting you around.”

While I had no true favorites when it came to the Corsican, Rafael and Giorgio remained equal in aggravating me.

I sighed. “Why not Louis? He annoys me least out of all of you.”

Jean-Pierre frowned. “Louis is in Nigeria. He will be unavailable for now.”

“Then, make him available.”

Emily placed her hand on my arm.

I held in my groan. “Fine. Make sure Rafael keeps his little jokes to himself.”

Sarcasm rose Jean-Pierre's words. "That will be at the top of my to-do list for today."

Fucking comedian.

I placed my hands on the table and threaded my fingers together. "Now that it is out of the way, let us return to the problems of the globe. Any reports on Italy?"

Max nodded and then began to speak.

All watched him as he talked about the high numbers coming in from our recent alliance with Black Axe.

None of that mattered to me anymore.

Emilio's face flashed in my head.

I must keep my mouse and him safe.

The lights flickered in the conference room.

David gestured at Wassily who stood by the door. No matter how many times I told David that the lights flickering were not a problem, he still had Wassily investigate.

But I knew the source.

Yes. Pavel. Your son will be protected too. Do not worry.

Chapter 17

Guilt

Emily

David handed out new orders to finalize Kaz's absence in Moscow. Once the rest of New Orleans's plans were finalized, Jean-Pierre and Valentina left the meeting and their screens went black.

The conversation changed to Brotherhood business. The atmosphere grew tense and brooding, with an unspoken sense of danger and menace permeating the space.

Did any of you send the spies to us?

I scanned the men gathered around the table. Most of them wore dark suits under leather jackets. Tattoos and scars adorned their hands, necks, and faces.

Some had shaved heads. Many kept their hair slicked-back.

As they watched Kaz speak, stern expressions covered their faces.

Can we ever get peace?

Under the table, I formed my hands into fists.

A searing pain shot through my gut, like a twisted knot of emotion that refused to unravel. I wanted to scream out with rage and howl for the peace that seemed so impossible—just out of reach.

If it isn't Lunita, then it is somebody else. How do I get us back on track? How do I heal me and kill our enemies at the same time?

All around me, scarred men discussed current conflicts in other Brotherhood territories. It became long and grueling.

Kaz responded to several grievances, ending several disputes with a few words.

I remained silent and paid attention to everything. Kaz needed me to have his back and catch anything that could be missed, and I just didn't want to...

I swallowed.

I didn't want to let Lunita keep fucking things up.

Kaz might have been fine with my part in the gardener situation, but he was still pissed. Lunita killing Olga didn't help. It deepened an already forming crack in our foundation.

Now, I was fighting mirrors and chasing after spies like a wild woman.

Further losing myself.

I have to get things back in order and make sure...our love is even stronger.

Suddenly, Kaz turned to me.

Everyone else directed their gazes my way.

Kaz raised his eyebrows. "Anything you need to say or ask, *mysh*?"

I wanted to bring up Paolo again, but there was nothing new to say. I was just desperate to keep him safe and let this enemy know that I would find them.

I tightened my fists under the table. "No. I have nothing."

He nodded and then turned back to everyone else.

I caught Kaz's cousins watching me.

What was on their mind? Did they accept my presence within the Brotherhood? Perhaps, they saw me as a way to get into Kaz's ear?

Or...maybe they didn't want me around at all? Were they behind the person threatening Paolo?

While I couldn't harm Lunita, at least I had others to search out and kill. Spilling their blood could ease the pain.

I looked at my lion.

Guilt rose within my core.

Silent, Kaz's gaze swept across the room.

The air trembled with tension.

Everyone froze.

Even I, completely unsure of what was going on inside of Kaz's head.

Then, my lion spoke, "Whoever sent those two women into my home is my enemy. That means that this person is your enemy too. Be sure you discover who."

My nerves stilled.

"However." Kaz looked at them. "Life is short. Many of us in this room could be dead by the next meeting."

What's going on, baby?

"Come." Kaz's voice carried through the room. "Tonight, let us do like our fathers and brothers in the old days."

Some of the scarred men smiled. Unfortunately, the happier expressions didn't make them appear less threatening.

Kaz continued, "After one of his meetings, my father would get out his best bottle of vodka. My mother would rush to the kitchen, gather any food we had, and share it with them."

Some of the men smiled and nodded at each other.

"I have vodka and cigars." Kaz turned to Harlem Crew and then the Brotherhood. "I have cards. We can get a few tables together for *Durak*. This is if you are not scared to get beaten by the Lion."

A few snickered.

Some chuckled.

What is Durak?

Kaz rose from his throne.

I followed.

Still watching the men, Kaz tenderly took my hand. "David will show you where the casino room is. If anyone

wants to have fun with my new guns, the shooting range is next to it.”

David stood and gestured for them to follow.

Heading away, one of his cousins said something in Russian. It was too fast to catch, but all laughed, including Kaz.

“We will see, Roman.” Kaz grinned. “But, I guarantee you my guns are bigger, just like everything else.”

Others laughed.

And I had no idea what they were talking about, but I was happy that Kaz seemed to be enjoying himself a little.

I knew Olga’s death would be hard for all of us. But, it would hit Kaz the hardest. So many times, I had walked in on Kaz laughing with Olga and Emilio.

I have to take care of him, and get myself, my family back in order.

Everyone began to leave.

Kaz faced me, raised my hand, and kissed my fingers. “Are you okay with our having guests this evening?”

“Of course, baby.”

“I have ulterior motives for the party.”

“Like what?”

“I will explain soon. Where are your people?”

“Outside.” I leaned my head to the side. “What ulterior motives.”

“I will tell you in front of them.”

“Okay.” I watched him rub his eyes. “Please, don’t forget that you need your sleep tonight, so regardless of your *ulterior motives*, we won’t have the guests around too late.”

“Sleep?”

“Yes.”

“Is that all I will need for tonight?”

I smirked. “You can have *whatever* you want this evening.”

Hunger coated his voice. “Is that correct, *mysh*?”

My body warmed. “Yes, baby.”

“Then, perhaps I will kick our guests out.”

I chuckled. “That’s cold. We can’t do that.”

Kaz guided us away. “No?”

“No.” I looked at him. “By the way, what’s Durak?”

“It’s an old Russian card game. Durak means *fool*.” Kaz tightened his grip on my hand. “The objective is to get rid of all your cards. The last player still holding cards is the fool.”

We left the conference room.

Several of our guards followed.

Wassily, Max, Blue, and Giorgio stood in the hallway.

Blue and Giorgio appeared to be in the middle of a conversation.

Watching them, Max held Lemonisha, shook his head, and leaned against the wall.

What’s going on?

Once they spotted us, Blue and Giorgio went silent.

Kaz looked at them. “Do we have a problem?”

Blue straightened her expression. “No, sir.”

Max shook his head. “Blue isn’t happy about not being able to go to New Orleans and protect Em. She thinks her or Giorgio should go too.”

I stepped forward. “Blue, I need you finding the motherfuckers behind putting the spies in the house.”

Blue pursed her lips. “Respectfully, you will have Paolo and Emilio with you in New Orleans and need more protection ___”

“Max will be with me.”

“More people should also be with you—”

“Like a proper number two?” Kaz scowled. “If you force Giorgio to go to New Orleans, we both know that he will not have his mind on my mouse.”

Giorgio didn't say anything. Instead, he watched Blue with a neutral expression.

With his free hand, Kaz pointed at Blue. “You are correct about more people coming. That means you have less than three days to find my mouse a proper number two.”

Blue widened her eyes. “Yes, sir.”

“Make sure the person is hungry, loyal, and skilled in killing enemies fast. Test them if you need.”

Max added, “And make sure I'm the *final* judge. I don't like new people around Em unless I've felt their energy first.”

“Okay.” Blue dug her hands in her pockets.

“This party...” Kaz lowered his voice. “It is about more than cards and my father's traditions.”

Max raised his eyebrows.

“I want you all to spend time with them. Get to know everyone in there. Names. What they own. Any interesting information.” Kaz pointed at them. “Many will talk under enough vodka. Make note of it all.”

I looked at him. “Do you think the person behind the spies could be in the casino room?”

“If not the person, then someone who knows about it?”

Kaz glared at Giorgio and then Blue. “Make yourselves useful and find the person.”

“Yes, sir.” Blue swallowed and headed off.

Giorgio followed.

Max got ready to head away.

“No.” Kaz put his view on Lemonisha.

Max stopped heading forward and turned around. “What?”

“If I see that tree in my casino room, I am setting it on fire.”

Max scowled. “Man, I wish you would stop hating on my tree—”

“And I wish that you would stop bringing it around.” Kaz gestured at Lemonisha. “Not only will that tree not be in my casino, it also does not come to New Orleans with us.”

“Shit.” Max chuckled. “Lemonisha’s bags are already packed, *partner*.”

A cruel smile spread across Kaz’s face. “Then, I guess we will be having lemonade.”

“Eh!” Max set Lemonisha down. “You need to chill. I didn’t come into your little conference room hating on those stupid as thrones that were clearly overcompensating for your big ego and little dick.”

“What did you say?” Kaz let go of my hand and headed to him.

Wassily got to his side.

“What are we doing, guys?” I got between them. “Calm down. We are all stressed and tired.”

I faced my baby. “Let’s just relax.”

Kaz scowled. “Idiot.”

Max sucked his teeth.

I placed my hands on my baby’s chest. “In fact, Kaz, go ahead to your guests. I will make sure Max puts Lemonisha up. Then, I’ll check on the kids and return.”

Kaz glared at Max.

“Also, I loved when you said that after your father’s meetings, your mother would go off and gather food for everyone.” I moved my hands from him and touched my chest. “I’m going to do that and make sure the chef brings out the most perfect items.”

Kaz slowly put his gaze on me. “What are you going to tell the chef?”

“To round up several platters of blinis topped with our best smoked salmon and caviar.”

Kaz slowly smiled. “Very good, *mysh*.”

“And I won’t forget the vodka.”

“We will need lots of it.”

“We will.” I got on my toes and kissed him. “Be good, baby.”

Max let out a long sigh behind me.

“Be safe, *mysh*.” Kaz licked his lips, headed away, and scowled at Max. “Idiot.”

“Yo. You need to chill, man.”

I relished in the view of Kaz’s muscled ass moving under his pants. Wassily and several guards headed after him.

I got myself together and turned around.

Okay. What a long fucking horrible day. Let me... somehow...make sure it all ends with some form of peace.

Max picked up Lemonisha and got to my side. “Him and I are going to be fighting a lot in New Orleans.”

“No you are not. Today, he is just tired and grumpy right now—”

“Man, we all are fucking tired. Lunita had us up all night.”

More guilt came.

I gritted my teeth.

Max continued, “That doesn’t mean he can just be ill to everyone.”

“You are also irrationally overprotective of that lemon tree.” I walked off in the opposite direction. “Just put Lemonisha up, so I can somewhat salvage this day.”

My guards followed.

I looked at him. “We have enough going on, Max.”

“I just need Lemonisha respected. Is that a lot to ask for?”

“Lemonisha is respected.”

“Cool. She doesn’t need to be around cigar smoke anyway.”

“Good.” I ran my fingers through my hair. “You’re always eating and partying with Misha. What other hors d’oeuvres should I ask the chef to prepare for everyone? Everything has to be perfect.”

“Why?”

“Are you serious, Max? It’s been a fucking nightmare for the past days—”

“Not because of you. That was on Lunita.”

“That doesn’t mean I shouldn’t try my best to make sure everything is better.”

“The only way shit will be better is if you take care of yourself.”

I tensed.

And who will take care of Kazimir? Emilio? Paolo?

I increased my pace. “Help me out, Max. What other hors d’oeuvres should I get the chef to make?”

“Misha be ill with his spread.”

I rolled my eyes. “But what does he usually have?”

“Pickled herring. Garlic cheese. Stuffed eggs.” Max kept my pace. “And Piroshki. Got to have that. Make sure it is stuffed with beef and cabbage.”

“Very good.” I checked my watch. “Emilio may be hungry soon. Can you rush to the chef and tell them all those dishes?”

“I’ve got you, Em.”

“Thanks.” I hurried some more. “When you head back down to the casino, stay close to Kaz, please, until I get there.”

“Okay.”

We hit the end of the hallway.

Max and Lemonisha went left.

I turned right and rushed up the stairs.

I should get his best cigars out too.

My guards continued with me.

What else would his mother have done?

I let out a long sigh.

These past days weighed heavy on my shoulders.

Will ending Lunita finally bring us peace? And...what is ending her?

Finally, I reached the nursery where Emilio was sleeping soundly in his crib.

Ten men stood outside the door.

I headed in and spotted Paolo sleeping on Baba as she rocked in my nursing chair.

I smiled.

Baba whispered, "I tired them out."

"You sure did." I tip toed over to the crib and gazed in.

My sweetie lay in the crib, wrapped in his favorite yellow blanket. Soft gurgles left his little lips.

What are you dreaming about?

"Paolo drew a picture of Emilio and him together. We placed it in your bedroom, right on the nightstand."

"Thank you, Baba." I gently reached into the crib to stroke his cheek. "Enjoy your sleep, baby."

Slowly, I left the crib, went over to Baba, and held out my hands. "I can pick Paolo up and put—"

"No. Let him rest. I love his energy—so pure and sweet." Baba's eyes watered. "These two helped me make it through the day. This morning was a hard one."

Guilt shivered through me.

I stepped back. "I am sorry about Olga."

"*You* are not the one that should be apologizing." Baba gestured to my gloves. "The maids have been whispering all day about how the Mouse hurt herself."

I frowned. "It was a low moment."

"Let us not have any more of those moments."

"Baba..."

"I understand, Emily."

I sighed. "I talked to the woman in New Orleans."

Baba stared at me.

"She says that she will be giving me something that could mess up my milk."

"Then, she is a careful practitioner and takes her craft seriously."

"I will need either a wet nurse or...change Emilio to formula."

"Consider both."

"And..."

Baba ran her fingers along Paolo's cornrows. "I already know what you are going to say, Emily."

I leaned my head to the side. "Are you sure you know?"

Baba nodded. "You want to tell me that the Lion and you are going to New Orleans and that you want *me* to stay in Moscow."

"Damn." Sighing, I lowered down to the carpet and then crossed my legs. "You're right."

"I also know that you will not be taking David, Giorgio, or Blue."

I blinked. "Do you think that is a bad idea?"

"No. They will find the Shadow and Paolo will be safe." Baba gave me a weak smile. "I have been having so many

recent visions of him as an adult. Tall...so tall. Bigger than even the Lion.”

My heart ached. “Paolo ends up being okay?”

Baba frowned. “Eventually.”

“What does that mean?”

“That is a conversation for another day. Right now, we need to discuss New Orleans, Emily.”

“Why?”

“First, I should apologize to you.”

“No.”

Baba looked away. “I could have warned you about Olga but...I never thought...I just...did not think it was what that meant. Never did I think Lunita would...”

“You only saw Olga’s cup being cracked in the garden. How could you have known?”

“A year or so ago I would have known.” Baba gazed down at Paolo. “Now, I ignore visions that scare me, too happy to pretend that all will be perfect. I have been thoroughly enjoying myself and relishing in the joys of family life.”

“I understand.”

Baba looked at me. “However, I *am* going to New Orleans, Emily.”

“I don’t think it will be a dangerous trip, but just in case you should stay in Moscow to help—”

“New Orleans will be dangerous.”

I tensed. “What? H-how?”

“If I told you, then you would not let me go.”

“Then, you definitely can’t go.”

“If I go, then all of you will be safe.”

“And what about you?”

“Emily.” She frowned. “My bags are already packed. I felt the trip this morning. We arrive there together.”

“And do we leave together?” I shivered. “Kaz has already lost Olga...”

“Emily.”

“Baba, keep yourself safe.”

She gestured to my gloved hands. “You should take your own advice.”

I clenched my jaw.

“Kazimir will be sad if a lot of us are killed, but if *you* allow yourself to destroy *yourself*, the Lion will be nothing. Do you understand that?”

“Y-yes.”

“You must take care of yourself too.”

“I will. I just...”

Baba quirked her brows.

“I am just scared to make Kaz run away. I know it sounds crazy. I know...that is irrational, but...how much can one man take?”

“Kazimir will deal with it all for you.” Baba pointed at me. “You.”

I tensed.

“I am coming to New Orleans.”

I sighed. “Baba, you are not—”

“Emilio and Paolo are going?”

“True, but that is for selfish reasons.”

“It is not selfish. You are a new mother that wants to be near her baby and little boy.”

I gazed at Paolo’s sleeping face. He was an adorable kid. When he slept the cuteness levels rose through the roof.

“I am coming, Emily.”

“Baba, will the threat for Paolo follow us to New Orleans?”

“A little, but you will have control.”

I looked at her. “Would it be dangerous for Paolo to stay in Moscow?”

“Yes, but not in the way you think.” Baba softly patted his back. “*You* need to be by his side as much as possible. The connection that Paolo and you have must continue to be strengthened. That means you cannot leave him behind.”

My voice went hoarse. “I just want to do the right thing.”

“Bringing *me* will be the right thing. *Taking care of yourself* will be another right thing.”

“Do you promise?”

She gave me a sad smile. “I do.”

“Perhaps, you should do my cards. What else should I know?”

“No cards. I want to spend the remaining time in Moscow with my grandson.” Tears left her eyes.

My heart broke and I couldn’t tell you why.

I swallowed down fear. “Baba...would you tell me if you were in danger?”

“David will not want me to go to New Orleans.” She slowly raised her hand from Paolo’s back and pointed to me. “Override David. Do not let me stay.”

“Why not?”

“That is all I can say.”

Rage hit me. “I think that’s bullshit.”

“Not telling you things has worked.”

“You think so?” My voice cracked. “We have to send Olga’s shit to her sister because Lunita murdered her. I am terrified that a part of me will kill more before we leave Moscow—”

“Lunita will not come out again in Russia.”

I widened my eyes. “Are you sure?”

“She will return, but not here.”

I hugged myself. “In New Orleans?”

Baba slowly nodded.

“Will the woman in New Orleans help me?”

“I see things, but there is nothing that is certain.”

“What do you see?”

“Emily, it is just images of—”

“What do you see, Baba?”

“I see you sitting on a wooden floor sewing small dolls.”

I twisted my face in confusion. “Dolls? Are you sure?”

“The dolls are no bigger than my hand and are made of cloth.” Baba moved her view to the window. “Three dolls are already laying in front of you, and you are sewing button eyes onto a doll in your lap.”

“Have you seen other things?”

“I woke up this morning to ivory white snakes—large ones. They slithered around red and black candles. Then, the vision disappeared.”

“What do you think it all means?”

“For now, it would all be guesses, Emily.”

I unfolded my arms. “Guesses are better than nothing.”

She sighed. “I think the dolls could be different parts of you. Perhaps, your sewing on the buttons for eyes, could be your healing or that you end up seeing everything clearly.”

I shivered. “Four dolls? Are the dolls parts of me?”

“Emily, it does not mean you have more personalities, it could mean something else.”

“Like what?”

“That there are four things you need to fix.”

“And the candles and snakes, Baba? What about them?”

“The snakes worry me, but at least they are white. That could be purification. Yet...snakes...sometimes point to evil.”

I swallowed. “And the candles?”

“They are a good sign. Illumination. Enlightenment. However...”

I raised my eyebrows.

“The fact that one of the candles is black, makes me nervous. While the red could point to love or passion. The black is usually...”

“Death. Darkness.”

She nodded. “What I do, Emily is not a clear science. We all have the power to know our future.”

I shook my head. “I don’t.”

“Emily, you must look deeper inside of your heart. You have more power than you understand.”

“I barely know myself.”

“You know it all. You are just...afraid to deal with it.”

“I know nothing.”

“The memories are inside of you.”

“Then, why can’t I remember it all?”

“Because you are too scared to deal with it.” More tears left her eyes. She let out an exasperated breath. “Just always remember that I love you so much.”

My heart warmed. “I love you too, Baba.”

She wiped her tears away. “Kazimir and you need more friends. New ones. Old ones.”

“I’m terrified to have new people around us.”

“No, Emily. You’re forcing Kazimir to make friends and trust new people. That is why the Brotherhood is stronger than

ever.”

With all the chaos that had happened, I did feel like we were truly stronger.

“Emily, do not lose the part of you that cares about others.”

“I will try not to.”

“Also, I must show you how to increase your power of intuition.”

My nerves flared. “You don’t need to teach me because you will always be around.”

“You know that is not true, Emily. One day I will not be here just like Olga and the others.”

My bottom lip quivered. “Not just like Olga.”

Baba nodded. “Regardless...intuition is a natural gift that we all possess, whether we realize it or not. It is a gut feeling or inner sense that guides us in our decision-making and helps us navigate the world around us.”

“But, what you do is magic.”

“Intuition is not a magical power or a mysterious force—it is a natural part of our human experience.”

“You see things—”

“But, only because my eyes are wide open and looking for it.” She pointed to me. “As we get ready for New Orleans and even while we are there, I will teach you how to increase your intuition. Will you let me?”

“Yes.”

“Perfect.”

A soft whimper came from the crib.

Baba smiled. “Emilio smells his mother.”

Another soft whimper left him as I rose from the floor.

Baba turned her gaze to the crib and then looked down at Paolo. “These two will be brothers. They will fight like

brothers too. But...in the end, they will remember the love that you teach them.”

“I hope you’re right, Baba.” I headed over to Emilio.

“You are important to them, and you are even more important to Kazimir.”

I won't let myself forget.

Chapter 18

Numb

Kazimir

Tonight, I had to be the Lion.

Olga's face flashed in my head.

An enormous amount of pain and guilt washed over me.

I pushed it away and thickened the wall around my heart and soul.

There is no time for sadness. Not with this new threat.

I took in the space.

My casino room bustled with activity. Players sat around the tables, betting money on *Durak* and smoking cigars. Each player had an ashtray in front of them.

Many shouted and hooted their bets.

Waiters hurried around with platters of tasty delights. My men stuffed their faces and laughed with each other.

Music blasted from hidden speakers. It was mainly 90's Russian gangster music—*bandit rap*.

The current song had a dark and heavy booming bass. The rapper spoke gritty, aggressive lyrics about how he was going to put his enemy's mother in the trunk of his car and drive away with plans to commit further violence to her.

The song echoed through me like a razor-sharp dagger, slicing my emotions into a million separate pieces. I felt disconnected from the world around me, as if nothing in life mattered anymore. The numbness consumed me, leaving no trace of pleasure or joy—only an abyss of emptiness and despair.

I need my mouse.

Emily was an integral part of my very being. My lifeline. But right now, I had to be strong for the both of us.

A waiter came by and filled my glass of vodka.

I nodded at him.

He left.

I gazed up at the clouds of smoke hovering over us.

“Wassily, have them open the windows.” I picked up my glass of vodka. “I do not want any smoke rising in the house and getting to my mouse or cub.”

“Yes, sir.” Wassily rushed off, ordering my men around.

“The Lion has a cub.” On my right, Tisha gathered the cards and began shuffling. “Kazimir, it will still take time for me to get used to that.”

On my left, Roman grinned. “I heard that the Lion also plans to get married.”

“No.” Tisha set the cards down. “This cannot be true.”

Roman widened his eyes. “She already lives in your house. Do you need the vows?”

I took a large swallow of my vodka.

Some of the numbness settled.

I gazed at Roman. “The vows are not for *us*, they are for the suicidal fools that dare to touch what is mine.”

“This bastard. I bet he means it.” Shock covered Roman’s face as he looked at Tisha. “Soon, you and I will be the only bachelors from the old days.”

Nikolay sat across from me and laughed. “Marriage is not that bad.”

“You can say that. You have found a woman to like more than a few months.” Roman chuckled. “I fear I will never find a woman like that.”

“And you will be better because of it.” Tisha raised his glass of vodka and took a large chug. “Kazimir, I remember our being knee deep in pussy one night. Breasts bouncing all around our faces, and we said that we would never be married.”

“That was *then*, cousin.” I took another swig of my vodka. “This is *now*.”

“This is now?” Tisha waved me away with his big hand. “I will not believe that the Lion is gone until I see you walk down the aisle.”

“You will see soon.” I gestured at the cards. “What are we betting for this game?”

Tisha gazed at the cards. “One million rubles.”

“Speaking of wives.” Nikolay raised both hands. “I cannot lose too much this evening.”

Roman laughed. “Is your cock at the house with her too?”

Tisha laughed. “I could never have a woman give me limits on anything.”

“I do not mind the limits. It is better than still roaming this earth for the right woman.” Nikolay shrugged. “You know what they say, *a well-fed man does not understand the hungry*.”

Tisha eyed Nikolay. “And who is the well-fed man, my friend?”

“I am.” Nikolay grinned. “You are the one that is hungry.”

Two women from Harlem Crew strolled by, heading to one of the card playing tables in the back.

Tisha winked at them.

One chuckled.

The other hurried them off.

Tisha watched the women walk away. “No one is hungry over here, my friend. I am always well-fed.”

I waved one finger. “My mouse’s women are off limits, Tisha.”

“Why?” Tisha lowered his voice. “Are you secretly sticking your cock in some of them?”

I’d wondered how much my cousins and other men had heard about Emily and Lunita. It appeared Tisha had not heard

anything. If he had, he would know that the very statement was dangerous.

Maxwell entered and gazed around at the packed room.

Good. No lemon tree.

I raised my hand in the air and gestured for him to come over. “You all should meet my mouse’s brother.”

“Aww.” The humor left Tisha’s face as he put his gaze on Maxwell. “The new king of Italy.”

I frowned. “Tisha, is that bitterness I hear in your voice?”

“Italy is a massive territory of overwhelming value, and this guy gets it because the Lion is in love with *his* sister.” Tisha returned to shuffling the cards.

I set my glass down. “Is that what you think?”

“That is what I have heard.”

“Then, you heard wrong. Maxwell has earned everything that is in his possession.”

“I do not know him.” Tisha fanned the cards out into a rainbow and then mixed them back together. “Who is this Maxwell?”

David entered next.

“And this guy? Another king I have never heard of.” Tisha pointed at David. “Who are these people around my cousin?”

I looked Tisha in his eyes. “They are family. Be careful.”

“I understand.”

“I hope you do.”

“If they are your family, then they are my family.” Tisha touched the tattooed red rose on his neck and then drew a line under his mother’s name. “Because *our blood*...it is the same, and that is because *we* are truly family.”

I frowned.

Maxwell came over and got to the one empty chair at the table. “What’s up?”

Nikolay scooted over. “We are right at the beginning of a new game. Maxwell, have you ever played Durak?”

“A few times.”

I eyed him. “Really?”

“Yeah, man.”

“Where?”

Maxwell dug into his pocket. “Up in St. Pete.”

“With Misha?”

“Of course.”

Roman snorted. “Then, you must definitely join us. Only one million rubles to get in the game.”

“One milly?” Maxwell took out a long blunt, sniffed the end, and smiled. “That’s close to 14k U.S. Right?”

Nikolay nodded. “Close enough.”

“I’m in, but with everyone at the table.” Maxwell gestured to Tisha, Roman, and me. “You all are real ballers. I feel like we can raise the bet.”

Roman quirked his brows. “You barely know the game, but you want to go higher?”

Maxwell shrugged. “I’ve played, and plus I’m a fast learner.”

Tisha set the cards on the table. “Ten million rubles.”

“Oh shit.” Maxwell pulled out his lighter. “That’s what the fuck I’m talking about. 136k U.S. green. That’s the type of shit I like.”

Tisha dealt the cards.

David stood on my side.

I looked up at him. “Anything new?”

“All has been quiet.”

“And the women?”

“Asleep in their cells? Eight men watching each woman.”

“Nothing happens to them, until my mouse and I ask our questions.”

“Agreed.”

Several more waiters hurried in, carrying trays with black lacquered boxes on them.

What is this?

One came over and set a box at our table. Another waiter arrived and laid down gold cutters.

Smiling, I opened the box.

Twelve elegant cigars rested within. Each one was long and slender with a tapered head. They boasted smooth, oily wrappers with a deep, rich brown color.

I looked up at David. “My mouse?”

David nodded.

Good job, mysh.

The delicious food and vodka had been nonstop. And now she had elevated everyone’s smoking by bringing out my favorite cigars.

I took a cigar and pushed the box across the table. “Maxwell.”

“Yeah?”

“Save your cannabis. You must try this.”

Maxwell wore a skeptical expression. “A cigar?”

“Those are not just any cigars. These are *Montecristo No. 2’s*. You have never had something so expensive between your lips.”

“Are you sure, man?” Maxwell placed his blunt on the table and grabbed a cigar.

I carefully rolled my cigar between my fingers, feeling its weight and texture. “Just try it. This is a symphony of smoke in your mouth. Quite a journey.”

Maxwell stared at it.

“Take a chance.”

“Speaking of taking chances.” Roman took a cigar.
“Maxwell, is it not risky for you to be here in Moscow?”

“What do you mean, man?”

Roman shrugged. “You must have many faithful and powerful men in Italy.”

I quirked my brows.

Maxwell snapped his gaze to Roman.

“A territory so important as that one.” Roman whistled. “I would never leave it alone for too long.”

Chuckling, Tisha finished dealing the cards. “I would never leave either. There is a lot to do in Italy. I plan to head down there some time this year and enjoy myself.”

“Just be sure to let me know when you do.” Maxwell twisted the cigar between his fingers and looked at Tisha. “Italy can be very dangerous.”

I watched them.

“And *you* will keep me safe?” Tisha laughed. “My friend, I have been to Italy many times. Never did I have a problem.”

Maxwell stared at him. “This time you may have a problem.”

Silence passed between them.

Tension thickened in the air.

I would not help Maxwell with Tisha. To do so would be to undermine Maxwell and make him appear weak in front of the others.

Plus, I knew that Tisha was only testing him, seeing if Maxwell could truly stomp with the beasts.

Tisha knew that I had handed Maxwell that territory. Therefore, he would never boldly come for Italy.

But, if Tisha wanted to...he would find covert ways to trigger chaos in Italy.

I looked up at David.

Put more people in Italy.

David nodded as if he heard me. He never needed the exact words. He always got the feeling in my head.

Tisha caught David's and my exchange and frowned. "So many *new* people."

"There are always new people." I brought the cigar up to my nose and inhaled deeply, taking in the rich aroma of the tobacco. "How are *your* territories in Mexico? In the meeting, we never got to the Americas."

Tisha's frown deepened. "The Cartels are annoying, but I am keeping them in line."

"My digital map says otherwise." I picked up the cutter. "While there is a lot of gold territories in the Americas, they keep shrinking around the borders."

"We are standing strong, and as you know more money always arrives to Russia on time every month."

I nodded.

"However, I am glad you brought this up, Kazimir." Tisha picked up his cards and scanned them. "I believe that if you are going to New Orleans, I should come with you."

Maxwell watched him.

I carefully cut off the tip of the cigar, taking care not to damage the delicate wrapper. "You want to come?"

Tisha turned to me. "I do."

"Due to the Cartels?"

"They are leaking into America and Canada, trying to fight us all for territory. And it is not just the Brotherhood that is battling them. The Triads. Yakuza. Even the Italians. They have kept all of us busy. There could be a problem if *you* are in America." Then, Tisha gestured to David and Maxwell. "And I do not know these *new* people that you have around you now. With so many gone, I think it is time for you to return to the most loyal."

“The *most loyal* was not in Italy helping me fight for the safety of my mouse and baby.”

“No one told me until the end.” Tisha set his cards down. “If you had given me the orders, I would have been there, ready to fight.”

Roman nodded. “I also did not get the call.”

Nikolay pursed his lips.

“At the time, I did not know who I could trust.” I placed the cigar between my lips.

David flicked his lighter on and held the flame to the end of my cigar.

I took a deep breath. The cigar lit. I leaned away and blew smoke out. “With these new spies currently in my house, I *still* am not sure who can be trusted.”

David flicked the lighter off and placed it back in his pocket.

Tisha eyed me. “You are not certain of *my loyalty*, cousin?”

I took another puff, savoring the exquisite flavor of the tobacco and letting the smoke fill my lungs.

Tisha touched his chest. “Have I not given my life to you?”

I leaned back in my chair and blew out smoke. Wisps of it curled around me like a fragrant cloud.

Could I still trust Tisha?

I took another puff. The taste was rich and complex, with hints of leather, wood, and spice.

*I thought I could trust Pavel, but he proved me wrong.
Or...did he?*

I exhaled slowly, letting the smoke linger in the air. “I will think about it, Tisha.”

“And I will patiently wait in Moscow until you have made your decision.” Tisha slowly nodded and returned to his cards. “For now, I will take this American’s money.”

Maxwell smirked. “Then, let us raise the bet again.”

“Higher?” Tisha asked. “How high?”

“Twenty million rubles.” Maxwell lit his cigar.

“Twenty million. Thirty million.” Tisha laughed. “It does not matter. It is *my* millions.”

Nikolay’s phone rang. He pulled it out, saw the screen, and chuckled. “My wife has special senses; she knows when I am going to lose too much. Hold on.”

The others laughed as Nikolay rose and headed off, talking on the phone.

As the night wore on, the smoke thickened in the room. The high-stakes game continued, with Maxwell and Tisha raising the bet again and again.

I watched them closely, trying to read their expressions and body language for any signs of deception or betrayal in their games.

But both men were masters at their craft, and it was impossible to tell who held the upper hand.

Maxwell won the first game.

Tisha was victorious in the second.

By the third, my mouse entered the room, and I no longer cared about cards.

She’d changed from her earlier outfit to a long sleeved off the shoulder black dress. As she strolled over, the soft material swayed around her hips in a slow, seductive rhythm. The top of the dress clung to the swell of her breasts.

All that emotional numbness shifted to many sensations—love and need, guilt and sadness.

My heart pounded in my chest.

Yet, she was my rock—my anchor in the wild sea of emotions.

“David,” I rose from my seat. “Take my place.”

David nodded and lowered into my spot at the table.

Without saying goodbye, I headed away and caught sight of Blue at one table.

There, she played Durak with some of the older leaders in the Brotherhood. Her elbows were propped up by stacked coins and piles of rubles.

The men laughed.

She winked at one.

Hmmm. Are you gathering information?

A few feet away, Giorgio stood off in the shadows watching and listening.

An odd confidence surged through me.

They are going to find the guy bothering Paolo.

I was certain of it.

Would I be an idiot to have this much hope in them? David always worked with unwavering efficiency. Blue had something to prove. And Giorgio would do anything to make Blue happy.

I inhaled and then exhaled, letting hope fill me for the first time this day.

They will have everything under control.

I made it to my mouse in the center of the room, took her hand, and led her away.

“Kaz...” Grinning, she kept my pace. “Where are we going?”

“Somewhere private.”

“And what about our guests?”

“You have made sure that they were fed, properly liquored, and smoking my finest cigars. You have done well, *mys’h*.” I guided her out of the casino room. “How is Emilio?”

“A little grumpy today like his father, but he went back to sleep after feeding.”

Guilt rose at my core, pushing away the little bit of hope I had. “Do you think he knows that Olga is gone and misses her?”

“Maybe, but...don’t think about it.”

“How could I not?”

“Think about me. Think about Emilio. Think about all the people who are still here.”

My heart ached.

We walked down the hall. I heard the soft clicks of her stilettos on the marble floor. Her hand was warm and soft in mine, and I felt a sense of peace wash over me.

These past days had been hard, but as long as my mouse remained by my side, I could overcome it all.

She looked up at me. “I talked to Baba. She sounded weird.”

“Since Italy, she always sounds weird.”

“She wants to go to New Orleans.”

I sighed. “With David remaining here, I would not separate them. Baba remains in Moscow.”

“I was thinking something like that, but Baba demanded that she come.”

I stopped us in the middle of the hallway and faced Emily. “Did she say why?”

“No, but she looked sad.”

“Like in Italy?”

“Yes.”

“But, we survived Italy and she was fine.”

“True.”

“Then, we trust Baba and let her come with us to New Orleans.”

Emily let out a long breath.

I leaned my head to the side. “You think we should say no?”

“Even if we did, she would still come.”

I took a step closer to Emily. My hand still held hers. “Then, what is wrong, *mysh*?”

She looked up at me. “Now that we have Paolo and Emilio, every step must be on point in New Orleans. No mistakes. No mishaps. No making new enemies.”

I stepped closer, until our bodies touched. “A lion’s job is to protect his pride.”

She gave me a sad smile. “And...I think some of the ways you can protect us and yourself is by...”

“What?”

“Well, J.P. mentioned traditions and rules to the criminal underground in New Orleans. I think we should hear him out, and if the Comedienne has some tips too, we should—”

“What? Carry them out?” I chuckled, but she didn’t laugh with me. “*Mysh*?”

“If these leaders need a certain respect, Kaz...would it hurt us to do whatever is necessary to keep everything peaceful?”

“You think I became the Lion because of my natural ability to follow traditions and maintain peace?”

“Kaz...”

“Should I curtsy every time I see these so-called bosses of regions within towns, when I rule continents?”

She smirked. “You do not have to curtsy.”

I raised a brow. “Then what do you suggest, *mysh*? That I bow down to them?”

“No, of course not. But maybe a little respect can go a long way, Kaz. We can’t just barge into New Orleans and expect them to accept us with open arms.”

Olga’s face flashed in my head.

The line in my jaw twitched. “I will...do my best to be... respectful.”

“That’s all I ask, baby.”

I leaned in and kissed her forehead. “Anything for you, *mysh*.”

“So...” She looked around the empty hallway and then turned her view back up to me. “I know you probably want to go upstairs and—”

“Fuck.”

She grinned.

“Your legs in the air. My cock deep inside of you.”

She stepped back. “I was thinking that since we have a small amount of time in Moscow, we should go downstairs and talk to—”

“The women?” I shook my head. “No.”

She pursed her lips together.

“We wait for our guests to leave. We get some sleep. After breakfast, we have Blue, Giorgio, and David there, and then, we question them.”

“I’m nervous about waiting too long.”

I frowned. “Or are you eager to cut them?”

“I’m tense and mad that they thought they could come for Paolo. I’m tight with anger. You know cutting them helps me release.” She looked at the floor. “But...”

I studied her.

“If you don’t think it is a good idea, then I won’t.”

“There are other ways I could help you release that tension.”

She raised her view to me. “There are?”

“Earlier, you told me that I can have whatever I want tonight.”

“I did.”

“Go upstairs, *mysh*.”

Chapter 19

Pleasure

Emily

The day was almost to an end.

Kaz wanted to make love, and I could think of nothing better than his body pressed against mine, his cock moving inside of me, and his arms wrapped around my body.

I needed his tenderness and passion.

But, there was fear in my heart too.

We were both jittery today and struggling with heartbreaking moments.

Even in this moment, there was a silence as we headed upstairs.

I looked towards Kaz, quietly yearning for more assurance that our love would be strong enough to deal with all of this.

Would our relationship survive this? Or would we be defeated by constant, horrifying darkness?

I hope not. I can't lose him.

As if Kaz sensed my fear, he placed his hand on the small of my back and guided me up.

We made it to the top of the stairs.

I tried to turn left toward our bedroom.

“No, *myssh*.” To my surprise, Kaz directed us to the right.

“Where are we going?”

“I wanted this to be a surprise on our first date night.” He led us down the hallway, passing Emilio’s nursery, Baba’s room, and even Max’s door.

“*What* was going to be a surprise?”

We hit the end of the hallway. Only the wall stood before us.

He stopped us right there and placed his hand in his pocket.

I looked at him. “What’s going on?”

Kaz pulled out a silver disk.

“What is that?”

A wicked smirk spread across his face. Then, he pointed the disk at the wall and pressed it.

A beep sounded.

“What?” I turned back to the wall. “No way.”

As the wall slid open, I was greeted by a rush of cool, refreshing air and a hidden space of sensual opulence.

I couldn’t help but gasp.

It was an expansive chamber with gothic chandeliers. Plush carpet covered the floor. Sensuous fabrics draped the walls.

Everywhere I turned glowed in opulence and grandeur.

Diamond shaped mirrors were strategically placed around the room and on the ceiling, casting a kaleidoscope light show throughout the space.

The atmosphere felt different here—almost magical—like I had stumbled into a secret kingdom only accessible through Kaz’s silver disk.

“What is this, baby?”

“I figured that as Paolo and Emilio grow up, they may wander in our bedroom at times when we do not want them to.” Kaz gestured for me to go inside. “Therefore, this is our room of fantasy and pleasure—a place to hide from everyone and everything. In here, none of the outside nonsense matters, *mysh*.”

I stepped over the threshold. “This is fucking incredible, baby.”

“We still have a way to go before it is finished, but I wanted you to see it before we leave for New Orleans.”

Another beep sounded.

I glanced over my shoulder.

The wall slid closed.

Kaz placed the disk back into his pocket.

“How long have you been walking around with that remote control?”

“For two weeks.”

“You were able to hold on to this surprise for that long?”

“Barely.” He took my hand and guided me around.

The scent of leather and sandalwood filled the air.

I turned to the right.

There stood a silver bird cage big enough for a human to live in.

It stood tall and proud, with its elegant silver frame stretching up towards the ceiling. The metal gleamed in the chandeliers’ light, casting a sparkling reflection all around.

I stepped closer. “Kaz...”

He smiled at it. “I told you that I knew a man who made beautiful cages.”

“I have to admit that...this is truly stunning craftsmanship.”

The door was covered in tiny diamonds, and the base of the cage was decorated with a sparkling array of gems and pearls.

Inside, the cage was fitted with a soft cushioned floor of plush pillows and velvet blankets.

I looked at him. “But, are you sure that *you* will be able to live in there?”

“Very funny, *mysh*.”

“Then, you better not get in trouble.” I guided us in the opposite direction. “That is the first place I am putting you.”

A dark chuckle left him.

We strolled forward.

Further up, the space around the bed was romantic. Several rose scented candles covered the side tables.

Three video cameras were on tripods and positioned strategically next to the bed.

A delicious shiver ran down my spine.

I looked at Kaz.

He wore a wicked smile that hinted at dark delights.

I grinned. “Apparently, you will be pursuing a hobby in cinema this year.”

“We will definitely be making movies, *mysh*.”

“You are so nasty.” I bit my bottom lip. “And I love it.”

We walked forward.

Carefully curated works of erotic art lined the walls—ranging from sculptures to paintings. Bodies twisted in provocative poses and glistened with pure carnal desire.

I widened my eyes. “This is so amazing.”

“I am glad you like our space.”

I eyed a wooden bench on the left. Buckled leather straps ran parallel to the bench and were attached to the sides.

I pointed to it. “What’s this?”

“A spanking bench.”

I smiled. “I did not know you wanted me to spank you.”

He laughed. “You think *I* am the one getting spanked on that bench?”

“I’m certain of it.” I took the lead and pulled him away. “You have a heavy hand. I am not letting you hit my ass.”

“It is only a matter of time, *mysh*.”

I stopped us by an odd object.

What is this?

It was a large wooden frame with one large hole in the center and one small hole on each side.

I stared at it. “This looks like something from the Middle Ages.”

“Good guess.”

I stepped closer and touched it. The rough texture of the wooden frame scraped against my fingertips. I could see the deep grooves left by the blade of a saw.

Kaz spoke, “*The stocks* were an instrument from the Middle Ages.”

I looked at him. “What was it used for?”

“Punishing criminals.” He pointed to the big hole. “Your head will go through this part, and then your wrists will be secured in the smaller holes.”

I eyed him. “*My* head and wrists?”

He grinned. “You will see.”

“I don’t know about that.” I strolled away.

Further ahead, a large, padded table stood by a big shelf stuffed with red satin boxes full of items.

“What’s happening over here?” I tried to walk that way.

“We will explore that another time.” Kaz took back my hand and kept us moving forward.

That was when I noticed a dedicated viewing area at the back of the space, with a large cinema-style screen and sound system.

Oh my. My baby is not playing around at all.

In front of the screen, a stage stood with three steps to get on it. A black, six-foot tall divider rested on the right corner of the stage.

Instead of rows of chairs for an audience, there was only one regal armchair covered in leather.

Shelves beside the chair held expensive cigars and bottles of Kaz's favorite vodkas.

"Go up on the stage and walk behind the divider." Kaz let go of my hand and headed over to the chair. "Put on something nice."

My heart raced with excitement.

What is going on now?

I walked over to the steps and went up to the stage.

Once I stepped behind the divider, anticipation surged through me.

Wow.

There was a full-length mirror and a rack of costumes—black lace capes and see-through dresses, satin bustiers and fishnet stockings, shimmering body suits and leather BDSM sets.

Kaz...you are full of nasty surprises.

A row of six-inch heels sat by the mirror—all of them were red and shiny.

I smiled.

Those are the shoes that you like me to wear, baby?

Glass clinked on the other side of the divider, telling me that Kaz was making himself a drink.

Okay. Let's see what outfits he bought.

I went over to the rack of clothing and found a black, revealing corset with a matching thong.

This could work.

I rummaged through more garments and grabbed lace thigh-high stockings.

This is so crazy...but...fun.

I began to change.

Only Kaz could find some way to make a nightmarish day end in the most sexiest way.

While shit had truly hit the fan this week, somehow, he had given us a place to escape.

My dress fell to the floor.

I kicked off my heels.

On the other side of the divider, a lighter clicked on.

Seconds later, cigar smoke filled the air.

The soft rustle of fabric sounded on my side as I finished putting on the sexy outfit.

A dark rumble came out. “Mysh?”

I smirked. “I’m coming.”

“Hurry.”

I rolled my eyes.

“I miss you.”

My heart warmed.

Then, the room’s lighting dimmed.

Did he do that?

Fully dressed, I slipped on the red heels and slowly stepped out from the divider.

I hope he likes this.

Kaz looked up from the chair and swept an appreciative gaze over me.

He had taken off his suit jacket. It lay across the back of his chair.

His tie was loosened around his neck and the top of his shirt unbuttoned.

He gripped a cigar in his right hand. Kaz’s voice grew low and thick with desire. “You take my breath away.”

I swallowed.

“Do you know why, *mysh*?”

“Because you love me.”

“And because you are the most beautiful woman in this world, both inside and out.”

“You always know just what to say to make me feel special.”

“That is because it is the truth.”

“Kaz, I love you, more than words could ever express. You’re my everything.” I took one step forward. “I’ll always do everything in my power to make you happy.”

“Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“Then...speaking of making me happy.” Kaz’s gaze settled on my breasts.

My nipples tightened under his attention.

He picked up a white remote control and pressed a button on it.

Lo-fi music came on, oozing this sensual beat. There were no lyrics, just a throbbing synthesizer, dark guitar melody, and silky drum pulsing.

The notes flowed like a promise of what it would feel like to ride the high, sweet swell of a perfect orgasm.

You want me to dance for you?

As if Kaz heard me, he pressed the controller again.

The chandeliers dimmed some more and, on the stage, red lights glowed from above.

Then, the screen on the wall brightened to white.

Saying nothing else, Kaz placed the lit cigar between his lips and inhaled.

You are so spoiled.

Swaying my hips seductively with each step, I strolled over to the center of the stage. Then, stopped right in front of

him.

And I love spoiling you.

I slowly moved to the music and let the rhythm take over my body. The corset's soft fabric rubbed against my nipples, making those sensitive points further come to life.

Kaz's eyes blazed with an intense, wild craving.

Red and white light played along my body. I swayed my hips in a primal rhythm, inviting him to come up on the stage and touch me.

The craving in Kaz's eyes grew more intense.

And I continued to fall into the addictive tempo. Every movement was deliberate, every twist was executed with hungry intention.

I can't believe I'm doing this.

But, I couldn't stop.

My breasts bounced up and down in the corset.

Kaz blew out smoke and leaned forward.

My pussy ached for release.

Kaz's intense gaze never left me.

I felt so fucking sexy. So beautiful. So, empowered. And filled with deep all-consuming desire.

Despite all that had happened outside of these walls, here in our secret space it felt like nothing else mattered except for us.

The music urged me on, thrumming through me like a raging electrical current, buzzing and sparkling in my veins.

My heart pounded. My breaths came out in short gasps.

Turning around, I put my back to Kaz, lowered to the ground, and slid into a sexy split. My legs were spread wide open, exposing it all to him.

Here you go.

Smirking, I leaned forward so my breasts pressed against the stage and bounced my ass.

Are you watching, baby?

My movements grew wilder and wilder as I gyrated my pussy on the stage, feeling freer than ever in this moment. Each thrust and grind increased.

Do you like that?

I rose a little and glanced over my shoulder.

What?

Kaz was no longer in the chair, but his cigar rested in the ashtray next to it.

A line of smoke rose from the tip.

What the hell?

I caught movement on the other side of the stage.

Oh.

Kaz prowled over.

Chuckling, I transitioned out of the split, rolled over, and quickly rose from the stage.

“No.” He got to me fast. “Get back on the floor.”

I held my hands out in front of me and inched back. “Excuse me, sir, but no customers are allowed on the stage.”

“Not even the Lion?”

“Not even you.”

He closed the distance between us. “But, what if this is *my* place?”

I stumbled back in the direction of the bright white screen, putting space in front of me. “Still, no touching the dancer.”

“And what if the dancer is mine too?” Fast, he had me against the cinema screen.

Heat and hunger radiated from him.

Kaz roughly grabbed me into his arms and kissed me deeply, exploring my mouth until I gasped for air. His touch radiated through my body like electricity, calming my nerves and filling me with heat.

Grunting, he trailed hot kisses down my neck before lifting me off the ground so that we were eye level.

I gasped and wrapped my legs around his waist.

Our bodies molded together.

A new song came on, just as throbbing and sensual as the other.

Kaz looked at me with such intensity. Then, he grabbed my wrists and held them above us with one hand. “Do you like teasing me?”

“Yes.”

He unzipped his pants. “Should I torture you for that?”

“If it means you will be torturing me with your cock.”

“Hmmm.” He moved my thong to the side, and then I felt his hard cock pushing into me.

I cried out in pleasure, “Oh!”

Kaz fucked me hard against the screen, sliding in and out of me.

His grip on my wrists tightened and I could feel him trembling beneath me.

“Oh fuck, *mysh*.” He thrust harder, pushing me further up against the screen.

“Baby.”

Our bodies moved together in a beautiful, syncopated rhythm of passion and desire.

We were one body, shuddering to the same beat.

Our movements grew more and more frenzied, and soon our hidden space filled with moans, groans, and passionate cries of pleasure.

Kaz reached his free hand down to my pussy and started to rub my sensitive spot.

“Oh, baby!” I felt pleasure rising with each thrust of his cock and caresses of his thumb. The intensity was too much, and before I knew it, I was screaming, “Oh, Kaz!”

He grunted. “Cum for me, *mysh*.”

“Oh.”

A dark groan left him. “Let me see it.”

My orgasm shook throughout my body. It was a blur of glowing red and bright white.

It was an explosive inferno of ecstasy consuming my entire being.

It was a tsunami of euphoria flooding every cell.

Kaz followed soon after. His cock pulsing and spurting within me.

And I rode him, clenching my pussy and loving the way he loudly groaned.

“Fuck!” He sneered at me as he came harder, pounding his cock into my pussy.

So perfect.

Soon, he slowed his thrusts and leaned against me.

We are going to be okay.

I panted.

He grunted.

Still, we remained connected—his cock deep inside of my pussy.

He kissed me softly before releasing my wrists. “I love you.”

I rested my arms on his shoulders. “I love you too.”

“You should have not gotten down into that split.”

“Why not?”

“I did not get a chance to show you the other surprise.”

“There’s more surprises to this room?”

“With one button, the stage will open up and a mechanical bull will rise.” That wicked smirk came back on his face. “And it vibrates.”

“Then, we will definitely try that out next time.”

Chapter 20

A New Method

Emily

I need to save us and protect our love.

On the stage, I didn't know how long Kaz kept his cock inside of me. I could feel his length twitching and his balls drawn up against my pussy.

I wish we could stay this way forever.

“Hmmm.” Kaz smiled lazily before slowly pulling out and then helping me down from the screen.

It took time to change back into my dress. While I did, he returned to his chair and watched me, appearing thoroughly exhausted.

A yawn left him.

Soon, Kaz sagged in his chair and rubbed at his eyes.

I smirked.

He reminded me of when Paolo would fight sleep.

As his lids drooped over his eyes, he slowly picked up his glass of vodka.

Nope. Time to get the Lion in bed.

I decided to go barefoot and left the shoes on the stage.
“Okay. You need to get some sleep, baby.”

He yawned again. “I will, but first I must finish my vodka and cigar—”

“You're going to sleep. Now.” I took his big hand and tugged it.

He stared up at me like I was crazy.

“You have had enough vodka and cigar smoking for this evening.”

He frowned. “Are you ordering around the Lion?”

“I am.” I struggled with making him get up.

When he finally stood, I dragged him away.

It took several more minutes to get Kaz out of our special space and to our bedroom.

Tonight, K.D., Giorgio, and ten guards sat in chairs outside of the door. I was glad that they had clearly let Blue go to her room and get some sleep.

With these two, she'll be safe in Moscow while I'm gone.

Still, I frowned, knowing both men hadn't gotten much sleep yesterday and would not be getting much tonight.

This bullshit has to stop, and I'm going to stop it.

I got Kaz into the bedroom.

Once there, he collapsed onto the bed and closed his eyes. “Come, *mysh*. Lay next to me.”

I stared down at him, wanting to do just that, but knowing...I couldn't.

So, I lied, “Let me check on Emilio and I will be right back.”

He yawned again. “I will come with—”

“No, baby. It will be quick.”

He groaned but didn't open his eyes.

“Trust me. It will be super-fast.”

He let out a long breath and rolled onto his back. “Hurry.”

“I will.”

By the time I made it to our bedroom's door, his snores sounded from the bed.

Poor baby. He was beyond tired.

I quietly left Kaz.

If I am not keeping him busy, then Lunita is.

When I stepped into the hallway, K.D. pulled out his gun and studied me.

I stopped in front of him and held out my hands. "It's me, David."

He eyed me.

Giorgio did too.

"Seriously."

"Understood." K.D. rose, stretched out his arms, and cracked the side of his neck. "We still should walk with you."

I frowned. "Okay. First, I have to check on Emilio."

K.D. yawned and got to my side. "First?"

"Yes."

Giorgio followed us, along with five other men who pulled their guns out.

After last night, everyone is on guard. Good.

We made it to the nursery.

There, several men flanked the doorway.

All stared my way, probably assessing if I was Lunita faking it or if it was really me.

I swallowed and entered the room.

Max loudly snored in the rocking chair. An almost empty bottle stood on the small table next to him.

Thanks, Max. You are an amazing uncle. I love you so much.

I tip toed over to the crib and looked over.

Emilio slept on his back.

I love you too. So much it hurts. So much that I will do anything to protect you.

I pulled the blanket up to his chin and softly kissed his brow before turning and leaving.

A soft gurgle left him.

Smiling, I headed out of the nursery, entered the hallway, and walked in the direction of the stairs.

“Now for the second thing.”

David got back to my side. “Can I help you with anything, Emily?”

“Yes.”

He raised his eyebrows. “What do you need?”

“I want you to help me do something that may aggravate Kaz but keep him protected.”

Tension rose in the air.

Giorgio and the guards followed us as we made our way down the hallway, passing several rooms.

David cleared his throat. “What do you want me to help you with?”

When we approached the top of the stairs, I headed down the steps and gave David a sad smile. “When Kaz wakes up, just tell him that you could not convince me to—”

“Emily, if you want to leave this estate, I will not—”

“I would never put you in that crazy of a position.” I continued down the stairs, increasing my pace. “I’m not trying to escape.”

David hurried with me. “Then, what do you want me to do?”

I stopped at the bottom of the stairs. “I want you to lock me away in one of the cells. Of course I will not be by the spies...for their safety and mine.”

David widened his eyes. “What?”

“Baba said that Lunita would not come back out in Russia, but...” My bottom lip quivered. “I need to be certain. I have to step in and guarantee that there will be no more problems from her.”

David rubbed the side of his head. “I cannot...no, Emily. I understand why you want to do this, but—”

“You know it would be safer for everyone to get some fucking sleep tonight, if I am locked up.”

“Emily...”

“You know it.” I raised my eyebrows. “Don’t you?”

David pursed his lips together.

I turned to Giorgio. “Am I right, Butler?”

He shrugged. “You are.”

David glared at him.

I grinned. “There we go.”

“Hold on.” David shook his head. “I am still not—”

“I go into a cell, my usual night guards stand outside of it.” I headed off. “That’s what we are doing. Please don’t fight me on this.”

Sighing, K.D. walked on my side.

“Let Emilio’s and even Paolo’s guards know where I am at. Therefore, if they wake up, then my guards can get me—”

“Emily, again...I understand your wanting to be careful, but,” he frowned. “There is the Lion to consider. If *he* wakes up and you are not—”

“Lunita could have killed him last night.” I stopped and scowled at K.D. “Do you disagree with that?”

He frowned. “I agree.”

“Thankfully, she didn’t kill Kaz...this time.” I shivered in fear. “But, what if another time she is too pissed off to care?”

David turned away.

I headed off toward the door that would lead us to the cells. “Tell Kaz that I demanded that you lock me up and even threatened you—”

“He would not believe it.”

“I don’t care if he does or not. Just do it, K.D. Please.” My voice trembled, and I knew that David could hear the fear in my words. “Regardless, Kaz will not hurt you.”

“I am not worried about that, Emily. I do not think that you are truly thinking this through—”

“I need to know that I’m not putting anyone else in danger.” I got to the door for the cells and opened it.

A light came on in the small narrow stairwell.

David let out a long sigh, telling me that he still had reluctance. “There must be another way.”

“This is the solution for now.” I stepped through and went down the concrete steps. “I need to know that I’m not putting Kaz, Max, Paolo, Emilio, and all of you in danger.”

“But...” David cleared his throat. “Sleeping down here may not improve...your mind.”

I let out a sad chuckle. “My mind...”

David looked at Giorgio.

The Butler shrugged.

“Listen.” I shook my head. “I cannot wake up another morning to news that my hands killed again. That is the shit that is really fucking up my mind.”

When we got to the final level, I scanned the cold place.

There were ten cells down here, and they were all mainly made of gray concrete walls. Each one had a steel door with a single window of reinforced glass in the center.

A small bed and toilet resided in every cell.

This will work for now.

I swallowed down my sadness and walked forward.

Maintaining my pace, David frowned on my left.

Giorgio got to my right. “I can clean whatever cell you will be—”

“No, Giorgio.” Now it was my turn to yawn. “These cells are new, and I’m exhausted. Just have some staff bring down extra blankets and pillows. Once I’m locked inside, then the both of you can go to your beds and fall asleep.”

David shook his head. “I will be down here with your guards—”

“David,” I stopped and looked at him. “I need you to find the person coming for Paolo. Period. That means that you need your sleep and to fully take care of yourself. Promise me that you will go to your room.”

David appeared uncertain, but finally nodded. “Then, I will double your guards down here.”

“That’s fine.” I continued forward and spotted the first spy in one cell.

She had been curled up on her bed. When we walked by, she hurried off the bed, went to the door, and hit the glass window. Russian spat out from her mouth.

I was too tired to try and figure out what she was saying. “When Kaz and I question these women, he wants you two with us, along with Blue.”

The woman banged her fist on the window again and yelled out something.

Don't worry, bitch. You will have all my attention tomorrow morning.

I kept on walking.

The woman finally ceased with hitting the window.

Two cells down, I saw the other woman. Bruises covered her face. Her eyes were closed, and I assumed she was sleeping.

You're going to deal with me too.

We walked on.

When we couldn't go further anymore, I turned to the last cell and gestured to it. “Come on, K.D. I know you have a key.”

David dove his hand into his pocket and pulled out a small square device. “Kazimir will not like this.”

“I would rather Kaz be alive and angry with me, then dead and silent.”

David sighed again and pressed the square against the door.

The steel screeched open.

“Thank you.” I stepped inside and looked around the room, taking in the bare walls. The cold, hard floor pressed against my bare feet.

This cell was a far cry from the comfortable master suite upstairs, but for now, it would have to do.

I turned around and gave them both a sad smile. “This is perfect.”

They both exchanged awkward glances.

I could still sense their hesitancy, but there could be no other way.

My hands shook at my sides, and my voice cracked. “Please...let me do this.”

David reluctantly nodded in response.

I gritted my teeth. “Lock me in and get some sleep.”

“Emily—”

“Do it, *David*.”

It felt like forever as they slowly left. Perhaps, they took their time, hoping I would change my mind.

Instead, I watched them back out of the cell and close the steel door.

K.D. peeked into the window.

“I’m serious.” I waved goodbye. “Get some sleep. The both of you.”

A worried expression covered his face.

Then, he left.

Thanks, David and Giorgio.

After a while, I heard their footsteps fade away.

No more bullshit from you, Lunita.

It was time to take a stand against her. Never again would she have my body violated by some stranger. And absolutely no more innocent people would die.

I should have done this before...but I thought...

I walked over to the bed and sat down, feeling the cold seep through my dress.

I thought you had some limits, Lunita.

I lay all the way down on the thin mattress.

I thought you understood how happy I was with Kaz...

I wrapped the small blanket tightly around me.

This will be good until we go to New Orleans.

Slowly, I closed my eyes to drift off to sleep.

Olga's face suddenly appeared in my mind.

No.

I opened my eyes and still saw Olga's face in my head.

I'm...sorry.

Her expression filled with rage and pain that pierced through me like a dagger.

Do you forgive me?

She never responded.

And, no matter how hard I tried to shake it away, her image remained imprinted in my mind.

I gripped the edge of the blanket. Tears left my eyes. And there, I finally cried in that silent, closed-in space.

Chapter 21

Lucid Fragments

Kazimir

In my dream, I sat on the edge of a jagged cliff and looked out into a wild sea. The briny gusts of wind roared past, wrapping me in its salty embrace.

My heart raced as my mind struggled to comprehend how real this all felt. “This is beautiful, even for a dream.”

The sun was setting, casting a warm golden hue across the horizon. The ocean called to me with a promise of unending freedom, daring me to take one more step forward.

“It seems so real.” I gazed at the endless expanse of water and sky before me.

But none of it was real.

Because Pavel sat beside me. “We should talk about this, Kazimir.”

I turned to him.

Pavel’s usually neatly combed hair danced wildly in the wind. His eyes sparkled with a mix of concern and understanding as he studied my face.

I frowned at him. “What should we talk about, Pavel? That your son is being threatened by possibly someone in the Brotherhood? Or should we start a conversation about my mouse and her other personality, Lunita?”

“I was thinking we should discuss Olga.”

“No.” I put my view back on the ocean, unable to share with him the overwhelming sorrow that filled my heart.

The loss of Olga, the woman who had been like a mother to me, weighed heavily on my soul. It stained every molecule of my being.

How could I explain the depth of my pain? What words would ever truly represent how I felt?

In this dream world, it seemed as if the wrong words would only shatter the fragile beauty of this moment.

If I spoke of Olga's death, the pain, the horror of it all... would the darkening blue sky not be blemished or ripped by shreds of light burning holes through the fabric of reality?

“Kazimir—”

“There is nothing to talk about, Pavel.”

“Well, you would be surprised, Kazimir, but I have been thinking a lot about death lately.”

I smirked. “Is it because you are dead?”

“And because death is an enigmatic concept.” Pavel looked at me. “What do you think?”

“The finality of death...it is something that we *all* must grapple with at some point in our lives.”

“I have always believed that there's something to be learned from death.”

“Learn? Death has only been a means for me to win or gain control, nothing else.” I let out a long breath. “Then...I met the mouse.”

“When you are in love, death can hurt you harder.”

“I am done discussing this.” I rose from the cliff and headed away.

Pavel never rose. He simply appeared on my side with his hands in his pockets. “Death can teach us about the value of life.”

“I already know the value of life.”

“But, do you understand how much we should cherish the time we have with our loved ones? Death is a reminder of our mortality and the impermanence of everything—”

“I did not need to know that lesson either.” Rage bubbled in me. “Olga could have lived. I already knew that.”

“Death can inspire us to make the most of our lives, to pursue our passions and forge deeper connections with others —”

“Olga should not have died!” I formed my hands into fists.

The sky turned shades of pink and purple.

Silent, Pavel reached out and placed his hand on my shoulder. It was a simple gesture that conveyed more than any words could.

Even though this was dream...I could feel the warmth of his love seeping into me, reminding me that I was not alone in my grief.

Sadness washed over me. “Olga...she was not a part of this life.”

Pavel nodded.

“She adored my son and your son. She loved Emily like her own daughter. Can you think of the horror she felt when seeing Emily’s face and then being stabbed in the throat?” I moved my shoulder from his hand and walked off. “Olga was confused when she died...”

Pavel appeared in front, forcing me to stop. “As painful as it is to lose someone we care about, death can also serve as a catalyst for growth and transformation.”

“Catalyst?” I spoke through clenched teeth. “You think I fucking care about that?”

“It is time to confront your vulnerabilities and fears.” Pavel pointed at the sky. “It is time you find hope and beauty even in the darkest of moments.”

“I do.”

“Do it even more.”

I looked off at where he was pointing. The last of the sun’s rays dipped below the horizon.

“The true growth is that Olga’s death must help you *change* your actions from now on.”

“That is the problem too, Pavel.”

He directed his view to me. “What is the problem, cousin?”

“Olga’s death will not change me.” I put my hands in my pockets. “I *should* have regret for killing the gardener, but none is there.”

“What if you knew that Olga would die?”

“When it comes to my mouse, there is no logic within me.” I gritted my teeth. “None.”

“Kazimir...”

“I still would have killed the gardener.” I looked him in the eye. “I still plan to kill his family, even though my mouse has hidden them from me. I will not stop searching for them.”

“If you kill his family, new consequences could come. At the bare minimum, negative karma could—”

“So be it.”

“Kazimir, I do not want you to lose your way—”

“He touched her!” My rage boiled over. “He came into *my* house and he touched *my* fiancée! Violated her!”

Pavel’s body flickered in and out, and I feared our conversation may end too soon.

I lowered my voice. “The gardener had to die. And now his family dies. Perhaps, many of his friends die too. What would you have done?”

“The same.” Pavel turned away.

Dread filled the silence.

“Exactly.” I stabbed the air. “Even dead, you cannot justify my not bringing violence.”

Pavel sighed. “We are our fathers’ children after all.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Yes, we are.”

We both stared at the glow of the rising full moon.

Pavel spoke, “I worry for you, Kazimir.”

“I will be okay.”

In this dream-like state, I could feel the bond of our
bloodline, keeping me strong as I faced the harsh reality of
Olga’s loss.

Pavel put his view back on me. “You should have regret,
Kazimir.”

“Should I?”

“Yes.”

“I do have regret.”

Pavel quirked his brows. “What do you regret, cousin?”

“I regret killing *you*.” My heart twisted. “I am sorry.”

Pavel opened his mouth, but no words came out. He just
stood there, staring at me with an expression that could only
be described as shock.

“I love you.” I tensed. “Even though I hate what happened,
I still love you.”

The silence between us felt like a lifetime before Pavel
finally spoke.

“I love you too, cousin.” He put his hand on my shoulder
again.

It was all the comfort I needed in that moment—a
reminder that no matter how much violence lay before us in
the future, it would never shatter the bond between us.

“Protect my son, Kazimir and love him like your own.”

“I will.”

Soon Pavel began to fade.

“No.” I reached out to him. “Not yet. Do not leave.”

Pavel disappeared along with the dream’s landscape.

My eyes snapped open as I woke up in bed.

Sweat beaded along my forehead.

That was a dream.

I exhaled.

Just...a dream.

I rolled over and didn't see Emily in bed. Even more, her space in the bed had not been touched. The blankets, sheets, and pillows were still neatly in their proper place.

She never came to bed? No. That could not be so... unless...

Terror ripped through me.

Lunita.

It felt like a weight being crushed down onto my chest.

I rushed out of bed.

What happened? Where is she?

My heart sank as a wave of panic washed over me.

The rising fury burning inside my chest threatened to explode. There was this constant undying need to keep her safe. It was an unstoppable inferno, raging within my veins.

Why did no one wake me?

Once out of the bed, I realized I only had on my black suit pants from last night—no shirt or socks. The front of my pants was open, exposing my hard cock under my black boxer briefs. I zipped my pants up and buttoned them.

Is she safe?

I grabbed a robe, slung it on, but didn't bother tying it.

Someone better have answers.

I stormed out of my bedroom, the robe's sides billowing around me in a furious wind.

When I got to the door, I grabbed the knob and swung it open.

Maxwell and David had been talking to the group—Blue, Giorgio, Wassily, and several other guards, then everyone noticed me glaring at them from the middle of the doorway.

They all instantly went quiet and watched me.

I fisted my hands. “Where. Is. Emily?”

Chapter 22

The Eyes

Kazimir

As I glared at them, no one said a word.

Maxwell gave me a sad smile.

Nervousness etched David's face.

Blue was the only one out of the bunch to show some courage and step forward. "Emily is fine."

"And safe," David added.

"Emilio and Paolo are cool too." Maxwell nodded. "I gave little dude another bottle. Then, Baba came in there, rocking and singing to him. Nephew instantly forgot that I existed."

The line of my jaw twitched. "My mouse did not do *any* feedings for Emilio last night?"

Maxwell and David exchanged glances.

My fists clenched at my sides. Rage coated my words. "Answer me!"

David stepped forward. "Emily wanted to protect you and everyone else from Lunita, so she decided to sleep in the prison cells below—"

My chest tightened. "The cells?!"

The air in the hallway grew tense and thick.

Everyone seemed to be holding their breath.

Meanwhile, my heart ached as I tried to imagine my mouse sleeping overnight in that gray, dismal space.

I had spent several months coming up with the perfect system of cells to horrify those that I needed to imprison.

The cell's confined dimensions were meticulously crafted to evoke an intense claustrophobia. It was a terrifying psychological cage.

Every cell had its own unique temperature system. They were cold and disquieting environments that constantly provided a sense of discomfort and unease. Dampness hung heavy in the air, seeping into every crevice like a living thing, clinging to skin and hair with unrelenting persistence.

The dim flickering lighting was to evoke despair and make the prisoner feel uneasy.

I wanted them to know that they were trapped, to know beyond any doubt that there was no escape.

And that was where my mouse slept last night...

I gazed at all of them, ready to put bullets in every head. I clenched my teeth tightly. On the inside of my chest resided a hornet's nest of madness swarming through me.

Slowly, I leaned my head to the side. "My mouse slept in a cell last night?"

That cannot be true. They know better.

"Look, man." Maxwell held his hands together. "David told me that she was adamant about—"

"You were there?" I whipped my view to David. My gaze seared into him like a branding iron. "You...allowed that?"

David cleared his throat. "At Emily's request, I took her down to the cells."

There was so much rage unfolding inside of me, pressing against my skin to get out. "Where were you, Blue?"

David took another step forward. "I ordered Blue to go to her bedroom and get some sleep."

"Eh. I get why you may be mad. I was a little pissed too." Maxwell rubbed his forehead. "But, I just went down to the cells to check on Em. She's chill and fast asleep on the cot—"

"Next to the repulsive toilet and cold, gray walls?" I opened and closed my hands, wondering which neck I would crack in two first. Blue was in charge of Emily, but David was in charge of all. And then there was Maxwell who's neck I should have broken a long time ago.

As if reading my thoughts, Maxwell raised his hands up in defense. “I think that we should consider her solution.”

“Solution?” I stomped his way. “You think Emily being in a cell is a *solution*?”

David stepped between us.

Did David not know that his life was in danger too?

Maxwell tried to walk around David. “I’m just saying let’s not act too fast on—”

“Everyone leave. Except David.” I glared at them all.

Blue’s expression hardened.

David kept his position in front of me.

Maxwell let out a long breath. “You want us to leave?”

“Now.”

“Man, I just ask that you don’t slap David. *Respectfully*. Please, don’t do it.”

“Get out!” I bared my teeth and pointed down the hallway.

They all hurried that way.

Although, Blue cast several nervous glances over her shoulder as she left.

Once we were alone, David spoke. “I know you are angry, but...this could be a temporary solution to our problem. It is very logical for what we have been dealing with.”

I sneered. “You think I put that ring on my mouse’s finger, so she could spend her nights sleeping in some cell?”

“No.”

“Not at all.”

David’s voice was calm, but there was a hint of desperation in it. “I understand your love for Emily, but after this week, one would admit that we are running out of rational options to keep everyone safe.”

I studied him. “My history with people serving me has always resulted in my killing them. For now you are not only

the best *number one* I have ever had, but unlike the others, I have never wanted to kill you.”

David tightened his lips.

“Until this moment...*this... moment.*” Rage continued to roar in my chest—potent and overwhelming. “If you were anybody else...*this moment* would have been very different.”

David gazed down at the floor.

“That carpet that you stare at?” I pointed to it. “That would have been drenched in your blood.”

David looked back at me.

Drawing closer, I lowered my voice to a venomous whisper. “Your skull would have been bashed open. Your heart stopped. Your intestines spilled over the side of your body.”

David did not respond.

“Did you know that, David?”

“I knew it would be possible.”

“Possible.” I stood barely two feet away from him. “What do you know about human eyes?”

He blinked. “Not much, Kazimir.”

“You should study them. Eyes are a marvel of biological design. The cornea. Iris. Pupil. Retina. They help us to perceive the world.” I watched him. “Last night, when you opened that cell and looked at my mouse...what did you see in *her* eyes?”

David sighed. “Sadness and desperation.”

I gritted my teeth. “Throughout history...civilizations have seen eyes as the windows to the soul. Have you ever heard that?”

“I have not.”

“Good. I taught you something today. Now let me teach you something else.” I walked up to him and got right in front of his face. My glare bored holes into his skull. “David, I want you to look deep into my eyes. Very. Deep.”

David swallowed.

“Look into the windows of *my* black rotted soul. Gaze into the wicked inner depths of me.” I was so close to fucking exploding that my lips quivered. That dark rage clawed at the very fabric of my being. “When it comes to my mouse, there will never be any logic nor rationale. Look! Do you see it?!”

“I see it, Kazimir.”

“Do you see the darkness?” I grabbed the collar of his shirt, yanked him up, and pressed my face even closer to his. My spit sprayed on his cheeks. “Do you see it?! The violence! The Death!”

“I see it.”

I let go of his shirt.

He stumbled back and wiped my spit off his face.

“The eyes never lie.”

David grimaced. “Then, can I show you something?”

“Show me something? Your only focus should be on trying to walk out of this hallway alive.”

“Unfortunately, my only focus this week and many others has been to keep *you* safe and protected.” David dove into this pocket, pulled out his cellphone, and pressed on it.

“What?” I went over to it.

He placed the device in front of me and pressed on the screen. The image showed Emily sleeping on a cot. It must have been the middle of the night.

I scowled. “What is this?”

“Please, keep looking.”

Annoyed, I looked at the screen again. Emily stirred in bed. Then...seconds later...she slowly sat up and rubbed her eyes.

I tilted forward.

Next, Emily leaned her head all the way to the side until it lay on her shoulder.

Lunita.

A cold shiver ran through me, knocking out all the anger.

On the screen, Lunita moved the blanket and hopped onto the floor like she was a kid heading outside to play.

David spoke, “This was at three in the morning.”

I gritted my teeth.

Lunita did an odd walk to the cell’s steel door and began searching for the knob. She slipped her hands along the front of the door and then at the top.

Frowning, she began walking around the cell, sliding her hands along the walls as if there could be some secret door in the concrete.

She must have not been watching the TV when my mouse went into the cell.

David fast forwarded some of the footage. It showed Lunita moving around fast, searching for an escape, and then finally giving up.

David took his hand off the screen and let the footage play normally.

There, Lunita lay back in bed and went to sleep.

My mind raced.

What did she plan to do this time?

I stared at the screen.

Was she just going to sit in the garden and cry over her dead lover? Or did she have plans to kill another?

Relief washed away more of my anger.

“I may not know a lot about the human eye, Kazimir, but I do see things more clearly than you.” The worry I heard in David’s voice sent a chill down my spine. “Emily knows Lunita is dangerous. Just like we all know...except you.”

I sneered. “Be careful, David.”

“The longer I work as your number one, the more I understand what my *true* job is.”

“Your job is to keep Emily safe—”

“Kazimir, my job is to keep *you* safe—”

“She is a very important part of me—the most sacred—”

“I agree.” David slowly nodded. “But...you have tried to control Lunita and failed. I believe we should let Emily attempt to get control.”

“David...she slept in a cell...” My heart broke. “In a place where I put my enemies, where men wait to die by my hands. *That* is where my mouse rested her head last night.”

Then, suddenly Emily spoke behind me, “And that is where I will be sleeping tonight too.”

I turned around and faced her.

There, she stood with her bare feet planted firmly on the ground. She still wore the black dress from last night. The fabric clung to her curves. Her hair was ruffled a little on the sides, but somewhat in place.

Meanwhile, a determined look set in her eyes. “David, can you please leave? I would like to talk to Kaz alone.”

I scowled. “Perhaps, you should let David remain here to keep you safe.”

“I don’t need anyone to protect me from you.” She walked off and headed to our bedroom.

I stomped after her. “Do you know where you were supposed to be this morning?”

“In bed next to you.”

We entered the room.

I slammed the door behind me. “Were you in bed?”

“I was not.” She continued to the closet.

I followed. “When were you going to tell me that you would be sleeping in a cell from now on—?”

“I told you that after Dr. Stovall worked on my hand—”

“You offered the suggestion and I shut it down.”

“That wasn’t a damned suggestion, Kaz. I was serious.” She opened the closet door and headed in. “And I still am serious. Do not fight me on this because you will lose.”

“I will lose?” Touching my chest, I went into the closet too. “Are you sure about that, *mysh*?”

“Kaz...” She stopped and faced me. “Think of this like... Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.”

“What?”

“Do you know the story?”

“I know it, but what does that have to do with *you*?”

“Everything.”

I groaned in annoyance.

“I always liked that story when I was a kid.” Emily shook her head. “Now, I wonder if on some subconscious level I knew that I was just like Dr. Jekyll, constantly trying to find ways to repress my evil urges.”

“You are not him.”

“I didn’t make a potion like Dr. Jekyll, but my brain did attempt to separate the hidden evil in my personality and...just like Jekyll when I transform only Hyde-like chaos occurs.”

“If you wanted a secure place, we could have—”

“What, Kaz? Built something. Put a steel door in a bedroom. What about the objects in the space? How do we know Lunita would not figure out a way to get free?”

“A cell—”

“Is the best place for me to be right now.” Emily stabbed the air. “I want that bitch to know that I am not playing with her.”

I widened my eyes.

“I love you. I want you safe. I want the people that I care for safe.” Emily hugged herself. “Lunita told you three for three.”

“She did, but unless, I trigger her, Lunita will not—”

“She threatened David and Valentina. Two people who I love with all of my heart. Enough with Lunita having the upper hand in this.” Emily’s voice cracked. “What the fuck are we talking about? Stop fighting me on this.”

“What about the birdcage in our pleasure room?”

“I could break off one of the spokes and slip out of that birdcage. Surely Lunita could too.”

“She is not as smart and strong as you—”

“And I am not taking any chances.” She frowned. “Jekyll felt himself lose control—”

“Are we back on that?”

“He knew that Hyde was a dangerous man bent on committing heinous acts.”

“You are not him.”

Emily whispered, “Jekyll killed himself.”

Tension gathered in my shoulders.

She headed off. “At least, I have other options.”

My heart felt like a lead weight dropped into my gut, dragging me down to the depths of despair.

A voice inside my head screamed for me to stop my mouse, to protect her at all costs.

But another part of me knew that Lunita was a force to be reckoned with, capable of unimaginable horrors beyond the comprehension of mortals. I doubted Emily knew that Lunita had come out this morning. If she did, that would be even more proof to my mouse to stay in the cell.

“Kaz, we don’t have a lot of time today. I need to hurry up, dress, get back to the cells, and beat the shit out of those bitches.” Emily went to the shelf stacked with tons of her jeans

and grabbed a pair of black ones. “Then, I have to hurry back up here, shower off the blood, and do a feeding or pump milk. I’m sure Max will need more bottles just in case and—”

“If you sleep in the cell, then I will sleep in there with you.”

“No. The whole point of my being in the cell is to not have Lunita come close to you.”

“I can deal with her.”

“You cannot.”

“She will not kill me.”

“Enough is enough, Kaz. Let’s move on. Besides, I have to find a wet nurse or consider switching Emilio to formula.” She rummaged in a drawer and then pulled out a long sleeved black shirt. “Then, I have to check out the list of new *number twos* Blue put together for me as well as make sure the staff packs the kids’ stuff as well as ours—”

“*Mysh.*”

She looked up. The ferocity of her gaze pierced me like a thousand knives. Her eyes were aflame with pure, unrelenting determination and I knew that no amount of persuasion or discussion could sway her from this chosen path.

Only one word left her lips. “Please.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Your comparison to Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde...”

“What about it?”

“I do not like the comparison.”

“Then, consider me a werewolf with a beast that comes out during a full moon, and during that time...I have to chain myself up. This week is a full moon.”

“I am afraid that the cell and this method will have you grow into more darkness—”

“Nothing was worse than waking up to Olga’s death.” Emily’s eyes watered. “I would rather open my eyes and see

gray walls, than see blood on my hands.”

“I am not the sort of man that could let you—”

“In this situation, I need you to step away from being the Lion.” Emily’s gaze plead with me. “Right now, I need you to love and support me.”

“You know I love you.”

“Then, support me.”

“That ring on your finger means that I am supposed to protect you—”

“And the ring says that *I* am to protect you also.” Holding the jeans and shirt, she walked over to me. “While you don’t need me to physically protect you, Kaz, you do need me to protect your feelings, your heart, your mind...”

“You do.”

“What Lunita did with the gardener hurt you.”

I gritted my teeth.

“Olga’s death hurt you too.”

Just hearing Olga’s name brought so much pain to my chest. All I could do was look away.

“That bitch is not going to harm *you* anymore. I’m not going to let her.” Emily came over and let the clothes fall from her hands. They fell to the floor. Next, she wrapped her arms around my waist. “No more letting Lunita do what she wants, Kaz. I mean it.”

My body trembled with anger as I held onto her tightly.

“Please, Kaz.”

I closed my eyes.

“Just until we go to New Orleans.”

I could battle Emily on this. I had more people than her, more resources. I could flood the cells with water or have them filled with concrete so that she could never even enter tonight.

I could war with her all day and stop any attempt again.

But, that would only stress her out more.

And possibly trigger Lunita's appearance.

Plus, I just did not want to stress her anymore.

A few minutes passed.

I opened my eyes and looked into hers. "I will let you do this, but only until we go to New Orleans."

"Thank you, baby." A relieved expression came on her face. She pulled away and picked up the shirt and jeans off the floor. "It will all work out."

I raised one finger. "But."

She quirked her brows. "But?"

"I sleep in the cell next to you."

She frowned. "You don't have to do that."

"I do."

"Kaz—"

"That is the compromise, *mysh*."

"Goddamn it." Sighing, she walked away.

Chapter 23

Questions and Answers

Emily

I had a lot to get done before leaving for New Orleans. One of those duties was to gather as many answers as I could so that Blue, David, and Giorgio had a good head start.

But, will we get answers from these chicks?

In my heart, hope twisted with fear.

We headed down to the cells.

Kaz and King David walked in front.

I trailed behind them. On my right, Max kept my pace and twisted a newly rolled blunt between his fingers.

Giorgio and Blue followed.

These bitches better talk.

As we moved forward, I raised my hands in front of me. Black leather gloves covered them. I closed them into fists.

They came to hurt Paolo. I'm going to fuck them up.

Thoughts of revenge unfurled within me like a serpent coiled in the shadows, patiently awaiting the moment to strike with venomous precision.

This is going to be fun.

Max glanced my way. "Do you mind not looking so happy to torture these women?"

Frowning, I opened my hands and dropped them to my sides. "Kaz, won't let me use anything sharp."

Max placed the blunt to his nose and sniffed. "You disagree with that?"

"No."

Max moved the blunt from his nose and leaned my way.
“What I want to know is if he slapped David or not?”

My frown deepened. “I don’t think so.”

Max returned to twisting the blunt between his fingers.
“You should know, Em.”

“Why?”

“It’s your fault if he did slap David. That was a dumb move, Em.”

“You know I didn’t want David to get in trouble, but tell me this.”

“What?”

“Did you not feel safer once you heard I was sleeping in the cell?”

Max sucked his teeth. “That’s not a fair question, man.”

“It is.”

“Of course I felt safer.”

“Then, I had to do it.”

“You say that, but I saw this motherfucker’s face this morning, when he realized you wasn’t in bed with him.” Max shook his head. “I thought I wasn’t afraid of dude anymore, but...I had a healthy amount of fear in the hallway today.”

“Listen. The plan was to be upstairs before Kaz woke up and then I was going to explain what I had done—”

“Well, you didn’t wake up before him, and this motherfucker almost killed David.”

I swallowed.

“I’m just saying.” Max tucked the blunt behind his ear.
“When we head to New Orleans, keep me up-to-date with *all* your plans so I’ll know how to maneuver possible situations.”

“I promise.”

“Cool.”

Up ahead, Kaz and David disappeared into the dark stairwell.

Next, we entered.

Max shook his head. “I still can’t believe you slept down here.”

“It was fine.”

“I won’t lie, Em. That shit hurt my heart a little when I heard it. We used to sleep in alleys and sewers, so I know you got it in you, but we’ve come too far—”

“You and Kaz keep focusing on the *cell*, and I just keep thinking about Olga’s blood all over her room.” I gazed at him. “It’s time to control Lunita. Fuck the quality of my sleeping arrangement.”

Max nodded in agreement. “You’re right.”

I followed the group down the narrow hallway. The scent of stale urine and sweat permeated my senses. We stopped in front of the first heavily secured cell.

A dim light flickered inside, casting eerie shadows on the gray, concrete walls.

Kaz turned to me. “You want lead on this?”

“You know I do.”

“No knives.”

“As we agreed.”

David stuck his hand in his pockets. “They have remained quiet since being caught. Anything you can get, Emily, will help.”

Kaz put his view on the cell window. “Even if I can just hear their accent or dialect to figure out the area they came from.”

The need for violence surged through me. “I’ll get more than that.”

Kaz studied me. “Careful, *mysh*.”

I looked at David. “What do you know about them so far?”

“They were hired as maids a week after everyone moved in. Which means they have been with us for several months.”

I shivered. “How could that have happened? You and Blue were on background checks and all of that. I trust you two.”

“Additionally, Misha’s people did the final check,” David added.

Kaz frowned. “Someone with *powerful* connections kept their backgrounds clean enough for not even *us* to find out how dirty they were.”

“How powerful do you think this person could be, Kaz?”

“They may have political power.”

Fuck.

Max crossed his arms over his chest. “Did you search their rooms?”

“We did. Everything was typical items, except one thing.” David pulled out a photo from his pocket. “This was in one of the women’s room.”

“Which one?” Max asked.

“The brown haired one in the other cell,” David said.

I took it.

The photo was old, showing faded colors and wrinkled corners. I spotted the brown-haired chick next to a tall man and two young girls dressed in pink. They looked like they might have been going to church.

Is this your family? And are they still alive?

I placed the photo in my back pocket and put my view on Max. “Get this chick in here to see my conversation with the blonde. If the blonde doesn’t have anything to say, then I end her and move to the brown haired one.”

Kaz nodded. “Simple and effective.”

David gave Max a key disk for the other cell.

“I got her.” Max headed off.

David stepped forward and placed his disk against the door. “One of the requirements of staff positions is being proficient in English. So, there should be no problem with speaking to them.”

“Perfect.” My heart pounded in my chest in anticipation.

The door creaked open.

David and I stepped inside.

The space was already tight.

Kaz stood in the doorway and watched.

Giorgio was somewhere in the hallway.

I surveyed the room. The stench of bodily fluids assaulted my nose. My eyes quickly adjusted to the dim light.

The blonde woman sat on the bed, staring at her hands. Instead of using the toilet, she had consistently urinated on herself. A disgusting dark stain drenched the crotch of her pants.

Not a bad tactic.

It would deter some men from raping her for that moment. Meanwhile, the sickest ones wouldn't care.

David stepped back and leaned against the wall.

I moved in close, until barely three feet ran between me and her.

She looked up. Hate filled her eyes. A thick Russian accent left her cracked lips. She kept saying something, but it came out so fast, I had no idea what she was talking about.

I glanced over my shoulder. “Does that help?”

Kaz nodded. “She is from the east of Moscow. Near the regions along the Volga River.”

The woman widened her eyes and went silent.

David left the wall. “It's the way she pronounces her g's.”

I placed my gaze back on her. “Good morning, East Moscow.”

She spat my way.

A glob of her spit landed on my left boot.

I'll make you regret that later.

Noise sounded on our side.

Max rushed in with the brown-haired woman and shoved her forward.

She fell onto the bed.

“You can go, David.” I gestured at the door.

As I knew David would, he looked to Kaz for direction.

“I’m not pregnant anymore.” I eyed my lion. “You think these two could hurt me? Especially with Max in here.”

Kaz frowned, but nodded for David to leave. Still, his number one didn’t exit. Instead, he remained next to Kaz by the doorway.

I took one step toward the bed. “Which one of you are going to talk to me today?”

The blonde scooted closer to the edge of the bed and spat on my jeans.

“We have a volunteer.” Fast, I grabbed the blonde’s head, wrenched her off the bed, and shoved her into the wall.

She managed to twist away before smashing into it.

I lunged forward.

She screamed and dove for me.

With my left hand, I grabbed her throat and clamped down on it hard. Rage filled me as I shoved her against the wall. I tightened my hold on her throat. “No respect?”

Her eyes bulged as she hit my arm over and over in a desperate attempt to break free.

“It’s two of you, bitch.” I moved in closer, keeping her pinned against the wall with one hand while the other clenched her throat tightly enough that it felt like my hand was crushing

glass. “You want me to kill you? I can do it. You think that is your only way out of this?”

The blonde let out a guttural sound as she tried to break loose from my grip.

My voice came out low and menacing. “Sure, I can kill you, but what about your family?”

For the first time, she moved her gaze to me.

I slowly released my grip on the blonde’s neck and stepped back, never taking my eyes off of her. “You have somebody out there that you love. I will find them all, and I will slice them from ear to fucking ear.”

The blonde touched her neck.

“I have questions.”

The blonde inched away from me. A heavy Russian accent lathered her words. “What questions?”

“Who hired you?”

“He will kill my family.”

He.

I studied her. “I can protect your family.”

“You cannot.” The blonde slowly walked around me, went to the bed, and collapsed on it.

I raised my eyebrows. “Why not?”

The brown-haired chick’s eyes watered. “Because he has them.”

I dug in my back pocket, pulled out the photo, and showed her. “This family?”

She froze.

“Who does *he* have? The girls? Your husband?”

She remained quiet.

Then, he must have all three of them.

So...some guy had taken this chick's family and forced her to do something to us. It was basic enemy bullshit tactics.

I returned my gaze to the blonde. "Who is he keeping hostage against you?"

She remained silent.

"You don't want to say anything because you don't want your people to get hurt. I understand." I dropped the photo on the brown-haired chick's lap. "However, you both are talking which means that you are *willing* to tell me something. It means that you are not fully on his side."

Brown Hair picked up the photo with shaking fingers. "After we came here, we heard what you did in Italy."

"And what did I do?"

She continued to stare at the photo. "Your people saved the boy. That is what they say."

The blonde stared at me. "Would you do the same thing for us?"

"Get your family from this guy?"

They nodded.

I looked at the blonde. "Who is he keeping from you?"

"We are sisters." She gestured to the photo. "This is my family too."

Something didn't add up.

"You may be sisters, but this man didn't use your sister's family against you." I shook my head. "So, what was it?"

The sisters exchanged glances.

Brown hair nodded.

The blonde looked back at me. "I was in jail."

"For what?"

"Murder."

"Who did you kill?"

“Many, and then,” the woman swallowed. “Suddenly, I was released from jail.”

“By him?”

She bobbed her head. “I was told that I must help my sister. He said if I did it, he would give me permanent freedom.”

Definitely sounds like this guy has political connections.

If we could get one of these women to help David and them, then it would be a good clue to finding the person.

They would have a fighting chance once we leave for New Orleans.

Max spoke, “What did you two have to do?”

Tension thickened in the air.

Brown hair swallowed. “We did not want to do it.”

“What was it?” Anger rose within me. “Enough with the bullshit.”

“At first, we were only supposed to come into the house and give him information about everyone,” the blonde said.

I leaned my head to the side. “And then?”

Brown hair gazed down at the photo. “Then, he told us to kill the little boy.”

I edged forward. “What?”

Max rushed to my side.

The blonde’s bottom lip quivered. “On the day that you caught us...we were supposed to kill the boy.”

All I felt was fury in my veins. I lost all control. I was on the blonde fast, lunging forward and slamming my fists viciously into her face.

“Em, stop!”

“Kill who?” I grabbed her by the hair, yanked her head back, and slammed it into the metal edge of the bed.

When her skull made contact with the cold steel, pain surged through my knuckles.

“Em!”

Over and over, I slammed her head into the metal again and again until her body went limp. Until blood gushed out, soaking her blonde hair and spilling onto the floor.

When I knew for sure that the bitch was dead, I got up slowly and took deep breaths to calm myself down.

Blood dripped from my hands.

Weeping filled the space.

I turned around.

Kaz and David were now further inside the cell.

In the corner, the brown-haired woman wept on the floor.

Max dove into his pocket and whipped out his knife.

“Move, Em.”

I stepped to the side.

Max went over to the dead woman and lifted her arm. With his knife, he began drawing a smiley face on her skin.

Sighing, I faced the brown-haired woman weeping in the corner. “You tell my people everything about this guy, and they *will* save your family.”

Trembling, the woman looked up.

More tears left her eyes.

“But, if you lie or put my people in harm’s way, not only will I carve up you and then your husband, but those cute little daughters too...I wouldn’t even want to do it, but I would... right in front you. I would let you see it all...and I would do it because you came for mine.”

She whimpered.

“Kaz, I’m going to check on the kids.” I gazed over my shoulder and stared down at the blonde’s motionless body for one last time before turning away and leaving the room without another word.

Chapter 24

The Decision

Kazimir

Minutes later, I found myself in my office with Tisha. He was dressed in a designer suit. Its tailored fit accentuated his strong physique as he towered over my desk.

Today, his black hair flowed around his face, giving him a more relaxed appearance.

That striking red rose tattoo adorned his neck, its petals seemingly in full bloom, while his mother's name elegantly flowed along the stem in delicate script.

Wassily stood by the door. His posture was alert and attentive. Since Italy, he had been on point and truly proving himself to be a good pick.

Meanwhile, David remained by the wall with his eyes focused on my cousin, observing him carefully.

Tisha will be a hard sale for David. Let us see if my cousin can convince David of his loyalty.

Tisha's intense blue gaze settled on me.

I could feel the weight of his attention. There was a certain determination in his eyes. Tisha was the sort of man that did not like to hear the word no. While he would not harm David in front of me, if David said *no*, Tisha would find a way to do something.

Tisha leaned his head to the side. "Have you made your decision about my coming to New Orleans?"

"I have not."

Tisha widened his eyes. "Why not, Kazimir?"

I looked at David. "What are *your* thoughts?"

Tisha snorted. "Will this *king* be the person who gives the final decision?"

“I hold David’s opinion highly.”

Tisha sneered. “What is a David? How long have you known this man?”

I gestured to the chair near him. “Sit.”

David continued to study him. “Tisha, why do you think that you should go with the Lion?”

Still sneering, Tisha lowered into the chair and kept his view on me. “I have known Kazimir all my life and protected him many times.”

David didn’t appear impressed. “I could go out in that hallway, pull six random men in here, and they would be able to say the same thing. Once the Lion took the throne and was able to eat, all of his siblings, cousins, and friends feasted too.”

Tisha slowly turned and glared at David. “I am not like them. I have *always* been loyal to Kazimir. I am from the time when Kazimir and I were rummaging through trash cans to find food. I was loyal then, and will continue to be loyal.”

I should have cared about this conversation. If Tisha were truly loyal, he would be a powerful force in New Orleans. If Tisha was a hidden enemy, then more problems could arise.

Yet, my mind kept drifting to thoughts of my mouse. Her choice to sleep in the cell couldn’t have been an easy one, and I couldn’t help but worry about her wellbeing.

As Tisha spoke, his words faded into the background, overshadowed by my concern for my mouse. I couldn’t shake the image of her, alone and vulnerable in that cell.

And Lunita...she came out...

I had not told her yet, but I would need to soon.

Mysh...

I longed to see her face, to know that she was safe and protected.

Where are you, and what are you doing?

I dove into my pocket and pulled out my phone.

David spoke, “And what will you gain by going with the Lion?”

Tisha hesitated before answering. “I would gain nothing.”

David snorted. “Not true.”

Tension gathered in my fingertips as I swiped through the camera feeds, searching for my mouse.

Where are you?

Annoyance laced Tisha’s voice. “Who are you to tell me that I am not being truthful?”

David sighed. “If you successfully help the Lion and the mouse in New Orleans, then you would gain more power, wealth, and respect.”

“Successfully help?” Tisha laughed. “What would Kazimir need help with on a holiday in America? It is just a vacation. Will I need to pull his cock out for him and explain how to use it?”

Mysh?

Putting all my attention on the phone, my eyes flickered from one screen to another, scrutinizing each frame for the slightest hint of movement.

Emilio slept in his nursery. Two of his guards stood near the crib. Five others flanked the doorway.

Rest, son.

I swiped through other camera views, spotted movement in the garden, and zoomed in.

There, Baba dug small holes with Paolo. Harlem trotted around the garden, chasing something.

I leaned in.

Is that a butterfly he’s hunting?

Harlem nipped at the butterfly and yanked it down to the ground.

Good boy.

David cleared his throat. “Tisha, this trip to New Orleans will not only be a holiday.”

But, where is she?

I scanned the corridors and rooms, my heart racing as a bead of sweat formed on my brow. The longer it took, the more my desperation grew. For some inexplicable reason, finding my mouse had become imperative, and every second that passed felt like an eternity weighing heavily on my chest.

I quickly shifted my focus to the hidden cameras that only I and a select few others had access to.

Mysh?

I meticulously combed through the live feeds, hoping to catch even the slightest glimpse of her. The anticipation gnawed at me, and I couldn't help but feel a growing sense of unease.

As I continued to search, my mind raced with thoughts of what might have happened to her, each possibility more troubling than the last. I knew I couldn't rest until I found her, safe and sound.

“What are you saying, David?” Tisha lowered his voice. “This is a vacation. Correct? Or am I wrong? What must be done in New Orleans?”

David spoke, “You will need to help Valentina keep Kazimir safe.”

Tisha leaned forward. “From whom?”

There you go, mysh.

I zoomed in on my bedroom's shower camera.

Mmmm.

Emily washed her body carefully. Water cascaded down her curves. On the floor, pink liquid spilled into the drain.

My cock got hard.

I couldn't help but imagine myself in the shower with her, my hands caressing her body, our lips meeting in a passionate

kiss.

“David?” Tisha disrupted my thoughts. “Who am I supposed to keep Kazimir safe from?”

David let out a long breath. “His mouse.”

What?

I looked up from my phone and scowled at David.

“The Mouse? Very funny, David.” Tisha let out a nervous laugh.

Neither of us joined him.

Tisha’s expression went neutral. “Are you...serious? Emily—his mouse—she’s a little thing. Surely, the Lion does not need protection from her.”

David and I exchanged glances.

Hold on. Does he really not know about Lunita or my mouse’s darkness?

I studied Tisha. “What have you heard about my mouse?”

Tisha raised his eyebrows. “Are we to discuss the Brotherhood’s gossip?”

“If necessary, then yes.”

“They say she was a serial killer in New York.” Tisha shrugged. “Cut dicks off of men because they broke her heart.”

“Those men never had her heart.” I frowned. “What else have you heard about her?”

“They say Emily can put three big men on the floor. One day I hope to see this.”

David crossed his arms over his shoulder. “Anything else?”

“They say that she has magic between her thighs and that the Lion is under a spell.”

I was going to argue against that point, but it made me think of her pussy. Due to that, I couldn’t help but glance back at my phone.

Mysh...

She still washed in the shower. Water trickled along her breasts as they bounced.

I held in my groan.

She covered her body in soapy pink suds.

My cock stirred.

Instantly, I yearned to be next to her, breathing in her scent, slipping my hands along her slick, curvy body.

David's voice pulled me away from my enjoyment. "And do you know about Lunita?"

Damn it. Concentrate.

I snapped out of ogling my mouse just in time to hear Tisha's reply.

"Who is this person?" Tisha glanced at David, and then at me. "Lunita?"

I quirked my brows.

Tisha really does not know anything.

My cousin looked me in my eyes. "What is going on, Kazimir? Is something wrong with your mouse?"

When a person lied, they tended to give it away. Many avoided eye contact. Others increased their blinking or touched their face a lot— nose, chin, or mouth. It was all a subconscious reaction to the anxiety associated with lying.

Everybody that grew up with us, knew that Tisha was a horrible liar.

I checked his hands. They remained still. He didn't fidget or nervously tap.

He has no idea.

A smart enemy sought as much information as they could about their opponent.

Lunita's existence was not a big secret. David made sure all of our men knew, so they could be on guard. When we

returned from Italy, the whispers of my mouse's personality disorder spread all over Russia and in other parts of the world.

Had Tisha been searching for some weakness or way to destroy me, he would have easily gotten this information.

But, he knows nothing...

I moved my view to David.

What do you think?

David gave me a slow nod.

Tisha's expression hardened. "What is going on?"

David unfolded his arms, left the wall, and walked over to the edge of my desk. "Perhaps, it would be better if you stay out of this situation, Tisha. There will be other opportunities and trips to help Kazimir."

Tisha looked at me with steely determination. His unwavering loyalty was evident in his blue eyes. "I know every detail of your past, Kazimir. Does that not matter?"

"It does."

"I understand the way you think. I can anticipate your needs and provide the support you require in any situation."

"*Any* situation?" David placed his hands on the corner of the desk.

"Kazimir knows my skills with a gun."

I bobbed my head. "You are an artist when it comes to combat situations."

"But, this would not be combat." David peered at Tisha. "The person that sits in this position must be willing to go against the Lion for his safety."

I sneered. "That is not true. Do not get him killed, David."

Tisha grinned. "I understand more than anyone how hard-headed Kazimir can be. My mother used to say that *his* head was full of rocks."

I rolled my eyes and turned back to my phone.

The shower was off. Emily was no longer inside it.

God damn it. Where are you?

I swiped through camera feeds.

Tisha spoke, “Our blood and our bond in childhood created a loyalty between us that can’t be bought or broken. I will stand by Kazimir, no matter what challenges I could face in New Orleans.”

I looked up from the phone. “Are you sure about that?”

“I am.”

“My mouse has more than one woman inside of her head.”

Tisha blinked. “What...are you saying?”

“There is a part of her that is wild and demented. We call that part of her—Lunita.”

This time, Tisha turned to David as if looking for help. “Surely...I am missing something.”

David shook his head. “New Orleans is about healing the Mouse and getting Lunita out of her head.”

Tisha directed his focus to me. “I do not quite understand, but I know that I can protect Kazimir.”

David eyed him. “From his mouse?”

I stiffened. “Is that necessary to say?”

David shrugged. “I believe so.”

Tisha sat up in the chair. “I will protect Kazimir from *anyone.*”

I took one last look at the camera feeds. My body stilled when I found Emily in the nursery. Now, she wore a white robe. It was partly open in the front, allowing Emilio to suckle from her right breast. Her hair was wrapped in a towel, giving her an air of tranquility.

A warm smile spread across my face, and the tension in the room eased ever so slightly.

I love you, mysh.

“You must understand, Tisha.” David stared down at him. “New Orleans will be risky business. You must listen to Valentina.”

Tisha snorted. “Will *Valentina* really be in charge?”

David’s expression didn’t soften. “She will be Kazimir’s number one. Do not challenge her and make New Orleans more difficult.”

“Tisha.” I turned my phone off and placed it in my pocket. “Are you hungry?”

Tisha shrugged. “I could eat something, but I would rather discuss this—”

“Wassily will take you to the sitting room. I will have my chef make you a few things.” I rose from the desk. “Give David and me a few minutes to discuss this. Have patience, cousin.”

Tisha stood. “Yes, Kazimir.”

As I watched Tisha leave the room with Wassily, my thoughts inevitably wandered back to the task at hand. New Orleans would present its own set of dangers, especially with my son and Paolo coming along. Ensuring their protection would weigh heavily on my mind.

Then, there were the potential enemies who yearned for the throne. They would always be eager to seize any opportunity to take it from me. If news got out that the Lion and Mouse were going on vacation with their children, it could be seen as the perfect time to strike and eliminate me.

The more loyal and skilled individuals I had surrounding us, the better our chances would be at ending any attempts.

The door shut.

I walked around the desk and got to David’s side. “What do you think?”

“Building a strong and trustworthy team is crucial for your security in New Orleans.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

“I was not sure until this meeting, but I think Tisha is a good choice. Valentina could bully many.”

“Not Tisha.”

“Then, Valentina will have reasonable limitations in New Orleans.”

“She does like to bomb more than me.”

“Tisha would complement what Valentina brings to the table.” David’s voice was measured. “But he must *really* understand the risks that he is taking, and what he is up against.”

My nerves flared. “What do you have planned?”

“I think we should show Tisha footage of moments where Lunita has—”

“Absolutely not. Many of those moments, she did not have clothes on—”

“Yet, she was also covered in blood and carrying cut-up body parts.”

“And?”

“He must see it, Kazimir.”

I glared at him. “After our conversation this morning, one would think that you would step carefully when it comes to all topics on Lunita.”

“Unfortunately, that conversation told me to go even harder with protecting you.”

Sneering, I looked away. “David, why are you trying to get me to kill you?”

“I think you care for Lunita. Too much.”

I tensed.

“I believe your caring for Lunita makes you blind and even...deaf to how dangerous Lunita is.”

I looked at him. “I can *see* and *hear* the horror that Lunita brings, I just choose to...”

David quirked his brows.

“You must understand that she is part of my mouse, David. How could I hate or despise her?”

“Olga should not have died.” David lowered his voice. “I knew that...Lunita might show up. I probably should have personally guarded your door that night, but I was so exhausted and...I thought that Lunita had limits to the pain she would cause.”

My heart ached.

“I will not make that mistake again, Kazimir.”

I ran my fingers through my hair. “Alright, show Tisha the footage. But only the ones where Lunita is covered in blood and carrying body parts. I will not have him seeing her naked.”

David nodded. “Understood.”

“Also,” I added, “I want you to bring in more men to come with us. Skilled ones. Ones that I can trust to protect my family.”

“I will make sure that you are prepared for anything that may come your way in New Orleans.”

“Good. And David?” I looked him squarely in the eyes. “Thank you for...protecting me last night and...”

David pursed his lips together.

“And thank you for...helping my mouse protect me too.”

A small smile hit his face, but he wasn't crazy enough to gloat. “You are welcome, Kazimir.”

I thought of Emily. “Are the men getting the cells ready?”

David checked his watch. “They should be close to done. I will check and make sure.”

“Good. I will get Paolo.” I headed to the door. “Just make sure Blue keeps Emily too busy to wonder about being around Paolo right now.”

“I will, Kazimir.”

“My mouse must not find out about my surprise.”

“All will stay silent.”

Chapter 25

Personal

Emily

I finished dressing and left the bathroom.

Blue rocked Emilio in her arms. “I *really* think you should consider what I am saying, Emily.”

“Breast milk has superior nutritional content.”

Blue loudly sighed.

“I’m serious. It’s full of proteins, carbohydrates, fats, vitamins, and minerals.”

Cooing, Emilio reached his hand out as if trying to touch Blue’s chin.

“I understand, Emily.” Blue grinned and watched him. “And, I want Emilio to have the best food too, but adding a wet nurse to the team after Olga’s...death. I think that would be a dangerous move.”

I swallowed. “You mean after *I* killed her.”

“After *Lunita* murdered her.”

A cold shiver ran down my spine. “The cell will keep Lunita closed in, and everyone safe. I...she will not kill anyone else. The wet nurse will be safe.”

“And what about in New Orleans?”

“Have you found a property with cells yet?”

“I have Misha searching, but even if we do have a cell for you, I am not excited about the addition of a wet nurse, while I am not around.”

“No one else is going to die by Lunita’s hands.”

“I am not talking about Lunita.”

I walked over to Blue and gently grabbed Emilio from her. “Then, what are you talking about, Blue?”

“I would want to do more extensive checks on these women—”

“True. Just because we don’t have the time, doesn’t mean that the security check should be lacking.”

Still, worry creased Blue’s face.

“What’s up, Blue?”

“I am uncomfortable with another woman coming around the Lion and pulling out her breasts.”

I chuckled. “You think the wet nurse may cause problems in my relationship?”

“Many would love to take your place. This introduces a lot of variables to the New Orleans trip.”

“Girl, I would beat that chick’s ass with her own arm.” I raised Emilio to me and kissed him on the cheek. “Even more, I trust Kazimir and I trust our relationship.”

Blue frowned.

“And most of all, I am not going to deny my son the best food on this earth because I’m worried about some chick trying to suck Kaz’s dick.”

Blue pursed her lips together.

“Plus, formula is synthetic. It does it’s best to mimic the composition of breast milk, but will always miss out on the nutrients.”

Someone knocked on the door.

I looked that way. “Yes?”

“It’s Baba.”

I smiled. “Come in.”

The door opened.

Baba stepped through. “There is my little guy.”

Emilio began squirming in my arms. Surely, he had heard Baba’s voice.

I gazed behind her. “Where’s Paolo?”

“Taking a nap. His men are watching him.” Baba came over to me and began gathering Emilio. “Come my little one. Your mother has to talk to the Lion, so I am going to spend some time with you. Where do you want to go? Do you want to see Baba’s candles and books? You like that.”

I blinked. “What did you say about the Lion?”

Baba rocked Emilio in her arms. “Kazimir asked me to send you a message.”

“What’s the message?”

“He wants to talk to you in the cells.”

My stomach twisted. “Why?”

“I do not know, Emily.” Baba kissed Emilio’s forehead. “When I am surrounded by so much cuteness, my mind goes blank.”

I hope he doesn’t want to argue about the cell again. I will not back down on this.

I let out a long breath. “Alright, but I will be back to grab him.”

“Take your time, Emily.”

I gazed at my cutie and then looked up to Baba. “Blue thinks I should not get a wet nurse. What are your thoughts?”

Baba curved her lips into a devilish smile as if knowing a huge secret. “The wet nurse *must* be hired.”

Blue crossed her arms over her chest. “Why?”

“Destiny.” Baba headed away, cradling Emilio in her arms and leaving us to ponder the cryptic message she left us with.

What the fuck does that mean?

Blue shook her head. “Then, I will have all wet nurse applicants here tomorrow morning.”

“Make it the afternoon. Starting tomorrow, I’m back in the gym.” I headed off.

What does Kaz want to talk about?

We left the room and walked down the hallway.

I checked Blue. “How are you doing on finding out the identity of Paolo’s monster? Did the brown-haired chick say more?”

“Her name is Yulia. She doesn’t know his name or what he looks like, but she has met with him five different times before being placed here to work for you.”

“She met with him, but doesn’t know what he looks like?”

“Apparently, he always wears a mask and uses some odd voice equipment.”

“Where would she meet him?”

“She doesn’t know how to get there.”

I frowned. “Excuse me?”

“She said that for many years, she used to do bad things for bad people. One of those things included getting close to particular male targets, forming an intimate relationship, and then killing them right when they were having sex.”

We made it to the stairs and headed down.

“So, she was some sort of hired assassin?”

“Yes. She also said that many of the people she worked for aren’t even alive anymore.”

She probably killed many of them.

“How many of her old employers are still alive?” I asked.

“We have a list of only four people who knew Yulia’s past. By this time, she had retired, dyed her hair, hid under a new name, and became a quiet housewife to a nice dentist.”

“But, her sister was in jail.”

Blue nodded. “And Yulia always visited her sister.”

“Did her sister do assassin jobs too?”

“Yes.”

“So, someone wanted women who were already skilled in efficiently killing people and keeping it quiet.”

“I think so. After one of Yulia’s visits to see her sister in jail, she headed to her car. Before she could get her keys into the door, someone knocked her out from behind and brought her to an empty bar.”

“A bar?”

“Well, with the way she described this place, it makes me think that it was more of a *kabak*.”

“What’s that?”

“A *kabak* is a traditional Russian tavern.”

“Okay.”

“Yulia said that the place had a wooden interior, dim lighting, and cozy atmosphere. An older woman was the server and brought over a glass of vodka and a bowl of borscht.”

“You think she could recognize the waitress again, if she saw her?”

“Giorgio asked that question, and she said yes. Yulia has seen this woman each time she has met with this person.”

We got to the bottom of the stairs.

“Okay.” I took the lead. “Yulia gets kidnapped after seeing her sister in jail. Next, she wakes up in this empty bar with a woman serving food and a person across from her wearing a mask and using a voice device?”

“Correct.”

“But, we think that the person who is behind the mask is probably either one of the four people who knew Yulia was a good assassin?”

“Or that person recommended her to them.”

“This is good.”

“I thought so.” Blue nodded. “David has an odd plan that we will be running by Kazimir and you.”

“What plan?”

“Everyone in yesterday’s meeting knew that we stopped the two female spies. And we assume that all of those in

attendance can be trusted.”

“I hope so.”

“After you all fly out tomorrow night. We want to tell the Brotherhood that you’re leaving because someone attacked Paolo and the Lion didn’t think it was safe for his family to be in Moscow.”

“So, whoever hired them to kill Paolo will think that the chicks came close to attacking Paolo, but didn’t complete the job?”

“Correct. And all will know that Paolo is in critical condition in the hospital.”

“Yeah, but anyone who *truly* knows me, would know that I would not leave Paolo like that.”

“I hope the enemy does not know.”

“Either way, that is one possible trap to get the person. Or the person has spies in the meeting and know that Paolo is truly with us in New Orleans.”

“Which is why the next plan would be...letting Yulia go, and our personally monitoring her every step.”

“Let Yulia go?” I stiffened. “Tell me more.”

“Whether this person believes the story or not, they will know that Yulia is back at her house, and the person would have tons of questions.”

“He would grab her again.”

“And we will be following.” Blue stopped us at the cell’s entrance. “I know this is risky because it is our top suspect at this point to get...Paolo’s *monster*.”

“Facts. Yulia is our best bet to getting to this motherfucker.” I dug my hands into my pockets. “If you three lose Yulia, it will be a problem on my side. And that’s just me. I don’t know what Kaz would do.”

“David, Giorgio, and I plan to watch her from different angles. We will have five people with each of us that we trust,

helping out with a full twenty-four hour watch of her day to day, until she gets grabbed.”

“Will you have Misha on this?”

Blue widened her eyes. “We have a problem with involving Misha’s people.”

“What problem?”

“All four suspects are from wealthy families in Saint Petersburg. My further research discovered that Misha had problems with these same families last year.”

“What the fuck? Do you know more?”

“I don’t, but Giorgio gave the information to Louis.”

“And?”

“Louis snuck a quick look into Misha’s people.”

I tensed.

Hopefully, he never finds out about that.

Misha’s temper wasn’t as bad as Kazimir’s but I heard he didn’t play. There would be no way that Misha would be cool with the French peering into his people.

Blue’s expression went neutral. “Louis found that some of these families have spies in Misha’s monitoring network.”

“So some of Misha’s hackers have been working for the families?”

“Yes. Therefore, David wants to proceed with caution, find out the exact names, and then tell Misha.”

I considered everything. There were tons of pieces laid out on the floor, but the puzzle was a long way from being complete.

Blue continued, “I also want Misha’s people to be on minimal monitoring for your trip in New Orleans, until we have more information.”

“Misha’s eyes keep us safe.”

“We want to switch to Louis’s people.”

“Kaz might not go for it.”

“David said he will put his foot down.”

“I believe that. I just don’t want David’s foot to get chopped off.” I opened the door and went into stairwell leading to the cells.

It was dark and steep.

I held onto the railing tightly. My eyes slowly adjusted to the light. “What about the political angle Kaz was hinting at with the women’s background being clean?”

The sound of Blue’s footsteps echoed off the walls. “Those four families have heavy connections in the government. The political connection could be true.”

My gut twisted.

Kaz and President Smirnov had a tumultuous relationship. In fact, Kaz had planned on assassinating the president and replacing him with a political rebel leader that the Brotherhood liked.

Meanwhile, I thought the very conversation of killing a country’s leader was so out of my paygrade. Always my anxiety surged at the very thought.

Blue spoke, “However, I think whoever is going after Paolo is doing this because it is *personal*.”

“You’re not buying the whole traitor’s son part?”

“No. This isn’t Brotherhood ideals.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“According to almost everyone, the Brotherhood is making more money than they ever have since Kazimir took the lead. Territories have greatly expanded. We have strong alliances. Lots of money all around which has meant less violence and more parties. Honestly, many of our people are getting fat and lazy.” Blue shrugged. “The Brotherhood is happy. No one going to harass the Lion’s fiancée about Pavel’s son, unless—”

“They want to bother *me*.”

Blue frowned. "I think the person hates you and wants you to lose everything you have."

"So, with those four families, try to figure out what connection I would have to them or their friends?"

"That is the plan."

"Good."

We reached the landing at the bottom of the stairs.

Rock music echoed off the corridor walls. Russian lyrics rode the grinding guitar riffs.

What is going on?

I gazed off at the end of the hallway to my cell where the music must have been coming from.

Suddenly, Paolo peeked his head out the cell, shrieked, and disappeared. "*Mysh come!*"

I widened my eyes.

Kaz's voice sounded next. "Good. Go get Emily and bring her in here."

Aww. What did Kaz do?

The rock music shut off.

My heart warmed.

I hurried my pace.

Paolo burst out of the cell and rushed to me on those tiny legs.

Look at my baby.

He had no shirt on. Green splotches of paint covered parts of his chest and arms. His jean pants and sneakers had paint on them too.

Barking, Harlem rushed out of the cell and raced after Paolo. Green paint dripped from his furry ears.

Blue and I laughed.

When Paolo got to me, I scooped him up into my arms and walked on. “What were you doing, baby?”

Paolo wore a huge grin. “Surprise!”

Harlem barked and bounced around my legs.

“A surprise?” I chuckled. “This is exciting.”

Paolo bobbed his head. “Surprise, *mysh*.”

Let's see what my Lion has planned.

Chapter 26

The Surprise

Emily

Carrying Paolo, I took a deep breath and headed down the corridor.

Honestly, I had been dreading returning to the cell this evening. It was such a gloomy and damp environment.

Last night, it took a while for me to finally go to sleep. Olga's face kept showing up in my head.

We got to the door, and instantly I was taken aback by the sight before me.

"What?" I lowered Paolo to the ground. "Holy shit. There's so much to take in..."

Kaz stood in the center with his shirt off. Red paint stained some of his chest and arms. "Take your time, *mysh*."

I couldn't believe my eyes as I stepped forward.

Kaz had transformed the cold, dreary space into a luxurious and comfortable sanctuary. The walls, once bare, gray, and lifeless, were now adorned with elegant white wallpaper.

Two large paintings hung on the right wall, displaying a large green mouse and a big cobra sliding next to it.

I pointed to them. "Oh, Paolo. Did you do these wonderful masterpieces?"

"Mouse." Paolo hurried over and gestured at the image. "Cobra."

"Awesome. Thank you so much for doing this." I chuckled.

During one of Baba's gardening sessions with Paolo, they spotted a tiny green snake in the bed of roses. Since then, Paolo had been obsessed with different types of snakes.

“Cobra, *myssh!*” Paolo bounced around the painting and did a funny little dance.

Harlem jumped around him, wagging his tail.

Kaz frowned. “I gave them both candy. That will never happen again.”

“That’s okay, baby. They will be fine. More important, I love that you spent time with Paolo, and I love the paintings, and I love this cell.” Smiling, I scanned the rest of the space. “I can’t believe you did this, baby.”

The air was perfumed with a gentle mix of lavender and sandalwood. It eased my nerves and reminded me of a fancy spa. That was a stark contrast to the stale odors that used to fill the cell.

I looked down.

A plush, intricately patterned Persian rug covered the once cold and hard concrete floor. I wanted to kick off my shoes and feel the soft fibers beneath my feet.

I exhaled.

The cot had been changed to a bed. White fur blankets and silk linens decorated it.

“Kaz...” My eyes watered. “This means so much.”

He formed his lips into a big smile.

In the back of the cell, blue drapes framed a tiny window. It was six inches long and wide. Yet, the window allowed soft, natural light inside.

I walked over to it and ran my fingers over the soft curtains, reveling in the sumptuous fabric. “When did they put in this window?”

“They started this morning, I wanted a bigger window, but they said this was as much as they could do in the time frame.”

“This is a perfect size, Kaz. I don’t want Lunita to be able to open it and climb out.” I walked over to my lion, pulled him in and hugged him hard. “Thank you so much...I’m so touched, and I feel... so loved.”

He wrapped his big arm around me. “You deserve all the love and happiness in the world, *myssh*.”

Tears welled up in my eyes. “I have it, baby. You, Emilio, Paolo, Max, Harlem, Blue, everyone. It’s all the love that I would ever need.”

Paolo chuckled as Blue picked him up. “Cobra!”

“Yes.” Blue laughed. “Let us get some cookies, Cobra.”

Kaz looked at them. “Paolo does not need any more sweets. Whatever you eat next, it should be something healthy.”

Paolo put his view on Kaz and held out his little hand. “No. No. Had orange.”

“That was an orange lollipop, Paolo, not actual fruit.”

Paolo pouted and faced Blue. “One, Blue. Cookie?”

“I do not think so, buddy.” Blue carried Paolo out of the cell.

Harlem trotted after them.

Kaz took my hand. “Let me show you something.”

“Okay.”

“You missed the other masterpieces.” He guided me over to the other wall.

“Aww.” I grinned when I spotted the art. “Who did these pretty heart paintings?”

“I would say it was a genius artist.”

“I agree.”

We stopped in front of a massive canvas taking up half the wall. Red hearts covered it. Big ones. Little ones. Some painted with a brush. Others with an ink pen, but all hearts.

Happiness surged through my chest.

I looked at Kaz. “This is brilliant.”

“And it is a Lion original.”

“Wow.” I chuckled. “That means that this painting will be worth a cool million in a few years.”

“I think so.” Smirking, he pulled me back into him and landed a kiss on my cheek. “There is a panel by the bed with several buttons.”

“Okay?” I gazed that way.

“To satisfy your entertainment needs, I had a state-of-the-art entertainment system built into the ceiling.”

“What?” I looked up. A large flat-screen TV was embedded into the ceiling right above my bed.

“This is if you are lying down and can’t go to sleep, then you can watch a show or press one of the calming visuals—fish swimming through the water, shooting stars on a moonlit night, and even a lion running through a field.”

“Excellent.”

“There is also a setting for music. Anything that can calm and relax you is on the playlist.”

“Oh, baby.” I took in the opulent surroundings and couldn’t help but feel a sense of awe and wonder.

This once confining and oppressive cell had been transformed into a luxurious retreat, designed to pamper me and provide the ultimate in comfort and relaxation.

My heart overflowed with gratitude. I put my view back on him. “Kaz...”

He quirked his brows.

“I thought you had called me down to argue again about not staying in the cell tonight.”

“I still want to, but I will not.”

“Thank you.”

“David and you feel really strongly about this and think it is a good solution, so...for once I will listen.”

I let out a long breath and couldn’t help but fall in love with him all over again.

While the Lion was breathtakingly handsome—with his chiseled features and smoldering alpha gaze—it was his kindness and thoughtfulness that had truly captured my heart.

“You make me feel so fucking special.” I leaned against his hard body. “I’m so lucky to have you.”

Kaz wrapped his arms around me and hugged me close. “We both are, *mysh*.”

His touch was tender and gentle, and his embrace could make any bad day better.

“Kaz...you have seen me through the darkest times of my life and never gave up on me.”

“And I never will.”

I looked into his eyes and saw the same love that I felt for him reflected back at me.

He wiped away a tear from my eye. “Tonight, I will be next door.”

I swallowed. “Did you make sure you made that cell nice?”

“I am the Lion.”

“That is not an answer, Kaz.”

“Yes, the cell has also been transformed.”

“I will check to make sure it fits my baby’s standards.”

He smirked. “Because you love me.”

“So fucking much.” I rose to my toes and kissed him.

As always, Kaz’s lips were warm and inviting. Groaning, he deepened the kiss with a passion that made my breath catch.

As we pulled away from each other, I knew that our love was a bright flame in the midst of an endless night, casting its glow on every shadow that tried to creep in. No matter how dark our surroundings were, the love we shared would always be there to light our way.

He leaned away and hit me with an intense look. “Solution or not, never leave me like that again, *mysh*. We talked about this before.”

“I was still in the house, so I figured—”

“Do not figure.”

I sighed. “I’m sorry, Kaz. I should have told you that I was going to sleep in the cell that night.”

“Last night, I would not have let you sleep there.”

“I didn’t think you would.”

“And...things may have been horrible because of my forcing you to stay in our bedroom.”

I tilted my head to the side. “Why do you say that?”

“David had footage of you in the cell last night.”

I tensed. “What happened?”

“Lunita appeared.”

My bottom lip quivered.

“Of course, she could not leave the cell, no matter how much she tried to find a way out.”

I let out another long breath. “Oh my God.”

“Lunita was safely secure in this cell last night, and due to that...everyone else was safe.”

“What do you think she was going to do?”

“I do not know, *mysh*.”

“Fuck.” I left Kaz’s hold and ran my fingers through my hair. “Then, we need a safeguard for the flight tomorrow night.”

He frowned. “We do.”

“Blue already checked. The flight is thirteen hours. I’m definitely passing out after a while. I should be in a secure place.”

“I considered that today.” His frown deepened. “Therefore, I decided that we will use my sister’s plane and she will ride on ours.”

“Why your sister’s plane?”

“She has a cell on it with sturdy bars.”

I blinked. “Why?”

“I never ask my sister too many questions. Few know about it.”

“Have you talked to Valentina about this?”

“Valentina is happy to help. She will be here tomorrow afternoon. She also wants to talk to you about the wet nurse.”

I sucked my teeth. “Is she against having a wet nurse too? So far, Blue hates the idea.”

“David is not a fan of the wet nurse either. However, Valentina has had several wet nurses, and would like to provide her expertise on the situation.”

“Oh.” I nodded. “Okay then. That will be helpful.”

“Everything will be in place by the time we fly out of Moscow.”

I should have been calm, but tension gathered around my shoulders. “What else do we need to do?”

“Pack.”

I shook my head. “No. I have our staff packing our things as well as the kids’ stuff.”

“There is the memorial for Olga. It does not have to be anything big. I could simply say goodbye before we leave.”

“We could.” I grabbed his hand and squeezed it. “Or we can take our time and say goodbye this evening.”

Sadness crept into Kaz’s eyes.

It broke my heart.

I swallowed down my sorrow. “Does the Brotherhood have a special way that they celebrate their lost?”

“It is very typical and Russian.”

“Tell me about it.”

“We have a *panikhida*. Friends and family gather to pay their respects, pray, and share memories of the deceased. Food and drinks are there, including *koliva*.”

“What’s *koliva*, baby?”

“It is like a...funeral cake. It’s made from boiled wheat kernels mixed with raisins, nuts, and honey.” Kaz gazed at the small window near the wall. “A candle is usually inserted into the center of the *koliva*, which is lit at the beginning of the memorial, then extinguished at the end.”

“Then, I will talk to the chef about preparing that for this evening.”

Kaz put his view on me. “We do not have to do this.”

“We do.”

“Olga was not family.”

“Yet, you loved her like your mother.”

Kaz directed his view back on the window.

“Am I wrong about that, baby?”

“You are not.”

“And...I feel like...since meeting you...”

He didn’t look at me. Instead, he kept his view on the window. “What?”

“I feel like you have been dealing with death harder now, then when I first met you.”

“I blame you, *mysh*.” Finally, he gazed my way. “Since you, I have opened my heart more and more to others.”

“That’s a good thing.”

“Not when they die.”

“Death is a part of life. You can’t stop loving people because you don’t want to ever mourn anyone.” My eyes watered again, but I would not let myself cry anymore.

“Tonight, we will hold a small memorial in the dining area. I will put everything together.”

Kaz went silent.

“And we will all join together in the room, filling it with good memories of Olga.”

Kaz spoke, “Will Paolo be in there?”

Shock hit me. “I’m not sure.”

“How will we tell him?”

“I don’t know.”

“While we were painting today, Paolo said her name three times and looked at me as if asking why he had not seen her.”

Tears left my eyes, even though I hadn’t wanted them too.

“He is smart, *mysh*. Just as smart as Pavel was.” Kaz pulled me close to him. “He has already lost so much in his young life. I do not want to hurt him anymore.”

My heart warmed.

I rested my head against his chest. “We have to tell him somehow.”

“Must we?”

“Like you said, Paolo is smart. He senses the changes in his environment. I don’t want him to be confused.”

“Then...”

I looked at him. “Yes?”

“If we tell him about Olga, then what about his parents?”

My bottom lip quivered. “What?”

“This trip to New Orleans is about *your* healing, yet I think we will all need to cure our wounds this time.”

My voice grew hoarse. “But...Paolo...I don’t want to...”

Kaz scowled at me.

I widened my eyes.

“I have been trying not to love him.” The scowl deepened.
“But, you and Pavel have pushed him on me, so now here I am.”

I blinked. “Is Pavel still coming to your dreams?”

“He is.”

My heart broke.

“I think I care for Paolo, *mysh*.”

“I think you do too.”

“Then, this memorial is about mourning *all* of the people that we have lost, not just Olga.”

“O-kay.”

“Tonight, we mourn them all with vodka and food—Olga, Pavel, X, Yuri...”

More sadness washed over me. “Alright. I will handle everything.”

“We celebrate the dead tonight. Then, tomorrow night...”

“New Orleans.”

Chapter 27

A Journey Through The Past

Emily

Time was winding down for our New Orleans trip.

A lot needed to be done, and I wouldn't let anything fall through the cracks. I was checking my to-do list twice, trying to finalize it all.

Only God knew how I would be when I returned to Moscow.

Would I be me in some ways?

How much will I be changed when we return?

I tried not to think of it.

Instead, I put all my focus on finishing up.

For a good part of the day, Misha and I spent hours in my office, tirelessly working on getting Kaz's favorite band, *Crucifix* to play this evening.

It would be a perfect surprise for my baby, but I wasn't sure if we could truly get them.

Crucifix was the Rolling Stones of Russia. They formed in St. Petersburg in 2009. The band's edgy image and electrifying music quickly caught the attention of the public, earning them a dedicated fan base and a controversial reputation.

Their music was a fusion of punk rock and heavy metal, and their lyrics were provocative, often challenging societal norms and political issues.

Ivan Volkov, the charismatic lead singer, was a rebel from a young age. Born into a family of Russian diplomats, he defied his parents' wishes by pursuing a career in music rather than following in their footsteps.

Thankfully, Ivan's powerful voice, striking stage presence, and magnetic personality quickly made him the focal point of

the band.

However, his scandalous love life and rumored connections to the Brotherhood often landed him in the headlines for all the wrong reasons.

Granted, those criminal connections were mainly because my Lion was such a hardcore fan and was always requesting Crucifix to perform at his events.

We have to get them to come tonight.

First, Misha and I contacted their lawyers, then manager, and next their agent. All of them placed the official decision on the other, probably terrified to be the person to tell us *no*.

Somehow we landed a phone call with Alexei Petrov, the band's talented guitarist. He had been a former child prodigy, winning numerous awards in classical guitar competitions.

Despite his classical background, Alexei fell in love with rock music and joined Crucifix to unleash his inner rebel. His virtuosic skills and passion for experimentation created the unique sound that became the band's signature.

Unfortunately, Alexei's addiction to gambling led to several brushes with the law, as he accumulated massive debts and became involved with the wrong crowd.

Therefore...Misha preyed on that fact, and got Alexei to agree to try and convince Ivan to jump on a plane and arrive in Moscow tonight.

If Alexei did it, then Misha would handle his gambling debts.

The only problem was that the lead singer, Ivan had been on a nonstop two-week celebration of pussy, parties, and pills.

Alexei assured us that he would do his best to get the whole band to appear.

I crossed my fingers and dedicated the rest of my time to giving instructions to the house staff.

I wanted to honor all the people we had lost, and what better place to hold it than in our extravagant ballroom?

It seemed that the weight of grief and loss was beginning to permeate every room of this massive house. It was time to celebrate them and heal.

The preparations began in full swing, and I was determined to make the event an unforgettable one. I made sure that every detail was impeccable, befitting the memory of those we had gathered to honor.

The staff spent the rest of the day transforming the ballroom into an elegant and glamorous space, adorned with beautifully arranged flowers, candles, and exquisite table settings.

The lighting would be soft and warm. It had to create an intimate atmosphere that allowed for both reflection and celebration.

I tasked Maxwell and Harlem Crew with gathering photographs of the lost, making sure that each person was represented and remembered. They spent hours searching through old albums, talking to family members on the phone, and collecting images that best captured the essence of those who had passed.

Once they had the photographs, they carefully placed each one in a large, ornate gold frame.

Presently, they were hanging the framed photos around the walls of the ballroom.

This would serve as a visual tribute to the lives that had touched ours so deeply.

Meanwhile, the staff worked hard to prepare an array of delicious Russian dishes for the guests to savor. From delicate blini topped with caviar to hearty borscht and flavorful pelmeni.

After taste-testing everything and giving approval to the chef, I rushed to pick my outfit out. I settled on a simple designer black dress and tear drop diamonds.

Then, I went to Emilio, washed my little buddy up, and began to get him ready.

He fussed as I dried him off.

“It’s okay, baby.”

Emilio whimpered some more.

I guess I have to shift into story time.

Emilio began to cry.

“Okay.” I smiled and did a light voice. “Once upon a time, there was a very brave baby prince who had to fight a super big spider that was scaring everyone.”

Emilio went silent and watched me.

“The prince used his special golden rattle and shook it really hard, making a magical storm come.” I wiped the side of his face.

“And then...the big spider, who everyone thought was unbeatable,” I wrapped the small towel around him, “was finally beaten by the brave baby prince.”

Blue entered the nursery, carrying a large box that had been stuffed to the brim with items.

Holy shit. She got it.

Knowing exactly what it was, my heart ached.

This is...really going to happen.

I tried not to think about the moment before Kaz shot Pavel, but still that horrible memory played out in my mind.

Naked, Pavel stood five feet away. Besides a few patches of hair in the front, he had a bald head. His chained hands were raised above him. More chains captured his ankles.

The stench of death filled the space, due to his lover, Rosetta’s head rotting in the space earlier that day.

One of the men had taken it out due to my order. I hadn’t wanted Paolo to see that, when they brought him in to talk to his father for the last time.

Sadness poured over me.

I held Emilio close to my body, needing his warmth and love.

Blue set the box down by the rocking chair.

Still, I shook my head, trying to get that vision out of my mind.

Don't think about it.

Blue slowly took the items out of the box, taking great care with each one.

Pavel came back to my mind.

"Emily, in my condo, there's a space under my bed. Open it up. It has albums, my mother's jewelry, and all of her old books. These things are Paolo's now. I...I think they're important."

Shivering, I carried Emilio over to his changing table and laid him down.

Pavel...I'm trying to honor you and do what's right. I hope you can see that.

I swallowed down my sadness. "How did everything go, Blue?"

"It was easy." Blue took out more items. "They were right where you said they were."

I stiffened.

"Emily," Pavel had whispered, "Those items under my bed are not worth a lot, but I want Paolo to cherish them. He should know where he comes from. Feel pride. Tell him. Tell Paolo how I wasn't that bad the whole time. That I had some good."

All I could do was whisper back, "Okay."

My hands shook as I unzipped the small protective dust bag holding Emilio's suit. It lay across his changing table.

Don't be sad. You're doing what Pavel wants. It's going to be okay.

“Oh good! I am not late.” Baba rushed in, wearing a yellow robe and carrying a lovely wooden chest. A towel was wrapped around her head. “When I am in the shower, I get the clearest visions.”

We all turned to her.

I raised my eyebrows. “What did you see, Baba?”

Baba set the trunk next to the box. “I think it is good that Paolo is learning about his parents’ passing today.”

“You saw that?”

“And other things.”

I quirked my brows. “What things?”

“Let us focus on the fact that in Paolo’s future most new visions have warmed my heart.

“And others?”

“Those are to be dealt with when they come.”

Cold chills ran up my spine. “I need more information than that.”

“I disagree.” Baba gazed at the items that Blue had already taken out. “You were smart to get these memories for my little one. This will make the dark times better for him.”

“What dark times?”

Baba left the chest by the rocking chair and came over to me. “Let me see that little boy. I just want to give him a big kiss.”

I frowned. “Are you going to answer me?”

“Look at the trunk I brought Paolo.” Baba gathered up Emilio and began doting on him. “It will be perfect for Paolo to open from time to time and pull out his memories of his family.”

“Will it?”

“Yes. He will go to that trunk every year on his birthday, when the house is quiet and everyone is asleep in their beds. He will spend many silent minutes staring at pictures trying to

see how much of the details of his face match his mother and father.”

I didn’t like the idea of Paolo sitting in his room alone like that. I wanted to be his strength, his foundation. I yearned to hug and love all of his pain away.

Baba rocked Emilio in his arms. “Every birthday. Even as an adult...Paolo will turn to these memories.”

“That sounds sad.”

“It will be important for him to have something tangible to hold onto, to remember where he came from and the people who loved him.”

My stomach twisted.

“It’s not just for the dark times, Emily but for the happy times too. You will be allowing Paolo to remember his parents, to never forget their faces, to even show his kids one day. Trust me. This will be therapeutic for him.”

I thought back to my parents, and how I could barely remember what they looked like.

Baba smiled down at Emilio. “And this little one here will be able to share in those memories with Paolo too. You’re going to help Paolo heal. Aren’t you?”

I sighed, feeling the weight of the responsibility on my shoulders. “I just hope I’m doing the right thing.”

“You are.” Baba rocked Emilio in her arms. So comfortable, my little guy began to slowly close his eyes. “Please, do not doubt this decision, Emily.”

I went over to the wooden chest that Baba had brought in. “But, he may be too young to understand—”

“Paolo understands more than you know.”

“I think we should wait—”

“Now is the time, Emily.” Baba gave me a sad smile. “Remember. You are honoring Pavel’s wishes and giving Paolo something he can cherish for the rest of his life.”

I glanced at Blue. “And your thoughts?”

She nodded. “I agree.”

I kneeled in front of the chest and ran my fingers along the edges. It was beautifully crafted and made of sturdy oak. A subtle, earthy scent emanated from the wood.

The polished surface easily slipped beneath my fingertips. “This is amazing.”

“My grandfather made it for me when I was a little girl.”

I snapped my view to her. “What? Are you sure you want to give *this* away?”

“To that perfect boy who brightens my days? Yes.”

I put my view back on the chest and took in some of the magnificent carvings. Majestic firebirds soared through the sky, and brave heroes on horseback galloped into war. Each detail had been rendered with exquisite precision.

I lifted the heavy lid.

The hinges creaked softly.

The lid went up, revealing a red velvet lining inside.

Blue gestured to the items she brought in. “Do you want me to start putting everything in there?”

I checked the items by the box and felt overwhelmed by the amount of memories. There was much more than Pavel had told me—photo albums, old letters, old toys, letters, books, a watch, and other jewelry.

Blue sat down on the ground and one by one began putting things into the trunk.

I carefully picked up the largest photo album. Its dark green leather cover was worn and faded with time. As I opened the album, I could see that it was filled with images of a young boy, captured in moments of joy, wonder, and discovery.

I began to flip through it. The pages were creased and yellowed from years of love and use. Tons of photos greeted

my eyes. In the beginning, the photographs were black and white, with a grainy quality. Handwritten notes in Russian with captions and dates filled some of the pages. Interestingly, a lot of the writing seemed more feminine than how I guessed a man like Pavel would write.

As I continued to look through the album, the photos shifted to colorful ones. There, I began to recognize Valentina as a little girl. She couldn't have been more than five years old. Two pigtails flanked her head. In the image, she played in the mud with a young Pavel who had wet dirt smudged on his forehead and dripping from his hands.

Oh my God. Paolo looks just like Pavel.

Now I understood even more why Kaz and Valentina had difficulty gazing at Paolo sometimes.

I turned to the next picture and parted my lips.

A group of children were gathered around a small birthday cake. A few holes decorated many of their clothes. Some even wore ripped, dirty jeans. It was clear that their parents had been struggling to keep them clothed.

Still, the kids' faces were lit up with excitement and anticipation.

The birthday boy surely Pavel, couldn't have been more than seven. The photo caught him blowing out the candles.

Oh my. Look at my baby.

A seven-year-old Kaz stood next to Pavel and was reaching his hands out to the cake as if trying to sneak a taste of the icing.

I studied Kaz's young face. There was so much sweet innocence in those big blue eyes. No cold violence or death. Just an adorable boy hoping to get a quick taste of something sweet.

Gazing at this picture, I could see the resemblance between Kaz and Emilio even more.

Oh my God. This is amazing.

I slowly flipped through other pages and stopped on another image.

Wow.

This photo showed Kaz, Valentina, and Pavel wearing jeans and heavy jackets. This time they were much older.

Teenagers...maybe.

Valentina stood in between them. In the image, they laughed at some inside joke. The sun was shining down on them, casting a warm glow on their faces while a snowy landscape of tattered houses showed behind them.

For some reason, my eyes watered.

Looking through Pavel's album was like taking a journey through time, filled with precious memories. While I may not have experienced those heartwarming moments, I still felt a sense of nostalgia.

Each photo served as a window into a different time and place.

Blue placed the last item into the trunk. "I am done."

"Cool." Sadness hit me as I closed the album and carefully set it on top of everything else in the trunk.

Then, I spotted an old stuffed animal in the corner of the chest.

What is this?

I picked it up.

Is this Paolo's?

I lifted the stuffed animal out of the chest.

Baba's voice held sadness. "A Siberian tiger."

The tiger's fur was a deep shade of orange and black. The stripes had once been vibrant and bold, but had since faded with time. I felt the weight of the tiger's plush body in my hands. Its well-worn fur that was matted and tangled in some places, told me that someone had years of play and love for him. There had been countless hugs.

No. this isn't Paolo's. This was Pavel's.

I ran my fingers along the tiger's soft fur and then placed it next to the album.

Blue closed the lid. "The ball room is done."

I cleared my throat and rose. "All of the pictures are up?"

Blue nodded. "As well as candles and flowers. A place has also been set for the band, just in case."

"Good." I headed over to Baba and Emilio. My little buddy was tired, but he still hung on, fighting to keep his eyes open.

Baba frowned when I got to her. "Are you about to take my baby from me?"

"Unfortunately, I must get him dressed."

"And when will I get him back?"

I grinned. "Soon."

"Aww." She kissed his cheek, whispered something in Russian, and then returned Emilio to me. "I will get dressed and return to get him."

"Thank you for helping me with Emilio." I cradled him in my arms. "Since Olga, I..."

"Yes." Baba gave me a sad smile. "I understand, but you make sure you know this...you *never* have to thank me for spending time with Emilio. He and Paolo are the highlights of my day. I am just sad Olga will not get to be with them as they grow up."

Those words tugged at my heart.

"But..." Baba's eyes watered. "She *is* watching."

"I hope so."

"She is." Baba bobbed her head and headed away. "She is always in the garden, strolling around and humming."

Chapter 28

The Order

Emily

I now had Pavel's memories for Paolo.

Also, the memorial's preparations looked to be going smoothly.

While I wasn't sure about Crucifix yet, I had high hopes.

What else do I have to do before we go?

I let out a long breath. "Alright. I have to get back to getting Emilio ready."

"I can help." Blue pulled out Emilio's suit from its protective dust bag.

"Thanks." I placed him on the changing table. "Max will be happy that Emilio will get to finally wear this."

"He bought the suit?"

"Sure did. Max bought several suits actually, a week after Emilio was born." I carefully grabbed the luxurious dark blue suit, feeling the high-quality fabric between my fingers. "And you know Max has no limit to how he spoils his nephew, so this cost him a good \$2000."

"US dollars?"

"Yep." I studied the suit. It looked like it had been crafted from the finest Italian cashmere. The suit's design was classic yet modern, with a tailored single-breasted jacket adorned with understated matte silver buttons. The matching trousers were precisely pleated.

For the first time in a while that day, a huge smile spread across my face.

Only Max.

Inside the jacket, a smooth silk lining displayed the designer's logo subtly embossed on the fabric. The

craftsmanship was evident in every seam and stitch. The scent of the new fabric was fresh and clean, carrying the faintest hint of Italian lavender.

I lay the suit by Emilio and smiled at him. “You are going to end up being the best dressed guy in the ballroom. Did you know that?”

He gurgled.

Blue watched me put Emilio’s dress white shirt on him.

Cooing the whole time, he slowly kicked those little legs.

“Hey, buddy. Don’t start that.” I held his tiny designer pants in front of him. “I would like you to be still for a few minutes, so I can dress you.”

Blue’s phone rang. She pulled it out and answered, “Yes?”

I could hear a faint voice on the other end, but I couldn’t make out what they were saying.

Blue’s expression changed from attentive to happy. “Are you sure?”

I hope it’s good news.

I buttoned up Emilio’s shirt. The whole time he wiggled and squirmed as if excited by the sensation of this new soft fabric against his skin.

“Perfect.” Blue chuckled. “Harlem Crew will be on the lookout for the car.”

What’s going on?

Blue put the phone up. “That was Misha.”

“Okay.”

“Crucifix landed in Moscow twenty minutes ago.”

“No fucking way.”

Blue bobbed her head and began texting on her phone. “I already had a small crew standing by at the airport to get them just in case. They are on the way.”

“Good.” I began sliding the suit’s pants onto Emilio. Of course, he started kicking those tiny legs in the air again. I didn’t know if he was trying to help me or just having a blast making this difficult.

Blue stood beside us. “Do you need more help?”

“No.”

“Are there any other remaining items for the memorial?”

“Just make sure the band will be hidden until the beginning of the memorial. They should have a nice room full of anything they need. I don’t want Kaz to find out until he walks in.”

“David is already on it. As soon as he heard the name, Crucifix, he sort of went a bit crazy. He knew all of the member’s favorite foods and drinks.”

I chuckled. “He’s a fan too?”

“Big one.”

“And you?”

“I am not into rock.” Blue reached her hand out to Emilio.

He grabbed her index finger and refused to let go.

Finally, Emilio stopped kicking those legs and placed all of his focus on Blue.

She grinned. “That is the cutest suit I have ever seen.”

“Max always knows the perfect thing to get.” I finished with putting on his pants and then slowly sat him up. “Emilio, you look quite dapper this evening.”

Blue picked up the small jacket and handed it to me.

“Thanks.” I grabbed it. “Alright. Tomorrow night I leave. What else is next?”

Blue frowned. “The wet nurse.”

I smirked, knowing she still wasn’t excited about that new hire. “How did that process go this morning?”

“We had sixty-five women show up at Dr. Stovall’s clinic. I had a Lactation Consultant with me.”

I blinked. “Damn. I didn’t think that many would apply.”

Blue rolled her eyes. “Everyone wants to feed the Lion’s son.”

“I can’t believe you’re still not a fan of using the wet nurse.”

“I am against it, yet I pushed forward. Anyway, many of these women in Moscow see it as a great honor. Plus, the salary would change most families’ lives.”

“Sixty-five women showed up. How are we going to get through all of them?”

“Do not worry about that.” Blue grinned. “My process was strenuous today. I have already eliminated several.”

“O-kay.”

“After an hour of physicals and tests early this afternoon, I eliminated ten women due to not being in good physical health.”

“Meaning?”

“Infectious diseases or drugs in their system.”

“Ewww.”

“Another five women had to go because the lactation consultant didn’t think they could produce enough milk to meet Emilio’s schedule.”

“He’s definitely a hungry baby.” I got the jacket on him and landed a gentle kiss to his forehead. “Such a big boy in his cute little suit.”

Blue continued, “Another five women had to leave due to not passing Dr. Nikitin’s evaluation.”

“Dr. Nikitin?”

“She was a psychologist recommended by Dr. Stovall.”

“Okay. I like where you are going with this. There can’t be any crazy women around us.”

I'm crazy enough.

“I am glad you agree, Emily, because I told five women to leave due to being deemed emotionally unstable.”

“Oh, hell no. We do not need any more drama in New Orleans then what will already occur.”

“Exactly. Next, I gave the remaining forty-five women some time to leave for lunch. They returned an hour later.”

“What did they have to do next?”

“They were required to take a test on their knowledge of breastfeeding and infant care. Two came back late. I eliminated them for not being punctual.”

I grinned. “I love how you are not playing with this decision.”

“Not at all.”

I picked up Emilio and held him. “How did the women do on the test?”

“Thirteen failed.”

“Yikes.”

“We are left with thirty women. Who submitted a third sample of their breast milk to the doctors. Whoever passes that will be here tomorrow.”

“Perfect.”

“Valentina called me and expressed that she would like to help with the final decision of wet nurses.”

“Cool. I trust her.”

“She will be arriving earlier than planned due to that.”

“Perfect.” I gazed at Blue. “Now it is time for *you* to get dressed. The memorial will start soon.”

“I have something else to run by you.”

“What?”

“While I have several possible people to be your number two, I think Lemon would be perfect.”

“Oh shit. Lemon.” I nodded. “I know and trust her.”

“I was thinking the same thing. Plus, she still has a lot to prove.”

“She’ll be hungry and on-guard.” I smiled. “But, make sure Max gets the final say on that. He will have to work with her in New Orleans.”

“I will.”

“And...” I sighed. “We should also talk about other things.”

Blue quirked her brows. “Other things?”

“How are Giorgio, David, and you getting along?”

Blue widened her eyes. “We are...focused on the task at hand and will find out who is bothering Paolo so that—”

“I have no doubt about all of that, Blue, but you know what I am asking.”

Blue ran her fingers through her hair. “I don’t know what to do about the other stuff.”

I tensed. “Come on, Blue.”

She blew out a long breath. “Both David and Giorgio are amazing men.”

“And they’re both in love with you.”

“I am not sure it is all love—”

“Whatever they feel it is *strong*.”

She pursed her lips together.

“And...” I braced myself for the tough conversation. “So...I hoped a decision would be made by now, but it hasn’t.”

“I know. I am sorry.”

“Giorgio has been here for a minute.”

“It is too complicated.” Blue looked away. “I have been hiding from the decision, not giving either one of them any... alone time.”

“Now Kaz and I are leaving, that’s going to be a lot of *alone time* with the both of them.”

“Oh no.” Blue shook her head. “Our sole focus will be on finding this—”

“They are going to be trying to fuck, Blue.”

She opened her mouth in shock.

I shrugged. “We have to keep it real. Right?”

“Still, my focus will be on keeping Paolo safe and his having no more threats when he returns.”

“I know it will be *your* focus, but once you have some strong clues and a sure thing happening with getting the person...David will totally make a move.”

She frowned.

“And that’s assuming Giorgio doesn’t jump on it first. Knowing the Butler, he will probably be attempting to romance you as soon as our plane is in the air.”

Blue widened her eyes.

Emilio raised his hand and tried to grab my earrings.

I tilted my head away from him. “Basically, Blue...”

She swallowed.

“I tried to give you time to figure it out, but...”

“Yeah. I have been...”

“Dragging your ass on the decision.”

She blinked.

“Now, unfortunately, I’m *ordering* you to make some decision by the time we return to Moscow.”

Blue put her view on the ground.

“I hate doing this to you because it’s not supposed to be *my* business, but honestly it is a miracle that neither of them have killed the other yet under this roof.”

She nodded.

“So, let’s not drag this out anymore, before someone gets shot in the head and war is possibly started between the Brotherhood and French.”

Blue placed her hands in her pockets. “I understand.”

“Look. I’m no expert.” I softly patted Emilio’s back. “Love is a complex and beautiful thing. It’s not always easy to make these kinds of decisions, but I think it’s important to consider what you *truly* value in a relationship. Maybe, that can help.”

“They *both* would bring value.”

“Then, instead of focusing on their individual qualities, try to think about how you feel when you’re with each of them. Even more important, how do they make *you feel* about yourself? And how do you see your future with each one?”

“That is actually helpful.” She put her view back on me. “With Giorgio, I feel comfortable and at ease. I think that...he *truly* understands me.”

“And David?”

“With David, there’s always this lusty excitement and passion, but sometimes it can be a little overwhelming.”

“It sounds like you need to consider what you want in a man.”

Emilio yawned.

I placed him in a cradling position.

He squirmed in my arms and then those eyes began to slowly droop.

I headed over to the rocking chair just in case he was still hungry. “Either way, Blue, passion and excitement can be thrilling, but a deep connection and understanding could provide a strong footing for a lasting relationship.”

“So...you think Giorgio?”

“It’s not my choice. It’s yours. I can’t do this for you.”

“You are right. I need to think about what I truly want and need from a partner.”

“Who can you build a life with? And...what do you want for your life?”

Blue looked at Emilio. “These past months, I have been wondering about that very question.”

“The good thing is that you can take your time on *that* decision.” I lowered into the rocking chair with Emilio. “But the decision of King David or the Butler...”

Blue swallowed.

“Have that figured out by the time we return.” I gave her a sad smile. “I’m sorry to rush you on it, but these are two merciless killers who have been playing good for now...let’s not push our luck.”

“It will be done.” She lifted her view from Emilio and put it on me. “When you met Kazimir, how did you know that he was the one?”

“Kaz made it easy.”

“How?”

“I didn’t have a choice.”

Blue wrinkled her forehead. “What do you mean?”

“Kaz came into my life when I least expected it. I was at a low point and he just showed up, like he was meant to be there.” I carefully adjusted the top of my dress, revealing just enough for Emilio to latch on.

Soon, he reached his tiny hands up to my breast and instinctively began to suckle.

I looked back at Blue. “From the moment I met Kaz, I felt a connection that I had never experienced before. It was like he understood me on a level that no one else did. There was no other choice to make, but to remain at his side and—”

“*Mysh!*” Kaz roared in the hallway. “*Mysh!*”

Really?

Blue chuckled.

I rolled my eyes. "I am in here!"

I'm going to curse his ass out.

"Mysh?" Kaz stormed in, looking like a million dollars. A black on black designer suit adorned his muscular body. His hair was perfectly styled back, showing off his chiseled face.

And just like that my annoyance dissipated, and my pussy couldn't help but moisten from the sight.

Damn.

The only reason why I hadn't sexually attacked him was due to Blue and Emilio being in the room.

Kaz prowled over, kissed me on the cheek, and then whispered in Russian, "Naughty mouse."

"What did I do?"

A huge smile spread on his face as he rose. "Did you think I would not know?"

"Know what?"

"Crucifix!"

I groaned in annoyance. "Did David tell you?"

"No." Kaz headed over to the window and happily grinned. "Ivan Volkov is vomiting in *my* driveway."

Jesus Christ.

"They were supposed to take the band to the back of the house." Blue sighed and headed off.

Kaz gazed out of the window. "David is taking pictures for me."

"Of this man vomiting?"

Kaz happily nodded.

"You are being a fan girl."

Kaz moved his view from the window and watched me feed Emilio. "Is that one of Maxwell's suits?"

“Yes.”

“It looks good.”

I slipped my gaze along his body. “You look good too.”

“Focus, *mysh*.”

I blinked. “What?”

“We have important things to do, before I fuck you.”

“Hold up. No one said we were going to have sex. I was just showing my approval of your attire.”

Kaz’s joyful expression shifted to neutral. “I saw the ballroom.”

I tensed. “Do you like it?”

“Maxwell put Paolo’s mother on the wall too, right next to Pavel.”

My mood dimmed. “Yeah.”

“After you are done feeding Emilio, we must tell Paolo...”

My heart broke. “I know, baby. I...had Blue get Pavel’s stuff from his place.”

Kaz stepped back. “What stuff?”

I gestured to the wooden trunk. “Do you remember when Pavel told me to get personal items for Paolo?”

Kaz stared at the chest. “I do not.”

“Not at all?”

“The only thing running in my mind was blind rage for him and fear that Valentina might die in the hospital due to the Romas attacking. Some of his words to you got lost in the madness.”

“Well...I remembered.” I felt Emilio’s suckling begin to slow down and looked down at him. He had his eyes shut and one closed fist raised in the air as if signaling his defeat to sleep.

Kaz slowly walked over to the wooden chest. “This holds the items?”

“Yes. I figured we could give it to Paolo when we...tell him. Baba gave me the chest and thought it was a good idea that we were going to do this today.”

Soft snores left Emilio. His head slowly tilted to the side. My nipple popped out of his opened mouth. Tiny drops of milk dotted his bottom lip.

I put my focus on Kaz.

Silent, he bent over and lifted the chest’s lid.

I pulled my top up.

As soon as Kaz spotted the photo album, he quickly shut the lid and inched back like he saw a terrifying ghost.

Silent, he stared at the chest. His hands shook at his sides. “I will be in the hallway.”

“Kaz...”

He walked off without looking back.

Fuck. How is this going to go with Paolo?

Chapter 29

Heartbreaking Reality

Kazimir

In the hallway, I leaned against the wall and contemplated the impossible.

How did one find the right words to tell a child something so life altering?

How did one communicate the unimaginable to a kid?

This was why the Brotherhood didn't deal with the orphans of our victims. We shot our enemies in the head and left the task to others. Let someone else clean up the blood and wipe the tears.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, trying to find the right words in my mind.

Instead, that last memory of Pavel played out in my head—the moment he realized we had successfully grabbed Paolo from Black Axe.

Pavel had spotted his son and cried tears of joy. It was a mixture of sadness and relief. Horror and comfort. "Oh my God."

Paolo let go of Emily's finger, hurried to his father, and hugged his chained legs. "Daddy."

Pavel couldn't hug him back due to his hands being chained.

Emily had turned to David. "Could you please undo his wrists?"

David checked with me.

I nodded. "Go ahead."

David and Wassily undid his chains, but remained right next to him, making sure there would be no escape.

Pavel rubbed his wrists and then picked up his son. “Ah, Paolo!”

Pavel had looked close to death when we first entered, but with his son in his arms, he’d come alive.

His tortured face had even brightened.

Shivering, I opened my eyes.

A heartbreaking gasp left me.

I looked around the hallway, making sure no one was there. All had been told to get dressed for tonight. Therefore, the space remained empty.

I swallowed.

My heart boomed in my ears.

Now that I was a father...that memory of Pavel...hurt more.

Dear God.

The day Emilio was born, my life forever changed, my thoughts, my...goals, everything.

Now I understood why Pavel did what he did.

Would I not have done the same for Emilio, had someone taken him?

Pavel...

Today, I knew what I had to do, but it weighed heavy on me like a boulder on my shoulders.

I could barely remain standing. My knees felt like they would buckle under the burden. But, I stayed up, even though my body quaked with dread.

Unfortunately, there was no way out of this. I couldn’t let this child suffer in confusion. It wasn’t Paolo’s fault that he was born into a world of violence and bloodshed.

And it damn sure wasn’t his fault that somehow...this boy had...seeped into *my* heart.

Damn you, Emily and Pavel. I did not want to love him, and now...

That moment in Italy returned again.

Pavel held Paolo in his arms and switched to Italian. "My love for you, my son...it has no bounds, no limits... You are the most precious gift that I have ever received."

Paolo gripped him hard. His bottom lip quivered. "Daddy, can we go now?"

"No..." Tears streaked Pavel's cheeks. "We cannot, but... Remember that no matter what happens, I will always be with you in spirit, in your heart... You are never going to be alone. I won't let it happen. I'll...I'll turn away from the gates of heaven and run back to earth, just to watch you...grow... You will never be alone."

"No alone, daddy."

"No alone." Pavel kissed Paolo's cheeks. "Don't...forget me...please..."

Crying, Paolo mumbled, "Where is mommy?"

"Mommy is...sleeping..."

"Where?"

Pavel shook. "Remember us..."

By then, I directed my view to Emily.

I doubted my mouse could understand their words, yet she trembled in sadness.

I frowned. "Mysh, take the boy."

She trembled again. "M-maybe, we could let them—"

"Take him." I looked back at Pavel, ready to kill him, ready to finally end the inevitable.

Back in the hallway, this cloud of turmoil hovered over me.

Pavel had been the first kill of mine to hurt me—to truly break my heart, mind, and soul.

What had my mother thought when she watched me do it?
Knowing that she had spent a large part of our childhood
protecting us both from harm.

Guilt rose within me.

In heaven, did she fist her hands and fall to her knees when
she saw me raising the gun and pressing the tip against Pavel's
chin?

Was she mad when I pulled the trigger?

Did she scream in agony when the bullet hit him?

*"After your mother died, you went insane," Pavel had
whispered that day. "You had to go."*

I clenched my fists at the memory.

It was true. After my mother passed, I felt like I had lost
everything. I delved into the darkness and found solace in the
Brotherhood.

Killing became my only purpose.

And then...the Lion met the Mouse.

I closed my eyes, lifted my chin, and leaned my head
against the wall.

And then, Emilio came.

I not only wanted to be a better man for Emily, but I
yearned to be a good father to my son.

It wasn't just about me anymore. I had to make amends for
my past actions, and that meant telling Paolo the truth about
his father and mother as much as he could handle for now.

But, how much?

Movement sounded.

I opened my eyes.

Emily walked into the hallway. "I called Emilio's guards.
They're on the way."

I turned to her.

She studied me. “Kaz...I can do this by myself. It will be difficult and—”

“You cannot do this by yourself.”

“Why not?”

“Because I was the one who killed Pavel.”

“You killed him for Valentina and me, so...”

“*Mysk.*” I shook my head. “I will not let you do this alone.”

Her bottom lip quivered. “Then, we do it together.”

I swallowed down sadness.

“I...umm...” Emily ran her fingers through her hair. “I did some research on how to do this.”

“What did you find?”

“We should use simple and clear language to explain that his parents have passed away.”

“In what way?”

“Basically...we shouldn’t say stuff like *gone to sleep* or *gone away*. It could confuse him.”

“I understand.”

“We also should emphasize that his parents loved him very much and that they will always be a part of his life, even though they are no longer physically present.”

“Anything else?”

“We are supposed to reassure him that he will not be alone.” Stepping closer to me, she took my hand and squeezed it. “Do you think Pavel or Rosetta was religious?”

“Pavel prayed and went to church from time to time.”

“That could help. Hopefully, Pavel explained heaven to him.” She sighed. “Also...if you are going to do this with me...perhaps you can tell him in Italian, since that is his first language.”

I thought back to Paolo talking to him in Italian and shivered. “I agree.”

Emily gazed at the nursery’s doorway. “Kaz?”

“Yes, *mysh*.”

“Did you recognize the photo album in the chest?”

I slowly nodded. “After my mother killed Pavel’s father for severely hurting him...she spent her last bit of rubles to get a nice album.”

“Those were her written notes inside the pages?”

“You looked inside?”

“I did.”

“Yes.” I shivered. “Those were her notes.”

“Baba said...Paolo will look at that album and the other things in the chest for his birthday every year.”

I gritted my teeth.

Mama, does that make you happy that he will cherish your album just as much as Pavel did?

Chapter 30

A Circle of Love

Kazimir

Footsteps sounded to the left.

I looked that way.

Five of Emilio's guards marched toward us, all dressed in their nicest suits.

I took a deep breath and pushed myself off the wall.

Once they got in position in front of the nursery, I quietly headed into the nursery.

Emily whispered, "Kaz?"

I went to the wooden chest, picked it up, and carried it away.

Once I entered the hallway, Emily got to my side, and we walked down the hallway.

The sound of our footsteps echoed.

My mind raced with thoughts of how I would tell Paolo, and even...how I would comfort him.

A few times, Emily glanced my way. I knew she worried for me, just as I stressed over her.

This will be one of the hardest things I will ever do.

When we reached his room, his guards stepped aside.

Emily tightened her hold on me. "Baby, I can do it. Turn around."

"No." I led her in and was immediately struck by the vibrant shades of green that seemed to adorn every surface of his space.

I'd never spent time in his room, trying my best to somehow...avoid and ignore Paolo, yet still live with him.

Now I could not avoid him or this space in our house anymore.

Paolo had his back to us as he played in the middle of the room. He wore a stylish deep, forest green suit, perfectly tailored to fit his tiny frame. Polished brown leather shoes covered his feet. Toys surrounded him—a fuzzy green frog, miniature cars of various colors, and wooden blocks stacked like buildings.

The lights were off due to all the windows being open and letting the sunlight in.

Yet, the sun was lowering as we stood in there.

And the darkness would come.

“Vroooooommm.” Paolo pushed a green car along the blocks and smashed it into the frog. “Bye bye, monster.”

With his other hand, he knocked the blocks down and giggled to himself. “No more.”

Watching him, Emily hugged herself.

I took in the rest of his room, delaying the inevitable.

I remembered when I bought the house, my mouse had spent weeks worrying about what she would do with his bedroom. Paolo had spouted out tons of things that he loved and somehow, she had put them all together.

Good job, mysh.

Fascinating murals adorned every wall, depicting animals in a lush jungle setting. Monkeys dangled on branches. Birds flew through the air. On the wall near me, a lion prowled and a mouse rode his back.

A sad smile spread on my face.

I should have come in here before.

I looked to the right.

Small bookshelves lined the walls, stuffed with books and toys. A tiny teepee rested near it. One picture book was open

inside of it, telling me that Paolo must have enjoyed gazing at the pictures inside of the teepee.

Pavel, do you like his room for your son?

Slowly, I walked over to the teepee and set the wooden chest next to it.

That got Paolo's attention.

"*Mysh!*" He rose from the floor, rushed over to Emily, and hugged her legs.

"Hey, baby." She lowered and embraced him.

He tugged at her shirt. "Emeeo, play with me?"

"No, baby. Emilio is sleeping right now, but soon."

"Oh." He turned my way. Shock covered his face. Then, he spotted the wooden chest and widened his eyes in curiosity.

Emily cleared her throat. "We have to talk, baby."

Paolo returned his view to her. "Talk?"

"Yes." She took Pavel's hand and guided him over to his bed.

His big brown eyes looked up at her in confusion.

What could have been going through his head?

After all this time...did he wonder about his mother and father?

Did he pray with those little hands that they would come to pick him up soon?

Or did he already know and was content here with us?

Emily sat down on the bed.

Smiling, he got next to my mouse and snuggled close to her.

He loves her.

"Paolo." Emily's voice was soft and gentle. "We need to tell you something very important."

His gaze shifted to confusion.

Slowly, I walked over, sat down on the edge of his bed, and spoke in Italian, *“We need to tell you something very important.”*

This time he blinked and turned my way.

I gestured for him to sit next to me.

After a moment of hesitation, he climbed onto the bed, but remained near Emily and placed his small hands in his lap. Pavel and Rosetta had taught him well in that short time they were with him. He was a perfect little gentleman.

I stiffened. *“Do you know about heaven?”*

Paolo happily bobbed his head. *“Angels live in heaven. When they cry, it rains.”*

“That is correct,” I said softly. *“But, do you know how angels are made?”*

He bobbed his head again. *“Like nonna. All gone. Bye bye. No more.”*

His grandmother passed. This must have been Rosetta’s mother.

Emily watched us.

I pushed on. *“Your father and mother...they loved you very much.”*

Paolo’s face brightened. *“Daddy? Mommy? Coming today?”*

My mouse may not have understood his Italian, but she got the gist of his emotions.

Her eyes watered.

“No, Paolo.” My bottom lip quivered. *“Your Mommy and Daddy... are in heaven now. They are angels, watching over you and sending you all their love every day, every moment.”*

Paolo’s eyes widened with shock and fear.

And he just sat there in this heartbreaking, oppressive silence. The sort of silence that tore even the most dangerous,

strongest man apart. The sort of silence that made anyone with a heart freeze in cold sorrow.

It was unbearable.

Paralyzing.

I didn't blink.

I didn't breathe.

I didn't move.

And the room suddenly felt like a tomb, suffocating me.

Then, suddenly Paolo screamed, "No!"

I almost jumped.

Sadness didn't cover his face. It was all rage. His little voice echoed in the room. "*Mommy and Daddy are not angels!*"

"Baby, I know this is very sad and it's okay to cry and feel upset." Emily reached her hand out to him.

He shoved it away. "No."

"Baby, we—"

"No!" Paolo scooted off the bed and ran into the teepee.

Tears spilled from Emily's eyes. She rushed with wiping them away.

I left the bed, went to the teepee, and sat on the floor in front of it.

From the inside of the teepee, he gazed back at me with pure hate blazing in his eyes. "*No angels, lion! No!*"

There weren't many times when I felt like crying, but this was one of them.

Still, I wouldn't allow myself to shed a tear. Instead, I took a deep breath and kept my own emotions in check. "*Your daddy wanted us to take care of you, if he became an angel.*"

Paolo balled his hands into fists.

“I loved your daddy.” I touched my chest. *“I...miss him so much it hurt my heart.”*

Paolo screamed, and then tears spilled from his eyes.

“Scream again if you want to. It is okay.” I nodded. *“Do whatever you want.”*

And Paolo did. He screamed over and over so loud those blood curdling sounds shook the walls. I felt every one of them deep in my core. And then he screamed some more, filling the space with pain and raw agony. Those screams ripped from his throat as he fell forward and cried.

“Oh, baby.” Emily lifted the teepee off of him and tried to go to him.

Sobbing, he got up from the floor fast.

To my shock, he ran my way and began hitting my chest with those tiny fists. *“Bad! Bad!”*

“Paolo, no.” Emily hurried over.

“No, *mysh*.” I held my hand up. “Let him.”

“Kaz—”

“Let him.”

“Bad! Bad!” Tears glistened on Paolo’s face as he hit my chest with those tiny fists over and over. They were merely soft taps to my body. If I could take more pain from him, I would have.

“Bad!” And then, he collapsed against my chest and sobbed.

“It is okay.” I wrapped my arms around his small body, and hugged him. *“You are right. I am bad.”*

For the first time in my life, I let myself...feel for this small child who had never done anything to me...yet, I had did *everything* to him.

I had taken away his world, his innocence. I had now made life scary and unsafe.

And he would never be the same because of me.

The weight of my actions pressed down against my core, crushing the air from my lungs.

I stared down at the child before me as he shivered in my arms and continued to sob. *“I’m sorry...so sorry.”*

An ache pushed through my chest that I had never known before. *“Paolo, we will take care of you. We will always be here to make sure you’re safe and happy. And your mommy and daddy will always be with you too, even though they are not here in person. They are watching right now as angels.”*

Emily came behind him and placed her hand on his back, slowly rubbing it.

“You are not alone.” I held him tighter. *“You will never be alone because...you are my son now. Your daddy was my family...that means you are my family too.”*

Paolo’s sobs slowly shifted to sniffles. He looked up at me with those big eyes, full of pain.

I could see the battle raging within him, the struggle to accept this new reality.

He shivered and whispered, *“I don’t want them to be angels.”*

Emily had no idea what he was saying. Still, she gently leaned against him and combed her fingers through his hair. *“I love you, baby. So much. And I’m so sorry.”*

Footsteps sounded behind me.

I glanced over my shoulder.

Several people had entered the room—Maxwell, David, Baba, Blue. And there was even the staff—people who had fallen in love with Pavel’s son in this short time—the chef who loved making him special treats, Paolo’s personal maid who snuck little candies to him before bedtime, and even two of his female guards from Harlem Crew who had sworn their allegiance to Emily to protect him.

Tears streamed down all of their faces as they tried to take on his grief that surely was too heavy for him to bear.

I had no idea when they had entered.

Was it his screams of sorrow?

Did Baba gather everyone knowing that he would need them?

It didn't matter.

Paolo did need them.

In fact, we all needed each other.

I slowly stood up, still holding onto Paolo, and walked towards the group of people.

Emily followed.

Maxwell sniffled and wiped tears from his eyes. I didn't think I had ever seen him cry before.

"Eh." Maxwell held his arms out. "I can get little man."

"No." I shook my head and kept him closer to me. "I have him."

Baba watched me. I could see the love in her eyes. She gave me the saddest smile, and then grabbed David's hand as he stood next to her.

Did this remind her of helping her grandson deal with the death of his parents?

How did she help David heal?

I made a note to ask her soon.

Meanwhile, I didn't know at what point everyone formed a circle around us, but they did. They all surrounded us in love.

It took some time, but Paolo sniffled, looked at each of them, and then turned to Emily and me.

My mouse's voice came out shaky. "We are all here for *you*."

Paolo's tiny hand reached out to touch the tears on her cheek.

She shivered. "I promise, baby. We are here for you, and we love you."

“Mysh.” Trembling, Paolo placed his arm back around me and buried his face into my neck.

Pavel’s last words sounded in my mind.

It was the moment right before I shot him.

“Emily.” Pavel had turned my mouse’s way. “Don’t cry.”

A sad smile appeared on his face. “Don’t forget the promise or I will haunt you.”

She whispered, “I won’t.”

“Kazimir will love Paolo one day,” Pavel said. “Don’t let him think otherwise.”

And then a sudden burst of light illuminated the room, casting shadows on every surface. The lights that had been turned off, were now all on. The lamps near Paolo’s bed emitted a soft glow, while the overhead lighting on the ceiling shone with a bright intensity.

“What the hell?” Maxwell frowned as he checked the switch by the door and saw no one was there.

Others didn’t notice, but Baba...she continued to watch me and then curved those lips into a joyful smile.

And...for whatever reason...I lost it right there.

I had held it in for so long.

The guilt.

The sadness.

The emptiness.

It all came out at once as I broke down in tears.

Chapter 31

Clocks and Mirrors

Kazimir

Paolo cried for so long that I could feel his warm tears soaking through my black shirt. The sound of his suffering pierced my heart.

I did not know what to do, so I held him closer and tried to provide as much comfort as I could.

Once Paolo's sobs subsided, everyone left to finish preparing themselves for the memorial—including my mouse.

The only person who stayed was David. My number one watched Paolo with sadness.

Several minutes passed.

Still, Paolo would not let me go. His small arms remained locked tightly around my neck, as if his life depended on it.

I patted his back and carried him out of his bedroom.

My guards in the hall rose and followed us.

I lowered my hand. "Let us go to the Memorial."

Sniffing, Paolo rested his head on my shoulder.

David walked with us. "Many have already arrived and are in the ballroom now."

"How were the final preparations for the ballroom?"

"The Mouse outdid herself as usual."

I quirked my brows. "Better than what she did with the impromptu party yesterday?"

"Even better." David bobbed his head. "I tried to add some things to give it more of a traditional Russian flair, but she had already thought of everything. So, I simply made sure the staff followed all of her instructions."

Good job, mysh.

David's face brightened. "Emily made sure that as the guests enter the ballroom that they are even greeted with a glass of vodka, served in elegant crystal glasses."

"What vodka?"

"Beluga."

A smile spread across my face. "That *is* a nice touch."

"I thought so too."

A head and shoulders above most other vodkas on the market, Beluga was named after the most expensive caviar in the world. The brand produced its vodka in western Siberia. I had been born and raised in the southeast of Siberia, so I had a special love for the brand. To make it, they used artesian water. Once distilled, Beluga added honey, milk thistle, and oats to give flavoring before bottling.

We headed toward the staircase.

David continued, "Emily has clearly done some research and asked around. Somehow she even knew about the mirrors and clocks."

"Aww." My heart ached.

My mother's face flashed in my head.

After a death occurred in our family, Mom would cover the mirrors in our house and even stop the clocks. According to our folklore, mirrors served as a gateway to the land of the dead. My mother would say that the first person to see their reflection in a mirror after someone had died would be the next to pass.

Keeping my pace, David let out a long breath. "Baba cried when she saw the staff covering the mirrors."

Nice touch, mysh.

I swallowed.

How did my mouse know? Did she understand how much this not only honored me, but my bloodline?

During my childhood, our family always stopped the clocks to assist our loved one's soul to move on quicker into the afterlife. This tradition had stemmed from ancient folktales passed through generations—ones that my mother and father had taken very seriously and were adamant about upholding.

My mother would have loved you, mysh.

When I became the leader of the Brotherhood, my mother argued that it was crucial that I found a wife who could not only support me but also hold her own in our world.

Thinking I would be a bachelor all of my life, I did my best to ignore her.

Yet, my mother never let up.

She went on and on about the kind of woman I should marry—someone smart, cunning, and tough enough to protect herself if necessary.

Next, my mother kept pushing and pushing about how this wife needed to be able to host gatherings for the Brotherhood and make sure that everything ran smoothly. This wife had to be able to hold her own in a room full of powerful men without embarrassing me or herself.

You were right, mother. As usual.

Thinking of my mouse, I looked at David. “Have you approved all security for New Orleans?”

“I did, but...”

“What?”

“I am not fully satisfied with Emily's main people.”

“Why not?”

“Blue reported that they picked Lemon for her number two.”

“Did Maxwell approve?”

“He did, but Maxwell believes he can watch Emily on his own.”

“Well, he has done so for many years.” I sighed. “But you do not approve of Lemon?”

“Lemon is loyal, but is too inexperienced for such a high position. She has not watched over Emily outside of Russia. She also has not met Lunita.”

I gritted my teeth. “Who do you want?”

David frowned. “You will not like my answer.”

“Who?”

“Boris.”

I groaned in annoyance. “Boris is a dead man walking. Why would I put him next to my mouse?”

“Boris is one of the *few* of us that can tell the difference between Emily and Lunita—”

“And I am pretty sure, Lunita would fuck him.”

“But, Boris would not sleep with her.”

“Would you bet your life on that, *King* David?”

He let out a long breath. “I would.”

“Putting your life on Boris is a very risky move. He is an idiot.”

David shrugged. “But I will not be in the States with you. That means I want the best people there. Max has never truly worked with Lemon. That means that she will be battling a steep learning curve. New Orleans is not the time for that.”

I remained silent, not wanting to admit that he could be correct.

“And...”

The line of my jaw twitched.

“If Boris is standing guard at night, Emily may not need to be in a cell. We will have someone who can alert everyone if Lunita is out and about.”

That was another good point. However, I knew Lunita too. Last time I saw her look at Boris, she had turned shy and

batted those long lashes, transforming from serial killer to a crushing school girl.

“Kazimir, I just ask that you think about this. Lemon can still go. With Boris there, Max could properly train Lemon.”

I frowned. “I will consider it, but I doubt my thoughts on Boris will change. By this time of the year, I had expected Boris to be lying in a casket and buried.”

“I understand, but thank you for thinking about it.” David glanced at Paolo. “On another note...you are doing a good job with him.”

“Am I?”

“Yes.”

I hoped David was right on that too. I yearned to one day gain Paolo’s forgiveness by being an anchor for the storm that he was going through.

David put his view forward. “As a kid who lost his parents...at a young age...all I can say is that *hugs* are powerful and important.”

I eyed him. “Baba hugged you a lot?”

“All the time. I...barely ever left her arms. I slept in her bed. I followed around. I held her hand if she could not hug me. I was always next to her as if...”

I raised my eyebrows.

“As if I was scared that she would leave too, and I would be all alone.”

Paolo stirred in my arms.

My heart ached for David, for Paolo, and for even me—now all motherless sons in this world.

David directed his view to Paolo. “While...you will probably never be able to take away his pain, you can be a steady presence in his life, Kazimir. Just like Baba was for me. In some ways...that can be enough.”

I nodded.

Silent, we headed down the stairs.

I gazed down at this little boy who had seeped into my heart.

Paolo had his eyes closed, but I knew he was not asleep. His breathing remained steady. His heartbeats thumped against my chest.

Since Paolo had started being with us, this had been the longest we had ever spent together without my mouse being present.

Will he be okay?

At the loss of *my* mother, my heart, my soul had shattered into pieces. I had buried her in a gold-plated casket and then killed many for months—specifically many among the Solntsevskaya Bratva.

The Brotherhood was divided into various brigades. While they operated independently, often, most collaborated with each other.

One of the most notorious groups within the Brotherhood was the Solntsevskaya. They were named after the Solntsevo district of Moscow—a place where my mother had been born.

They formed in the 1980s by a group of former Soviet military officers and KGB agents. My mother's father, Maxim had been part of the originals who had used his KGB training and connections to build a vast criminal empire.

Other notable groups within the Brotherhood included the Tambov Gang, the Orekhovskaya, and Izmaylovskaya Gang. Each had its own history, structure, and areas of operation.

The Izmaylovskaya gang had killed my grandfather and others in a war over territory.

My mother was a teen when it happened.

She did her best to follow in her father's footsteps. Although the Solntsevskaya were not welcoming to women, they let my mother enter solely because of Maxim and his proven loyalty to them.

She'd ran with that brigade for many years—stealing and killing when necessary.

Later, the Solntsevskaia approved her marriage to my father and no longer expected her to serve them.

However, my father ran the Orekhovskaya brigade of the Brotherhood. Perhaps, they did not want to make an enemy of him.

Then many years later, my father died. As a single mother, she had no real protection or support in Siberia. It forced her to take Valentina and me to Moscow. There, she returned to the Solntsevskaia to earn money to take care of us.

Due to my mother's beauty, her first duty was to get close to the King. He ran the Izmaylovskaya gang, and the Solntsevskaia had still not forgiven that crew for the wars from decades ago.

They wanted my mother to kill the King.

Instead, she fell in love and married him. And he raised Valentina and me like his own blood. At times, it seemed like he loved us more than his son, Sasha.

The Solntsevskaia never forgave her, but they could not touch her either. She became strong within the Izmaylovskaya, gaining the utmost respect from my Uncle Igor, Rolan, Timur, and many others.

When my mother passed decades later, many members of the Solntsevskaia came to her grave and urinated on it.

And I bombed their shitty little district and other territories. The group went from several thousand soldiers to now...only a few hundred.

All of Russia called those months the Season of Blood.

Hold on.

Tension gathered in my shoulders.

I stopped in the center of the staircase. "I have just thought of something."

"Yes?"

“The person who hired the female assassins may be connected to Solntsevskaya.”

David widened his eyes. “You really think *they* could be involved?”

“It seems...petty for them to target a young kid, yet they are some unforgiving bastards. All know how important the Mouse is to me. To hurt her would be to break me.”

David frowned. “I will look into any recent activity or conflicts involving them.”

“Put Giorgio on it.”

David raised his eyebrows. “The Butler?”

“They will not spot him. They will be looking out for you and our people.”

David considered it. “I am not a fan of the idea, but it would be a good plan.”

“If they spot him, then... perhaps *they* will kill him.” I shrugged. “That leaves my hands clean and my mouse not mad with me. Yet, a Perfumed Pansy would be in the ground. This is good for us all.”

David grinned. “It appears the Solntsevskaya are not the only unforgiving bastards in Moscow.”

I began walking down the stairs. “I do have their blood running through my veins. Perhaps, that is where I get my pettiness from.”

David followed. “However...”

I eyed him. “Yes?”

“If they kill Giorgio, Blue may go after them with the French.”

I hit the bottom of the stairs and turned to David. “Which means my mouse will want to help.”

“I will keep Giorgio and his people decently guarded while they monitor the Solntsevskaya.”

I frowned. “But, do you not want the Butler dead?”

“It is not that I care about his death.” David sighed again. “It is that I do not want Blue to be sad and seek revenge.”

I groaned in annoyance.

David directed his view to me. “You do not approve of my thinking?”

“I do not approve of the woman.”

David put his view in front of us.

“I like Blue as my mouse’s number one. She’s strong and more than capable of protecting Emily, Paolo, and my son. But as your lover...”

“You still do not approve?”

The line of my jaw twitched. “By now, Blue should have ordered Giorgio to go back to France. And she should be in *your* arms. But, you must remember that I am... Team David.”

He smirked.

“And I will never switch teams.”

“How I wish love worked the same way. That everything was just as simple. Then, I could get Blue off my mind.”

I gritted my teeth. “Have you at least sought Baba’s counsel on this situation with Blue?”

“Baba pretends to not know the outcome, but she does.”

“How do you know?”

“When I was a kid, she told me that I would have twins and that she would knit my kids special blankets. Two blue ones.”

“And?”

“She just finished the second blanket this month.”

I blinked. “Twins with Blue?”

David shrugged.

I didn’t know what to think about that. Part of me enjoyed the idea of David being a first-time father with me. The other part hoped David would find new love with another woman.

I tensed as we got closer to the ballroom.

He spoke, “But, perhaps Baba is just...planning for the future or something.”

“Why do you say that?”

“You know that babies terrify me. I can barely stand a foot near Emilio. How would I be able to take care of *two* babies?”

“I will help you figure it out.”

David smiled at me.

I did not return it. “However...”

“Yes, Kazimir?”

“There is one thing that Emily has taught me.”

“What is that?”

“Choosing the right woman is one of the most important decisions you will ever make in your life.”

“I believe you.”

“If you end up with Blue...just make sure that she is loyal to *only* you.”

Or I will kill her.

As if hearing me, David blinked.

My mouse had urged me to mind my business, but I could not, when it dealt with David’s heart and reputation.

While I didn’t want to break David and Emily with Blue’s death, I would not allow her embarrass David by fucking Giorgio.

I wondered if she knew how serious I was.

So far, she had been smart and not done anything with the Butler under my roof.

No one knew this, not even David or my mouse, but I had a secret team from Misha’s people monitoring Blue. They had reported that she kept all private conversations with Giorgio very short and typically rushed off.

Apparently once, Giorgio had tried to steal a kiss that she dodged.

Granted, she had done the same with David.

But it didn't matter.

In my mind, Blue belonged to David for as long as he wanted her. That meant that if she disrespected him, a bullet would go through her head.

David cleared his throat and changed the subject. "Misha informed me that he would be here for the memorial this evening."

"Really?"

"He thought Maxwell would need some support in mourning his loss."

I rolled my eyes. "While I am happy my cousin *finally* has a friend, his attention for Maxwell can be...annoying."

David chuckled. "Well, you will be happy to hear that Misha is also bringing your niece with him."

My mood suddenly brightened. "That should have been your first sentence."

David laughed.

Chapter 32

The Elegy

Kazimir

Music drifted out to us as we approached the ballroom.

It had a haunting piano melody accompanied by a faint drumbeat. The lead guitarist joined in, playing a mournful electrical solo that added to the feeling of melancholy. Then, the bass guitar flowed along with a steady rhythm that anchored the melody.

I recognized the song immediately and curved my lips into a huge smile.

Ivan's voice rushed in, filled with emotion. "*The bells toll for thee, my love. This is the day.*"

David looked at me and smiled. "Elegy."

I nodded. "Elegy."

Crucifix did not have many slow songs, but this was one of them. The first time I heard it, I had shut my bedroom door, locked it, and cried as I played it on repeat over and over. That was how much it had moved me.

From the ballroom, Ivan continued to sing, "*The world grows colder, because you have slipped away.*"

Only Ivan could convey this sense of sadness and loss. His voice was deep and rich, with a mournful quality that added to the overall mood of the song. The haunting melody mingled with Ivan's voice to create a powerful sense of grief.

A lump formed in my throat.

We walked closer to the ballroom.

The song, *Elegy* told the story of Ivan's first love who had died from a drug overdose. Her name was Anastasia and they had grown up together. Ivan had written the song the morning after he found her cold body on his bathroom floor.

I shook my head. “The first time I heard this...I knew without a doubt that love was dangerous.”

David bobbed his head. “Love is dangerous, but from looking at your experience with the Mouse...”

I quirked my brows.

“It is also the most beautiful thing to possess in this world.”

Ivan’s voice became more desperate as he sang, “*Death may part us, my love, but our souls remain entwined. And memories of you will forever echo in my mind.*”

We entered the ballroom.

Two guards held open the ballroom’s ornate gold doors.

Soon as I took one step inside, the sweet aroma of borscht and blinis wafted towards me.

Then, my eyes widened in awe as I took in the sight.

My mouse had made sure the staff completely transformed the space. It was beyond gracefully decorated. Twinkling lights hung from the crystal chandeliers and golden candlesticks illuminated the space.

But what truly caught my attention the most were the gold-framed pictures adorning the walls. They featured all the people who had passed away. Under each photo lit candles were surrounded by bouquets of fresh flowers.

I’d seen them hanging some of the images earlier, but the final effect had almost floored me.

Mysh.

My heart warmed from all the subtle details.

Many people crowded the space, dressed in black suits and dresses. Tons mingled. Others paid their respects to those that had passed, lighting candles by their framed pictures and bowing their heads in prayer.

I spotted Maxwell holding Emilio and wearing a suit that perfectly matched my son’s. One would have thought that was

his son.

I almost frowned, until I noticed Maxwell lighting a candle near Xavier's gold framed photo. As he placed the lit candle by Xavier's designated bouquet, he whispered to my son, and I wondered if he was telling Emilio stories about the man that had saved my mouse and him long ago.

I calmed my anger as a pang of sadness hit me.

I hope Maxwell can finally mourn Xavier the way he deserves.

Baba stood with several maids near Olga's photo. They smiled and chatted with each other. Every few seconds, Baba gestured to the image.

I took a deep breath and felt a sense of peace, knowing Olga would be happy.

In the center of the room stood several massive circular tables overflowing with traditional Russian dishes—caviar, smoked salmon, pickled vegetables, and other delights.

Guests feasted with gold forks and drank from crystal glasses.

I turned to the front of the ballroom.

There, Ivan was on stage, shirt off, hair wet with sweat, and eyes distant as if he were lost in the song and unable to climb out from the lyrics.

He is a master.

The rest of the band played behind him.

Solemn expressions covered their faces.

The chandeliers' lighting dimmed, casting long shadows across the ballroom. Near the stage, guests swayed to the music. Some even had their eyes closed.

This is...breathtaking.

I scanned the space and saw tears in many eyes. Even the toughest of my men rushed to wipe their wet cheeks. It was a testament to Ivan's talent as a musician and a songwriter.

Soon, the song reached its climax.

“In death, you found peace, but my heart remains in pieces.” On the small makeshift stage, Ivan fell to his knees. *“And the void you left behind, forever increases.”*

The crowd was silent, mesmerized by the haunting melody and the raw emotion in Ivan’s voice. Like me, they appeared lost in the moment, lost in the beauty of the song.

Thank you, mysh.

Paolo lifted his head and stared at the band.

I whispered in his ear, “Do you like it?”

Paolo gave me a slow nod.

“Good.” My voice went hoarse. “Your father loved this song too.”

Paolo widened his eyes and put his gaze back on the stage, completely captivated by the performance.

Ivan remained on the ground, and he no longer looked at the audience. *“The pain of losing you, is an eternal scar. But the memories we made, are like shooting stars.”*

One of the servers—dressed in all black—approached with crystal glasses full of vodka. She gave me a sad smile and handed a glass to me and then David.

I took a sip and swallowed down the smooth, full-bodied liquid.

“The world may keep moving, but my heart stands still.” Ivan’s voice rose to a crescendo, and I felt a tear slip down my cheek. *“As I mourn the loss of you, my love, with an unbreakable will.”*

I wiped the tear.

The song ended, and the crowd erupted in applause.

With tears in his eyes, Ivan stood up and took a bow. *“Thank you.”*

Everyone clapped louder.

Ivan held up his hand.

Slowly, the audience went silent.

Crucifix's guitarist, Alexei played some light notes in the background.

"We come here to mourn many this evening." Ivan gazed at everyone. *"I have found that music is the ultimate escape from reality."*

A few in the crowd muttered their agreement.

"I hope that I give you all an escape this evening."

Someone loudly hooted in the background.

I checked and realized it was Tisha. He stood right by Pavel and Rosetta's photos. Some of his guards flanked him.

Meanwhile, Tisha wore a designer black shirt and pants. His hair was out and flowing around his face. Two women were on his arm, sipping glasses of champagne. A third woman stood in front of Tisha, feeding him a *pirozhki*.

At least Tisha will be entertaining in New Orleans.

Grinning, I headed that way.

David followed.

Ivan continued to speak to the crowd. *"We will be taking a brief intermission."*

The chandelier lights brightened, illuminating the space.

"So I advise you all to eat and get a lot of energy." Ivan began to place the microphone onto its stand. *"Because when I return, we're going to dance and make so much noise that even the souls in heaven will take notice and chuckle at our antics."*

Many laughed.

Ever observant, Paolo's gaze darted around from here to there. But, I knew the moment he spotted his parents' pictures.

Speaking in Italian, He pointed at Pavel's and then Rosetta's image. *"Daddy. Mommy."*

"Yes." I gave him a sad smile. *"Tonight, we celebrate them."*

He pointed at Pavel. *“Pictures.”*

“Yes.” I nodded. *“After the celebration...do you want the pictures?”*

Paolo bobbed his head.

“Then, we will make sure your parents are in your room.”

Paolo went silent and continued to stare at the images.

Chapter 33

Feminine Problems

Kazimir

I approached Tisha and his women.

He had just finished eating the *pirozhki* that the third woman had been feeding him. The second wiped his mouth with a cloth napkin.

And Emily says that I am spoiled.

When I got a few feet away, Tisha raised an eyebrow in surprise. “Kazimir, finally you arrive. I thought you were never coming down. Do you know that I felt lonely and completely unloved?”

I smirked. “With so many women around you, I am surprised that you actually need *more* attention.”

“You would be surprised at many things, cousin.” Tisha gestured towards the women. “This is Liza, Anya, and Maria. Ladies, this is the Lion. Be careful around him. You would not like his roar.”

One of them giggled.

The other two greeted me, batting their lashes and smiling.

Tisha chuckled. “There was a time when I would have shared one of them with you.”

I shrugged. “There was a time when I would have taken all three of them from you with just a wink of my eye.”

The women laughed.

Tisha shook his head. “Oh yes, our teen years and your voracious appetite. How greedy you were back then. I do not miss *those* days.”

Silent, Paolo curiously looked at Tisha.

“My God.” Tisha slowly shook his head, moved away from the women, and came closer to us. “Kazimir, there is no

need for an introduction.”

Paolo blinked.

“It is as if we are young again and I am staring at a tiny Pavel. The hair. The eyes. The mouth. The only thing that is missing, is that he is not picking his nose.” Tisha held out his hand for Paolo to shake and switched to Russian. “*Hello, little cousin.*”

Paolo leaned away and glanced at me.

I nodded. “Go ahead. He is nice.”

As if still unsure, Paolo little by little put his hand out.

“*Do not be shy.*” Tisha’s large fingers covered Paolo’s tiny ones. “*Your father is no longer here, but I am. Come to me any time in your life, whenever you are in need.*”

Paolo stared at Tisha’s big hand.

My cousin continued, “*I will give you anything you desire—food, money, a place to stay, women. Even an army of killers if you require it.*”

I shook my head. “Paolo will never need an army. My mouse is determined to make an artist out of him.”

“Oh no. Violence runs thick in his blood.” Tisha moved his hand and gently patted the top of Paolo’s head. “He is Pavel’s son, and now yours. Mark my words, Kazimir. When this little one grows up to be an adult, he will pick up the *gun*, before he grabs a paintbrush.”

I looked at Paolo, wondering if that would be true.

Paolo stared back at me, his big eyes filled with innocence.

I couldn’t imagine this little boy as a killer, let alone holding a gun.

But Tisha’s words lingered in my mind, reminding me of the violent world we lived in.

And then there was the other side of Paolo’s and my situation. While I had told him that his parents were dead, I did not explain *who* had killed them.

That would be a conversation for another time, and I did not know how that talk would end.

Would Paolo understand when he was bigger?

Would he love me enough by then, to forgive me for what I had done?

Or would he in fact need that army of Tisha's killers to seek his revenge against me?

Would I have to kill him?

Or would he kill me?

A cold shiver ran up my spine.

Leave those answers for another day.

Sighing, I tousled Paolo's hair and pushed those thoughts aside. "Let's not talk about guns and violence, Tisha."

He frowned. "No?"

"Tonight is an evening of celebration for all those that we lost."

"And what a celebration it is. Since when did you learn how to throw such an elegant affair?"

It was my turn to frown. "I have thrown elegant parties before."

"No, cousin. Not to *this* level. While your events were not cheap, they never held this much class."

I scowled.

"For one, there are no lion sculptures towering all over us and dripping cold water everywhere. And for that I am thankful." Tisha grinned. "The temperature is perfect this evening. You always liked it cold as if you never considered our needs at all."

I rolled my eyes.

"Earlier, I wiped my mouth with silky monogrammed napkins. My lips felt rich. My cock got hard as a rock from the lavishness."

I let out a long breath.

Tisha raised on finger in the air. “Also, the food is much better. High-quality. And let us not forget about the alcohol. You always kept your best bottles for yourself. However, this is the *second* time at your home this week that I have enjoyed some of the finest drinks in Moscow.”

I frowned at him. “I did not *always* keep the best bottles for myself.”

“Did you know that there are elegant signs in the parking area outside and even on the inside, helping us navigate the party space?”

“Are there?”

“Signs to the bar, restroom, to the party. This tells me a very sophisticated woman was in charge.”

I beamed with pride. “My mouse.”

“Of course. I knew it was not you.” Tisha turned to David and frowned. “Aww, and here we have King David. Who apparently is the king of...something, although I do not know what of.”

The women laughed.

David ignored Tisha and stared in another direction.

I followed my number one’s gaze and grunted.

Oh mysh.

Emily walked in with Blue. Both wore black dresses, but my mouse...

I am going to fuck you hard tonight, mysh.

The dress clung to the contours of her body, but it wasn’t revealing. It showed the perfect amount of skin, yet taunted me too.

Her hair was carefully pulled back in a perfect bun.

I yearned to unravel it.

Sparkling diamonds dangled from her ears.

She was the most gorgeous woman in the room, and so regal like a queen. So perfect. She could have been the president's wife. There wasn't a man in this space who didn't take notice of her as she strolled in.

I had never been more proud that she was mine.

"Whoa." Tisha got to my side and snapped his fingers, grabbing his lovers' attention. "Ladies, give me some space. I need time to myself—a moment for deep reflection."

Not looking too happy, the three women rushed away.

"Cousin." Tisha leaned my way. "Introduce me to the one with the blue hair? The one walking with your mouse."

David snapped his view to Tisha. "Not necessary. *You* will not be speaking to *her*."

Correct. We do not need to turn this damned love triangle into a love square.

Tisha scowled at my number one. "Excuse me?"

"You do not talk to her." David glared. "You see her, you walk the other way. Do we have an understanding?"

"Walk the other way?" Tisha smirked. "But then how would I bounce her on my cock?"

Pissed, David tried to walk around me and head for him.

I got between them and looked at Tisha. "As I explained before, my mouse's people are off limits."

Tisha held his hands out. "This is unfair. Your mouse has too many sexy women around her. How is one to focus?"

"You will figure out a way."

"Damn it. I hoped she was a friend, sister, or at least a cousin." Tisha pointed their way. "You mean to tell me that the pretty blue-haired one shoots guns too?"

"She does, and very well."

David added, "And she is taken."

Tisha quirked his brows. "By you?"

Something like that.

David glared at him.

“So many limits nowadays. That is very unfortunate.” Tisha smirked. “However...is she coming with us to New Orleans?”

David glared. “She is not.”

“Very smart, king.” Tisha smirked. “You will be smart to keep her far away from me.”

I gazed back and lost sight of Emily within the crowd of people.

Mysh, where are you?

“Aww!” Baba appeared on our left, heading straight for us. “*My little pumpkin is partying with the big men?!*”

Paolo glanced in Baba’s direction and quickly held out his arms as if ready to leave me.

I guess our time is done.

Once Baba got to us, she took him. “*Such a big boy. Did you have a cigar?*”

Paolo widened his eyes. “*No, Baba.*”

“*Oh good. What about a little vodka?*”

A wicked grin spread on Paolo’s face and then he bobbed his head.

What? I did not give him vodka.

I frowned.

“*Oh my.*” Baba chuckled. “*The Lion gave you vodka?*”

For the first time that evening, Paolo mischievously giggled.

Baba laughed. “*Then, you are no longer a little pumpkin. You are a big pumpkin.*”

Paolo nodded. “*Yes, Baba.*”

“Oh well. My baby is now a man. We must fill that stomach, big pumpkin. Vodka with no food is a very bad thing.”

“Baba.” Paolo pointed to the framed pictures of his parents. “Mommy. Daddy.”

“What?” Baba made a big show of gazing at the images. “I thought that was the King and Queen of Russia. That is your mommy and daddy?”

Paolo bobbed his head.

“You are a very lucky pumpkin.” Carrying Paolo away, Baba headed off without saying a word to Tisha, David, or me.

It appeared that anytime Emilio or Paolo was around, everyone else would be invisible to Baba.

What is it about women and babies that makes them crazy?

I scanned the space, only seeing chatting guests feasting on hors d’oeuvres and perusing the pictures.

Where is my mouse?

David nudged me and gestured to the right.

Oh good. He found her.

I checked that way and was wrong.

Instead of gorgeous mouse, Misha walked over with Ava. Both wore black. Ava had a stunning diamond necklace around her neck. Misha had his arm possessively wrapped around Ava’s waist and his gaze on her with each step as if someone were going to jump out of the shadows and take her.

I sighed. “David, find my mouse.”

He nodded and headed off.

When Misha and Ave approached, I glared at my cousin. “Where is Natalya?”

Ava smiled.

Misha sighed. “Good evening to you too, Kazimir.”

“That is not an appropriate answer to my question.” I looked to the side just in case her nanny, Alina was following behind him.

Misha spoke, “Valentina wanted to spend as much time as possible with Natalya before she left tomorrow.”

“This is unacceptable. My sister could have spent that time with Natalya here—”

“Valentina rented out the Saint Petersburg Dolphinarium this evening.” Misha pulled out his phone, slid his finger on the screen, and then placed it in front of my face. “Look. Valentina just sent this to me. Natalya swam with the dolphins.”

On the screen, my sweet niece wore a pink bathing suit and little floaties on her arms. Water splashed around her as two sleek dolphins soared above her. A beautiful smile decorated her face.

“I want this picture.”

“I will send it to you.” Misha put up the phone. “Presently, Valentina and she are having a slumber party by the dolphins’ tank—”

“Moscow also has an aquarium.” I scowled at him. “And it is bigger.”

Ava grinned.

“We were aware of that.” Misha rolled his eyes. “But, lesson learned. We clearly should consult *you* next time we plan an event for *our* daughter.”

I nodded. “That is all I am saying.”

Annoyance hit Misha’s face.

Ava chuckled.

I held out my hand to her. “Good evening, Ava. It is always nice to see you.”

Ava took my hand and shook it. “Good evening to you, Kazimir.”

“Mosquito.” Tisha held out his hand. “It has been a while.”

Misha shook it. “Long way from home, Tisha.”

“I am learning that all of the pretty ladies have come to Russia these days.” Tisha gazed at Ava. “And who is this beautiful—”

“None of your concern.” Misha led Ava away.

Tisha laughed. “I see he has still not forgiven me for sleeping with his girlfriend that one summer.”

“It was actually three different girlfriends and three different summers.”

Tisha opened his mouth in shock. “Are you sure?”

“I am because I stopped Misha from killing you *three* different times.”

“Hmmm.” Tisha watched Misha and Ava walk away. “Unfortunately, I only remember the blonde.”

“There was no blonde. They all had black hair.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” I eyed him. “Will you and your cock be a problem in New Orleans?”

“Are you suggesting that I tend to have feminine problems?”

“My mouse’s women are off limits.”

“You have already said that. Kazimir, there is work and there is play. When it is play, my cock is out. When it is work, my cock remains in my pants.”

A server brought over more crystal glasses of vodka and took our empty ones.

“Good.” I raised my glass. “To your cock staying in your pants.”

With a sly grin, Tisha held up his. “And to the times when my cock will be out.”

I tried not to, but I laughed anyway.

It really will be nice to have Tisha around.

Then, Tisha faced Pavel's image and toasted. "You will forever be missed, cousin. We will love and protect your son. May you find peace in Paradise, until we are reunited again."

"To you, Pavel."

And then we both took a large gulp of the vodka and reminisced on the old days when times were poor, but everyone was alive.

Chapter 34

Smooth Criminal

Emily

Blue and I couldn't find Kazimir, but I hoped he was enjoying himself.

Kazimir had been my rock through it all, supporting me during the toughest moments and lifting me up when I was at my lowest. With the way things had been with Lunita in Italy and Russia, I knew that New Orleans would be a heavily emotional trip.

It meant a lot for me to make sure that my lion was able to get a mental break this evening before our trip.

Have fun, baby.

Since I couldn't find Kaz, we went to X's portrait and hung out with Max.

Yuri's framed photo was a few feet away and on the right. Boris's mother, Fatuma and his sister, Nina stood over there, sipping red wine and chatting with a few of Harlem Crew.

I wanted to go over, but I felt so guilty.

Due to Kazimir wanting to kill Boris, he had not returned to Moscow and seen them. When Fatuma had introduced me to Olga, I had told her I would fly them out to visit Boris, whenever she wanted.

Fatuma had not contacted me about it yet.

And now Olga was dead.

I could not look her in the eyes.

It would hurt too much to even try.

Blue gestured to Yuri's photo. "I will be right back."

My voice grew shaky. "Cool."

Blue went over, embraced Fatuma and kissed her cheek.

More guilt rose within me.

I turned away and focused on my baby.

Look at that adorable little boy. Did he really come from Kaz and me?

As usual Max had tired Emilio out. My baby boy lay in his arms with his mouth wide open and that one tiny fist raised in the air.

I signaled his top guard, Luda.

She came up to us. "Bedtime?"

"Yeah."

"Damn. Nephew can't hang." Max kissed Emilio's forehead and handed him over to Luda. "See you next time, E."

I smiled as Luda took Emilio from Max's arms. "Thank you."

"Of course, ma'am." Luda cradled Emilio in her arms.

Slowly lowering his fist, Emilio snuggled into her chest.

I turned back to Max. "Thank you for taking care of him this week. It was a huge help."

"Anytime, sis." Max grinned at me. "You know I love that little guy. When he gets older, he's going to stay with me in Italy during the summers."

"Sounds good to me."

A server brought over a tray of vodka.

"Thank you." I grabbed one.

"Oh shit!" Max clapped his hands. "You're drinking tonight, Em?"

"Hell yes. I pumped enough milk today to have some fun." I smiled at the glass. "I will just have to dump all of tonight's milk, but one glass should be worth the trouble."

Max pulled out the joint that had been tucked behind his ear. "Hell yes. Let's have a smoke out session too."

I shook my head. “Max, I can’t smoke yet—”

“What the fuck, Em? What do you mean you can’t smoke yet? You’re about to drink.”

I swirled the vodka around in the glass, watching the chandelier light reflect off the crystal. “Dr. Stovall told me that alcohol takes about two hours for the body to completely eliminate it, but marijuana can take up to a month to fully clear from breast milk.”

“Bullshit.”

“It’s facts.”

“How?”

“The cannabinoids are stored in fat cells.”

“But hold up.” Max placed the joint between his lips. “Jamaican mothers breastfeed and smoke all the time and their babies are always just fine.”

“How the hell do you know that?”

“Remember my plug in East Flatbush. She had five kids and would smoke right around them. Motherfuckers were chill as fuck—”

“And probably very high.”

Max lit his joint. “I bet they’re fine.”

“No worries. We will be smoking soon. I make the final decision on the wet nurse and hire her tomorrow—”

“Titties? I’m definitely helping with that.”

“No, you’re not. Anyway, once we land in New Orleans, bring out your fattest blunt.”

“Word?”

“Word.”

“Shit.” Max blew out smoke. “I’m going to get you so fucked up in N.O.”

I laughed. “Max, not *too* messed up. I’m still a mom—”

“With a fucking team and shit. You’ve been through a lot, Em.” Max winked. “Take a fucking break and get high.”

“New Orleans is about healing, not partying.”

“Fuck that. The trip is also about R&R—rest and reefers.”

“Rest and relaxation, Max.”

“That too.”

“I can’t with you.” I took a sip of the vodka. Although the liquid was cold, a burning sensation smoothed down my throat and warmth spread through my body.

Wow. That’s quite a kick.

I studied the glass, wondering if I would actually finish it all.

I better slow down. That pregnancy made me a super lightweight.

Raising my head, I looked at the photos on the wall. Memories of the people I had lost flooded my mind. It was hard to believe they were gone, but being surrounded by their smiling faces made me at least feel closer to them.

I’m glad we did this.

Suddenly, the chandelier lights dimmed.

Next, the audience erupted in cheers as the members of Crucifix stepped onto the stage.

They wore black leather jackets and ripped jeans, their long hair flowing as they took their positions.

I scanned the space, hoping to see Kaz’s face, but didn’t see him.

“Yo, Em.”

I gazed back at Max. “Yeah.”

“Besides hiring the wet nurse, is there anything else that needs to be finalized?”

“Nothing else.”

“Perfect.” Max blew out smoke to the side. “How long do you think we will be back in the States?”

“It would be nice if it is just a few days—”

“A few days?” A skeptical expression decorated his face. “I don’t know about that.”

“You said Timur was there for two days and was back to normal.”

“Look, man. Timur and Lunita are two very different people.”

“Then, how long do *you* think we will be there?”

“I think it may be two weeks. That’s if the Lion can behave himself and don’t start any bullshit like in France and Italy.”

I quirked my brows. “What?”

“Kazimir tends to go to places and make enemies.”

“Leave my baby alone.”

“Yo, just talk to him.”

“About what?”

“Jean-Pierre stressed that New Orleans had a very nuanced criminal underground.”

I nodded.

“Dude was trying to tell Kazimir how things go in the meeting and the Lion was on that usual bullshit, thinking he was god almighty.”

Smiling, I took a sip.

Max inhaled and shook his head.

“What?”

“You like that shit, Em. Don’t you?”

“Like what?”

“Your fucking kitty being on that big dick energy shit.”

I tried to wipe away the smile but couldn’t.

“Yo. Stop liking that shit.”

I shrugged. “He’s the Lion.”

“Eh, there’s guns and then there’s fucking voodoo-hoodoo shit.”

“Would you relax?”

“All I know is that he better not get some curse put on all of us because he wants to come into other people’s territory swinging his dick around.”

“I’ll make sure that Kaz will be good.” I turned my view back to X’s picture. It had a white background. A huge smile spread across his face. The image stopped a little above his chest.

I leaned my head to the side. “Where did you get this picture?”

“That was his mug shot from the last birthday we celebrated in Harlem.”

“You mean that night when you got him crazy high in Central Park?”

“We were having fun and not breaking any laws, and then the cops came around, fucking with innocent brothers.”

I shook my head. “That’s not exactly how it happened.”

“Pretty much. Fucking cops saw five pounds of weed in my book bag and thought I was in distribution and shit.”

I eyed him. “Because...five pounds of weed.”

“Seemed like the perfect amount for X’s birthday.” Max grinned. “Great motherfucking memories.”

“Yep.” I let out a long breath. “Only X would smile in a mug shot.”

“It was his birthday. Jail or not, you got to smile on your birthday.”

I laughed.

On the stage, Cruifix’s members began tuning their instruments.

I took another sip of my vodka and gazed that way.

Ivan, the lead singer, stepped up to the microphone and grabbed it. Soon, his raspy voice filled the air.

The first time I saw the band, I didn't really pay attention. It was the party where Kaz wanted me to meet all of his family and friends. I was too nervous trying to pay attention to names and faces.

But now I had the time to take in Crucifix.

They seemed to be an eclectic group, each with their own unique style and personality.

Tall and rippling with lean muscle, Ivan had blue eyes and a shock of jet-black hair that fell across his forehead. And he had the sort of face that commanded attention. That was probably why so many women were making their way to the stage.

Gripping the microphone, Ivan said several things in Russian. It was hard to figure it all out, but it sounded like he was making jokes.

Several people in the audience laughed.

I checked out the drummer.

What the hell was his name again? I think...Sergei... maybe.

He was slim and tatted up, with long hair tied back in a ponytail. It was hard to describe, but he had this let-the-devil-show-up smile.

Then there was Alexei. He continued to tune his guitar. He had short-cropped hair and a serious expression.

Right when I was going to check out the other guitarist, I caught David prowling through the crowd with a fluid, effortless grace. His gaze was fixed on Blue as she talked with Fatuma and Nina.

Is Kaz with him?

I checked around and didn't see him.

Fuck. Where are you, baby?

Max tilted my way. “Look at this motherfucker.”

“Who? David?”

“Hell yeah.”

I put my focus back on David.

Max flicked ash onto the floor. “Watch how smooth this motherfucker is when he thinks no one is looking.”

I smirked.

Dressed in a perfectly tailored designer suit, David moved towards Blue with the confident swagger of a man who was used to getting what he wanted.

Alright, King. Come through.

Max held the joint between his two fingers. “First, we have the King’s step one.”

David reached Blue, he nodded at Fatuma and Nina and then slyly placed his hand on the small of Blue’s back.

I see you, David.

“Then, the King’s step two.” Max took a long drag.

Leaning in, David brushed his lips against Blue’s ear and whispered something.

I raised my eyebrows.

Turning to David and meeting his gaze, a blush spread across Blue’s face.

I took a sip of my vodka and swallowed it. “Oh, he definitely said something fly.”

“Sure did. Made her blush.” Max took a long drag. Then, smoke left his nostrils. “Bet her blue panties are soaking wet.”

“Eh. Relax.”

“Sorry. I’m just stating facts, Em. The sensual hand to the back move is a classic panty wetter.” Max pointed at David with the joint’s tip. “Now, check out step three.”

“Step three?”

“Got to have a step three to seal the deal.”

I watched.

While David whispered something again, his hand inch by inch slipped from her back, moved over her behind, and then he gently squeezed her bottom as if it were his.

I blinked.

“Nice and simple.” Max pursed his lips and then kissed the tips of the fingers as if savoring the flavor of a delicious meal. “If David wasn’t so focused on licking Kaz’s balls, he would have *been* sealed the deal with Blue.”

“You think David has a better chance of being with Blue than Giorgio?”

“That depends.” Max quirked his brows. “Are you trying to put a bet on which guy will hit first?”

“I am not participating in a bet that deals with Blue’s vagina.”

Max shrugged. “Shit would be fun to have money on it. Admit it.”

I sipped more of the vodka. This time the liquid burned less, but I could feel it working.

“How about we don’t bet money, Em? We could bet something else.”

“I’m not fucking with you on that, Max.” Shaking my head, I took another swallow.

“Because you know I’m going to guess right.”

“But, *who* would you put your money on?”

“Not telling you, until we bet.”

“Fuck that.” I sucked my teeth.

Finally, the band’s instruments were ready on stage.

For no damn reason, Ivan let out a primal scream.

I widened my eyes. “What the fuck?”

The band launched into a hard-hitting song. The pounding of the drums and the screeching of the guitars shook the floor.

Damn. I hope they don't wake up Emilio.

The music grew louder.

Ivan's voice rose above the noise. I had no idea what he was saying, but it was definitely getting the audience hyped.

All the guests became frenzied. Bodies pushed and shoved against each other as they jumped around with their arms waving in the air.

Max tilted my way. "These Russian dudes be on a whole other level when they party."

"That's facts." I couldn't help but sway to the rhythm as the lead singer's voice thundered through the speakers, filling the room with raw energy.

"I don't know what he is saying..." Max blew out smoke. "But I bet it is about pussy."

Chuckling, I finished the vodka.

"Aww. Here we go." Max grabbed the empty glass from me.

Right when I was going to ask him why he took my glass, a strong hand grabbed mine on the right and pulled me away from Max.

Oh.

I smiled as Kaz towered over me. Those piercing blue eyes locked onto mine.

Desire laced his voice. "Hello."

I licked my lips. "Hello."

"I could not help but notice you from across the room."

I chuckled. "Oh really?"

"You are a sexy American woman. What is your name and why are you here in Moscow?"

I chuckled. "That's none of your business."

“No?”

“Not at all.”

“Do you not know who I am?”

“I don’t.”

The music pounded on in the background—the drums beating a primal rhythm that matched the lusty pounding in my chest.

Kaz pressed his body against mine. “Did you come with someone?”

Flames of desire licked my skin. My nipples stiffened. “Yes. I did come with someone.”

“Boyfriend?”

“Fiancé.”

“Good.” Kaz breathed me in. “Point him out.”

“Why?”

“I am going to kill him.” He captured my mouth and seared my insides with a hot kiss. It was hard and deep, stirring my soul into a horny frenzy.

Moaning, I gave in to the moment and let myself be swept away by the heat of his touch and the power of the music.

I melted as he explored every curve, ravaging my soul.

The music swelled around us.

People began to scream out the lyrics.

Kaz ended the kiss, leaned in closer, and slipped his lips against my ear. “Dance with me.”

Without waiting for my reply, Kaz led me out onto the dance floor.

A sea of people surrounded us.

Everyone danced wildly, but in that moment, it felt like we were the only two people in the entire space.

The band’s drummer went crazy on stage.

The crowd roared.

Yet, Kaz wrapped his arm around my waist, pulled me close to him, and had our bodies moving to *our own song*—one that had a sexy, sensual slow rhythm.

Damn.

The scent of his cologne teased me.

I had no idea if Crucifix still played the same song or something else.

Instead, I found myself lost in the passion of him. The need. The craving. The ecstasy-driven desire that pulsed between us.

Swaying together, he guided us deeper into the sea of dancing people.

Kaz's hand brushed against my skin.

I came out of my sexual haze long enough to notice that his fingers were on the hem of my dress and slowly yanking it up.

My heart raced.

You better not.

His fingers crept up underneath my dress.

Oh, shit.

My pussy pulsed.

He whispered in my ear, “Do you know what this song is about?”

“No.”

“The undying power of pussy.”

I laughed, remembering Max had already guessed the content.

“*Msyh*, will you be giving me this pussy tonight?”

“Yes, baby.”

In the next second, his fingers were inside my panties.

My breathing became rapid.

I grabbed his strong shoulders for support. “Kaz—”

His fingers slipped against my clit.

I gasped. “Oh!”

He captured my mouth, tasting my moans.

His hard cock pressed against me.

And there Kaz finger fucked me on the dance floor in the center of the roaring crowd.

Oh fuck.

The music thumped and pounded in my veins.

The beat propelled my heart faster.

Kaz’s fingers sent sparks of pleasure shooting through my entire body. With each tender thrust he reached deeper, coaxing a plea from me. His tongue dueled with mine while his fingers slipped in and out and his thumb kept up its steady rhythm against my swollen bud.

Holy fuck!

I felt myself rising higher and higher as I clung to him, shuddering and moaning. Rocking my hips and groaning.

Kaz left my mouth and grunted in my ear, sending a delicious thrill through me. “You’re so fucking hot. I should fuck you on this dance floor.”

“Oh. Oh.”

He thrust his hips into mine and I could feel every inch of his big, hard cock. “Instead, I’m going to make you cum to my favorite song.”

I shivered in pleasure, moving my hips to match the rhythm of his skilled fingers.

The band’s song reached a crescendo just as I began to come undone. “Oh. Oh. Oh.”

“Fuck yes, *mysh.*” Kaz’s fingers turned relentless. Intense erotic sensations surged through my core. “Cum for me.”

My head fell back. “Oh, baby!”

Ivan shouted something from the stage, igniting the crowd into a frenzy of bliss.

And I came so fucking hard that I began to forget where the hell I was. All I knew was that I was the luckiest woman on this planet.

Chapter 35

Rock Star

Emily

Hours later, the echoes of applause still rang in my ears.

I wore Kaz's suit jacket and lounged on the small stage with my legs stretched out comfortably in front of me, basking in the afterglow of the magical evening.

Harlem slept by me on his back. Light snores left his furry body. It was a shock that he was with me because lately he had transformed into Paolo's dog and usually remained by his side.

However, Baba had kept Paolo in her room tonight just in case he woke up feeling alone or had a nightmare.

My shoes were tossed next to everyone else's by the steps leading to the stage. I wasn't sure when everyone decided to go barefoot, but I guessed it was after the five rounds of vodka shots that Kaz had made us all participate in.

Currently, the staff cleaned up around the ballroom, gathering plates and crystal glasses, wiping down tables and chairs, and putting out candles.

Meanwhile, we all hung out on the stage, partly to get out of the staff's way and also to keep enjoying each other's company due to the atmosphere still feeling electric.

What an amazing night. We all really needed this.

Kazimir's cousin, Tisha sat beside me while a woman named Anya ran her fingers through his hair and kept kissing his cheek. Two other women, Liza and Maria remained behind Anya and glared at her the whole time.

What is going on with that? Are they friends? Or did they all come with Tisha?

I put my view on Misha and Max. They sat on the other side of the stage, laughing and chatting about something. It was in that moment that I realized they both were wearing the

same suits. I hadn't noticed that when we were all partying on the dance floor.

So then...Emilio was dressed like Misha and Max too?

I shook my head.

Thank God Kaz didn't see that.

Lemonisha hung out by them.

When in the hell did Max bring the tree down?

I checked out the tree. It stood vibrant and proud on the stage. Those lush green leaves cast a lovely contrast against the deep hues of the ballroom. The tree's branches stretched out gracefully.

And then there was her fruit. Bright and yellow, they hung heavily from the branches.

By the time we come back from New Orleans, I'm going to get me one of those lemons.

Max caught me looking at Lemonisha and moved her closer to him.

I rolled my eyes.

Max returned to his conversation with Misha, moving his hands around with each word.

Ava lounged between Misha's legs and rested her head against his chest. A serene smile played on her face as she watched Max talk.

I didn't know what Max was saying, but he kept making Ava and Misha laugh. In between chuckles, Ava sipped her glass of water.

Hmmm.

I studied her.

Ava is probably the only sober one on this stage.

She had passed on doing the vodka shots with all of us. I also couldn't remember if she had drunk anything else this evening.

Wait a minute. Is it because she is being disciplined for ballet? Or...is she pregnant?

Max passed his joint to Misha who happily grabbed it.

Interesting. I didn't know the Mosquito smoked.

I decided to stop being nosy and turned my view to the center of the stage where my baby held the band hostage.

Poor guys. They may never get to leave Moscow.

Surely, Crucifix deserved to go home. They had given their souls to tonight's performance. Their voices and instruments blended seamlessly, evoking a tapestry of emotions for even me who barely understood what the lyrics meant.

I wish David were here. Maybe, I could have gotten David to help me drag Kaz away from them.

Always on top of things, David and Blue went off to make sure all guests left our mansion, and no one lingered back or created a threat.

To my shock, I never saw Giorgio tonight. It was odd when usually he was by my side.

Yep. He sucks as my number two. Kaz was right.

Regardless, I couldn't help but smile as I watched Kaz standing at the front of the stage with the band's lead singer, Ivan.

Leave them alone, baby.

The scene unfolding before me was one of pure joy, a memory that would undoubtedly be cherished for years to come.

Super patient, Ivan placed a hand on Kaz's shoulder and once again tried to guide Kaz through his signature dance steps. "As I said Kazimir, it is all in the hips."

Max and Misha stopped talking and looked their way.

"In the hips?" Kaz stared down at his own hips and looked back at Ivan. "Not in the legs?"

“Not at all. The legs follow the hips.” Ivan did some twisting hip swing that made me quirk my brows. “See. You must let the hips flow like the river.”

“Hmmm.” Kaz studied Ivan’s movements. “But, which river?”

“It does not matter, Kazimir.” Ivan waved his hand. “Any river.”

“But, I think the river is important.”

Ivan shrugged. “Then, Volga River.”

“Aww. Now I understand.” Kaz tried to mimic Ivan’s earlier move.

Max and Misha laughed.

Oh my God. How much vodka did my baby drink tonight?

I shook my head.

Meanwhile, Kaz continued to sway his hips. Granted, he was a little offbeat, but appeared determined to master Ivan’s signature move.

“Yo, homey.” Max laughed. “You’re getting this on camera right?”

“Of course.” Misha winked at Max. “Once I heard Crucifix would be here, I had ten cameras placed around the stage and ready to record, particularly for this moment.”

What?

I glared at Misha.

“No way.” Max high fived him. “How did you know he would do this?”

“He usually does this.” Misha grinned and pointed at Kaz. “Look.”

Ivan clapped. “Yes, Kazimir. Very close.”

Kaz did some odd bop with his muscular shoulders and then a few crotch twists.

No, baby.

I didn't know if I should laugh or hide my face in embarrassment. Either way, I could not stop my baby. He was truly having fun and this had been one of the shittiest weeks of the year. I might as well let my lion enjoy himself.

“*Mysh.*” Kaz turned my way and wiggled his hips. A playful grin tugged at his lips. “Look.”

Several chuckles left me. “I see, baby.”

“I may retire as the Lion and go on tour with Crucifix.”

Worry covered Ivan's face. “Oh no. The Lion must not retire.”

“But, we must admit that I am rock star material.” Kaz did a quick turn that made him stumble to the side.

A ripple of laughter came from the other band members as they began packing up.

“Yo!” Max laughed so much that he started coughing. “I would pay to see this shit every night.”

Misha leaned his way. “I will send you the footage so you can replay this moment during your darkest moments.”

Alright. I'm going to have to shut this down.

“Baby.” I pointed to my watch. “We should let the band get back on the plane and head to Saint Petersburg.”

Ivan nodded.

Misha held up his hand. “No. Let us not rush this moment. I have a plane to take the band later.”

I scowled at the Mosquito.

Chuckling, Misha shrugged and returned his view to Kazimir as my baby continued his impromptu dance lesson.

“I definitely have it now.” Kaz's face lit up with childlike wonder. His legs tangled a little and his balance wavered, but he was back to hip twisting and crotch thrusting. Kaz staggered to the side.

Ivan caught him just in time before Kaz fell back. Their laughter intertwined as they steadied themselves.

“Not bad, Kazimir!” Ivan patted his back. “With a little more practice, you may give me a run for my money.”

Max yelled out, “That’s one way to look at it!”

I pointed at Max. “Leave him alone.”

Chuckling, Kaz waved Max’s comment away. “He is jealous of my moves.”

I turned to Tisha. “Was Kaz always like this?”

“Yes, and I believe my cousin gets more impossible as he gets older.” Tisha snapped his fingers.

Anya pulled her hands out of his hair and went over to the other two women, who were still frowning at her.

Watching Anya walk away, I thought of how Pavel used to travel with his hairdressers. “Does she style your hair?”

“No.” Tisha smirked. “But, she does everything else.”

I grinned. “You are funny.”

“I am.” Tisha nodded. “We will have fun in New Orleans. You will see.”

I tensed, thinking about the healing that would hopefully come from that trip. “Well...I hope so.”

“Trust me. Your family and you will be safe. My men and I are efficient.”

“Thank you for coming with us.”

“I want to be there for Kazimir.” Tisha’s face turned serious. “I...have not been around him like I should, but with Pavel’s...death...I thought I should be around more.”

I gave him a sad smile. “Death does that. It makes us remember what is truly important in life—friends and family.”

Tisha nodded. “I miss my cousin, Pavel a lot. I do not want to have to mourn Kazimir. Therefore, the Lion must remain safe.”

“I understand.” I gazed at his long, silky strands. “Since meeting you, Tisha I have also wondered if you always had your hair this long.”

He glanced at me with a nostalgic glimmer in his eyes. “Funny you should ask, Emily. I actually let it grow out when I heard about Pavel’s death. It felt like a way to honor him.”

“I get it. I bet Pavel would appreciate that.”

“Me too.”

Kaz chuckled in front of the stage. “Now, I want to play the drums. Come, Sergei. Show me what to do.”

Are you serious?

I let out a long breath. “Baby, we really should head out. Tomorrow will be a lot of planning, before we get on the plane tomorrow night.”

“Oh no.” Misha waved his hands. “I am sure David is on it. What is a number one for anyway? Let the Lion have fun.”

“You better stop it, Mosquito.” I glared at him. “Or you and me are going to have problems.”

Misha chuckled. “I just want Kazimir to get the true Crucifix experience.”

Ava turned Misha’s way and gave him a disapproving look.

Instantly, Misha stopped chuckling and cleared his throat. “Perhaps, I should let the Mouse deem when the night is over for the Lion.”

I smiled. “Thank you, Ava.”

She smiled at me.

Meanwhile, slamming of drums sounded on the left.

Oh my God.

Kaz bobbed his head as he hit a drum here and there, while mainly missing them most of the time. “Like this Sergei?”

Startled, Harlem woke up and rolled over.

I’m really going to have to drag Kaz off the stage myself.

Max and Misha laughed.

Tisha spoke, “Do not worry. My cousin will get tired once he grabs the guitar from Alexi and begins strumming.”

I widened my eyes. “Oh, no. He isn’t going to do that. Right?”

Tisha gave me a sad smile. “Unfortunately, Kaz must always play *all* of the instruments before Crucifix leaves.”

“Wow. I may not have them at the wedding.”

“But, you must—”

“Look, *mysh!*” Kaz slammed the stick against the drums at an unsteady rhythm. “I am a rock star.”

I cannot with him right now.

It was almost painful to listen to.

Just then, Harlem ran over and started barking.

You tell him, Harlem.

“I have mastered this.” Kaz gave up on the drums, rose, and headed over to poor Alexei who had just put his guitar away. “Do you all know that had I not picked up the gun, I would have been strumming a guitar?”

“I did not.” Alexei forced a smile and began to pull his guitar out. “Let us see what you can do, Kazimir.”

I looked at Tisha. “Alright. He is on the guitar, so we are almost done?”

Tisha nodded. “We have about ten more minutes of this.”

I grinned. “Good. Because that is about all I can take.”

“I agree.” Tisha leaned back against the wall. “You are good for him.”

“Thank you.”

Tisha directed his view to Kaz. “Do you know why they call my cousin the Lion?”

I blinked. “You know what? I don’t. I mean...he just...has always been the Lion to me.”

“When Kazimir and I were young boys—barely thirteen, but tall for our age—we got involved with a local gang to make some extra money. They called themselves, *Otryad*.”

“What does that mean?”

“It is like...squad or troop in English.”

“Okay.”

“We mainly ran a few errands for them. Of course, we hid this from our mothers.”

“Uh oh.”

Harlem hurried back over to me and got in my lap.

Tisha continued, “Their leader was named Kon, but everyone called him, the Gorilla.”

“Why did they call him that?”

“He had strength, a big size, and quite an intimidating presence.” Tisha raised one finger. “Also, Kon used to be a competitive powerlifter. But, they say that one night when the group got into a bar fight with some other guys, Kon single-handedly took down several men with his bare hands.”

“Sounds like quite a guy.”

“He was in his own way.”

“Did you enjoy working for the Gorilla?”

“I did not.” Tisha wagged his finger. “But, as always I did what Kazimir asked me to.”

I tried to imagine Kazimir and Tisha at thirteen, walking around with their long, skinny legs and trying to hang with the big guys.

“Also, it was odd when we worked with him.”

“Why?”

“Kon thought Kazimir’s ego was too big. He was always trying to challenge Kazimir to get him to weaken his confidence.”

“That’s fucked up. People should let a kid be confident.”

“Very true, but the Gorilla had a different mindset. One day, he decided it was time for Kazimir to truly prove himself. He gave us a seemingly impossible task.”

I petted Harlem’s head. “What was it?”

“Kon told us to steal a prized motorcycle from a rival gang’s territory.”

“That’s messed up. It sounds dangerous.”

“It was very dangerous. These men...they would not care that we were kids. Surely, we could have gotten shot in the process.”

“Did you all still do it?”

“Kazimir, always fearless and eager for a challenge, led us on this daring mission.”

“No way.”

“Yes way.” Tisha chuckled. “Picture us naughty kids—Valentina, Pavel, me, and others, sneaking away from our homes in the middle of the night.”

“Oh God.”

“We snuck into the rival gang’s garage, and Kazimir expertly hotwired the motorcycle.”

“Wow. At thirteen?”

“We were very naughty.” Tisha winked at me. “Now. Just as we were about to leave, one of the gang’s guards spotted us.”

I opened my mouth in shock. “What did you do?”

“The rest of us raced away, completely terrified. Valentina yelled at Kazimir to come.”

I smirked. “But, he didn’t?”

“No. With the guards charging towards us with their guns aimed our way, Kazimir turned on the motorcycle, mounted it, and then let out a wild, ferocious roar.” Tisha chuckled. “It was ridiculously loud.”

“What the hell?”

“Yes.” Tisha shrugged. “Kazimir roared and roared, absolutely confusing the guards. They stopped running and stared at him with odd expressions. Surely, they thought that this boy had gone mad.”

“I can’t believe he did that.”

Tisha tucked some of his hair behind his ear. “Yet, I am glad he did. It gave us all the time to escape, and Kazimir sped off on the bike, roaring again.”

I laughed.

“We met up later near Kon’s shitty house and brought the bike to him. The man was honestly shocked we had *really* done it.”

“I still can’t believe he would tell kids to do something so dangerous.”

“Maybe, the Gorilla was hoping we would fail and get shot. Or perhaps, Kon saw what Kazimir would become one day, and hoped to get rid of him. Jealousy. Resentment. Any of those things.”

“That is crazy on so many levels.”

“It is, but it does not matter. Kazimir’s mother, Svetlana killed Kon, after she heard what he had us do.”

“Oh.” I blinked again. “Damn. The more I hear about her...the more I love her.”

“She was a great woman.” Tisha let out a long breath and placed his hands on his lap. “After whipping all of us with a very heavy, thick belt, she let us keep the motorcycle. And from that day on, Kazimir was known as the Lion for those roars that kept us from getting shot.”

“Wow.” I placed my hand on Tisha’s. “Thanks so much for telling me this story. It really gave me insight into—”

“*Mysh*, look!”

Sighing, I turned Kaz’s way. “What, baby?”

There, Kaz fumbled with the guitar’s strings, attempting to strum some tune. “I will give you a serenade.”

But do you need to?

Kaz stumbled forward with the guitar and faced me. “I dedicate this song to my mouse.”

“Yo, hold up!” Max tapped Misha’s shoulder and pointed at Kaz. “Look at this.”

Baby...

Kaz began to perform. The sounds that emanated from the guitar were, in all honesty, quite terrible.

Still, I bobbed my head with the erratic notes which only seemed to make him even more determined to serenade me.

“This song is about our love.” Kaz began to wiggle his hips. His movements were exaggerated and ludicrous. “Look, *mysh*. I am doing it.”

“Well...” I held out my hands. “You are doing something.”

Max laughed far too loud on the other side of the stage.

But as I watched Kaz, the love in my heart swelled. It didn’t matter that he couldn’t play the guitar, nor did it matter that his hips moved with the grace of a newborn giraffe. What mattered was that he was trying to make me smile, and he was absolutely succeeding. With each off-key note and awkward hip wiggle, I fell even more in love with this man, my soon-to-be husband.

When he finished, I clapped. “Bravo! Bravo!”

Barking with excitement, Harlem jumped off my lap and began wagging his tail.

Kaz stopped playing and took a bow.

Laughing the whole time, Max and Misha rose and gave him a standing ovation too.

“Alright, baby.” I slowly got up too. “I’m exhausted. Surely, the band is tired too. The memorial is officially over, everyone.”

The poor guys appeared helpless next to Kaz.

Misha helped Ava rise. A yawn left her, and then she touched her stomach. Misha gazed at that hand and a wicked smirk spread over his face.

Hmmm. She might be pregnant for sure.

Or maybe I just wanted Emilio to have more playmates and cousins his age and within our family.

That would be so dope.

As everyone began getting ready to go, Kaz frowned. “But *mysh*, the band wants to show me more things—”

“Baby, they can teach you stuff later. We have a long day ahead of us. It is time to get rest.”

Groaning in annoyance, Kaz gave the guitar back to Sergei. “I am sorry, men. You know how women can be.”

I rolled my eyes.

Really?

“Yeah, man.” Max carefully grabbed Lemonisha. “My baby is tired now.”

“She must get her rest.” Misha touched one of the big dangling lemons.

“What the fuck?” I frowned at Max. “You never let me touch the fruit.”

“Stop being jealous, Em.” Max shook his head and gazed at Misha and Ava. “Let me walk you two out. We got to get our Prima Ballerina back.”

Misha kissed her cheek and took her hand. “Yes. *My* baby also needs some rest.”

Baby as in Ava’s stomach? Or are you calling Ava your baby?

I got way too giddy for my own good.

Ava waved at me. “Goodbye, Emily. It was quite a memorable evening.”

Should I ask her? No. I need to mind my business.

I swallowed down my curiosity and waved back. “Thanks for coming. It is always a blast when I see you, girl.”

Ava took Misha’s hand. “When you come back, we should do a spa day together or even a little weekend girl’s trip. You pick the city.”

Excitement hit me. “Totally.”

Misha frowned. “Let us make sure that the Mouse is healed before you all schedule—”

“That’s enough, Misha.” Ava tugged him along. “Bye, everyone.”

Kaz headed over to me and eyed Tisha. “You were not flirting with my mouse. Correct?”

“Of course not, cousin. But, with your rock star moves, how could I ever truly have her attention.”

Kazimir wrapped his arm around my waist. “I *did* do a good job.”

I chuckled. “As Max said...that is one way to say it.”

Chapter 36

The Lion's Den

Kazimir

I hugged everyone goodbye, swaying slightly as I did so. My eyes were blurry, and my ears were humming with laughter from the night's festivities.

Once done, we headed to the stairs, and I almost missed a few steps.

"Be careful, baby."

"Lions do not need to be careful." I stumbled a little yet kept my balance. "We should check on Emilio."

"David has footage going to our phones. Emilio is peacefully sleeping. I don't want us to go in there and wake him up."

I grinned. "That is my beautiful son."

"It is."

"We are creating a beautiful family."

"We are, baby."

Emily and I continued downward.

When we made it to the bottom level, I stopped in front of the first cell where the stupid female assassin sat on her cot. She had her hands in her lap and her gaze focused on us.

You think you can look at my mouse and me? On this evening?

Anger blazed in my chest, threatening to explode.

I stopped in front of the cell and placed my face in front of the small window in the door. "You come into *my* house? You disrespect the Lion. I will fucking kill you and your family and your friends and their friends and then I will destroy the land that your family's houses sat on so nothing can grow or live.

Not a plant or even a worm will sit in that soil. I will rain down—”

“Kaz, get your ass away from the cell.”

I swayed to the side and bumped into the wall. “I am letting her know, *mysh* that—”

“We already let her know, baby.”

I smirked. “Baby.”

Emily eyed me. “What?”

“I like when you call me *baby*.”

“I’m glad.” She chuckled. “Come on.”

My mouse tried to guide us forward.

I grabbed her hand and pulled her to me. “What about Paolo, *mysh*?”

She quirked her brows. “What do you mean?”

“Is Paolo safe tonight? Should we check on him? Hold him?”

“Aww.” A soft expression crossed her face like a shadow. It was as gentle as a summer breeze and as radiant as the sun. “No worries, baby. Paolo is knocked out and sleeping next to Baba.”

“So, Paolo is good?”

“Yes.” She tried to tug me forward.

I kept her close to me. “You honored my bloodline tonight.”

“What?”

“The party. All the details. Crucifix. Food. The clocks—”

“Thank you, but Kaz, it is late.”

“My mother...”

Emily parted her lips.

“She would have loved you. She would have...spent all her days with you, laughing and probably shooting guns with

you.” My heart ached. “My mother would have even loved Lunita.”

Emily widened her eyes and then looked away. “We should get to our cells and then go to sleep.”

Cells.

I frowned.

I agreed earlier today to let you stay in your cell, but now I've changed my mind.

I pulled my mouse closer to me, feeling the warmth of her body against mine. “I don’t want to sleep in a cell away from you. Not when I have you next to me now. I want us in our big bed upstairs—”

“We talked about this—”

“And we are talking about this again.” I breathed in her scent, a mixture of jasmine and roses.

“Let’s go.”

I didn’t know how she did it, but she slipped out of my hold and rushed away, laughing.

I spoke through clenched teeth, “*Mysh*, get back here.”

Her soft ass swayed from side to side as she continued to put space between us. “Kaz, you are impossible, when you are sober, but when you are drunk—”

“I am a mighty lion—”

“You are aggravating as hell and about to get knocked out.”

“Am I now?” I rushed for her.

She shrieked and hurried forward. “Kaz, what are you doing?”

“I am going to catch you—”

“No, you are not.” She sped up.

However, I was too determined. My cock stiffened as I chased her down the hall. My legs burned as I caught up with

her and grabbed her waist.

Out of breath, she laughed against my chest. “I am so out of shape. You shouldn’t have got me. This is a damn shame.”

Groaning, I rubbed my cock against her. “I can train you right now.”

She chuckled. “I’m exhausted. Train me in the morning.”

“I want some pussy.” I captured her face between my hands and pulled her in for a kiss. The tip of her tongue traced the curve of my lips, and then slipped into my mouth. Locked together we kissed passionately, our mouths exploring each other’s warmth and heat.

When we broke apart, she tried to slip away.

I wouldn’t let her. “Tonight, you sleep in *my* cell.”

“No, Kaz.”

“Yes, *mysh*.”

“We already went through this.”

“*Now* I change my mind.”

“That isn’t how this works,” she whispered, even as her hands roamed over my chest.

“Why not?” I slid my hands lower to rest on her hips. “You are mine.”

“This is more than about if I am yours.”

I leaned in closer, landing kisses on her cheek and then the curve of her neck. “It is not.”

“I want to keep you safe.”

“I do not care.” I growled and nipped at her earlobe. “I would rather Lunita slice my throat than sleep alone and away from you.”

“Baby, don’t say that.”

I shoved her up against the wall and kissed her some more, groaning against her lips and fucking her with my tongue.

Yes. She will sleep next to me tonight.

She pulled away and licked her lips. “Maybe, we can make love, but afterwards, I have to—”

“I am the Lion!”

She widened her eyes and then chuckled. “Kaz, if I don’t know that by now, then I have to be a moron.”

“We sleep in *my* cell together. If you must, we can still lock the door, but I am confident that Lunita will not come out tonight.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes.”

“Why are you so confident about that?”

“Because I am the Lion.”

“Oh my God. I’m about to get David down here to help—”

“*No one* can save you from me.” My cock hardened even more.

She smirked. “Okay.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Okay?”

“We can sleep together in your cell.”

I studied her. “Are you trying to trick me, *myssh*?”

“Lions can’t be tricked.”

I frowned at her. “Is that right?”

“Yes.”

She is trying to trick me, but I will win.

I let her go. “Alright.”

“Okay.” She took my hand, and we strolled toward my cell.

Pay attention. Make sure that she does not win.

Gazing at me, she gave me a mischievous smile. “Did you want to be a rock star when you were young?”

“I wanted to be *everything* and more.”

“Tisha told me the story about how you got the name lion.” She squeezed my hand. “I was impressed and shocked. You were a very naughty kid.”

“I was, and our sons will be naughty too.”

Her expression softened. “Our sons? You are including Paolo.”

“Pavel and you made me love him, so yes...I must start including him from now on.”

Her eyes watered. “Oh, baby.”

We made it to my cell and walked inside.

A distinctive aroma enveloped the space. It was a refined blend of rich leather, expensive cigars, and sandalwood.

My mouse let go of my hand and scanned the cell. “Very nice.”

I smirked.

The cell’s walls, formerly cold and stark, had been covered in dark, mahogany wood paneling, adding warmth and depth to the area.

In the center of the room sat a plush bed with an opulent, gold-embroidered duvet.

I headed that way and then collapsed onto the bed. The softness of the sheets—a blend of silk and cashmere—was a tactile delight for my fingers.

I grabbed a pillow and put it under my head. “Come here, *mysh*. It is time to tuck you in.”

She chuckled. “Oh, I bet you are going to *tuck* me in.”

Rather than approach me, she headed towards a luxurious black leather armchair situated close to a small table. On the tabletop rested a brass ashtray, a glittering crystal decanter of aged whiskey, and an antique lamp that filled the room with a comfortable glow. “I really like what you did with your cell.”

“It is not a cell, *mysh*.”

“No?”

“It is the Lion’s Den.”

“Oh. My bad.” She snickered and touched one of the glowing buttons on the wall.

Suddenly, classic jazz filled the air.

She looked up at the ceiling, probably searching for the hidden sound system. “This is *really* nice.”

My lids drooped over my eyes. “Only the best for the Lion.”

She walked towards the bed and climbed in, snuggling into my arms. Her warmth felt like a soothing balm against my skin. “You do know how to spoil yourself, Kaz.”

“I spoil those I care about even more.”

She nestled her head against my chest. “Sometimes, I think that you spoil me too much.”

“Never enough, *mysh*.” I kissed the top of her head, taking in the intoxicating scent of her hair. “You deserve the world.”

She let out a contented sigh. “As long as I have you and my babies, I have all I need.”

My heart swelled with love for this woman who had come to mean so much to me. “You have me, and you always will.”

As we lay entwined in each other’s arms, soft jazz played in the background.

A sense of peace washed over me.

How insane that peace and even love had eluded me for so long.

But then the Lion met the Mouse.

I yawned.

My eyelids grew heavy. “*Mysh...*”

“Yes, baby.”

Gentle jazz notes danced in the air.

“You calmed the beast in my heart.”

“Did I?”

I closed my eyes. “Yes...”

My last thoughts before slowly drifting into sleep were filled with gratitude for the life I now had and the woman who had made it all possible. In this moment, I knew I was no longer just the Lion—I was a man in love, and nothing would ever be the same again.

A click sounded off in the distance like my cell door was being closed.

Perhaps, David had come down to lock us in?

I rolled over as darkness swallowed me whole.

Chapter 37

Work Out

Emily

The next morning came too soon.

In the gym, sweat dripped down my face and coated my chest.

My head throbbed from all the vodka I had last night. My bones ached from all the dancing to Crucifix's music.

It was a miracle that I had made it to the gym at all.

Granted, I woke up to my lion screaming out *mysh* over and over like a goddamn mad man. He had wanted me to sleep in his cell last night. One would have thought that we had not already argued this point many times yesterday.

Once I realized that he was asleep, I snuck away and locked myself into my cell.

Fuck you, Lunita. You will not have us kill anymore or fuck more strangers. I'm done with your bullshit.

But, the true question was if I could ever get Kaz on board with my plan.

Did he not fear Lunita and what she could do?

Either way, this morning, he yelled outside of my cell, let himself in, and proceeded to roar. I ignored his craziness and suggested that he help me train.

Thankfully, he obliged.

And now he's in the gym kicking my ass.

I released an exhausted breath and raised my fisted hands in front of me.

My muscles burned, but I would push on.

You got this. Let's get this body back in shape.

Kaz stood in front of me, still wearing a grumpy expression.

I tilted my head to the side. “Would you stop being mad?”

“You left me alone in that cell.”

“It is not a cell.” I winked. “It is a Lion’s Den.”

“I thought I fell asleep next to you.”

“Then, you thought wrong.” I charged for Kaz, delivering a kick to his chest.

He slapped it away with ease. “Too slow.”

I growled and lunged at him.

He sidestepped my attack, throwing a punch at my face that never connected. It was just to show me that he could knock me out if necessary. “You left that pretty face open.”

“Whatever.”

“Whatever?” He threw another punch my way.

I blocked it with one arm and answered back with a roundhouse kick.

Kaz dodged the attack. “Pitiful.”

I stumbled to the side. “You are quite the motivational coach this morning.”

“I woke up on the wrong side of the cell, alone and pissed.”

“Clearly.” I dove for his feet and sent him flying backward.

Yes!

Granted, we both fell to the ground, but I knew I had a better advantage down there. The corners of my mouth rose into a smirk. I reached for his neck, aiming to grab it, but he evaded the move, grabbed my legs, and flipped me around.

I shrieked.

“*Mysh*, did you really think that it would be so easy?” He charged me.

I expected that, rolled away, jumped back up, and spun around, trying to deliver a roundhouse kick to his jaw.

So fast, Kaz ducked, yet surprise hit his eyes. He rose from the ground. "That was unexpected."

"Damn right it was."

"But, still not good enough." He charged me again.

I planted my feet firmly on the floor and waited for him to come closer, my eyes never leaving his face. When he was close enough, I grabbed his shoulders, lowered, and flipped him to the floor. My shoulders strained from the impossible effort.

Holy shit. I did it.

My arms ached.

Okay. How did I do that?

I replayed the moves in my head.

"That was simply luck." He groaned in pain but refused to stay down for long. He rolled away and stood up again.

"Unfortunately, you are still too slow."

"Fuck you." I lunged and threw my fist his way.

He dodged it. "Even slower."

Fast, I punched him in the jaw.

For the first time that morning, it connected.

His face jerked back.

Pain bit at my fingers.

He twisted his jaw and chuckled. "And, you still hit like a girl."

I snarled and dove for his waist, tackling him to the ground with enough force to shake the earth beneath us.

He grunted. "Not bad."

I let him go and tried to roll off him.

He caught my waist, flipped us over, grabbed my wrists, and hovered over me. “Now for a break. You owe me pussy.”

“Kaz, I’m trying to get back in shape, not *fuck* in the gym.” I struggled to break free, but he held me down. His grip on my wrists was like steel shackles.

I scowled at him. “Kaz.”

“But, my cock is part of getting back in shape.”

“Says who?”

“Says the Lion.”

“Let me go.” Amusement covered his face as he slipped his gaze down to my breasts. “Absolutely not.”

“I can’t wait until I can get back to kicking your ass.”

“Soon.” He lowered until his face was an inch from mine. “But, until then.”

He captured my mouth.

I wished his kiss didn’t affect me, but it was all consuming. Helpless, I sank down in this insatiable pleasure as he coaxed my tongue to join him in his passionate dance.

Damn him.

He pressed his body against mine, hard and demanding.

My body screamed for more.

More of him.

More of this.

His body moved against me and in a moment, my mind went blank. I held on to him as he rubbed his hardening length against my stomach.

He nipped at my lower lip. “Before we fuck, we should talk about something that has been weighing heavy on my mind.”

I caught my breath. “Actually, we are not having sex.”

Chuckling, he let my wrists go. “My cock is hard. I am getting some pussy.”

Once free, I shoved him off me. Shocked, he fell back, recovered easily, and lunged my way.

Fuck. He is too fast.

Shrieking, I rolled away.

He rushed for me again.

Goddamn it!

Somehow I dodged him, zipped to the side, narrowly avoiding his next grasp, and jumped to my feet. “Stop it.”

“Well...” Frowning, he got up from the ground. “You *are* getting better.”

I winked. “That’s why you better stop talking shit while I train.”

“Or what?”

Grinning, I hopped around and punched the air. “A bitch is getting back where she needs to be.”

“Oh really?”

“Yes, really.”

“Hmmm.” He stretched his head to the left, cracked his neck, and then stretched his head to the right.

“What are you doing?”

“Round two.” He charged for me.

“Shit.” I threw a flurry of quick punches.

Kaz dodged each one and shoved me away.

I countered with a powerful kick to his ribs.

“Better.” He grunted in pain but quickly regained his footing, launching his own flurry of punches near my head.

Screaming, I blocked them all, stumbled back, and launched a spinning backfist.

It connected to his head. He staggered back. “Fuck!”

“Still, hit like a girl?”

He rubbed his head. “Yes, you still hit like a girl, but closer to Valentina.”

“I’ll take that.” I shook off my weariness and got back into a fighting stance. “What did you want to talk about?”

Kaz raised his fists. “First, let me get you back on the ground.”

I chuckled. “You’re not getting me on the ground.”

“We will see.”

Kaz and I circled each other, both looking for an opening.

I backed up a little. “What did you want to tell me, Kaz?”

“Boris can come back to Moscow. I will not hurt him.”

Shock hit me. “What?”

Kaz lunged forward, trying to take me down.

I slipped out of the way and tripped him.

“Shit!” He crashed to the floor.

Right before he tried to roll over, I jumped on top of him.

He grunted.

We grappled on the floor and somehow I got him in a tight headlock.

Groaning, he struggled to break free, but I maintained my iron grip. “Boris can come back?”

He bobbed his head and tapped the floor.

I let him go.

He rolled away. “Much better, *mysh*.”

“Thanks, coach.” Panting, I sat up. “You really mean it about Boris?”

“I do.” Kaz remained on his back. His chest rapidly rose and fell. “Boris can return to Moscow.”

“I’m sorry, baby, but...”

“But?”

“I don’t trust you.”

“You can, *mysh*. I think Boris can help me get you back in my bed.”

“What?”

He looked at me. “I will not sleep in bed alone another night. Lunita and you win on this one.”

What does that mean?

I quirked my brows. “Boris comes back and what?”

“Boris becomes your night guard along with two more guards of your choosing. Then, that means you are in my bed because we have proper security around that is trained in dealing with Lunita.”

I leaned my head to the side. “Why are you really letting Boris back?”

“I said why.”

“But...are you *cool* with Boris now?”

“Everyone knows that I am a forgiving lion.”

“Bullshit.” I crawled over to him. “What’s the *real* reason, Kaz?”

“The last time I talked to Lunita...she said that Boris was like Max and Blue.”

I moved his arm and lay my head on his chest. “How?”

He let out a long breath and placed his arm around my waist. “Lunita believed that Boris could tell when you were her.”

I swallowed. “Are you sure about that?”

“I am. Although it is probably because Boris is in love with you, and watches you too damn much—”

“Kaz—”

“Regardless, yesterday David *also* argued for Boris’s return.”

“Oh really?”

“Yes. David wanted me to think about it.”

“And you did?”

“When I woke up alone in my cell. I thought about it long and hard.”

I smirked.

“I would rather have Boris stalking around lovingly monitoring you in the evening, than you out of my bed.”

I looked up at him. “Boris enters Moscow and you will not kill him?”

“I will not.”

“I still don’t trust that.”

“You should.”

“Why?”

“Lunita said if I killed Boris, she would kill David.”

I gritted my teeth. “Fuck her. She better not touch David or anyone else.”

Kaz frowned.

“Don’t look at me that way.”

“You are still mad at Lunita. Why?”

“Are you insane, Kaz? Lunita killed Olga, and while it wasn’t her that put bullets in my guards’ heads, it was because of her that they are dead.” I leaned my head to the side. “Why are *you* not mad with her?”

“Because Lunita is part of you.”

My heart hurt. “She’s not.”

“She is.” He kissed my forehead.

She is not.

I ran my fingers through his sweaty hair. “When will Boris arrive?”

“I let David know this morning. He then got in touch with Maxwell. Apparently, Boris was already close to Moscow.”

I pursed my lips.

“I am sure Misha was hiding him for Maxwell.” Kaz scowled. “Therefore, Boris should be here in less than an hour.”

An excited smile broke out on my face. “Seriously?”

His scowl deepened.

“I missed him.”

“Boris better keep his eyes where they are supposed to be.”

“He will. I will talk to him. I promise.” My stomach twisted, knowing that would be a really uncomfortable conversation. Still, the talk was necessary. Boris could never sneak a glance at our lovemaking again. If he did, Kaz would definitely kill him.

Kaz disrupted my thoughts. “Lunita will be happy that Boris is back.”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh joy. I live to make Lunita happy.”

“Be nice, *mysh*.”

Fuck her.

“Anyway.” Kaz cleared his throat and slipped his fingers along my cheek. “Now it is time for pussy.”

I gave him a sad smile. “It’s not.”

“Are you going to deny me?”

“I am.”

“We should be practicing, *mysh*.”

“For what?”

“It is time to give Emilio and Paolo a sister. That would make our family complete.”

“Dude.” I blinked. “I am not getting pregnant again.”

“You are.”

“Last time, I was pregnant for five hundred years.”

“Mysh, that is a serious over exaggeration.”

“It seemed like forever. I finally have my body back.”

“You always had your body.”

“Max wants to smoke.”

Kaz groaned in annoyance.

“I need a break.”

“You will have New Orleans and our wedding, and then during our honeymoon I am putting a daughter inside of you.”

“Hell no. We can talk about this in like...three years once Emilio is walking and—”

“Three years? Absolutely not. Emilio and his sister should be close in age. Paolo will be a good big brother and watch over them. I have thought this through, mysh.”

“Well, you can think again.”

Someone knocked on the door.

Kaz called out, “We are busy!”

I grinned. “We are not! Come in!”

The door opened.

Kaz groaned again in annoyance.

David peered inside. “Emily, the wet nurse applicants are here. Maxwell is lining them up.”

“I bet Max is lining them up.” I left Kaz’s arms. “If Max is with the applicants, who has Emilio?”

“Baba stole him. Paolo and she are now performing a puppet show for Emilio.”

My heart warmed. “Thanks, David.”

David nodded and stepped to the side.

Still on the floor, Kaz watched me. “Do you think the wet nurse is a good idea? You mentioned that Blue had a problem with it.”

“Yes. I want to get a wet nurse. Valentina told me it would help me a lot, especially for New Orleans and planning the

wedding. This will allow me to fully have my body back while Emilio gets milk rich in antibodies.”

“But a wet nurse?”

“Wet nursing has been going on for centuries.” I straightened my clothes so I wouldn’t look too crazy when I met them. “I’ll get more sleep and be much more mobile—”

“And what will the Lion get?”

“You’re spoiled enough, baby.” I laughed and left the room.

Chapter 38

The Layers of Healing

Kazimir

My men held the double glass doors open.

The air grew thick with the scent of gardenias, oleander, and frangipani that grew around the ornate marble near the garden entrance.

“Come, Haalem!” Paolo raced into the garden and headed toward the fountain.

Two of Paolo’s guards kept his pace.

Barking, Harlem chased after Paolo and his guards. His chocolate brown ears flopped with the movement.

I entered.

My men followed.

Peacefully sleeping, Emilio snuggled close to my chest in the kanga wrap that Olga had given me. His small hands fisted tightly around the soft fabric.

I found myself reassured by the presence of his small body nestled securely against me, knowing that he was safe and sound.

Baba walked on my side and sadly gazed at the kanga. “I miss Olga.”

I tensed. “I miss her too.”

“She will forever remain in my mind.”

My heart hurt too much to respond.

Instead, I guided us forward and took in the beauty of the garden.

The stone pathways wound through the plants and bushes, leading me deeper into the oasis.

Elaborate lion and mouse statues were scattered around the space, their intricate details adding to the enchantment of the garden.

Water trickled along the edges of the statues.

The garden was a feast for the senses, and I savored every moment. The vibrant colors, sweet scents, and gentle sounds of the space were a reminder of the beauty and fragility of life.

Baba let out a long breath. “In fact, I had a dream about Olga last night.”

“What was it about?”

“I sat in this very garden sipping tea and she simply walked in, looking beautiful in a flowing white gown.”

My mood brightened. “As if she was an angel?”

“Yes.” Baba put her view on Emilio as he slept. “She told me to watch over her boys.”

I grinned. “Emilio and Paolo.”

“And you too, Kazimir.”

I widened my eyes.

“She mentioned your name first.”

Sadness seeped into my heart.

“She also told me to thank you for sending all that money to Ama and her village in Ghana.”

I stopped walking and turned to her. “How did you know that? I did not even tell David.”

“So, you did send money?” Baba smirked.

“No one was supposed to know about that.”

“Olga knows.”

“Then...good.” I returned to walking. “Do not tell anyone else.”

“You would like to keep your murderous reputation alive?”

“I do not want people thinking that the Lion has weakened because of love.”

She laughed. “Absolutely no one thinks that.”

“The gardener did.”

“The gardener was a stupid, silly man that fell in love with Emily’s darkness.”

Frowning, I kept on walking and stared at the top of Emilio’s head.

A twinge of anxiety hit me.

I was a father now. My primary instinct was to protect my family, but now I wondered what that truly meant.

Was it simply a matter of ensuring their physical safety, or did it go deeper than that?

Harlem barked.

I looked up to see Paolo and Harlem chasing each other around the fountain. I had no idea who would catch who. His laughter and Harlem’s barking filled the air.

Emilio stirred in my arms, yet he remained asleep.

Baba looked at my son. “Are you ready for New Orleans?”

“I am.”

“It will be a lot.”

I eyed her. “Will it?”

“Do you like onions, Kazimir?”

“When added to meals.”

“A person with Emily’s disorder can be compared to an onion with layers upon layers that need to be peeled back in order to reach the core.”

“Do you *not* think we have already peeled back enough layers?”

“Perhaps, one or two have been pulled back, but there are more.”

I pursed my lips together, worried for my mouse.

Baba continued, “In order for Emily’s healing to occur, each layer must be carefully examined and dealt with, one at a time.”

“And then what happens?”

“Emily will begin to understand the root of her pain.”

“And that will help her heal?”

“It’s a painful process, but yes...she will heal.” Baba sighed. “Just as an onion’s layers can make us cry, the pulling back of trauma’s layers can be overwhelming and difficult to process.”

“But what are you *not* saying, Baba?”

“I am saying everything.”

“You are not.” I scowled. “Does each of my mouse’s personalities represent a different layer of the onion? Are there more besides Lunita?”

“Does it really matter, Kazimir?” Baba shrugged. “If Emily had ten personalities, you would be by her side. If there were a hundred personalities, you would still love her. Regardless, we would still be heading to New Orleans to heal her. Why stress yourself in Moscow?”

“Should I wait to be stressed in New Orleans?”

“You should just remain in the moment *now*.”

I lifted my hand and tenderly ran my fingers along Emilio’s silky curls. “You said *we* would still be heading to New Orleans.”

“I did.”

I shook my head. “You are not invited on this trip.”

Baba opened her mouth in shock. “What ever could you mean?”

“I will not separate you from David. If he remains in Moscow, then you will too.”

“I raised David to be a grown man. My babies are going to New Orleans.” Baba gestured to Emilio and then Paolo. “I will be going too.”

“If something happens to you while we are out there, I cannot be the person to bring that news to David.”

“My bags are packed. You will *not* keep me from going to New Orleans.”

“Baba, I have cells in the bottom of my house and full control of all transportation in this country. You will remain here. Do not push this matter any further.”

“And *I* have the full support and love of a divine spirit.”

I rolled my eyes.

Baba crossed her arms over her chest. “You are a lion, but you are not God. Be mindful of that.”

“And you be mindful that you are not coming to New Orleans.”

“I am. Besides, I cannot remain here with David, Blue, and Giorgio.”

I quirked my brows. “Why not?”

“David has a clear destiny—a beautiful one. It has already been difficult enough to not meddle. With my being gone he will get closer to his *true* destiny.”

“Will Blue come to her senses and—”

“You are to leave Blue alone, Kazimir.”

I grumbled.

Paolo and Harlem left the fountain and raced down the path toward where I had killed the gardener days ago. That should have made me uneasy, yet instead I beamed with pride, knowing that his murder was one way I had solidified the protection of my family.

No one will ever harm or crack the foundation that I have with my mouse and my sons.

As if hearing me, Baba shook her head. “As Emily embarks on her journey of healing, I would like you to also walk down that path.”

“And what do I need to heal?”

“A lot, Kazimir. You also have a darkness within you that must be brightened.”

I led us toward the section of the garden that was my favorite. “You think I became the leader of the Brotherhood due to singing about flowers and sitting around a campfire?”

“I imagine that was not your process.”

“I got the position through death and blood, Baba. Therefore, death and blood will be how I keep it.”

“Yet, it was not death and blood that strengthened the Brotherhood and you. It was your *love* for the Mouse.” Baba’s words hung in the air.

I wished I could punch them away.

We paused in front of a line of Siberian Irises. Majestic, their large and brilliant flowers seemed to command attention with their deep purple and blue shades that radiated against the foliage. The intricate petal patterns were breathtaking, and I couldn’t help but be captivated by them.

Baba spoke, “Let us return to the conversation of New Orleans.”

“What about New Orleans?”

“I have been seeing visions of stringed colorful beads splattered with blood.”

I tensed. “What does that mean?”

“It means that the Lion may roar or Lunita may come out. Or both. Regardless, those visions speak of death and blood, chaos and violence.”

Pressure built in my chest.

“These things do not surprise me. Death and blood is your way, and death and blood is Lunita’s way too. Perhaps, that is

why you understand her more than even the Mouse.”

“You think I understand Lunita?”

“Yes. A lot more than most. However, in New Orleans *my babies* will be with us. Paolo has seen enough violence—bombing and shooting. Also, now Emilio is here and must be sheltered from all of the madness. I am begging you to not *roar* while we are there.”

“And if someone comes for my mouse or kids? What am I to do? Purr?”

“While in New Orleans, I ask that you seek *my* counsel in all things. Do not act on anything, until we have talked.” Baba stared at the ground. “Also...new cards...”

“What?”

“New cards revealed themselves to me this morning. They sat on top of my desk.” Fear filled Baba’s eyes. “I asked David to show me the footage of my office. He got it and we watched the video together. I had to see who brought these cards to me.”

“Who brought them?”

Baba lifted up her view and targeted me with her gaze. “They simply just appeared.”

“What does that mean? Could it have been...Pavel?”

Baba shrugged. “Or Olga or your mother or any spirit. When people pass, some of their essence remains with us.”

“Why?”

“They are there to protect and assist. However, only God knows who it was that brought those cards.”

“What do they look like?”

“They are thick, wooden, and hand painted. I believe these cards should give me special guidance for New Orleans.”

A cold chill ran through me. I still had planned on keeping Baba in Moscow, but now...she had to come. Sighing, I turned

back to the flowers. “When will you do my reading with the new cards?”

“I want to wait until we are in New Orleans.”

“Why?”

“The energy will be different there. It could help.”

I looked around and realized that I had lost sight of Paolo and Harlem. However, I caught giggling and barking among the flowers as they played in the garden. And then I spotted Paolo’s guards running around and playing with them.

Baba got in front of me. A worried expression covered her face. “Kazimir?”

“Yes.”

“You have showed your power as a lion for a long time, roaring in Russia, the States, France, and even Italy.” She gave me a sad smile. “In New Orleans, I would like you to change how you handle problems.”

I wanted to roll my eyes, but I gave Baba her proper respect. “What should you have me do when my family is threatened?”

“As I said before, seek my counsel before reacting.”

I gritted my teeth.

“I do not want more of us to die.”

My heartbeat quickened. “I promise that I will seek your counsel before reacting.”

“Thank you, Kazimir.” Her smile widened. “You have really been showing growth since the birth of Emilio. I also...”

She looked like she was about to cry.

I widened my eyes. “What is wrong, Baba?”

“I...also appreciate that you are finally opening your heart to Paolo.”

I looked away.

“Continue to hold him close to your heart.”

“I am trying to be better, Baba.”

“You are, Kazimir.” Then, Baba touched her head and shivered. “Wait...” She blinked her eyes several times. “No. No.”

Is she getting a vision or something?

“No. No.” She frantically scanned the space, looked at something behind me, and grimaced. “No! Do not...do this!”

“What is wrong?” I checked over my shoulder.

David approached with several men. A curious expression covered his face. “Are you okay, Baba?”

“I saw it. I...already know.” Baba touched her chest. “No. Do not do it, David.”

My number one’s brows furrowed. “Baba...”

“Do not tell him, David. It is not necessary. All is done.”

David blinked. “Baba, I do not know if you are talking about what is on my mind, but if it is...I am just doing my job. What is done is done.”

“You could have ignored the information. Hid it. Anything. Your job is not to make him happy. It is to make him better.” She scowled. “You cannot give the Lion everything he wants.”

I held out my hands. “What are we talking about?”

Baba got between us. “Do not do it, David.”

I walked around her. “What is going on?”

David swallowed. “Baba, it is too late. Most of our men already know.”

She closed her eyes.

I looked at David. “What is going on?”

A neutral expression covered his face. “I have...something that you have wanted.”

Baba turned to me. “Kazimir, we have just talked about your walking on a healing path and not—”

“What does that have to do with David’s information?” I eyed my number one. “Someone tell me what is going on. Now.”

David looked down at the ground. “We have the gardener’s family.”

A mischievous smile spread across my face. “Oh, do we now?”

Baba sneered. “You are better than this, Lion.”

“Actually, I am not.”

David placed his hands in his pockets. “In ten minutes, our men will be picking the family up at the airport along with Boris.”

“Our men? No.” I shook my head. “It is too lovely of a day for the Lion to not go out and welcome them *all* back to Moscow myself.”

Baba pointed at me. “Kazimir, we just talked about your growth—”

“Let us save my growth for New Orleans. For now, I am in Moscow. And examples must always be made.” Already I could feel my fingers itching to grab a gun.

Emilio snored against me.

All must understand...

Images of death and blood spun in my head.

Never fuck with my mouse, and never ever fuck with the love that I have with her!

Chapter 39

Milk

Emily

Now newly showered and dressed, Blue and I headed for the conference room to talk to the wet nurses.

I checked my right and only spotted my regular guards and three new ones. “Eh, Blue. Where’s Giorgio?”

She frowned. “Apparently, Giorgio slipped on ice and hurt his leg. He is resting to let it heal. However, he added his top three guards to your detail.”

I gave her a skeptical look. “Slipped on ice?”

Blue shook her head.

“When did this happen?”

“I was told it was last night.”

“He told you this?”

“No.” Blue sighed. “David informed me.”

“I bet he did.” I put my view on the path ahead. “You think David beat his ass?”

“I hope not.”

I knew an ass whipping was coming. I just didn’t think David would make the first move.

What the hell happened? Did Giorgio say something to piss him off? Or did David get a bit of vodka, lose his patience, and knock Giorgio out.

No wonder Giorgio wasn’t at the memorial service last night.

“I apologize for the inconvenience, Emily.”

“If the bullshit was going to go down, now would be the best time.” I shrugged. “However, they can’t be fighting while we’re gone. Everyone must focus.”

Blue nodded.

“And...as I said before, a decision must be made.”

A tense expression decorated Blue’s face.

“Once the decision is made, Giorgio should stop *slipping* on ice.”

“I agree.”

I was glad I gave Blue the ultimatum to pick one of the men. Clearly, last night had triggered David to do something to Giorgio. Only God knew why or what had truly happened.

Max had claimed that Giorgio had the upper hand in the fight in Italy. Clearly, David won last night.

Giorgio 1. David 1.

The biggest question was who would win the third round? And would that battle involve guns?

Visions of blood filled my head. I saw their bodies mangled, bullet-riddled and lying on the ground.

As I had said before, we were all lucky both guys had kept this problem on a gentlemen’s level. Both surely had the gun power and capacity for violence. If unchecked, shit could truly get out of hand.

By the time we return, this situation had better be settled or I’ll pick for her.

I pushed that bad thought out of my head. “Any word on Lemon?”

“She has her bags packed and is helping the others get everything on the plane.”

“Oh wow. The staff is already loading us up?”

“Yes.”

My nerves flared. “Damn. This is really happening.”

“It is.” Blue cleared her throat. “I am not...happy that we will be separated.”

“Me either, but I want us to return to a Moscow that is safe for Paolo. That’s more important than you having my back in New Orleans.”

“I will find this person and kill them. There will be no problem when you return.”

“Perfect. I know you can do it. Just make sure you have some visuals of the kill.”

Blue looked at me. “You want me to record my killing the person?”

“Hell yes. If this motherfucker wants to get rid of Paolo, then I want to hear his or her screams and see the blood spilling out of his head.”

“Okay.”

I smiled. “Fuck it.”

“Oh.” Blue checked her watch. “Valentina will be arriving in less than five minutes. She already texted that her driver was entering the neighborhood.”

“Excellent.”

As we approached the conference room, I caught feminine chatter.

We got to the door.

Blue opened it.

The first thing I saw was Lemonisha, lounging on the massive table.

Next, I spotted Max, wearing an aqua blue designer suit and looking like he was about to go on a date.

He stood before thirty women dressed in a variety of styles. Some wore flowing velvet or jean dresses. Others had on heavy sweaters. Hair colors varied from dark brown to red, blonde to black. Some had their hair up and others let it fall around their faces.

Max held his hands out and spoke to all of the women, “So, if there are any complaints come to, Papi. I’m going to

handle everything and make sure you're comfortable."

I sucked my teeth and continued forward.

Rubbing his hands together, Max scanned all of them. "Now, I want you all to line up in the back and take off your tops and bras. I need to see what you're working with. Please don't be shy. We are all family in here—"

"No." I continued forward. "Keep your clothes on, please!"

"What?" Max turned to me. "How are we going to see the breasts?"

"Man, if you don't get your ass out of here." I gestured to the door. "Bye."

"Why do I need to go?" Max crossed his arms over his chest.

"Because you don't need to be in here."

Blue chuckled and guided them to the back wall. "This way, please."

The women followed her.

"Come on, Em." Max frowned. "I'm staying."

I placed my hands on my hips and studied him. "Are you going to tell me what happened in Italy with you and Ufuoma?"

"What?" He widened his eyes. "How the fuck did we get on that? We're talking about titties."

"I know you wouldn't be ogling other women's breasts if you were getting married to your *wife*."

"You don't know shit—"

"What happened?"

"It's a very long story."

"You just don't want me to go down there and slice her up."

He shrugged. "That too."

What the fuck went down in Italy with Ufuoma?

“Anyway,” Max looked back at the women, touched his chest, and returned his view to me. “I am here as my nephew’s representative. That’s all. It is a huge sacrifice as an uncle, but I am willing to make it for him.”

“Excuse me?”

“Max Jr. will need the right titty. Not just any titty will go in my nephew’s mouth, and everyone agrees that Max knows titties.” He made a big circle. “Nephew needs something nice and warm. Sweet-smelling. Perfect nipples pointing like bullets. Soft like a pillow.”

“And, Em.” He scowled at me and wagged his finger. “Skin must have some melanin. I see way more vanilla sisters than chocolate sisters in here, but I’ll let that slide if their titties are better. However, high points automatically go to melanin titties. The reason? Slavery.”

I leaned my head to the side.

“Her skin should taste like caramel latte with a hint of vanilla or honey or maybe even green tea. As you can see, I’ve been thinking about this all morning.” He snapped his fingers. “Also, I should be able to bounce a quarter off the nipples. Pop. Pop. If I don’t hear the pop, then she’s out.”

“*You* need to get out.”

“Then, who’s going to suck the milk out?” Max held his hands to the side. “Blue or you? While Blue *may* be down to suck on titties, you are not up for the job. Therefore, I volunteer to take over the duty. I like milk. I eat that shit with my cereal. You know what I’m saying?”

“First of all, Max, no one is even sucking milk out of anyone’s breast. Second of all—”

“Oh, you got nephew fucked up.” Max waved his hand. “Someone has to taste the milk—”

“Their milk has already been tested—”

“What the fuck is some lab to Uncle Max?”

“Max, I’m not doing this with you—”

“You need a skilled individual to suck on titties and here I am. Lemonisha and I cleared our schedule, and this is how you treat us.”

“Lemonisha can stay. *You* can go.” I grinned. “And no one is tasting the milk, Max. Have you lost your mind?”

“But, someone has to taste their titties?”

A feminine voice sounded behind him with a heavy Russian accent. “That is why *I* am here.”

Huh?

We turned.

Valentina greeted me. Her long blonde hair was up in a bun. She wore designer jeans and a beige cashmere shirt with suede heeled boots. Surprisingly, upon her beautiful face, she had a black eye.

I pointed at it. “How did that happen?”

“Do not ask. It will only make me fly back to Saint Petersburg to end a ballerina’s career.”

No way. Ava did that?

“Anyway.” Valentina gazed at the women. “Hmmm. This is quite a selection. In fact, everyone looks quite tasty. I am glad I skipped breakfast.”

I blinked. “Wait. hold up. No one is sucking milk out of anybody today—”

“This is bullshit.” Max scowled at me. “You want to kick *me* out, but let the *Pussy Bandit* stay.”

“Pussy Bandit?” Valentina winked and headed away. “I like that name.”

I called after her. “I am serious Valentina. No sucking.”

Max rubbed his forehead. “Why would you let *her* help, Em?”

“Valentina told me that she had ten wet nurses in the past so I figured she would be helpful.”

“*Ten* wet nurses.” Max pulled out a joint. “Come on, Em. Use your mind. You know her daughter only needs one or two. Who you think the other wet nurses were for?”

“You’re being ridiculous.”

“Bullshit. Valentina, is nasty in the bedroom. I can tell you some shit that would make you never shake her hand again—”

“I don’t want to know anything.”

“Damn.” Max watched Valentina and whistled. “My archnemesis, the Pussy Bandit strikes again.”

I chuckled.

“Oh well. I’ll take this loss.” He frowned at her walking off. “At least, you will finally get to smoke with me again.”

“Oh yeah.” Sarcasm laced my voice. “That’s the most important thing about finding a wet nurse. My ability to use drugs with you.”

“Play if you want, Em. I got a couple of blunts rolled up just for the special occasion of you and me, smoking. They are all packed in my luggage. When we hit New Orleans, you and I go off to Bourbon street smoke, drink, and fuck up all the strip clubs.”

I smiled.

“And don’t invite Kazimir to our first session. Dude spits all over the weed.”

“He is going to come, Max. Are you afraid Kaz will show you out on the dancefloor.”

Max considered it and smiled. “Last night, drunk Kazimir was the shit. Fuck it. If he comes, you got to let me get him all types of fucked up.”

“We’ll see.”

Far off, Valentina clapped her hands and spoke in Russian. “*Take off your shirts and bras!*”

I opened my mouth in shock. “What the fuck?”

“I want to see all of your breasts.” Valentina clapped her hands again. *“I must touch them.”*

Max laughed. “I don’t know what she is saying, but I bet it’s about seeing those titties.”

I groaned in annoyance.

“See what I mean? Pussy Bandit.”

Jesus Christ.

“No. No.” I headed off. “Bye, Valentina. I no longer need your help either. You and Max are out of here.”

She spun around and pouted. “What did *I* do?”

“I said no sucking.”

“Alright, but we must see the breasts. How would we know if the nipple is proper for my sweet nephew?”

“You both are trying to get charges up against me—”

“Charges? What is this?” Valentina widened her eyes. “What are you saying?”

“Sexual assault charges.”

“That is not a thing in the Brotherhood.”

I pointed to the door. “I no longer need your help. Go ahead and follow Max out the room, please.”

Still chuckling, Max left.

“I am Emilio’s aunt. I must *see* the breasts for myself. I must *feast* on—”

“Girl, you know I love you but...” I pointed to the door. “I will see you at the airport this evening. We can share a nice glass of wine and laugh about this.”

“But—”

“I’m serious.”

Valentina huffed and headed away.

I turned back to Blue. “Okay. Now that we have those two clowns out of the way. What should we *actually* do?”

Blue gave me a sad smile. “Honestly, Valentina and Maxwell were *sort of* right. We really should be checking out their nipples and breasts. Looking at the shapes and sizes.”

I groaned in annoyance. “Fine. I’ll do it.”

Chapter 40

The Final Step

Emily

An hour passed. I eliminated ten women and experienced great discomfort as I told them goodbye.

To me, it sucked to fire women because of the look of their breasts. I felt like I was *body shaming* them. I imagined the women going home, rushing to the bathroom, snatching up their shirts, and assessing their breasts with tears as they tried to figure out what was wrong with them.

The next hour, Emilio's doctor arrived with the lactation specialist, Dr. Ivy, who had a gentle voice and inviting smile. Together, they further narrowed the group down to five women.

Then, we needed Emilio to make the final decision. Blue ordered his guards to bring him up.

Minutes passed, and then Baba entered, carrying Emilio in her arms.

Harlem and Paolo followed, covered in dirt and grass.

I curved my lips into a smile. "You two have been enjoying yourself today."

Paolo bobbed his head. "Hunting."

"Awesome." I lowered, gave Paolo a big hug, and then ruffled Harlem's ears. "Are you ready to go on a big trip today?"

Paolo bobbed his head.

"Already, you have seen more places than I had at your age." I kissed him on the cheek, rose, and then turned to Baba.

To my surprise, she had a sad expression as she handed Emilio to me.

I cradled Emilio in my arms. "Are you okay, Baba?"

“I am.”

“But...did something happen?”

“Ask your lion.” Without saying anything else, she grabbed Paolo’s small hand and guided him away.

Wagging his tail, Harlem hurried after them.

O-kay. What the fuck is Kaz up to now?

Blue and I watched her exit.

Emilio gurgled.

I smiled at him and then turned to Blue. “What do you think is wrong with Baba?”

“I have no idea, but I will look into it.”

“Is Kaz here?”

“I will find that out too.”

“Good.” I slowly rocked Emilio with my arms, happy that he was in a good mood and not fussing. “Blue, we are hours from leaving, I don’t need any bullshit before we go.”

“I am on it.” Blue pulled out her phone and left the room.

Dr. Ivy came over. “Are we ready, Emily?”

I nodded.

She carefully took Emilio from me.

He began to whimper.

“Oh, baby.” I made sure I remained in his view. “We just need you to do something.”

Dr. Ivy rocked him. “Mr. Solonik.”

I smirked.

Dr. Ivy smiled at him. “It is time for *you* to pick, and this is a very important decision. You will be with this person a lot.”

Nervousness surged through me. Then, a sharp pang of jealousy knotted in my chest.

The idea of another woman putting her breast in my son's mouth suddenly hit me. It was odd how I hadn't realized that *clear fact* until this moment.

Remember. Breastmilk will be better for him than formula.

I couldn't remember much of my childhood, but I guessed that my parents didn't have the grand resources to hire a wet nurse like I did.

And I doubted that my mother even researched milk and how to give me the best nutrients.

But I had an insurmountable number of resources at my fingertips, I would use it all to give Emilio a better life than I had.

While formula milk had been good enough for me, my son would get better.

And...I will be better than my parents...in every way.

Plus, there were other things.

I thought back to what Delphine had said to me.

"You got to stop breastfeeding too." Delphine crunched on something as if she were snacking on chips or nuts. "What I'll be giving you and putting inside your body, you don't want that to seep into the milk and have that baby grow up different."

I shuddered at the memory.

What the hell was this woman going to give me?

My heart raced.

Stop it. Focus on now.

Sighing, I walked over with Dr. Ivy and Emilio.

And the final process began.

One by one the women sat in my rocking chair, brought my squirming son to their breast, and guided his tiny mouth into place with gentle fingers.

For most of them, Emilio cried and twisted his head away, refusing their attempts. He simply was not having it. Loud

cries bellowed from his little lips.

Oh, baby.

I headed over to get him.

Dr. Ivy held up her hand. “It is alright, Emily. This may be hard to watch, but this is how it must be done.”

“Maybe, I’m making a mistake.”

“Emilio will pick soon.”

I swallowed down my fear.

Soon, Dr. Ivy proved to be correct.

Two wet nurses passed Emilio’s test. They both easily calmed him down, found the correct angles, and coaxed him into suckling.

Emilio drank from both and by the second one, he fell asleep.

My little lion.

Even more intriguing, the two women that Emilio chose happened to be the only ones with my dark brown complexion. I wondered if their skin color was what made Emilio more comfortable, or perhaps it was all in my mind.

“It appears that we have tired him out.” Dr. Ivy handed Emilio over to me. “But, he did an amazing job.”

I cradled my son and studied the two women.

Will they be good people? Was Blue’s process enough?

I shivered, held Emilio closer to me, and studied them.

The first was a curvy black woman with fiery red hair that cascaded down her back in loose waves. Her features were striking, with high cheekbones and full lips.

The second woman had sleek black hair pulled back in a tight bun, and her smooth skin was flawless. She had a regal air about her, with a strong jawline and piercing brown eyes.

Dr. Ivy stood next to me. “Emily, do you have any questions for them?”

I looked at the red-haired women. “What is your name?”

An accent laced her words, but I couldn’t pick up the origin. “My name is Abena.”

“And where are you from?”

“I grew up in Ghana. My mother is a midwife. Her work brought her to Russia.”

“And you have experience with breastfeeding?”

“I have helped countless mothers and babies.”

While it was possible for a woman to lactate if she was not pregnant. Inducing lactation tended to involve a complex process that usually involved hormone-mimicking drugs.

Most likely, these women had kids which made me wonder about that. Kaz and I flew around a lot. It would mean that they might be away from their children most of the year. I didn’t like the sound of separating a mother from her kids.

I raised my eyebrows. “How many children do you have?”

Her bottom lip quivered. “I...no longer have my child.”

Oh no.

I quirked my brows.

“She passed away at...two years old.”

My heart broke. I couldn’t even comprehend the pain she must have been going through.

I also didn’t know if I could breastfeed other babies after that. It would have made me insane.

But, Blue made sure that all the women had their mental health checked out, so she had to be on an even psychological playing field.

Dr. Ivy gave her a sad smile. “And how did your daughter pass, Abena?”

I widened my eyes, not wanting to make the poor woman go there.

Abena's voice went low. "She was bitten by an infected mosquito. Next thing I knew...she had a high fever with shaking chills and pain. Soon...she fell into a coma."

Oh my God.

My eyes watered.

This is so fucked up.

Dr. Ivy slowly nodded. "It was malaria?"

Abena nodded her head.

I shivered. "I'm so sorry."

"It has been six years. Healing has come." Abena swallowed. Her quiet strength was evident in the way she held herself, with a calm confidence that was both reassuring and inspiring. "And sometimes I still feel her near."

"I'm sure she is."

"Now...I have dedicated my life to children." Abena's eyes sparkled with warmth and kindness. "I love being around other kids and watching them grow. I believe...my daughter would be happy with that decision."

All business, Dr. Ivy gestured to the other woman. "And you?"

The second woman stepped forward. For some reason, she appeared older to me, but I wasn't sure. It didn't show on that flawless face, but I could see the maturity in her eyes.

I studied her. "What is *your* name?"

"Chidi." She smiled. "I grew up in Nigeria. At eighteen, I became pregnant with my son."

I widened my eyes.

"He is now twenty and at University."

I smirked.

Alright. She's 38, but looks 28.

Chidi continued, "I began working with a lactation program that brought me here. I have served as a wet nurse for

three different families. As you will see from all of my reference letters, they were very happy with me. Many cried when I left.”

I thought of Olga and could see how that could happen.

Dr. Ivy turned to me. “Do you have any other questions, Emily?”

To my surprise, I talked to them more, still trying to figure out which one I would pick to be a part of our family.

Abena spoke of her upbringing in Ghana, where she had learned the value of hard work and determination from her parents. She shared stories of her community, of the joys and struggles that came with life in a small village. Her passion for helping others shone through in everything she said.

I really like her.

Chidi, on the other hand, spoke of her journey to Russia, of the challenges she had faced as a black woman in a foreign country. She spoke of the discrimination she had encountered, but also of the strength and resilience she had developed as a result. Her determination to make a better life for herself and her family was evident in her every word.

She reminds me so much of Olga.

As the interview came to a close, I knew that either woman would be an excellent choice as a wet nurse for Emilio.

They both exuded warmth and kindness, and their experience and passion for helping others made them the perfect candidates.

Blue arrived and stood on my right.

Dr. Ivy watched me. “Which one would you like to hire, Emily?”

I swallowed. “I want to hire both. Is that odd?”

Both women appeared pleased.

Blue scowled.

Dr. Ivy shrugged. “A back up wet nurse would help, especially if one is sick or unable to be there for whatever reason.”

Or if Lunita somehow gets free and decides to kill one.

Unfortunately, that was a heartbreaking possibility that I would have to consider.

Don't think about that. Lunita will be gone soon. Nothing will happen to these women.

I stiffened and forced myself to smile. “Welcome to my family, Abena and Chidi. I hope you enjoy the...adventures we will have together.”

They beamed and nodded in agreement.

“In fact, tonight...we are flying out to the States.”

Abena blinked.

Chidi opened her mouth in shock.

“I suggest you pack. Blue will make sure our driver picks you up and has you at the airport on time.”

Dr. Ivy held up one finger. “Before you two leave, I still have more things to discuss and lots of paperwork to sign.”

They nodded and headed off with her.

The scowl remained on Blue's face. “*Two* wet nurses?”

“I couldn't pick.”

She watched them. “I am sending more people to monitor the both of them.”

“Cool.” I gazed down at Emilio as he slept. “You have two wet nurses, baby. You are going to be more spoiled than your father.”

Blue's voice wavered. “Emily.”

I looked up. “What's up?”

“An hour ago, Kaz and David left to pick up Boris from the airport.”

Cold fear sliced through me. “And now where are they?”

“Our people are still searching.”

“Did you ask the Mosquito to help?”

“Misha adamantly explained that his people will not be involved in the Lion’s escapades.”

Fuck. That means that Kaz is on some bullshit.

I shook my head. “Kaz said he wouldn’t hurt Boris. I have to trust him on that.”

“I believe the Lion plans to scare him.” Blue continued, “However, Misha also wanted you to know that Rolan and Mrs. Jones have just arrived in New Orleans and will be waiting for you all there.”

“That’s cool.” I headed off with Emilio.

Blue remained by my side.

Terror surged through me. “But what the hell is Kaz doing with Boris?”

Chapter 41

A Cold Heart

Kazimir

We took my new Rolls-Royce Cullinan out for its first spin.

On the day my mouse gave birth to Emilio, I gave her tons of gifts.

Weeks later when she was fully healed, she surprised me with the Cullinan.

The gesture shocked me.

Emily had truly outdone herself.

This Rolls-Royce Cullinan was not like any other. It was a one-of-a-kind masterpiece gift. The exterior boasted a distinctive lion-themed paint job, with a deep, majestic golden hue as the base color, accentuated by intricate hand-painted black stripes inspired by a lion's mane.

The Spirit of Ecstasy emblem on the hood was customized to incorporate a lion's head, symbolizing strength and power.

Upon opening the coach doors, a rich, warm fragrance of the finest Russian leather greeted me. The seats were upholstered in supple, cream-colored leather with intricate lion embroidery in gold thread on the headrests.

The cabin featured custom wood inlays of ebony and gold leaf.

Of course, it had a custom audio system delivering crystal-clear sound, and was fitted with a vodka chiller and an exquisite humidifier for my cigars.

I guessed that she spent a good half a million of her money to spoil me.

When Maxwell had arrived to meet Emilio and spend time with us, he spotted the car in my huge garage, whistled, and bestowed it with the name, *Mufasa*. It had been a long time

since I had seen the movie, but I thought that was a perfect nickname.

As we drove down the winding roads, I couldn't help but feel like a king.

I turned to David and grinned. "Incredible. Right?"

"The Mouse keeps impressing me."

"All will be jealous of Mufasa." I leaned back in my seat.

Oh, mysh. The things I will do to you on the plane tonight...

David's phone rang.

He picked up the call and spoke to the person.

And I continued to relish the smooth ride as we headed out of Rublyovka neighborhood, cruising by lavish mansions. Lush landscape, manicured gardens, and towering trees lined the streets.

The driver navigated down the winding roads.

David got off the phone and placed it in his pocket. "Our men finished preparing the location you wanted."

A wicked smirk spread across my face.

"We are heading to this place now, Kazimir. Boris is already there surrounded by our men."

"And the idiot gardener's family?"

"They are being transported to the location now, and will be there before we arrive."

"And my tools?"

"All is there, from blow torches to hand saws. Different shaped knives, spikes, hammers, and even a few loaded guns just in case you get tired toward the end."

"Excellent."

The day was turning out to be so perfect I almost started whistling a tune.

I gazed out the window.

The well-maintained roads of Rublyovka offered a pleasant drive. Other luxury cars passed us driven either by their affluent owners or chauffeurs. Regardless, all took a look at Mufasa, surely envious.

Mysh, I am going to stuff you with this cock the whole time we are hovering over the clouds.

We headed out of the residential section and traveled along the picturesque streets filled with high-end boutiques, gourmet restaurants, and luxurious spas.

Soon, we left the Rublyovka behind and gradually transitioned back into the bustling cityscape of Moscow. The contrast between the peaceful, upscale environment of Rublyovka and the energy of the city was striking.

David spoke, “Do you think you will need refreshments and moments to take a break?”

Grinning, I shook my head. “With this, I will not get tired.”

David really is my best number one.

While Giorgio and Blue had done a good job of hiding the family, neither could ever beat David.

How can I reward him? Perhaps, he needs a special car too.

I made a note to ask my mouse. She has proven to be talented with doing all of the right things for people.

We drove further through Moscow, and I gazed out of the window.

The transition from winter to spring in Moscow was a gradual, yet captivating process. Day by day, the city emerged from the long, frigid months of winter. The snow and ice blanketing Moscow’s streets, parks, and rooftops were slowly melting.

Excitement bubbled within me. “We cannot be in New Orleans for too long. I want my mouse and sons to experience spring in Moscow.”

David threaded his hands in his lap. “It is quite the sight.”

One of the most striking aspects of the transition from winter to spring in Moscow was the reemergence of vibrant colors. The once-barren trees sprouted to buds, eventually unfurling their leaves and filling the city with various shades of green. Flowering trees and shrubs—cherry blossoms, lilacs, and forsythias—burst into bloom, adding a delicate touch of beauty to our urban landscape.

But that was not all.

As the temperatures continued to rise, Moscow’s parks and public spaces came alive with activity. Residents eagerly shed their heavy winter coats and flocked outdoors to enjoy the sunshine and fresh air. The city’s numerous parks—Gorky and Kolomenskoye—transformed into bustling hubs of activity.

Oh. This will be quite the spring.

In my mind, I pictured my mouse and sons having a picnic among the flowers, laughing and playing.

I turned to David. “When you lived in Russia as a kid, did you spend a lot of time in Moscow?”

“Baba and I moved around a lot, but we did spend three years in Moscow.”

“So, you were able to enjoy our spring?”

“I did. My favorite part was all the birds returning and filling the air with their songs.”

“I cannot wait for Emilio to hear the birds for the first time. I want to see his face—those beautiful brown eyes popping open with curiosity.” I chuckled.

“I am sure it will be a sight.” David’s phone rang again. This time, he checked the device, frowned, and then placed it back in his pocket.

He is not going to answer that one.

I quirked my brows. “Who is it?”

“Baba.”

The smile left my face.

David frowned. “I believe Baba is still upset. This is her fifth call since we left.”

“Yet...” I shrugged. “This was a great surprise before I left for New Orleans, David. I am truly happy with you as always.”

A tense expression covered David’s face.

“One must not forget that an example needed to be made.”

All the enjoyment of the day dissolved into blazing rage. The gardener had not only violated my mouse and disrespected my relationship, *he* took a *shit* on my authority as the Lion.

Surely, by this time, others throughout the world would have heard of what he had done. Everyone from the Brotherhood to the Yakuza and even Corsican would be watching for what was next.

Would the gardener’s death be enough to solidify that I was not to be fucked with?

No true answer came to mind.

All I knew was that I needed to assert my dominance and demonstrate my true capacity for violence and retribution. This display of power served a crucial role in strengthening my position. The blood spilled today would discourage others from messing with my mouse and silence anyone that was currently questioning my leadership.

I was confident that I was making the right decision.

But...when I looked at King David, something tugged in my chest.

Suddenly, his face served as a canvas of concern—creased eyebrows furrowing inward and casting shadows over his deep-set eyes. The corners of his mouth were tugged downwards, as if weighed down by the gravity of his thoughts. His eyes darted back and forth in restless motion, betraying a sense of unease and anxiety. A sheen of sweat glistened on his

forehead, highlighting the tension that gripped his facial muscles.

I pursed my lips together.

Threads of doubt cracked through some of my confidence.

The intensity radiating off David seemed to hint at something deeper and more complex than what was initially apparent.

“You found the family because I demanded it. This is the sign of a good number one.” I studied him. “But, what do *you* think about my killing the gardener’s family?”

“Many fear the Lion due to your constantly demonstrating the severe consequences of disobedience, betrayal, and even... incompetence.” He didn’t turn my way. “You always send a clear message. Killing his family would be on par with who you are.”

“This is what Baba—and I fear—even Emily will never understand. Hugs and kisses are fine, but in the Brotherhood, it is about death and blood. As I said before, no one with the gardener’s blood can live after what he has done.”

The line of David’s jaw twitched.

“He knew who I was.” I shrugged. “Did he not think of the consequences? Who is truly the selfish person in this situation—him or me?”

David pursed his lips together.

Still...I felt it necessary to further defend my choice. “My show of force today will intimidate and discourage anyone else who might consider touching my mouse or even attacking my family.”

“It would be swift, decisive, and violent action.”

“Correct. In our criminal underworld, reputation is *everything*. A man that is seen as weak, indecisive, or vulnerable will quickly lose the respect of his people and become a target for more enemies.”

David watched me, yet...I still did not think he was truly convinced.

I frowned. "What?"

"You think that people *now* see you as weak, after what the gardener did?"

"I allowed a man to come into my house and fuck my mouse while I slept peacefully in my bed." Tensing, I looked out the window. "Is that not weak, David?"

"That is not an easy question to answer, Kazimir. Your situation is very different than other stories of bosses' significant others cheating on them. The Mouse was not a *willing* participant with the gardener. All know that. And then there's Lunita, who many know about as well."

I put my focus back on him. "Go ahead."

"The Mouse is not a weak woman. She is just as dangerous as you at times. I believe many in our criminal underworld clearly understand that fact."

"They know how strong Emily is?"

"They do."

Pride swelled in my heart.

"They also know how much more dangerous she is. Stories have been spreading about the Mouse's love of slicing bodies and cutting off penises."

I grinned. "She still scares them?"

"I am sure it terrifies *anyone* with a penis." David raised one finger. "And you are in love with her. You boldly sleep next to her with no fear for your own penis."

My grin widened. "Go on."

"If all know that Emily and you are a dangerous force to fear. Does that not mean that perhaps...there is no need for *more* examples when it comes to this situation with the gardener?"

"How so?"

“The only person that would try to have sexual relations with Emily now would be someone who has no idea who she is. That means they are outside of *our* world, like the gardener was.”

I spoke through clenched teeth, “Still, he should have been scared.”

“I am sure he was.”

“Not scared enough.” Rage rose within me.

David let out a long breath. “However...”

I quirked my brows. “Yes?”

“What do you think of what Baba said earlier?”

I leaned my head to the side. “What do you mean?”

“She said that my job is *not* to make you happy. I wonder...if...to be a better number one to you...I should be less accommodating in certain situations.”

“Hmmm. David, I must be truthful with you.” I put my view back on the window. “I very much like being happy. I will never be the person to argue against it.”

“But, is that my job, Kazimir?”

“Baba tends to be correct on many things, but I am a stubborn fool in love. That I can admit.” I never looked back at him. “What the gardener did...”

Pressure built in my chest.

I cleared my throat. “It hurt me.”

David remained silent.

“Now, I want to hurt more people.” I shook my head. “So...I do not know the answer with this situation. Maybe, Baba is correct. Or...perhaps, I am the one that is truly right. Let us see how today goes.”

Silence filled the space. Surely, the both of us were contemplating the many questions of today.

Damn you, Baba for making David second guess me, and even...making me second guess myself.

We continued to drive through Moscow.

Sunlight filtered through the trees. Icicles dripped from branches, and my mind wandered back to how the world outside was slowly awakening from its wintry slumber.

Did the same change happen with humans?

I had always thought of how the phases of the moon affected us, but what about the seasons. And even more... could this change truly happen to me?

All would agree that I possessed one of the coldest hearts in the world. I had prided myself on that fact and did my best to maintain that freezing violent interior for so long.

But Emily had come into my life, and now I had Emilio and Paolo too.

How much had I already changed?

And more importantly...should I change even more?

Should my frozen heart further thaw?

And if it did, what would that mean for my rule over the Brotherhood?

What would it mean when it came to protecting my family?

I gritted my teeth.

This metamorphosis of the world around me stirred a sense of contemplation deep within my soul.

Should I follow the Earth's lead?

Should I embrace a season of change?

With the birth of my youngest son and the gentle touch of my mouse's heart, I found myself standing at the precipice of a new beginning, one that offered the chance to leave behind the frosty shackles of my murderous past or tighten that coldness further around me.

Always it comes back to that choice of...to kill or not to kill...

I thought back to what the gardener had done.

My heart ached.

I do not want to change. I want the gardener's spirit to look down from the gates of heaven and cry as I torture his family.

Meanwhile, Baba argued about my need for growth and change.

But, those ideas triggered my very core to tremble. For me to act with peace and forgiveness would be to journey into the realms of the unknown. I didn't like uncertainty.

I understood violence, but forgiveness...that was something I did not have a lot of experience with.

My heart was not like my mouse's. Hers was a complex tapestry of evolving emotions. She made her choices based off emotion. If Emily killed, it meant that someone she loved had been in danger.

I thought back to how she had viciously murdered the female assassin sent to kill Paolo. There had been no forgiveness in Emily's eyes in that moment. It had not been her intention to present an example to anyone. She simply refused to let that woman breathe anymore. And the only reason the other assassin remained alive was to help Blue find the main person.

Once she did, only God knew what Emily would do to her.

But...Emily did change my heart a little.

I bombed less and made sure to keep the number of innocent victims down.

And...business did improve. But could I point to that for the improvement?

My head hurt.

Had I not picked up the gun, I might have been some sort of philosopher studying the true essence of humanity. Questioning the possibilities of personal transformation.

But, I am the Lion, not a philosopher. An example must be made.

David disrupted my thoughts. “On another note, everything is ready for the trip. The plane is packed with everyone’s bags. After you are...done, I plan to have you go straight to the plane.”

“Oh.” Shock hit me. I pushed any thoughts of change out of my head and turned to David. “Straight to the plane? Then, I will be off soon.”

“Very soon.”

And I will have to say goodbye to you.

I swallowed.

David gave me a sad smile. “Do you think you will need something else?”

“I cannot think of anything.”

David nodded.

“But...”

He raised his eyebrows.

“I must say, David. . I will miss you.”

David smirked. “Do not worry, Kazimir. We will talk at least three times a day.”

I gave him a mocking grin. “Just make sure it is on video.”

“Of course.” David winked and then chuckled. “I would not want you to miss *my face*.”

I wanted to say more, but couldn’t. If I did...I might get too emotional.

Maybe, my heart wasn’t as cold as I thought.

Never had I cared so much for a number one in my life.

My nerves flared as I thought of our separation.

“Be careful, David.”

“I will be.”

“Whatever you need from anyone, you will get it. They know that you are the Lion’s Roar.”

David laughed. “The Lion’s Roar?”

I didn’t laugh with him. “Yes. I just came up with that.”

“Well,” he chuckled again. “I like that. I will be sure to remind anyone who may doubt my power.”

“Be sure to do that.”

Nothing can happen to you.

The car continued its journey and I went back to pondering the ever-changing nature of the world.

I found myself lost in thoughts of transformation and the possibility of my own metamorphosis.

As the ice thawed and spring breathed new life into Moscow, I couldn’t help but feel the stirrings of change within me as well.

But could I reconcile the man I have been with the man that Baba and my mouse wanted me to become?

And again, would that be enough to secure the future of my family and the Brotherhood?

These questions weighed heavily on my heart, as I faced the delicate balance between love and power.

Would this example of violence benefit my new family?

Or would it ultimately be my undoing?

Plus, I wondered if it was even possible for someone like me—with a heart forged in the cold, brutal world of the Brotherhood—to truly change.

Was it within my nature to soften and embrace the warmth of love and family?

Or was I destined to remain entrenched in the darkness of my past, forever bound by the cold and unforgiving code of the Brotherhood?

Fear sliced through me.

I fisted my hands in my lap.

We will see.

Chapter 42

The Coroner

Kazimir

My driver pulled Mufasa up to Dolgov Vechnost Funeral Home.

As soon as we stopped, David left the car and held the door open for me. “I received a text that the gardener’s family is definitely inside with our men. All are waiting for you.”

“Are you sure my blow torch is in there?”

David nodded. “One must never forget the blow torch.”

Grinning, I stepped out of the car.

Snow crackled under my feet.

Cool air nipped at my skin.

“And what do you think is on Boris’s mind while he looks at the gardener’s family?”

“He is probably wondering what is going on and is terrified.”

“I bet he is.” I gazed at the funeral home.

Set against the backdrop of a crisp, clear day, the grand marble building stood as an imposing yet elegant monument to Moscow’s elite.

I couldn’t help but marvel at its opulence. “Did you ever hear stories in the Brotherhood about a man named the Coroner?”

“I did not.”

“My mother loved to tell me stories about him. His name was Bogdan Sidorov.” I headed forward. My footsteps echoed softly on the snow-covered cobblestone pathway. “He grew up on the outskirts of Saint Petersburg. His mother was a nurse. Meanwhile, his father was a skilled mortician. Perhaps this explained why death fascinated Bogdan so much.”

“Due to his fascination, I am sure Bogdan did well in the Brotherhood.”

“Oh yes. He quickly gained a reputation for his ability to make bodies disappear. In fact, it was my father who named him the Coroner.”

David kept my pace. “Did you ever meet him?”

“I did. He was cold man, and I am not just talking about his attitude. His hands were freezing cold when they shook my little fingers. And even the room seemed to...freeze any time he entered. As a kid, I would always button up my coat and stand closer to my mother, terrified of him.”

We approached the entrance.

David grabbed the brass door handle and pulled it open. “Whatever happened to the Coroner?”

I stepped inside and was immediately overcome with a sense of awe. Classical music hummed in the background of the space. Gleaming marble floors sparkled beneath my feet. Heavy brocade curtains framed the windows. The perfume of freshly cut flowers and polished wood filled my nostrils.

The high ceiling held a large chandelier that dripped with crystals.

“Bogdan navigated our dark world for a long time, earning a reputation for ruthlessness and cunning violence that few dared to challenge.” I continued forward. “And then one day, he met a woman named Alina. She was a talented artist that lived in Samara.”

“Baba always told me that some of Russia’s most famous artists and writers lived in Samara.”

“It must be true.” I shrugged. “However, my mother claimed that Alina had eyes that held the promise of a thousand sunsets.”

“She sounds breathtaking.”

“She must have been, because soon Bogdan put his guns down and dedicated his life to only loving her.”

“No more Brotherhood?”

“No more violence either.” I smiled. “However, Bogdan did not let go of death.”

“How did he hold onto it?”

I gestured to the funeral home. “This is his place.”

“Oh.”

A tall man approached, wearing a dark black suit and black shirt.

I leaned my head toward David. “And this is Bogdan and Alina’s son, Maksim. He handles the darker aspects of our operations. For example, the disposal of bodies.”

Maksim approached us and extended his hand. “Welcome, Kazimir.”

“I hope all is well.” I shook his hand. Unlike his father, Bogdan who had passed away years ago, his fingers were warm to the touch.

Maksim’s gaze went to David. “Is this your new number one?”

“Aww.” I widened my eyes. “Has it been that long since I have visited you?”

“It has. Actually, the last time you came here. Sasha was by your side.”

“Then, it has been a very long time because Sasha is gone.”

“I did hear of Sasha’s demise.” Terror covered Maksim’s face. “I also saw it too on the television.”

Moscow News channels had made sure to show many blurred images of Sasha’s hanging dead body for several days, no doubt enjoying the higher viewer ratings.

Maksim gave David a sad smile. “I hope that you are enjoying your job and do better.”

“I plan to.”

“All blessings to you then. Let us return to business.” Maksim guided us through the lobby and past the viewing rooms.

As we walked further into the huge funeral home, we passed through a serene courtyard on our right filled with carefully a manicured garden. Already, spring was showing its face out there. There was definitely more greenery than snow. The melody of water trickling sounded around us.

Next, he led us out of the courtyard’s garden, back into the funeral home, and down a long hallway.

“I must say, Maxim.” I scanned the space. “I am always impressed when I visit.”

“It was my father’s aim to provide our clients with a beautiful and dignified place to say goodbye to their loved ones.”

“He did a good job.”

However, I wondered how much of the décor was due to Bogdan’s artist wife, Alina. On the walls, someone had painted realistic images of angels flying amongst the heavens.

Did she do that?

“The space I am taking you to is our most popular viewing room.” Maxim beamed with pride. “It can hold up to two hundred guests and has state-of-the-art audio and video equipment.”

“You have chosen well.”

“Nothing but the best for the Lion.”

I nodded.

Minutes later, Maksim escorted us into the large viewing room.

Natural light streamed in from the large windows, illuminating the space in a warm, golden glow.

Instantly, I caught sight of my torture tools—blow torch, pliers, ice picks, sledgehammers, and so much more. A thrilling sensation surged through me.

I rubbed my hands together. “Very good job, David.”

To my shock, he stirred.

Then, his face returned to that canvas of concern.

I will not worry about him. David will soon understand that I am right, and Baba is wrong.

I returned to scanning the space.

Next to my table of torture tools, three beautiful caskets lay in the center of the room—each one was a masterpiece of craftsmanship.

Plush chairs and floral arrangements surrounded the caskets.

And several feet away from the caskets, a family of ten huddled together and sobbed. Their faces were a mixture of fear and desperation.

I put my full attention on them.

They inched away and trembled.

David sighed and got to my side.

I studied them.

The family had blonde hair just like the gardener. Today, their faces were pale as if they had lost many nights of sleep, and their clothes were ripped and dirty, as if someone had dragged them through a field.

“Enjoy, Kazimir.” Maksim gave me a half bow.

“I plan to enjoy myself.”

Maksim left.

I spotted the middle-aged couple in the center of the trembling family.

This must be the idiot’s parents.

The older man was over six feet tall. He had his arms wrapped around what I assumed was his wife, who could not have been more than four feet tall. Tears flew freely down his cheeks.

I tilted David's way. "The gardener said his mother was sick. She does not look sick to me."

"I am sure he lied. Had I been in his position...I might have lied too...just so you would not kill me."

"Hmmm."

Another woman on her side turned her head toward two teenagers. Fast, she shoved them behind her, looked at me, and whimpered. "*Why are you doing this? What do you want? We will give you anything.*"

I ignored the woman and put my view back on the gardener's mother. Her eyes were red and swollen from crying.

Meanwhile, the other adults who could have been the gardener's siblings or cousins began to one-by-one beg for their lives.

A tall blonde woman dropped to the ground and kneeled. "*Please, we still do not know what our brother Konstantin has done to put us in danger. How can we make up for this?*"

Tension thickened in my shoulders.

"*We will do anything!*"

"*Kill me and let the rest of my family go!*"

My jaw tightened.

"*We have a house. It is yours!*"

"*There are children. Please do not harm them.*"

Pushing their pleas out of my mind, I approached the long table covered in my tools, picked up a pair of white plastic gloves, and slipped them onto my hands.

One of the family members shrieked.

David's phone rang. Sighing, he pulled it out, checked the screen, sighed again, and went to the side to answer it.

I eyed him.

That better not be Baba causing any trouble.

I looked back at the family.

One man stepped forward. *“Please let my parents and all the children go. If someone must die, let it be me.”*

I hesitated for a moment, feeling the cold sweat forming on my brow.

Clearing my throat, I checked the table again. My heart pounded like a sledgehammer in my chest.

The gardener’s mother cried, heightening the sense of dread in the space.

To my surprise, the sound caused my hand to shiver a little.

An example must be made.

I picked up the bone saw. Its sharp, serrated edge glinted menacingly under the light.

The women whimpered.

I ran my fingers over the cold metal, acutely aware of the weight of the tool and the gravity of the task that lay before me.

A chill ran down my spine.

I assessed the saw’s teeth.

Without looking their way, I could feel the family’s nervous gazes on me. I could even sense their bodies tense with apprehension—their breaths hitching as they struggled to suppress their own rising panic.

For some reason, the room seemed to close in around me. The atmosphere grew heavy with dread and uncertainty.

The family’s unspoken question hung in the air—as heavy and oppressive as the darkness rising within me. Surely, they wondered if any of them would make it out of this nightmare alive.

But what of my men?

I lifted my view and scanned the rest of the room.

My soldiers lined the walls. Many held neutral expressions, while others looked in any direction, but the family. Some even shifted with unease.

And then I found Boris standing in the corner. His gaze nervously darted around the room.

Boris has made some changes. Interesting.

His head was no longer bald. He had grown his dark brown hair out to a curly afro. The hair cast eerie shadows across his face. His once clean-shaven face was now partly hidden beneath a thick beard that obscured some of the tattoos snaking up the top of his throat.

It was a stark contrast to how I remembered him in Italy.

But has he changed his insides too?

When his gaze locked onto mine, I saw him shiver.

A sinister smile crept across my lips.

The air grew colder, as if anticipating the horrors that would unfold.

I kept the sinister smile on my face, lowered the bone saw, and picked up the scalpel. "Come, Boris."

He widened his eyes.

With the scalpel, I gestured for him to get in front of me. "We have a lot to talk about."

Chapter 43

The Gift

Kazimir

Boris hesitated for a moment, but then slowly made his way in my direction. He kept his head down, avoiding eye contact with me or anyone else in the room.

Yes.

I glared at him.

Mr. I-want-to-see-the-Mouse-moan. Let us talk.

When Boris was within reach, I gestured for him to come closer. “It has been too long.”

Boris swallowed. “Hello, Kazimir.”

In the background, the gardener’s father spoke. His voice quivered with each word. *“Please, I beg you, have mercy on us. We never intended to cross you or your...organization. Whatever my son did, it was a mistake, a terrible misunderstanding!”*

I turned to the man and watched him.

His wife held her hands in prayer as he continued, *“Sir, we have children. Innocent lives. They don’t deserve to suffer for my son’s mistakes. We’ll do anything you ask, just please spare them.”*

Another adult on his side struggled to hold back tears. Soon he spoke too, *“We can make this right. I’ll work for you, pay you back every penny my brother must owe, no matter how long it takes. Just please, don’t hurt my family.”*

More came forward.

Their voices shook as they begged.

“Please, sir, we’re scared. We promise we won’t say a word to anyone. Just let us go, and you’ll never hear from us again.”

“We’ll disappear, start over somewhere else. You’ll never have to worry about us. We just want to live, please.”

The family’s pleas hung in the air.

Their raw emotion permeated the space.

Pressure built in my chest.

I put my view back on Boris. “Do you know about the gardener?”

Some of the family members hushed, probably trying to understand what I was saying. I wondered which ones knew English.

Meanwhile, others whimpered.

Boris cleared his throat. “Maxwell told me that the gardener did sexual things with Emily’s other personality.”

The father gasped in horror.

The mother began loudly praying.

Now you know what your son did.

I nodded at Boris. “Then, you have an idea of who these people are?”

Boris swallowed. “This is the gardener’s family.”

“It appears your time away from us has smartened you up. Yes. This is the gardener’s family.” I raised my hand holding the scalpel and placed it between us. “Tell me, Boris. When you slept in these past months, did you have nightmares?”

His bottom lip quivered. “I did.”

Eager for the next answer, I leaned forward. “And was *I* in your nightmares?”

With no hesitation, he whispered, “You were.”

I curved my lips into a smile.

Fear radiated off him.

I leaned in closer, my eyes never breaking contact with Boris. “Life is all about choices. Some choices lead to life, while others lead to death.”

In the background, the family's sobs grew louder. Their cries echoed. Each heart-wrenching sob amplified the tension in the space.

I kept my attention on Boris. "It's been a while since we've talked, *my friend*. How have you been?"

Boris stirred. "I've been good, Kazimir."

"I had not heard much from you in the days that you were gone."

"Maxwell told me that I should keep... a low profile."

"I see that. And you have made some changes." I motioned to his hair and beard with my scalpel.

His breath hitched as I held the scalpel in the direction of his throat.

I scowled. "We had a problem in Italy."

"We did, Kazimir." Boris swallowed. His Adam's apple bobbed under the targeted attention of the scalpel. "However, I am back to make up for that moment and gain your loyalty."

"Hmmm." I shifted my scowl to a smile. "I saw your mother and sister last night."

Boris blinked. "W-what?"

"We were all celebrating the dead. So many have passed and even more will go this year."

Boris froze.

I turned back to the gardener's family.

Their eyes widened with terror. They returned to being huddled together in a tight group, as if hoping that their proximity to each other could offer some form of protection.

"Choices." I let out a long breath and put my view back on Boris.

His gaze was now fixed on the scalpel.

"The gardener made a choice. He slept with Lunita." I tilted my head to the side. "Do you remember Lunita?"

Boris's bottom lip quivered. "I do."

"She likes you."

Boris inched back. "I would...never even—"

"Oh, I hope not, or this will be your fate." Fast, I pointed my scalpel at the family.

Several screamed in horror.

I shook my head. "Can you imagine your mother and sister standing over there, due to the misadventures of your cock?"

Sweat beaded on Boris's forehead. "I would n-never."

"But, it would feel so good."

"I w-would not..."

"I hope that I can believe you, Boris." Slowly, I placed the scalpel on the table and picked up the blow torch. "Did Maxwell tell you what I did to the gardener?"

Boris cleared his throat. "He did, and others talked about it too."

I looked up and quirked my brows. "It is gossip now?"

Boris bobbed his head. "Many talked about how the man screamed."

The gardener's father began to cry.

"Good." I motioned for Boris to come closer. "And are you packed for New Orleans?"

He reluctantly closed the space between us. "I-I am packed."

"Excellent. It should be quite a thrilling journey." I flicked on the torch. It buzzed in my hands. A flame shot up at the tip and roared. "So many choices."

The beads of sweat began to drip down the side of Boris's face.

"I told my mouse that I would not kill you, but..."

Boris trembled.

“I do not remember if I said I would not injure you?” I considered the conversation in the gym and truly couldn’t remember anymore. “Surely a burn or two would not make my mouse mad. Do you have any thoughts about this?”

“I-I am sorry f-for what I did—”

“Lunita has shown that she will not obey my rules. I am sure that if she sees that you have returned...she may want to fuck you too.”

Boris’s chest rose and fell like he had been running. “I would never t-touch her or Emily.”

“What am I to do about Lunita, Boris?”

“I would h-help. Maxwell explained my job in New Orleans. I am to watch over the Mouse at night and make sure to let everyone know if Lunita comes out.”

“Do you think you can tell the difference between Emily and Lunita?”

“Yes. It is easy.”

“Are you sure?”

“They are two very different women.”

“Others could not tell.”

“I can.”

“And tell me, Boris.” I looked down at the torch’s flame. “Would you need both eyes to see the difference between them?”

“Ummm...” His bottom lip quivered.

“Perhaps, you do not understand the question.” I faced him and held the torch between us. “If I burned off one eye, would you still be able to tell if it is Emily or Lunita?”

Boris hesitated for a moment before nodding frantically. “Y-yes, but I would like to keep both eyes.”

“Very good.” I turned off the torch and lay it back down on the table. “You were more truthful than most would be under the threat of a flame.”

A huge sigh of relief left Boris.

“Choices.” I crossed my arms over my chest. “Today, you have a choice. Tomorrow, you will have a choice. And every day in New Orleans you will have more and more choices.”

Boris remained silent and still.

“Today’s choice is simple.” I gestured to the caskets. “My friend, Maxim has placed three caskets here for you.”

Boris touched his chest with a shaking hand. “F-for me?”

“Yes. You must pick one for yourself. Consider it a gift for returning to us.”

Boris studied the three caskets.

“Come.” I walked over to them. “Let us get a closer look. So many choices.”

Boris followed me, while the family whimpered behind us.

I smiled at him. “This is quite the decision.”

The first casket we approached was a deep mahogany color. Intricate carvings of swirling vines and delicate flowers covered the top.

I reached out to touch the surface. The cool, polished wood smoothed against my fingertips.

“Check out the interior, Boris. It is lined with soft, plush velvet, in a deep crimson hue.” I pointed at it. “You must consider that just in case you happen to be buried alive in one of these caskets. Comfort would be important.”

Boris appeared close to pissing himself.

“Hmmm.” I guided us over to the second one.

Made of stainless steel, it had a sleek and modern design. The surface reflected the surrounding light, and I could see my own reflection staring back at me. I appeared cruel and monstrous, and I wasn’t sure how I felt about that.

Meanwhile, the metal was cool to the touch, and a faint metallic smell hung in the air around it. White satin lined the interior.

I gazed at Boris. “This casket has a unique and contemporary design. What do you think?”

“I...t-think you are right.”

“Well, I am no expert.” I shook my head. “But...so many choices.”

We went over to the third casket.

“Aww.” I whistled. “This may be the most royal one of them all. Clearly very expensive.”

Precious stones and gems decorated the sides. Fine crimson silk served as the interior. To my surprise, the casket smelled of perfume.

“This is luxurious.” I checked Boris. “You really should touch the interior to experience its elegant feel. Go ahead. This is a *big* decision.”

Boris hesitated before reaching out to touch the silky fabric. He looked at me, his eyes pleading for mercy.

I nodded. “Choices.”

Leaving the caskets, I walked back over to my table of torture tools, stopped by the guns, and picked one up. “Lots of choices.”

The weapon lay heavy in my hand.

I lowered my hand and placed the gun at my side. “Which casket will it be, *my friend?*”

Boris looked at them and then finally pointed at the mahogany casket. “I choose this one.”

“Excellent choice.” I slipped my thumb along the cold metal of the gun. “Should I have Maxim send it to your mother’s home? And do not worry. I have her address.”

Boris stirred.

“It is because I have had men outside of her place and your sister’s and your cousins...watching...That is their only job—to follow your family around and watch...and wait...wait for my signal...”

Boris gulped.

“Choices.” Keeping the gun at my side, I stepped closer to Boris.

Barely an inch of space ran between us.

Threatening violence rose in the air.

I lowered my voice. “There was a time when *you* made the choice to open a door and look inside at my mouse as she moaned.”

Boris’s eyes watered.

“How beautiful it must have been to see her naked breasts bouncing, her mouth parted as she came hard on my cock.”

Boris’s breathing increased.

“Surely, you regret that.”

“I-I do.”

“But understand this, you are not here because of my forgiveness. I am still an unforgiving bastard, and I will probably be that way until I die.”

Boris shivered. I could see in his eyes that he wanted to edge back, but he did not dare.

“It is only because of Lunita and her escapades this month, that you were even allowed back around my mouse again. Do you understand that?”

“I-I will not mess up, Kazimir. I will keep my eyes where they are supposed to be. I will not disrespect you or her. I promise.”

“Is that the choice *you* are making?”

“Y-yes, Kazimir.”

“Look at the gardener’s mother.”

Trembling, Boris turned her way.

The family’s sobs grew louder.

Horror decorated Boris’s face.

“That may be your mother one day, if you fuck around with me.”

As he looked at the gardener’s mother, a tear spilled from his eye.

“Choices.” I stepped back and tapped my thumb against the gun. “The gardener made *his* choice. And you must make your own choice every day while you are next to my mouse... because... I will *definitely* make my choice.”

Fast, I raised the gun and pointed it at the gardener’s mother.

She screamed in terror. “*No! Please!*”

“Kazimir!” David rushed over to me. “Hold on. Do not shoot yet.”

My aim remained steady on the woman’s forehead. “Why not?”

David placed his phone inches in front of my face. “Because the Mouse wants to talk to you.”

Damn it.

I gritted my teeth.

Chapter 44

In Trouble

Kazimir

Frowning, I lowered the gun.

The gardener's mother gasped and stumbled back. Her husband and what I assumed to be her sons, helped her regain her balance.

I turned to David as he held the phone in front of me. "Who told Emily that I had the gardener's family?"

"Baba." Still holding the phone, David took my gun. "Perhaps...you would like to have the conversation *outside* of this room."

I eyed him.

David lowered his voice, his eyes reflecting a deep struggle within. "Because the Mouse's voice sounds as if she may yell."

"Basically, Baba got me in trouble?"

David's face twisted into a mask of conflicting emotions. "It appears we are both in trouble with the Mouse."

"We will see about that." I snatched the phone from him and stormed out of the room.

Surely, my mouse was seething on the other line, but she would have to wait.

If we were going to argue, it could not be in front of my men. Emily had the ability to cut through me, right to the core, leaving me exposed, vulnerable, and emotionally raw.

My men could never witness the bread down of the Lion. In front of them, I had to always be this statue of threatening violence.

But...what does she think she can say to me? I have made my decision. That is that.

I left the room.

Several of my men flanked the door.

I continued forward.

They began to follow.

I shook my head. “No. I will return. Stay here.”

A few appeared uncomfortable with the idea of giving me too much space. Still, they remained by the door.

I am the fucking Lion. This is how I deal with things.

I continued down the hall, made it to the courtyard, and stepped outside.

A chilly breeze brushed against my skin.

She will stand down, and Baba too. Meddling women!

Yet, my nerves stood on edge.

I didn't lift the phone just yet, perhaps to avoid this conversation that I didn't want to have.

Will she understand? She must.

I scanned the courtyard. It was a vision of serenity and felt like the heart of the funeral home.

Like all of Moscow, winter's icy grasp began to relinquish its hold in the courtyard, surrendering to the tender warmth of spring.

But it was even more present here.

Statues of two angels stood sentinel in this sacred space. Their marble wings were unfurled as if poised for flight. Each figure embodied a moment frozen in time, an eternal balance between sorrow and solace. Their gentle faces gazed down upon the courtyard, offering comfort and hope amidst the thawing landscape.

She will understand.

I walked down the stone path. Small patches of snow covered some of the stone. In other places, the snow melted.

Bushes lined the path. I guessed that when spring came, those bushes would bloom roses and other flowers.

Alright.

I went to the wall in front of the angels, stood there, and ran my fingers through my hair.

Do not let her talk you out of this. She is the Mouse. You are the Lion. There are levels to this.

I breathed in and then exhaled.

Just tell her what is going to happen, and that is it.

Swallowing, I raised the phone and placed it next to my ear. “*Mysh?*”

“Kaz?” Her voice sounded like she was in deep pain.

It made my confidence waver...just a little.

I swallowed again. “Yes, *mysh?*”

“Can you answer a question for me, Kaz?”

Shock hit me. “Yes.”

“I thought I fell in love with a lion, but...did I really fall in love with a monster?”

Pain throbbed in my chest.

I leaned against the wall and closed my eyes. “*Mysh...*a lion is a primal creature. Therefore, sometimes a lion can be a monster.”

“Which is why sometimes a mouse would have to hide from the lion? Correct?”

I opened my eyes. “Hide, *mysh?* Hide from who? Me? Hide where? What part of this planet can I not touch?”

“We have already been through so much this month. No more blood should be shed over Lunita’s actions.”

“Yet, blood *must* be shed.”

“Let it go. We deserve some peace before we head to New Orleans.”

“Killing them will give me peace.”

“And your killing them will give guilt—driven nightmares to me. I will not sleep. Between you and Lunita I am barely holding on to the bits of sanity floating around in my mind.”

Guilt coursed through me. “Never would I want to add to your pain. You know how much I love you—”

“If you love me, then let these innocent people go—”

“Someone must pay for the gardener’s betrayal!”

“*He* paid for it. My guards paid for it. Then, your guards paid for it. And even more, *Olga paid for* it. Enough!”

My eyes watered at the mention of Olga. A sudden, overwhelming sense of dread washed over my body like a tidal wave, drowning me.

All the sorrow and despair that I had kept at bay began to claw and tear at my very core.

“Damn it.” I lowered the phone and placed it by my side.

I had no idea if Emily was talking or not.

I just couldn’t...

The cold air around me seemed to thicken, as if an invisible fog had descended upon the courtyard.

It was suffocating.

My chest tightened.

Her heart wildly pounded.

Trying to regain my composure, I looked at the angels in the courtyard. They were the only things in the space not covered in ice.

I found myself wondering why the snow on the angels had melted first. Did they have some spiritually healing energy radiating from their stone bodies? Did that make them warmer than other objects in the courtyard?

I sighed.

Why did she have to say Olga’s name?

I pushed through the sorrow, lifted the phone, and placed it against my ear.

“Kaz? Kaz?”

“I am here, *mysh*.”

“There must be a way we can compromise on this.”

“Dead is dead. The only compromise I am willing to listen to is *how* the family dies. I will do that for you—”

“That is not enough! There are teenagers in the family. Right?”

I frowned.

“Are you going to kill them too?”

I remained silent.

Her voice cracked. “Kids?! Kids?!”

Pressure built in my chest.

“Would your mother have agreed with this?”

“Do not do that.”

“Release the kids.”

“If I kill the whole family...it will be a permanent reminder of why the Lion is the Lion.”

“We already know you are the fucking Lion!”

“My reputation would strengthen. They will say he is heartless—”

“Because you would be heartless to take the teenagers’ lives—”

“And the world will fear me more—”

“Including me...”

I leaned back against the wall and closed my eyes.

“*Mysh*...”

“I have limits. You know that. *Lunita* has limits. You know that too. Harming kids are *both* of our limits. Do you really want to fuck around and find out with the both of *us*?”

I remained silent as my mind raced with thoughts of what to do. I knew in my heart that what she said was true. Killing innocent teenagers was not something I wanted to do, but my reputation was at stake, which meant my being able to keep my family safe was at stake too.

“Kaz, talk to me.”

Sighing, I opened my eyes. “If a gardener can come into the Lion’s home and disrespect him, bigger criminal elements will feel they can easily seize the opportunity—”

“It doesn’t have to be that way—”

“The female assassins thought it was a great time to attack.”

“We got them.”

“But, will we get them all?”

“Killing teens won’t stop them.”

“It would buy us more time to continue to strengthen.”

“Bullshit. Your ego is bruised, and you are mad. Do not try to play me with ideas of how this is to protect Emilio, Paolo, and me. Bull! Shit!”

I gritted my teeth.

“You kill the teenagers, and I *will* leave you, hopefully before Lunita comes out to terrorize your ass—”

“Leave? Careful, Mysh.” I tightened my grip on the phone. “Be. Very. Fucking. Careful.”

“Do you really think I would stand by your side if you killed teenagers?”

Goddamn it.

She continued, “And is that how you want Emilio’s first years of life to be...us playing cat and mouse all over the globe? My running country to country. You’re chasing.”

It all played out in my mind.

She would hide. I could hear it in her voice. Granted, I knew I could find her, even if Misha chose not to help and the

French shielded her.

I would catch her eventually.

But, I also knew that Emily had spent most of her life hiding from monsters.

If she ran away, there would definitely be days, maybe even weeks without my seeing her face, breathing in her scent, and touching her soft skin.

There would also be moments when I wouldn't see Emilio and hear his little cooing.

And there would even be times when I would miss the sound of Paolo screaming out, *mysh* along with me.

I took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "Fine. We can come to a compromise."

She breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you."

"I will spare the teenagers. But the rest of the family will still pay for the gardener's betrayal. Are we done?"

"No."

"*Mysh*, you have saved some of them, be happy—"

"I want all of them to live—"

"Not possible. I want them to suffer the way Olga suffered. They will feel the same pain and humiliation that she did before she died."

"But, *you* triggered Lunita to do that, not the gardener." There was a pause on the other end of the line, and I could hear her struggling with her emotions. "I...I *want* to be by your side and love you until the day that I die—"

"And you will do so because I will never let you fucking go. So there is no escape from me and there is no place that you can hide for too long."

"You would be surprised, Kaz."

"This is not a conversation that you ever want to have with me."

"Do not kill them—"

“So that there can be another time when some man moves inside of you?”

Her voice wavered. “There will never be another situation like that. We are going to New Orleans for me to get help. Leave these people alone. They are innocent—”

“Not if they have his blood!”

“Do you hear yourself?”

“I do.”

“That is not the voice of the man I fell in love with.”

“It is. You knew who I was then, and you know who I am now.”

“You have changed. You are different now.”

“Not when it comes to my love for you.” I gripped the phone hard and growled. “When it comes to you, I have been consistent! A mad man!”

“I want that to stop today. There has to be another way.”

“This is the only way—”

I blinked. “Rosetta.”

“What?”

“Paolo’s mother. That was her name. Rosetta. Now she is dead.”

“I know she is dead.”

“Paolo will never see her again—”

“Mysh, I will talk to you later—”

“Pavel.”

I shivered. “What about Pavel?”

“Do you not regret killing him?”

“These people are not Pavel.”

“Yet, they will haunt you like Pavel does.”

“That is a low blow, *mysh*.”

“But, it is the truth.”

The sound of a baby whimpering came on the other side of the line.

“Is that Emilio?”

“I just walked into the nursery. Max is dressing him for the trip. We are getting ready to go. My only question is if you will be on the plane with me.”

“I will most definitely be on the plane.”

“Not if you kill the rest of those people.”

“And who will stop me from getting on it?”

“You kill them, and the plane takes off without you.”

“And the pilot, stewardess, your men, and anyone else who helped fly you and my sons away...will die.”

Silence hit the line.

I trembled. “*Mysh?*”

“You know Lunita will not like this either.”

“She never said anything about his family.”

“Stop playing with *her* and stop playing with *me*.”

Emilio gurgled on the other line.

My heart ached. “*Mysh...*”

“Yes?”

“What will Emilio be wearing today?”

“Max bought him some designer tracksuit that matches his.”

Although I tried not to, I smiled.

“We have a family, Kaz. We have a love that is constantly getting stronger. Is that not enough?”

“It will always be enough.”

“Then, leave there and meet me at the plane.” I heard a door close, telling me that she must have gone into the

nursery's bathroom. "Get in your car and head to the airport."

"When I am done."

"Thank you for saving the teenagers, but if you kill the adults, then..."

"What?" I gritted my teeth.

"I don't know. I want to threaten you, but I can't." She sounded like she was about to cry. "I love you too much."

She sniffled.

"Mysh?"

And then she cried.

Damn it.

Her crying was a haunting melody of anguish and suffering. A guttural plea. The embodiment of pain and unbearable heartache. The sound reverberated over the phone and shook me down to my core.

I could tell that all the layers of her defenses fell away.

"*Mysh*...please...do not cry." My breathing grew shallow and labored. Each inhale began to be a struggle. Each exhale was turning into a desperate gasp for air. It felt as though the courtyard's walls were closing in and the space was shrinking, trapping me in my own personal cage of panic and fear.

My vision blurred. The edges of the courtyard frayed and dissolved into a disorienting whirlwind of panic.

"Please, *mysh*." I wanted to fall down to my knees, but somehow, I held myself up against that wall. "I love you."

"I love you too, but don't do this." She sobbed. "Maybe... maybe there can be...another way."

Tension gathered in my shoulders.

"What way?"

"Maim the men. Take a finger or hand. It could be a visible reminder of why being an enemy of the Lion is a bad idea. I am okay with even some of them losing a limb, but do not kill them."

I shook my head, getting some of my clarity back.

“Please.”

I wanted my way, but I yearned for my mouse’s peace more. Her being calm, kept me anchored. For her to suffer, for her to lose it all, incited chaos within me.

I took a deep breath and considered her words. “Mysh…”

“Yes?”

“Do not cry. For you… I would do anything, even stop my revenge.”

“Please.”

“But, do not cry anymore.”

She sniffled and let out a shaky breath.

“I will not kill them.” I swallowed down my sadness. “But I will maim the men.”

Her voice wavered. “Okay.”

I heard the sound of her taking a deep breath and then exhaling slowly. “Thank you, Kaz.”

Her voice was still shaky with emotion, but the worst of her crying had subsided. “I know this is hard for you.”

“It is harder for me to hear you in pain.” I felt a pang of guilt in my chest.

“The boys and I will be leaving for the plane soon, baby.”

My heart warmed at her finally saying *baby*.

“Maim them if you must,” she whispered, “And then come to me.”

“I will.”

“I love you, baby.”

“And I love you, *mysh*.”

Chapter 45

Change In Plans

Kazimir

Lunita and Emily won this time.

Defeated, I left the courtyard and entered the long hallway.

That is okay. I will take my revenge out on her pussy.

Still, the walk back to the viewing room was difficult. My fingers had itched to make many scream and bleed. Now it would be a few wails.

A finger or hand? She said limbs too. Leg? Arm?

It was odd, but I suddenly had the distinct impression that I was being watched.

Surely, I was being irrational.

I checked over my shoulder and saw nothing.

Something is off.

Then, the lights flickered.

I frowned. "Oh, shut up, Pavel."

Surely, he was gloating too.

My men still flanked the door.

When I approached, one of them opened it.

I entered the room, and a profound sense of emptiness enveloped me.

What the fuck?!

My men no longer stood around the walls. Boris was gone too.

Where is everyone?

My eyes scanned the blank space. Even the gardener's family had disappeared.

Now only David stood by my table of torture tools near the caskets and chairs. He had his hands in his pockets. A neutral expression covered his face.

He better have answers.

I walked across the empty room. My footsteps echoed faintly.

David watched me.

I stopped three feet in front of him. My voice went low and dangerous. “Where the hell did everyone go?”

David’s eyes flickered with something I couldn’t quite place. “I ordered everyone to leave.”

I widened my eyes. “What the fuck did you say?”

David pulled his hands out of his pockets, unbuttoned his suit jacket, and shrugged it off.

I raised my eyebrows.

He carefully placed the jacket on the plush chair closest to him and then returned his view to me. “I let them go.”

I scanned the space. “*You* told them all to go?”

“I did.” He raised his hands to his tie, loosened it, and then began taking it off. “I am aware that this is not what you want ___”

“You let the family leave too?”

“I did.”

“Where did they go?”

David set the tie on the chair. “Back to the airport, Giorgio’s people are taking them to a new location.”

I sneered. “And Boris?”

“On the way to the airport to take up his duties next to the Mouse. I assumed you were done scaring him—”

“I was just beginning.”

“You should be in the air before sun set—”

“I will be in the air when I damn well please!”

David began unbuttoning his shirt. “I decided that I will be a number one that does not make you happy. Instead, I will double down on protecting you.”

I leaned my head to the side. “David, I think the *biggest* question right now is why the fuck are you taking off your clothes.”

David slipped off his shirt, revealing a toned muscular chest and powerful arms. “On the first day I came to Moscow with you, after you grabbed Emily from the French, I bought this suit to look more...up for the job. I was nervous. I wanted to impress you and the others. I did not think my flashy French suits would—”

“Why are you taking your clothes off?”

“The suit is sentimental to me, Kazimir. I do not want blood on it.” He neatly folded the shirt. His biceps flexed with the movement. He placed the shirt on the chair, returned in front of me, and then locked his gaze with mine. “*You* told Boris that we all had choices. I made mine.”

The line of my jaw twitched.

“You want someone to torture. I am the one that released everyone. Hurt me. I can deal with the consequences of my choice.”

I stepped closer to him and glared. “Getting rid of the gardener’s family was not your choice to make.”

“Am I not your best number one?”

“Do not let compliments go to your head.”

“But, am I?”

I gritted my teeth.

“Baba was upset.”

“Baba is not one of my men.”

“But, you must agree that Baba is not only invaluable to your life, but...she is your family.”

I swallowed.

“The Mouse was upset too.” Worry filled his eyes. “The conversation that she had with me on the phone...it was terrifying. I thought that you were scary, but...”

I didn't want it to, but pride swelled in my chest.

“Apparently, a mouse can roar too.”

“You are *my* number one.”

“Baba talked about bad karma and how you could attract extreme amounts of negative energy by taking the family.” David shook his head. “She...mentioned visions of blood. And it wasn't yours or Emily's.”

I eyed him. “Whose blood was in her visions?”

“Emilio's.”

I stepped back. “What?”

“She said that all this dangerous energy could be avoided if the gardener's family was saved, then she put the Mouse on the phone, and...Emily discussed the many ways she had learned to make men scream, and how she would be using those special skills on me, if I ever brought innocent people around you to kill again.”

A smirk spread across my face. I tried to push it away, but it remained. “My mouse is quite a woman.”

“She is.” David gestured to the tools on the table. “We do not have much time, Kazimir. If you are going to torture me, then now is a good time.”

My smirk shifted to a scowl. “Are you trying to prove a point?”

“I am not.”

I studied him. “You really think I could hurt you?”

“I think that you need someone to hurt today because part of you...is still in pain over what Lunita did. It was horrific and unfathomable, and you do not know how to deal with it without killing someone.”

I fisted my hands at my sides.

“Your reputation. Your position in power. The respect that all have for you as the Lion.” David shook his head. “None of that stuff was harmed due to Lunita. None of our men see you differently. All feared you before. All fear you now.”

“But, how can you be so sure?”

“My job is to make sure that your reputation is secure, and I have confirmed this over and over in these last days that people are even more terrified after you killed the gardener.”

“But killing his family—”

“It may scare everyone to the point that they may begin plotting again like they did before...to kill you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Before you killed Pavel, he mentioned that many thought you were losing control and needed to be stopped.”

I placed my hands in my pockets.

David continued, “If they see you as an uncontrollable madman who kills innocent people, they will believe that you have truly lost it and need to be taken out. Killing someone’s mother, sisters, and teenaged relatives... *That* is the type of stuff that can unite dangerous men to work together and come for you.”

I clenched my jaw. “Get Mufasa ready.”

“And what about the torture?”

I rolled my eyes, turned around, and stormed off.

Idiot!

* * *

Several minutes later, we were riding in the back of the Cullinan.

Now fully clothed, David spoke on the phone, ordering our people around.

Completely annoyed, I watched him.

Like my mouse...he has too much power over me.

Had it been any of my other number one's that had done what he did, they would have been still lying on the floor, chest open, blood pooling around them.

Was it good to have a number one that I cared about?

Surely, I preferred a number one that I could easily kill.

Yet...

I groaned in annoyance.

He has the been best and...I do care for him.

Frowning, I gazed out of the window.

The sun—a blazing orange ball now turning red—was nearing the horizon.

My phone vibrated against my leg.

Mysh?

I pulled it out and checked the phone.

The name, *Lord Petunia*, showed up on the screen.

What the hell does he want?

I turned it on and placed it against my ear. “Jean-Pierre, I cannot stress enough how much I do not enjoy hearing your voice.”

Humor laced his words. “Unfortunately for you, Kazimir, my annoying you makes me incredibly happy.”

“Why are you on my phone? Do you not have a beautiful baby girl to be cradling?”

“So you think Marcella is beautiful?”

“I think you should be lucky that your daughter looks like the flute player.”

His voice shifted to annoyance. “One day I am going to give you a lesson on musical instruments.”

A chuckle escaped me. “And one day I am going to give you a lesson on how to properly die.”

“Until then, let us get on with why I called—”

“We know why you called, and as I said many times before, I belong to my mouse.”

Jean-Pierre sighed. “My people say that you will be flying out soon.”

“Those people will soon be bleeding, when I find them.”

“You will never find them, but again, we are off topic.”

“Which is?”

“The Alligator Don.”

I held out my hand. “This is who?”

“Thibaut Leclair. They call him the *Alligator Don*. He was born and raised in the swamps of Louisiana. Growing up amongst the waterways, he developed a unique understanding of the landscape and wildlife. As a teenager, Thibaut became involved with a small time gang, using his knowledge of the bayous to smuggle goods and evade the authorities. Now he controls all the bayous and is considered the king—”

“Why am I hearing about a king of muddy bayous?”

“Because you should know who you will be *respectfully* dealing with in New Orleans. And I believe you are not taking my warning from earlier seriously.”

“What warning?”

Jean-Pierre groaned. “The warning about paying certain people the proper respect—”

“You are correct. I am not taking it seriously.” I hung up the phone and was about to put it in my pocket.

But, it rang again.

Now David was off his phone and staring at mine. “Who called?”

“Lord Petunia.”

David chuckled. “What did Jean-Pierre want?”

“To warn me about New Orleans and its leaders.”

“Oh.” David raised his eyebrows. “And what did he say?”

“You mean before I hung up on him?”

David gave me a look similar to one that Emily had given me before. It was the one that screamed that I would be in trouble.

The phone rang again.

David held out his hand. “I should at least be aware of everyone so that I can prepare Valentina and Tisha and monitor everything.”

“I am already pissed off that Baba, Emily, and you did not give me my way...and now you want me to listen to Lord Petunia? Are you suicidal today?”

“Please, Kazimir.”

Sighing, I handed him the phone.

David turned it on and pressed the speaker. “Tell us about the leaders, Jean-Pierre.”

“Good evening, King David.” An edge hit Jean-Pierre’s voice. “I am glad that *you* answered. I heard my cousin suffered a small injury last night over a misunderstanding.”

Huh? David hurt Giorgio? I hope someone has the footage.

I made a note to ask Misha.

David rolled his eyes. “Did the Butler go complain to his mommy? And even more, did you kiss his hurts for him?”

“Oh no. I did not kiss his hurts as you say. But I believe *someone* kissed him.”

David sneered.

“Lucky for you,” Jean-Pierre said. “My cousin was adamant that I could not get on the plane, fly to Moscow, and handle you—”

“Oh, do come, Jean-Pierre.” A bored expression covered my number one’s face. “I am always up for a perfumed visit.”

I formed my lips into a smile.

Team David.

Silence hit the line.

No doubt the Butcher was seething and thinking of the many ways he could use his sharpened bow on David.

And if he tried, there would be no France. I would blow that fucking country up, until it was just dirt and collapsed buildings sinking into the water.

I really need to see this footage.

Jean-Pierre broke the quiet. “Let us proceed with the topic of New Orleans.”

David frowned. “That would be wise.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Yes. Tell us about the king of a whole big muddy bayou. Oh my. My cock is hardening at the very thought.”

“The Alligator Don is cunning. Over the years, he has established himself as a feared and respected figure in the New Orleans underworld.”

“And why should *I* care?”

“Because no more than a day from your arriving in New Orleans, you are expected to pay him respect—”

“Excuse me?” I laughed so loud the noise rose in the car.

Meanwhile, David did not join me. “How must Kazimir pay respect to this don?”

“I am *not* doing it.” I laughed some more.

Jean-Pierre cleared his throat. “Kazimir should bring him two gifts that represent Russia. I suggest a good bottle of vodka and maybe some chocolate—covered prunes. Anything that is special to Russia that the don cannot get in Louisiana.”

David nodded. “And if Kazimir does not?”

I stopped laughing and realized that David or Emily would end up convincing me to do it.

Will they not let me have any fun in New Orleans?

Jean-Pierre continued, “The don has two twins that remain with him. Two witches—Genevieve and Evangeline. When the don perceives that he has enemies, he uses them to curse and bother—”

“Get off my phone, Butcher.” I waved him away. “I have my own *witch*.”

“Kazimir, I am warning you—”

“And I have heard, if this king wants vodka and Russian sweets, then fine. I will have my sister take it over.”

“*You* must do it.”

“We shall see.” I began to get bored. “Are we done?”

“There is the Quarter Master.”

I groaned in annoyance.

“His name is Remy Broussard. He grew up in the bustling heart of the French Quarter. He dominates the black market in all of America’s South. New Orleans is his headquarters.”

Smirking, I leaned my head to the side. “And does he require vodka and sweets too?”

“No. Giving him gifts would be disrespectful. It would be as if you are saying that he is in need of charity.”

I looked at David. “I do not care about this. Hang up on him.”

David stared at the phone. “What does the Quarter Master need?”

“Remy will know that the Lion is powerful.”

“I am glad *someone* there will know it.” I frowned.

“Remy will hold a big event for Kazimir and Emily as if you all are his best friends. It will be all for show. I am guessing he will host you a huge masquerade ball with you two as the honorary guests. There will be a second line parade to celebrate—”

“He is going to throw us a party?” I raised my eyebrows. “We are there for Emily to be healed. There may not be many

moments of free time with my mouse. When I get to have time alone with her, I will not share it.”

“It is a party, Kazimir. Go.”

“And if I do not?”

“Remy would consider it a slight, be embarrassed, and seek revenge.”

David blinked. “What could he do to Kazimir?”

“Remy has extensive connections and resources that could sabotage the Mouse’s plans of healing.”

I tensed.

“Delphine uses Remy to get items that would be illegal or impossible to find with anyone else.”

I let out a long breath. “Alright. I must personally give one idiot gifts. And then Emily and I must go to a party for another idiot.”

“And also consider not calling them idiots.” Jean-Pierre sighed. “Then, we have your final and most dangerous threat.”

I leaned forward. “Who is that?”

“Delphine.”

A cold shiver ran through me.

I swallowed down my fear. “Tell me about her.”

“They call her the Bayou Banshee. But no one would ever say that to her face.”

I widened my eyes. “How did she get that nickname?”

“People claimed that she has extraordinary power, and one of those things is to create haunting, otherworldly sounds that can disorient and strike fear into the hearts of her enemies.”

David and I exchanged glances.

Jean-Pierre continued, “She was born into a long line of voodoo practitioners. For some reason, she was taken from her mother and raised by her grandmother. It had to do with a kid dying in her class.”

“Okay.”

“After her grandmother’s passing, she inherited her grandmother’s house and began providing services to many. Over time, Delphine’s reputation grew, and she is now the most sought—after figure in the New Orleans criminal underworld.”

“Do you think she can heal Emily?”

“If anyone can do it, then Delphine can.”

David spoke, “And does Delphine require any tribute, gifts, or parties?”

“Delphine requires a great amount of respect—the sort that I am not sure Kazimir can provide.” Jean-Pierre sighed. “Therefore, I advise Kazimir to stay away from her as much as possible. She will not care that you are the Lion. If you step out of line, she will harm you.”

“Avoid her? If she is to be around my mouse—”

“Trust me, Kazimir. While I do not care if Delphine has you returning to Moscow with your insides on the outside...”

I parted my lips.

“I would like the godmother of my daughter to be *truly* healed. That means you must step aside as much as possible, so Emily can get that healing.”

I didn’t like it, but I also knew that of all the people that Jean-Pierre discussed, Delphine was in fact the most dangerous.

I nodded. “On this, I will adamantly listen.”

Shock laced the Butcher’s voice. “Really?”

“Yes.”

“Then...just remember this.”

I quirked my brows.

“New Orleans is a place of contrasts, where beauty and darkness coexist, and the line between the spiritual and the

tangible is heavily blurred. Be safe, Kazimir.” Jean-Pierre hung up.

Up ahead, the airport came into sight.

Excitement didn't hit me.

Instead, thoughts flooded my mind regarding New Orleans.

Chapter 46

New Orleans or Bust

Emily

Time to go.

The sun set, casting an orange glow over the tarmac.

I scanned the four sleek private planes gleaming under the fading sunlight, ready to embark on our journey to New Orleans. Kaz and I would be taking Valentina's plane, due to it having a cell on board.

I still should ask her what's up with that. No judgement, but...

Either way, my main guards would be on the plane with me, along with Kaz, my boys, Max, Harlem, Boris, Emilio's wet nurses, and Tisha who demanded to be next to the Lion's side while in the air.

Valentina and the majority of the Brotherhood would be on Kaz's plane. Two other planes were added to transfer Harlem Crew, more of Kaz's people, and tons of weapons.

I checked my watch.

Less than an hour.

Our departure was coming up, inciting hustle and bustle at this private airport. Luggage carts beeped while they carried over last minute bags. Crew members loudly coordinated the flurry of tasks.

A faint smell of jet fuel lingered in the air.

Many in Harlem Crew exchanged enthusiastic glances. I guessed that they were excited to visit the States and check out a new location. They all had their best travel clothes—silk and leather, diamonds and other gems.

Meanwhile...

A wicked smirk spread across my face.

I'm half naked under this fur.

Standing next to Valentina's plane, I kept my hand gripping the coat and making sure it was closed. Underneath was a surprise for my lion.

Max strolled out of Valentina's plane and headed downstairs. "Boris is set up in the back."

"Okay."

"Have you said hi or spoke to him yet?"

"No. Since shit is so tense with Kaz, I was going to wait until Kaz was by my side, before greeting Boris."

"Eventually, you are going to have to talk to Boris by yourself."

"I know, but Kaz already had some threatening conversation with Boris today. I don't want to add to the tension. It would be better to let Boris just have a calm plane ride."

"Boris told me that Kaz gave him a gift."

I looked at him. "A gift? *My* baby gave Boris a gift?"

"Yep."

"What was it?"

"Apparently, a really nice casket."

I let out a long breath.

"That motherfucking Lion is a master at terrorizing people."

"Well...at least Boris is alive with all of his limbs."

"There's that." Max nodded. "Oh yeah. Emilio and Paolo are good to go too. Baba is reading a story to them. The wet nurses are in there watching. By the way, I have a question."

"What question?"

"You know that red headed wet nurse with the big tits just begging for a brother to—"

"No."

“You didn’t even know what I was going to say.”

“The answer is no.”

“Come on, Em. I’m better than that. Let me ask the question.”

“Fine.” I stared at him. “What?”

“Can I fuck the red headed wet nurse?”

I scowled at him. “No.”

What is wrong with him?

“Damn. Baba said the same thing. I hadn’t even talked to her. She just turned to me and told me that that chick was off limits. I bet Baba had some vision of me slamming into the red head—”

“Max.”

“Fine. She’s off limits.”

“Oh wait.” I eyed him. “Baba is riding with *us*? I thought she would be going with Valentina—”

“Naw, Baba moved my shit out of the nursery room and declared that she would be with her babies.” Max shook his head. “You would think she carried Emilio and Paolo herself.”

I chuckled.

Max took out a joint. “Yo. How long is this flight going to be?”

“Twelve hours.”

Men began to gather in front of Kaz’s plane.

What’s going on over here?

It must have been sixty of them, all scarred, tattooed, and dressed in suits. Slowly, they got into three lines.

Soon Valentina strolled out of Kaz’s plane, made it down to the tarmac, stopped in front of the group of men, and placed her hands on her hips.

Max slipped his lighter out of his jacket pocket. “What do you think the Pussy Bandit is doing now?”

“Probably having a conversation with them first, before heading off.”

“Hmm.” Max chuckled to himself. “This should be interesting.”

I nodded. “I wonder how she will be as Kaz’s number one.”

“Oh, she’s going to be a hot mess for sure. I bet I’ll be laughing the whole time while we’re in New Orleans.”

“Don’t say that.” I put my attention back on Valentina as she began to address the men.

Valentina pointed at her chest. “*I am in charge.*”

Max lit his joint. “Here she go with the bullshit. Watch.”

“Leave her alone.” Feeling a little breeze against my breasts, I made sure the fur coat was secure.

Valentina scanned all of the men’s face. “That is right. In New Orleans, I am my brother’s number one.”

Max blew out smoke. “New Orleans is going to be a shit show.”

I smiled. “She will do a good job.”

Then, suddenly Valentina screamed at them, “Big! Pussy! Energy!”

Max coughed on smoke.

I patted his back. “Are you okay?”

Max coughed again and spit on the ground near his foot. “Em...I will never be okay after that.”

Chuckling, I went back to keeping my fur closed and glancing at my sister-in-law.

All of the men appeared scared, and in all honestly, they should have been. Only God knew what she would do next. She was just as bad as her brother.

“You step out of line.” Valentina pulled out both of her guns and pointed at the man in front of her. “You challenge or question me.”

O-kay.

Some of the men edged back.

“I blow holes in your head. Big holes.” Valentina bobbed her head. “Big pussy energy holes.”

Fuck.

I turned and scowled at Max. “You really have to stop saying crazy New York slang around Valentina. She’s going to be up in New Orleans getting us all shot.”

“Man, I have never said anything about *big pussy energy*.” Max blew out smoke. “She made that shit up.”

“Bang! Bang!” Valentina twirled the guns in her hand like she was a fucking cowboy in a Western.

What the hell?

I widened my eyes.

Max edged back. “If those are loaded, then she is about to shoot herself in the head.”

When Valentina stopped spinning the guns, she blew at one of the guns’ points. “If you test me, then you will fail. Don’t fail. If you do, I cut your heart out, take a shit in the hole in your chest, and send your body back home in a casket so your mother or wife has to clean it out.”

Wow.

Some of the men gazed at the ground.

“Yeah...” I cleared my throat. “New Orleans might be a shit show.”

“I’m trying to tell you, sis. Valentina as Kazimir’s number one? Naw. She won’t keep him calm. Her ass will be hyping his ass up.” Max took a hit of the joint. “Together, they both will get us in more trouble.”

A white car pulled up and parked.

Who is this?

The chauffer jumped out, rushed to the back, and opened the door.

One by one, three women in tight dresses stepped out.

O-kay...

Next, Tisha left the car.

Max blew out smoke. “This motherfucker.”

I shrugged. “For this trip, Tisha is going to give you a little challenge in the pimp game department.”

Max sucked his teeth. “Bet I get more pussy than him on this trip.”

“Word?”

“Word.”

“I’ll put a thousand dollars on the bet.”

“Fuck that. I want a car like you bought Kazimir.”

“Facts?”

“Facts.”

“Alright then.” I watched Tisha tongue kiss each woman one by one. “And what do I get, Max, if I win?”

“What do you want?”

“Lemons from Lemonisha—”

“Man—”

“And I want *us* to have matching suits too. Five of them.”

“What the fuck? Like we are dressing alike? That doesn’t even make sense, Em. Kazimir would lose his fucking mind.”

“You dress like Misha all the time.”

“Here you go with that jealous shit.”

“I’m not being jealous. I’m stating facts.”

Max sucked his teeth and flicked ash on the ground. “Fuck it. Lemons and suits, I got you—”

“And—”

“What? How are you going to have three things, Em?”

“Kaz’s car cost over half a million. Don’t play with me. The bet has to be fair.”

“Fine. What else?”

“You also have to tell me what happened with Ufuoma.”

“Man, if I do, then you have to promise not to get involved.”

“I won’t.”

Unless, she did something to you that pisses me off.

Max snapped his view to me as if he heard my thoughts. “I mean it, Em.”

I forced a smile. “I promise.”

Kind of.

“Okay.” Max nodded. “I agree to tell you. And if you win, I pick the lemons—”

“Nope.”

“Well, I pick the suits.”

“That’s cool.” I smiled as Tisha patted one of the women’s butts and waved goodbye. “Come on, Tisha. For the win. I need to get those lemons.”

“You’re going to lose. Trust me on that.” Max winked. “I’ll show you that you should never bet against your boy.”

“We’ll see.”

“And no helping him either, Em.”

“I won’t.”

Tisha’s car departed with his women.

As he approached us, Tisha nodded. “Good evening.”

“Great to see you again, Tisha.”

He continued to the stairs. “Has the Lion arrived yet?”

“Not yet. I’m waiting for him.”

“Good. I will be on the plane.”

“Cool.” He went up without glancing over at Valentina as she talked to our men.

I wonder how Tisha and Valentina will work out together.

Then, Valentina grabbed my attention again.

“I say jump!” Valentina glared at them. “You leap very high and try to touch the sky.”

Max muttered, “Shit show.”

Valentina prowled down the first line of men. “Big pussy energy. So big you can see nothing else.”

Max scratched his head. “That doesn’t even make any sense. You have to tell her, Em.”

“Hell no.” I shook my head. “I’m minding my business.”

“However, if you want to test me.” Valentina bobbed her head and gestured to all of them. “Tickle the dragon’s tail and see what happens to your finger.”

Shaking his head, Max put out the joint. “I can’t do this anymore. Valentina is fucking up my session. I’m going on the plane.”

I smirked. “Don’t forget your seatbelt.”

“You just make sure Valentina doesn’t get on our plane because if she says *big pussy energy* around me one more time, I’m throwing her off that motherfucker.”

* * *

Ten minutes passed before Valentina finally finished harassing the men. Once done, they all loaded up on Kaz’s plane.

I checked my watch.

Come on, baby.

The flight crew took away empty luggage carts. Plane engines buzzed.

I looked around.

Besides airport staff, I was the only person on the tarmac.

Soon, our private planes would soar into the sky, leaving Moscow behind and making our way across continents and oceans to the vibrant city of New Orleans.

My stomach churned with nervousness as if it were a turbulent sea, tossing me from side to side.

We are really going to do this.

My mind raced.

I leave Moscow one way...I will return...as a different person. But how different?

I thought back to the moment when I had fought the mirror, wishing I could hit Lunita.

Will I get rid of her?

Fear twisted in my core, and it was not my fear.

A little guilt tugged at my heart. Part of me knew that Lunita was also me. Plus, hadn't Lunita saved us from the horrors of our life—the things I could not even remember.

But, she also created horror in my life too...

I couldn't lose more innocent people.

And even more, I would not have my relationship with Kaz messed with again.

After what she had done with that gardener, most men would have left me.

Others—the ones as dangerous as Kaz—might have killed me along with the gardener.

Kaz had remained by my side, patient and loving.

I will not lose him over your shit, Lunita. Trust and believe. If it is a choice between him or you, it will always be him.

Sorrow washed over me, and I couldn't identify who felt sad—me or her.

“Emily?” Abena appeared at the top of the stairs and looked down at me. “Can we have a quick talk?”

“Sure.”

Abena hurried down. She had her red hair out. Those kinky curls bounced around her shoulders.

When she made it to the bottom of the stairs, she gave me a nervous smile. “Chidi and I were wondering if you wanted us to start feeding Emilio on the flight or in New Orleans.”

“Oh. I hadn’t thought of that.” I blinked. “I...well...”

Abena nodded. “You want to stretch out your time nursing Emilio as much as possible?”

“This has been *our* thing. I think it would feel weird to not feed him.”

“True. It would feel like that for a few days, and then you will discover other ways to spend time with him.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes.”

“This might sound odd, but I don’t want him to forget me or stop seeing me as important because he isn’t drinking from me.”

“You are his mother, Emily. That will never happen. Chidi and I are only here to give you more time to rest and enjoy your life.”

“Hmmm.” I considered it. “Then...if he gets hungry, go ahead and feed him. Just...call me so I can be there.”

“Of course. Emilio will still need his mother.”

My heart warmed. “Yes.”

Kazimir’s car rolled up.

There he is.

Abena spoke, “I see champagne on the flight. Make sure you get a glass or more. You do not have to worry about what you drink.”

“That is true.” I watched King David step out of the car first.

To my shock, David placed his view on Abena and widened his eyes.

She turned to him.

David studied the woman, slipping his gaze over her red hair.

Alright now, David. Your favorite color is blue, not red.

“I should...check on Emilio.” Abena nodded and headed away.

David put his view on the car.

Kaz stepped out and all my attention went to my baby.

As usual, he was a vision of strength and sophistication.

His broad shoulders filled out the tailored jacket. The suit’s color—a deep shade of navy—complemented his tanned complexion.

Ummhmm. I’m going to be all over you when our plane takes off.

When he spotted me, his piercing blue eyes sparkled with a hint of mischief.

I bet he’s thinking about something nasty. Don’t worry, baby. I’m matching your energy tonight.

David began talking to him.

Instead of listening, he prowled my way. The suit’s trousers clung to his well-defined thighs and tapered down to his polished black shoes.

I licked my lips.

My baby moved with a graceful, self-assured stride, each step exuding dangerous confidence.

He stopped in front of me.

David followed and got to his side. “Like I was saying the vodka and chocolate covered prunes will be on the next plane along with other—”

“Open the coat, *mysh*.” Hunger coated his voice. “Now.”

David pursed his lips together.

I smirked. “I can’t, baby.”

“No.”

“No.”

Kaz leaned his head to the side. “Are you naked under there?”

“You will see later.”

“It is a surprise.”

“Is it now? I am getting a gift.”

“Yes, but I must admit that...you have definitely had this gift many times before.”

“Hmmm.” A dark groan left him. “That sounds like it is my favorite gift of all.”

“I would think so.”

David cleared his throat. “Give me ten more minutes, Kazimir to finalize your appointments in the Volga Federal District.”

Kaz directed his gaze to my coat. “You have *five* minutes.”

Chapter 47

The Surprise

Kazimir

Once I said goodbye to David, my mouse headed up the stairs, luring me forward.

With each step, the chocolate brown fur rippled around her curvy body. That garment was the only barrier between my prying eyes and whatever she hid under it.

What could my mouse have on?

Honestly, if she were naked, I would be happy.

Still various outfits spun around in my head, inciting lust in my core.

Once she had worn this delicate black lace bra and high-waisted panties. I ripped those off so fast, I couldn't even remember the exact details. However, now I figured it would be nice if she had something like that on again.

Yes. Those panties were very nice.

Another time, she had chosen a vintage look. Super classy. It reminded me of one of those American pin-up girl calendars. Black silk and ivory lace with a very sexy garter belt.

It was timeless. From the sight alone, pre-cum instantly spurted from my cock's tip.

What if she decided to do a costume? Slutty nurse? Bad teacher?

A wicked grin hit my face.

It does not matter what she wears under there. I will tear it off.

Up ahead, Emily disappeared inside the plane first.

Naughty mouse.

Grunting, I prowled after her.

A stewardess tried to hand me a glass of champagne.
“Good evening, sir. Would you like your usual steak and...”

Ignoring the stewardess, I continued past her. My only focus resided with my mouse.

Food would come later.

In my mind, there was only one thing that existed—her beautiful bouncing breasts, those hard nipples always stiff and pointing at me, and last but definitely not least, her exquisite pussy—tight, warm, wet, and all mine.

Mysh, do you know that your pussy has an invisible leash on me?

Slyly, she strolled away, and I followed as her pussy’s obedient servant.

Yes. She is taking us to the back where the bedrooms are. Good job, mysh.

I passed many of our people as they readied themselves in their seats—grabbing pillows and blankets, snapping on their seat belts, and turning on their devices. A few watched movies, while many read books.

A masculine voice called after me. “Good evening, Kazimir. Do you require anything from me tonight?”

I thought that might have been Tisha or someone else asking. All could get conversation from me later.

All I need is my mouse.

I returned to guessing what she could have on under the fur coat.

What about the flower thing she had on that one time I fucked her on the yacht heading to Italy?

It was a colorful lace body suit. Exquisite and made up of embroidered floral motifs. Her nipples had pushed up against the thin material. Her pussy was so wet it soaked the fabric when I slipped my hands along the space between her thighs.

I grunted.

Or...let it be something red. I have told her many times that I love that color on her.

My cock hardened.

Yes. Red and lace—a material that is easy to tear.

This uncontrollable urge to take her in my arms came over me.

“Enough, *mysh*.” I increased my speed. “I want to see now.”

Chuckling, she gazed over her shoulder. “Wait until we get in the back.”

“Now.”

“You are so spoiled.” She picked up her pace.

You better run.

I increased my speed.

Damn it.

She went faster, approached the back before me, opened the door, and disappeared into the master bedroom.

It closed behind her.

Fuck any outfit. By the time I get in there, you better be naked.

One of my men headed toward me. “Kazimir, the cell is cleaned and prepared for the Mouse this evening along with ___”

“Get out of the way.” I barreled forward.

He jumped to the side.

Can he not see that I am chasing my mouse?

The pilot spoke over the speakers. I ignored him.

Finally, I made it to the door fast, grabbed the knob, and rushed in.

The door slammed behind me.

Yes.

There, she stood across from me, with this innocent little look on her face. Her hands gracefully, yet firmly, grasped the edges of the coat and kept it tightly over her body.

To my shock, a stripper pole was next to her. Being that I bought my sister this plane, I clearly knew that she had added it.

I decided not to think any more about that fact.

A sensual jazz song filled the room with its seductive melody. The bass guitar's notes penetrated my soul, stirring something primal within me. I became enraptured in its magic.

Emily pointed to the space on my right.

I looked in that direction.

A chair was there.

“Sit down, Kaz.”

“And if I do, will you take that coat off?”

“Yes.”

Excited, I went over to the chair and lowered into it.
“Okay. Go ahead.”

“Can you be patient?”

“No.”

Those beautiful brown eyes were transfixed on me, warming my heart. “I would like to talk a little bit before—”

“Take off the coat.”

“Is that how you ask?”

“You are lucky that I am still sitting in this chair and that you have the coat on. I am thinking about running to you and ripping that fur to pieces.”

She parted her lips.

The song progressed. A sultry female voice joined the mix. Her velvety words weaved through the melody.

God. I want to fuck.

I leaned my head to the side. “Just tell me this, *mysh*. Do you like that coat?”

“Before you try to assault my coat...”

On the song, sultry piano chords mingled with the singer’s enticing vocals.

Next, a saxophone solo took center stage. It was all rich, honeyed tones weaving a spell around me.

I didn’t know if it was the music or the secret under her coat that triggered this unbearable sensation within me.

I gritted my teeth. “Take the coat off.”

To my surprise, sadness flickered over her eyes. “First...I want to say...sorry about not giving you what you wanted today.”

I quirked my brows. “And what did I want?”

“Revenge. You didn’t get to kill the gardener’s family.”

Tension gathered in my shoulders. I leaned back in my chair. “I am sure I will get to kill someone in the future.”

She frowned. “You know what I am trying to say.”

“I do, but are you aware of what is *really* important to me?”

“You want to make sure that your reputation of danger keeps you in power and our family safe.”

“Correct. But even with that, there is something that hovers higher above the ideas of my power, reputation, everything else.”

“And what is that?”

“What I *truly* care about, *mysh*. Is not revenge. I just never want you to run and hide from me.” At the very thought of her doing so, a whirlwind of emotions threatened to consume me. I did my best to push them all away. “And...”

“Yes?” She widened her eyes.

“I never want *you* to see me as a monster. Let the world fear me. Let them all call me thousands of evil names. But you...”

She bit her lip.

“I never want *you* to fear me.”

“I love you, baby.”

“I love you too.” I licked my lips. “Now take off the coat.”

“One more thing.”

I spoke through clenched teeth, “Goddamn it.”

“How many limbs did you cut away from the gardener’s family?”

“Take the coat off.”

“We are having a conversation, Kaz.”

I began to rise from the chair.

“No.” She held her hand out. “Just tell me, baby. Your answer won’t change this surprise.”

Only because she said *baby*, I lowered back into the chair.

Still, I scowled. “Do you like teasing me, *mysh*?”

“I do, but I also want to know how many people you maimed and what you did?”

“Why?”

“Because I need to know.”

“You plan to shed tears for all the cut-up fingers on the floor?”

She blinked. “I...want to take responsibility for what Lunita...what *I* have done.”

“You did nothing.”

“How many fingers did you cut?”

“None.”

“What?”

“By the time I returned to the room, David had sent the entire family away. And while I had the very right to maim David, I chose not to do so.”

“Good.” She curved those sexy lips into a smile. “I really like King David as your number one.”

“Speaking of that and since you are doing your best to drag this out as much as possible,” I pointed at her. “You do not ever threaten David again.”

“Why not?” She attempted to put that innocent expression back on, but she was too wicked to pull it off. “Did I scare the king?”

“You did.”

“Too bad.”

“Too bad?”

“Yes.”

“Be careful with that game, *mysh*. You have a number one also, and I have no problem squashing that little trouble—causing—*blueberry*, whenever she annoys me.”

“Blue never annoys you.”

“She does.”

“How?”

“Team David.”

“Enough, Kaz. You are taking the team thing way too far. I am upset I even told you to pick a side.”

“Then, tell your number one to pick a side.”

“I did.”

“Then, it better be David.”

“Whatever.” Emily smirked. “However, I promise to be nice to David from now on.”

“Take off the coat.” I fisted my hands. “Now, *mysh*.”

Lust and hunger filled her eyes, telling me that she was just as horny as I was.

The song rose to a seductive crescendo. The harmony of the instruments intertwined with the singer's voice. It all felt like a lover's caress.

Mmmm.

The plane's humming shifted to a roar. A deep vibration pulsed under my feet.

Emily's slender hands brushed aside the soft fur and began to open it, revealing the delicious curves and exquisite mounds of her body beneath.

Hmmm. Naughty mouse.

My body stirred with an insatiable need.

Her silk bra was red with lines of diamonds dangling across her breasts. Each one reflecting light and dancing as she slowly slipped the coat down her arms, turning into a temptress and teasing the hungry beast at my core.

My jaw twitched.

Her high-waisted panties were also made with the same red silk and had a diamond shaped pussy portal inviting me to enter.

The coat fell to the floor.

A deep primal groan escaped me. The air around us became electric with anticipation.

The song continued as the tempo gradually increased and the intensity of the music mirrored the growing heat within my body.

She grabbed the pole. "You liked when I danced for you before."

"I did." Pressing against my pants, my cock passed beyond stiff and went into the realm of diamond hard.

She locked her gaze on me, and exuded an air of confidence and sensuality that was impossible to ignore.

I licked my lips again.

Slowly, her body swayed to the rhythm of the seductive music.

Mmmm.

Her every movement appeared meticulously crafted to captivate me. She rocked those hips, causing the diamonds to ripple and sparkle around her.

I yearned to jump out of the chair and fuck her.

She twisted around the pole with a hypnotic grace, drawing circles in the air as her arm rose above her head—her fingers tracing delicate patterns like a painter’s brush on a canvas.

Meanwhile, her body served as an instrument of hot seduction.

The song’s percussion—once a gentle heartbeat in the background— now pulsed with urgency, driving the song forward.

It made her move too, shaking that fat ass and driving me crazy.

All mine.

She gripped the pole and leaned away, the subtle arch of her back accentuated the curves of her body, creating an enticing silhouette that beckoned me forward.

Then, she twirled and dipped, shaking that ass even more.

This irresistible craving consumed me.

I could take no more teasing.

Groaning, I rose from the chair. My pants tented in front of me and showed her just what she had done to my cock.

A teasing smile spread across her face.

She knew the power she held over me.

I stalked over.

Slowly rising she bit her bottom lip.

The song reached its climax with a powerful chorus. The singer's voice soared to new heights.

I stopped right in front of Emily.

No space ran between us.

Surely, she could feel my hard cock pressing against her.

I leaned in. My lips were just inches away from hers. "I assume your answer for another baby is yes."

She blinked. "What?"

"With *this* outfit and that dancing, I will be putting several kids into you tonight."

She chuckled. "You need to calm down."

I leaned in and pressed my lips against hers.

Moaning, she opened her mouth to meet mine.

The sensation was electric. Our tongues touched, and an inferno ignited inside me.

The music swelled around us. It was an excellent erotic symphony to our passionate kiss.

I cupped her face in my hands and deepened the kiss, needing to explore her more with my tongue.

And all I could think about in my head was how she was the perfect mate. The one I would happily spend the rest of my life with.

My lover. My future wife. The mother of my son. The woman of my heart. The one woman in this world I could never get enough of.

I pulled back and looked into her beautiful brown eyes.

They were alive with hot desire.

"Mysh."

"Yes?"

"After New Orleans, we marry."

She whispered, "Facts."

“No more stalling.”

“I wasn’t stalling. I just didn’t want to be six months pregnant and wobbling down the aisle.”

“Now Emilio is here. I will not wait after you are healed.”

“I want to marry you just as much as you want to marry me.”

“Good.”

“Good.”

“And I am getting my lions.” I kissed her before she could reply.

Next, I scooped her into my arms and carried her to the bed.

The plane hurtled down the runway.

In mere seconds, I had my clothes off. Her silk and diamonds went next.

When I entered her, thrusting with a slow, deliberate passion, I damned near came close to exploding. “*Mysh.*”

The plane rose into the sky, and we were skin on skin, wet with sweat and her arousal, grinding each other into a state of delirium.

Her lips enveloped my neck, sucking on the curve, and I realized that I really fucking loved when she did that. My fingers slid to her clit and teased the sensitive bud. It swelled under my touch.

Moaning, she clutched at my arms, her body shaking with pleasure.

I moved faster, my body on fire with desire. “Who’s fucking you?”

“The Lion.” She joined my rhythm, meeting my thrusts with a fervent hunger.

“Are you going to be dirty for me, *mysh?*”

“Yes.”

“I’m going to fuck you like a savage beast.” I pounded hard into her.

“Please!”

We moved together.

Our bodies in perfect harmony. The bedroom filled with the sound of our breathing, now heavy and labored.

“Oh, Kaz!” She screamed, and her body convulsed in ecstasy. “Oh!”

“Fuck yes.” I moved my hips faster with increasing ferocity, the intensity of pleasure almost unbearable. Her body quivered beneath me, and I knew we were close to the edge.

“You are fucking mine!”

“Oh!”

Without warning I reached down, grabbed her wrists and pinned them above her head to the bed, locking her in a vice grip as we hurtled towards an explosive climax.

“Oh!” She gasped.

“You will always be mine.” Fucking her hard, I moved my lips down to her neck and bit down hard.

“Oh! Oh! Oh!” She cried out in ecstasy.

Groaning, I increased my pace, pushing us both to the brink of climax.

“Oh, baby.” Her pussy contracted around my cock.

There we go.

I groaned, and with one final thrust, she came undone beneath me. Shaking, her body rode the orgasm.

“Now my turn.” I thrust one last time and with a loud groan of pleasure, I came hard inside of my mouse, filling that pussy with all of me.

Here comes baby number two.

Chapter 48

A Plan

Kazimir

I had no idea how many times I fucked Emily on the plane. I just remembered us stopping to say goodnight to the boys, eating dinner with Tisha, Lemon, and Maxwell, and then finally returning to our room to fuck again.

Lucky for Boris, he remained out of my eyesight, although I knew he would be near our bedroom once Emily went to sleep.

She thinks I am going to let her go to the cell. Not going to happen.

I had a clear plan.

First, we put on our pajamas. Emily had bought them for us. They were both silky white. Paolo and Emilio had on matching ones too. Maxwell made fun of us, but it made me too happy for us to all dress alike to be truly bothered by his teasing.

Next, I poured us shots of vodka and we toasted to a happy trip in New Orleans.

Then, I poured more.

A wicked smirk spread across my face. “Another, *mysh*. This time we will toast to—”

“Are you trying to get me drunk?”

“Me?”

“Yes, Kaz.”

“Why would you ask that?”

She eyed me and drank that shot.

Smirking, I poured a third one.

She frowned. “I am going to that cell tonight.”

“Boris is back. There is no need.”

She gulped that shot down and then shook her head as if trying to get out the harshness of the liquid.

I nodded. “Very good, *mysh*.”

“Kaz, I want to wait until we get to New Orleans. We must keep everyone safe until I meet with Delphine—”

“Speaking of her, the Butcher called me today.”

“Why did he call?”

“You mean besides being obsessed with me?”

“Kaz, why did J.P. call?”

“He told me about three people I needed to impress in New Orleans.”

“Oh.”

I poured the fourth shot. “Apparently, I will have to give some alligator guy gifts and then we will need to go to a party for some other idiot. Finally, he put his little perfumed high heeled foot down about my needing to respect Delphine.”

“J.P. doesn’t wear high heels. I need you to stop picking on him.”

“Yet, you did not argue about the perfume.”

“Kaz, are you going to listen to him?”

I poured her a fifth shot. “I know how much this trip to New Orleans means to you...to our family.”

“Lunita has to go.”

Unease settled in me. I swallowed it down. “We will go to New Orleans, and we will heal you. Together.”

She took the last shot and then set the glass on the night stand next to the bed. “Thank you, but...”

I picked up her glass and tried to hand it to her.

“No more vodka, Kaz.” She waved it away. “Meanwhile, you did not answer my question.”

“Which was?”

“Are you going to listen to the Butcher?”

“*Mysk*, you know I’m not one to bow down to anyone.”

She frowned.

“But for you...”

She raised her eyebrows.

“For you I will bow. I will kneel. I will even hold in my roars.”

She blinked. “You know how to bow and kneel to people?”

“I believe I can research how it is done. I assume it involves not shooting them in the head.”

“That is one way to bow.” She grinned.

“Regardless, for you, I will do whatever it takes to make sure this trip runs smoothly and brings you the healing you need.”

Her eyes watered. “Oh, Kaz.”

I set the bottle of vodka down. “I will respect these people in New Orleans, not because I fear them, but because I love *you*, and your well-being means everything to me.”

“Holy shit.” She chuckled, yet tears welled up in her eyes. “And can I get this in writing?”

“You can, but only if I can sign it with my cock.”

Tears left her eyes. “You are insane.”

I wiped the tears away. “Then once New Orleans is done, I get my wedding.”

“*Our* wedding, Kaz.”

“And my lions.”

“We will further discuss the number of lions and I must double down on the fact that they will be in cages.”

We shall see about that.

I studied her. “Then, we will have the birth of my little girl.”

Emily chuckled. “Kaz, are you trying to get thrown off this plane?”

She will see.

Soon, she yawned. “I should go to the cell.”

“We still have time.” I leaned my head to the side. “More vodka?”

“Hell to the no.”

I smirked. “Then, pussy?”

“I think you have had quite enough—”

“It will never be enough.”

“Stop trying to keep me from going to the cell tonight.” She yawned again.

“I want to fall asleep with you in my arms.”

“Kaz, it will just be a few days.”

“That is too damned long. Besides, everyone is asleep, enjoying the gentle vibration of the plane. Must we wake our men—”

“We are not doing this.” She yawned again.

We shall see.

Her lids drooped over her eyes, telling me she was beyond tired.

At night...you belong in my arms. Nowhere else.

Suddenly, wet dots appeared at the front of her pajama top.

I raised my eyebrows. “What is that?”

More came.

“What?” She looked down at the top. “Oh, fuck. My milk is leaking.”

“Hmmm.”

“I have to pump this out and dump it. Surely, liquor is in it. Plus, Emilio now has two wet nurses. He won’t need my milk anymore.”

“Pump and dump it?”

“Yes.”

“Is that what you think is going to happen?”

“Yes, Kaz.”

While I had already come twice, the very sight of her milk dripping from those nipples made me hard again.

My body hummed with need. “Open the top. Let me suck out the milk.”

“Why are you so nasty?”

“You made me this way.”

“I did not.” Tipsy off vodka, she slowly unbuttoned the top and revealed two full and heavy breasts.

My body hummed some more. “Feed me, *mysh*.”

“What?” She laughed.

I scowled. “Now.”

“Kaz, I am going to stumble my drunk ass to the cell and then ask someone to get my breast pump, and then I am probably going to fall asleep while it is pumping—”

“Let me drink the milk.”

She chuckled. “Are you serious?”

My cock jerked. “More serious than I have ever been in my life.”

She smiled. “Come here, nasty baby.”

I unbuttoned my own pajama top and flung it to the floor.

“Hold on.” She laughed. “No one said to get naked.”

“I will not need my shirt for this.” I went over to her and positioned myself so that she could cradle me in her small arms.

If anybody walked in on this, it would be quite a sight to behold.

“You are too much.” Emily gazed down at me and brought her dripping nipple to my mouth.

I eagerly latched on to it.

“So spoiled.” She chuckled some more as her other hand moved lower down, exploring the muscular curves of my stomach.

This sweet, warm liquid filled my mouth.

Groaning, I sucked greedily.

The milk was so good, so tasty. It was a creamy drug that I planned to indulge on for the rest of the year.

Now I understand why my son cries so much for it.

And now it was all mine.

A soft moan left her.

I greedily gulped, drinking from her body. Every suck of the sweet liquid was more satisfying and delicious than the last.

Unable to help myself, I suckled on one breast and fondled the other’s nipple with my fingers. I damn sure planned to drink from that one next.

Her breaths became deep and labored.

Moaning, she dove her hands into my pajama pants and began stroking my cock.

Oh, mysh. We are never going to sleep now.

I drank from her breast and rocked my hips. Her hand grew wet with my pre-cum. I moaned as milk began to spurt out the nipple I was fondling, making my fingers slippery.

Fuck.

I moved my head from her breast.

Some of the liquid spilled out of the corner of my mouth.

Emily laughed. “Something is wrong with you.”

“Damn right it is.” I rose and pushed her down to the bed, forcing her to let go of my cock.

And there, I began to drink from her other breast as the milk squirted from her nipple.

“Oh.” Her eyes fluttered.

I knew she was exhausted and close to falling asleep, but I had to have her just a little bit more.

Mmmm.

I left her breast and swallowed the milk. “Do you want me to stop and let you get some rest?”

“I’m tired, but...”

“You still want my cock?”

“Yes.” Slowly, she closed her eyes.

I returned to drinking from her breast.

She lazily stirred a little.

Hmmm...She’s almost asleep, but can my cock wake her?

Leaving that nipple, I moved to the right, put my mouth on the other breast, and began to suckle again.

Fuck. This is going to be my new hobby.

Emily slowly arched her back, and another soft moan left her.

A wicked smirk came to my face.

After I make her cum, she will pass out in my arms.

I left her breast, swallowed down the milk, and slowly slipped her pajama pants down over her hips.

She murmured something and yawned.

I pulled the pants down her legs and took them off.

She looked fast asleep, but I hoped she was still up.

I tossed the pants to the floor. “Emily?”

“Mmmhmm.”

“Are you up?”

She yawned but said nothing.

Well...I know how to fully wake you.

I slipped down to her pussy and slowly parted those delicate folds.

The warm scent of her arousal filled my nose.

She will definitely be pregnant by the time we return to Russia.

I lapped at her pussy. Her warm juices coated my tongue. I savored her sweetness.

Fuck.

Since meeting Emily, I had wanted to consume her, and now I was feasting from her breasts and pussy.

Soon, I was intoxicated with her.

My head went dizzy, and it had nothing to do with all of the vodka that I had enjoyed earlier.

Like a mad man, I kept licking and licking, needing to taste more of her.

She squirmed a little.

Mmmm.

I flicked my tongue on her clit.

Her breaths became deeper, and her body shivered in pleasure.

I slipped my finger inside of her.

A small groan left her. "Ooo."

Ooo?

"Ooo. Ooo. Ooo."

I lapped at her pussy. "You like that?"

She didn't respond.

I wasn't sure if she was asleep or not.

But my cock was hard, and she damn sure had woken me up with my length in her mouth many times before.

Groaning, I spread her thighs wider, slowly slipped up her body, and realized that her eyes were open.

Oh. She is up.

I smirked. "So you are awake, *mysh.*"

She widened her eyes.

"You like how I licked your clit?" Slowly, I slid my cock inside of her.

Her bottom lip quivered.

She closed her eyes and groaned so loud and...so oddly...as if she had never been fucked before as if she were some virgin feeling dick for the first time in her life.

I blinked.

O-kay.

Still, I couldn't deny the fact that it made me crazy.

“Ooo. Ooo.”

Groaning, I pushed into her again. “Open those eyes.”

And Emily did as she shivered.

Yet, on the pillow she tilted her head dramatically to the side and crinkled her nose.

“Why am I so addicted to this pussy?” I thrust in and out of her.
“Tell me.”

She parted her lips in shock. This expression of puzzlement covered her face.

It felt so good to be inside of her so...

Wait a minute.

I quirked my brows and thrust in her again.

Her eyes—usually lust-filled and focused during sex—now darted around my body as if she'd never seen me naked before.

Why is she looking at me like that?

I paused with my cock deep inside of her pussy and stared at her.

She tensed and watched me in silence.

“Emily?”

The creases between her eyebrows deepened, but she...never responded.

No...no...I mean...it could not be...

And I wanted to return to fucking. That wet pussy felt too good to not go back to thrusting and pounding.

The pleasure of her pussy hugging my cock was too damn intense, yet...

No...she is just...drunk...that's why she is being...different...

But then, an odd voice left her. “Keep... doing it to me.”

Fuck. This is not Emily.

I clenched my jaw and gritted my teeth, struggling with the concepts of wrong and right.

Get out. You cannot do it.

Determined, I fought against the tidal wave of sensation and inch by inch slipped my cock out of her.

FUCK!

It took EVERYTHING within me to pull out.

Everything that I had.

All of my strength.

Was this body not mine?

Did this pussy not belong to me?

Yet...

“Goddamn it.” I grunted as my wet cock bobbed between us.
“Lunita?”

She batted her eyes.

I glared. “Lunita?”

She pouted. “I like how it feels.”

“Goddamn it!” I rolled over and lay on my back. My cock dripped wet and pointed to the ceiling. “Fuck. When did you get here?”

“When you were licking the special place.”

Jesus Christ!

It shouldn't have, but the way she said it, made my cock jerk.

I ran my fingers through my hair, grabbed the sheet next to me, and yanked it over my cock. “You should have stopped me.”

“It doesn't matter.”

“It does.”

“It doesn't.” Sadness coated her voice. “*She* already hates me.”

I sat up. “Emily does not truly hate you. She is just upset with your killing Olga.”

“But, it was one for one.”

“She does not care about *one for one*, Lunita. She loved Olga too.”

She scowled at me. “But, you loved Olga more, and I wanted *you* to cry.”

I stared at her. “What are you doing out here?”

She turned away from me and tried to get out of bed.

“Sit the fuck back down.” I glared. “You will not leave this room.”

Groaning in annoyance, she remained on the bed. “So many rules.”

“What do you want, Lunita?”

She turned to me. “There is no healing. This trip is stupid. Make her turn around.”

“What?”

“There is no getting rid of *me*, unless...”

“What?”

“Unless, she is dead too.”

Tendrils of unease began to unfurl within me. “Explain.”

Lunita pouted. “*She* is not in charge.”

I shivered.

“Tell her.”

“I will not tell her that.”

“You must. If you don’t, then she is going to feel really dumb later.”

“If she is not in charge, then *you* are in charge?” I leaned my head to the side. “Is that what you are trying to tell me?”

Lunita pointed to the door. “Can I smell Emilio’s neck? It always smells so good.”

My heart pounded in my chest. “You smell him sometimes?”

She frantically bobbed her head and then a giggle left her. “And I play with Paolo’s hair while he sleeps. I braid it.”

“What?” My hands trembled.

“Don’t tell her. She doesn’t want to share them with me.” Lunita tapped the side of her head three times. “I hear her thoughts.”

I gritted my teeth.

“Can we go out and—”

“Who is in charge, Lunita?”

Her voice shifted to a whine. “You are not going to let me have *any* fun?”

“No. I will keep you in this room until you leave and while you are in here you are going to answer my questions.”

She stared down at her hands. “All of you might as well turn back around. This trip will be so stupid.”

“What?”

“There is no healing in New Orleans.”

“I think you may be lying.”

“I’m not.”

“You are scared that Delphine can get rid of you.”

“It won’t be *me* that goes.”

“It will be you.”

She snapped her gaze to me and laughed.

I blinked. “What is so funny?”

She chuckled. “You know nothing, mean old lion.”

“What is funny, Lunita?”

“The Wiz.”

“What?”

She pointed. “That’s why I call you mean old lion. It’s because of the Wiz.”

“Who is that? I have no idea what you are saying.”

She leaned forward and whispered, “Ask Max.”

“*You* should tell me.”

“No.” She lay down. “I’m going back to the roof. You are too stupid to talk to now.”

“No, Lunita.”

She smiled. “Thank you for not killing his family. My Flower Man would have been so sad.”

It shouldn’t have, but rage roared through me. “Forget that and forget him, Lunita. Also, do not leave just yet. I want to know—”

“You won’t do it to me? It felt so good. I want more.”

I parted my lips.

She gave me an odd wink. “It felt really good. Better than in my head. Boom. Boom. Boom.”

I went speechless. But what could I have truly said? She was absolutely not making any sense to me.

Then, she closed her eyes.

“No, Lunita.” I grabbed her arm and shook it. “Lunita, what do you mean when you said that it would not be you that goes?”

I shook and shook, and she never responded.

Minutes later, soft snores left her.

“Lunita!” I shook her hard. “Lunita! Lunita! Lunita!”

Footsteps sounded outside the door.

“Wake up! Goddamn it!” I shook her some more.

The door opened.

Who the hell is coming in here?

I turned that way.

Maxwell rushed in with his gun pointed. His shirt was off, and his pants were falling down his hips. He held them up with his other hand. “I heard you yelling to Lunita. Where the fuck is she?”

I let go of her arm. “She left.”

“Lunita, right?”

“Yes. I was trying to wake her up, so she could—”

“Man, are you crazy? What is up with your obsession over her?” Maxwell set the gun on the bed, yanked his pants up, and buttoned them. “I’m putting Em in the cell—”

“The hell you will, and what is going on with your pants?”

“I was fucking this stewardess in the bathroom next to this room.” He went over to Emily as she slept and slowly closed her shirt. “Come on, man. Help me out. I don’t want to wake her as I put her in the cell.”

“She stays in here.”

Max let out a long breath. “Yo.”

“She stays. Lunita is not coming back tonight.”

“But what if she does?”

“Is Boris still outside the door?”

“Yeah, man.”

“He will wake us up.”

“Man, you’re tripping.”

“Then, let me...trip.”

“If you keep Em in here, then I’m about to put everyone by this door, including Tisha.”

“Fine.”

“When Em wakes up, she is going to kick your ass for letting her stay in here.”

“I can deal with the consequences.”

Maxwell shook his head, went over to the gun, and grabbed it. “Your ass is going to be in trouble.”

“You just fucked my sister’s stewardess. You will be in trouble too.”

Maxwell blinked and then frowned. “Whatever, man. Valentina won’t do anything. She won’t care about my fucking her stewardess.”

I smirked. “Do you not know my sister at all?”

“Yeah. Yeah.” He showed me his middle finger and headed off. “By the way, you got milk all over your chin. I bet that is breast milk. Freaky motherfucker. Get some help.”

I rolled my eyes.

But, then when he made it to the door, I tensed and yelled, “Maxwell!”

He paused in the doorway and turned around. “What, man?”

“Do you know who the Wiz is?”

“What?”

I quirked my brows. “The Wiz? Maybe, it is someone Emily and you grew up with in Harlem.”

“We didn’t grow up with anyone named the Wiz.” He scratched his head. “Why?”

“Lunita said that she called me the *mean old lion* because of the Wiz.”

Maxwell widened his eyes, thought about it for a few seconds, and then laughed.

“What?”

“When we hit New Orleans, we’re going to get some popcorn, and I’ll show you what she’s talking about.”

“I want to know now.”

“Yo. I’m busy and plus it will be funny to watch you realize it. Oh yeah. By the way, when Em returns, tell her that I just had sex with the stewardess. That’s one point for me. Zero points for Tisha.”

“I am not telling my mouse about your sexual escapades, and how does it have anything to do with my cousin.”

“Man, I got a bet going on. Tell her I have one point.” He closed the door behind him.

Noise sounded outside of the door as Maxwell ordered people around.

Lots of movement near the area came next.

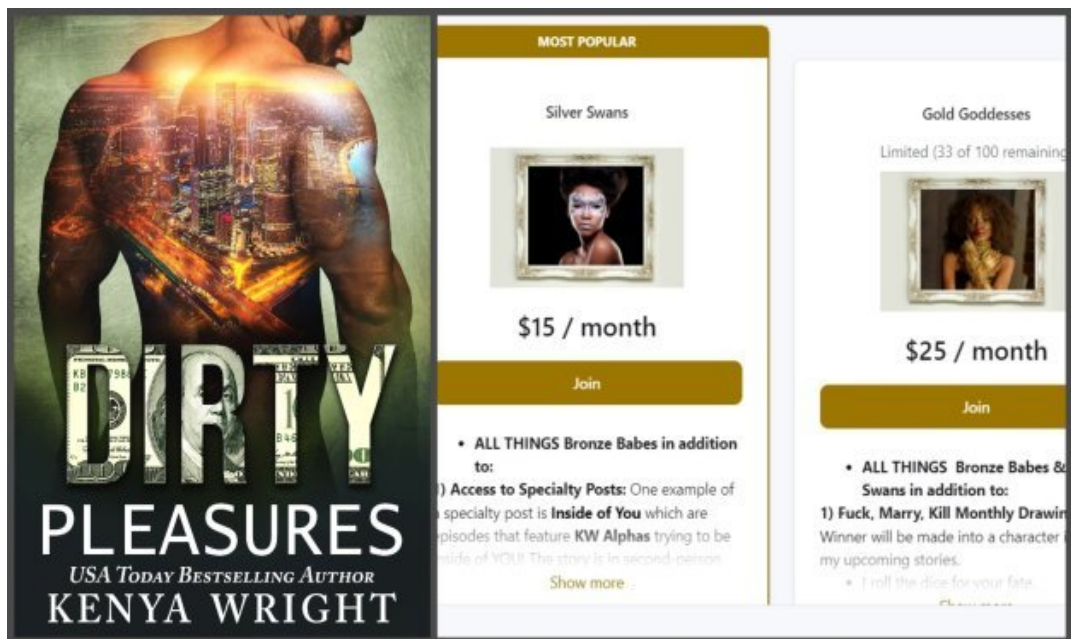
And I sat in bed in a complete daze, trying to figure out what had just happened.

Who is really in charge?

And will it matter?

And more important, can Delphine truly heal her?

Do you want to read more Lion and Mouse?



The image shows a book cover for "Dirty Pleasures" by Kenya Wright, a USA Today Bestselling Author. The cover features a muscular man's back with a glowing cityscape tattoo. To the right is a screenshot of a Patreon page titled "MOST POPULAR". It lists two tiers: "Silver Swans" at \$15/month and "Gold Goddesses" at \$25/month. The Gold Goddesses tier is limited to 33 of 100 remaining. Both tiers include "ALL THINGS Bronze Babes in addition to:" and "Access to Specialty Posts". The Silver Swans tier includes a specialty post "Inside of You" featuring KW Alphas. The Gold Goddesses tier includes a specialty post "1) Fuck, Marry, Kill Monthly Drawing" where the winner is made into a character in upcoming stories.

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